

Spanning the Gap



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Living Treasure Interview: a Life on this Land

Nancy Shukaitis

by Superintendent John J. Donahue

National Park System units often exist as the result of extraordinary efforts by one individual. By all accounts Nancy Shukaitis was the primary force behind the creation of this spectacular unit of the nation's park system. The Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area and its centerpiece the Delaware River are a case study in how one person did make a difference in the history of the nation and the environment. The centerpiece of the park, the Delaware River, is also the longest free flowing river in the Eastern United States. If it were not for this living treasure, Nancy, the primary view from the Delaware Water Gap might be one of a massive dam rather than a world renowned geological formation.

Nancy is a humble person who has lived all of her life in the Delaware valley within sight and sound of the ever present river. She shuns any glorification of her own accomplishments and efforts. However, she happily lists all of the people who joined her in the fight to stop the Tocks Island Dam that threatened to flood this ancient river valley for all time.



For literally hundreds of years this area (now the park) was viewed as a potential water reservoir for the downstream urban areas. For over a century plans were considered to dam the Delaware. In the nineteen sixties (1960s), this project became a bad idea whose time had come. Following the devastating flooding and tragic deaths of 1955, sentiments turned from water reservation to flood control.

And Nancy Shukaitis traveled to Philadelphia to attend the first public meeting held by the Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE). What she saw and heard at that meeting led her to resolve that she would do everything she could to stop that dam. She did not attend the first meeting of the resistance at Zion church on river road with any notion that they would win that epic struggle, but somehow they did. They showed the whole country that David can still conquer Goliath and they coincidentally unleashed events that grew into the environmental movement that we know today. Nancy and her compatriots grew from a small band of locals into a national movement that eventually brought the United States Government to the point of recognizing the folly of damming the Delaware. In just a few years she moved from homemaker to

organizer, protester, litigant and a citizen filing a motion at the supreme court of the land. On behalf of the 604 plaintiffs she brought the fifty copies to the Supreme Court in a suitcase. "It was ironic because one year later, the National Environmental Policy Act passed into law and had we waited we might have been granted our hearing" she said.

However, fascinating the "Nix on Tocks" movement can be, it is really only one chapter in the life of this dedicated citizen. A life we can all read about it in her recently completed book which will be published soon. When she was born on her family farm (the Michael farm) her grandmother delivered the baby and the doctor arrived a day later. His late arrival is reflected by her birth certificate which lists a day after her actual birth as her birthday. That was just part of life in the country back then. We didn't call them chores or work back then. "It was just projects," she said as she recalled planting cantaloupes, potatoes and corn as a child. She worries today about the decline of farming and the loss of what was once a sustainable life style independent of the outside world.

The family farm included a spot known as sandy beach, where the sand washed out of the farm fields and collected on their personal riverside bathing spot. Life on the river was a continual lesson in the ecology of moving bodies of water.

Later fishermen started asking if they could camp there and they built huge fireplaces that everyone used. Slowly people began bringing trailers and what was once a neighborly activity became a small business. More than making money, however, her father seemed to enjoy providing recreational opportunities. She remembers that people would come from all over to collect arrowheads. "We would only collect one if it was perfect in those days since they were so abundant," she recalls.

Still a young girl when world war two began, Nancy took up a job at Patterson-Kelly a factory that made heat exchangers and soon shifted from laundries to LST boats. And of course the women ran the farms and the men all went off to war. There were no proms or class rings since every scrap of metal, rubber or cloth and every effort went to winning the war and although no one knew at the time Patterson-Kelly was making parts for the Manhattan project.

Soon after the war she married. Nancy and her husband ran a boarding house, that we might call a resort today. They had oil

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lamps and outhouses, one for the men and one for the women. “No one fell, no one sued us and no one drowned”, Nancy recalls. Perhaps it was the family oriented nature of vacation travel that kept everyone watching each other and prevented some of the tragedies that are all too common nowadays.

When asked about the history of flooding in the valley, Nancy can take you back to the 1936 flood. “The farmers knew from the amount of rainfall that there would be flooding. They built a dyke that ran through the hollow from Poxono Island all the way to Smithfield beach and it held. We could hear small things scraping against the bank at night. It was very eerie. Because when the river is mad, it can be awesome and awful,” she recalls.

The larger flood in 1955 came all the way up to the family farm way up on the hill. “Our farm was in the family from 1794 until the government took it to make the park, said Nancy without rancor” “The flood came up over our garden and right below the 26 room farmhouse and I thought our fields would be ruined, but they weren’t. In fact the river filled the fields with sand way up on the mountain and the sand is still there today,” she said. She also recalls the horror of that terrible tragedy. “You heard screams in the night and people moved from the first to the second floor, only to see the entire building washed away.”

These floods come regularly, but luckily most don’t result in a great loss of life like the 1955 flood did. Most of the time life along the river is pleasant and wonderful. “The river is a live creature. It’s like a human body. And actually the places like the riffles are essential to purify that water. The sun gets through those shallows and it can’t do that in a deep reservoir. We are saving the taxpayers money, by leaving the river the river. There are many other aspects of it, the fisheries is a multi-million dollar industry. The benefits are manifold and I don’t think we can even know them all, she reflected.”

Nancy went on to become a county commissioner, an author and a celebrated protector of the environment. As recently as last year she was recruited to help organize the struggle to stop development on Depue Island in the middle of the river. She has recently completed her own book on her rich lifetime of experiences which will be available soon.

This is a person every visitor to Delaware Water Gap NRA should know about and revere. Nancy doesn’t like flattery, but truth be known the things people say about her are not flattery but just the plain simple truth just the way she likes to speak it herself. She understands the importance of recognizing that some things come before our own personal satisfaction. She didn’t struggle to save her own farm, she struggled to save this entire valley and the river not just for the people she knew, but for everyone. This lady is a person that John Muir and Marjorie Stoneman Douglas would be proud to know. Threaten the river tomorrow and you can count on hearing from Nancy Shukaitis. I for one am very proud and honored to have had the opportunity to meet and know this great individual, this proud citizen and this wonderful living treasure. Her story belongs to all of us and her struggle to save these lands and waters is part of our national heritage just like the river itself. ■