Woodstock on the Water: An oral history of the Ramblin’ Raft Race

It began almost as a joke, but within just a few years the race became a cultural phenomenon, attracting tens of thousands of fun seekers to the shores of the Chattahoochee for a massive floating party.

June 15, 2015 Charles Bethea Radio columnist

Every third Saturday of May during the 1970s, Atlanta hosted a raft race on the Chattahoochee River. Sounds simple, and it sort of was, until the race took on dimensions that even its founder, Larry Patrick, never imagined. Thousands of rafts would take to the water, sailing (and often sinking) down river with their cockeyed captains and tipsy deckhands aboard. Now, on the 35th anniversary of the Ramblin’ Raft Race’s end, we revisit the Georgia Tech frat boys who made it happen—as well as a few other folks who weren’t too happy to have a quarter-million people partying on the banks of the ‘Hooch with their tops off, their cups full, and, for a while there, no one to stop them.

1969–1971: The Fraternity Years

MIKE DINEEN, 71, is retired and living in North Augusta, South Carolina. In the early 1970s, he was a DJ at WQXI radio. I came to the station in June of 1969, fresh out of the Army. I was feeling pretty frisky. Atlanta was full of boundless energy and enthusiasm. There were buildings going up downtown. Underground was flourishing with entertainers like Piano Red and Cortez Greer. I-285 was nearly complete. It was just fabulous, the feeling the city projected. Atlanta was ripe for a party. All it needed was a spark, somebody to light a match.

LARRY PATRICK, 66, is retired and living in Kings Mountain, North Carolina, where he is fighting a degenerative lung disease. In 1969, as a student at Georgia Tech, he thought it would be fun to stage a competition on the ‘Hooch and asked WQXI if it would help promote the “First Annual Great Chattahoochee River Raft Race.” I’d just been fired from my library job. I had all this time on my hands, and I needed something to get excited about. In 1969 Tech only had about three girls.

DINEEN The gauntlet was thrown down on air. He challenged us. It built momentum, and at the end of the show, we walked down to the program director’s office to ask for a few hundred dollars for a raft, to rent a van, that kind of stuff.

On July 26, 1969—a week after Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon, less than a month before Woodstock—Patrick and his crew, which dwindled from nine to three over the course of the race, won the 34-mile inaugural event in about 50 hours.

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DINEEN We had around 55 entrants, maybe 2,500 watching. Right away, we realized that rather than a competitive race, we should just make this a fun float, a social event.

PATRICK By the end of the race, no one knew where the finish line was, and nobody really cared. I’d just joined the [Delta Sigma Phi] fraternity, but they made me vice president because of the thing’s popularity. The talk about it never quit. So we figured we’d do it again.

The first raft race covered a preposterous distance; 34 miles. Subsequent races were less than 10.

1970

Applications for what was called the “Second Annual Delta Sigma Phi Chattahoochee Raft Race” — now 10 miles, stretching from below Morgan Falls Dam to Paces Ferry — came from as far away as Chapel Hill. The Coca-Cola Company offered free soda at the finish and a “raft load” of Cokes for the winner of each race class: “battleships” (homemade rafts with more than 60 square feet of deck), “nugboats” (smaller homemade rafts), and “commercial” (such as rubber rafts). Spectators lined the Powers Ferry bridge to watch 1,066 rafts compete in water raised three feet by Georgia Power.

GARY CORRY, who died in 2010, was a WQXI program director in the early 1970s. From “Keep the Needle Peaking”, his memoir: In addition to the liability insurance the station already carried, I was ordered to take out another one. Hire a plane to buzz the river all day trailing a banner saying, “WQXI welcomes everyone to the raft race”; have huge signs painted; flyers printed; write and produce more promos; and remember if anything goes wrong, it was my idea to get the station involved in this crazy promotion.

PATRICK We only had one injury, and that was a sprained ankle. The race was a huge success. We got the whole town wet.

TOM FREEMAN, 67, lives in Morganton, North Carolina, and works in software development. He wrote the famous Raft Race jingle, which included the lines: “Then I studied and I figured and I nearly went daft! Floatin’42 people on a 12-foot raft!” Larry was a genius. It was scary how smart he was and how all-inclusive his vision was. He envisioned an east team and a west team traveling the country and doing this event.

“Probably the most outstanding entry of all ended the cruise two miles short of its destination. The Chattahoochee Queen, Delta Sigma Phi’s entry, was a 34-foot-long pirate ship complete with tri-deck, mast, and pirate flag, but alas, she sank.” — Atlanta Journal, May 18, 1970

JERRY HIGHTOWER, 67, has been a park ranger at the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area since 1978. Tens of thousands of people were all coming to the Chattahoochee. While it had its problems, it was knock-down gorgeous. You didn’t see the buildings that you see today. Very little traffic noise. And even though there may have been a haze, so to speak, with some folks, the beauty of the river stuck with them.
1971

By the third year, some 180,000 spectators and 4,700 entrants came from as far away as Michigan. Race booklets were printed with maps and pictures. Georgia Power cleared a camping area at Morgan Falls Dam. The Marine Corps offered to transport rafts on its trucks. A broadcasting company built scaffolding along the river to film the race. Even the University of Georgia took note. George B. Purifoe, president of the University of Georgia’s Yachting Fraternity, sent a letter of challenge to “the men of the Yellow Jacket Armada” that read: “On the morning of May 22, 1971, one delegation of mad Bulldogs will descend from the North to appear on the water and prove once and for all the superiority and know-how of the mammal over the insect . . . not all the slide rules in the world can take the place of sheer guts and determination.” Some 170 Georgia Tech students helped Patrick and a group of his fraternity brothers prepare for the race.

FREEMAN Before the race, Larry didn’t sleep. He was keenly aware that thousands of lives were on his shoulders. He’d work with all the government starched-suit guys. And then he’d hunker with the college kids. He could work with anybody on any level. He was a true entrepreneurial CEO, way before his time.

PATRICK I got good at begging for stuff. Even from my brother.

GILBERT PATRICK, 64, lives in Kings Mountain and is Larry Patrick’s younger brother. I helped stage the whole thing. I ran the finish line for a few years. Then the whole match. I’d just react to where things were going wrong. One time, a windstorm came up the night before the race and made a 20-foot rip in a tent, so at three o’clock in the morning, we’re sewing.

PATRICK Gilbert leveled a hill at the U.S. 41 takeout for me—without permission.

G. PATRICK The finish line there was really steep. So Larry sends me and two [fraternity] brothers to fix it. We had a pick and a shovel, trying to knock this hill off. Well, there was a small Caterpillar D8 dozer sitting nearby. Phil said, “Why don’t we use that? You don’t need a key!” Fifteen minutes later, we take the hill off and push the dirt in the water. Truthfully, we cut it to where it is today. We were pretty pleased. But Larry went ballistic: “You can’t do that!” I said, “It’s done; we can’t put it back.”

PATRICK I don’t know why, but we never got in trouble.

G. PATRICK We even put criosties up the sides and landscaped it out. It looked really nice until the first flood; they all washed down the river.

CHARLEY CHENEY, 65, lives in England, I was “day labor.” No food provided, no water, not much instruction, left at the Lockhead raft assembly area in the hot sun until I got shifted to the finish, stopping rafts at the mooring line—a three-inch-diameter rope—helping them up a slippery, muddy bank. Exhauing under the best circumstances, dawn-to-dusk. Things had to change.

“It may have been the world’s biggest float-in—4,700 rafts, inner tubes and oil drums, and one floating Volkswagen—carrying no fewer than 20,000 happy Georgians down a 9-mile stretch of the Chattahoochee in a demonstration dramatizing the need to clean up the river, which runs through suburban Atlanta. But then, with 100,000 people watching along the shore, the float-in turned into a kind of watery Woodstock.”

—Newsweek, June 7, 1971

T RUSKIN, 64, lives in Roswell and owns Applied Thermal Resources, an HVAC equipment company.

You had several thousand people spending the night there by the river. There was a lot of partying, but people were good. I don’t remember much more than good-natured chaos.

JOE TANNER, 77, lives in Thomaston. He is a former commissioner of the Georgia Department of
JOE TANNER, 77, lives in Thomaston. He is a former commissioner of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. It got to be unruly, drunken. There was tremendous litter from the participants and the spectators. They pretty much trashed the river. A lot of the crafts just disintegrated.

PATRICK When someone said a bad thing about the raft race, I took it personally. People talk about all the drunks and everything, but my crowd was pretty nice. Farther down, it got rowdy. The county commissioners in Fulton gave permits to sell beer and then got on me about it.

RUSKIN Anything home-built, 50 percent of those didn’t make it. A former Falcons player, Alex Hawkins, he built a humongous raft he brought in at night. I don’t know how many dozens were on it, but it made it a couple hundred yards down the river before it went under.

G. PATRICK To get the stuck rafts out, usually you had about two johnboats and about three boys on each boat. The Palisades section was always catching people. It’s lucky more didn’t go under.

HIGHTOWER There was so much unopened beer floating in the river—entire six-packs in the eddies and brush.

Young folks were excited about helping us clean up.

CHENEY Larry got raked over the coals after 1971. No one anticipated that the event would take off as it did. It’s suddenly really important to have a transportation system set up, the right number of Porta-Potties in the right places, the right number of food and drink vendors. All the things college kids never anticipated in 1969.

In 1972 Patrick helped create the American Rafting Association (ARA), a nonprofit that—with the promotional help of WQXI—ran the “Ramblin’ Raft Race.” But opposition had increased: The race was polluting the river and snarling traffic. Patrick issued trash bags to spectators and contestants, and spent weeks after the race cleaning the river. Styrofoam crafts were banned. A large net was stretched across the river at U.S. 41 to prevent downstream pollution. Patrick even helped inaugurate a Georgia Tech course, Industrial Engineering 491: Raft Race Systems Analysis. There were now six race divisions, including a “Bikini Division,” in which each craft would be crewed entirely by women, “preferably in bikinis.”

1972–1978: Big-Business Time

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JIM UNDERWOOD, 65, runs an estate planning practice based in Atlanta. I was studying industrial engineering [at Tech], so I was supposed to know about traffic control. Larry asked me to help plan. We were a bunch of engineers who thought we could figure it out.

CHENEY Jim was one of the most important additions Larry made to his “staff.” He pretty much
CheneY Jim was one of the most important additions Larry made to his "staff." He pretty much designed the transport system. In 1972 it was radical to think about traffic flows, how to engineer those things.

Underwood I remember we had to go down to Joe Tanner's office and present our plan—that it wouldn't be a disaster in 1972. The state was about to close it down due to the traffic jams.

Ruskin The U.S. Army Reserves were called in at some point to help at the finish.

Tanner It was a nightmare—that's what I remember.

Underwood We had a trailer out at the Morgan Falls, where we headquartered traffic control: maps, bus schedules, contact information, telephones, radios. It was command and control. We had police there, reporters. We set up big parking areas at Lockheed, where buses shuttled rafters to the start and the finish, so we wouldn't have cars jammed everywhere. We had rafts brought in the night before. We parked the trailer under these high-tension power lines to energize it. Every time you hit the door wrong, you got a shock.

Underwood Larry and the other guys had all the fun, while we were back there running traffic control.

Deborah Staudinger, 59, is a partner at Hogan Lovells law firm, based in Washington, D.C. She was one of the few women on Patrick's team. Our student civil engineering group used to build a raft out of Budweiser beer cans, and I helped row it down the river. That's how I joined Larry's gang. There weren't many other women. Here I was, a dorky engineer, and I got to do all this cool stuff. And the guys were really nice. Larry had an ability to lead.

"The scene outside Atlanta . . . looked like something out of a Matthew Brady Civil War photograph. In the early dawn, smoke from fires rose to join the rising mist over fields littered with large Huck Finn rafts a man could live on . . . Hunkered down in this marvelous disarray, an Atlanta engineer wondered aloud if some of his fellow men, chilled by a world of increasing complexity, might not have a subconscious urge to test themselves, uncompromisingly, irrationally even, against pre-technological forces and dangers." —Sports Illustrated, May 29, 1972

CheneY The first big event Charlie Daniels Band ever played was that 1972 race. That was one of the few things I got to see. We were too busy trying to fix things: "I can't get my truck moved. How do I get my raft out of the river? I can't find my mother."

Underwood A lot of Larry's time, energy, and personality were wrapped up in the race, and he wanted to make sure it was done right and done well. What we put down on paper in 1972 actually worked. And it was filmed!

CheneY Bob Storer of Storer Broadcasting made "It's a Beautiful Day to Save the River," another distraction that damned near killed us. There was no dialogue, just abstracts with "Woodstock" split screens. I think Larry probably has the only copies.

Patrick It was a horrible movie.

Ruskin Still, it was my claim to fame. I was a movie star for a week. In college!

CheneY And then there was the cleanup. We'd clean all day and then try to sleep on these boat trailers. At some point, you've got to study. But you're responsible for cleaning up from Morgan Falls all the way to south of 41.

Patrick You have the best time when you're busting your ass. That's what Ted Turner told me. He was there.
1973

Race day weather was cold and rainy, but an estimated 200,000 spectators still showed up to see some 20,000 participants in gunboats, coffin rafts, cars on tubers, and floating political ads. There was a growing feeling among some of Patrick’s fraternity brothers that he had wrested control of the race away from them.

DINEEN After 1972 larger interests became big parts of the event: beer companies, insurance companies. It became big business. And of course, all the big magazine coverage was still happening with Larry front and center.

PATRICK Budweiser told me I was responsible for more beer sold than any man who ever walked.

CHENEY This fact gets lost: how much putting on the race cost Larry personally, in terms of friendships. Some of his fraternity felt he was taking the event away from them. But he had this vision with what he wanted to do. And anyway, time tends to put a nice haze on the pain and suffering.

There was plenty of pain, and of course, it wasn’t limited to those who put on the race.

RUSKIN We had a rope across the river that was the starting line. As the rafts were put in the river—10-by-15s, double-deckers, few well-built—the big boats started first, and they’d mosey across that rope. And then the Corps of Engineers let out water, which created a current to push the boats. But there was a rope in the way; suddenly every boat near it got caught up in it and was basically torn apart.

HIGHTOWER People were losing their rafts, their coolers, their friends. Everyone is getting pushed under by that damn rope. Lord knows what it cost.

RUSKIN If you got past the start, you were gonna have some fun.

PETE BAILEY, 69, is a real estate developer in Sea Island. Beginning in the early 1970s, he lived in a condo along the Chattahoochee at a famously free-spirited community called Riverbend, more than halfway through the race course. You could almost walk across the Chattahoochee on all the floats during the day, it was so full of people. They were getting in and out all over the place. They stopped at Riverbend and wouldn’t go any farther with that beer truck sitting there. I had the door of my condo open; people came in and out. One of my old girlfriends came along once, and we started arguing about who broke up with who.
1974

Referring to one press account as “Georgia’s answer to the Spanish Armada,” the raft race now included sponsors like Dairy Queen and the Treasure Island discount stores. The ARA had also launched races in Nashville and St. Paul. But Atlanta’s was largest. And Riverbend remained a focal point for the less serious “racers,” who were the vast majority.

BAILEY They used to call Riverbend “Gonorrhea Gulch.” I guess there was a lot of sex going on. The Raft Race seemed to heighten that. Particularly with people who’d just met. They’d stop off at Riverbend and go by the big pool and meet. You’d go to that huge beer truck and have a beer and watch the girls take off their tops as they passed. You look back on some of these things and say, “Man, did that really happen?”

PATRICK My dad said, “Son, you’ve been a wonderful member of this family. But when your grandmother sees nekkid people drinking on the side of the river because you put them there, we might not be family anymore.” Fortunately the first thing she saw when she got off the river was her Presbyterian minister.

1975

The increasing cost of putting on a safe and clean race led Patrick to run the race for profit, with the help of WQXI. The station sent out a hot air balloon manned by DJ “Coyote McCloud” to “cover” the race from the sky.

TANNER There were people who came down through there nude or partially nude, drunk, getting out on private property and creating issues and so forth with homeowners. It started off pretty harmless, but it turned into a nightmare.

HIGHTOWER I went out and looked at the impacts of the race for the Georgia Wildlife Federation. I’d start at the river’s edge and look up the bank and back 10 feet. I spent all day out there, before and after the race. My conclusion, which some people didn’t like, is that sure, it cost taxpayers, and it was a law enforcement nightmare, but trash-wise it wasn’t as big a deal as people thought.

BILL DOMENICO, 83, moved to Riverbend in 1971. He lives in Marietta. We’d drift down the river and drink and smoke and everybody was just hanging loose. It was just a big floating party. Not drowning was winning for most of them.
Sponsors increased at what was now called the “WXII Ramblin’ Raft Race.” Coca-Cola provided thousands of balloons, and Rich’s department store offered race T-shirts, sunscreen, and towels. Patrick, who had graduated with a degree in textile management, was still living and running ARA out of a Georgia Tech dormitory building, where “most of my volunteers could hear me from a loudspeaker.” The university gave him $350 a month for managing the dorm.

PATRICK It was all so expensive—Porta-Potties, rental stages, rental sound, everything—I had to hit Dad up for some money.

JAMES “BUBBA” SLOAN, 64, is owner of Atlanta’s High Country Outfitters. We’d get phone calls from people blaming us because someone using our rafts was urinating in their yard next to the river. I would say, “Oh God, we’re really sorry.” There wasn’t much we could do.

CHENEY There was an impression Larry was getting filthy rich from all this madness. You don’t get rich on $5 a throw—no matter who is out there.

PATRICK Everybody came, even Ted Turner. He built his own raft. I remember him telling me, “Larry, wouldn’t it be nice if we had some Coney Island hot dogs?” “Yeah, sure,” I said. “Well, let’s get some!” He sent a plane to New York to get the hot dogs.

G. PATRICK I think Ted learned to sail at the race.
1977

“As Cobb County Civil Defense director, [James] Ray knows that the higher the turnout of rafters, boaters or inner-tubers, the greater the risk of someone losing his life . . . even with a $25,000 budget and dedicated volunteers, the Cobb rescue operations often are not able to prevent tragedies.” —The Atlanta Journal and the Atlanta Constitution, May 21, 1977

STAUDINGER Larry planned with the local agencies: police, fire, EMT. There was such care taken to make sure proper safety precautions were made.

HIGHTOWER It was only a matter of time before someone got hurt. But it hadn’t happened yet, so the show went on. And it kept getting more acclaim.


An extra 70 Cobb County police officers, along with several dozen state police, patrolled the race course, which was now being called “The Rose Bowl of the River.” Between 300,000 and 400,000 spectators showed up. One couple nearly drowned after being swept under construction debris below the I-285 bridge. Both the man and woman were pronounced dead when removed from the river, but then subsequently revived. Larry Patrick’s star continued to rise.

FREEMAN He had a mentality like Richard Branson or Mark Cuban: the real, true whacked-out visionaries that either wind up billionaires or on skid row. With his mind and grit, he could have been a billionaire or held public office.

“Huckleberry Finn is alive and well, masquerading as Larry Patrick. ‘When Mark Twain wrote about Huckle Finn, he immortalized the raft,’ says Patrick, president of the Atlanta-based American Rafting Association. ‘We’ve popularized it.’” —The Columbus Enquirer, May 17, 1978

TANNER We were watching close.

“The Cobb County police will be observing the action at Saturday’s ‘Ramblin’ Raft Race’ with an eye toward seeing that the 10th anniversary of the annual Chattahoochee River event is also its last anniversary . . . police officers stationed along the race route will likely be recording the carousing crowd on both still and movie film.” —The Atlanta Journal, May 16, 1978

HIGHTOWER It was stressful.

In the summer of 1978, there was no park presence. You could go down to Diving Rock beach on a weekend in July and buy quaaludes and speed. People would spend all day selling $5 beers to underage folks who could afford it.

“Cobb County District Attorney Tom Charron no longer wants to stop the annual Chattahoochee River Ramblin’ Raft Race, but he thinks race sponsors should reimburse local authorities for the additional police protection the race requires. ‘It takes a lot of man-hours and money to police an event like that,’ said Charron. ‘I think it’s only right that the sponsors reimburse the city or county for the police they send out there.’ . . . The courthouse was forced to position 70 extra officers along the 9.2 mile course.” —Chattanooga News-Free Press, May 23, 1978
County was forced to position 70 extra officers along the 9.2 mile course." — Chattanooga News-Free Press, May 23, 1978

On August 15, 1978, President Jimmy Carter established the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area, a unit of the National Park Service. It was good news for protection of the area.

PATRICK I didn’t think we’d get that park. I really didn’t.

TANNER Now they had to come to us to apply for a marine event permit.

HIGHTOWER The National Park Service runs a very tight ship, and they weren’t real crazy about having a raft race in 1979. So they brought in rangers from all over the region, including a park police detail from Washington, D.C.

By now there were more than 70,000 participants and 400,000 spectators, and the race’s budget was around $100,000. Meanwhile the new Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area recruited 25 park rangers from around the Southeast for duty. Patrick moved ARA’s offices to a little building on Third Street.

PATRICK I got to walk around with a Playboy Playmate named Candy Loving, who was sent out there by Budweiser. She was something.

CHENEY I didn’t get to see Candy. She had plenty of competition in the crowd, though.

"[Patrick] said he has never drawn the $12,000 annual salary he is due as executive director of the ARA. ‘There was always more we needed to buy, or another vehicle, or ballhorns,’ Patrick said, ‘I hope this year will be the first’ . . . ‘The dorm is being torn down for expressway expansion, so there goes my home, my job, and my office,’ he said, fingering the wide brim of the beaver felt hat that has become a race day lucky charm over the years.” — The Atlanta Journal, May 18, 1979

CARL HOLMBERG, 74, is retired and living in Maryland. Beginning in the late 1970s, he was a regional law enforcement specialist tasked with coordinating efforts among the park and local police and fire departments. We weren’t prepared to handle all the found property— clothing, wallets, jewelry—or the lost people. Sixteen year-olds who didn’t make arrangements for pickup. We’d have all these parents showing up saying, “Where’s my child? He hasn’t come home!” They’d expect you to drop everything. And there were 50 or 60 parents asking all at once.

“In what some in the Atlanta radio community view as a major promotional blow to WQXI, the American Rafting Association (ARA), which puts on the Ramblin’ Raft Race, has signed on arch-rival station Z-91 (WZGC-FM) as its primary sponsor and promotional arm for the 1979 event.” — The Atlanta Constitution, March 1, 1979

The ARA had a river permit, but WQXI did not go quietly, securing a separate permit to use Morgan Falls State Park on race day and teaming with Budweiser to create a “WQXI-Budweiser Fleet” contest as part of the race.
Park on race day and teaming with Budweiser to create a “WQXI-Budweiser Fleet” contest as part of the race. Litigation ensued, but “the world’s largest participatory event” went on with ARA in control.

**PATRICK** It was more the result of differing philosophies than anything else. The raft race didn’t belong to the media; it belonged to the people of Atlanta.

“‘It was a matter of money,’ [said WQXI general manager Jerry Blum]. ‘He [Patrick] was going to get more money from somebody else.’” — North Fulton Extra, May 1, 1980

**HOLMBERG** People were jumping off of Diving Rock stark naked. That always attracted a crowd. And they’d be intoxicated. And somebody would bump into someone else, and you’d have a fight. As a brand-new park, how do you handle prisoners? Where do you transport them? How are they processed?

**TANNER** We had a Cobb County magistrate down on a sandbar. You’d bring the people in who didn’t comply with the law, and he’d take their case and act on it right there in the river. We also had a bus to take noncompliant people to the jail.

The Atlanta Constitution reported 110 injuries, including a 15-year-old boy who broke his neck trying to jump from a bridge down to a raft.

**HIGHTOWER** There was growing concern with the local governments over the expense of the raft race: “How many of our residents are benefiting from this?” I know with the Park Service, we budgeted $60,000 for extra rangers for a two-day period.

**HOLMBERG** I always wondered what happened to people who didn’t make it to the take-out area around Palisades. Maybe they’re still floating out in the Gulf of Mexico.

**1980**

The ARA and WQXI continued to fight over control of the race, both seeking the coveted “water event” permit given out by the Department of Natural Resources. In April, WQXI won the permit and, with a budget of about $100,000, planned the race without Patrick’s involvement. Once a strong supporter of the race, the Atlanta Journal and the Atlanta Constitution reported that public safety officials had concluded, “There’s no way to fully control the thousands of beer-swilling, dope-smoking rafters” who would take part.

**FREEMAN** WQXI beat our socks off in court with a bunch of high-priced lawyers. Overly ambitious people thought that they could take over an event about which they knew nothing. We were barred from the event.

**CHENEY** They had no experience and no concept of the organization and contacts that Larry had by that point: Cobb County rescue, local police and safety offices, the Georgia Conservancy, Fish and Game. There was a tremendous amount of coordination necessary, and they didn’t do their homework.
TANNER We had to go clean it up ourselves. We took park personnel, rangers to take litter out to a landfill. There was tons. We couldn’t find anyone to clean up the mess, much less control it. That was a problem, but the drowning was a disaster.

HIGHTOWER There was a drowning the night before the race. He was doing some pre-race partying when he went in. On race day itself, I was assigned to a rescue boat with another ranger at Diving Rock, in the narrows. It’s a rocky area. At high water, you get big waves. And people were getting tossed out. We’re grabbing them and taking them over to the aid station. Then bigger rafts come down, and they’re slamming into islands, breaking up. Suddenly you’ve got two-by-fours with big nails floating by, hitting rubber rafts. We’re grabbing folks, throwing them on the islands, and going back to get more. The water is cold, and nobody’s wearing a life jacket. People are screaming, “Get us off the island!”

“Divers searched two areas on the rain-swollen, muddy Chattahoochee River for reported drowning victims Saturday, but the search was called off at dark. There were confused and unconfirmed reports throughout the afternoon and evening that as many as four persons drowned during the Chattahoochee River Festival. Though a number of people were still unaccounted for Saturday night, there were no confirmed deaths.” — The Atlanta Journal and the Atlanta Constitution, May 25, 1980

In the end, there was only one drowning victim, from the night before the race.

HIGHTOWER It was technically called a “river festival” that year, but it wasn’t festive for a whole lot of people.

“‘We’re getting pretty disgusted with it,’ Cobb Civil Defense Director James Ray said. ‘We haven’t gotten any cooperation from anybody who staged this thing. We’ve been down there looking for these people since Saturday and not once has anyone from WQXI offered us any assistance or responded to our questions.’” — The Marietta Daily Journal, May 26, 1980

HOLMBERG When you start putting restrictions on alcohol—as the NPS did—and what you can or can’t do, people don’t come as much. Once you cut down on participation, you cut down on money. And then the sponsors go away. So that’s what happened.

“Larry Patrick notified state Department of Natural Resources Commissioner Joe Tanner that [the ARA’s] application to stage the race May 9 was being ‘exemptedly withdrawn’ because of ‘DNR’s holding of the permit application for eight full weeks without a decision or an indication of direction’ from Tanner. ‘They just didn’t give us enough lead time,’ Patrick said later.” — The Atlanta Constitution, April 7, 1981

CHENEY It’s a shame it had to go away, but it probably had to. The mores changed; the times changed. It’s probably best it’s in the history books.

G. PATRICK If we’d had cell phones back then, it would have been a cinch.

SLOAN Long-term it was a good thing. It brought attention to the river—Georgia’s most important natural resource. Put Atlanta on the map, too.

RUSKIN One thing I learned from Larry is that if you have a passion for a dream, you can make it a reality. College kids turned a raft race into the largest cocktail party in the world! The old people at Johnny’s Hideaway still talk about it!

- See more at: http://www.atlantamagazine.com/great-reads/woodstock-on-the-water-an-oral-history-of-the-ramblin-raft-race/?timestamp=n8W/ZA5KC.zipu