



Sandy Adams swims from her dock across the St. Lawrence River to Brockville each summer.



Reflections of a River Rat:

True river rats go the distance across the St. Lawrence

Sandy Adams picks the August day each summer. She waits for a windless, clear morning when the St. Lawrence River resembles a piece of glass. She asks her husband Bill to check for laker traffic, and they ready the boat.

When she hops in the 65-70 degree water, her rite of summer begins. She'll swim nonstop to Brockville, Ontario, across the 1 ¼-mile expanse, through the 60-foot depths in the Seaway channel, and navigate a current of about 2 knots (2.3 miles per hour). About an hour later, she reaches the Canadian side.



Sandy Adams crosses the St. Lawrence River with Brockville, Ontario in the background.

“I always feel happy and excited to do this swim,” said Adams, a Gouverneur native. She has spent her summers on the road between Morristown and Jacques Cartier State Park since her parents purchased a cottage there in the 1960s. Now she winters in North Ft. Myers, Fla.

“I swim freestyle most of the way, but I find myself smiling when I do the backstroke and look up at the sun and sky and feel I’m in an endless pool with no wall that I have to turn around.”

“There is nothing like the meditation of floating on your back and staring up at the clouds or clear blue sky. I am very blessed to have no physical afflictions to inhibit me from swimming.”

Adams doesn’t give her age, but she is a 1967 graduate of Gouverneur Central School. Few persons her age maintain such a high fitness level. If that inspires people, Adams is cool with that.

“This year on August 4, I swam across the river with no leg cramps, or fatigue of any kind, during or after I finished,” she said. “It is a personal, joyous accomplishment.”

Adams is one of hundreds, probably more, who tackle the river each summer. When I put out a call for people who cross each year, there was a wave of responses:

Maureen Moore Mazer: “My mom (Shirley Callahan Moore) used to tell us about swimming across to Canada when she was younger!”

Kathy Sargent Elling: “My aunt, Jane Heffernan, did with Pat Sargent and John Perretta as the guides.”

Judy Barley Taylor suggested an interview with Debra Monteith.

Lois Langtry: Does part way count? I could only make it to Old Man Island way, way, way back in the 1950s.

If you scour North Country Now, you’ll find the exploits of the Hackett kin from Ogdensburg – Gabrielle Morley, Allyse Claxton Pierce, Peg Hollis Powers, Lori and Chelsea Hackett – some of whom have been crossing from the Dupont plant in Canada to Morley Bay since 2015.



Chris Sargent, 41, from Ogdensburg completed the swim once, just before the Covid pandemic squelched border crossings. His teen-age cousin led Sargent and his wife to the Canadian side on a jetski, he touched the shore, then swam back to Blackstone Bay in 53 minutes.

“I was glad I completed it but there was no celebration,” said the strength and conditioning coach at SUNY Potsdam, “because I was one of the few on my mom’s side of the family that hadn’t swum the river. It was less of a badge of honor and more of a removal of a scarlet letter. Things like that can always be hung over your head in a large Irish family.”

For every guy like Chris Sargent who took years to splash his way across, there are probably 10 people like Ogdensburg City Court Judge Marcia LeMay who just need to carve out the time. She swam competitively for OFA and St. Lawrence University before attending law school in Albany Law, and still swims often for recreation.



The Connor, Norman and Magee families gather after crossing from Brockville in 2011.

“I intend to make the crossing, I just haven’t had the chance,” she said.

Perhaps the most fertile ground, or better yet, water, for river crossers is just down the road from Adams. The Connor, Long, Magee and Norman families were childhood friends and shore neighbors when they started swimming the river in the 1970s. They can tell stories about floating patches of seaweed, shoals that resembled whales, and the most revulsive sight on the river – dead fish.

“The first time I swam the river, I might have been 10 years old,” recalled Nancy Connor Kotarski, 58, a Balmain native who tests software for a U.S. Army contractor from her Rineville, Ky., home near Fort Knox.

“I swam with my brother, Joseph, I think. My dad, a marathon runner, accompanied us via boat. Another time when I was quite young, I swam with my cousin, Kimberly Connor Baumhofer. She was a strong swimmer and encouraged me a lot.”

Kotarski figured she crossed four or five times, and would have attempted more, but her education and occupation led her from Gouverneur High School to SUNY Potsdam, Albany, Virginia, Germany, Alaska and Kentucky. Still, she traveled home each summer to visit family and friends and developed a tradition – the group crossing.

The next generation of Connors, Magees and Normans completed several mass crossings. They assembled a sizable flotilla of tenders and supervising adults, spread them among the swimmers, and shepherded them across. Back on shore, the group photo and brunch awaited.



There is an honor system in crossing. Once you enter the water, you don't touch the boat. You can tread water or change strokes, but you can't rest. However, the first rule remains safety.

Kotarski trains in the pool all winter for a new passion -- open water endurance swimming. She completed a 5-kilometer swim (3.1 miles) on July 23 in 2 hours, 18 minutes at Lake Memphremegog, which spans the border from Vermont to Quebec.

"Probably the last time I swam the St. Lawrence," Kotarski said, "was about 20 years ago, but I am ready to go any time. Let me know."

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