

WALTERS

WALKER

A YOUNG ROWER-WRITER DISCOVERS THE TRANSFORMING POWER OF A SMALL IDEA. BY NAT STONE PHOTOGRAPHY BY DANA LEIGH DOLNEY





On a summer afternoon in Pittsburgh, the 28-foot pontoon boat, *Anna Hubbard*, edges its way along the shoreline of the Allegheny River, across from the new architectural jewel, the David L. Lawrence Convention Center. The tired boat putters along, stopping frequently along the shore.

Crew members wearing chest-high waders and lobsterman-grade rubber gloves stand ready to do their grungy work each time the boat stops along a section of riverbank.

On the forward deck are two 55-gallon barrels, emptied of dank water and hauled off the bank. Next to the barrels is a 1960s refrigerator. There are two car batteries, three rusted wheels and a large section of mud-soaked, shag carpet.

Lengths of metal pipe protrude beyond the bow, and a crushed shopping cart is half buried beneath a tangle of thick, worn rope once used as a tugboat's docking line.

A dozen car and truck tires, including two from a semi trailer, lie in several stacks.

For the *Anna Hubbard* and its eclectic crew—the helmsman is a 12-year-old boy from Millvale—it's one more load of river junk brought aboard during scores of trips in the summer 2003 inaugural run of the Tireless Project.

The prospect of a boat and volunteer crew spending an entire summer fishing tires from Pittsburgh's section of the Ohio River was only a rowing daydream until Three Rivers Rowing Association Executive Director Mike Lambert, Environment Program staff from The Heinz Endowments, and I developed a plan for recycling collected waste.

Lambert told me about a local company, Recovery Technology Group, that was using a new technology for a more efficient separating of rubber tread from steel mesh. The salvaged rubber was being re-used as an improved form of Astroturf, as well as for padding children's playgrounds and athletic running tracks. We also developed a list of recycling outlets for other riverbank trash.

With a direct route from riverbank to recycling centers in place, the Endowments awarded a modest \$14,000 grant to establish the *Anna Hubbard*'s summer voyage as a model for what might be accomplished in other communities that border inland waterways around the country.

"When you look at the amount of clean-up that was accomplished from this one small project and you see the community awareness generated from the publicity around it, the impact from the dollars spent is tremendous," says Caren Glotfelty, director of the Endowments' Environment Program.

The community education component, says Lambert, who has been directing rowing programs on the city's rivers for 20 years, is not so much about the cleanliness of Pittsburgh river

Lobsterman-grade marine work gloves dry on a line stretched across the deck of the *Anna Hubbard*. Right, top: Just one small section of the Ohio's riverbank shows the daunting task faced by Tireless Project workers. Right, bottom: Tireless Project leader and the story's author, Nat Stone, tosses metal barrels into a dumpster after a long day on the river.



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water, which has improved markedly in the past two decades, than about the importance of citizen involvement in keeping it clean. “This project has given people an idea of how much of a negative impact tires and other riverbank trash can have on a water system that is basically in good shape and getting better each year,” he says.

Four years earlier, in April 1999, with the goal of better understanding the condition of the country's rivers, I set out

brick towns and cities. And in Wellsburg, W.Va., the mayor told me of the untreated sewage and oil slicks that typically had sullied his town's section of the Ohio River. Now, he said, such pollutants have nearly been eliminated through enforcement of federal environmental protection laws.

As it turned out, the waterways I traveled from the Brooklyn Bridge and back offered repeated examples of environmental reclamation from decades of pollution.

THE FORWARD DECK OF THE 1970s-ERA PONTOON BOAT WAS

from New York City to row a boat on a circuit of the eastern United States, from the Brooklyn Bridge and back. I headed north on the Hudson River, west on the Erie Canal, and by way of the Allegheny, Ohio and Mississippi, through to the Gulf of Mexico. After rounding Key West, I followed the eastern seaboard back to New York.

In the weeks before my trip, I tried to prepare myself for some nightmare scenery based on a 1980s childhood in which I read about well-publicized pollution disasters decimating wild animals such as the American bald eagle and destroying natural habitats and scenery. I imagined rowing past deadened riverbanks and over rainbow sheens of spilled oil. I pictured sections of the Erie Canal as ecological wastelands, and wondered whether I would need a course of antibiotics after rowing the Mississippi between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, where the river frontage is packed with petrochemical industry refineries and referred to locally as “Cancer Alley.”

But once I started rowing northward, I discovered that the Hudson River Valley retains much of the beauty captured on canvas by Thomas Cole and the Hudson River school of painters some 150 years earlier.

Even the Erie Canal, cleaned of decades of pollution, is now a lovely channel through pastoral valleys and post-industrial

One exception, though, was the section of my trip down the Ohio River from Pittsburgh, where I saw riverbanks littered with old tires — from the small doughnuts used as spares on cars to the exclamatory rubber Os of the big rigs. Further downstream, where steep, city-side riverbanks give way to natural beaches exposed by the river's low summer flow, tires were scattered at the water's edge. I counted them at several points as I rowed, and, in one section, I tallied more than 100 on one riverbank during a minute of rowing. The likely source was tire company workers dumping discards in a scheme to avoid recycling fees. Though studies are under way to determine whether the rubber itself poses any dangers to a river ecosystem, the visual blight caused by hundreds of thousands of tires along its banks still defines the Ohio in my mind as “the River of Tires.”

While rowing past, I imagined the live-aboard workboat I might someday launch to clean the riverbanks. In the years after my rowing adventure, I stayed in contact with Three Rivers' Rowing's Lambert, who had been my host when I rowed through Pittsburgh. He, too, had wondered what could be done about the tires, but our discussions about a clean-up project dead-ended against the fact that, since an efficient way had yet to be developed to separate rubber from the steel belts in most tires, a landfill would have to be created to take them. That



ORIGINALLY DESIGNED FOR PICNICS AND SUNBATHING.



fund Tireless. Even with that support, the project would rely heavily on volunteers from the Pittsburgh community, with a focus on youth leadership. “The project’s emphasis on engaging young people interested in being on the rivers appealed to us,” says the Endowments’ Glotfelty. “This was an opportunity to use the boat as a way to draw the community into the environmental issues beyond the story of pulling tires and grocery carts out of the river.”

Marietta College student and varsity oarswoman Megan Rogers signed on as a full-time crew member, and we purchased a 1970s-era pontoon boat. Its forward deck, originally designed for picnics and sunbathing, was cleared for

would only be transferring a trash problem from river to land.

Then, in the winter of 2003, we discovered River Technology Group. With the recycling center on board to accept the tires and with arrangements made for certified landfills to accept other trash, the Endowments, Green Treks Network, a Philadelphia-based multi-media producer of stories on the environment, and the Ingram Barge Co. of Nashville, agreed to

work. The blue indoor–outdoor carpet was removed, and the exposed plywood deck was painted battleship gray. As part of the boat’s humble commissioning, two nameplates were cut out of scrap plywood and painted to read *Anna Hubbard*, in memory of the couple who built a houseboat and drifted it down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers in the late 1940s. Anna and Harlan Hubbard had been among the last of the American shantyboaters,





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river residents who had lived simply in houseboats along the same network of rivers now targeted by the Tireless Project.

At the ceremony in which the *Anna Hubbard* was officially named, blessed and launched, a bottle of local Pittsburgh ale was poured over the bow and deck. Included in the small crowd gathered to see her off was Pittsburgh's mayor, Tom Murphy, and Jeff Pfoertner, the 12-year-old whose sense of curiosity about the world often led him down to the banks of the Allegheny, where he would talk to fishermen and watch coal-laden barges glide by.

As we prepared to cast off from the dock, he asked if he could join us and we took him aboard. As it turned out, he remained with us for the rest of the summer, a key member of the crew and exactly the type of young person we had hoped the project would attract. Jeff comes from a low-income neighborhood; he had been struggling in school, and the project offered structured outdoor work with adults willing to guide and encourage him.

With a summer mop of red hair, blue eyes and a quick smile, he eagerly stepped from the boat onto muddy riverbanks to retrieve beached flotsam and jetsam. By the end of the second week, Jeff had become proficient in piloting the awkward work boat, even when it was weighed down with "goods" and difficult to maneuver. His white Tireless Project shirt, our only gift to volunteers, was filthy by the end of each afternoon, but was always bleached clean when we met him at the dock the following morning. After several trips on his own, Jeff began to show up with his older brother, Matt, and younger sister, Renee. The three were the first to arrive at the dock each morning, and the last to go home at night. "I just liked working," Jeff said of

Top left: Tireless Project workers remove debris from the Beck's Run Passage along one section of the Monongahela River.

Middle: Volunteers came out from every quarter of the city to help clean the rivers. Here, members of the Allegheny County Garden Club chip in with several artists, a college champion rower and a freelance writer to haul debris off the boat. Right: Jeff Pfoertner, the 12-year-old from Millvale, who turned one day of volunteering into a summer-long position as pilot of the *Anna Hubbard*.

his Tireless experience. "That's like a job for me. I just love it, cleaning up the river and spending time on it. Someday I want to work on a tugboat."

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Not all of what was pulled from the water ended up in dumpsters. Sometimes our crew included Pittsburgh artist Bob Johnson, who, long fascinated by river refuse as worthy art material, had been cleaning waterways in the region long before our project. Among the finds that eventually made their way to a scrap yard to be compressed into "Rivercubes" were plastic school chairs, a barrel, two tires on rusty wheels, the remains of a shopping cart, an old wooden lawn chair and assorted lengths of rusted metal. The artistic dredging and compressing continued through the summer until Johnson had created a dozen cubes, sculptures for the Throwaway Age. Several of these sculptures were exhibited at Point State Park during this summer's Three Rivers Arts Festival.



Another artist, photographer Dana Dolney, signed on to document the project as part of her own continuing work with “found” objects. But her insights extended beyond the camera lens. “I saw change and transformation,” Dolney remembers. “Sometimes it was... a littered riverbank turned spotless. But I saw change in the crew as well. I did not see a single person leave the dock and return unaffected. Sometimes we have to clean up others’ messes, and there’s reward in that.”

Our main mission was fishing for tires, but it was often the most difficult. We discovered that the well-dredged riverbanks in a city like Pittsburgh tend to be steeper than in more rural areas, and cause tires to settle into deeper water. Some tires were found nearly buried in gravel and mud and had to be wrestled free. Others, like tractor-trailer tires with steel rims attached, were filled with water and mud, and weighed several hundred pounds.

By the end of the summer, some 60 volunteers had logged in more than 1,300 hours to remove about 65,000 pounds of tires and debris. Some 500 car and truck tires were recycled, many of them likely to be reincarnated into turf builder for Heinz Field and other professional football stadiums around the country.

Despite these accomplishments, much more clean-up work remains for Pittsburgh’s rivers. “It’s like cleaning out an old house,” says Three Rivers Rowing’s Lambert. “The workload in its entirety seems overwhelming. But I believe that, as we complete a few seasons, we’ll get to a point where a little bit of maintenance each year will take care of Pittsburgh’s waterways, and we can expand the project to river sections beyond the city.”

So in the spirit of Lambert’s hopeful vision of the future for Pittsburgh rivers, my memories of our summer on the water go beyond trash-filled dumpsters and despoiled shorelines. There is Jeff’s confident look as he nosed the *Anna Hubbard* into shore; the swirls of river water hinting at the powerful currents below; the great blue herons scouting the river under the shade of overhanging trees; brick-home-dotted hillsides sweeping toward the river; and towboats framed against a Pittsburgh skyline as they float thousands of tons of freight down the Ohio River.

But most of my enduring memories are of the Tireless crew, including Jeff, who found meaning and responsibility on board the *Anna Hubbard*. The pride and confidence he gained from pitching in on the grunt work to achieve a greater good will surely serve him well in the future.

More than a year after that Tireless summer, Jeff told me, “I shut my eyes and wish I was back on the *Anna Hubbard*, jiving [with the crew] and hauling tires.”

I told him that I often have the same wish. I am reminded by Jeff’s enthusiasm that, regardless of the aesthetic improvements to Pittsburgh’s riverbanks, we each took some life-improving lessons from the river that summer as we “jived” our way through the muck.

Receiving these lessons, knowing at least one young life is transformed and that parts of a river are restored: that’s not a bad catch for one summer’s fishing. *h*