

University of North Carolina at Asheville

Western North Carolina Whitewater

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November, 1990. Twenty year old, Corran Addison approached the lip of Looking Glass Falls outside of Brevard, North Carolina. He was paddling a fiberglass kayak and was completely outfitted in a batman costume. The sixty foot falls was not the highest falls Addison had ever attempted but it was the highest ever attempted in North America at that time and was among the most technical. The plunge over the falls did not go as planned. The result was a trip to the hospital and three months in traction. ' When asked why, he responded "What was I thinking? ... if you asked my mother, she'd be quite happy to say 'He wasn't.'" However, this reckless, mohawk sporting punk represented a new direction in kayaking and kayak design. A 1990 *Paddler Magazine* article reported "If Corran Addison survives his penchant for running extreme rivers and falls that most experts would not go near, he will bring new blood and ideas to the next generation of kayak design" His skills as a kayaker had been refined and mastered on the many rivers of Western North Carolina (WNC) and he represented if not defined the highest level of paddling at that time. Paddlers like Corran were responsible for bringing the Whitewater of WNC to the attention of the paddling community as well as using the region as a testing ground for design innovations that would change the sport.⁴

¹ Corran Addison, September 16, 2007, personal email message.

² Corran Addison, September 16, 2007, personal email message.

³ Corran Addison, "Looking Back at What Started it All," *Imagine News*, <http://www.2imagine.net/blogger2006/dwaars.html>.

⁴ Corran Addison, September 16, 2007 and Eugene Buchanan, "Corran Addison," *Paddler Magazine*, http://www.paddlermagazine.com/issues/I_998_6/corran.html.



Corran Addison running Looking Glass Falls, November, 1990.⁵

⁵ Corran Addison, "Looking Glass Falls," Photograph, *Imagine News*,
<http://www.2image.ne^logger2006/pictures/general/lookingglassfalls.jpg>

The mountains of western North Carolina produce numerous rivers that contain some of the highest quality Whitewater in America. Today, this region is one of the premier destinations in the United States for Whitewater boating. However, this has not always been so. In the early 1950's when Whitewater recreation was growing across the nation, the rivers of western North Carolina were largely undiscovered and their potential unknown. This all changed in the coming decades however and western North Carolina and its Whitewater became known globally as a Mecca for Whitewater enthusiasts, establishing a Whitewater industry in the region and attracting top paddlers from around the world.

It is difficult to place Whitewater paddling in Western North Carolina into a historiographical framework because no such framework exists. On the subject of Whitewater recreation, there is only one authoritative work that exists, *The River Chasers* by Sue Taft. Looking broader and placing Whitewater paddling within the history of outdoor recreation and tourism in the region is difficult because it often defies the interpretations given to that specific field of study. Paddlers as a whole represent a small portion of the outdoor recreation market. Of that portion of paddlers, the number of Whitewater paddlers is perhaps less than ten percent.⁶ However, aspects of paddling history such as the attraction to the region are mirrored in the burgeoning study of tourism as a vital force in southern history.

Richard Starnes *Southern Journeys*, examines the role of tourism as a social force in southern history, culture, and economics. He found tourism in North Carolina was most reliant on geography, hospitality, and culture. Most important would be geography, of which "North Carolina boasted many natural advantages," which clearly included the

Woody Galloway, October, 13, 2007, personal email message.

"breathtaking mountains in the west."⁷ Through the scholarship that does exist, it is irrefutable that the natural beauty of WNC has been a magnetic force in attracting tourists.

In Starnes' more recent *Creating the Land of the Sky: Tourism and Society in Western North Carolina*, he refines his study of tourism to the region of WNC and looks further back in time, examining its roots during the second half of the nineteenth century and onwards to the present. Starnes expands on the process by which the region became one of the most prominent tourist regions in the country. He highlights at least three factors that motivated tourism in WNC; the stunning natural scenery, its accessibility, and a purported "Appalachian culture." Though Whitewater recreation as a industry only began to attract tourism dollars, later in its history, outfitters and professional kayakers held closely to the idea that Starnes highlights, that, tourism was the best path of economic development for the region and they were willing to pursue it "even at the expense of ... other forms of economic development."

While the natural beauty of WNC was successful in attracting tourists, the influx of tourists and the development of a tourism economy created a conflict that holds parallels in the paddling community as well. The development and management of the mountains and scenic areas that abound in WNC pitted environmentalists, developers, national parks, and entrepreneurs against each other.⁹ In paddle sports, development has been a difficult question as well. Development may equate to greater accessibility and

⁷ Richard Starnes, *Southern Journeys* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003), 139.

⁸ Richard Starnes, *Creating the Land of the Sky: Tourism and Society in Western North Carolina* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005), 76.

⁹ Daniel Pierce, *The Road to Nowhere*, ed. Richard Starnes, "Southern Journeys" (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003), 197 and Margaret Brown, *The Wild East* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2000), 216.

dependable water releases from hydro-electric projects.¹⁰ It also brings with it the real potential for pollution, overcrowding, and a degraded wilderness experience. The member *written American Whitewater Journal* has for the last fifty years been a forum for debating the positive as well as the negative effects of developing natural resources.

Sue Taft's *The River Chasers* examines the history of Whitewater in America in a categorical and chronological manner. She finds that technology, in a very broad sense, was what has allowed each evolution in the history of Whitewater paddling. While this is true in many regards, it ignores the fact that styles of boating like slalom racing didn't push early paddlers to explore and push their limits. The book makes a fine point that the development of a Whitewater specific industry greatly pushed the sport of Whitewater paddling to new heights.¹¹ Though Taft divides the many chapters and time periods apart geographically, she does not provide much for comparisons between them such as their prominence in the paddling community or the numbers and skills of paddlers relative to other regions. Thus the book does not explicitly single out WNC as an important region in the history of Whitewater recreation in the United States.

This paper will give Western North Carolina a unique position in the history of Whitewater paddling in the United States and identify how the people and ideas that came from this region had a significant impact on the Whitewater paddling community across the last fifty years. It will examine how Whitewater paddlers, in a pattern similar to the tourism in the region, were drawn to the mountains and rivers in pursuit of excitement, a wilderness experience, or even relaxation. This paper will chronologically and topically

¹⁰ Kevin Colburn, "Boofing into the Future," *The American Whitewater Journal* Vol. 42 No. 1 (2002): 19. http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/Journal_archive_

¹¹ Sue Taft, *The River Chasers* (Mukilteo, WA: Alpen Press, 2001), 74, 133-134.

chart major developments in the history of Whitewater paddling and evaluate the role that WNC played in each of these developments.

While canoes and kayaks date back hundreds of years, their use as a recreational craft only emerged in the first half of the twentieth century. It is impossible to put a date on when people first started paddling Whitewater for fun but its popularity began to attract attention in the 1920's and 1930's. Paddling Whitewater or "cruising" as it was called, had a different focus and offered boaters a different experience than they would later seek. Cruisers got their primary satisfaction from the beauty of paddling through a wilderness setting.¹² Rapids were just obstacles to boaters trying to pass through wilderness waterways, and they were seldom worth the risk to the boater and his boat.

In the early years, boats were often not suited for Whitewater use. It could be argued that the boats, just as much as the cruiser mentality, were responsible for the lack of advancement into harder Whitewater during this period. Canoes and kayaks made of fiberglass couldn't endure repeated contact with rocks. Kayaks were often not fitted with sprayskirts, a nylon or neoprene "skirt" that a kayaker wears that provides a watertight seal around the cockpit of the kayak. For kayakers that used sprayskirts, they viewed them as a necessary evil. While they kept the waves from flooding their boat, they took time to put on, are hot in summer weather, and make it difficult to reach items in the cockpit. As a result, sprayskirts were not regularly used. Furthermore, it made it nearly impossible for capsized boaters to "roll" or right themselves, resulting in a swim and potential damage to the boat and boater.¹³

¹² Bob McNair, "This is Slalom," *The American Whitewater Journal* Vol. 2 No. 1 (1956): 22.
http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/Journal_archive_.

¹³ Dave Stacey, "Coamings and Spraycovers," *The American Whitewater Journal* Vol. 1 No. 4 (1956): 18.
http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/Journal_archive_.

Slalom racing was the first form of competition in Whitewater paddling. Slalom racing was first seen in 1934 in Austria and Switzerland and it borrows many elements from slalom skiing.¹⁴ Slalom racing involves paddling down a stretch of Whitewater with alternating green and red gates hanging over the surface of the water. Paddlers must go through the gates in an alternating manner, downstream through green gates, and upstream through red gates. Time penalties are given for missing or contacting a gate. The fastest paddler or team wins. Races were divided into a number of classes, K-1 and K-2; solo and tandem kayaks, OC-1 and OC-2; solo and tandem open canoes, and C-1 and C-2; solo and tandem decked canoes. Downriver racing also appeared in the mid 1930's, around the same time period as slalom racing. Downriver racing was much simpler, there were no gates but the race course was considerably longer. While a slalom race course may take four to six minutes to complete, a downriver course could range between twenty minutes to over an hour.

Racing was popular because it was a great format for experienced paddlers to demonstrate their ability and for beginners to practice their skills. Racing provided a challenging competition in a low risk environment. Courses were typically built along sections of challenging but not extremely difficult or dangerous Whitewater. Creating a course was fairly easy and it didn't require any alteration of the natural environment, allowing one to transform a mellow stretch of Whitewater into a challenging obstacle course.¹⁶

¹⁴Mcnair, 21.

¹⁵ Max Wellhouse, "Downriver Racing part II," *The American Whitewater Journal* Vol. 29 No. 4 (1984): 12. http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/Journal_archive_.

¹⁶Mcnair, 21.

Slalom racing made a slow journey across the Atlantic, first appearing in the United States in the early 1950's. When Italy invited the United States to send a team to the world championships in 1953, it caught American paddlers by surprise.¹⁷ Slalom racing as well as "cruising" were centered around club organizations. Clubs served to organize events, educate new paddlers, and provided a meeting ground for local paddlers. Clubs were located across the country in areas of quality Whitewater. The geographic regions that these clubs were centered around were the Midwest, Northern California, and New England.¹⁸

In a 1958 *American Whitewater Journal*, a reader wrote "There is another section that will become better known in the next few years, and that's the western North Carolina area. There are a number of excellent rivers flowing on the edge of the Great Smoky Mountains that furnish some exciting sport"¹⁹ With the popularity of racing still growing, it merely became a matter of time before the rivers of Western North Carolina would be discovered and their potential realized. Racing served to put western North Carolina on the map in the international boating community. The character of the rivers that paddlers ran in those years was particularly conducive to slalom racing, deep, swift, and challenging for their day.²⁰

In 1972, following its growing international success, slalom racing was added to the summer Olympic Games in Munich. Following the games, John Burton, an American racer at the games started the Nantahala Racing Club. Its mission was to train

¹⁷ McNair, 22.

⁸ Sue Taft, *The River Chasers* (Mukilteo, WA: Alpen Press, 2001), 60.

⁹ Ramone Eaton, "Letter to the Editor," *The American Whitewater Journal* Vol. 4 No. 2 (1958): 15. http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/Journal_archive_.

²⁰ McNair, 22.

slalom and downriver racers for international and Olympic competition. Located in Bryson City, North Carolina, the NRC was within miles of the Nantahala and Tuckaseegee rivers, making it a superb location for training.



The Nantahala River near Bryson City, North Carolina, 1958"

The character of the Nantahala made it ideal for racing. Water for the river was released from a dam upstream that provided consistent, daily flows almost year round. It had stretches suitable for both slalom and downriver racing and provided just enough challenge for racers. The NRC brought recognition to the region because the racers it

¹ "Why Rhinos," *NRC History*, <http://www.nrcrhinos.com/aboutnrc.php>.

² Ramone Eaton, "Letter to the Editor," *The American Whitewater Journal* Vol. 4 No. 2 (1958): 15. http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/Journal_archive .

produced proved themselves in competition and the races it hosted attracted some of the strongest competitors from around the world.²³ To date, all American's who have won top honors in Olympic Whitewater slalom have been NRC members.²⁴ National as well as international racing organizations like the NRC, the US Olympic team, and the now defunct Whitewater Open Canoe Committee, have used the Nantahala river for national and international competition for the last fifty years.²⁵ Even more recently, the Nantahala river has been used for Olympic team selection because it still offers a challenging and competitive venue.

While the popularity of racing continued to grow internationally, paddlers in the Western North Carolina began moving in a new direction. Instead of racing, many began challenging themselves with more difficult Whitewater and with new styles of kayaking. It would be incorrect to say racing died in WNC because it still existed with many of the top racers training on the Nantahala river near Bryson City, North Carolina. However, while slalom racing was on the upswing following its inclusion into the Olympic games in 1972, paddlers in WNC were starting to follow and create new styles of boating.

The first new group of boaters that appeared identified themselves as river runners. They were in no race to get to the bottom, the trials they faced were the rapids

"" "Why Rhinos," *NRC History*, <http://www.nrcrhinos.com/aboutnrc.php> and Bunny Johns, "Open Boat Nationals To Be Held At Nantahala," *The American Whitewater Journal* Vol. 26 No. 2 (1981): 8. http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/Journal_archive_.

²⁴ "The Full Story," *About NOC*, http://www.noc.com/about_fullstory.html.

²⁵ Bunny Johns, "Open Boat Nationals To Be Held At Nantahala," *The American Whitewater Journal* Vol. 26 No. 2 (1981): 8. http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/Journal_archive_, and "Russian Team Top Nantahala '90 Competition," *The American Whitewater Journal* Vol. 35 No. 3 (1990): 9. http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/Journal_archive_.

²⁶ Chris Hipgrave, "2000 Wildwater Eastern Team Trials on the Nantahala River," *The American Whitewater Journal* Vol. 40 No. 2 (1981): 83. http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/Journal_archive_

that lie between the put-in and the take-out. What separated them from earlier "cruisers" is that they were pushing the envelope, even if only cautiously at first. They did much of the pioneering of the Whitewater rivers in the region and everything they did was cutting edge at the time.

A second group of paddlers that began to stray away from racing were a style of paddlers that eventually become known as playboaters. Playboating or freestyle kayaking, is a style of boating where paddlers use natural river features like waves and hydraulics to perform a variety of tricks. In the 1970's and 1980's, play boating had not yet developed as a discipline that paddlers would identify themselves exclusively with. Boaters were rarely strictly playboaters or river runners. Both styles complemented each other on the river and made for a better overall paddler. River runners could "play" their way down the river catching surf waves on the fly. Playboaters could try their skills on larger and more powerful river features and spend time playing at the same spot to refine their technique. It was not until the 1990's that there became to completely separate groups of paddlers and even then skilled paddlers often practiced both skill sets.²⁸

Beginning in the late 1970's, boaters and boat designers began rethinking the designs of kayaks and canoes to better suit the needs of the new "river runners." Paddlers wanted boats that could navigate Whitewater more safely and with greater ease. Maneuverability and safety became the focus of boat designs for the next decade. Because paddlers were moving away from racing and towards river running, they became increasingly willing to sacrifice speed for greater maneuverability. Previously, slalom

²⁷ Sue Taft, *The River Chasers* (Mukilteo, WA: Alpen Press, 2001), 178 and Clay Wright, September 22, 2007, personal interview.

²⁸ Peter Cogan, "Boat Wars: Rivalries Surface" *The American Whitewater Journal* Vol. 35 No. 5 (1981): 56. http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/Journal_archive_ and Corran Addison, October, 14 2007, personal email message

racing kayaks had been the best designs for Whitewater. By 1980, slalom kayaks had become so specialized they were no longer suitable for Whitewater river running. Further, the International Canoe Federation had set the minimum length for slalom racing kayaks at 400cm.²⁹ It became apparent to those wanting shorter, more maneuverable boats in the late 1970's that such a development would have to come from outside the racing community.⁰

Boat designers, realizing this growing market, rethought traditional hull shapes and features. Cockpits increased in size for easier and safer entry and exit. Kayaks and canoes began shrinking in length making them more maneuverable. Between 1981 and 1982, WNC resident Allen Stancil designed a boat he named the Dancer that forever changed the way Whitewater kayaks were designed. The Dancer was the first boat to incorporate a significant rocker profile.³¹ Rocker, the amount of curvature on the hull of the boat, combined with length determines how maneuverable and fast a boat is. Furthermore, rocker makes a boat easier to handle in steeper and rougher Whitewater. This was important because the Whitewater rivers that were paddled in WNC in the early 1980's and the rivers that would be paddled in the near future required boats that were nimble and maneuverable to safely negotiate the steep, boulder-congested rapids that exist in the region. The trend of shorter, more maneuverable boats would continue into the twenty-first century.³⁷

⁰⁹ Joe Bauer, "Short Boats," *The American Whitewater Journal* Vol. 21 No. 2 (1976): 56.
http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/Journal_archive_.

³⁰ Bauer, 56.

³¹ Allen Stancil, September 22, 2007, personal email message.

³⁷ Corran Addison, September 16, 2007, personal email message and Shane Benedict, October 11, 2007, personal email message.

In addition to the changes in the designs of Whitewater canoes and kayaks, another revolution occurred during this period that drastically changed the way boats were made and how they performed. Up until this point, kayaks for Whitewater and racing were built from fiberglass. Fiberglass kayaks while stiff and light for racing, were not strong enough to handle the regular abuse that occurs from river running. Further, most boats used by Whitewater kayakers were not produced commercially. Because of their cost and fragility, many paddlers and clubs would make their own. By making a female mold over a commercially purchased boat, paddlers could make as many copies of that boat as needed all at the cost of the materials. Producing boats in this manner held a few drawbacks. Not only was this method a violation of the designer's design copyright, it also produced boats of marginal quality.³³ Duct tape was just as important of a safety item as a lifejacket or helmet because of the frequency of cracks and breaks that required on-water repairs.³⁴ Because of the rocky character of many Whitewater streams in WNC, fiberglass kayaks limited paddlers to only a small selection of the rivers that existed in the region. All this started to become a problem of the past in the early 1980's when plastic kayaks began replacing fiberglass boats.

Plastic kayaks made of polyethylene immediately proved themselves superior to their fiberglass predecessor in many respects. These new plastic boats were far more durable and could easily survive years of use. Structurally they were more solid than their fiberglass predecessors making them safer for paddlers. The first plastic kayak introduced available commercially was the Hollowform in 1973 manufactured just across

³³ John Wilson, "The Big Debate," *The American Whitewater Journal* Vol. 16 No. 4 (1971): 115.

http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/Journal_archive_.

³⁴ "New Kind of K-1," *The American Whitewater Journal* Vol. 26 No. 3 (1982): 31.

http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/Journal_archive_.

the border in Athens, Tennessee. Perception, located in nearby Easley, South Carolina also had plastic models available by 1978.³³ By around 1982, most kayak manufacturers had switched to rotationally molded polyethylene kayaks.³⁶ Canoes for Whitewater had traditionally been made from aluminum or fiberglass. In 1972, canoe manufacturer Old Town Canoe Company introduced the first royalet canoe, the "Snapper."³⁷ By the mid 1970's, most canoe manufacturers began switching to royalet. Royalet was superior for the rocky rivers of WNC because it would not dent like aluminum and was quieter and it was more durable and required less maintenance than fiberglass.³⁸

One of the largest problems paddlers faced in regards to equipment was that most of the gear they used was not designed specifically for Whitewater use. Because of the lack of Whitewater specific equipment, many boaters made equipment by themselves including boats, paddles, and lifejackets. The result was equipment that was inappropriate, unreliable, or simply unsafe for Whitewater use. A 1963 article in *AW Journal* recommended the use of an inflated bicycle tube wrapped in a figure eight around the body as a good, cheap life preserver.⁹ Leading boat designer and longtime professional paddler Corran Addison recalled using pieces of plywood nailed onto closet dowels for paddles, wearing a pair of water wings on his arms for a lifejacket, and cutting a hole in a plastic tablecloth to use as a sprayskirt as a young boy in South Africa in the early 1980's because no suitable equipment existed for him to use. He remembered

⁵ Sue Taft, "Whitewater and The Paddlesports Industry," *The American Whitewater Journal* Vol. 51 No. 4 (2006): 11. http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/Journal_archive_.

⁶ Graham Mackereth, Interviewed by Paddling Life, *Paddling Life Magazine*, <http://www.paddlinglife.net/article.php?id=130>

⁷ "New Product Announcement," *The American Whitewater Journal* Vol. 17 No. 2 (2006): 54. http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/Journal_archive_.

⁸ "Hull Materials," *Canoe Design and Construction*, <http://www.quintanna.com/mtnsports/madrivercanoe/2002/design.html>.

⁹ John Bombay, "Safety as We See It," *The American Whitewater Journal* Vol. 9 No. 1 (1963): 28. http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/Journal_archive_.

"From the first day I started kayaking I also had to be inventing... We had to think about every piece of equipment we used"⁴⁰ This was a reality for paddlers in WNC as much as anywhere. However, WNC set itself apart by being the site of a number of innovations in equipment and techniques over the next twenty years.

The equipment used by paddlers today is a giant step forward in safety and performance from the gear used by early paddlers. In many ways, it was the equipment rather than the skills of the paddlers that allowed more difficult rivers to be tackled. The 1970's and 1980's saw a significant increase in new and refined safety devices. Rescue throw bags, a coil of rope stuffed inside a nylon or canvas pouch designed to help rescue capsized and swimming paddlers, became popular in the late 1970's⁴¹. In the coming decades, throw bags became considered a must have safety accessory for all Whitewater paddlers.

As Whitewater boating was changing significantly in the last two decades of the twentieth century, the mountains of western North Carolina became a center for a lot of these changes. The Whitewater of the region inspired many paddlers to make a career from their passion. An entire industry emerged out of WNC dedicated to improving the experiences of Whitewater users. Today, three major kayak manufacturers are based out of North Carolina and four more exist in bordering states.

Corran Addison developed a name for himself as a designer as well as a kayaker while living in Asheville, North Carolina during the 1980's. Addison came to the United States from South Africa in 1986. He brought with him a design he had created on his own and it so impressed Bill Masters of Perception Kayaks that he was given a job as a

⁴⁰ Corran Addison, September 16, 2007, personal email message.

⁴¹ Ray Miller, "The Stuff-Bag Rescue Rope," *The American Whitewater Journal* Vol. 21 No. 5 (1976): 164. http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/Journal_archive_.

boat designer at the age of seventeen. During his time in North Carolina, Addison was responsible for creating multiple boats that revolutionized the sport and kayak design. He left Perception Kayaks in 1989 because he was not able to produce the designs he envisioned, which were radical at that time. Perceptions' Bill Masters recalls "He was a very good mold maker, and he learned incredibly fast, but many of his designs were very radical. We had to soften-up most of what he did."⁴² Addison maintains "They [Perception] didn't want to do anything new or innovative."⁴³

Despite the potential of his designs, kayak manufacturers were reluctant to produce his designs. They shared the opinion Bill Masters had in the 1980's that Addison's designs were too radical for the average paddler. He continued nonetheless and created a prototype that he lent out to others to try. A friend, Pat Miljour, was so impressed that with financial backing from actress Selene Thorns, the two created Savage Designs in Asheville in March 1994.⁴⁴ The boats he created had features that revolutionized the sport. He created the Gravity, the first planning hull kayak. At the time, every other Whitewater boat that had been produced prior had a displacement style hull. Displacement hulled kayaks feature rounded bottoms and displace the same amount of water in all conditions. Planning hulls have a flat surface on the bottom that displaces less water at speed, "planning out" over the surface of the water.⁴⁵ The concept was revolutionary for playboating because it allowed kayaks to surf and interact with waves in a similar fashion to a surfboard. The boats that Addison designed with Savage Designs

⁴² Eugene Buchanan, "Corran Addison," *Paddler Magazine*, http://www.paddlermagazine.com/issues/1998_67corran.html ^{4j}

Corran Addison, September 16, 2007, personal email message.

⁴⁴ Corran Addison, September 16, 2007, personal email message.

⁴⁵ "Sailing and Sailboat Glossary," *The Performance Sailing School*, <http://www.jworld-sailin2.com/2losd.htm>

were met with uncertainty from the paddling community. They did however get the attention of the industry. By the late 1990's, all Whitewater kayaks manufactured featured at least one innovation made by Addison during his years in North Carolina.

Corran Addison spent the time between his departure from Perception and founding Savage Designs, establishing himself as one of the top kayakers in the world from his home base in Asheville. His feats brought the region notoriety from the paddling community and also brought greater attention to the sport from non-paddlers. During this time he earned numerous first descents of local rivers and creeks, previously thought unrunnable including the Linville Gorge, Big Creek, and the Falls of the Little River.⁴⁷ In November of 1990 Addison ran 60ft Looking Glass Falls near Brevard, North Carolina wearing a batman costume resulting in multiple fractured vertebrae. The falls

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was the highest drop to have been run in North America at that point. Despite his injuries he showed the paddling community what was possible in a kayak. Longtime paddler Leland Davis recalls "Back then, it certainly was not commonly known if you would break your back by boofing a waterfall, much less how high you could safely go before that occurred. You might say that Corran's Looking Glass run was the point where that information entered the common consciousness of the paddling community."⁴⁹ Despite his many mishaps and brash personality, people slowly began recognizing his radical paddling technique and kayak designs had potential.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Corran Addison, September 16, 2007, personal email message.

⁴⁷ Ben Hayes, "First Descents," *SteepCreeks.com*, <http://www.steepcreeks.com/firstdescents.htm>

⁴⁸ Corran Addison, "Looking Back at What Started it All," *Imagine News*, <http://www.2imagine.net/blogger2006/dwaars.html>.

⁴⁹ Leland Davis, "In Corrans Defense," 11 October 2005 *Boatertalk*, <http://boatertalk.com/forum/BoaterTalk/888599> (20 October, 2007).

⁵⁰ Eugene Buchanan, "Corran Addison," *Paddler Magazine*, http://www.paddlermagazine.com/issues/1998_6/corran.html

Though perhaps less revolutionary, Phillip Curry created a company in the mountains of WNC that was both an industry leader and innovator. Further, he did this not once but twice. Curry grew up kayaking in WNC in the 1980's and shared the frustration that many others had over not having equipment made for Whitewater boating. Like Addison using plywood and dowels for a paddle, Curry had to be an inventor if he wanted a lifejacket for boating steep creeks in WNC. In 1993 Curry dropped out of Warren Wilson College to make lifejackets for himself and his friends. His company, Lotus Designs, located in Weaverville, North Carolina was the first lifejacket manufacturer to make products specifically for Whitewater paddling. Curry pioneered the lifejacket market, using new materials, creating freestyle and creek boating specific jackets, women's specific jackets, and children's jackets.³¹

In just a few years, Lotus Designs had become so successful that it attracted the attention of outdoor apparel giant Patagonia. Curry sold Lotus Designs to Patagonia in 1999 and they continued producing lifejackets in North Carolina. Three years later, Curry founded Astral Buoyancy Company in Asheville. Asheville, a hotspot for environmentally conscious and "green" individuals and businesses motivated Curry to work to "shift the industry's paradigm to much less toxic, easily recyclable foams and other buoyant technologies."³ The more environmentally responsible setting that Asheville offered inspired Curry to pay close attention to the source, ingredients, and by-products of what he bought, produced, and wasted.⁵³ In a short time, Curry had recaptured the market with his designs and he has continued to produce innovative and

³¹ Phillip Curry, September 15, 2007, personal email message.

⁵² Phillip Curry, September 17, 2007, personal email message.

[^] Phillip Curry, September 17, 2007, personal email message.

functional products for the Whitewater community inspired by the region's Whitewater as well as its "green" mindset.

Paddlers and innovators like Corran Addison and Phillip Curry played a very important role in allowing more difficult rivers to be run with their influence and inspiration starting in WNC and spreading rapidly across the country and beyond.. The equipment they created set new standards for function and safety. The change to plastic kayaks and royaalex canoes resulted in boats that could handle repeated abuse in rocky rivers. Shorter, more rockered boats were far more maneuverable and better suited for the steep, narrow, and technical creeks that exist in WNC. Furthermore, "extreme" athletes like Corran Addison demonstrated to the paddling community the uppermost limits of kayaking. Up until this point, paddlers had not pushed their bodies and their skills to the absolute limit. The plateau that was reached in the late 1980's and early 1990's by extreme kayakers has yet to be surpassed significantly.

The evolutions in skills and equipment opened up the boating possibilities in North Carolina more so than other regions. Previously the rivers that were run in North Carolina were larger, higher volume rivers such as the French Broad, the Nolichucky, the Nantahala, and the Chattooga?⁴ These rivers, while swift and large, often contained few obstacles to navigate and posed few risks to boaters. Unfortunately for early paddlers, the western half of the state was mountainous and the majority of rivers were small, steep creeks that fall down the sides of the mountains. The eastern portion of the state in comparison was flatter and held little Whitewater. Another asset that paddlers had were the numerous dam-release rivers that existed across the southeastern United States.

³⁴ Henry Wallace, "The Week of Rivers," *The American Whitewater Journal* Vol. 21 No. 1 (1976): 14. http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/Journal_archive_.

Though generally opposed by the Whitewater community because they dewater or make lakes out of naturally flowing stretches of rivers, dams also can provide consistent, year round flows on rivers that may otherwise have been too low to navigate in the dry summer months⁵⁵.

Following the lead of a few "extreme" paddlers, the paddling community began to realize the potential the area held for boating. The late 1970's to the early 1990's was a period of river exploration in WNC.⁵⁶ Many of the Whitewater rivers that are now considered "classics" like section 4 of the Chattooga, the Russell Fork, and the Green were first run during this period. The increase in boaters running steeper, more difficult Whitewater also pushed designers to design steep creek specific boats. The jump in technique, skill, and equipment led many to push for revising the International Scale of River Difficulty as rapids previously thought unrunnable or extremely difficult were now being run with greater frequency.³⁷

The mid 1990's onward saw a refining of the lessons learned in the past decade. Boat designers had a grasp of what features a boat needed to have to paddle well and each year they would offer a small refinement from the previous year's model.³⁸ Few rivers were left to be explored and that was only because they were extremely remote or rarely received sufficient rainfall to bring the water level to a navigable level. The skills of paddlers also remained at the plateau set in the late 1980's and early 1990's. Corran Addison's descent of Looking Glass Falls has only been repeated on two occasions since

³⁵ Forrest Galloway and Chris Koll, "Two Gallon River," *The American Whitewater Journal* Vol. 35 No. 5 (1990): 47.

³⁶ Chris Koll, "Steep Creek Fever," *The American Whitewater Journal* Vol. 34 No. 4 (1989): 23. http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/Journal_archive_.

³⁷ Charlie Walbridge, "AWA Forum," *The American Whitewater Journal* Vol. 27 No. 5 (1982): 27. http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/Journal_archive_.

³⁸ Corran Addison, September 16, 2007, personal email message.

1990.⁵⁹ Though kayakers since the early 1990's only rarely push the limit like their predecessors, there has been an increase in the number of highly talented kayakers in WNC.

The Green River was largely responsible for producing the number of expert Whitewater paddlers in WNC as well as setting a new standard for expert kayak runs. As "benchmark" runs were slowly downgraded and replaced, the titles for hardest rivers and best paddling region were passed around the Southeast. In 1980, the Upper Yough in Pennsylvania was acknowledged as the expert's proving grounds in the East. During the 1980's the title of the East's expert test run was passed on to the Russell Fork, another class V stream on the Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia border. By 1990, the title had been passed on to the Green Narrows, a stretch of Whitewater near Saluda, North Carolina.⁶⁰ The Green has been regarded by many as one of the best steep creek runs in North America.⁶¹ By the mid 1990's it was a run that was known by extreme boaters throughout the world. Because water is dependant upon electricity generation from the hydroelectric dam upstream, the Green can run over three hundred days per year. It is the ultimate training grounds for expert paddlers according to Tommy Hilleke, extreme kayaker, and former Asheville local. "This is where class V kayakers are made."⁶² In 1996 an annual race was started that grew to be the most revered as well as difficult creek race in the world. Since its first years it has attracted boaters from across the globe, all seeking the highest level of glory and respect that a win earned.

⁵⁹ Russ Kullmar in 1994 and Pat Keller and Austin Ratheman in 2004 per Corran Addison, September 16, 2007, personal email message, and Pat Keller, October 2, 2007, personal email message.

⁶⁰ Forrest Galloway and Chris Koll, "Two Gallon River," *The American Whitewater Journal* Vol. 35 No. 5 (1990): 48.

⁶¹ Christie Dobson and Dixie-Marie Prickett, "Top US Whitewater Cities, Asheville, NC," *The American Whitewater Journal* Vol. 51 No. 4 (2006): 46.

http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/Journal_archive_

⁶² Tommy Hilleke, September 20, 2007, personal email message.



Leland Davis running "Gorilla" on the Green Narrows ⁶³

⁶³ Andria Davis, "Leland on Gorilla," (image), *Green, NC*
<http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/Photo_detail_photoid_18023_size_big_>.

The number of highly skilled paddlers coming out of North Carolina and the publicity generated in the boating community led to WNC becoming known as a boating Mecca during the mid 1990's.⁶⁴ Its mountains and rivers provided the finest training ground for extreme kayakers. Between dam-release rivers and natural flow, class V Whitewater was available year round. Many boaters that learned to kayak in WNC went on to become respected as top athletes in their sport, like Hilleke who learned to kayak while attending Brevard College in Brevard, North Carolina or extreme kayaker and boat designer Shane Benedict who learned to kayak in a summer camp in Highlands, North Carolina.⁶⁵ Other accomplished paddlers chose WNC as a place to hang their hat and keep their skills sharp.⁶⁶ "You can find as high quality of runs here as you would traveling halfway around the world" said Hilleke.⁶⁷

The quality and potential of the Whitewater in western North Carolina could not possibly have been realized by Whitewater enthusiasts in the first half of the twentieth century. The technological breakthroughs in equipment that occurred in the region allowed rivers to be navigated that were thought previously unrunnable. Similarly, the athletes that have emerged from western North Carolina have continually set new records and opened new doors for the global paddling community. Today, the Whitewater industry in western North Carolina continues to produce the highest quality equipment and set the benchmark for the rest of the industry. The paddlers that use the regions Whitewater as a training grounds continue to produce results in competition globally.

⁶⁴ Christie Dobson and Dixie-Marie Prickett, "Top US Whitewater Cities, Asheville, NC," *The American Whitewater Journal* Vol. 51 No. 4 (2006): 46.

⁶⁵ Tommy Hilleke, September 20, 2007, personal email message, and Joe Carberry, "Whitewater Town USA," *Paddler Magazine Online*, September-October 2005.

⁶⁶ Tommy Hilleke, September 20, 2007, personal email message.

⁶⁷ Tommy Hilleke, September 20, 2007, personal email message.

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