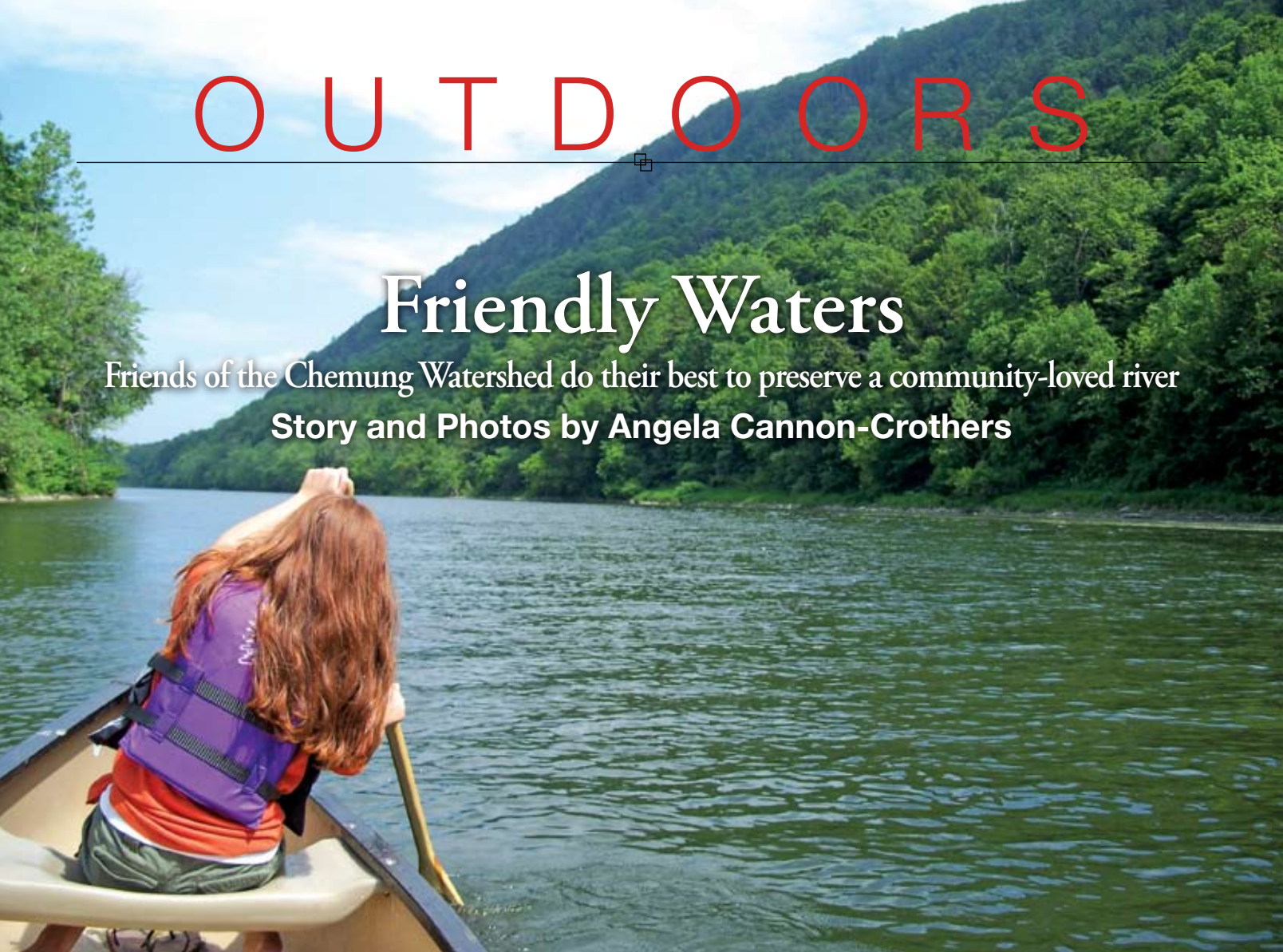


Friendly Waters

Friends of the Chemung Watershed do their best to preserve a community-loved river
Story and Photos by Angela Cannon-Crothers



Seven years ago, Jim Pfiffer was canoeing along the Chemung River in Elmira, New York when he was fortunate enough to catch an array of colors on the flowing water's surface at sunset. He took a picture. When he developed the image, however, he was disturbed to find garbage distorting one entire corner of his shot. Pfiffer decided to put together some volunteers to clean the river banks. The group managed to haul a lot of garbage from the river (over ten tons to date) in a water system that supplies 68 percent of the local municipality's drinking water. Pfiffer knew the garbage would just keep coming if things didn't change.

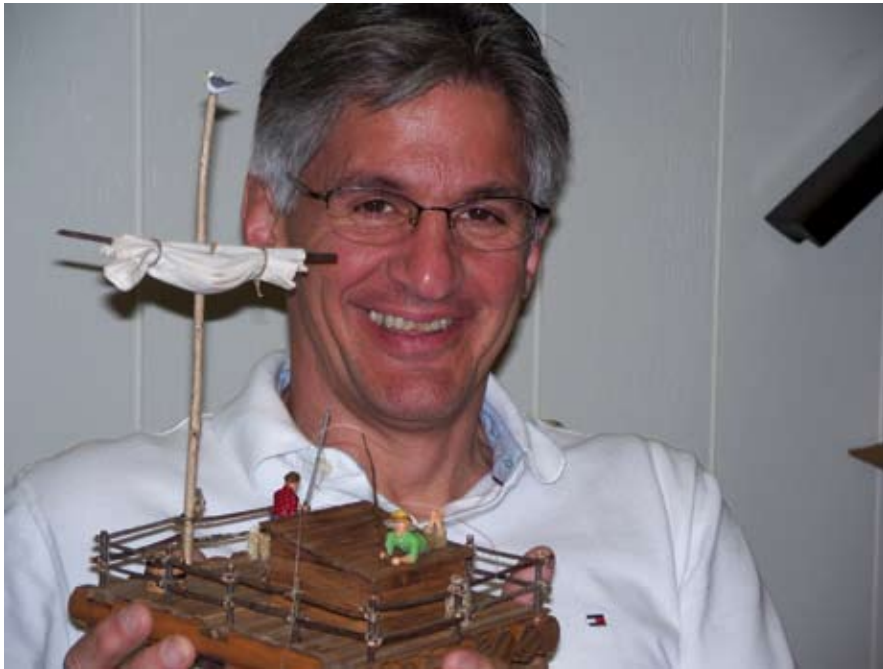
As if by fate, Cornell Cooperative Extension announced a grant to do a study on the perception of the Chemung River around that same time. Pfiffer got involved. "People who'd lived here all their lives didn't seem to know much about the river," said Pfiffer. "Past floods, like the one that hit in 1972, had distorted people's view," he added. Quite literally, tall cement barriers lining the river edge made it difficult for anyone in the city to get to the water, or even see over the wall's edge. As well, a water control dam has made portaging nearly impossible. In 2007, CCE obtained a follow-up grant to create a Master Plan on the use, protection, and future development of the Chemung River thus creating the Chemung River Council.

"The Master Plan was full of great ideas to help get people

connected to the river – with trails, a whitewater sluice at the dam for kayakers, picnic areas, boating derbies, concerts and eco-education," said Pfiffer. "Unfortunately, there weren't any funds to make it happen." But Pfiffer was too hooked on the river to let the plan stall. He found financial support from Chemung County and the municipalities of Elmira, Big Flats, Southport, Chemung, Casella Waste Systems and private donations to help fund a non-profit organization to implement the Master Plan through 2013. Pfiffer quit his journalism career of 27 years and took on the director role of The Friends of the Chemung River Watershed in December 2008. Since then, the goals of the Master Plan the original Chemung River Council set up, have been roiling ahead like a river after ice break-up.

"We're more than just the Chemung River," Pfiffer tells me. "Because the Chemung River eventually feeds the Susquehanna and then the Chesapeake Bay, tributaries like the Cohocton, the Canisteo, Cowanesque, and Tioga, as well as the surrounding hills and valleys, are all part of the watershed." The river's system now includes boat and fishing access areas with kiosks explaining the unique history and qualities of each site. River and tributary hosts help maintain and check each area.

"It's all about partnerships," Pfiffer says as he takes me on a driving tour of all the local Chemung Friends sites along the River in Elmira. "I tell people – I want your help to improve



Above: Jim Pfffer holding a model Huck Finn raft for the rafting race. **Background:** Our author and her daughter, Maeya, took a canoeing trip down the Chemung River near Elmira.

the environment, economy, and quality of life right in your own backyard!" That, he says, is an easy sell. We stop at Katy Leery Park Community Garden - an old dilapidated tennis court on the upper banks has been turned into a Community Garden of raised beds loaded with beans, squash, and greens with plans for berries and fruit trees to come. Teachers can utilize the garden and riverside for hands-on education. "No matter what the subject is," says Pfffer, "you can connect it to the river."

At another site we visit a solar-powered weather station and barbecue pavilion with picnic tables, at yet another area we tour mountain bike and hiking trails with Tom and Carol Trifoso, who started the Finger Lakes Mountain Bike Club and help maintain and promote a section of trail. We visit future bike trails in the making, the historic Chemung River Pump House, a music concert area and an island overlook full of nesting ring-billed gulls. I'm gazing out over the river just south of the dam when I see three men out wading in the wide shallows below the dam; the rhythmic sound of heavy clinking against slate rock echoes through the air.

"What are they doing?" I ask Pfffer.

"They're fishermen," he tells me. "They're banging the rocks to stun minnows so they can use them for bait."

I nod.

What: Model Huck Finn Raft Contest
When: Saturday, September 25
 Additional Information: "Make a model" raft contest and derby.
Cost: \$5 Entry Fee
Prizes: First place winners receive \$100. Second place finishers earn \$50. A \$50 "Spirit of Huck Finn" award goes to the youth who builds a raft that best symbolizes Huck's raft.
Sponsored by: the Friends of the Chemung River Watershed, Cornell Cooperative Extension's "Farm-City Days" and the Chemung Valley History Museum.
Info: For more information and race rules, contact Lee at (607) 562-3988 or visit www.chemungriverfriends.org and click on "events" for the Huck Finn Model Raft Race details.

"There are a lot of families who depend on the fish in this river for food too," adds Pfffer.

I can see what Pfffer means when he says the Chemung River connects to everything; I can feel that river running through and rolling on, from its wild areas for paddling, to its history, its trails for biking and hiking, its plentiful fishing, community activities, and opportunities for time spent in the soothing presence of flowing water. Pfffer is right - "a river runs through us." 📍

Angela Cannon-Crothers is a freelance writer and outdoor educator living in the Finger Lakes region of New York.

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