

The Tale of the Karmic Oar

The Cornell rowing tradition is to present senior oarsmen with an oar upon graduation if an old set is being retired. I never received an oar because by my senior year I had become too heavy to be a coxswain and, frankly, I should have gone out to row for the 150 pound lightweights. Actually, I'm not even sure that coxswains got an oar. Maybe we just got an old rudder. This was back in the 1960s when wooden shells actually had a rudder attached to the stern, and not that little movable fin behind the coxswain's seat that they call a rudder nowadays. But I digress.

I always wanted a Cornell oar. The closest I had was the pledge paddle I made in 1965 fashioned from a one inch by seven inch by five foot pine board stolen from the lumber yard near the boathouse and made to look like an oar using genuine carnelian red boathouse paint and the team rigger's oar stencil. Nice, but far from a real oar.



At my 25th Cornell Reunion in 1993, I had hoped to see a few of my old boatmates from back in the day. Although I had a great time going back out on the inlet for a row with the alumni, I was disappointed that I knew none of the participants.



As our fiftieth reunion approached in 2018, I was determined to get at least a few of the oarsmen back, particularly from our 1965 Freshman boat, which was the greatest crew I had ever been a part of. We beat Navy, Syracuse, Yale, and Princeton to start the season and were ranked top seed in the Eastern Sprints. We would have matched that seed if we hadn't suffered a disastrous crab in the last three strokes and lost to Harvard. We went on to beat Pennsylvania and were looking for redemption in the IRA regatta, but we were severely weakened when we lost the heart of our "engine room" to mononucleosis and took third place behind Navy and Dartmouth. But, we won together, we lost together.

With the help of CornellConnect, I sought out the members of our freshman boat and successfully made contact with them all, with the exception of Bob Kelley, who had passed away eight years ago. Though only one or two had even thought about attending the reunion in June, the surviving eight members of the 1965 First Freshman Eight made the trek from all over the United States to Ithaca to once again paddle on the inlet with Rick Dehmel, '68 filling in for Bob. We almost made it out onto Cayuga Lake, but we discovered that 72+ year olds have only so much stamina left.

Rick, who rowed with the lightweights and with the freshman heavies towards the end of the 1965 season, fashioned reproduction racing shirts exactly matching the jerseys of the time. After the row, we convened for the obligatory ice cream stop at Purity on Cascadilla Street. That evening, Bruce Moulton, '68 organized a dinner at ZaZa's Cuchina. And after we had all returned to our everyday lives, John Lindl, '68 launched a drive for us to buy a new Empacher eight for the program. That boat was dedicated and launched in September of 2019. Bob Kelley and Arnie Sierk (who passed just four months after our joyous 2018 reunion) were honored by gunwale inscriptions next to the seats where they rowed. In the bow, we recognized our debt to Clayton Chapman, '57, our freshman coach, who also attended the christening of the "Class of '68." Bob's widow, Merijean, christened the new boat with traditional Cayuga Lake finish line water, with Arnie's son, Michael, cheering her on. Naturally, we took the new boat out for an inaugural row on the inlet.

Fifty years had done little to separate the common bonds forged so many years ago. Even if we didn't row like it, we felt young again, just like the old days. Personally, I was thrilled to have gotten the ball rolling, snowballing into such a memorable event rekindling valued friendships and providing long term benefits to the Cornell rowing program.



Cornell 1965 First Freshman Eight Reunion, June, 2018:

Bruce Moulton, Jack Lyons, Tom Noble, Arnie Sierk, David Hill,
Pete Robinson, John Lindl, Paul Ericson, Rick Dehmel

of the oar was too much to handle when Arnie left Ithaca in 1968. Maybe he gave it to a fellow oarsman who could safely transport and care for it. Maybe Arnie didn't want an oar he had probably broken with his strength. We just don't know.

I was bold enough to ask Chris if I could have the oar if nobody else wanted it. She replied, "After checking with our family, no one feels that they need/want or can accommodate the sweep that was found with Arnie's name on it...I know Arnie would be happy for you to have it if you still wish." The current owner said, "...it has a good-sized crack in it so it is kind of delicate." After the shell christening, on the way home from Ithaca, we picked up the oar from Cape Cod, the oar longer than the car and protruding from the trunk of our Prius and sounding the "open door" alarm all the way home.



So does initiating a chain of events that results in Cornell University receiving a brand new eight oared shell deserve my receiving a 52-year-old cracked oar? Is that karma? I think so. I also think it's a fair deal. In fact, a very good deal.

David R. Hill, '68
Chebeague Island, Maine
October, 2019

But, remember the oar that I had lusted for? For months, I had toyed with the idea of asking Coach Todd Kennett if he had an old vintage oar laying around the boathouse that he could spare, but I didn't feel comfortable making that request.

Then out of the blue, I received an e-mail from Arnie Sierk's widow, Christina, stating that Arnie's oar had been found in a house on Cape Cod, in Harwich, Massachusetts. The new owner of the house had taken the initiative to track down Chris and offer the oar back to her and her family. Nobody knew how the oar had made its way to its present home. Maybe the 12' 2" length