

Spanning the Gap

Living Treasures:
Ruth Jones



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Spanning the Gap
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The Living Treasures Program

by Superintendent John Donahue

People often comment on what a joy it must be to work for the National Park Service and the wonderful opportunities we experience as employees.

They are, of course, correct in their assumptions about the grandeur we sometimes find in our every day work. However, one of the greatest results of being an NPS employee is the chance to spend time with the unique individuals we meet along our path through the nation's heritage.

I think of these special people much in the way the Japanese think of their living cultural resources as "Living Treasures."

Here at the recreation area, we have many fabulous people who are truly "Living Treasures." It is my intention to interview and visit with many of these fine folks for upcoming issues of this newsletter. Listening to the stories of these individuals is experiencing history first hand through their eyes and their memories.

This first "Living Treasure," interview concerns probably the most recognizable symbol of life and recreation on the Delaware River: everyone's guide and my new friend Ruth Jones.



(Left, top) Ruth Jones at the Living Treasure Interview.
(National Park Service Photo)



(Above) Ruth and her parents, Ernie and Edna Olschewsky, (and Tippy) in the summer of 1941.

(Below) Ernie and Edna Olschewsky on the terrace above Kittatinny Point Beach in 1964. Ernie built the flagstone terrace and original staircase himself.

Ruth is emblematic of the very nature of this region. Just as the Delaware River flows on endlessly with no obstruction that can resist its gentle persistence, neither can anyone deter Ruth Jones from bringing people to enjoy the river.

We hope that this new feature helps us all get to know the wonderful and colorful individuals who people this magnificent river valley and add the very character to the "endless mountains" that make our stories worth telling. Let us know if you enjoy it and if you know some "Living Treasure" that we should highlight here.



Ruth Jones: a Life along the River

by Interpretive Specialist Michelle Jacques

Ruth has always lived along the Delaware. She was born in 1932 and her early years were spent at Karamac, then a popular summer resort on the New Jersey side of the Gap. Her father, Ernie Olschewsky, a young emigrant from Germany, worked for the resort, and her mother, Edna Koutz, came from a local vegetable farming family. The young parents saw to it that their only daughter got to her 2-room school house in Columbia NJ. Year-round life at Karamac was paced to the seasons and the river winding by.

Wanting their own business, Ruth's parents took out a loan to buy a mile of riverfront down-stream at the Gap. Ruth's mother chose the name for their new home: Kittatinny Beach. "A great name," Ruth muses. "It means *Endless mountains*. When you are paddling down the river there are always endless mountains ahead of you."

The small family built up the property from a row of wooden lockers to a colony with cottages, a beach, and restaurant/bar they leased out. Ernie himself built a 41-step flagstone staircase from the beach to



Ernie and Edna and canoe livery, 1950's style. In their first years of the livery business, Edna took reservations with a pencil and a composition notebook. Kittatinny Canoes is now on its third system of computers to handle reservations.



The livery at Kittatinny Point in 1964. The company, still bearing the name *Kittatinny*, now includes 1100 canoes and kayaks, 800 rafts and

the riverbank above. The Olschewskys also rented out a half-dozen canoes and rowboats to rent for navigating the calmer waters of Kittatinny Pool.

One day, a guest asked if Ernie would drive him upstream with a canoe in his pick-up, so he could paddle back downstream with the current: the "river trip" business was born. Edna penciled in the reservations in a composition notebook, and the operation thrived with the passing years. "The old resort business was fading then." Ruth notes. "People were coming in cars instead. In 1953 Route 80 came through, so we had to move a lot of our buildings."

Ruth married Frank Jones, who joined in the business, and the couple settled in at Kittatinny and had their first child. Yet the river -- and the government -- were not done shaping their lives. In August of 1955, when Ruth's son was just a year old, Hurricanes Connie and Diane delivered a foot of rain and a 100-year flood. The water came up over the bank, and halfway up the windows of the inn (now Kittatinny Point Visitor Center), and to the roof of Ruth and Frank's house. "It was mind-boggling," Ruth recalls.

"My parents lost their home," Ruth continues. "The foundation crumbled and the house just collapsed. I saw my father turn gray in 3 months." Gone was the careful fruit of a decade of hard work, and, though they did not see it yet, gone also was the valley's isolation from the federal consciousness. A 10-year Small Business Loan helped put the family back on its feet. They even ran the restaurant, with Ernie as bartender playing *doodle-sack* (or *doodlesock*, a one-man band) to tunes on the jukebox. Then came the proposal to control any future flooding -- the Tocks Island Dam and its surrounding reservoir lands.

Ernie Olschewsky died on September 1, 1965, the day that legislation creating the recreation area was signed into law. Ruth speaks as if it were yesterday: "We assumed we would get lifetime rights. We were

tubes, and 300+ campsites on the Upper Delaware.



On the river: like father ... Ernie Olschewsky and a young passenger at Karamac NJ in 1929. Ernie's handiwork is still visible at the concrete riverside platform along Karamac Trail.



... like daughter. Ruth and a friend put in from a recent private clean-up run. Ruth still paddles several hundred miles on the Delaware each year. (In the tradition of her mother's family, she also maintains a vegetable garden.)

below the (proposed) dam, and were providing recreation service. But the Army Corps of Engineers condemned our lands." Ruth thinks that the Army Corps "made an example" of her family? Ruth thinks so. "They didn't need my little yellow house (at Kittatinny). My husband Frank was very involved in *Nix on Tocks* (the fight to defeat the dam.)" She also feels that the Army Corps tactics worked. "A lot of older people sold off saying: *Ah, look what happened to the Olschewskys and the Jones!* My mother had to leave. She was all shook up. Older people should have been given lifetime rights," Ruth reflects. "It's hard to transplant an old tree."

In the end, though, *Nix on Tocks* won; the dam was stopped. But the land at Kittatinny, which even a flooding river hadn't taken away from them, passed from the hands of those who had built it from the operation up -- twice. Another 10 years of work was gone.

The "river trip" service begun by the Olschewskys still bears the name Kittatinny, but now, as president of Kittatinny Canoes in Dingmans Ferry PA, Ruth oversees a fleet of 1100 canoes and kayaks, 800 rafts and tubes, and 500+ campsites on the Upper Delaware. Kittatinny Canoes also provides guided trips and paddling lessons, and every year sponsors the nationally acclaimed *River Clean-up*. Ruth claims her main focus is cleaning up the river, but she also has an eye on river wildlife, invasive plants, and the recreation industry's stake in overall waterflow in the Delaware River Basin.

"I'm glad we stopped the dam," she admits. (It would have been) "a crime to dam up a beautiful, free-flowing river. But I am glad the government established the recreation area, too. Otherwise it would be one condo after another on the river -- that would be another crime. Now the river is being preserved for me to paddle on, and for my children and my grandchildren to paddle on."



Ruth and son Dave, somehow still smiling, at the grand sorting of the junk after the River Clean-up.



Ruth's grandchildren counting tires at the River Clean-up.

(Photos directly above are courtesy of Ruth Jones and Kittatinny Canoes.)



Ruth Jones and John Donahue at the *Living Treasure* Interview on August 20, 2004. *(National Park Service Photo)*