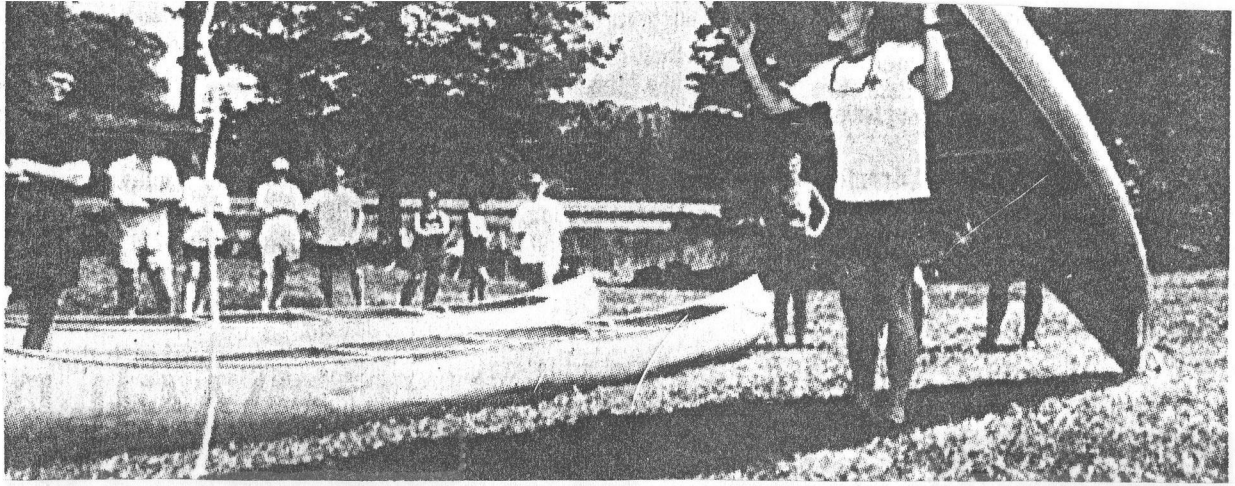

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Record Photo By Becky Kirkland

Bob Benner Teaches Students How To Do One-Man Canoe Carry

Neighboring Notable

Area 'Guru Of Canoeing' Retiring From WPCC Job

By COLLEEN CONGEL
Record Staff Writer

MORGANTON — Dean of Appalachian White Water, Bob Benner will say his farewell to Western Piedmont Community College at the end of the month.

He is renown across county lines as a canoeist, author, physical fitness educator and hiking-trail builder.

Benner, the "guru of canoeing" in western North Carolina, has utilized his love for the watersport to teach students for the last 26 years, according to one of his first students, Steve Erikson, who also is Burke County's planning director.

Boy Scout trips triggered his love for nature as a young boy in Atlanta, Ga.

A Burke resident since 1970, Benner moved to the county after he was given the opportunity to start a canoeing program at Western Piedmont Community College. As coordinator of WPCC Physical Education, he

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'Guru Of Canoeing' Retiring From Post

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has had ongoing rapport with students eager to learn about outdoor sports.

Not only does he relish water sports, he thrives on any activity that takes place out of doors amid trees, brush and tall grass.

"I'm fortunate enough that I have been able to do things that I've always enjoyed," Benner said. "My philosophy has always been to try to make a difference.

"I have had many mentors over the years. I will miss all the contact with the students."

Over the years, Benner has canoed in the eastern United States and Canada. He competed and took first place in his last race, the C-2 Master Division of the Open Canoe Championship in 1992.

His most memorable canoeing trip was a when he broke his leg going down Savage River in western Maryland. His first day at WPCC, he hobbled enclosed in a cast from his hip to his ankle.

Sam Ervin, from the Western Piedmont Council of Governments, joined Erikson with students in Benner's first class at WPCC. "He's the father of whitewater canoeing in Western North Carolina," Ervin said. "He's really helped a lot of people get involved who otherwise wouldn't have. He has a lot of patience as a teacher, having people in his class with no experience."

Erikson said canoeing has changed since his pioneering trips with Benner. 'We had aluminum canoes back then, and after each trip, we would beat the dents out of the canoes so they would be ready for the next weekend," Erikson said.

"There are many reasons why I canoe, for the serenity and excitement," Benner said. "I enjoy observing nature and have developed a skill for competition."

He is remembered most often by his canoeing partners as a cautious and thorough canoeist. "We always respected him and trusted his judgment. He's a great person to scout rapids and plan an approach," Erikson said. "Whenever anyone wants to know anything about canoeing, you just asked Bob."

Benner is instrumental in introducing people to an environmentally conscious and nondestructive sport. "I have enabled them to see things they wouldn't normally see, and I have established interest in conserving them," Benner said. "More people need to save our rivers and streams. You tend to put more time and effort into things you're comfortable with."

Not only has Benner taught canoeing, he has instructed all outdoor courses at WPCC, including hiking, backpacking and rock climbing.

Benner is the author of "Carolina Whitewater," published in the early '70s, which has been rewritten with the help of his son, David Benner. He also co-authored "A Paddler's Guide to Eastern North Carolina," in the '80s with Tom McCloud.

He also is involved in many outdoor volunteer committees. He is the coordinator for Central Blue Ridge Task Force of Mountains to Sea Trail, which is responsible for the trail construction and maintenance. When completed, it will cover 750 miles statewide.

"I hope to walk it when it is completed (in four years)," Benner said. "I would also like to establish a more active task force with retired people. It is a good way for hikers and backpackers to put something back in and to build a trail. It is hard work but it is very satisfying to contribute to something that may last for 50 years."

Dwayne Stutzman, from the N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation, works alongside volunteers like Benner. He has known him since 1988 and says he wishes there were more volunteers like Benner, who are tremendous workers.

"We have canoed and hiked together, and have gone bushwhacking to lay out trails," Stutzman said. "Bob is a person when he decides to do something, he does it, and tries to do it right."

Benner recommends that individuals interested in canoeing acquire good basic instruction and become knowledgeable about equipment. "The better condition you're in, the more enjoyable it will be," Benner said.

In recognition of Benner's retirement, his family and friends are playing host to a roast in his honor.

June 10 has been designated by "Bushwhackers Anonymous" as the day to recognize, honor and roast Benner for conservation leadership, teaching and sharing the enjoyment of outdoor life.

Proceeds from the $10 ticket price will go toward starting a scholarship fund at WPCC honoring Benner along with Ruby Pharr.

Pharr, a biology teacher at WPCC is known for her botany and ecology field trips.