

Sunday

July 10, 2005

Business Editor: Fred Pace
Phone: (304) 255-4466
or toll-free at (800) 950-0250
E-mail: fpace@
register-herald.com

Money

THE REGISTER-HERALD

▼ **DOW**
+145.70 at 10,499.14

▼ **RUSSELL 2000**
+19.10 at 662.14

▲ **NASDAQ**
+55.51 at 2,112.88

▲ **AMEX**
+6.27 at 1,561.01

▼ **S&P 500**
+17.42 at 1,211.86

▲ **NYSE**
+84.99 at 7,330.58

■ STOCKS ON PAGES 4B & 5B

North American River Runners celebrates 30 years

PASSION FOR WHITEWATER



Note the lack of helmets in the early 1980s North American River Runners rafting trip photo. Mark Lewis, front left, helps as part of the

COURTESY PHOTO
crew in this guide training run down the New River. Lewis has been with the company for over 20 years and is now the director of sales.

Whitewater outfitter ran its first river trip in 1975

Frunk Lukacs was a banker and stockbroker in Toledo, Ohio, when he took his first whitewater rafting trip. “We ran a river in Pennsylvania in 1970,” Lukacs recalled. “I was also a weekend warrior in the Marine Corps at that time and I was always looking for outdoor adventure.”

He continued whitewater rafting when he could in the early '70s and one of those trips brought him to West Virginia.

“Everyone said West Virginia had some of the best whitewater in the world,” Lukacs said. “I was excited.”

It didn't take long for Lukacs to develop a passion for whitewater. “It seemed to be the only thing I wanted to do with my free time,” he said. “To say that I loved it was an understatement.”

While in West Virginia, Lukacs had a vision. “I had a dream in which I opened my own whitewater rafting company in West Virginia,” he said.

His dream reached fruition on the first Saturday of August 1975 when his new company – North American River Runners (NARR) – ran its first river trip with Lukacs at the helm.

“We had a small group from Maumee, Ohio,” he said. “The next day I guided a group from Dominic's Restaurant, which is also in Ohio.”

With two rafts and a Ford van, Lukacs started the fourth whitewater outfitter in the New River Gorge area.

“The first personal flotation devices (PDFs) used at NARR were Helmsman brand from Sears,” he said. “Believe it or not, they held the highest rating for Type III jackets at that time.”

Lukacs took his dream and his new company and eventually built one of the premier whitewater rafting companies in the country.

“I had no idea the company would grow to the size it is today,” Lukacs said.



In 1977 NARR launched its first trips on the Gauley River and in 1983 the company opened the NARR Kayak School, which focuses on instruction for kayak beginners. It is the oldest

continuously operating kayak school in West Virginia. “Kayaking is really growing in popularity,” he said.

Lukacs said in 1986 helmets became a part of normal equipment in paddle boats. “There have been huge improvements in safety equipment and materials that make the rafts over the years,” he said. “It's funny to see the old pictures when nobody was wearing a helmet in the boat.”

NARR converted its fleet of rafts to all U.S.-made, self-bailing boats in 1992.

In 1995 the company opened the experiential education program and the high and low ropes courses were constructed. “We became the first outfitter in the state to offer teambuilding services,” Lukacs said.

In 1966 NARR expanded accommodation facilities at its base camp by building a neighborhood of tent cabins and the High Country Café restaurant.

In 2002 NARR constructed one of the best bathhouses in the industry, which made a total of 26 showers at the base resort.

Today NARR uses a fleet of more than 100 rafts and 25 vehicles. The company's resort-style base of operations covers over 100 acres and its services have expanded from “mild to wild” whitewater rafting to add teambuilding programs, high and low rope challenge courses, a kayak school, paintball, a climbing wall, a super swing, basketball and volleyball. Amenities include campgrounds and tent cabins, bunkhouses for groups, large bathhouses, a restaurant and an outfitter shop.

“The biggest overall change over the past 30 years is that we are more than just rafting companies now,” Lukacs said. “There are campgrounds, teambuilding, lodging and various other activities and amenities.”

Today NARR employs more than 180 people, hosts over 16,000 guests each

MONEY MATTERS



Fred Pace



North American River Runners owner Frank Lukacs stands in front of a group getting ready to leave for a rafting trip.

LEW WHITENER / THE REGISTER-HERALD



North American River Runners owner Frank Lukacs seated left, with employees, from left, Nora Morris, Mike Sharp, Mark Lewis, Josh Cave and Brian Jennings.

LEW WHITENER / THE REGISTER-HERALD

season and is one of the driving forces behind West Virginia's multi-million dollar adventure sport industry that thrives on whitewater rafting.



Lukacs and his wife, Sharon McNeill, live in Canvas and enjoy their close-to-nature lifestyle. "West Virginia is our home," he said. "I don't think we could ever live in a big city again."

McNeill operates Caledonia Café in downtown Summersville.

Last week, Lukacs was recognized during a dinner at NARR's High Country Café with the "Governor's Distinguished West Virginian Award" for his contribution to the state's economy. "It was an honor," Lukacs said.



What is next at NARR? "I will continue to develop more educational and teambuilding programs for corporate and school groups," Lukacs said. "This plan follow our mission statement:

To excite, educate and entertain in a professional and fun environment for our guests and staff."

NARR offers one-and multi-day trips that are mild for families with young children or senior citizens to wild for the more adventurous or experienced rafters.

The 30th year for NARR is expected to be one of its best. Great water conditions and rising temperatures are leading many Americans back to whitewater rafting in 2005.

"We've seen an upsurge in business this season," said David Brown, executive director of America Outdoors, the nation's leading association of outfitters and guides. "The season got off to a slow start in much of the east due to a cool spring, but with temperatures rising outfitters are seeing a spike in their reservations."

Lukacs said those who go whitewater rafting learn things that will last a lifetime. "The rivers have taught us passion as well as hard work," he said. "I found that people actually thrive on challenging themselves on a daily basis. We attempt to give those lessons back to our guests every day in the hope that they discover the same passion and kinship with nature and the rivers that we feel."

For more information about Lukacs or North American River Runners, call 1-800-950-2585, or visit the website at www.NARR.com.

- E-mail: fpace@register-herald.com

