

The Boston Globe

How Pawtucket, R.I., came to celebrate dragon boat racing

By **Ellen Albanese** Globe Correspondent, Updated May 14, 2019, 6:44 p.m.



Dragon boat racing on the Blackstone River in Pawtucket, R.I. (JAMES TOOMEY/BLACKSTONE VALLEY TOURISM COUNCIL)

How did Pawtucket, R.I., become a hotbed of dragon boat racing, with an annual race and festival that draws 35-40 teams and up to 10,000 spectators? The story begins with two immigrants who came to this country with nothing, achieved success, and wanted to give their new community something from home.

As Robert Billington, president and CEO of the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council, tells the story, back in the mid-'90s, the council was trying to think of new ways to promote the area's chief asset, the Blackstone River. "One day, Mr. Yip and Mr. Ng walked into the office and said if we really wanted to promote the waterfront, we ought to do something interesting like dragon boat racing," he recalled. Billington was intrigued but had no idea where to start.

Louis Yip and Sunny Ng grew up together in Tai O, a fishing village of Hong Kong. As boys, they loved to watch dragon boat racing on the river. “When we were little, we’d try to jump into the dragon boats,” recalled Ng with a laugh. “Sometimes they’d let us get in and paddle, even though we were not really strong enough.”

In their early 20s, Yip and Ng came to the United States, eventually settling in Rhode Island. Yip opened a Chinese restaurant, and Ng launched a business selling Chinese gifts and antiques. Today, some 40 years later, they are principals in the Tai-O Group, a leading real estate development company in the Blackstone Valley.

“Bob was always talking about how much people enjoyed the river,” Yip recalled. “I told him you can attract a lot of people to the river for dragon boat racing.”

Yip and Ng arranged for two wooden boats to be built for the council in Hong Kong, and the first race took place in 1999. The race’s popularity grew, and when the wooden boats wore out, the tourism council rented Fiberglass boats. In 2009, the council hired a professional race company out of Toronto, 22 Dragons. Around the same time the city of Pawtucket invested over \$2 million to provide electricity, parking, and landscaping at the race site, which now also serves as a festival site, a boat launch to Narragansett Bay, and a popular fishing spot.

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For the 2004 race, Taiwan sent six new boats. These heavier and more stable Taiwan-style vessels made it possible to add a flag-catching element to the race. As the boats sprint to the finish, a crew member has to catch a pennant suspended over the water. If he misses it, the boat gets penalized 2 seconds. “The excitement comes when someone rides the head of a dragon and reaches out to grab the pennant,” Billington said.

Dragon boat captain Carlos Costa of Johnston, R.I., who has been racing dragon boats for more than 10 years, says the flag catch is distinctive to this race. The more stable Taiwan-style boats also make it possible for community teams to participate, he added, which enhances the camaraderie. “In the last 11 years, I’ve seen a lot of the same faces,” he said. “These people become your friends. They’re the ones pushing you to try harder.” Costa also notes that Pawtucket is the only race he’s seen that gives out prize money.

“From the beginning, we thought people who come to the races would also want to learn about the Chinese culture,” Billington said. The concurrent Taiwan Day Festival, run with the assistance of the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Boston, features crafts and games, Taiwanese food, dragon dancers on stage, and the popular dumpling eating contest.

This year's races will be held on Sept. 7 at Festival Pier, Pawtucket. Six new boats from Taiwan will be added to the fleet, for a total of 12 on the 1,000-foot course. As details become available, they will be posted on dragonboatri.com. A reception on Sept. 6 to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the race and the 40th anniversary of the Taiwan Relations Act passed by Congress will feature a lighted dragon boat parade.

"Dragon boats have become the glue in this community and beyond," Billington said. Speaking of Yip and Ng, he added, "Much of what we do here we couldn't do without them."