History

THE REAL BEGINNING OF THE WCA

by Sandy Richardson

(Sandy Richardson, as well as being a former vice-chairman of the WCA, has been a trip organizer, served on the Outings and Conservation Committees, and was editor of The Wilderness Canoeist *and* Nastawgan *from 1977 to 1985. Of the current WCA membership only he and Glenn Spence were present at that historic meeting at Seneca College in 1975.) This story was originally published in the Nastawgan Spring 2023 Journal.*

It was sometime in the spring of 1974, I think, during preparations for a trip on the Nahanni River, that I came across an application form for the Wilderness Canoe Association in Margesson's, a camping/outdoor store on Adelaide St. in Toronto. (Dave Margesson, I later learned, was one of the founders of the WCA.) It was the name of the group that attracted me: the *Wilderness* Canoe Association. It promised to be more than just a social club for weekend paddlers. I sent off my $5 and looked forward to joining a group of serious canoeists interested in exploring our vast wilderness heritage.

In due course, I received a welcoming letter and a copy of Volume I, Number I of *Beaverdamn*, the Wilderness Canoe Association's "interim" newsletter. I learned that the association had been formed in late 1973 in Orillia. It had wonderfully ambitious aims encompassing education, safety, and the environment, and even bringing a test case before the courts to preserve traditional portage rights. But something was missing. Among all these lofty ideas there was almost no mention of members actually doing any wilderness canoeing. Only one club trip (already past) was listed and no up-coming meetings. That was it; no further newsletters or other communication followed.

Now I was not the only one who had found an application and joined up; in fact, many of my paddling buddies had as well. We were all disappointed that a club with such a fine name could be such a bust. For most of us that is as far as it would have gone – another wasted $5. But not for my friend and work colleague Gord Fenwick. Gord, as some of you may recall, was not one to take anything lying down. After months of hearing nothing he was on the phone to the secretary, eventually forcing her to call a general meeting even though the chairman and many of the executive could not be found or were no longer interested. That meeting, arranged largely by Gord, was held in early 1975 at Seneca College in King City.

About 25 people attended the meeting; some were folks who had joined on speculation, like myself, and others who were canoeing friends whom Gord and I had invited. At that meeting we replaced the old executive. Gord volunteered to serve as chairman and I as vice-chairman. Pat Armstrong and Alex Stoddart from the original executive stayed on as secretary/treasurer and membership co-ordinator, respectively; and Pete Emmorey sent word that he would continue as newsletter editor, although he was not present. (Dave Margesson was not present and did not wish to continue as a member of the executive, but offered assistance if needed.) More important, we set a new direction for the WCA, replacing the grandiose but unrealized aims of the founders with a more practical emphasis on an active programme of member trips and regular communication through a quarterly newsletter. Before we left the meeting, we had put together a calendar of six trips (three novice and family trips, and three trips for experienced paddlers) for the spring, arranged for a newsletter to come out in March, and agreed to meet again in the fall to assess how things were going.

Things happened quickly that "first" year. The club mounted a display at the Sportsman's Show, thanks to Dave Margesson who let us use some of his space, to showcase the club and attract new members. To keep informed on matters of interest to wilderness canoeists, the WCA took out memberships in and

engaged with a number of other organizations, including: Federation of Ontario Naturalists, Sierra Club, Algonquin Wildlands League, National and Provincial Parks Association, Council of Outdoor Educators of Ontario, Canoe Ontario, and the Ontario Voyageurs Kayak Club. The initiatives we had set out at the meeting went well. The newsletter came our regularly and on time. Our first trips were well received and more were listed in each newsletter, including a 4-day fly-in trip on the Dumoine River that summer. New members stepped forward as trip organizers. Hiking and winter trips were included, making the WCA a club for four-season wilderness travellers. Membership had grown to 145 by the fall. At the fall meeting, the club executive was increased to six members; the secretary/treasurer position was split with Pat Armstrong remaining as secretary and Glenn Spence taking on the role of treasurer. Because of resignations, Ralph Kitchen took over as membership co-ordinator, and Roger Smith as newsletter editor. With Volume 2, Number 4 (December 1975), the newsletter changed its name to *The Wilderness Canoeist* and moved to a tabloid format that allowed us to include photographs. The club adopted a new logo in the spring of 1976 for use on the newsletter, brochures and stationery; designed by Barry Brown, it gave the club a much more professional look. (This logo was recently modified and is again the WCA's logo.)

The rest, as they say, is history.

Although the WCA existed on paper in 1973 and 1974, the real beginning of the association we know today was at that meeting at Seneca College in 1975. The WCA has certainly grown and changed over the last five decades: membership has increased about 20-fold to around 500 today (the membership fee has increased as well); the average age of members has probably doubled; the number and range of club trips has grown; the WCA journal has changed its name (from *Beaverdamn,* to *Beaverdam*, to *The Wilderness Canoeist*, to *Nastawgan*), and format (from a simple photocopied and stapled newsletter, to a newsprint tabloid then a bookstock tabloid, to a magazine, now glossy and in colour), as well as growing in size and quality; new activities like slide shows and the annual wilderness canoe symposium have been introduced; and we have taken on an active role in conservation issues. However, the course we set at that 1975 meeting has remained the guiding principles behind the WCA.

As the Wilderness Canoe Association prepares to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary, it seems appropriate to look back and reflect on how it all began. Although many people have contributed to the fabric of the association over the years, there is one person who deserves most of the credit for making the WCA what it is today; that person is Gord Fenwick. Without his drive and determination, the WCA as we know it would not exist; the association would have languished and likely faded into oblivion.