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Spring 2021 Vol. 48 No. 1 Journal of the Wilderness Canoe Association

Running Rapids on Mississagi River

The River Of A Hundred Ghosts

The Mississagi River from Spanish Lake to Aubrey Falls

Story and photos by Erik Thomsen

Prologue

In early Spring 2019, while hiking through Frontenac Provincial Park, I sat alone by my campfire under the leafless silhouette of a stand of tall oak trees as a cool cloudy evening crept in. After dinner, I lay by the crackling fire and opened up "Book Two: Mississauga," the second part of Grey Owl's seminal 1936 work, *Tales of an Empty Cabin*. I ventured back in time to a place east of Lake Superior and north of Lake Huron, to the fabled Mississagi River – the river of a hundred ghosts.

> River of a hundred ghosts….sublime in your arrogance, strong with the might of the Wilderness, even yet must you be haunted by wraiths that bend and sway to the rhythm of the paddles, and strain under phantom loads, who still tread

their soundless ways through the shadowy naves of the pine forests, and in swift ghost-canoes sweep down the swirling white water in a mad *chasse galerie* with whoops and yells that are heard by no human ear. Almost can I glimpse these flitting shades, and on the portages can almost hear, faintly, the lisping rustle of forgotten footsteps, coming back to me like whispers from a dream that is no longer remembered, but cannot die. (Grey Owl, 1936)

I had read reports of voyages down the river and heard tales of its allure. I knew of its storied history – the exploits of Grey Owl, the timber runs, the canoe brigades. But from that evening, the Mississagi gained, in my imagination, a tangible, living character – a wild and mysterious brilliance – that beckoned me northward.

In the summer of 1912, Tom Thomson – one of our country's most beloved artists – ran the Mississagi from Biscotasing to Lake Huron over two months. In a subsequent letter to a friend, Thomson remarked that the Mississagi was "the finest canoe trip in the world." While we can only guess what compelled Thomson to scribe those words, having now run the river, it is clear to me that the Mississagi still retains the magic that he must have felt as he sat on its rocky shores and sketched the wild panoramas that surrounded him.

As you embark, perhaps, on your own journey down the Mississagi, remember that in exploring this immense and formidable place, you will draw yourself closer to the earth and rekindle the glory of the Mississagi's formative years, before the ceaseless march of the modern world. Paddle the Mississagi and you will reawaken the ghosts of a still wild kingdom, so that they may sing, chant and paddle once more.

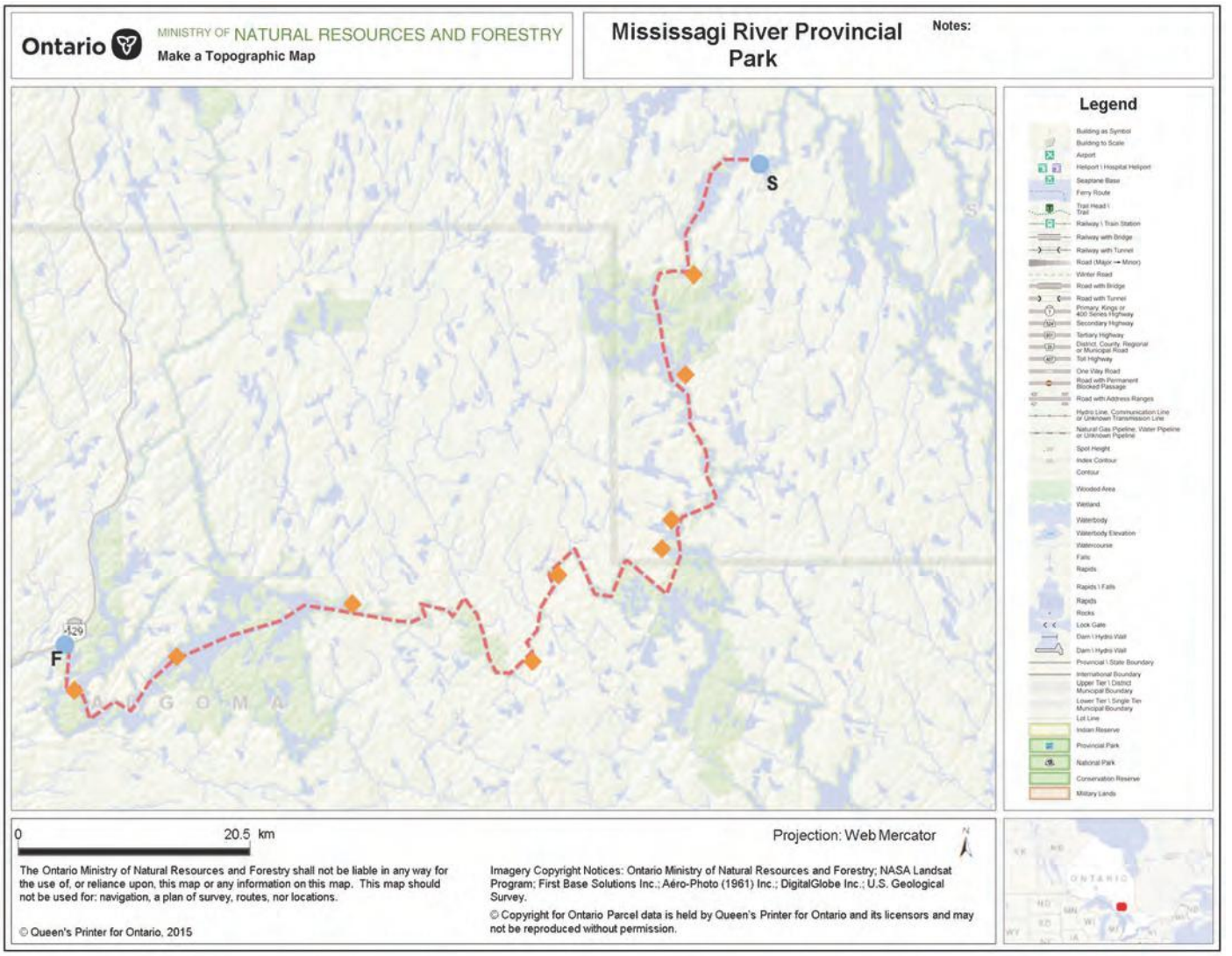
History of the Mississagi Basin

The Mississagi is characterized by precipitous formations of volcanic rock, molded by ice sheets, winds and extreme weather over aeons. Massive cliffs and crags are common throughout the region, while mixed forests of pine, spruce, maple, birch, aspen and others envelop a collection of thousands of rivers, wetlands and island-speckled lakes.

The extent of historic Indigenous presence along the Mississagi is not well known. There is evidence to suggest, however, that the waterways of the Mississagi were used by Aboriginal populations for hunting and habitation, with encampments found at Upper Green Lake, Rouelle Lake and Rocky Island Lake.

The expansion of the fur trade brought voyageurs and European explorers to the region and outposts were established as early as the late 1700s. The river offered an excellent opportunity for trappers and traders to access the bountiful pelt-yielding lands of the interior. North West Company forts soon sprung up at the mouth of the river and on the north shore of Upper Green Lake – these

Kashbogama



Mississagi Map

were subsumed by the Hudson Bay Company in the 1820s.

By the late 1800s, logging operations began to expand to the Mississagi basin with the exhaustion of more southerly forests. An immense network of logging trails, camps, dams and chutes (including a 350-metre flume at Aubrey Falls) were established to support operations that fed enormous quantities of timber downstream and en route to mills on the northern shores of Lake Huron. Timber extraction continues to varying degrees in the Mississagi region, though well beyond sight of the canoe route.

One of the most destructive forest fires in Canadian history tore through the Mississagi River Valley. In May 1948, separate fires in the Chapleau-Mississagi region merged together and scorched almost 750,000 acres of forest before being extinguished three months later. Large old growth forests were devastated, logging and industrial operations were shuttered and the sky was shrouded in a haze that blocked the sun as far south as Washington D.C. While the valley has rebounded, there is still evidence of this monstrous fire along many portions of the river as seen in the formation of second-growth forests of birch and poplar.

Adding to the vibrant history of Mississagi River was the former presence of Archie Belaney (Grey Owl). In the early 1900s, Belaney, who was born in England, took up work as a trapper and forest ranger, living in both Temagami and Biscotasing for some time. While in Bisco, Belaney comprehensively travelled and trapped throughout the Mississagi wilderness. Over time, his fascination with the Anishinaabe people and culture grew and he adopted and embraced an Ojibwe persona. Under the moniker, "Grey Owl," Belaney produced a number of writings on matters of conservation and the Canadian wilderness, gained international recognition and conducted speaking tours in several countries, dressed in Ojibwe regalia – even taking audience with the British royal family. Belaney's true identity was not revealed to the public until his death in 1938.

Trip Journal – 11 Days on the Mississagi

Having resolved to canoe the Mississagi back at that campsite in Frontenac, I en-

Wading

deavoured to make the trip happen in August 2020. Our crew of six friends, including Devin, John, Jono, Kevin, Lachlan and myself, aimed to tackle the 143-kilometre expanse of the upper river between Spanish Lake and Aubrey Falls over 11 days. This section of the river is far more remote and pristine than the portion that flanks Highway 129 south of Aubrey Falls to Lake Huron, which is interrupted by a series of hydroelectric dams.

As part of the planning process, I made arrangements with Mike Allen, the owner of a cottage rental business called Kegos Camp, north of Thessalon, Ontario, to handle shuttle logistics.

On the morning of July 31st, our party departed Toronto and made it to Kegos Camp by evening, where we camped in a grassy meadow.

In the morning, we travelled north on a scenic and moose-laden stretch of Highway 129 to Aubrey Falls where we dropped off Mike's escort vehicle before continuing on. During our drive, Kevin and I had engaged in an interesting dialogue with Mike on Canadian battles of World War II. In light of this, as we approached the small community of Sultan, Mike suggested that we stop the car at the side of the road. The other two vehicles in our convoy followed suit and Mike led us off into the bush where we came upon a small cemetery.

On the right side of the old cemetery was a flat, grey, traditional military headstone adorned with Canada's maple leaf emblem and cross. The stone read:

B. 163291 PRIVATE
MANSELL L. SLIEVERT
NO. A. 10 C.A. (INF.) T.C.
9th MAY 1945,
IN LOVING MEMORY
KNOWN TO MANY, LOVED
BY ALL
FATHER, MOTHER AND FAMILY

It was somewhat peculiar to see this gravestone here, in this isolated locale, as the vast majority of on-duty World War II soldiers were buried overseas. Mike explained that this young man, who died at the age of 19 and evidently had roots in Sultan, had actually perished in a motor vehicle collision while on duty in British Columbia.

Before continuing on to Spanish Lake to begin our trip, we wandered the rest of the graveyard. A number of the headstones were terribly weathered and illegible. We then found one that marked the final resting place of a man named John Ceredigion Jones, deceased in 1947. A poet and vagabond, it is the words of Ceredigion Jones, that were immortalized in stone above the entrance to the Memorial Chamber of the Peace Tower in Ottawa to commemorate our fallen war heroes. His words read, "All's well for over there amongst his peers A Happy Warrior sleeps."

This moment brought me back to my own visit to the Memorial Chamber, a number of years before, and reminded me of a moving verse inscribed on the wall of that sacred room, written by Richard Miles. I thought of the verse and perhaps never felt so grateful to be venturing off into our great wildlands once more:

I go that we may breast
Again the Dorest Downs in zest,
And walk the Kentish lanes where I
Began a larger life knowing

You. Yet if from seething sky
I win reprieve but by the slowing
Crutch or whitened cane, my doom
Will yet have helped to hold in bloom
Old English orchards, and Canadian
Woods unscarred by steel, Acadian
And Columbian roofs unswept
By flame. My mother will be kept
From stumbling down a prairie road
Illumed by burning barns and snowed
By patterned death.

From Sultan we drove south, through the small logging and rail community of Ramsay, crossed over Spanish Chutes and found the entrance to the eastern shore of Spanish Lake. We bid our drivers farewell and portaged our gear down to the lake with the sun beaming overhead.

Part I – Spanish Lake to Bubble Bay

We travelled south to the Bardney Lake where a seven-kilometre paddle on open water confronted us. Though we had a slight headwind, we held no quarrels – it was simply liberating to be in the open air and on the water once again.

At the end of Bardney, we climbed the 430-metre Height of Land portage separating the Spanish River and Mississagi watersheds. The portage rose steadily before dipping and abruptly ending at Sulphur Lake. Here we found a Ministry of Natural Resources logbook which confirmed that we were only the fourth party to travel the route that year.

We camped on Sulphur Lake. Late in the day, I was pleased to catch a good-sized pike on a solo canoe outing, as the sky unveiled a broad spectrum of pinks, oranges and yellows with the on-setting dusk.

Morning brought grey, monotone skies and high-winds from the northwest which rattled the spruce trees over our campsite. Four quick portages, including a lung-busting 930-metre carry, would bring us to Mississagi Lake and eventually the Mississagi Lodge fly-in fishing outpost. The lodge was on a sandy peninsula that separated the Mississagi Lake narrows from Upper Green Lake. This was the former site of a Northwest Company outpost, though no evidence of the old trading station remained.

Upper Green Lake is a large body of water that can become troubling in high winds. Perhaps the most famous example came during Tom Thomson's trip in 1912, when a storm swamped his canoe. Thomson and his paddling partner were forced to swim to shore as a result of the catastrophe, and narrowly survived.

A fascinating relic of the past, in the form of an old decommissioned fire tower, can also be found on the eastern ridge of Upper Green Lake. With plenty of time left in the day, we decided to paddle to the shore beneath the tower to see whether a trail up the ridge had endured. As we searched for the trail, we found an array of rusted debris, including gasoline canisters and tools that were clearly several decades old, as well as the ruins of an old ranger's cabin.

We found the heavily overgrown remains of the old tower trail that led us up the ridge to the base of the tower. The tower, made in 1957, was an impressive steel structure that forced its way out of the tangled woods and out above the tree line.

Back on the water, the wind had intensified dramatically and white caps washed alongside our canoes until we

Bubble Bay

River site

crashed against the southern shore of Upper Green. A brief 90-metre hike took us to Kashbogama Lake where a gorgeous sheltered campsite awaited us across the lake.

The following day, we paddled through Shanguish Lake and Kettle Lake before arriving at the first two rapids of the trip. Their shallow, rocky character forced us to methodically wade our boats through, negotiating tricky footholds on the riverbed.

Past the rapids, on the north end of Upper Bark Lake, we found a long, flat island amongst a stand of dying pines that served nicely as our campsite. Upper Bark is a beautiful and serene body of water with a plethora of lonely bays and islands. At the centre of the lake, three small islands, almost identical in appearance, form a distinctive triangle. A cloudy sunset soon rolled in, and we built a large fire. The call of the loons skipped over the waters as a light rain began – together these peaceful sounds lulled us to sleep.The next day we decided to make a very leisurely four-kilometre paddle to camp on an island at Bubble Bay. On approach, we found the island to be a scenic outcrop of tiered rock ledges, capped with a few large, windswept pines. There was just enough room for our tents, though limited firewood would force Devin and I to make a trip to the shore later in the afternoon.

We spent the rest of the day swimming and fishing. I also found time to read from a book that I had brought along, *Of Time and Place*, by Sigurd F. Olson, the opening passage of which fit our adventure well:

> Over the years the voyageurs, as we called ourselves, made many trips together retracing routes of the old voyageurs in their far-flung travels along the rivers and lakes during the days of the fur trade… We ran the same rapids, knew the waves on the same big lakes, and suffered the same privations. Though ours was a modern age, we knew the winds still blew as they had then; the dim horizons looming out of the distance were no different from the mirages they had known. In the mornings we saw the same mists, resembling white horses

galloping out of the bays. We knew all this, but most important was the deep companionship we found together. We had been most everywhere, and for us the North was much more than just terrain. We were part of its history.

Like men who had been in combat, we looked at the world through different eyes, for we had been tested in the crucible of the wilderness and had not failed. The values we shared from our common experience are hard to explain, but without them life has no purpose. (Olson, 1982)

Toward the end of the day, I found myself in my canoe casting a line for walleye and bass. Devin and Kevin both had success fishing off the rocks, John paddled out to explore the lake on his own, while Lachlan and Jono cooked bannock over the fire.

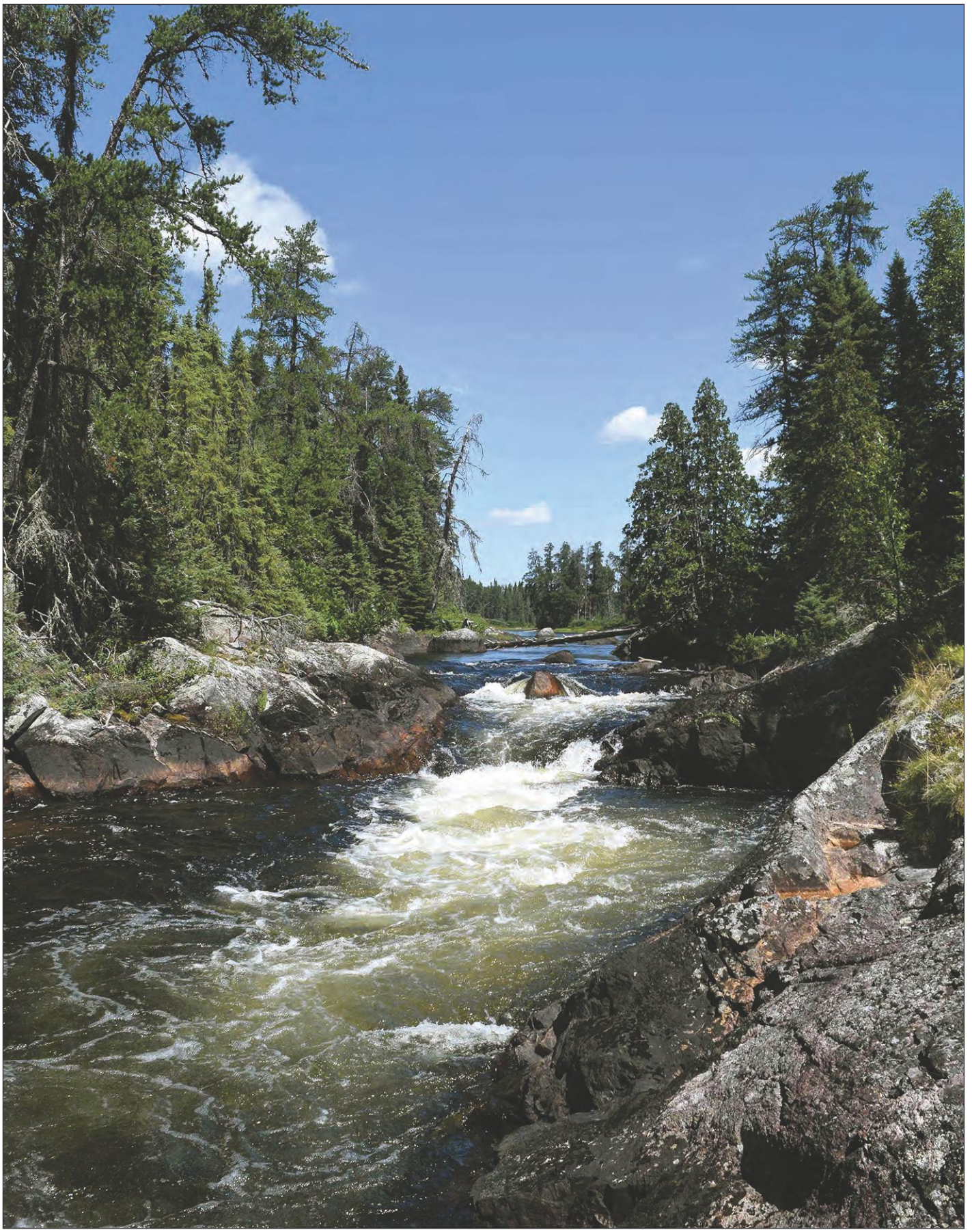
It was the golden hour now. The sun crept out from behind the curtain of dark clouds on the western horizon and bathed our jagged island campsite in a brilliant orange light. The island, with its iconic windswept pines, about 20 metres before me, was thus transformed into a monolithic silhouette etched against a radiant backdrop. Turning and gazing out over the expanse of dark waters to my east, gentle waves lapping against my canoe, I could see that the treeline on the far shore was now set ablaze with a glow so pure that it seemed to fall from heaven itself. The scene was one that travellers of this remote landscape, through the ages of old, would have known well. This was a scene that would have doubtlessly stirred – as it had for us – their profound admiration for all the natural world.

As the evening set in, we gathered around the campfire and savoured the expertly prepared bannock baked by our companions. The clouds had begun to dissipate, stars emerged and a spectacular full moon rose between them to the east. From somewhere off in that same direction, the loons called out again.

Part II – Bubble Bay to Rocky Island Lake

We awoke to harsh winds from the west and we could tell from the swirling clouds that rain threatened. Heading onward we paddled south through Presage Bay and came to a cabin that served as the headquarters of the Mississagi Provincial Forest Reserve in the early-1900s. It was in these days that Grey Owl stayed here while on duty as a forest ranger, and even carved his initials "AB" on the cabin's interior in 1914.

Illuminated tent



Hellgate

Majestic marsh

The building had clearly seen finer days. Its walls, except at their rotting base, were constructed of large, hefty log beams, perhaps of cedar; the gable roof was weatherproofed with faded red shingles and though the solitary window was boarded up, the door was jammed open. Peeking our heads in, we could clearly see that wild animals had been dwelling inside from an arrangement of torn and chewed articles on the floor. The cabin contained a variety of thoroughly aged items – pots, pans, tools, bedding – all strewn about in disarray.

It was fascinating to think of all the people who had passed through here over the years and the stories they must have held of their own adventures in this land. The walls on the cabin's interior were covered in hundreds of carvings denoting the passage of former travellers. While the location of Grey Owl's name was not readily apparent, we spotted carvings as old as the early 1930s and thought about how the world would have been back then.

We departed the cabin and were now entering the Mississagi River proper. From this point, for the next 30 kilometres, the Mississagi cuts a path through the land in the shape of a large "W" and is characterized by innumerable rapids and falls, interspersed by flat water. At the end of this colossal zig-zag the river flushes into a vast wetland known as "Majestic Marsh" or "The Maze," en route to the big waters of Rocky Island Lake.

As we thrashed our way down the river into a strong headwind, to the northwest, the dark churning clouds above finally gave way to a thick, cold rain. Patches of blue sky ahead, however, gave us hope and the rain subsided as the river narrowed and swung to the southwest.

Past a series of swifts and rapids, we pulled out at a 150-metre trail that opened into a large, flat-rock clearing with plenty of room for tents. Alongside the clearing, a set of rapids came to a turbulent culmination of white spray and froth as the river cascaded over large rocks before easing into a large black pool. We decided that this would make an excellent campsite.

In the evening, with wispy indigo skies above and dozens of swallows fluttering through the warm, fresh summer air, we fished in the dark eddies at the bottom of the cascade. Devin was the first to land a good-sized fish – a walleye – that we filleted and took up to our campfire. Jono had brought lard and fish batter along and rapidly set to the ritual of preparing a fine meal, as a broad blanket of stars became clearer overhead.

With daybreak we forged over a number of rapids under the summer sun, and arrived at Hellgate Falls by midday. Here, the river funneled over a number of violent drops before settling 10-metres below. We quickly tackled the mandatory 680-metre portage and bushwhacked along the rugged shoreline to catch spectacular views of the maelstrom.

Mudflats

The day wore on as we conquered several more rapids and portages before arriving at a well-used campsite near the entrance to Majestic Marsh. Following a nice meal by the fire past dusk, we withdrew to the shore where we spotted seven or eight meteors flashing brilliantly and silently over the silhouettes of the pines across the rippling river.

The river moved swiftly beyond our campsite and we made great progress in the morning. Within a few kilometres, the rocky, elevated topography that had previously surrounded us, began to open up.

The entrance to the Majestic Marsh is quite clear. What was less certain for us was the navigability of the wetlands, which are said to change dramatically depending on water level. In fact, we had read a story, from 2013, of a couple that had become disoriented and lost in marshes here for two days, and were lucky to have been saved by a passing canoe group. While we weren't worried about getting lost in the marsh, we were somewhat concerned about a tedious slog through a frustrating web of channels and dead ends.

It turns out those trepidations were entirely unfounded. Majestic Marsh was an incredibly beautiful landscape and a joy to paddle. Within the marsh, the river snaked peacefully through a clear path of reeds, teeming with wildlife. Mergansers and golden eyes, grey jays and other birds cruised the waters and skies alike; a large beaver swam directly under our canoe. Our time in the marsh passed too soon.

A few more kilometres on, we bypassed the Abinette River confluence and Bulger's Folly as the river started to show signs that it was gradually opening into a massive lake. A riverside cliff we encountered, for instance, showed a high waterline that was eight feet above our current levels. We knew, of course, that this could be explained by the fact that Rocky Island Lake, which now lay only five or six kilometres to the west, was a dam-controlled reservoir for the hydro-electric generating station at Aubrey Falls and held a large surplus of water every spring.

At this point we began searching for sites, but having found few that suited our needs we pulled out at dry mudflat, about two kilometres east of Third Island near the end of the river. There were now only 35 kilometres remaining on our voyage.

Part III – Rocky Island Lake and Aubrey Lake

We knew Rocky Island Lake presented a special challenge. The prevailing winds had cut consistently from the west for the entire trip. Our path would take us over two massive open water crossings, likely into strong winds and waves.

As we made our way through the final portions of the river and around the corner of Sprat Bay, our fears were confirmed. The winds were strong and had whipped up tumultuous white caps as far as the eye could see. It would be extremely reckless to attempt a crossing in these conditions and so we knew we'd have to pick our way south along the east shore, completing a series of smaller crossings instead.

Despite the fact that it is a reservoir, Rocky Island Lake is an incredibly unique, beautiful and wild place. As its name suggests, the lake is speckled with a seemingly endless array of rocky islands, rocky shorelines, bays and cliffs that could easily accommodate a week or more of exploration by canoe.

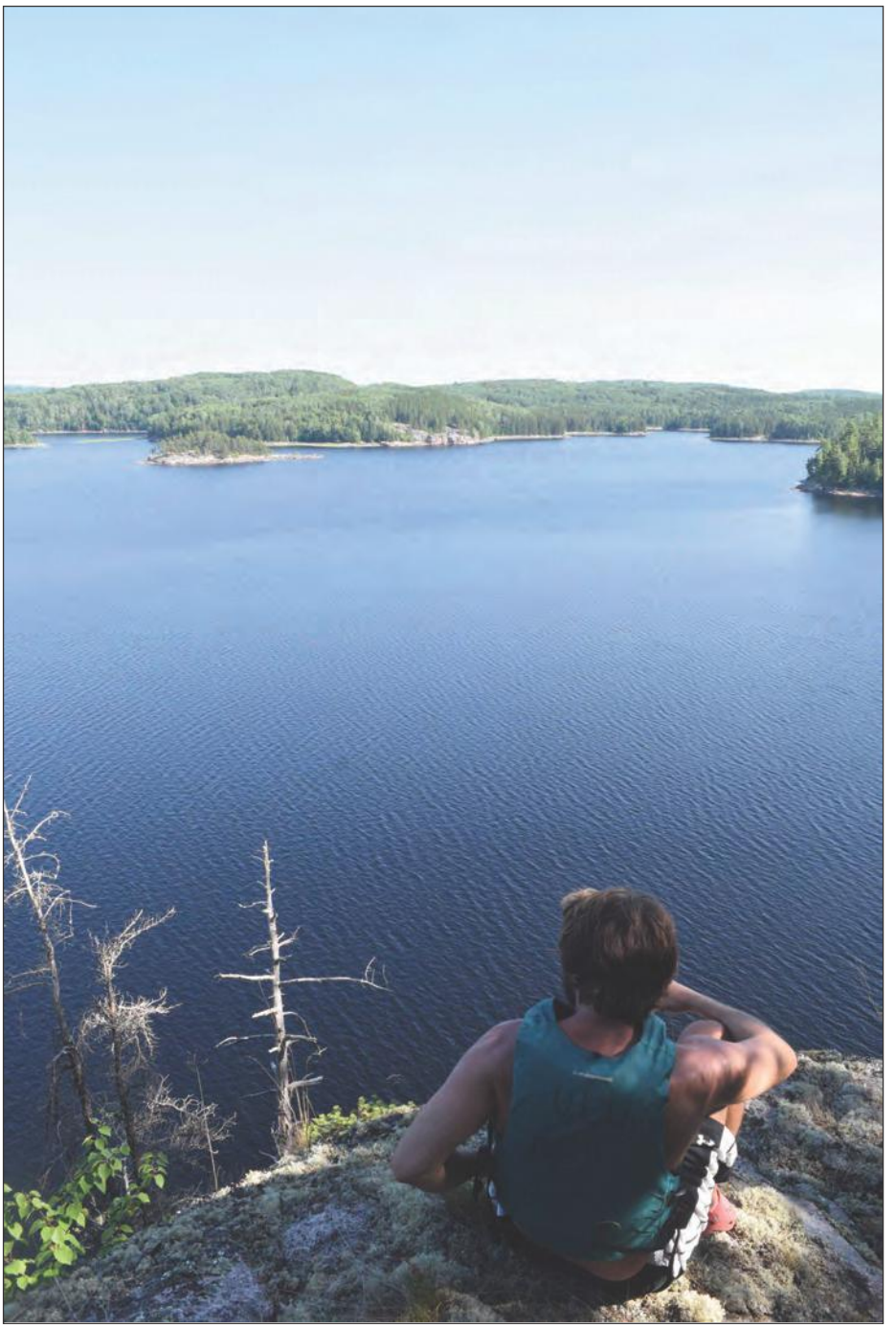
Having completed the first major crossing, the sun faded in favour of dark clouds and rain seemed certain. We set our sights on an island campsite located about 10 kilometres to the west at the opening of Seismic Narrows and began paddling through the tall cliffs of Stimpy Channel.

Headwinds continued from the west, but as we entered the main body of Rocky Island Lake, where the longest crossing awaited, we were fortunate to find the severity of the wind had waned. This being the case, we set out on the large crossing to the south end of Dayton Island.

Near the tail end of this island, Jono remarked that he saw something swimming in the water ahead of us. On approach, he shouted that it was a bear. Each of the three canoes took care to give the animal a wide berth so as not to frighten it while it swam to shore. Upon landing on the island, the medium-sized black bear charged up the shore, taking one glance back at us, and was gone into the dense bush in a flash.

We continued, a harsh rain pelting down us, and finally landed at the island site near Seismic Narrows. The island was a teardrop shaped outcrop of rock, crowned with dozens of jack pine. Its most peculiar feature, however, was an old, dilapidated driftwood fort, approximately four metres long, four wide and two high, that was constructed near the fire pit. The fort listed heavily to one side as some of its support beams had rotted out over the years. While the interior included various tables and benches, also constructed of driftwood, most of them were heavily decayed and unusable. Upon further examination of the innumerable carvings attached to the structure, we found that the fort named, "Driftwood Lodge," was constructed in 1981.

We calculated that we were now only 18 kilometres from Aubrey Falls and the end of our trip. In view of savouring the journey a little bit longer, we decided to take a rest day here, which we spent in leisure on the island and exploring the sheer cliffs surrounding the lake. With night closing in and a strange, eerie



View from the cliffs

Driftwood Lodge

blood moon emerging over the horizon, we gathered around the fire and I carved a few words into a plank of wood to be added to the fort:

ERIK – LACHLAN – KEVIN – DEVIN – JONO – JOHN
MISSISSAGI OR BUST 2020

The last full day of the trip was now upon us and we targeted one final campsite approximately 15 kilometres away on Aubrey Lake at a place called Carter Island. The weather was fair and sunny with a slight coolness hanging in the air. A west wind greeted us as we paddled through Seismic Narrows and amongst its sheer stately cliffs.

We soon found ourselves turning the last corner of this massive lake and faced a 720-metre portage around Rocky Island Lake Dam – a large storage dam, built in 1949, that preserves water above the Aubrey Falls hydroelectric generat-

Aubrey Falls

ing station.

Much like Rocky Island Lake, Aubrey Lake is rugged and picturesque with massive hills and towering land formations rising regally from its shorelines. We landed at our planned site on the east side of Carter Island, which afforded an endless northeast vantage of sprawling island studded waters bounded by a large range.

Within two hours of landing at Carter Island, however, the weather took a turn for the worse. Dark, brooding clouds formed to the west and high winds picked up – we could see rain rapidly approaching over the lake. Kevin and Jono's tents, which were held to the ground with stones, flipped suddenly in the howling wind and we scrambled to re-anchor them as large heavy drops of rain pummelled the campsite.

As I ran back into the bush toward my tent to find relief from the storm, John met me on the trail and, struggling to make his voice heard over the chaos surrounding us, pointed out a medium-sized spruce tree that was breaking at its base in the wind. Before our eyes and to our astonishment, the tree fell through the forest before meeting its resting place on the forest floor – right in between our tents.

Within an hour, the electrical storm and rain had ceased entirely and I emerged from my tent to find tame skies and calm waters surrounding our island. Lachlan pointed to the east at the dwindling remnants of a rainbow.

We saw the existing conditions as a perfect excuse to fish and bagged several bass and walleye as the light grey skies developed a strong pink and purple hue. Jono and John set to work preparing our haul over the stove and campfire, and we capped our final night in the woods with a delicious feast.

Having resolved to wake up early and paddle the remaining four kilometres to our cars at the Aubrey Falls spillway, we found ourselves on the water shortly after 7 a.m. The cloudless skies were a wonderful colour of deep blue and the horizons of this ancient land, with its mammoth cliffs and ridges, were fully shrouded by thick tufts of morning mist. It seemed as if we were gliding through the sky itself.

On we paddled into Brookfield Bay, passing a flock of ducks cruising along the shoreline. We could now see the bright red warning booms of the Aubrey Falls hydroelectric generating station before us and hugged the right hand side of the river to our takeout point at the spillway. Finally at our journey's end, we pulled our boats on shore, shook hands and celebrated.

To conclude our adventure, we drove around to the main entrance of Aubrey Falls Provincial Park and hiked the short trail to view the falls itself.

Aubrey Falls is a spectacular cataract

Morning Mist

Our group (from L to R): Lachlan McVie, Devin Sullivan, Erik Thomsen, Kevin Groombridge, Jono Kuketz, John Helmeste

that drops 53 metres over ten distinct segments containing upwards of 25 chutes that cut through orange granite. Despite the fact that the falls are dam controlled, all paddlers of the Mississagi should stop here to enjoy its incredible majesty. The best view of the falls comes at the end of the trail, past the Tom Thomson memorial, past the footbridge that spans a chasm over the river and up to the top of the adjacent ridge.

Epilogue

Our full journey on the Upper Mississagi spanned 11 days, 10 nights, 172.4 kilometres of travel, including 19 portages and a drop of 64 metres in elevation from beginning to end.

Although the river has been indelibly impacted by the hand of industry – logging and energy projects are clear examples – the upper stretch of the river to Aubrey Falls shows little evidence of this. For many, it may be disheartening to think of the influence that humans have had in altering this waterway, especially south of the falls, but this river is still one of the finest I've had the joy of paddling.

The Mississagi is a river that deserves to be travelled over 10 days or more. Its incredible and varied scenery, biodiversity, and unique history command sufficient time to explore and savour this wild place. This is, after all, the river of a hundred ghosts – a place of grand adventure, through which many have passed and where few tread. And yet signs still endure: the fire tower; the old cabin; the lodge made of driftwood; the centuries-old portage trails themselves. This river has seen generations of Indigenous hunters and trappers; the great canoe brigades; the lumberjacks; a great artist; and a conservationist and a writer, who once scribed the following words:

> There comes the song of a white-throat, high in the trees, above me. I hear the roaring of the River, the endless noisy march-past of the River; and the distant rumour of the rapids sounds like the conversation of the Dead.
> The plaintive, unfinished melody of the little bird trailing off into utter silence, burdened with all the sadness, all the heart-throb, all the glory of the North, and infinitely beautiful, sounds the Requiem of the Lost Brigade– singing, singing in a far-away cadence, farther and farther – fainter – fainter –

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Nastawgan is an Anishinabi word meaning "the way or route"

The WILDERNESS CANOE ASSOCIATION is a non-profit organization made up of individuals interested in wilderness travel, mainly by canoe and kayak, but also including backpacking and winter trips on both skis and snowshoes. The club publishes a quarterly journal, *Nastawgan*, to facilitate the exchange of information and ideas of interest to wilderness travellers, organizes an extensive program of trips for members, runs a few basic workshops, and is involved in environmental issues relevant to wilderness canoeing.

Follow-up for *Nastawgan:* "Look-at-me-Heroes" thoughts

Bob,

Latest *Nastawgan* arrived at my door yesterday. It just takes a little longer for it to arrive in Germany! I was so glad to read your "rant" because I've been in a similar pain. Just a few of my personal recent trials and tribulations: last summer, on a hike through the Pyrenees, I met a Belgian self proclaimed explorer (https://www.louis-philippe-loncke.com/) on a quest for another "first" – to hike the HRP unsupported. This meant for him to start out at the Atlantic with 49 kilograms on his back – excluding water, including ALL the food, ALL the stove fuel and whatnot. He made it to the Mediterranean, and sure it has some value to see what the human body can (is willing to) endure. But – why?

Or an example from Germany: The self proclaimed farthest-ever hiked women on Earth: http://christinethuermer.de/ with a real-time counter of her kilometres up front on her website. A bestseller author, inspiring other people – for what? Kilometers? This is my review (translated from German) for her latest book:

"Had so many hours to contemplate, and ended up counting kilometers? What a pity. After all, long stays out-of-doors can lead to so much more than Olympic higher-faster-farther. I also dare to question the title of "Most Hiked Woman in the World." What about those who have had the good fortune to discover other thoughts along the way, to whom kilometers mean nothing because they have come to realize what really counts? Couldn't it have been GONE a little more humbly? To those who (quite rightly!) seek a happier life out-of-doors, kilometers are pretty much the least important thing at the end of the day, the end of the journey, or the end of one's life. Despite the fact that the author's website presents this in an entirely different way."

To put it clearly into words once again: it's not about the people themselves, it's about the messages they convey. But, we need specific examples to better illustrate a point of view. And Adam Shoalts or Frank Wolf are simply sticking out like a sore thumb.

Frank, 35 days from Yellowknife to Chantrey Inlet, probably the fastest known time ever (FKT, www.fastestknowntime.com). But at what price? I met Frank on the Back River when he was literally flying by. 35 days (from Yellowknife!!) in comparison to my 50+ days from Jim Magrum Lake. Again: why? No lingering at beautiful places? No time to smell the roses? Fishing? Investigating historic sites along the way? Climbing lookouts en route, waiting for wind or rain to cease? Eating ready-made meals instead of a proper self-cooked meal? Or worse: no meals at all?

Shoalts, with his heroic tales, in mud up to his crotch, under mosquito torments, through life-threatening rapids, mean grizzly bears all over the place. What are the effects of such messages? What do readers do with their plans when they hear and read that? Some might plan to paddle from Yellowknife to Chantrey Inlet in only 30 days, others might prefer to stay at home, and giving the ordeals the Arctic allegedly has to offer a pass. Neither can really be considered wise. Please, these cannot be the messages! That is a road to perdition.

To me, such reports are a testimony of poverty. Book titles like *Alone Against the North: An Expedition into the Unknown* are hard to bear, to put it mildly. Or reviews like this one:

"When reading *Beyond the Trees,* one gets the impression of author Adam Shoalts as a kind of Jack Kerouac meets Jack Reacher: an obsessive wanderer at his calmest in the midst of catastrophe." – Atlantic Books Today.

Shoalts the Jack Reacher of the Arctic? Gosh, am I peeved.

What's next? Conan the Barbarian of the North? Where is this going to take us? Wouldn't it be better if we looked at wilderness not as a battleground, a frightening place, but as a place of healing? The following sentence is handed down from the mother of Omand Solandt: "I often feel the need to go camping in the woods. It irons the wrinkles out of my soul." (Che-Mun outfit 69, summer 1992) I dare say, Frank and Adam would have been irritating to her, to put it mildly.

This discussion is about much more than just them. Or, to borrow from Willie Dunn: "I pity the country, I pity the state, And the mind of a man, Who thrives on *attention.*" (original word is *hate*)

Money and attention are false idols. The real heroes are the silent ones, out there, those who have been canoeing through the North for decades, without wanting to make a big fuss, pleasantly unobtrusive, who talk little about their voyages and therefore are talked about little, those you meet by chance at some river bend. And they are out there! Probably not only a few. I know one and the other.

Carsten Iwers, Germany

What's in a Plate?

By Robert Perkins

What's in a plate? If you came across it in my cupboard, you'd not consider it special. An old enamel tin plate, chipped, humble in its provenance and use, nothing special. When I die, it will be taken to the second-hand store and sold for less than a dollar. We all harbor objects like my plate, seemingly inconsequential, but to us who know their story, irreplaceable.

I found the plate in a dump. I had to dig down. It was a badly covered hole in the ground from the 1950s, full of empty tin cans, broken fishing rods, bullet casings, and the other debris from living in a tundra cabin in the middle of nowhere. Other than curiosity, I had no reason to dig and I found the plate. The dump is on an island in Gary Lake, hundreds of miles from the nearest town, on a river called the Back River that flows northeast through the tundra beyond Yellowknife and enters Chantrey Inlet on the Arctic Ocean. The river is five hundred and sixty miles of pure, uninterrupted bliss. The tundra is the largest last true wilderness left on our crowded planet.

In the early 1950s, Father Joseph Buliard was looking for unconverted "natives." The Inuit in the area he arrived in father south had already been taken, either into the Catholic faith or the Protestant. In flying over Gary Lake, he spied a handful of families, and returned to build a simple cabin on an esker island. He was on his own. He'd come from France, a small town on the Swiss border, and he was a member of the Catholic Order of Mary Immaculate, or OMI, whose vow was to serve the poorest and the most in need. He had a lot to learn. The 1950s were a desperate time in the arctic. Supplies were scarce after WWII. Winter starvations became the norm. He became a focus of attention for the families around him, and more families moved in to be near his mission and the food he could provide. His mission lasted a few years, and then he disappeared, falling through early fall ice checking his fishing nets. Or so the story goes. Nobody knows the real story.

The cabin has been abandoned ever since. Infrequent travelers and fishermen use it for shelter. It's a solid wall in a storm. There's a half-mile of white sand beach, a good place to be picked up at the end of the summer. There's a rock to the left of the door that makes a comfortable seat. It's a good view across the lake. The lake and the landscape keep their own company. No Inuit live on the land anymore. It's very quiet. Bits of the cabin rattle in the wind. The passages of bugs, larger animals and birds, are marked in the sand. I like the birds best. Their tracks go along and then just stop, two little indents where their wing tips lifted off. The wind blows the beach grasses that make their sweep of a curve in the sand. You only see the wind through what it touches.

36th Wilderness and Canoe Symposium

Last year's Symposium, which took place in February '20 at York University in Toronto, will be remembered for several reasons. After many years of being hosted at the iconic Monarch Park Collegiate location, WCS finally moved to a more modern and a friendlier location. It was a good move. Unbeknownst to us at the time, it happened in the last pre-Covid days before our world and our lives changed – perhaps forever.

This year's Symposium was held online, following the pattern of new social and regulatory norms. About a thousand participants gathered in the digital zoomitorium, to paraphrase our lovely and capable MC Erika Bailey, to partake in – and witness – the new WCS format. A competent crew of volunteers facilitated 5 presentations, a musical concert and 4 breakout sessions. The event lasted about 4 hours and, judging by your feedback, was very well received.

Wally Schaber masterfully brought Dumoine's rich history to life, followed by James Raffan's story and song about the incredible Beaver pilot Ronnie Bowes. Martin Spriggs showed us how cycling from coast to coast can change your perspective on life – because your life counts. Jerry Vandiver and his excellent One Match Band entertained us with *Songs About Paddling and All Things Outdoors.* Breakout session facilitators had a huge following – a testament to the interesting topics they shared. Bob Henderson, in his "Look-at-me-Wilderness-Super-Hero" critique, illuminated a phenomenon of self-proclaimed "explorers" who throd across the land in the quest to be the "first," or toughest, or fastest, or most popular book bestsellers, or...whatever. Bill Ostrom delighted us with his pragmatic advice on how best to fit our thingies into our canoe packs to carry heavy loads lightly. Brian Johnston quizzed us about ways we connected to nature during COVID-19. Iva Kinclova invited us to brainstorm with her on the prospects of paddling – or not paddling – in the territories during the upcoming summer.

What happens next? Covid or not – many of us are inspired with the prospects of future online gatherings that offer many tangible benefits. As Erika so eloquently proposed in the "Break Trail or Run Rapids?" email – you will be able to join from the ease, comfort and safety of your pyjamas, sitting on your couch, with your various pets. Bonuses include access to the bathroom with no line-ups, your favourite snacks at your disposal, and no restrictions to bringing a glass of wine to the event. Plus, people who would normally not join due to travel challenges, cost, visas, and general life demands could access the Wilderness and Canoe Symposium much more easily. Another particularly appealing aspect of digital gathering is the fact that participants – and presenters – could be from anywhere in the world.

Yet, we clearly miss a human touch, we miss the camaraderie that only happens in the hallways of Monarch Park, the physical proximity of – to paraphrase George Luste –s kindred spirits in search of knowledge and a sense of place. The vibe and richness of our face-to-face interactions can't be replicated by Zoom or Webex. And thus, we'll continue to seek the good balance between "brick-and-mortar" Symposium and a digital one. I believe there's a place for both in our lives.

A Cautionary Tale

Frank de Jong and Iva Kinclova

The only thing worse than distrust of a group leader is over-trust.

Who is responsible for planning decisions on a group-organized trip?

The Harricana is a powerful, remote, Quebec river that flows through four distinct types of geography: the clay belt, Canadian Shield, limestone bedrock and the James Bay lowlands. It takes roughly four days to paddle each section.

The clay belt is expansive flat bush and farm land where erosion increases the turbidity of the water. This section is a bit of a slog but has majesty if you are of a contemplative disposition. The river then flows through gorgeous, pink granite, crashing through stunning rapids, falls and chutes, the rocks bearing the 10,000-year-old scars and sculpting of the glaciers. The geology then abruptly changes to 200-million-year-old sedimentary limestone. Here you paddle past cliffs embedded with fossils, skimming quickly over countless limestone ledges. The river then broadens into the muddy James Bay lowlands, with its characteristic kilometer-wide tidal flats, the habitat of shore birds, seals and belugas.

Our 3-female, 7-male crew consisted of myself and nine of my long-time friends, although, typical of our far flung society, most of them had never met. We congregated in Cochrane after long drives from Thunder Bay, Ottawa, Montreal, Toronto and Huntsville. I initiated the trip months earlier and coordinated the preparations, so I was thrilled it was finally underway.

While greeting each other, several of the experienced paddlers were surprised that one couple had brought a composite rather than a heavy-duty whitewater canoe. The couple knew the Harricana was a whitewater river but had made a poor choice of boat. We were concerned about the potential consequences, and as titular leader, I should have insisted they rent a whitewater canoe in Cochrane, but I didn't.

Like all good canoe trips, ours started the night before in a bar. Perhaps it was a bad omen, but for various reasons only 5 of us went to the bar. Omen or not, we had a raucous time laughing and bragging and getting acquainted with a few of the other crew members.

Life under the Tarp

The morning of our departure from Cochrane we discovered that we had only two bailers for five canoes. This required a trip to a dollar store and scavenging recycling bins at gas stations for new ones. Also, the person in charge of maps couldn't find one of the two copies they brought, plus the first 4 pages were missing. This was remedied by dashing to a motel and begging the proprietors to print out the missing pages and an extra

200-million year old brachiopod

The Map

set from an online version. We managed this just before our shuttle, Brian Porter (705-272-8268), drove us the four hours from Cochrane to the put-in, downtown Amos, Quebec.

It had been difficult to find trip reports on the first section, from Amos to Joutel. The notes on the maps from www.cartesplainair.org were pretty much the only source. As we started off from Amos it became apparent that no one had taken a serious look at this section. On Day 2, when we divided the length of the trip by 14, the number of paddling days available, we realized it would take an average of 28km per day to get to the mouth of the Harricana. This seemed like a daunting proposition since the Canadian Shield section contained many rapids which would require scouting, lining, running or portaging, plus many trip reports warned of strong, cold headwinds.

Two of our crew members, who hadn't carefully read all the pre-trip emails, and weren't present on the Zoom calls since they joined the crew late, had assumed the put-in would be Joutel. Most Harricana trips start at Joutel in order to avoid 150 km of flat water that must be paddled when starting from Amos. This oversight put too much strain on a pre-existing bursitis-plagued shoulder, forcing the couple to bail from the trip on Day 4.

To paddle to James Bay from late August to mid-September was to tempt the weather gods. And indeed, the weather turned out to be unseasonably cold. Though throughout the trip only two canoes dumped in rapids, both times our capsized colleagues were near-hypothermic by the time they finished their swims. Dry suits should have been mandatory.

Most canoeists consider trip planning to be exciting and interesting, but not our crew. On the Zoom calls the conversation invariably veered away from organizational details. Even the obvious question of whitewater experience was skipped over. The inadequate whitewater skills of several of the crew members became apparent during the granite section of Harricana. This problem forced two of the skilled paddlers - who initially insisted on padding together - to partner instead with unskilled paddlers.

The twin problems of inexperienced paddlers and the fragile canoe dictated that all but Class I rapids had to be lined or portaged. On top of this, the often non-existent portage trails slowed our progress and exhausted us. Our group split between those who paddled the rapids and those who lined or

Lining through boulders

portaged, which on several occasions meant losing sight of each other for periods of time, breaking a cardinal rule of canoeing.

Due to these time pressures we not only missed spending a couple of leisurely days in the spectacular granite area, but we often had to paddle in challenging conditions.

One day, we found ourselves lining through a kilometer of huge boulders in a hail storm. Another day, late in the late afternoon, we descended a kilometer-long rapid while fighting sleet in a gale-force headwind tunneling up a limestone canyon. A canoe dumped in mid-rapid forcing us all to head for shore and make camp in an unimaginably inhospitable spot. While hacking out tent sites and starting a fire to warm up the shivering capsized paddlers, two empty canoes went airborne (they were not tied up), one flipping end over end down the rocky beach, the other spinning like a top before landing just off shore.

Many of us were outside our comfort zone for the entire trip. Anxiety kicked in about Day 3 and plagued us for the rest of the trip. We worried that a single paddling error, unexpected rock, a trip or slip, a change in weather, could have meant injury or death. As you can imagine we had a few emotional meltdowns and several times we almost pushed the red button.

But at the same time, everyone took responsibility for our situation. Everyone was a trooper, we worked as a team, made inclusive group decisions, and worked through challenges with a great deal of humour and from a position of trust.

We were 8 people living in close quarters, depending on each other, requiring bravery, self-awareness, constancy, selflessness and cheerfulness. The Harricana turned out to be a metaphor for life, it was society in microcosm, we were living one day at a time under challenging circumstances. We all had a stake in ensuring inclusivity and social cohesion.

We lived "in community," face to face, 24/7 — not online. Our trip was surreal and life-changing, and doubly so because of the previous months of COVID-19 isolation. Partially because of my poor leadership we lived with the imminent threat of death, which added immediacy and hyper awareness every day.

Mini puffballs for supper

We lived for 16 days as a vulnerable, interdependent community in a gigantic, timeless, elemental landscape. We lived side by side with boreal caribou, moose and belugas, migrating swallows, fish, geese, ducks, eagles and sandhill cranes. Most of the Harricana lies above the northern limits of agriculture and logging where nature is still intact, where a full range of creatures continue to live on an evolutionary scale.

The euphoric stress release we felt at

Tim and the glass canoe

trip's end was palpable. No one drowned or had been seriously injured, the composite canoe leaked badly but didn't fully collapse, and only one of the two map sets ended up swimming with the fishes. Miraculously, aided by tailwinds and very little rain, we made it to Washow Lodge/Goose Camp of the Moose Cree First Nation only one day later than planned.

Two nights and a sunny, warm day while waiting for our shuttle (James Bay Shuttle – Kim Cheechoo kim.cheechoo@moosecree.com, 705-363-7172), gave us time to decompress, dry out, explore the area and recover our wits in preparation of rejoining the larger society.

The second morning, on the high tide and under a clear sky, we headed west on a glassy James Bay in two open freighter canoes. But a cold north wind soon rose making our traverse a very bumpy, miserable 5 hours on rough seas.

Once in Moosonee the wind was still and the sun shone. Townspeople were genuinely curious about our trip. Waiting for train-time we sprawled on the grass in glorious warmth, overlooking the placid Moose River; the beer and junk food never tasted so good. Then, on the mostly empty Polar Bear Express leisurely clattering to Cochrane, we felt like 19th-century royalty.

Overplanning can take the fun out of a trip, but under planning can cost lives. This trip was clearly under planned. Some of us understood the broad strokes and assumed the details would work themselves out, others assumed other crew members, or myself, would exercise due diligence.

I learned many lessons on this trip. I knew that some of the people didn't have the requisite whitewater skills but I didn't act on my knowledge. I was in the best position to coordinate and share research but I didn't make sure we had an acceptable description of the physical and psychological challenges. I should have organized a more rigorous spreadsheet to ensure we would have appropriate gear, particularly dry suits, whitewater canoes, bailers and a set of maps in every boat.

Having learned these lessons, I am still left with questions. How far does a trip organizer go in making decisions for other adults on a self-organized trip?

Searching for life in the universe

Where is the balance between being autocratic and giving people room to make decisions and live with the consequences? And why did my fellow paddlers not ask the hard questions about others' paddling skills or discuss the number of days needed to complete the trip? Was it because of their tight work schedules, a habit of abdicating power to others, or a fear of standing out by asking questions?

With these questions in mind, I conclude that our Harricana trip was a fabulous vacation that I never want to repeat!

Cold, bumpy James Bay shuttle

High Water On The Rio Grande

By Cliff Jacobson

Camp just below Santa Elena canyon. The river was very high, muddy and dangerous.

Some people don't like to do the same river twice – attitude being "been there, done that, seen it all." Maybe not. I've done many of my favorite rivers several times. And each time they have provided new insight and challenges. My latest (November, 2019) fourth run with friends down the Rio Grande, a very remote, spectacular desert river in Big Bend National Park that forms the border between the United States and Mexico, is a case in point.

On previous runs, the water flow ranged from a barely runnable 150 cfs (cubic feet per second) to 550 cfs, a low but ideal level for open canoes. On this most recent eight-day journey that began at Lajitas, Texas, we were a group of four in two solo canoes and one tandem*. Our launch date was November 4. The flow rate was 550 cfs and the sun was shining – perfect.

Past Rio Grande trips have always been in February, and typically we barely saw a soul – just free-ranging horses and cows, wild pig-like javelinas, great blue herons, soaring hawks, and road-runners, plus, on occasion, a few congenial Mexican *vaqueros* (cowboys) on horseback, searching for wayward livestock. But now we were running into boating parties practically every day. Among them were three "river rangers" (two men and one woman) on patrol. We paused to chat. They were friendly and helpful, river-knowledgeable and equipped for emergencies – and most importantly, dedicated to making the river experience enjoyable for all. Note that just three law-enforcement personnel are responsible for patrolling the 118 miles of river that border Big Bend National Park – an impossible task for so small a crew. My hat is off to them.

Larry Rice. Canoe is Northstar B17, IXP layup.

On our first day, not long after we made camp at the entrance of Santa Elena Canyon, the first of two major canyons we would be traversing, we encountered a party of two canoes – a 40-year-old man paddling solo, and two young women paddling tandem. The man identified himself as Chris Baker – a former U.S. Triathlon Olympic team coach and river guide. Five years earlier, at age 35, he was struck by a car while riding his bike. He was minutes away from death when the ambulance arrived. He physically recovered after months of surgery and therapy, but his memory didn't. He only remembers scattered bits and things about his life before the accident; others, his friends and family, had to fill in the missing gaps as best they could.

Chris' medicine for healing is the wilderness. He and his girlfriend, Natalie Cloes, plan to experience and document, through photographs and words, every one of America's 58 national parks – by foot, bicycle, or canoe. Big Bend, and the river which borders it, is national park number one. They have a five-year plan to complete the remaining 57. When they're not trekking the parks, they live in a pop-up tent atop Chris's pickup truck. They've allotted $1,000 a month over the five year period for expenses. Currently, they are self-supported, so naturally they're looking for sponsors. Chris's passion is photography and he is quite skilled at it. You can see some of his work on his web-site (www.chrisbakerphotography.com).

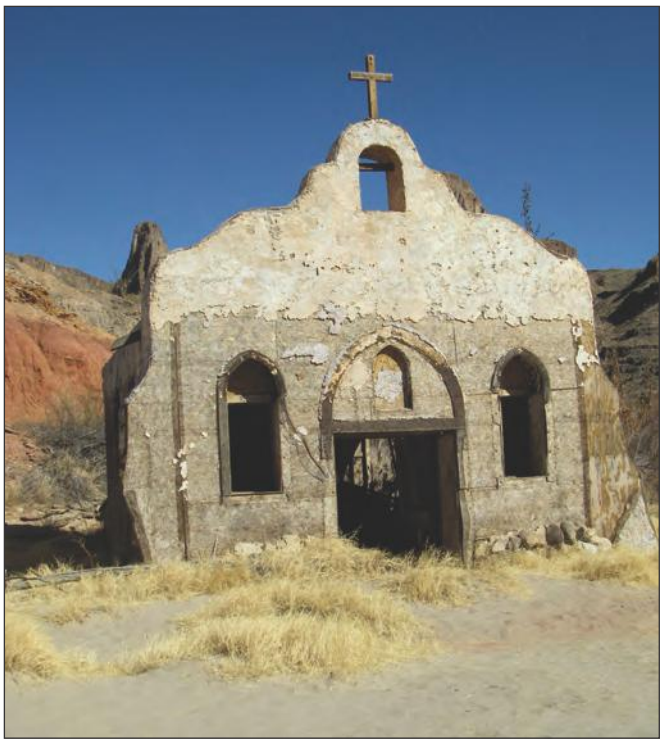
Katie Wolfenden, third member of the team, hails from London. She has been to the U.S. many times; always to experience wild places, of which there are very few in England.

We enjoyed sharing two campsites with this delightful trio, this being the first time we have ever shared a campsite on the Rio Grande.

On November 7 we witnessed a spectacular lightning storm far south in Mexico; a few hours later it began to rain at our camp. That night the river began to rise. Fast!

The next day (November 8) it ramped up to 2,000 cfs and was now flooding into the cane thickets and willows that lined the banks. What in the past had been an easy run, was now a challenging undertaking in our tripping canoes.

There were two iconic obstacles that we faced on this stretch of river: **Rock Slide** (within Santa Elena Canyon) and **Tight Squeeze** (in Mariscal Canyon). At low to moderate water levels, **Rock Slide** is relatively easy. But, at higher levels, you'd best be skilled, and very prudent. We carefully cho-



Hollywood movie prop. Originally used in the film "Durango".

reographed our moves: first, a 20-yard portage (canoe drag) over a gravel (er, mud) bar on river left (the U.S. side), then line the long, heavily-loaded tandem canoe around a short but harsh turn (the shorter solos could be paddled); float into an eddy on river left; then forward ferry across the strong current to the clear channel on the Mexican side. Turn left into the narrow slot and you're home free. It was dicey but doable.

Two days later, just before we entered Mariscal Canyon, with the river still high and getting higher, we were surprised and concerned to see an abandoned blue kayak on shore on the American side. We didn't stop, as the current had grabbed us and was taking us quickly within the canyon's dark and deep walls.

That's our canoe coming through Santa Elena Canyon. Credit: Caitlyn Mahoney, River Ranger.

About 100 yards above **Tight Squeeze,** where the 1,200-foot-high sheer rock walls are practically close enough to touch with outstretched arms, we saw what appeared to be an identical red kayak downstream, wrapped around a boulder in the jaws of the rock-jumbled rapid. We pulled smartly into an eddy above **Tight Squeeze** so as not to run blindly into this dangerous obstacle. What had happened? Where were the occupants of these two abandoned kayaks?

One plausible explanation was that the two kayaks were traveling together – the red one, which was far in the lead – capsized above (or at) **Tight Squeeze**, and the boat pinned. There was no sign of the paddler so we guessed he got out safely. When the blue kayaker saw the capsize he quickly headed to shore and later connected with his friend. What to do? Our map indicated that a very rough four-wheel-drive road ran from roughly the blue kayak's location to Rio Grande Village, 40 miles away. Could the pair be walking the road to RGV? If so, could they carry enough water for a 40-mile hike through the desert? We doubted it. More on this later…

At "normal" water levels, **Tight Squeeze** commands respect, but it isn't particularly difficult. But at 2,000 cfs, the water is pushing hard and you can't see what's beyond the ordinarily canoeable, narrow slot against the Mexican wall. Safest plan was to portage! We ferried to river left then spent over an hour hauling boats and gear over a mound of big boulders on the U.S. side – first time we've ever had to carry around this rapid. And, oh, the mud. Everywhere, on everything. There was simply no escaping it. Given this scenario, we worried about our new friends – Chris, Natalie, and Katie – upstream. We hoped they were not on the river today.

A short distance below **Tight Squeeze**, where the river had slowed, we set up camp for two nights in a magically beautiful site deep within Mariscal Canyon.

On our layover day at camp, we inspected the stick we had placed upright at the river's edge. The crude gauge told us that the water level was dropping rapidly. Good; it should be much safer tomorrow when we continued downstream.

We wondered about the fate of the two unaccounted-for kayakers upstream. Concerned that they may be hiking out, an epic journey, to say the least, I called Big Bend headquarters on my satellite phone. I quickly explained the situation we had observed and said I was on a satellite phone in a canyon and could lose contact any second, so please forward my message to the proper park authorities. There was a short pause, followed by, "Sorry, sir, we don't handle calls like this; you'll have to call 911!" At this, I went ballistic, reiterating that I was on a satellite phone in a canyon and the phone could go dead any second! "Please, just relay the damn message," I hollered. Seconds later, the phone went dead.

Around 4 p.m. the next day the Chris Baker team arrived. Whew! They had wisely camped for two days while the river dropped. Smiles and hugs followed and I made a fine supper for all.

After Mariscal, we had two more days on the river. Our plan was to pull out at Rio Grande Village (RGV) while Chris and his team would finish below Bouquillas Canyon. We shared

Playing around in Santa Elena canyon (2016 trip, low water)

The LIttlbug stove (www.littlbug.com) accepts small twigs up to 2 inches thick. Assembles in seconds and takes up almost no space when packed.

contact information and Chris promised to send photos.

Day 8 and overcast. The river had dropped substantially but it was still moving fast – so fast, that we were a full day ahead of schedule and RGV was just 12 miles away. Should we camp another night in the mud or hustle to mud-free ground where hot showers awaited? No contest – best speed to the end!

We arrived at RGV at 2 p.m. and immediately set up camp. There are 100 campsites in RGV and nearly all were taken, most with RV's, but 20 or so with tents. At 4 p.m. the wind began, ultimately reaching 50 miles per hour, with some gusts higher than that. Minutes later EVERY tent (except our North Face VE-25) blew down, breaking poles, shredding fabric, flying off like kites. My solo canoe (Northstar Phoenix) was overturned and tied to a tree; it twisted around on its line several times and would have flown away had it not been leashed. We drove to the little convenience store near the campground and learned that sections of the park were closed and park personnel in the Chisos Mountains area were directed to report to safe quarters.

Just before dark, RV's began to leave the park en masse.

By morning, there were just a scattering of RVs left in the campground, and zero tents. We had planned to breakfast at Chisos Mountain Lodge, and from there go for a short hike, but with freezing rain, howling winds, and the steep, twisting road up to the lodge temporarily closed due to ice, we just bagged it and headed for home.

On our way out of the park we stopped at the Visitor Center and spoke with the head ranger there. "Did you guys get my message about the wrapped kayak?" I asked. "No, sir," he replied. Then, I went "calmly ballistic," suggesting that they should have a MUCH improved protocol for this sort of thing. The ranger agreed and said he'd look into it. We never did learn the fate of the kayakers or the name of the person who took my call.

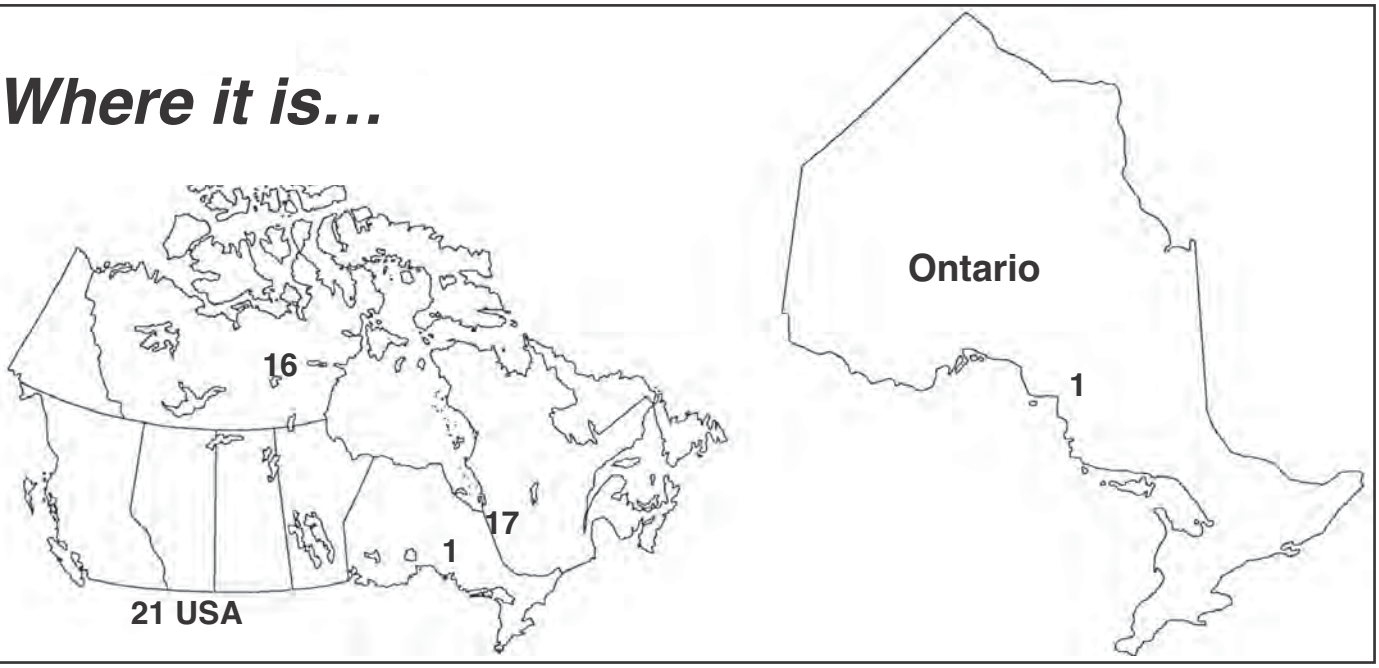
As this trip tale illustrates, a "been there, done that, know it all" attitude can get you into big trouble when out-of-control variables threaten what you think you know about what lies around every bend.

**A BIG thanks to my friend, Larry Rice for use of his photos from our recent trip. Larry paddled tandem (Northstar B17 canoe) with Darrell Foss, who has Alzheimer's disease. In 2016, we had to cut short a Rio Grande trip with Darrell due to complications with his condition (see my blog, Knowing when it's time to quit!).*

Friend Dick Pula, an accomplished paddler and one-time U.S. Olympic canoeing team contender, and I each paddled Northstar Phoenix solo canoes.

Camping in the canyons offers breathtaking views. The tent is an Eureka! Tundraline (no longer made).

Where it is…



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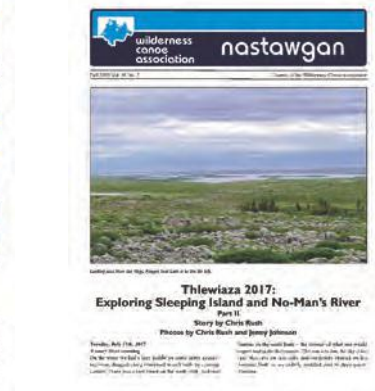
Story and photos by Dwayne Wahlgersuth



Thlewiaza 2017: Exploring Sleeping Island and No-Man's River

Part II

Story by Chris Rush

Photos by Chris Rush and Jenny Johnson

Thlewiaza 2017: Exploring Sleeping Island and No-Man's River

Part I

Story by Chris Rush

Photos by Chris Rush and Jenny Johnson

Cat River Canoe Trip

Story and Sketches by Jon Berger

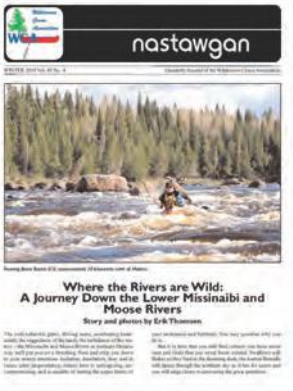
Canoe Ungava: Crossing the Ungava Peninsula with No Single-Use Plastics

By Beth Jackson and Eli Wallier

Flat River

Story by Dwayne Wahlgersuth

Photos by Dwayne Wahlgersuth and Rory McIntosh



Where the Rivers are Wild: A Journey Down the Lower Missinaibi and Moose Rivers

Story and photos by Erik Thoresen

My Memory of the Lake Superior 1967 Centennial Canoe Voyage

By Craig Macdonald

Photos by Dr. Bob James

AGAWA!

Story and photos by Jeff McCall

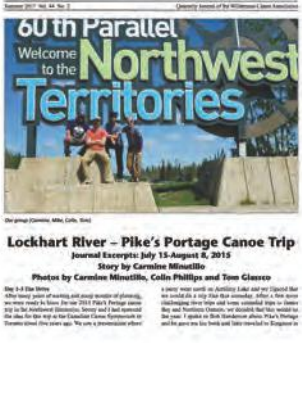
From Labrador to Chisaslibi on James Bay

By Herman Perry

Back Door to the Hood River

Story by Rob Dale

Photos by Greg Konigshaus, Sara Gartlan, Rosemary Warren, Rob Dale



Lockhart River – Pike's Portage Canoe Trip

Journal Excerpts: July 15-August 8, 2015

Story by Carmine Minutillo

Photos by Carmine Minutillo, Colin Phillips and Tom Giasco

Up the Grandin River and down the Johnny Hoe River

Story and photos by Dwayne Wahlgersuth

Palmer Rapids – a home away from home

Aleks. Gosev

From the Heart of the Snake

Story by Stephanie Potter

Photos by Stephanie Potter, Tom Potter, Teresa Socha, Rob Jickling

Chapleau River 2013

by Richard Griffith