wilderness canoe association

nastawgan

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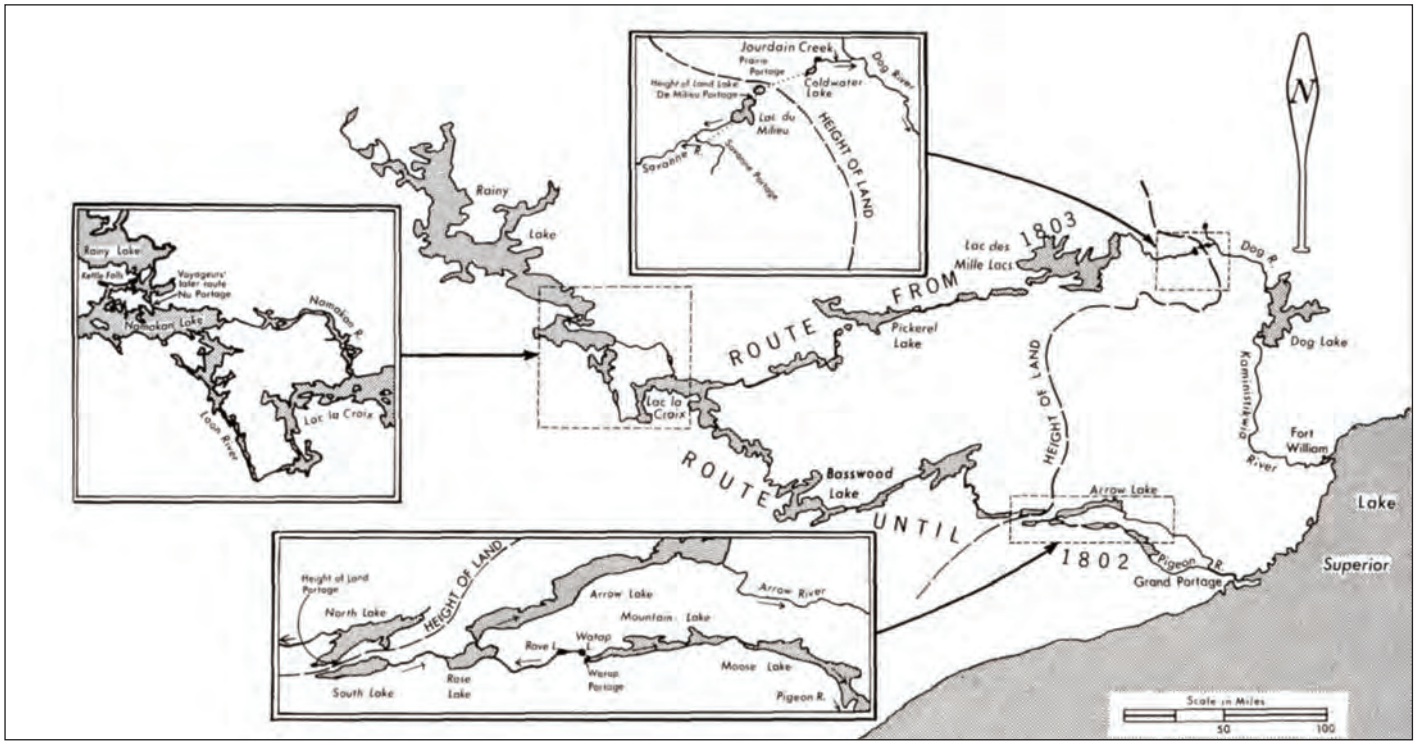
Kitpou, MacMillan and author, height of land ceremony

Hugh P. MacMillan's 1970 Canoe Brigade: The Intractable Retracing of a Fur Trade Route

Story by Mark Stiles

Not all was well in our 26-ft North canoe after leaving the Grand Portage on our way west through the Ontario-Minnesota boundary waters, known as the Voyageur Highway. One paddler, a hitchhiker Hugh MacMillan had picked up on the drive to Thunder Bay, developed a bad back after the first few miles and took a break to fish. This annoyed our petulant bowman, John Gadsby. No sooner had the fishing line dropped over the side, it became tangled in weeds. This annoyed Gadsby even more.

We waded our heavily laden canoe up a 4-mile stretch of the Pigeon River. The cold, powerful current numbed our legs, and the slippery rocks made the going treacherous. We were averaging



Morse, E.W. (1968). Fur Trade Canoe Routes of Canada/Then and Now. Queen's Printer, p. 79

less than a 1/2 mile an hour when Kitpou – self described medicine man of uncertain authenticity and one of several colourful characters Hugh had recruited for the brigade – lodged his leg between a sharp rock and the full weight of the North canoe. It took the combined effort of everyone to get Kitpou calmed down. It was difficult to determine the extent of his injury, but it was obvious that he wouldn't be able to carry much across the many portages that lay ahead. First day out, two men down.

Tempers reached the boiling point beneath the weight of Hugh's 250-lb North canoe, patched profusely with fiberglass, as we neared the end of the long portage into Fowl Lake. It was then we heard a strange commotion, like some creature unhinged. I could feel the adrenalin racing as we set the canoe down quickly. We looked ahead in disbelief. There was Kitpou, stark naked, save for his elk-horned headdress and a bandage on his right leg. With arms outstretched, head thrown back, he intoned in a high-pitched howl that sounded out-of-this-world, wild-eyed, and in a state of complete abandonment, his stocky body gleaming with sweat. As we watched this spectacle unfold, we could see that Kitpou – who normally never touched alcohol – had siphoned a mug from Hugh's 5-gallon keg of high wines for "medicinal purposes" while waiting for us to traverse the portage. Slowly, like an apparition, he hobbled out onto a cedar log on the water's edge, paused for a moment – now with a silly grin on his face – then plunged into the lake, broke into a powerful front crawl and disappeared around the next point. This was a performance he would repeat several times in the days ahead with equal dramatic effect.

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As canoe trips go, none compares with Hugh P. MacMillan's 1970 Nor'Wester canoe brigade for its ragtag cast of characters and misadventure. Our intent was to retrace the fur trade route from Lake Superior to Winnipeg in five, 26-ft North canoes (Canot du Nord) as part of Manitoba's centennial celebrations, and to film the expedition along the way. We were 35 motley paddlers, ranging in age from 13 to 68. Hugh, 46, our unflappable brigade captain and trip 'organizer', was a descendant of James MacMillan, a trader and explorer with the North West Company in the early 1800s. Hugh was amid a storied career with the official title of 'liaison officer', but acted as a 'roving archivist', for the Archives of Ontario. He was so steeped in fur trade history that his wife, Muriel, often remarked that he should have been born 200 years earlier.

The centre of attention throughout most of the journey was the charismatic Shaman Chief Kitpou, a television personality and acquaintance of Hugh's. Kitpou brought along his son, David, and a young Salish boy, plus two enormous steamer trunks stuffed with breechclouts, head dresses, peace pipes, rattles, drums and wolf skins. Added to that was Kitpou's 20-ft-tall canvas teepee. Two women, Elsie Burnham and Sandy Whittal, accompanied our brigade, but wisely kept a distance in their 17-ft canoe. Rounding out the brigade were Hugh's eldest sons, Malcolm and Ian, a camp counsellor, Brian Law, with a clutch of teenage boys from Camp Kandalore, three crusty Americans from Illinois, two cameramen, a journalist from the *Toronto Telegram*, and hitchhikers picked up between Toronto and Thunder Bay to replace paddlers who had bailed before the trip began. The brigade even had a mascot, a Manx cat we named Cabbit, who one of our young crew found wandering in MacMillan's back yard.

Wynn Jones, a university friend, and I arrived at Hugh and Muriel MacMillan's residence in the Willowdale neighborhood of north Toronto on July 10, a hot, sultry afternoon – two days before our scheduled departure – to help with packing. Hugh wasn't there – he was late leaving Port Hope where he had been visiting Angus Mowat, Farley's father. So Wynn and I headed to a small basement room where we launched into sorting more than 1,500 sachets of chicken noodle soup, 100 packages of macaroni, over 100 lbs of oatmeal, and 250 cans of meatballs. I discovered 40 boxes of barley balls, which according to the directions, required three hours of soaking before cooking, perhaps not the best choice with a tight schedule and 400 miles of hard paddling and portaging ahead.

Hugh eventually arrived in fine fettle, despite having learned that the professional film crew had backed down at the last minute and we'd lost the $20,000 needed to cover the cost of filming our adventure. Fortunately, he was able to call upon Glenn Fallis and Greg Cowan of the Voyageur Canoe Company in Millbrook. They agreed to undertake the filming with equipment they begged and borrowed, including a 16 mm Bolex camera on loan from the Royal Ontario Museum.

Late that evening, tired and sweaty from packing, Wynn went upstairs to use the shower and quickly returned laughing. "What's so funny?" I asked. Without a word, he led me to the source of his amusement. There, in MacMillan's bathtub, floating in steaming, murky water, was a 5-gallon hickory keg "for Hugh's high wines… sealing the cracks." I had been forewarned of the near-lethal potency of MacMillan's high wines and would soon learn that the stories were true. The next day in ritualistic fashion Hugh filled the keg with whatever alcohol brigade members had brought along, the heels of several liquor bottles, four bottles of cheap rum, twice that of Alcool (an overproof alcohol product), several bottles of strawberry brandy, multiple bottles of sacramental wine for good measure, a few dollops of unpasteurized honey and enough tincture of capsicum to choke an ox.

Hugh P. MacMillan on picnic bench

The drive to Thunder Bay in Hugh's van was slow going, as his journal attests: "The van seems to work well enough with the new motor but we are pulling a very heavy load with the large tandem trailer, three 26-ft canoes, two 16-ft canoes, over 20 packs on the deck and 7 men inside with all their gear. One can't go over 50 miles an hour or the trailer starts to fishtail and you have to hit the brakes and then accelerate to straighten it out." Not mentioned was Hugh's proclivity for making phone calls along the way – "telephonitis" was the label his sons put on it – which meant stopping at almost every public telephone booth along the highway. And then there was the matter of his overdue federal tax return, which he worked on in the back of the van next to a large cardboard box brimming with receipts. That went well until his son, Malcolm, opened a rear window without telling his dad.

We reached City Hall in Thunder Bay on July 14, where Kitpou was waiting, having driven there from British Columbia, but we were so late the mayor and the press were long gone. We were ready for a ceremony, everyone decked out in bright toques, colourful *ceinture flêchées* and some in buckskins. Hugh's journal reads: "A representative of the post office showed up with our official mail sack [containing copies of letters sent by canoe to the Red River Settlement more than a 100 years ago], which we are to transport by canoe

Driving to campsite Grand Beach, Manitoba

Filming Grand Beach

through to Red River and Winnipeg. Got the canoes in the water ready for the sprint race when a dense fog set in, which necessitated canceling the race as it was impossible to see the canoes more than 10 feet from shore." We camped at Grand Portage, Minnesota that night and the next day arranged to have the five North canoes, the smaller canoes and our gear transported by truck to Partridge Falls, above the 8.5-mile portage the Ojibwe called *Gitchi Onigaming* or "Great Carrying Place", otherwise known as Grand Portage. Our brigade members walked the historic trail with only their personal packs. We got off easy compared to the voyageurs and *coureurs de bois* who would often sprint across this portage, their neck muscles straining under a tumpline holding two or three 90-lb bales of fur. We camped about a mile beyond the end of the portage. Hugh's journal reads: "Very poor campsite – thousands of mosquitos and black flies on hand. We got very little, if any, sleep tonight because of this incessant horde of bugs."

On July 16 we made our way up Fowl Lake, across the three portages into Mountain Lake where we found a good campsite, but not before 9:00 p.m., everyone exhausted and dehydrated, the salt rations nowhere to be found. Hugh's journal reads: "I can see it is going to be a constant problem getting camped at any reasonable hour…, combined with the difficulty in finding large enough campsites for this many men. John Gadsby is not too happy about us making a late camp. …Kitpou's leg is giving him plenty of trouble and doesn't help his mental attitude."

A full moon rose over Mackenzie's Rock where we had seen ravens soaring effortlessly in the updraft earlier in the day. A breeze from the west kept most of the mosquitos away, rewarding us with five hours of blessed sleep.

Two days out and we were already well behind our schedule, which Hugh had set based on the 1967 Centennial Voyageur Canoe Pageant from Rocky Mountain House to Montreal, a distance of about 3,283 miles completed in 104 days for an average of over 30 miles per day. But the military had supported that pageant with food drops and logistics, and each North canoe was manned by six burly paddlers who could easily maintain a stroke a second for most of the day. Their canoes were almost empty; we had all manner of gear – a waterlogged mail sack, a large tin lunch box, Hugh's heavy reel-to-reel tape recorder, a Nor'wester flag, a mast and sail, a barrel of high wines, canned meatballs and a scattering of camping and cooking gear. Kitpou had brought a 65-lb steamer trunk and a teepee, sodden and heavy from sitting on the bottom of Hugh's leaky canoe. To make matters worse, the camera crew with several of our strongest paddlers – Glenn, Greg, Wynn and Vitalis Snukins – had set off ahead with a small outboard motor mounted on the gunnels of one of their canoes, in order to get footage of our historic route. The two women paddlers were already well ahead.

Kitpou at Grand Beach, Lake Winnipeg

The next day, we rose at 6:00 a.m. and were on the water by 8:30 a.m. after a big breakfast. But the going was slow getting to North Fowl Lake, Moose Lake and across the three short portages beyond into Mountain Lake, where we camped as the sun set behind the verdant hills. Gadsby refused to put up his

tent in protest to our lateness; Kitpou's injured leg was causing him severe pain; his son's feet were besieged with nasty blisters, the result of improper footwear; Hugh's left knee was acting up; and the first aid kit was missing.

We were up early again on July 18 as dark clouds settled in. By late morning we had made our way to Watape Lake and had begun searching for the "Petit Détroit", through which Watape Lake flows into Rove Lake, when Kitpou lost it. Without warning, he slammed his paddle across the bow gunnels, rose near naked from his seat, cursed Hugh, threatened to quit the brigade, launched himself overboard, swam to the nearest point and disappeared into the woods. Hugh's imperturbable reaction: "Jeesh, what was that all about?" We sent Kitpou's son and a couple of voyageurs off to find him. About an hour later Kitpou appeared alone on the shore with a sheepish grin, as if nothing untoward had happened. We got him back in the canoe and sent a search party to search for the search party. It took forever to get everyone going again, but after a hasty, late lunch in the pouring rain and a shot of high wines we were finally on our way to Rove Lake.

Barnes and Kitpou at the height of land

By midafternoon we reached the 2-mile portage from Rove Lake into Rose Lake, rated the worst portage of our journey next to the Grand Portage. The first 3/4 mile of sporadic trail twisted its way through a mosquito-infested swamp. Large cedar and spruce trees formed a tangled maze across our path, and the heavy rain made the exposed tree roots treacherous underfoot. Mud oozed up to our armpits in the deepest bog holes, forcing us to abandon our heavy loads until we could successfully extricate ourselves. That Morris Perkins, the captain of the Illinois canoe, carried little more than his paddle and camera, leaving his vassals to carry his heavy gear, did little for morale. Some, like me, traversed that miserable portage six times. As the light began to fade, we had all the gear and one canoe across. We used that canoe to ferry everyone to a nearby campsite. The last of our voyageurs arrived at 9:00 p.m.

Two American fishermen, already camped at the site, were more than a little taken aback by our bedraggled gang, some in breechclouts, others in mud-splattered period costume. At first, they were apprehensive about sharing their campsite, but Hugh's fast talking and a dram of high wines changed their minds. They set up a large fire and cooked a huge pot of spaghetti, which kept everyone going until we had our camp set up. An increasingly irascible Gadsby refused to pitch his tent and bunked in with the Americans. Here we learned that the film crew had taken an alternative route via Clearwater Lake and would likely meet us the next day.

We reached the height of land late the following day in a downpour, but no film crew, much to Kitpou's dismay. Hugh's journal reads: "We looked for a campsite, which took until 10:30 p.m. Plenty of trouble getting a fire going but

we finally got something to eat by 11:30 p.m. and stretched out tarps over the canoes on rocks. A liberal tot of high wines managed to take some of the chill from the evening and we finally got to bed by 1:00 a.m." Gadsby was not amused.

We had dried everything out by noon the next day. Our campsite was bedlam with all manner of clothing and gear strewn over rocks and tree branches. Hugh's journal reads: "…we put everyone through the height-of-land ceremony where they promised never to let anyone past this point without a similar ceremony, not to kiss a voyageur's wife without her permission, and then each one got his tot of high wines. Kitpou was a great big help and very impressive in handling this part of the ceremony in his full regalia. I presented each man with a Beaver token as a symbol of his having crossed over the height of land. The crews have a right to feel pleased as this has been a tough session thus far and one that few men or boys will ever get the opportunity of participating in."

By the time we reached Saganaga Lake a few days later, injuries, exhaustion and meagre rations had begun to take their toll. Hugh's journal summed it up: "One of the Kandalore boys has forgotten to take some pills with him that he needs for an allergy and got a bad case of sunstroke. I had to carry him across the portage. Kitpou's leg is badly swollen and likely infected. We haven't been able to find the medical kit so far but have been treating his leg with sulfa and feeding him pain pills." And still no sign of the film crew.

On July 20, we camped at a good site on Magnetic Lake. The next morning, we were up at 5:00 a.m. to find Kitpou performing a sunrise ceremony from a rocky point overlooking the water. His powerful voice and beating of a drum were haunting in the pale morning light as mist rose from the cool water below.

We reached the ranger station at Cache Bay on Saganaga Lake on July 22 where Hugh chartered a Cessna to look for our filmmakers, leaving me in charge at the tender age of 21. I was hung over from a night of revelry, which involved a bottle of Cutty Sark, gratefully purchased by Jack Barnes and shared with me and two pretty girls who worked at the small store at the ranger station. We pushed on along the Ontario-Minnesota border through Cypress and Knife Lake to the ranger station on Basswood Lake, but not before one more of Kitpou's over-the-gunnels-and-into-the-woods disappearing acts. For much of the day he was about as cooperative as Pinky the Cat and threatened to have MacMillan jailed. Staff at the Department of Lands and Forests at Basswood wisely decided to fly Kitpou out to a hospital in Atikokan the next day. We learned that the film crew had passed by three days earlier on their way to Crane Lake, Minnesota, where the locals had planned a party for us. The rangers scolded us for having our brigade in such disarray, spread over half of Quetico.

John Gadsby pointing the way

Kitpou in full regalia

Our diminished group soldiered on without a major incident, but with growing concern that our food supplies were running low. We made good time, shooting several sets of rapids that we had been told were unrunnable. We were portaging around Wheelbarrow Falls on the Basswood River when we met Glenn, Greg and Wynn from the film crew coming the other way. Clearly in take-charge mode, they had come to fetch us with two motors, one they affixed to their 17-ft canoe and the other they secured onto the stern of Hugh's North canoe. Before setting off, they made a large fire, gathered all the sugar, chocolate and oatmeal we could scrounge in a galvanized pail, mixed in some water and boiled it up. Using our hands, we happily scooped the warm, brown mush into our mouths as we journeyed through the night. Someone found the salt tablets, which were hidden in the bottom of Hugh's tape recorder case and each of us was issued a ration. That, combined with the chocolate and oatmeal, gave us terrible indigestion as we motored, half-paddled, burped and dozed through the night across Crooked Lake. The Aurora Borealis had transformed the sky into a magnificent light show, without a doubt the most magical night of our journey.

Hugh flew into the south end of Lac la Croix to meet us on July 25. He was running a temperature of 103° F and had lost almost 20 pounds. He had arranged extra motor power, so we quickly traversed beautiful Lac la Croix, arriving at the 4-mile Dawson Portage by nightfall. With the help of several large cabin cruisers and pick-up trucks provided by Bill Zup, Dwight Haberman and the citizens of Crane Lake, we crossed the Dawson Portage and made our way to Sand Point on the Rainy River system. Everyone was eventually transported across the border to Crane Lake where hundreds had turned out for a voyageur festival, which involved canoe races and a fish fry with over a hundred pounds of fresh, filleted pickerel. It was a wonderful celebration and a welcome rest – a chance for us to lick our wounds.

The following day, after spending a fruitless hour searching for Cabbit, who had decided she liked the fish treats at Crane Lake better than our tinned stew and barley balls, we drove to Sioux Narrows in search of Kitpou, but he was nowhere in sight. We settled in for the night at the provincial campground where some of the crew enticed several female campers to sample our replenished high wines. One of the girls swore the grog made her ears tingle even before it reached her lips.

On Monday July 27, we rose at 8:00 a.m., wolfed down peanut butter and jam sandwiches and were loading our gear into our cars and van when we were startled by the sound of a siren and the flashing lights of a police cruiser. What had we done now? The Ontario Provincial Police vehicle stopped abruptly in a cloud of dust and there sitting in the front passenger seat was Kitpou – beaming smile, elk-horned headdress, wolf skin over his shoulder and a peace pipe in his mouth with an

unlit stogie sticking up from the bowl. Other than a large bandage on his injured leg, he was in fine form, rather pleased with himself for having cajoled the OPP to drive him all the way from Fort Frances, a distance of 175 miles.

Our brigade now reunited, save for Cabbit, we drove to Kenora where we were fêted by the mayor and a delegation from the Lake-of-the-Woods Historical Society. Hugh's journal reads: "We drank the usual toasts of high wines as it would have been done in the days of the Beaver Club. The town had a very good dinner after which we went back to the waterfront and spent an hour putting on sprint races and tug-of-war events for the large crowd of tourists gathered to watch us perform." Malcolm MacMillan and Steve McCann rounded up a van load of girls – some local, others from as far away as Montreal, New York and California – and brought them out to our campsite in the park. A raucous party ensued until well into the morning. Hugh asked me what smelled so good and I explained that it was marijuana. His response: "Oh… how about that now?" Gadsby had pitched his tent on arrival and turned in early, disgusted with our unsavoury lot.

On July 28, we paddled the mercury-polluted Winnipeg River to Minaki Lodge where we entertained guests with sprint races and precision paddling. Hugh, whose appetite had begun to improve, noted the "barbeque [steak] dinner laid on for us which is a great improvement over cooking stews over campfires." The next day we drove to Grand Beach on the shores of Lake Winnipeg, barely avoiding disaster when the trailer hitch on Hugh's van gave way, sending the trailer with its heavy load of canoes careening off the highway. We set up camp in the park at Grand Beach. The following morning was spent filming — Kitpou in full regalia, now completely in his element. But the bright, sunny day of filming was not without incident. Hugh's journal reads: "The mounted police [RCMP] …threatened to arrest John Hedger and Ken Cowan who are both going around wearing breechclouts. …This evening I had a meeting with the mounties…. It was finally decided to drop any charges, providing the boys didn't go into the Grand Dome restaurant and hotel dressed in this manner."

Kitpou sunrise ceremony, Magnetic Lake

On to Lower Fort Garry on August 1 where Hudson Bay Company officials, including Deputy Governor Richardson, joined us, everyone in period costume. Some dignitaries had arrived in a York boat; there was a crew from Manitoba in a North canoe; and group from Ontario Lands and Forests showed up with a beautiful 30-ft birch bark canoe built by Charlie Laberge (who later became Supervisor of Voyageur Life at Old Fort William). With everyone decked out in voyageur garb and several of our deeply-tanned paddlers with headbands, breechclouts and moccasins, it was a striking sight. Hugh was as excited as a school boy.

The Manitoba Centennial Corporation arranged lunch, and we joined in canoe races with thousands of spectators

Kitpou, MacMillan and Gadsby at the height of land

Lake Superior in fog

lining the high banks of the Red River around the fort. Hugh described the next event as follows: "We were …escorted to a large platform where a group of Salteaux Indians were on hand with some $20,000 worth of furs lent by the Hudson's Bay Co. so that we could conduct a trading ceremony between the Nor'Wester canoe brigade and the locals. This was a most colourful event with furs changing hands for trade axes, guns, blankets, beads, etc. …We carried our canoes into the fort and then set up our keg of high wines to treat some of the staff. …This has been the highlight of the Centennial celebrations here in Manitoba." In mock officialdom, we handed over the mail sack we had carried all the way from Thunder Bay. Fortunately, we had hung it up in the sun to dry the day before so that the soggy heap looked half presentable.

On Sunday, August 2, the Manitoba Centennial Corporation arranged a church service, conducted in Latin and French, as was the tradition at the height of the fur trade. Unfortunately, a rock concert in a park across from the Manitoba Legislature proved a stronger draw for many of our voyageurs. Hugh and a few others returned to Lower Fort Gary that evening to meet Ed Schreyer and the Premiers of several other provinces. The camaraderie we had experienced along the Voyageur Trail was beginning to wane, overpowered by the inevitable distractions of 'civilization'. Hugh MacMillan's 1970 Nor'Wester Brigade was drawing to a close.

Some of us wanted nothing more than to push off again and head further into the back country to the rhythm of our paddles. We had gained a first-hand look at iconic Canadian shield country most of us hadn't seen before, and we had lived a part of this country's fur trade history. Despite the many mishaps, discomforts and occasional outbursts, one could not ask for a more memorable canoe trip, one that broke all boundaries and crossed into the realm of the imagination — the stuff of dreams. The world could use more dreamers like Hugh P. MacMillan. Muriel had been right: Hugh should have been born a couple of hundred years earlier, but those who paddled with him in the great *Canots du Nord* were grateful he wasn't.

Mail sack transfer at Thunder Bay

Portage into Gunflint Lake

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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 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.

37th Wilderness and Canoe Symposium

Second-in-a-row virtual Symposium attracted 713 registered participants and offered an entertaining and informative program:

Nicolas Roulx: Expedition AKOR "Crossing Canada: Beyond Geographical Exploration"

Patrick Moldowan: "Wilderness as a living laboratory: Over 75-years of wildlife science at the Algonquin Wildlife Research Station"

Jon Turk: "Tracking Lions, Myth, and Wilderness in Samburu"

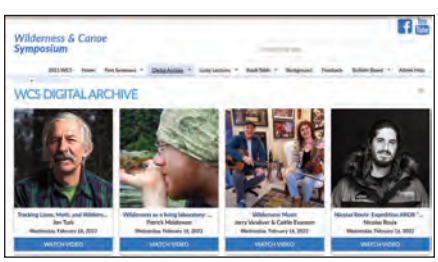
Wilderness Music by Jerry Vandiver and Caitlin Evanson

Canadian Canoe Museum update by Jeremy Ward and Carolyn Hyslop

Breakout Sessions: "Gear Heads", "Let's Talk Trips", "Tripping with Young Kids" and "The Cooler Room"

Online recordings of most sessions are available at WCS Digital Archives on www.wcsymposium.com website.

Our team of volunteers are hoping to host the 38th WCS in-person at York University on 24-25 February, 2023. Please forward your programing suggestions to wcsymposium@gmail.com.



Kazan River Cairn

I read the exchange of correspondence between John Martin and David Pelly in the Winter 2021 issue of *Nastawgan* about the cairn at Kazan Falls with some interest. I can add a little more information that readers may find interesting.

When we were there in 1977, we knew there would be a cairn having talked to both Fred Gaskin and George Luste. The "stick" (really a 2x4) the Gaskin party left was still there, lying beside the cairn. It had suffered some animal chewing at one end, but was still quite legible. The "Beaver Nut" can that contained the notes in a plastic bag, mentioned David, was in good shape at that time, as were the notes inside it.

We added a note to the cairn and another "stick", just because Fred Gaskin had; we had only planned to add a note. I don't recall, but the "stick" must have been in the vicinity.

The attached photos show:

1. The Kazan River cairn in 1977.
2. The "stick" left by Fred Gaskin in 1973, the note left by George Luste in 1974, two notes from 1975, and our 1977 note. You can see the "Beaver Nut" can.
3. Our "stick" along with the Gaskin group's.

Regards, Sandy Richardson

And the Winner is…

Christopher Mayberry! Christopher responded to my call for more shorter and diverse stories with a submission about a canoe trip with his daughter Elizabeth on the Spanish River. Kudos to you, Christopher, for being a great Dad and for following up. The Sansbug pop-up tent prize is well-deserved!

Escape Rapids

By Robert Horwood

Escape Rapid, Coppermine River (from Michel Lafrance's personal collection)

One day's paddle from the Arctic Sea, the Coppermine River drops rapidly through a forbidding canyon. Here you can choose either to carry your canoe and gear over the hills to calmer water, or trust your skill in the rapids.

Samuel Hearne was the first European explorer to pass this way. His skilled Indigenous guides saw him safely downstream in his search for the native copper reported to be common in the river valley. The Indigenous paddlers managed these rapids so easily that he did not mention them in his journal. Incidentally, he did not find any significant amounts of copper. But the river was still hopefully named "Coppermine." Fifty years later, another explorer, John Franklin, came to the same passage, but did not fare so well. His canoe foundered in the heavy white water from which he and his companions narrowly escaped. He named this part of the river Escape Rapids.

I stand on the east bank of the Coppermine, just above the beginning of Escape Rapids. This is likely the spot from which all those before me have looked with wonder and concern at the rising cliffs. Like them I am an explorer, facing similar challenges and uncertainties – only with better equipment and different motives. I am exploring my responses to adventurous life and travel in "a land so wild and savage," as Stan Rogers mused in his famous song "*Northwest Passage*." I want to feel and work with fear, to make a friend of it. And yes, to feel a sense of kinship with those intrepid souls who have been this way before.

The basalt rock quickly gets steeper on each side of the river. The water, a deep blue, becomes dotted with bouncing white patches, revealing hidden rocks as the water gains speed over the steeper drop. Downstream, the river makes a sharp left turn. Spray dances on the rocks as the torrent runs into the cliff ahead at the turn. My heart lurches. A canoe in that place will be pushed against the unyielding rock. "Between a rock and a hard place," has literal meaning there.

The near left side of the river has larger patches of white. Further downstream, in the centre, are even greater areas of turbulent white. One of these is set off by a large V-tongue of smooth water shooting into a series of steep standing waves with extensive white patches on either side. These show the position of large rocks with dangerous holes below. Such holes have a strong undertow that can easily be fatal to those trapped in them. I decide that my rising heart rate will be best handled by examining the situation.

My companions and I look for a path that matches our abilities and gear. We must first avoid the left side at the start.

The revealed rocks on the right are reasonably easy to evade. We are standing on the right shore, and I gain confidence that we can begin with good prospects to stay dry. But on the right side at the turn of the canyon is that dangerous cliff. We must somehow start on the right, then move across the river to the left far enough to avoid the dangerous heavy water in the centre well down stream. From that point we can safely navigate the rest of the big water, avoiding rocks near the left bank.

So our plan is made. We will not portage. We will cover the canoes with water-tight spray skirts that fit snugly around each paddler's waist. Using back strokes to keep the canoe speed slower than that of the water, we will lower ourselves down the water avoiding the scattered rocks on the right. Approaching the turn, we will set the angle of the canoe across the current, paddling backstrokes in such a way as to maintain the angle. The action of the current in combination with our paddles will push the canoe sideways across the river to the left above the large holes. This downstream ferry, as paddlers call it, will move us away from the threat of the cliff at the turn. If timed correctly, it will also put us on the safer left side of the large complex of heavy water in the centre.

The leading canoes in our party complete their preparations and push off. We delay our departure to watch the line they trace down the river. Each canoe follows the plan, safely negotiating the hazards on each side. I gain confidence. We check that the loose gear in our canoe is stowed. We unfold the spray skirt and fit it (with a little stretching) to the canoe. The spare paddles are secured in straps on top. We snug up our life vests and slide the canoe into the water. Ivan McWilliam, whose turn it is today to paddle bow, climbs into his place through the spray skirt. He adjusts the laces at his waist for a snug fit.

Then it is my turn to board. I feel an excited anticipation and a burst of nervousness. I am awkward when shifting my weight from land to the canoe, and I fumble with the laces on the skirt. Once I am finally settled in kneeling position there is no turning back. I am enclosed and dry, safe inside. But I also feel trapped. It occurs to me that if we capsize, it will not be easy to escape from being trapped in this vessel in wild water. All these thoughts fade as Ivan indicates that he's ready and we move out of the shallows into the flow of the river. There is no longer time for reflection.

As expected, the first section is easily navigated. We work smoothly together to move the canoe through safe water around the rocks. Moving deeper into the canyon it's tempting to glance away from the water to the cliffs towering above us.

On the right, a beautiful white thread of falling water tumbles down from the top of the cliff. I yell to Ivan so that he can share this moment of calm. But it's a mistake. We are at the turn and have missed the moment to start our critical ferry to cross the river. We try it anyway, because we must avoid being dashed into the cliff that is looming closer and closer. The ferry begins to work, and we ever so slowly move away from the cliffs. Our downstream progress and ferry have taken us just above the long tongue and standing waves that mark the start of the heavy water we meant to avoid.

Evasion is no longer possible. To ferry further will put us into a serious hole. We straighten the canoe and enter the maelstrom. The canoe begins its steep slide down the smooth V-shaped tongue ahead. As waves pour over the canoe, I yell to Ivan to brace hard. We both lean out to our respective sides with paddles pressing the water like outriggers in the manoeuvre paddlers call a high brace. The water runs harmlessly off the spray cover as wave after dancing wave splashes over. The spray soaks my face.

I hear the hissing roar as we pass the edge of a large hole on the right. Another appears to pass by on the left. We are successfully threading the needle between these hazards and at length reach easier water. At the end of the canyon, we meet the paddlers who have gone before us. One of them asks, "What were you guys doing out there?" I have no words to reply. We make camp on the tundra where it levels out as the cliffs end, again on the right side of the river. I am quite sure that this is the same spot where Franklin's party must have camped. It's the only suitable place to recover from a close call. Franklin's able assistant George Back painted an accurate watercolour of Escape Rapids as seen from below, only on the less hospitable left side. He must have crossed the river to find the position for his painting. He would not have done that unless the party had made camp.

In the calm and safety of our camp, I reflect on my friend's question. What were we doing out there? Well, for one thing we were paying the price of letting a lovely little fall of water high on the cliff lead us to neglect the river. But perhaps another thing is that we were unknowingly taking the "hand of Franklin reaching for the Beaufort Sea," as Stan Rogers suggests in "*Northwest Passage*." It feels good to be part of the distinguished company of adventurous explorers that escaped Escape Rapids.

Houston, C. Stuart (1995). Arctic Artist. McGill-Queen's University PressQueen's, Figure 4.

Daddy, Daughter on the Spanish River

By Christopher Mayberry

I cannot remember why we picked the Spanish River as our first wilderness trip but I am certainly glad we did. Whatever our prerequisites were, most of the boxes must have been checked. Remote but not too remote, a train trip, rapids, under a week trip and first voyage for Elizabeth on the Chi-Cheemaun ferry. Our schedule was relaxed: we drove from London to Espanola on our first day. Elizabeth enjoyed her first trip on the Chi-Cheemaun. On Manitoulin Island, we pulled over often to watch the sandhill cranes.

We reached Espanola late afternoon and settled in. The following day was free to arrange the shuttle, parking and permit. Elizabeth was able to log in quite a few hours of the cooking channel, another trip highlight.

July 24th our trip began. Ray, of Ray's Taxi Service, picked us up at Agnew Lake Lodge, our take-out spot, and dropped us off at Sudbury's train station. He has a 5-star shuttle service. We had a comfortable ride. His trailer was large enough for canoe and packs, and en route, he pulled over at Tim Hortons so I could get a much needed coffee. The train was punctual enough and the Budd car was filled methodically but with haste. While checking our tickets, the conductor assured us that we would be dropped off at the Forks. As we left Sudbury, the rain started and seemed steady. Upon arrival, we, and two other groups, quickly unloaded. The rain had stopped briefly and gave us time to set out.

Our first campsite was to be Athlone Rapids at km 98 but, because of the weather and speculation that the sites might be taken by the previous two groups, we just paddled a few hundred meters to the Forks site. It was a wise choice, camp was made comfortably and in between rain we paddled around the Forks area and enjoyed the day.

Day two, we set out on an overcast but not so wet day. Our night had been comfortable and I had enjoyed the train going by in the middle of the night. The farm I had grown up on had the Goderich to Guelph line over the lane not too far from the house: I think the association gave our campsite a warm, nostalgic feeling. We quickly reached Athlone Rapids. Already, I surmised the water levels were up compared to late spring, early summer levels. The top of Athlone Rapids had a wonderful large wave train and we portaged our packs before running it. Elizabeth was a little nervous but after that run, she was hooked. As we paddled, we noticed that the overcast weather was in part smoke from a distant fire. We camped at Cliff Rapids that night as planned (km74).

Day three we set out as an energetic group of young men showed up ready to set up camp and fish for the rest of the day. One of them mentioned that it was the highest water they had experienced on the Spanish, being his 5th summer trip. After Cliff Rapids we met one of the groups who had started with us at the Forks and visited for a bit. At Zig Zag Rapids we met the second group from the train setting up camp. Zig Zag was a great rapid to run and it was followed with four or five kilometers of swifts. Late afternoon we made it to Tofflemire Rapids, our planned campsite (km55).

The next day was glorious weather. We pulled over at the Elbow and visited with a local outfitter. At Graveyard Rapids we portaged our gear and Elizabeth chose not to run the rapids because of the falls. We struck up a friendship with a fellow camping at the falls, and he and I paddled the set to make it more of a liftover. He mentioned that he often camped there, paddling down from the Elbow and poling back.

We came to the second falls which had a short portage and took lunch. I believe Agnes Rapid soon followed where we ran the top and lined the second half. Elizabeth often mentions how much she enjoyed lining the canoe. Cedar Rapids followed, certainly a favourite for me. We found an eddy halfway and enjoyed an afternoon snack. We made it to our last planned campsite on Reynolds Creek (km26). It was by far my favourite campsite, open with tall pines and a gentle brook.

The last day was good weather and gentle winds thankfully. I think we made it to Agnew Lake Lodge shortly after lunch and headed home to London.

In summary I can see why the Spanish is a go-to trip. I didn't mind seeing the occasional paddler, as everyone was happy to be there. It also meant eventually someone would paddle by if you wrapped your canoe beyond repair. The bugs were having an unexpected renaissance for late July but that was welcome due to their scarcity in the spring. Fishing was poor by all accounts, one fisherman's theory being the sudden rise in water levels. All the campsites were decent and seemed to be treated well by fellow paddlers. Most importantly my twelve-year-old enjoyed herself and has committed to two trips this year!

Winisk River

Story by Eric Thum
Photos by Eric Thum and Doug Merriman

Beginning of the trip – sunrise on the Pipestone River

On June 10, 2019, Doug Merriman and I pushed our Dagger Reflection 17-foot canoe off from shore and started the long journey down the Pipestone and Winisk Rivers in northeastern Ontario. Our destination was Peawanuck village on the Winisk, just 16 miles from Hudson Bay. We planned on four weeks to paddle and portage, with brief stops at the First Nation Reserves of Wunnumin, Summer Beaver, and Webequie along the way. Doug had travelled this route before and had friends in those villages. I had not been north of the more civilized Quetico Provincial Park. We looked forward to fast water, meeting First Nation natives, wildlife sightings, and Canadian Shield scenery. This vast boreal forest is what Sigurd Olson called "the lonely land".

Pipestone River

Our first seven days were spent on the Pipestone River. The water was high from spring run-off and the numerous Class II and III rapids tested our whitewater skills. Cautious about swamping in the big rollers, we stayed close to shore and/or followed the "V" whenever possible. Portages that were so easy to find and hike in the Boundary Waters were non-existent along this waterway. Our first job, after finding the start of the portage, was to cut a path with machetes and flag the route with surveyor tape, then return to fetch the first load. A final return trip was necessary to get the last pack and canoe. On our second day we portaged through burned-out terrain from a 2018 forest fire, almost stepping on a newborn bear cub along the way. Needless to say, we finished that portage double time to avoid a confrontation with the mother bear. We had some wonderful campsites during this early stage of the trip. Our campsite overlooking the "Hole in the Wall" falls was spectacular. It took a long time to adjust to the long daylight hours up north. I found myself wondering if it would ever get dark at 10 p.m. In the distance, the clear whistle of the white-throated sparrow was ubiquitous. On Assin Lake we met a fishing group, flown in from Iowa. On our last night on the Pipestone, we had a gorgeous campsite surrounded by black spruce. Someone had left a stack of firewood. We gobbled up our freeze-dried chicken and rice dinner and thought about what lay ahead – the big Wunnumin Lake and Winisk River.

Our arrival in Wunnumin Village marked the second stage of our trip. We left our canoe on the sandy beach and hoofed it to town. Thanks to counselor Phil Gliddy, we acquired overnight digs in a small apartment. We showered, washed our clothes and had frozen pizza

purchased from the Northern Store. Residents here were most kind. The next day Phil drove us back to our canoe. It was a beautiful day and the lake perfectly still. From here we would paddle Wunnummin Lake and then enter the 295-mile Winisk River. Today our canoe made the only ripples on the placid water. What a lucky break! Doug was windbound here last year for several hours. It took us just three hours to cross the immense lake. We had lunch (waffles and bacon topped with whipped cream and berries provided by the folks at the village) on a rocky point. Next was a 0.6 mile portage short-cut that saved us many extra miles of paddling. Hordes of black flies feasted on our blood as we trudged through large water holes and spongy moss. But at the end of the portage was the Winisk, the shore lined by spruce and aspen. It was a beautiful, narrow stretch of river. Bald eagles watched us from high atop their perches as we paddled by. But we had no luck finding a decent campsite at the end of the day. Finally, Doug spotted an old trapper cabin with room for two tents, and we spent the night there. Late that night a loon made a lonely call off in the distance.

We left the trapper cabin campsite at 8 a.m. It was a beautiful sunny start to a long day. The Winisk at this point is wide, almost like large lakes aligned southwest to northeast. We finally arrived at Summer Beaver late in the day. Peter and Sylvia Neshinapaise let us take showers at their house and pitch the tents in the spacious backyard. Doug and I decided to take a rest day here to ship some of our unused equipment home, pack more food and relax. The cursed black flies seemed to ignore the Permethrin I sprayed all over my clothes and tent at the beginning of the trip!

From Summer Beaver we had our share of class II-IV rapids. Many were too dangerous for our canoe, so we portaged on what the natives call “skidoo trails”. The Winisk was very wide at this point. Our campsite that night left much to be desired. Using a machete, we hacked at the spruce and balsam to clear enough room for two tents. The black flies were insufferable. As soon as we finished devouring our pepper steak freeze-dried dinner, we jumped in the tents to get away from the blood suckers.

More wide-river paddling the next few

Burnt portage on Pipestone River

Hole-in-the-Wall Falls

Lunch break along the Pipestone

Webequie School

Bearhead fish camp on the Winisk

Wye Rapids on the Winisk

days. On June 23 we rounded the bend to see Webequie off in the distance. Heavy winds made the going tough, so we stopped on an island in hopes the wind would die down. I smoked a cigar and Doug took a catnap amongst the cedar, balsam and alder. Soon we heard a motorboat – Eric Jacobsen and Chipa Anderson were there to do some fishing and saw our canoe beached on shore. We talked awhile and agreed to meet later to talk about the lower stretches of the Winisk. After the wind died down, we paddled a short distance to Webequie. Marlene Whitehead invited us to stay at her mother's place. We spent two rest days here, walking to the cemetery and location of the old Hudson Bay post. Eric gave us some idea of the river ahead and what to expect for rapids and portages. He also said we may see a wolverine – a species new to the area.

Wednesday, June 26: After a few rest days in Webequie we loaded the canoe and pushed off for Peawanuck. Only 230 miles left! Headed north into a strong headwind on Winisk Lake. Ahead was the entrance of the river. We portaged around the first set of rapids and hugged the shore on subsequent whitewater stretches. One of the highlights of the trip was Bearhead Rapids – a wide maze of islands, large rocks and strong rapids. We had too many choices on where to run the canoe. We decided to stay to the right and shoot small class II rapids around several small islands. A few times we jumped out of the canoe to prevent swamping. It was a wild but successful ride. Once in calm water I looked back to see the tumultuous and dangerous class IV water we missed by skirting the outside edges. On the 27th we reached Tashka Rapids – an incredible stretch of class III-IV mix of standing waves and violent water that continued as far as the eye can see. I pitched my tent and Doug slept in one of the three old hunting cabins. We decided to take another rest day here, taking pictures, fishing and exploring the area.

On the 29th we took the portage around Tashka Falls in a cold, misty drizzle. It seemed we were on a path that had been used by natives and fur traders for hundreds of years. Large spruce trees blocked the sun and silvery moss grew along the well-worn trail. It was another long day which included cutting a portage around Baskineig Falls. At Seashell Rapids we

portaged on a long rock shelf in the middle of wide whitewater. Once below Seashell the river started to change – spruce along the shore gave way to tall grass and alder. Geese, sandpipers, and terns greeted us as we followed the swift current. We paddled left or right along long islands. Our main concerns at this point were the reports of polar bears sighted on the Winisk. We had bear spray and a large assortment of fireworks in case one got close to our camp, but it didn't assuage our fears of an attack in the middle of the night!

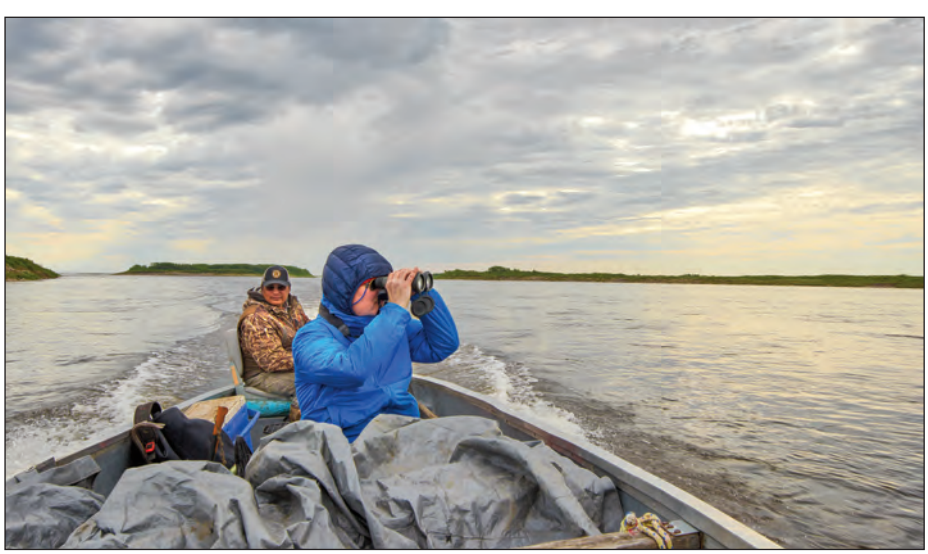
One afternoon, dark clouds moved in from the west and the wind picked up. Even though the wind was at our back, it made steering the canoe difficult. When a crack of thunder exploded in the distance, we quickly got to shore, turned the canoe upside down and stored the packs. Our timing was exquisite – driving rain drenched everything in sight for about an hour. And then black flies came out in hordes. We pitched the tents to get away

Tashka Rapids fish camp

Tashka Rapids

Eric looking over Baskineig Falls on the lower Winisk River

Limestone cliffs on the Winisk near Peawanuck



Boat ride to Sammie's Cabin on Hudson Bay

from the tenacious bloodsuckers. That night I thought about the trip so far and what lay ahead – 6 days of paddling left if we wanted to be in Peawanuck by Saturday. Sammie Hunter, a well-known native there, offered to take us by motor boat to his cabin on the shore of Hudson Bay for a night.

The next day we reached the sharp right turn bend in the river, so pronounced you can see it on small scale maps. Every now and then I noticed large freshets of water pouring into the Winisk. Caspian terns would fly over our canoe and dive bomb into the water. That night we probably had the worst campsite of the entire trip – no good place to pitch the tents – just plenty of gravel and stone. Deer and horse flies attacked us in hordes under a hot sun. But by late evening it finally started to cool off.

Late July 2 we finally made it to Peawanuck! But it took 70 miles of paddling that day to reach our destination, thanks to a very strong current, fear of encountering polar bears, and no decent place to make camp. The Winisk was very wide at this point, with plenty of islands. The shore landscape was sand, gravel, and tall grass. Right before Peawanuck we marveled at the enormous limestone cliffs, deposits of an ancient ocean. A large set of rapids with cross currents and whirlpools tested our canoeing skills one last time. Around the bend we saw the tall microwave antenna of Peawanuck and a fleet of wood and canvas fishing boats (Canots Nor-West) on shore. The final tally – 465 miles in 23 days.

Sammie Hunter was a very gracious host. Since he would be away hunting, he let us use his apartment until our flight July 9. He also invited us to stay at his cabin, located in the Polar Bear Provincial Park on Hudson Bay. We packed sleeping bags and food and Greg Patrick took us in his motorboat from Peawanuck to the shores of this fabled inland sea. After a lengthy snowmobile ride over the muskeg, we reached his humble abode. Doug and I spent the majority of the afternoon on the roof looking for polar bears off on the horizon. Soon one came into view, heading south along the shore. We were also treated to a beautiful sunset. It was a fitting end to a memorable canoe trip down two unspoiled rivers in northern Ontario.

Serendipity Happens

by Gary Storr

A true artist knows when a painting is done. They step back, survey their work, then throw down their brush and declare, “Enough is enough.”

I tried painting once. It didn’t go well. I picked up a brush and, on my canvas, painted the sky. Then the clouds moved and I painted it again. As the plumes reshaped and drifted across the blue vastness, they floated simultaneously across my rendering. Art imitating life. I would never finish a painting at this rate. To borrow a phrase from Kurt Vonnegut, my art was “unstuck in time.” It didn’t make random temporal leaps like Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five* but it moved fluidly along. I would have to learn to stop, to freeze my subjects in a single instant: a collie suspended in mid-air awaiting a frisbee that would never come; Christmas carollers holding sheet music, their mouths framed eternally in perfect ‘O’s, halting a hymn that no one would hear. “Art is never finished, only abandoned,” said Leonardo Da Vinci. The trick is to know when to quit.

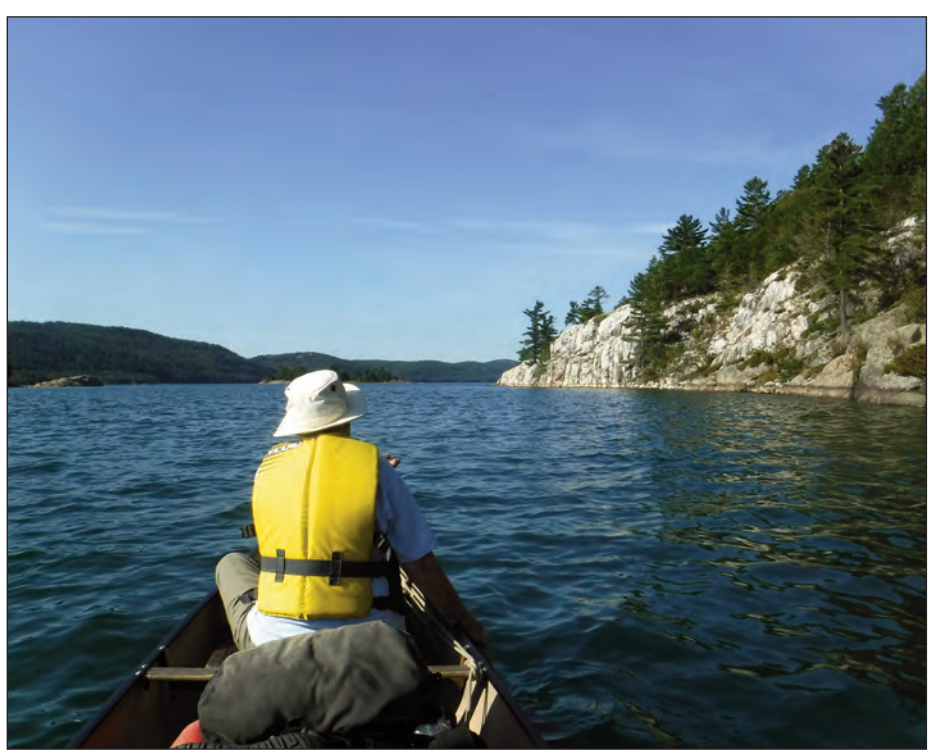
Ofra Svorai knows. I stood in the gallery where she exhibits her work and let my eyes wander. They fell upon a painting only four inches square. In it there was water, quartzite and, at dead centre, a lone pine. The scene had been brushed in oils on a block of wood and set into a plain wooden frame. It captured a momentary glimpse in time and yet was timeless. On the back was printed: “Low Lake.” I had to have it.

My wife Debby and I had canoed extensively on the lakes below the La Cloche Mountains near where Ofra had painted Low Lake. I had camped and snowshoed on the ridges in winter. We had seen almost all of Killarney Provincial Park but had never set eyes on Low Lake. I studied the map. The portage from Nellie Lake to Helen and Low Lakes was two and a half kilometres long. All of the carries leading to Nellie Lake from outside the park were arduous, and they would have to be tramped twice – in, and back out. I am fast becoming a relic of my former self.

Baie Fine

No thanks.

I looked at the map again and then showed Debby what I saw. She agreed – it was doable. We’d start at George Lake, head west from Killarney Lake out through Baie Fine, cut north into



Baie Fine

Low Lake

McGregor Bay and then head up into Low Lake. Nine days return. We booked campsites. Imagine! An entire canoe trip sparked by a small chunk of wood with a picture on it!

As canoe trips go, this one was memorable for the weather. Lovely, sunny days paddling in and two idyllic days and nights camped on Helen Lake. We'd circumnavigated Low Lake but found the only campsite there inhospitable. Then, on the return trip, meteorological hell broke loose. We were hammered by a monsoon on the portage into Baie Fine and were forced to huddle under a tarp in our remaining camps. Crimson sunsets bled into the water. Red sky at night, sailors' delight? Nuh-uh. It teemed all night and all the next day. And the next. On the last day it stopped.

While portaging from Killarney Lake to Freeland we encountered a fellow tripper. As we returned for our second bundles he passed us with his first. At the Killarney end of the carry a woman hobbled along the trail. Her knee was wrapped in a makeshift bandage. She leaned on crutches fashioned from paddles: the handles were sticks duct-taped to the shafts. Debby and I shouldered our packs and grabbed a couple of theirs. After completing the portage I returned to offer support to the injured woman. We chatted as we inched along. She'd been the victim of a campsite mishap and her hinge had gone east when it should have gone north.

"I'm Ofra," she said by way of introduction.

Ofra? How many Ofras could there be? "Ofra, the artist?" I ventured.

"Yes," she smiled through the pain.

I could barely contain my excitement. How cool was that?! I explained how her tiny gem had inspired our trip. And now, to top it off, we'd gotten her in the bargain!

"The little painting of Low Lake?" she asked. "I remember it. I was fond of that one – I almost didn't sell it."

Does art imitate life? Does life imitate art? Oscar Wilde would have it both ways. In his essay, *The Decay of Lying*, he argues that, "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life." For Debby and me, Life, in this case, was influenced by Art. If not beguiled by Ofra's small treasure, Low Lake, and indeed, Ofra herself, would have remained undiscovered by us.

I looked up. If those clouds would just stop moving I might be able to paint them.

Ofra Svorai in her "studio" – photo by Dave Robinson

Ofra Svorai's "Low Lake"

Early Days in the Nahanni Area

by Jan Bignell

Recently reading an account in the Black Feather newsletter by Wally Schaber on his first guiding job on the Nahanni River in the 1970's just after the park had been designated, reminded me that my late husband Bob and I had been on a McMaster Research Field Camp in the area back in 1972.

Dr. Derek Ford, renowned Karst (limestone) expert, had been asked by Parks Canada to investigate the interesting geologic features that should be included in the new park boundaries which were being established.

Bob and I joined Dr. Ford and 12 other graduate students from various disciplines on this trip. What an adventure for a young woman recently emigrated from the UK to be flown into a remote area of NWT.

Prior to arriving in Fort Simpson I recall the long 1,000-km drive from Edmonton, in a van with a U-Haul trailer up a gravel/dirt road for hours and hours. I remember along the centre of the road were oil-fired flare pots to divide the road in two sides for nighttime driving, and the dust which covered everything!

The previous year we had been with a Field Camp in the Rocky Mountains, and as soon as the float plane from Fort Simpson dropped us off on the side of a small lake – an eighty minute flight to the west in the remote Mackenzie Mountains – we knew this was going to be a very different experience. It was swampy with very dense bush all around and we quickly named it "Mosquito Lake"! The Brits among us got deluged with bugs which we had never experienced before and I was tasked with sewing the mosquito netting to all our hats. We didn't know about bug jackets then and I don't believe our tents had bug screens either, since many of them had been made in the UK!

I don't remember exploring the area very much. I expect the women in the group stayed behind to cook! It was surrounded by dense vegetation so much that one day three of the group who had tried to take "a shortcut" home failed to return by evening. We called and whistled, and Bob was responsible for firing gun shots every hour in the hope they could hear us and follow the sounds back to camp. After two nights out and much searching by the rest of the crew, Derek called in a search helicopter. This surprised Bob to see it overhead as he crawled out from the tent in early morning to fire another shot! Fortunately they were found fairly quickly and fairly close by, unharmed but hungry and bitten and rather embarrassed!

With time to spare the helicopter pilot asked a couple of us if we would like a trip up in the beast. Of course we would, our first time! We flew over a more open area so that we could see some of the limestone karst features and actually landed in a polje (a deep, flat-bottomed depression) on the tundra. It is interesting that these fill with water every summer now, but were completely dry then. Then the pilot decided to show us some cool heli moves and dove straight down into the campsite from the skies – not quite so exciting!

I believe most of us stayed about a week in the wet and the bugs, and then we drove back down the gravel highway. One notable incident was while we were driving along we suddenly noticed a U-Haul trailer trundling along beside us on the shoulder! Whoops, we realised our trailer must have come loose! We and it stopped without any damage done fortunately!

Four unlucky participants including Bob stayed on the site doing more work for five more weeks, during which it rained and rained and became almost intolerable. As expected with the lake water rising and no way to light a fire to dry off at all, emotions in the group flared up and it took Bob the rest of the summer to recuperate from the ordeal.

It was all for the good in the long run! The rugged limestone country around our camp, the "North Karst," is unique in its landforms, "*the most accentuated karst known anywhere in the arctic and sub-arctic regions of the world*" according to Derek. It extends from the South Nahanni River at First Canyon northwards for fifty km into the Ram River basin. At that time, a small part of the South Nahanni basin, from Rabbitkettle Hot Springs downstream to Virginia Falls and through four deep canyons to The Splits (a tricky bit of canoeing through braided, ever-shifting channels), had just been proposed as a National Park Reserve by Pierre Trudeau, who had paddled the river.

After 1972 the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS), Derek and many other wildlands people campaigned for protection of the entire South Nahanni and Ram basins and in 2009, a mere 37 years later, the federal government proclaimed it!

In the late '90s Bob organised a river trip with five other graduate students from McMaster, and they took water and other samples for ongoing investigations taking place at the university.

In 2006 Bob persuaded me and some friends to do the trip again! I was a little apprehensive since I don't like whitewater but we made it and had a great couple of weeks on the river. My one and only northern river trip! Once again we had a geomorphologist who could point out relative features, and she found lots of interesting rocks, some of which made their way into our packs for future analysis!

Happy memories!

...in this issue

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