



nastawgan

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Unforgettable hike in the "Moonscape"

Mountain River

Story by Nicola Ross

Photos by Brendan Spafford and Aleks Gusev

The late Bill Mason, Canada's iconic canoeist, once described his idea of a "river of which dreams are made." His wish list included a spectacular waterfall or a long, deep canyon with runnable rapids that came near the end of the

river, "so you've got something to look forward to."

Mason was likely referring to the Northwest Territories' famed Nahanni River – by far Canada's best-known and most-travelled northern river – when he wrote those words.



Mountain River and Dusty Lake, the start of the trip

According to his book *Song of the Paddle*, however, Mason actually preferred the Nahanni's virtually unknown neighbour, the Mountain River. Despite its six canyons, unrelenting whitewater, expansive landscapes, hikeable mountains, and abundant wildlife, the Mountain languishes in obscurity.

Had I read Mason's book before I embarked on an 11-day trip down the

mighty Mountain, I would have been intrigued by his enthusiasm. On the other hand, his detailed description of how a whirlpool in the fourth canyon sucked his canoe under, and how he then became trapped underneath his boat as it risked slipping into the undercut at the base of a massive cliff, might have given me pause. But I didn't read Mason's book before I left, so I would

enter the fourth canyon unaware of his cautionary tale. You might think that I'm a seasoned canoeist whose lifelong dream was to paddle one of Canada's remote big-water rivers, and write my ode to Mason, Wally Schaber, and other famous paddlers. The simple truth, however, is that I answered a last-minute call from Lin Ward and Al Pace, owners of Canoe North Adventures, for a jour-



Upper part of the Mountain River



Hike from the Grizzly Meadows, looking towards Black Feather Creek

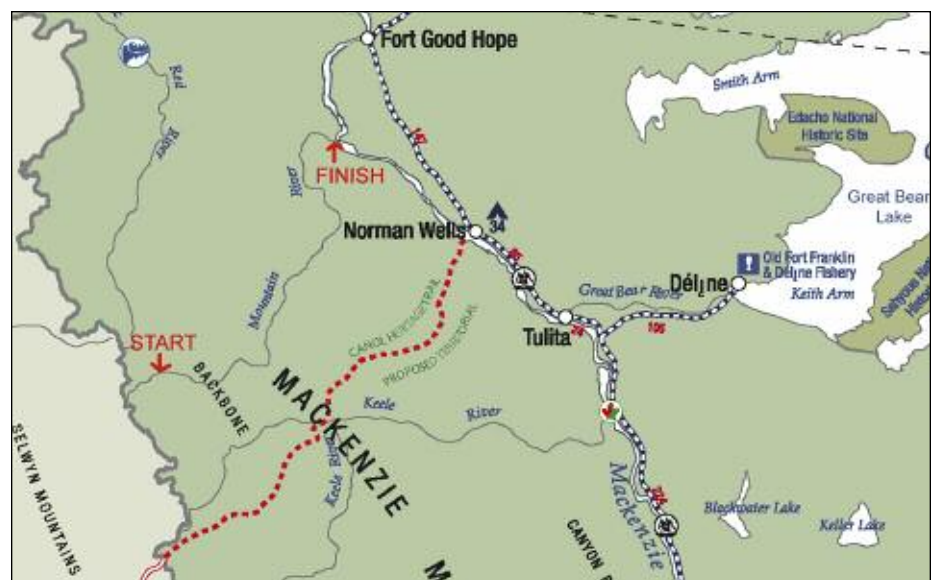
nalist to accompany them on a Mountain River trip. I had no whitewater paddling experience, limited exposure even to flatwater canoeing, and I'd never heard of the Mountain River.

Three days before I was to embark on the 22-hour journey to Norman Wells, a small town not far south of the Arctic Circle, and unsure of how best to prepare for this adventure, I googled "paddle the Mountain River." Soon I was watching several canoes, sheathed in what appeared to be raincoats, careen through turbid, caramel-coloured water on the fastest-moving and most-powerful river I'd ever seen. Whitecaps formed in the churning, rushing flow, and the canoes, looking more like cars on a rollercoaster than Canada's quintessential mode of transport, climbed up great standing waves and crashed down the other side. Layered in clothing, the paddlers wore helmets and gloves. The accompanying images of caribou, grizzly bears, and soaring eagles only increased the gnawing feeling in the pit of my stomach. I would be well outside my Southern Ontario comfort zone.

As I tossed and turned in bed that night, I realized that it wasn't fear of physical mishap on the river that kept me awake, so much as concern that I would hold the group up. I felt the canoeing equivalent of being underprepared for an exam. So the next day, I googled "how to paddle a canoe." For two hours, I studied the different strokes and when to use them. I was particularly

taken with the bow draw. "When using the bow draw," my virtual instructor advised, "concentrate on pulling the canoe toward your paddle rather than pulling your paddle toward the canoe." From the comfort of my living-room couch, I was unaware of how valuable a tip like this would be.

The town of Norman Wells sits on the banks of Canada's longest river, the



Mackenzie. With a population of about 800, most of them Dene, it is part of the Sahtu Region, which takes in the enormous Great Bear Lake and the Canol Heritage Trail, as well as several very canoeable rivers. Home to the midnight sun, Norman Wells was the farthest north I'd ever ventured.

My first night there, I settled into Canoe North Adventures' comfortable log lodge, which sits on the shores of a small lake. Over thick steaks, plentiful wine, and exorbitantly priced vegetables that had been barged into Norman Wells earlier in the week, I sussed out my fellow adventurers – three guides and nine guests. Trisha Jackson, who was finally living her dream of paddling a northern river, had learned to canoe at summer camp on Georgian Bay. Don Smith and his wife Donna Griffin-Smith from

Huntsville had paddling resumes the length of one of the canoes we would be using. But despite being the least experienced canoeist on the trip, I wasn't alone in feeling some trepidation about our upcoming adventure. Late in the afternoon the next day, we clambered out of a North-Wright Airways' floatplane on Dusty Lake, high in the Mackenzie Mountains near the Yukon border. During the flight, we had rubbed shoulders with deeply crevassed, sometimes snow-topped peaks, and now we sat in an enormous bowl. Shrubs and a few lonely white spruce spread up the mountain flanks until the cold stopped their ascent. I wondered why I had always thought the Northwest Territories was flat.

We carried our canoes for a kilometre through scrubby brush on the trip's

sole portage. When the Mountain River finally came into view, it was a murky, taffy-coloured stream that bore no resemblance to what I'd seen online. Nonetheless, it was hard for me to imagine the moxie of Mason and Schaber, who, in the 1970s and 1980s, launched down some of Canada's northern rivers with little knowledge of the perils that lay ahead except what they could extract from bush pilots. Recalling the Mountain's canyons, Mason wrote, "With the speed of the current and the sheer walls, there would be no turning back." Similarly, I realized that my moment of reckoning had also arrived. It turned out that our canoes had raincoats too. Called spray decks, they reduce the amount of water that can get into a boat, a point I appreciated when I stuck a neoprene-clad toe



Happy Hour



Nicola in the bow, Brendan in the stern

into the river for the first time. My concern about embarrassing myself quickly took a backseat to my fear of an unexpected dip in the five-degree water. I envied Trisha her paddling mate, Al Pace, our head guide, who was about to make his sixth trip down the river. “Al hasn’t dumped a canoe in 30 years,” Trisha bragged. “I don’t think he is going to start with me.” I cherished Al’s quick tips: “Use a short, powerful bow draw in a river like this. Stab the water.” Then he demonstrated a stroke that bore little resemblance to what I’d seen online.

As we travelled downstream, the river’s girth expanded until it was ripping along with the energy of a testosterone-laden teenager. At times it separated into three or more individual “braids” that combined and recombined. Al would avoid the channels that

rammed into the shoreline at a 90-degree angle, because at these points the river formed “wave trains” consisting of a dozen or more six or seven-foot standing waves that could swallow a canoe. My paddling mate – Al’s son Taylor – would rate the big waves as “raftable” or “kayakable” as he steered clear. Even Taylor, a talented but dare-devilish 21-year-old, seldom considered them “canoeable.”

One memorable day consisted of a continuum of long ramps of explosive rapids strewn with gravestone-sized boulders, interrupted by only slightly flatter sections of equal length. In the calmer stretches, the water was dense and ominous, pregnant with pent-up energy. When it tilted into rapids, the river seemed to exhale in a great gasping breath as it cascaded angrily down-

stream at more than 20 kilometres per hour. “Draw. Draw. DRAW!” Taylor would shout from the stern, by which point, knees braced against the hull, I’d be desperately stabbing the water with my paddle’s short, fat blade.

As my bow draw improved, my fear of making a fool of myself gave way to the exhilaration of travelling down one of Canada’s mightiest whitewater rivers. The valley would hem us in and then open up into broad vistas. I’ll never forget the first time I saw caribou, their antlers so large that the sight of them made my neck hurt. Startled by our parade of six canoes, they bounded along the shoreline before disappearing into the forest. The wind tore at my face – it reminded me of cycling downhill or skiing a steep slope. Had I been wearing one, my scarf would have been stream-

ing out behind me.

Al, a big teddy bear of a man, governed our group with the light touch of a benevolent dictator. During the entire trip, no one questioned his pairings in the canoes, no one missed his morning pep talks that informed us of what the day held in store and no one, except young Taylor on occasion, intentionally followed a line other than the one Al carved in his lead canoe.

When we came to the tricky parts of the river, mostly the canyons, we would get out of our canoes, and Al, Taylor, and Brendan Spafford, our third guide, would select a route that avoided any giant boulders, canoe-sucking whirlpools, or undercut cliffs. In a tone that brought us all to attention, Al would describe the route and then add: “You don’t have to be an expert paddler to make it down the Mountain River on a guided trip. You just need to come up with your ‘A’ game at key times.”

Following our guides’ advice we’d successfully negotiated the 90-degree turn in the very narrow, kilometre-long first canyon on day one. On day five, we made it through the tricky entrance to

Cache Creek Canyon without mishap. Two days later, we saluted Battleship Rock, which stands guard outside the third canyon. Recent flooding had turned it into an unexpectedly straightforward, two-kilometre-long float. A day later, our focus was the fourth canyon, the longest and most challenging of the Mountain’s six canyons. “You can’t take your eyes off the river for a nanosecond in the fourth canyon,” Al warned.

As we neared this obstacle, a bitter headwind undermined the day’s brilliant sunshine. A three-quarter moon hung above us in the late afternoon sky. If ever we were going to need our “A” game, this was it.

Soon enough, the river disappeared between towering rocks that marked the entrance. Taylor and I practically surfed through the narrow passageway, and it took some powerful paddling to catch the eddy and pull up alongside Al and Trisha on a narrow, rocky beach, one of the few safe havens in the two-kilometre-long canyon. As our guides hiked downstream to take a look at what the river had in store, we chatted anxiously.

Between sun-stopping cliffs, the river roared with disdain, slamming into the sheer walls like a caged animal trying to bash its way to freedom.

“It’s going to be big – bigger than we’ve been used to,” said Al when he returned. “We have the big Tabouli Hole.” But our guides also found a “sneak braid,” which, if all went well, would keep us out of the dreaded Tabouli, and avoid the possibility of having to rescue a boat or person caught in the hydraulic whirlpool’s endless spin.

Al and Trisha peeled out from the shoreline eddy and into the flow with the speed and arc of a getaway car leaving a crime scene. Al would set the line for the rest of us to follow. Don and Donna were next; then Taylor and I swung into the raging river. His voice tight, Taylor told me, “I’m not worried about rocks. A rock you can go over. So don’t be scared. If we get too close to them I’m going to be telling you to draw your ass off.”

“You just keep me dry, Taylor,” I replied.

It took almost an hour for all the boats to make it safely past the Tabouli



View of the surrounding mountains from the tuffa mound

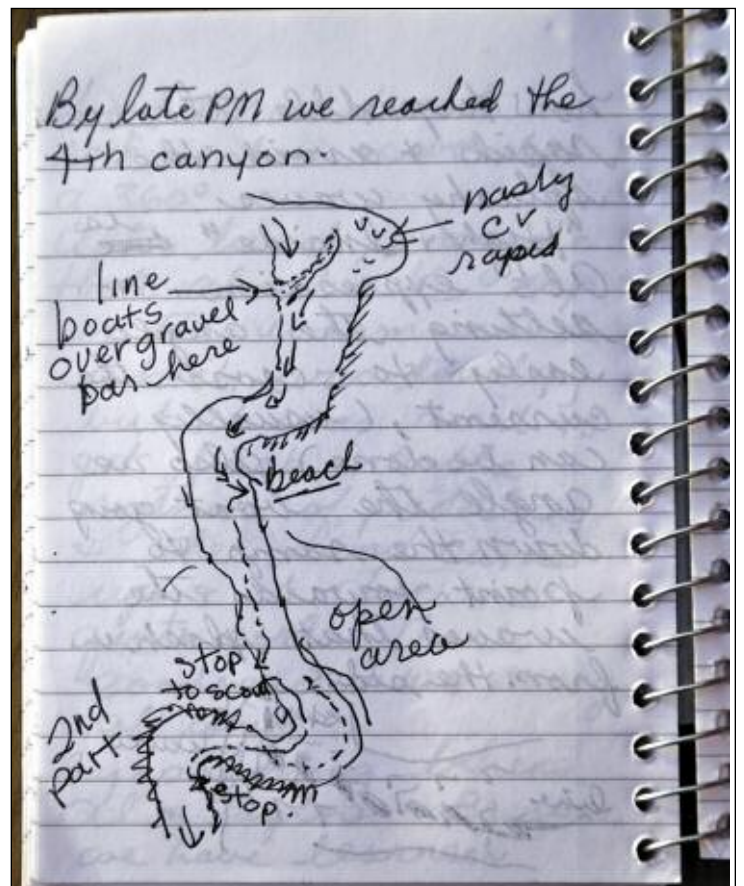


Precious moments on a quiet afternoon

Hole and into the depths of the fourth canyon. We pulled into shore again to scout the next set of obstacles. “There is a big wave train on the left,” Al said. “That wave train is huge and I don’t want to take it. There is a rock on the right.” The idea was to slip between them, a route that would point our boats directly toward 200-foot-high cliffs. With the angry water pushing us into the rock face, we had to make a 90-degree turn. I was about to perform the most important bow draws of my nascent paddling career.

“If it looks like you are going to get pulled into the wave train, then commit to the waves and go straight through,” Al advised us. “Stay high. Keep a nice tight line.” Two years earlier, one of the boats that Al was guiding had tipped over in these waves. The paddlers were soon rescued, but all I could think about was how unpleasant it would be to be immersed in such frigid water.

Al and Trisha pushed off with Don and Donna in close pursuit. A few strokes in, it was clear that Al and Trisha were paddling hard to avoid being pulled into the looming waves, but Al’s skill and brute force conquered the current. Following a slightly looser line, Don and Donna were soon in a desperate struggle. “Paddle your asses off, you guys,” shouted Taylor, though there was no chance they could hear him as they edged ever nearer the pounding waves.



The infamous 4th canyon that provided most of the whitewater excitement; sketch by Donna Griffin-Smith



The river grew in size and became more clear after Stone Knife River tributary joined

Moments before they were sucked in broadside, Al's words penetrated. Don and Donna turned downstream and committed to the waves. They hit the first riser at a slight angle, climbing over the crest and slamming down the other side, only to be completely swallowed by the trough below. They rose up the next, larger wave on more of an angle, sat at the apex for a split second, and came crashing down again. As they reappeared on the third and largest wave, they were at a 45-degree angle to the flow. At the wave's peak, their canoe was momentarily suspended in mid-air as though balancing on the head of a pin. Both bow and stern were well clear of the water, and their boat was tilting precariously to one side.

At this critical juncture, inexperienced paddlers such as myself, or the people who had overturned two years

earlier, would be inclined to grab the canoe's gunwales and hang on for dear life. Unfortunately, this move will assuredly capsize a boat. But with thousands of kilometres of paddling experience between them, Don's and Donna's hands remained firmly on their paddles. As the boat heeled close to the point of no return, Donna slammed her paddle down flat on the wave with the force of a beaver's tail, in a manoeuvre known as a brace. The canoe stabilized, and seconds later, they scooted out of the next trough and made the requisite 90-degree turn.

We were next. Taking no chances, Taylor took a high line much nearer to the rock on our right, avoiding the pull of the wave train. It seemed so easy. Then I looked ahead. We were charging toward the massive cliff. But this time, Taylor didn't need to call out instruc-

tions. I was leaning miles out of the canoe, stabbing at the river with the conviction that comes from experience – and urgency. The canoe began to pivot around my paddle. One draw, two, three and we were turned. The cliff wouldn't get us, or anyone else, on this sunny day.

We pulled up alongside Don and Donna, their eyes brimming with adrenaline. "Those weren't just the biggest waves I've ever paddled," Donna said. "They were the biggest waves I've ever seen." "I sure hope someone got a photo of that," Don added, "or else our paddling friends will never believe what just happened."

We'd survived the fourth canyon, but the Mountain River wasn't done with us yet. A day later, we navigated fifth canyon, a sinuous passage filled with boils and hydraulic whirlpools. The wolf

carcass, hair and gristle still attached, that we discovered during our reconnaissance at the canyon's tricky entrance, set the tone. A massive headwind stalled our progress in fifth canyon, and one of our canoes narrowly missed being sucked under on that cold blustery grey day. Now able to taste our final destination, we paddled long and hard into the evening to reach the sixth and final canyon, a relaxing float between sheer cliffs on a river that was slowing as we left the mountains behind.

I liken my Mountain River journey to skiing downhill for 11 days, except that along the way, we saw no other people. In fact, our group made up nearly 50 percent of the people who had passed this way all year. Down and down we skied (paddled), day after day, until we had covered over 300 kilometres, and I had honed my skills to the point that I

felt as if I could tackle any mountain.

We spent our last night camped on the banks of the Mackenzie River. When two small boats putt-putted by, drowning out the low rumble of the Mackenzie's San Sault Rapids, we knew we were closing in on civilization. Mother Nature smiled on our now closely knit group: After almost two weeks of sometimes freezing temperatures, bone-warming sunshine was our reward.

Sitting around an enormous bonfire that night, we traded stories and contemplated our experience. The astonishingly beautiful, exhilarating, and physically demanding trip down the Mountain River took each of us outside our comfort zone. Don and Donna had been unsure about a guided expedition. But that night Don acknowledged, "I certainly wouldn't have felt comfortable without a guide." Trisha and her hus-

band Ramsay were already planning their next trip.

And me? I'd been concerned with my lack of paddling prowess. But as we sat outside that last night, watching stars dance on the surface of an uncharacteristically calm Mackenzie River, I relived some of my best bow draws. I could feel the current pulling against my shoulders and back as I stabbed at the churning water. I recalled how, when I got it right, the canoe turned around my paddle with the grace of a dancer. So, later that evening, when Al referred to me as a "paddling chick," I was more than a little bit proud.

Formerly the editor-in-chief of Alternatives Journal, Canada's national environmental magazine, Nicola Ross is now pursuing her love for adventure and the environment as program manager for French River Adventures.



Last night under clear skies on the Mackenzie River

Canyons of the Mountain River & Grandfather's love

By Al Pace

While guiding a canoe trip on the Mountain River in the Northwest Territories, Al Pace and son Taylor heard the sad news that Taylor's grandfather, Jack Ward had passed away peacefully of old age on August 20, 2011 in Owen Sound. The following is a poem written by Al for Taylor – a poem inspired by a grandfather's love.

Dearest Taylor,
I'm with you here, right now. As always, and forever;

At the 1st canyon, did you see me?
I was a blaze of orange rock on the canyon wall, as you steered your craft safely around the 90° bend.
Did you hear my echo as you drifted through?

At the Cache Creek, canyon a shadowy slot in the rock face, I was with you there.
I was the eagle gliding high overhead.
I whispered to you at the frothy S-bend.
Hold your line, be steady, be true!
And, as you blazed out of the canyon, the sunlight bathed you in a halo of beauty, of joy, of zest, of peace.
You are truly one with the river.

At the 3rd canyon, there stands a sentinel on guard – Battleship Rock.
As you slip past this flowerpot rock, I marvel at your courage and skill as you
enter the canyon and wrestle the churning waters.
Did you feel my presence?
I am the Battleship Rock.

Fourth canyon beckons and you answer the call,
Guarding your fleet through safe passage.
I can feel the tension mount as you scout the bend ahead.
Did you catch my scent deep into the canyon run, as you skipped past the giant waves?

I am the forest at the canyon cliff top.
I was with you through every stroke.
I am with you now!
Do you feel my unbridled love?
My future is yours.
I've passed forward the torch of life, live it well.

At 5th canyon, you pushed boats into the flow.
You lent them your hand.
You shared your confidence; you helped them believe they can do it.
Always lend a hand. It feels so good, so right.
You have much to share.
Down the frothy ramp you ran the wave train, slid to river left, around to
the U-turn and down to the sand camp.
Did you feel my warmth?
I was the fire that warmed your feet.
I am the fire that warms your heart.

The long run *down to 6th canyon*;
I was the tail wind that lightened your paddle and lightened your load.
At the vaulted stone gates, you swirled through the quiet waters.

Did you feel the quiet peace in your heart?
Did you marvel at the beauty of the ancient cliffs?
They are timeless. They tell life's story.

There is a whisper on the north wind – it is my love for you!
The wild is calling you and it is calling me.

Let us eddy in and drift downstream together, evermore.

Love, Pere



Al Pace ready to eddy out and charge down the canyon



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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.

Contributors' Guidelines

If you are planning to submit any material for possible publication in *Nastawgan*, you would do the editors and certainly yourself a great favour by first consulting the *WCA Guidelines for Contributors to Nastawgan*. These guidelines should be followed as much as possible by all contributors, so that the editorial team can more effectively edit your contribution to make it fit the *Nastawgan* style. You can send your digital images via Dropbox to journal@wildernesscanoe.ca. The latest draft of the guidelines is available on the WCA website.

Events Calendar

Fall Meeting will be held at the Madawaska Kanu Centre on **29 and 30 September 2012**.

Wine & Cheese Fall Party will take place on **17 November 2012** at TSCC.

Wilderness and Canoe Symposium will be held on **16 and 17 February 2013** at Monarch Park.

Book Sale

George Luste had planned to run a mail order book business in retirement but alas, medical circumstances now require that the 7,000 items in his house find a home elsewhere. Included are books on Canoeing, Wilderness, Nature, Exploration, Arctic and Polar, Fur Trade, Native People, Anthropology, and more. The prices start at \$2 and are modest for most books – although there are some scarce and special items that are valuable and worth more than a thousand dollars, such as some arctic books over a hundred years old.

Planned sale dates for the modestly priced items are: 29-30 September at Madawaska Kanu Centre (Fall Gathering); 13 October at George Luste's home at 139 Albany Avenue in Toronto; 16-17 February 2013 at Monarch Park (Wilderness Canoe Symposium).

Visitors for the scarcer items or with special requests are welcome by appointment. If you plan to attend any of the above-mentioned book sales, please contact George Luste via email (gjluste@gmail.com). Please start the Subject line with “northern books.” You will receive the book listing and update on a possible location and date change in case of inclement weather.

Deadlines

The deadline dates for submitting material for the four issues we publish each year are: the first days of February, May, August, and November. If you have questions, please contact the editor; addresses on the last page.

WCA Activities

Want to view all club activities, learn more about our extensive outings program for members, or organize and post a trip? It's easy! Visit the Outings section of the WCA website: www.wildernesscanoe.ca



Mushrooms appreciated!

Aleks, congratulations on a great issue. You definitely are the man to fill Toni's shoes. He will be missed but I look forward to your future output. Konstantin's piece on “Mushrooms of the North” especially caught my attention. I really like his writing style ... loved following the path his story took. The opening sentence drew me in immediately. The Walt Whitman quotation was a perfect conclusion. Radmilo's photos were perfect illustrations ... and beautifully laid out. Please pass my appreciation on to the appropriate people.

Cheers, Anne Bradley

Book Review

Canoeing a Continent: On the Trail of Alexander Mackenzie, by Max Finklestein, published by Natural Heritage Books, Toronto, 312 pages, second printing 2005.

Review by Martin Heppner

This year's Mike Weverick speaker at the WCA's annual November Wine-and-Cheese gathering is Max Finkelstein, whose book, *Canoeing a Continent*, is now a classic of its genre. Already in its second printing, it's a jaunty tale of paddling across the North American Continent along the path of Alexander Mackenzie. The fur trader's cross-Canada trip in 1791–1793, first by error to the Arctic Ocean, then finally successfully to the Pacific, was the first transcontinental crossing of North America by a white man.

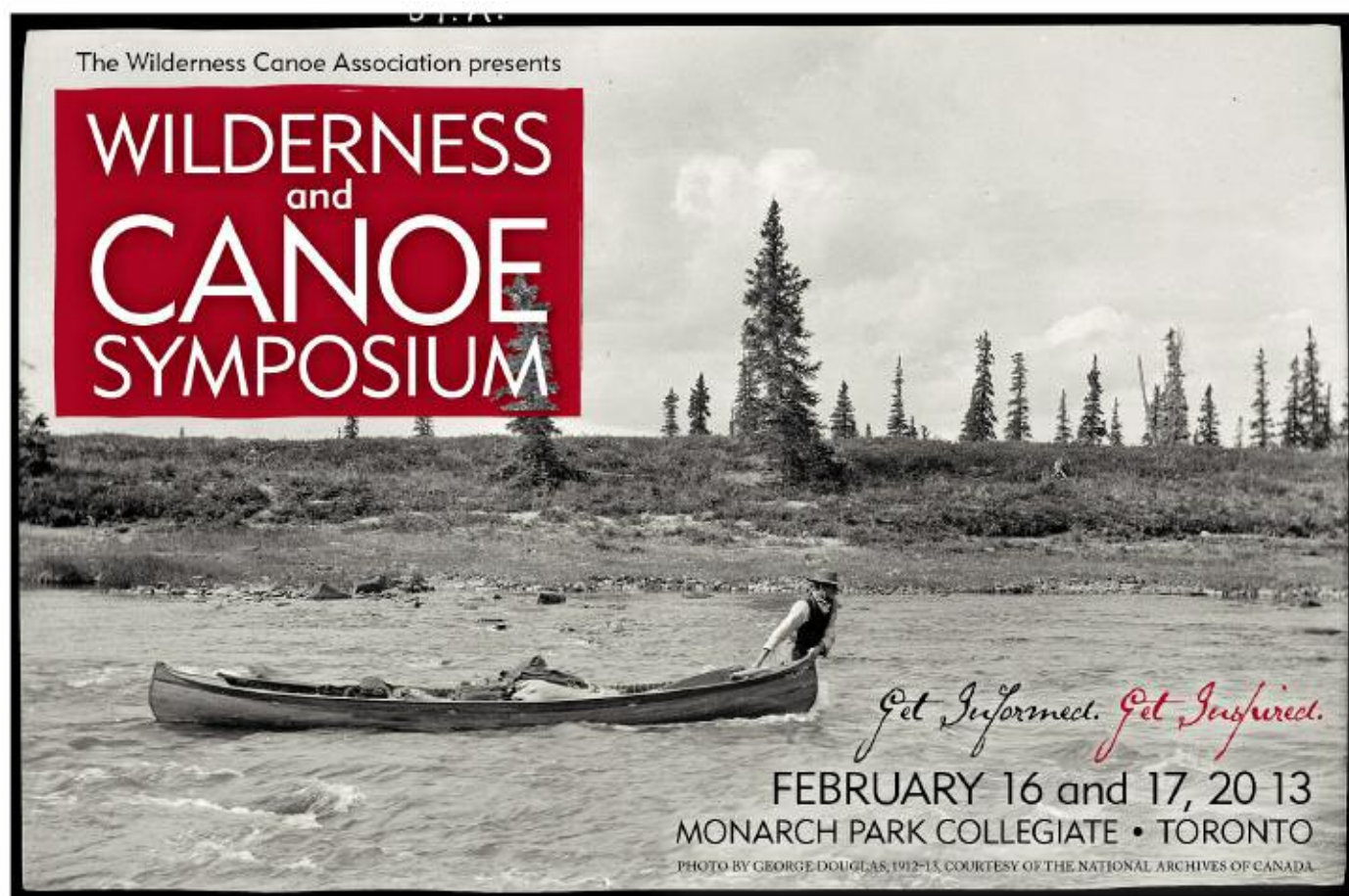
“Max,” as both the character in the book and the author are known, sets out from Ottawa one cold May morning of 1997 on his expedition; alone, except for the spiritual companionship of Alexander Mackenzie whose observations, excerpted from his *Voyages*, spice the book with the authenticity of two centuries. Characters come and go, whether accompanying Max on the various legs of his voyage, or accommodating him along the way with food, drink, shelter, and good talk. But the central characters are always Max, Mackenzie, and the vast, varied, and still in many places, wild countryside that Max traverses.

Philosophical musings abound, much as they do on any lengthy canoe trip. “This is a story of water,” so Max begins his tale. And well into the voyage and its

hardships he muses, “But beauty nurtures the mind,” as he contrasts the natural beauty of the waterways with the ravages of man.

Musings aside, this book is also a practical guide to making such a journey. It is conveniently organized into 21 chapters, 17 of which concisely describe the routes of the 17 separate stages of the journey, and four “How to” appendices. This is a good starter reference for anyone attempting the whole trip or any part of it.

No long voyage leaves the voyageur unaffected, and so it is with both these journeys, Mackenzie's and modern day Max's. Each has a beginning and an end, and in their wider world the discovery of self. This book is a testament to a paddler's journey and an inspiration for the reader's own.



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PHOTO BY GEORGE DOUGLAS, 1912-13, COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF CANADA

The Clearwater River

Story by Beth Bellaire

Photos by Bruce Bellaire



Smoothrock Falls

From the beginning of our wilderness canoeing adventures, the Clearwater has been on our ‘to-paddle’ list. Perhaps it was its fur-trade connection to the famous Methye Portage, first crossed by Peter Pond in 1778, that appealed, or the lure of the great rock paintings left by one of the Beaver, Cree, Chipewyan, or Dene people who knew its waters long before the Europeans arrived. Or it could have been just its name – evoking images of a cold, crystal-clear elixir for quenching that end-of-portage thirst. Whatever it was, it languished on the list for years since it required at least three weeks to do it any justice at all – close to one week for travel from Ontario, leaving two to navigate a respectable portion of its

295 kilometres – and most of us were still working stiffs with limited time.

The headwaters of the Clearwater are in Broach Lake, about 700 kilometres north of Saskatoon in northern Saskatchewan. From there, it flows southeast to Careen Lake, where it turns sharply to continue westward to its confluence with the Athabasca River near Fort McMurray. For this trip, we (Dave (Davey) and Barb Young of Brampton, Dave (Daver) and Dawne Robinson from near Elora, and Beth and Bruce Bellaire of Cobourg) decided to tackle a 180-kilometres stretch of the river between Lloyd Lake and Contact Rapids.

This upper section of the river flows over the Precambrian Shield, providing

many rapids with some waterfalls and a couple of spectacular canyons. We had a few trip reports to guide us on our way, including Canoe Trip 58 from Lloyd Lake to Warner Rapids and Bill and Barbara Bowen’s 2000 report from Careen Lake to Contact Rapids, but our primary reference was the description of the Clearwater River by Laurel Archer in her book, *Northern Saskatchewan Canoe Trips*. Ms. Archer includes a brief timeline of the river’s human inhabitants, and the back-story of one of the pictographs, reported to be of Dene authorship. She also recommends avoiding the river in August, saying it is often too shallow to navigate, but we were on the river from August 1 to August 13, 2011, and our



Dave and Barb Young paddling a flat section of the Clearwater

water levels were fine. As well as trip reports, we had several maps, some on GPS, and a satellite phone supplied by Vin of Clearwater Canoeing.

Sunday, July 31

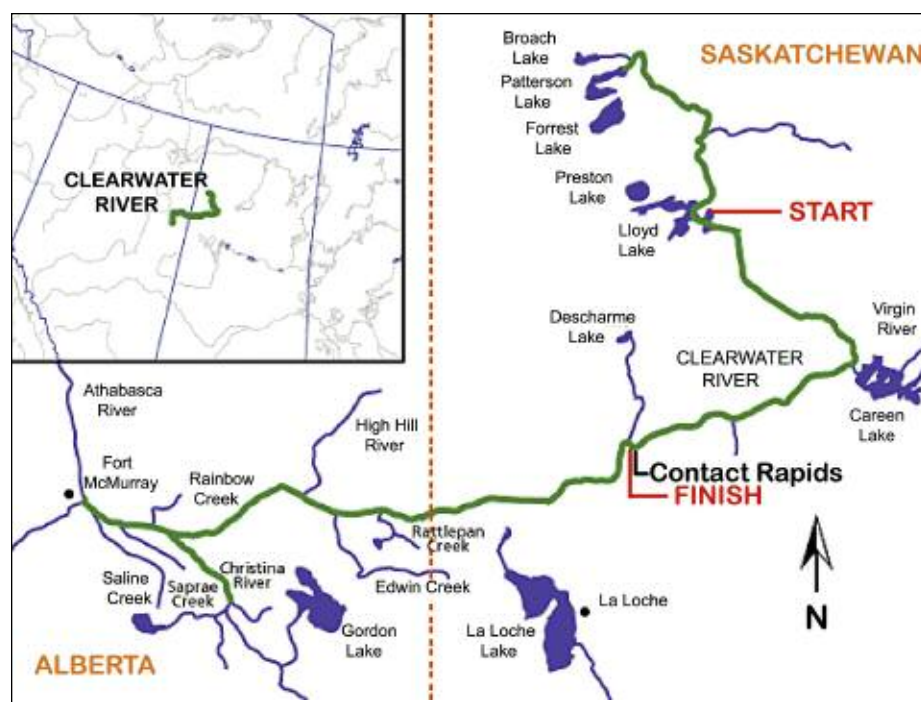
Three 14-hour days of driving brought us from the industrial smog of southern Ontario to the “mosquito” smog at the Courtesy Inn in Buffalo Narrows, Saskatchewan. Arriving at dusk, we were swarmed as we unloaded our gear and did a final check to ensure that head nets, bug shirts, and spray were all accounted for.

Monday, August 1

After a hearty breakfast, we drove two minutes down the street to Voyage Air. Of the several outfitters we’ve used over the years, this was by far the cleanest looking and most environmentally conscious, as well as very friendly and helpful. By 10:40 a.m., we were lifting off. An hour later, we touched down on Gibson Bay, at the eastern end of Lloyd Lake, near the river’s start. Soon after setting off, we discovered the first pictograph of the trip on river right at a brief narrowing.

Next up was Lloyd Rapids, a series of three drops, each one progressively more challenging. The weather, which had been mostly sunny to this point, took a turn for the worse with brief cloudbursts hampering our progress. My partner’s eyesight was hindered by a cataract, so

he was not sure how well he’d be able to pick out underwater rocks. Not wanting to test his limitations this early in the trip, we opted to portage our gear over the excellent trail and run the empty canoe through the first two drops and then carry the last one. The others ran the





Best moose sighting of the trip

whole rapid with only one or two tricky manoeuvres.

Excited by our first run of the trip, we zipped right past the second pictograph site at the bottom of the rapid; a short paddle brought us to another narrowing of the river and the third site on river right. Here we saw what looked like two moose – one red and one (fake?) green.

Another short paddle, and we were at the next rapid – rated as a 2+; it is a steep drop followed by a wave train that is easily missed by staying to river left. Wanting to save some excitement for the next day, we backtracked and camped on river left atop our first of many superb jackpine bench sites.

Like so many of the trip's campsites to come, this one has plenty of open space, covered in soft caribou moss, between scattered jackpines. After our buggy welcome at Buffalo Narrows, we were pleasantly surprised to be bothered by only a few black flies and an occasional mosquito. There were well-established

animal trails along the shoreline, permitting evening walks. Bear scat reminded us to keep a clean campsite. The day ended with a beautiful sunset, completing a perfect first day on the river. How could it get better than this?

Tuesday, August 2

There are long days on the Clearwater in August (at this point, we were around 570N). There was still light in the sky at 11:00 p.m. and it came back by 4:00 a.m. – no need for flashlights to illuminate any nighttime 'fluid level adjustments.' Since we had plenty of time to cover the distance we needed to make each day, we were on a relaxed schedule. Most mornings, Bruce and I rose first, made coffee, and enjoyed the morning quiet, soon to be joined by Barb and Davey, and later, by Dawne and Diver. Breakfast and breaking camp took a few hours, so we were usually on the water by around 10 a.m.

The weather continued to hold – mostly sunny with some wind, at times

friendly and other times, not so much. As per our earlier scouting, the first and only rapid of the day was easily run on river left. A boulder garden that some of the trip reports warned of did not materialize, thanks to our friendly water levels.

The next point of interest was some pictographs on river left: first a small, very faint grouping and further on, at a larger cliff, an impressive display of a thunderbird, a face, an animal – a wolverine?

From here, the river enters its first meandering stretch, which continues for kilometres, providing ideal habitat for waterfowl. While watching the ducks, we were being watched in turn by an inquisitive young black bear. Most of us had floated right past, unaware of these shoreline eyes – except for Barb who spotted him and gave a shout. Startled, off he scrambled, too quick to be captured on film.

Briefly, we were able to raise a makeshift sail and catch a wind to give our paddling muscles a rest, but as was the Clearwater's way, this did not last long before we had to work again. Although great for ducks, this shoreline is not so friendly to campers, so when we saw a big flat site on river left, we decided to take it. Typical of the trip, the swimming was not great, but it sufficed for washing away the day's sweat. That evening, we heard the sandhill crane's surreal call, reminding us of how far from the city bustle we now were.

Wednesday, August 3

The cranes called again to wake us. We were still noting the remarkable lack of bugs – hardly any bites yet. The meandering continued for most of the morning. It was cooler but still clear, with only light winds. Bird and animal sightings duplicated those of yesterday, including another bear sighting by Barb. Although this one stayed long enough for all to have a good look, it was still too shy for the lens to capture. After two solid hours of paddling, we came to the end of the open, marshy area. The shorelines come together and the gradient drop increases. An otter popped up to chatter at us as we passed, perhaps warning us of the fast



Clearwater River above Granite Gorge

water ahead. The first rapid is a rocky C1 that requires some boulder dodging. Next, a C2 run down river right offered enough fun to wake us up from the doldrums of the morning. We stopped on river left for lunch at a picturesque campsite furnished with a set of well-weathered moose antlers.

From here, it was a short paddle down to what Lauren called the First Gorge. We weren't sure how much we'd be able to paddle, but we hoped to navigate at least some of it to lessen the 1,380-metre portage mentioned in her book. However, when Daver scouted the first 1.5-metre ledge that was listed as a 'pull over,' he said there was no way, so we got ready for the full slug. To our surprise, this first trail, although steep in spots, is only 150 metres long and ends after this first drop, with no sign of a longer route. The next section is rated as a C2, so we ran this, with plans to take out before the C3 in the canyon proper.

Finding this second takeout in the

eddy above the C3 proved tricky. Because the right shore was so rocky, it was hard to find any spot to eddy out. Dawne and Daver shot right past the takeout and grounded just before the bigger stuff. Davey and Barb stopped just above the start of the trail, while Bruce and Beth pulled out just below. With a little lining, we all arrived safely at the start of the trail.

The start of the trail at this point is very steep, challenging our strength and stamina to climb out, but once on top, it was easy sailing. Like most of the portage trails on this river, this one now opens up into a wide path, with gentle ups and downs, very few, if any, blow-downs, and even some sections that are park-like in nature. Blueberries lined the route, offering many a juicy mouthful to help quench the thirst and maintain energy levels.

For the first time this trip, blackflies became bothersome, especially for the canoeheads amongst us. The end of the

carry was swampy with an even greater supply of bugs, so we hurriedly packed the boats and paddled out into the current to catch a welcome breeze.

Just below this gorge, the river narrows again, creating a little swift. On river right is an overhang and beneath it more pictographs including a moose and



One of a pair of bald eagles guarding their nest



Hill site below Olsen's Rapids

some other less clear markings.

The last rapid of the day was a short C1, offering a choice of eddy-practice or wave train fun. Now the river widened and started its meandering again, this time past huge sand banks on river right.

We soon came to an unmarked site on river left that looked fairly small from the river, but once on shore, it opened up like the previous nights' sites into a huge area of moss and trees. This had been our longest day yet – on the water at 10:00 a.m. and not off until 6:00 p.m. – so we all felt we had finally earned our keep.

Thursday, August 4

Last night, we'd been treated to a lovely peach sunset. We'd stayed up later than our habit, but still we didn't have a campfire: with light lasting so long, it seemed unnecessary. This day was planned to be a short one: only a 10-km paddle down to the confluence of the Virgin River where we would take a detour and ex-

plore a waterfall just a bit upstream. Because of the short itinerary, we had a leisurely morning – oatmeal pancakes with applesauce and coffee, and a second cup of Labrador tea that Dawne and Daver had bought in Baker Lake on a previous trip.

We all agreed that the Virgin River should have been the one called the Clearwater – its waters are cold and crystal clear with a beautiful greenish undertone. The wind kindly helped push us up against the current to a lovely spot at the base of a falls – very picture-worthy.

Disappointingly, there was no site there. There were fishing boats stashed on each shore and a portage trail leading away on river left. After a complete study of the falls and the now-dry spring run-off bed beside it, we paddled back down to another jackpine bench on river right. It was a great spot, with lots of room, a good fire pit lined with rocks, and the best swimming yet. After we cleaned up,

we relaxed over appetizers of smoked mussels with cream cheese and Whiskey Sours. Did I say this is the life?

Friday, August 5

Another sunny, warm day with even less wind – so far, we had had excellent weather. A loon serenaded us over breakfast, and then we were treated to a sighting of two unidentified birds. According to my notes, they acted like woodpeckers but had no red on their heads. They had a divided tail like a swallow, and a white breast, and they made a squeaking sound. From my online research, my best guess is that they were a pair of olive-sided flycatchers, but I'd invite the reader to offer his or her best guess.

As soon as we had re-entered the main flow of the Clearwater, we came to a C2 rapid, which we ran through a broken ledge on river left. Another 1.5 km, and we came to an easy C1+. Then it was a five-km paddle through a narrowing of

the river to the well-named Beauty Rapids, consisting of two cascades around an island. The scenic portage on river right was short, open, and flat. This took us to the C2 run out at the bottom of Beauty, and this we ran on centre left.

To liven up the post-lunch paddle, Daver treated us to his prowess at “paddle toss”, a sport he and friends had invented on a previous trip. The gist of the manoeuvre is to time the toss just as one drifts under an overhanging tree so that the paddle arches oh so elegantly over the branches and back into the waiting arms of the tosser below – to much applause and accolades, I’m sure. However, this time, the trick finished, instead, with many hearty laughs as we watched Daver practise his balance-beam skills to teeter out to the lodged paddle and flip it back to the water before he himself flipped in. What one won’t do for a laugh?

We then entered a section of the river reminiscent of the Spanish River’s ‘royal

ride,’ several kilometres of s-curves and good current. Next came a C3 that all ran down the left, skirting past a big centre wave-train and potential holes.

This section also offered some interesting wildlife. First, as we paddled along, Barb saw her third bear, just next to a beaver lodge. We also saw another pair of mystery birds – sounding like sandpipers but not acting like them at all. One sat at the top of a tall pine and screamed at us until we had all passed by. They had a white rump and a reddish tail with a tern-like wing and flat tail. They were about the size of a lesser yellow-legged sandpiper.

Having loosened up our muscles on the morning C3, we were now ready for Granite Gorge, the next big obstacle in our path. It was described as a series of four drops rated respectively at 2+, 2+, 3, and 3, all together creating first a sharp curve to the right, then a wide curve to the left, and ending up back right again,

with several holes along its length. This adventure was also run by all. After the first two C2 drops, both easy tongues on river right, we all eddied out above a large midstream boulder. Daver and Dawne led out from here and stayed far left, making a shore eddy turn before the final run out, where they just brushed a pillow. Beth and Bruce skipped the eddy turn, but still kissed their canoe off a final rock. Showing their stuff, Davey and Barb had a clean run all the way down. After all this excitement, we found a camping spot on river right. Again, the evening was a beautiful, bug-free event.

Saturday, August 6

It was another misty calm morning, a repeat of yesterday, with no clouds in sight and little breeze. We had a slow start, allowing extra time for swims and paddle repairs.

The first rapid of the day, a C3, starts on the far right side, through a little V,



Could Rapids above the rock face



Dave and Dawne running the final C3 of Gould Rapids

with a quick adjustment to centre right and a final eddy on the left. In the following calm, we saw several lesser yellow-legged sandpipers and our first moose of the trip, enjoying a morning feed on river right. We were enroute to a great close-up when a raft of ducks gave warning, and the moose quickly disappeared up the bank. Right on the tail of this sighting, a second moose was spotted high up on a sandbank, but he, too, did not stay long.

After lunch at a great blueberry patch on river left, we came across an active eagle's nest. The young fledgling was being guarded by one parent in the nest and another one watching from a nearby tree. All three sat still as statues as we drifted by.

Next up is Bielby Rapids, an easy, short C2 rapid, which everyone ran down the centre channel on the centre right side. (The left-hand side was very shal-

low and we couldn't see the far right at all from our scouting spot.) Anniversary Rapids follows quickly on the heels of Bielby. A boulder-dodger, it, too, was run right and centre right. The final rapid of the day is a longer, bouldery C2 with several navigable channels to choose from.

Again, it was time to search for a site. The one we chose had an interesting log structure: four posts, each about one metre high, made from still-rooted trees with axed-out wedges. There were also two full trees, now both fallen, that could have been doorposts. These were also wedged. Since some sites in this stretch of the river had been labeled PC (prehistoric campsites), we thought this must have been one of them.

During dinner, we had the final wildlife encounter of the day. We heard a strange sound: perhaps a frog, less likely a woofing dog, or maybe an owl – it

turned out to be the booming sound a nighthawk makes as it dives in its courtship display.

Sunday, August 7

During the night, we had a huge down-pour. All the sleeping tents held up well, but the dining tent had collapsed and everything under it was soaked. However, the morning sun and breeze soon dried everything out.

Right around the bend from camp, we came to the first rapid, which set the pattern for the day – all C2s with some boulder dodging that was made less difficult, perhaps, by the rain of the night before. At least, most of the rocks were covered enough that the canoes would effortlessly slip over them.

So far, we had been making very good time, even with the relaxed pace we'd set. Now we really had to work at slowing down even more so that we

could stretch out the remaining kilometres until the scheduled pick-up a week hence. We rationed out distance carefully – this day, we limited ourselves to just running Olsen's Rapid – a fun run, offering either rock dodging along the edges or a centre wave-train.

The lunch stop at a rock outcrop offered the best swimming yet. What a treat to dive in and really swim! A two-minute paddle through a riffle and we were at the goal for the day – a site high up on a hill with a great view.

There is a well-used trail that leads back up to the top of the swift and opens to a smooth, flat red-rock outcropping – a great spot for washing clothes and bodies. And the blueberry patch was the best one yet. The trees were more a mixture here, not just the jackpines we'd become so used to. As well, there were several varieties of wild flowers – a veritable wildflower garden.

It had been sunny all day, but now it was more humid and rain threatened.

However, all that came was distant thunder; the storm passed us by, treating us to a beautiful double rainbow, followed by a gorgeous sunset.

It was at this site that we had the final bear sighting of the trip. As I was enjoying the sunset, I sensed a movement and turned my head to see this inquisitive fellow standing up on its hind legs to get a better look at us. Luckily, it was on the other side of the river.

Monday, August 8

The day broke brisk with a clear sunny sky that lit up a small bush, full of spider web hammocks. Since we had too much time and not enough river, we didn't break camp until 11:30 a.m. Just a couple of kilometres downriver from the site, we reached Upper Mackie Rapids, a bouldery C2 run, then Lower Mackie, a more challenging C3. Although reported as unscoutable, we were able to see it by bushwhacking across an island. We decided it was runnable, with caution. We

slipped over a ledge at far left and continued with eddy-hopping down the left side, then moved centre and punched out of a tongue to miss a big hole on river left and finished in a bouldery C2 run-out.

A few kilometres later, we came to a long C2, another test of our manoeuvring ability. Another few kilometres and we were at Warner Rapids where the only road and bridge of the trip crosses the river. There is a bit of a roadside park here and a dilapidated sign relating a bit of the local history, but it was very messy, with lots of garbage, so we decided to just eat lunch and move on.

On river left, there was evidence of a recent fire; as it happened, we soon found out the details of it. Just past the bridge, we were hailed from shore by three Dene, so we turned in for a visit with Gary, his son, Layne, and his uncle, Russell. It turned out that their family had owned a cabin at the site of the fire; it had been torched on the July 1st week-





Skull Canyon

end as a result of a late-night altercation during a party at the Warner Bridge Park.

Gary was now in the process of collecting logs to rebuild, but he'd been sidetracked by a moose, which they'd shot two days earlier. He shared some of the freshly smoked meat with us and we reciprocated by sharing our beef and turkey jerkys – young Layne enjoyed our spicier versions of this traditional fare. We also admired the hide, which Gary was in the process of tanning. He had soaked it in the river overnight to loosen the hair, and he was now scraping away any remaining bits of meat. He hoped to get a pair of mitts for his son and perhaps a pair of moccasins and a vest for himself out of the finished product.

Leaving the threesome, we paddled off to find a spot for the night. There was supposed to be a site at the end of the portage around the next rapid, Tricky Ledges, but it was very small, completely overgrown, and with poor water.

To top it off, it was buggy, and we were now spoiled, so we decided to push on.

Tricky Ledges was another pick-your-path C2-event. We were hard pressed to find a clean run through it. The reports suggests going left, but that looked very dry, so we all went down the right shore. We continued down to the final run of the day, a long C1 on the left side of an island, which is as picturesque as our notes had promised. After this, the river opens up and we had to look carefully for our site on river right, at the end of a big bay. There is a steep, rocky path following the line of an outcropping. Halfway up was a campfire, and hidden back in the woods was an opening big enough for all of us.

Tuesday, August 9

We barely moved this day, just paddling eight kilometres. We stopped for a morning snack at a jackpine bench on river right where I'd spotted the frame of a

large teepee, a perfect locale for the requisite group photo. We still fit in a rock garden, a C2, a few swifts, and a C1 just above the site we were heading for, on an island bracketed by swifts, itself just above Gould Rapids. That night, there was a beautiful, golden orange waxing moon.

Wednesday, August 10

A few raindrops fell while we were breaking camp, threatening to ruin our dry streak, but again failing to result in much. As it turned out, the last C1 of yesterday is the lead-in to Gould Rapids. We'd anticipated portaging parts of this rapid but wanted to make it as short as possible, so we scouted as we went and eddy-hopped down the right shore to the start of the C3. Again, after careful scrutiny by Daver, we found a sneak channel on the right that hugged a big rock face, and we all successfully powered into an eddy at the bottom of this

cliff. After a break for lunch, we ran the rest of Gould, a fun C2, avoiding any portage at all.

From here to Smoothrock Falls, the water was very deep, with no rocks, yet good current. We approached slowly, looking for an old beaver dam and a rock outcropping that were said to bracket the hidden take-out. In the end, there was no need for such caution since the take-out was obvious, but this stretch of river is worth savouring – it is one of the most beautiful sections of the river.

Our water travel was done for the day; now came the portage, labelled as a 1,350-metre haul. But what an easy one.

Except for a couple of fallen trees that were soon cleared, two or three short boggy spots, and a little stream near the end with a makeshift bridge of logs, the path was truly ‘a walk in the park.’

Our destination was another wide-open jackpine bench with a lovely view and promising-looking swimming. We took our time setting up camp, since we’d decided to stay here for a rest day. The breeze kept the blackflies at bay; they’d become more frequent over the last couple of days with the advent of more humid conditions, but they still didn’t warrant head nets or even spray. The mosquitoes did come out briefly at dusk,

but with the netted dining tent, we hardly noticed. Over a campfire, we were again visited by nighthawks but there was no repeat of the diving boom show of before.

Thursday, August 11

The rest day was spent reading, baking, eating, hiking, blueberry picking, napping, and generally exploring our little piece of paradise. As well as the usual bell flowers and a big swath of purple Joe pyeweed, we found a few new flowers. One was a delicate, bell-like white flower that hung down in twos or threes at the end of each branch. The other had irides-



Dave and Dawne shooting Skull Canyon from below



Pelicans at Buffalo Narrows

cent red berries. We also noticed a shrub with the brownish remains of blossoms – perhaps Labrador tea? Our final discovery was a new orange fungus that looked like coral. Bruce and I hiked up to Smoothrock Falls before breakfast, and we all returned later for lunch. It was a spectacular place!

Friday, August 12

Another eight-kilometre paddle down the river, and we were at Skull Canyon, the last big drop of our trip. Skull Canyon portage is much shorter than Smoothrock Falls, only 350 metres of up and down. After carrying everything, we walked back to explore another magnificent place with lots of clambering trails and fantastic lookouts. The water pounds through a narrow canyon of red rocks and then opens into a wide bay across which we could just see our site. Although comfortable, it did not compare to last night's. We'd definitely chosen our rest day well.

The sky was threatening so we quickly set up, having everything in place by 3:30 p.m. The storm finally materialized, but with a few tarp adjust-

ments we stayed cozy and dry.

This site also had several interesting features: a pit with half-burnt logs spanning it, a wooden drying frame nearby, and several notched logs and planks, looking like remnants of a cabin. There was also a rock blind on a hill behind our tents, and behind that, a huge, partially man-made clearing – definite signs of habitation. The sky cleared after dinner, and we were treated to a wonderful moonrise that warranted many photos.

Saturday, August 13

The mist was heavy this morning. The weather had finally turned. It waited for us to pack, but then rain started with purpose and stayed with us until Simonson's Rapid. We came to the first ledge in the centre channel. Two canoes decided to portage 80 metres across the island, while the third tried a sneak channel, complete with a sweeper and a tight drop, on island right. All ended up at the end at about the same time. Hard to say who was wetter?

After this, there was some heavier water, but routes were clear with no big drops. The rain stopped and blue sky

poked through. Soon we were at the portage for Contact Rapids – another wide-open trail. We took the first load to the end, only to discover no campsite there or further down where Voyage Air was going to pick us up, so we backtracked about 300 metres and found an old fire pit at the last pine bench on the portage, evidence that others had made similar choices.

We still had time to walk back up the trail and scout the rapids we'd skipped – we thought perhaps we might have been able to make it down with only a couple of pull-overs, but that would be for another trip.

Sunday, August 14

Morning found us fog-bound. Would we actually be able to get out? It took its time, but by mid-morning, the fog had lifted and we heard the telltale sound of an Otter. Another trip was over; soon our thoughts would turn to the hustle of our real lives, but for now, we all wanted to savour our last moments in this beautiful part of our country, the Clearwater.

Svend Ulstrup: A Boat Builder/Educator For Our Time

Story by Bob Henderson and Zabe MacEachren

Photos by Svend Ulstrup



Two paddlers and the sun-dancing woman standing in the middle, blessing the canoe

“I think democracy must have started in a canoe.” Okay, this statement is not the sort of thing you hear regularly. But from the mouth of Danish boat builder/educator, Svend Ulstrup, such is the norm. He is a man full of aphorisms. He is a man who makes two counter-cultural thoughts prominent: from Bruce Cockburn: “the trouble with normal is it only gets worse,” and loosely from another singer, Pete Seeger, speaking about Woody Guthrie: “any fool can be complicated but it takes a genius to be simple.” Svend Ulstrup is not normal and he is genuinely simple. Let’s go back to “democracy in a canoe.”

Svend builds kayaks and canoes. He figures so far he has built over 2,000, mostly in educational courses, for about 6,000 people. He has been at this for over 20 years. He’s built Umiaks (skin boats from the Arctic), birch-bark canoes, and ... oh yeah, an 84-foot Bronze Age water craft. A really big canoe complete with a mythic creature masthead!

In this canoe, all eyes face the same way, making all paddlers equal according to Svend’s thinking. Rowing (facing backwards) was the way of the Iron Age Viking boats that came later. In Viking boats, leaders faced the direction of travel, the rowers faced the leaders.

Democracy, or an earlier form of it, possibly had its beginnings in a canoe. Makes you think, doesn’t it? Genius or goofing around, it was hard to tell. We (Bob and Zabe) spent two days with Svend and his wife Annalie. We paddled in his Greenlandic skin/wood-frame

kayaks and admired his badarka design, both of which he builds in educational courses. It was hard to ignore the 84-foot, (that’s 25 m), 42-paddler Bronze Age ocean boat in the canoe yard, with its double bow stem and wide enough in the middle to serve as a stage for a jazz



The head of the canoe showing the horse. The horse was the holy animal drawing the sun from the east to the west



Over 5,000 curious onlookers came to witness the boat launch

quartet. Building kayaks for a living in Denmark might be enough to make you eccentric, but build a Bronze Age boat (oops, canoe) and involve local curious folks in the building and paddling and you, well, win a certain notoriety. Almost as if he hadn't thought of it, Svend came to realize, it is hard to get 42 folks together for an afternoon paddle. Hence the canoe sits in the yard, and Svend has started (indeed the day we left) to build a smaller version, not necessarily more sea-worthy, but more paddleable for an afternoon outing. It will require 18 paddlers and be 32 feet long.

These canoes must be flexible for the big waves of the ocean. "The feel of the canoe is like a worm in the water", Svend says. The flex can be almost frightening on the ocean fjord by Svend's workshop. In big waves, the bow may disappear from sight to the stern paddlers. Svend had documented the inaugural 'canoe' launch. The pictures are ... exciting. Happily the oceans were warmer when these boats plied Danish waters, and warmer overall temperatures meant four seasons for trade far afield. Bronze-age folks were the precursors to the Vikings and it was the Iron Age that made possible the shift from the more flexible-skin canoe shape to the Viking rigid, wooden hull. Think iron rivets by the 1,000s.

Let's remember, indigenous peoples in Canada started their Iron Age with materials brought over from Europe in the 1400-1500s. The canoe had and continues to serve them well on lakes, rivers, and oceans.

We never felt far from the Bronze Age with Svend. We examined many Bronze Age canoe rock art images from Scandinavia in his library. We visited a burial mound site enroute to catch our bus out of town. The rock art is very similar to Canadian Shield images, particularly those at Stoney Lake, Ontario, in Petroglyph Park (minus the double bow to cut the ocean waves). Svend uses rock art both as an inspiration and a design template. There are no blueprints from the Bronze Age. Svend's rawhide skin covering theory has validity given the seaworthy qualities of his canoe. It may seem speculative to us but not to Svend Ulstrup. But we look at ancient rock art, Svend studies them.

Earlier in my trip, it was casually pointed out to me (Bob) that there were Bronze Age burial mounds, "here, and one over there too." In total without particularly looking for them, four were pointed out from a particular vantage point. Svend said, that 100 years ago, there were over 2,000 such mounds peppering the Danish landscape. Now, given

advanced farming practices, this has been reduced to about 200. Svend's interest in the Bronze Age, given this wealth of artifacts and his intense awareness of Danish heritage made my Danish landscape experience seemed alive with a past that would make a Canadian history buff salivate. Bronze-age boat building is a natural extension – for a kayak / canoe heritage builder. It seems "normal" but a mark of genius. That said, the kayaker who gave us a lift to Svend's place felt compelled to warn me that, "he is a bit of a kook." I think she might be missing this heritage to waterways connection.

Another connection that is anything but kooky is Svend's Greenlandic heritage linkage. Each year, about 20 mentally challenged Greenland adults learn about their kayak heritage at Svend's workshop. They each build kayaks and when they return to their communities with the kayaks, it marks an all-community celebration. Svend regularly goes back to Greenland to help keep the kayaking spirit alive in the communities.

More thoughts from Svend the educator – with over 6,000 people served (a top-of-his-head guesstimate), certainly Svend has learned a thing or two about people and craft. In Svend's words, "People really want to learn, but they don't want to invest in it." Good craft-making takes time. He added, "People are hung up on success – failing is important." In Svend's workshop, when you make a mistake, you deserve a present. Svend gives out biscuits. In a related manner, he has noticed over time changes in students' abilities to work with their hands. Folks are tentative. Confidence is low. Specifically he suggested, students now ask lots of questions: too many questions. This is because they are anxious when beginning, as if afraid, to make a mistake. Svend, even though we had only two days together, comically and almost lovingly pointed out many of his mistakes. He was clear that a mistake not always presents something wrong, but can be another way to present a solution. From mistakes we can gain inspiration and address new technical variations to make progress.

But let's make no mistake about it: this guy doesn't make many mistakes, re-

ally; or rather, he learns from his mistakes. His boats are beautifully finished and on the water he would be my go-to guy. One story should suffice. On one of many coastal kayak trips, Svend had three people overturn at once. It was cold and rainy and the water was not Algonquin summer temperature. Using all available resources, he had one swimmer quickly in a sleeping bag; #2 of the three had warm tea and was jogging to keep circulation going, and #3 had warm water poured on his chest. Svend said it wasn't an experiment in hypothermia by design; rather it was his immediate response to the moment. He would now teach this third approach, which is not the approach suggested in the hypothermia literature. It is from his experience (more than just this story) that he has come to recognize this response as the fastest and safest. The point: his experience is central to his understanding and his understanding is grounded in his years of trial and error as a boat builder, paddler, and educator.

Thinking over our time with Svend Ulstrup, we realized, "we need this guy." He can help a hurried, harried people make valuable healthy connections in time and space, with heritage and places and technology. Svend's approach to life and education helps keep ways of living on the Earth that now seem distant, alive and well. I (Bob) am reminded of the poster of 1881 found in Steven Heighthon's novel *Afterlands*. The poster is for an actual presentation Capt. Tyson gave to the Arctic – hungry audiences of New England concerning the survival of many crew members and Inuit set adrift on an ice flow from the Howgate Expedition for 196 days before rescue – a true story, and a true poster. After all the promotional material, the poster finishes with, "...told with the graphic power of actual experience." In today's world of virtual realities and over hyped events, I'm inclined to think cynically; "imagine that, actual experience!"

Well, Svend has it, "actual experience" that is. His lifestyle and life practise / work have "graphic power" that stands out so distinctly today. Finally, little about Svend is normal and there is a simple genius in that. For all these reasons, we feel compelled to write about him.



Svend Ulstrup standing at the mouth of the canoe

The term, the *worm*, had something to do with the translation for this boat in what is known of the Bronze/Viking age language – so when the boat flexed it helped reinforce where this term originated – the bronze age before the Vikings. Many anthropologists also did not agree the boat was built with rawhide (which enabled the worm-like flex in waves) versus the wood of Viking and rigid form when rowing. *Svend's work here is "experimental archeology."*



Drawing that inspired Svend to build the canoe

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WCA Postal Address

P.O. Box 91068
2901 Bayview Ave.
Toronto, ON M2K 2Y6

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Dave Young
(Chair)
chair@wildernesscanoe.ca
416-457-7937

Mary Perkins
mary.perkins@sympatico.ca
905-725-2874

Geri James
Geri.james@blackrock.com
416-512-6690

Diane Lucas
lucasde@yahoo.com
905-826-0875

Dave Cunningham
DBCunningham-Appraisals
@rogers.com
905-863-2865

Bernadette Farley
mbernadette.farley
@gmail.com
416-762-8073

WCA Contacts <http://www.wildernesscanoe.ca>

Secretary

Bill King
45 Hi Mount Drive
Toronto, ON M2K 1X3
416-223-4646
lyonrex@rogers.com

WCA Outings

Bill Ness
194 Placentia Blvd.
Toronto, ON M1S 4H4
416-321-3005
bness@look.ca

Editor

Aleksandar Gusev
8 Valiant Road
Etobicoke, ON M8X 1P4
416-236-7079
aleks@gusev.ca

Treasurer

Barb Young
youngjdavid@rogers.com

Webmaster

Jeff Haymer
Toronto, ON
416-635-5801
jhaymer@primus.ca

Membership and Computer Records

Emmy Hendrickx
emmy.hendrickx@bell.net

Conservation

Jeff McColl
mccolls@sympatico.ca

Editorial Team:

Aleks Gusev: Editor-in-Chief
Pegi Dover: Text Editor
Bernice Slotnick: Text Editor
Barb Young: Food Editor
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Toni Harting: Photo Editor
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