

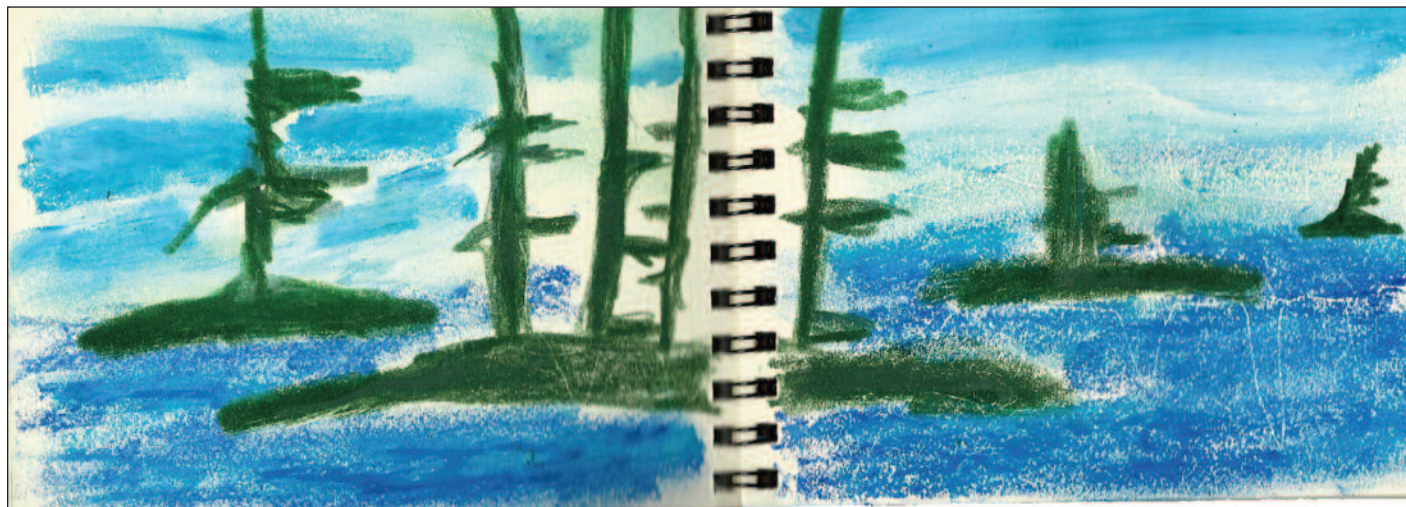


wilderness
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nastawgan

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Journal of the Wilderness Canoe Association



Pine Islets on the Cat River

Cat River Canoe Trip

Story and Sketches by Jon Berger

A September State of Mind

Since age 12, I divide the year into time on the canoe route and all other time spent in anticipation and preparation for the next trip. In my year, September is the time of transition between these two parts.

On the route in September, the light is changing. It is dark in the tent at the early rise. The travelling day is shorter. The skies are more muted in color compared to the brightness of mid-summer. Grasses and trees turn to autumnal hues. The water is colder. There seems to be more mist and blowing light rain. There is fog. There is more cold wind and the parka is on frequently.

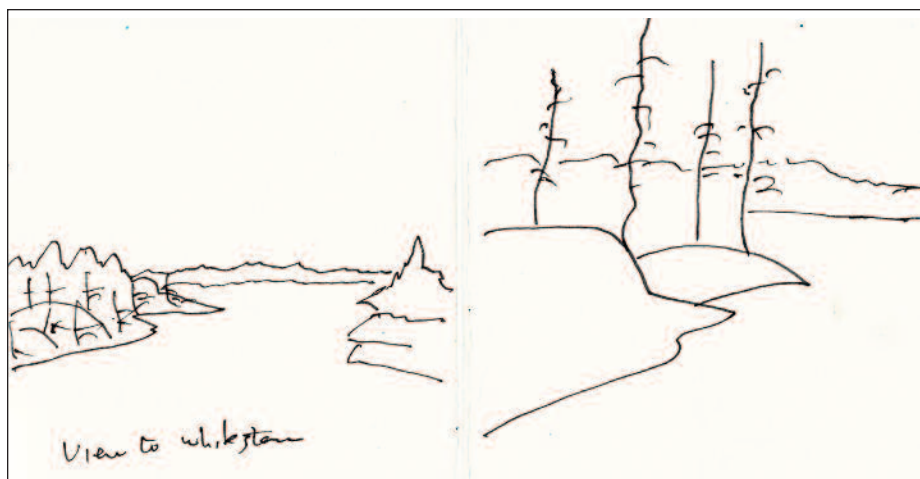
As journey's end approaches in September after weeks on the route there is both anticipation of the end of travel and regret at the soon-to-be cessation of movement. As old age encroaches, this anticipation accompanies thoughts of how it was "back in the day." These fleeting thoughts can be of the halcyon days of my late teens and my growing strength and skill, the early twenties and mid-thirties of a man who could carry 220 pounds across a trackless burn for two miles, or the reveries of a father of two young children caring for them out on the route.

Maybe there is pain from a chronic injury or medical condition mixed with a sort of wistful determination to plan ahead for the next summer. Is it just looking for times past and lost or will it be a real trip and not a day dream of lost energy and strength?

Back home, the High Holy Days, and their prayers of renewal and repentance will soon start. Usually the job beckons with a renewed sense of energy. Loved ones await. And it won't be long until I start the fall redraw of my sketch journal which always seems to trigger thoughts of a route for the next summer.

All these feelings are familiar and form a package, a sort of feather pillow, a sort of oasis of rest. They are so familiar and make the end of a trip bearable and even enjoyable. The line from Simon and Garfunkel comes to mind, "Hello darkness my old friend, I have come to be with you again." Or maybe the haunting sound of Yesterday from the Beatles expresses the feeling.

In September 2019 the transition was more poignant than ever. By April mysterious cardiac symptoms ended the training for the trip and started a series of tests leading to an early May operation which left me able to walk but unable



View to Whitestone

to lift or paddle for six weeks. At nearly the same time a crescendo of events at work caused significant anxiety and turmoil. I felt awful.

An August canoe trip seemed unlikely as I needed time to get back into shape and my daughter was getting married at the end of the month and expected me to be there, walk her down the aisle, and give a speech at the wedding dinner. It looked like there might not be a canoe trip to assuage the vicissitudes of life.

By mid-June I had started training again as I portaged sand bags around

the local lacrosse field and carried my canoe up and down the hills of the neighborhood to the accompaniment of headaches, dizziness, and nausea which the surgeons and cardiologists were unable to diagnose and treat. I had entered a period of considerable anxiety about my body and my life. It seemed as if my state could change minute by minute. Even if I wanted to paddle, could I do a canoe trip? Or worse, would the continuing testing show a very pessimistic future?

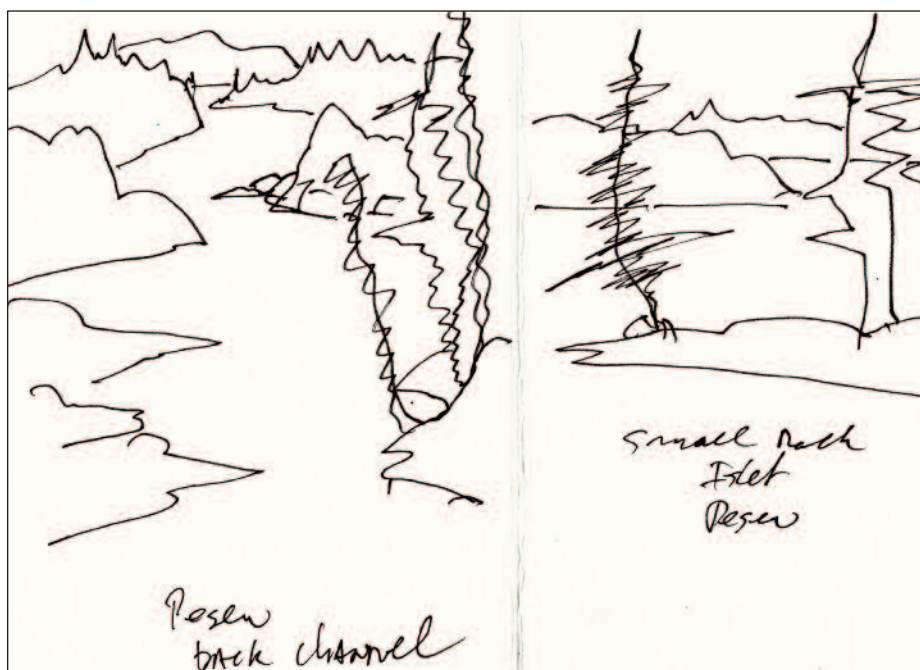
Conversely, curiously, and I guess as a result of the electronic devices im-

planted in my body and the results of tests, there was unanimous approval among the cardiologists of my request to go on a canoe trip, "If I could get in shape."

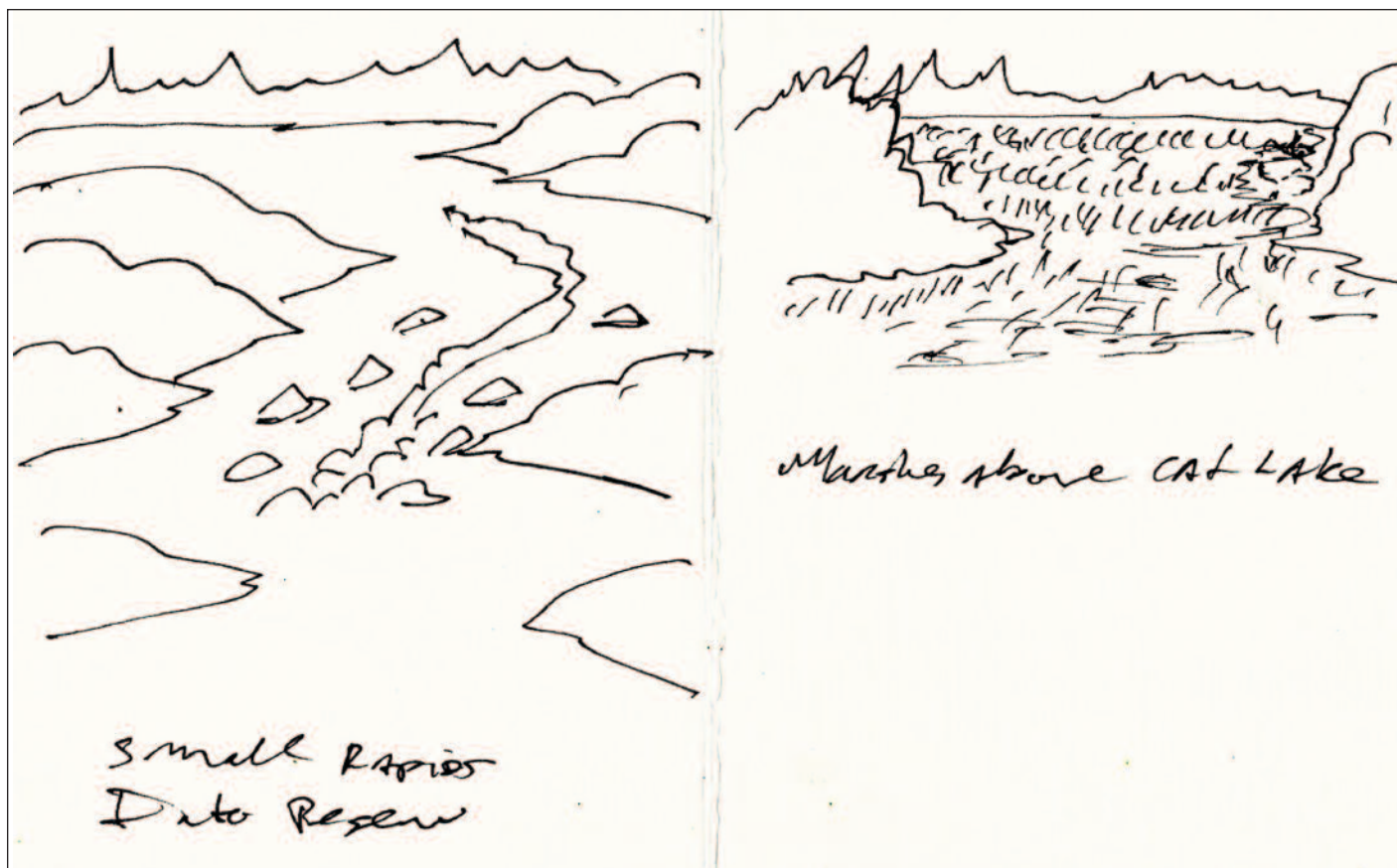
In retrospect I don't think the doctors had any idea of what I was planning to do! At the most recent October appointment, the specialist almost fell out of his chair when I told him I had been on a 10-day, 120-mile canoe trip in northwest Ontario. He said "nobody could paddle a hundred and twenty miles."

By late July, Tom Terry, my friend and co-author on *The Canoe Atlas of The Little North*, agreed to go on a September trip since his grandchildren were back in school and he had a break in his contract work and guiding activities around Sioux Lookout. September was my last chance for 2019 and I felt I had at least reached a minimum level of condition. We agreed on the Cat River, an easy route we both knew from long experience. We agreed on a very easy travelling schedule of camping by 3 p.m. every afternoon. We rapidly went through the checklist for the outfit, picked up missing items, and flew by Otter float plane from Sioux Lookout to Whitestone Lake at the head of the Cat River with our destination the road head at the community of Slate Falls, some hundred odd miles to the south, on North Bamaji Lake.

The trip was too short but a real joy. The voyage was a strange mix of emotions. It looked and felt like the end of the travelling season but it was just the beginning. Even as I reveled in the glorious autumn light I coped with headaches and dizziness. The familiar beauty of the Cat River with its low ledges, smooth at the water's edge, with flat jack pine areas up behind that marked both the lake and river vistas mixed with the anxiety and uncertainty of my condition as well as the symptoms that came and went almost on a whim. Some moments I was in the travelling groove and at others I had trouble even tying my boots. The rhythm of travel, the looking and the sketching was an antidote. Getting going always



En Route to Peseu Lake



North of Cat Lake

made me feel better. I even broke into song after carrying the canoe 700 yards around the Cat River Canyon.

Going in or Jumping Off

It is a good hour in the air between Sioux Lookout and Whitestone Lake. The further north we flew the more the weather deteriorated. With the crew's GPS mounted on the windshield we could follow our progress as we recognized the shapes of the various lakes and streams. The weather closed in as we made our final run and landing on Whitestone. The crew managed to glance off a shoal and so we unloaded in the middle of the lake from a grounded plane. It took a bit of doing to get the canoe off the rack and the gear out of the plane and into the canoe. Rain was falling. It was a dark surface with dark clouds over head. We had long views to burned shores, and a chill descended. Last light was coming and one pilot asked if we wanted to get back in and go back to Sioux Lookout. I just wanted out of the plane! We circum-navigated an island looking for a camp-site and eventually ended up along the

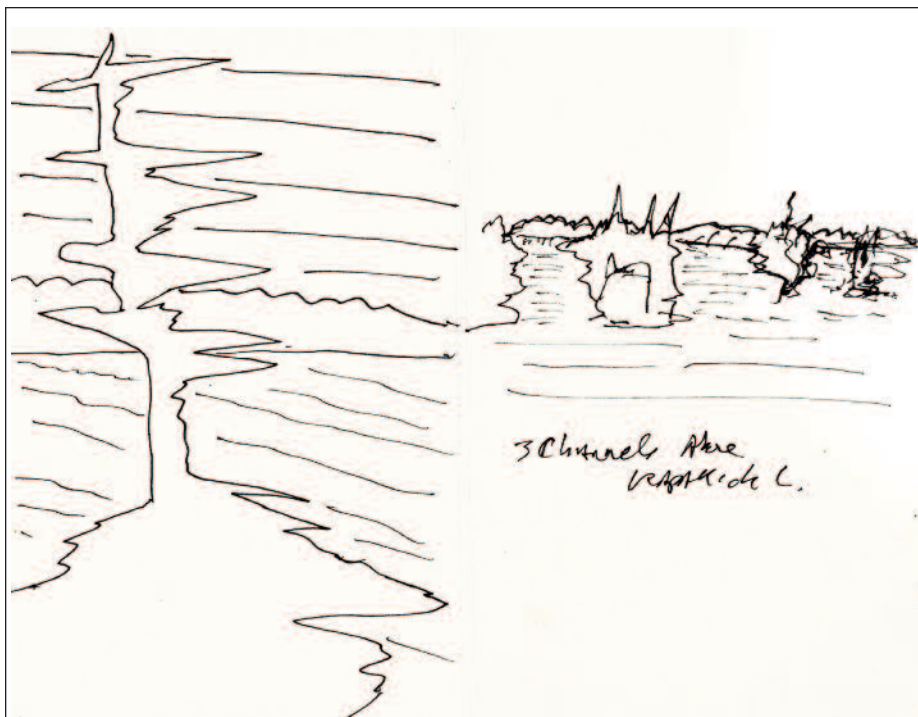
south shore and found the Cat River mouth. Just into the river mouth we used the spot Pete Spiller and I had found several years before. We could hear but not see the rapids. In a determined effort to beat the fading light we got everything up, the fire going, dinner made, travelling bannock cooked, sketches done, cold swim accomplished. Bedtime for me arrived quickly, though Tom stayed up around the fire despite the spitting rain.

The Route in the Ground

I have spent much time traversing the Lowlands of James and Hudson Bay. It is a vast area characterized by limestone cliffs and towers, long wide gravel runs, massive delta islands, underwater multi-colored limestone pavements, and clay and alder banks. I have spent much time crossing the vast till plain of Northern Ontario and Manitoba where almost all the rivers of James and Hudson Bay rise. Here are the miles of black spruce and tamarack, the eskers, the deep, rutted-in-the-moss trails, the pothole lakes, the loon shit

ponds, and the narrow, twisty, swampy streams with rock channels. Yet despite these varied, remote, and scenic travels, I have preferred or even loved since childhood the rocky landscapes of the Shield.

The Cat River from its mouth to headwaters is a corridor of stone walls, rocky islets, jagged shore lines, rock islands, and yards of sloping shelves and ledges on the shores. And because it has been scraped bare of any real soil, all you get are the jack pines and birches with some maples, mountain ash, the odd spruce cluster, and the omnipresent grasses and shrubs like the blueberry and the sweet grass. It is not fertile but it is striking. These patterns run right from CNR tracks far to the south north through the Savant and Pashkokogan and Miniss Rivers, up to Lake St. Joe and into the Cat at Blackstone Lake and Johnston Bay. You could easily do three weeks on the water without ever leaving the stone landscape. Though to the north of the Cat and the northeast the till plain with



On the way to Kapikik

its heavy boreal forest and long portages awaits those who leave the openness of the river.

The other striking characteristic of the river is that it is traveled by the locals whose permanent and seasonal camps are all over the place. Every

portage is kept open and most of them are short. Along the course of the river from Lake St. Joe all the way to Whitestone there are significant bypass routes around clusters of rapids and big drops in elevation. These go through nearby lakes and ponds and set you out

either above or below the big drop. These are kept open. There is significant evidence that over time trails are re-routed or let go and replaced.

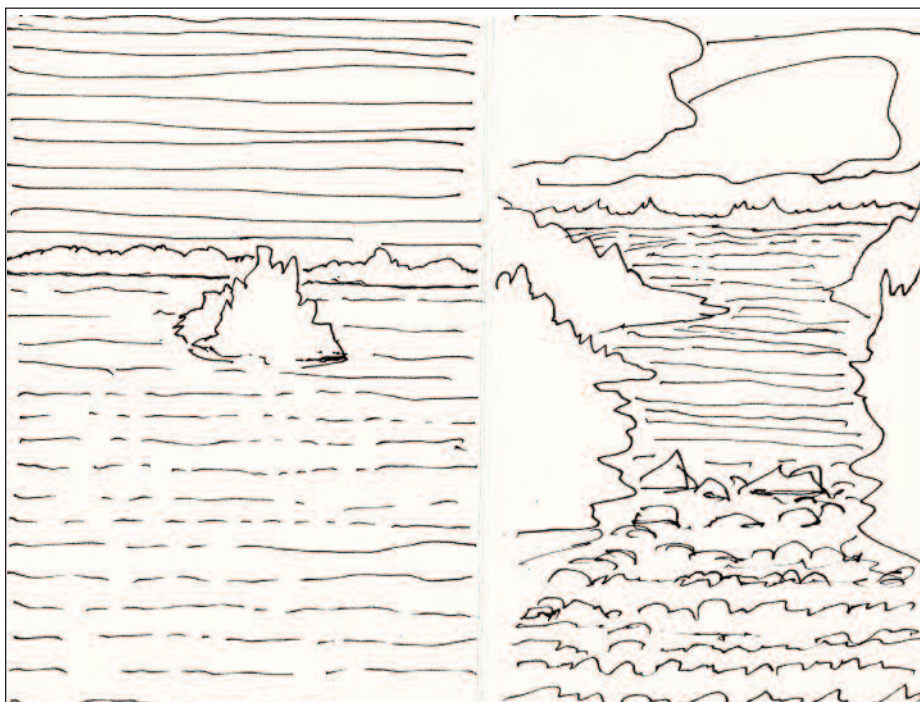
Thus it comes as no surprise that when we left our river-mouth campsite for Pesew Lake, we headed for one of these bypass routes. The route follows a short portage over a narrow neck of land into a branch of the Cat River rather than descend the main channel. Considering we carried three sets of rapids and falls on well-used trails, I speculate there must be a bad stretch of rapids on the main throw. On the branch is small water and we snaked down to find the trails.

Cat Lake Memories

From Pesew Lake we followed the route down a southward-reaching bay and along the trail around Pesew Falls. At the bottom all was calm, though on other trips I have found a boiling outrun with whirlpools and back eddies. Just below, the main branch of the Cat comes in from the west and the run to Cat Lake begins.

The landscape is one of rock islands, rock islets, and long shelves of shore bedrock interposed with extensive marshes and marsh channels. It is almost like seeing ships of rock in a sea of weeds. On these rock shorelines, the further south we went we saw more sign of use as we approached the community. Cold wind and rain blew through and then almost as if by sheer chance the sky cleared, the sun came out, and we found a camp on a small rock island not far from a former rehab center that was built on an island near the settlement. The wind blew hard from the northwest but we found a marvelous nook for the fire and kitchen embedded in a rock hollow that, unlike many of its kind, was quite spacious, cozy, and warm.

I think this was my 7th trip to Cat Lake as the Cat River is the gateway to the Albany, the Otokwin, Attawapiskat, the Severn, the Winisk, and the Berens and can be travelled just as easily up stream as down. The first was the summer of 1970 when as a trip guide for Camp Temagami, I looked



Kapikik Views – Island at River Mouth; Outlet Rapids

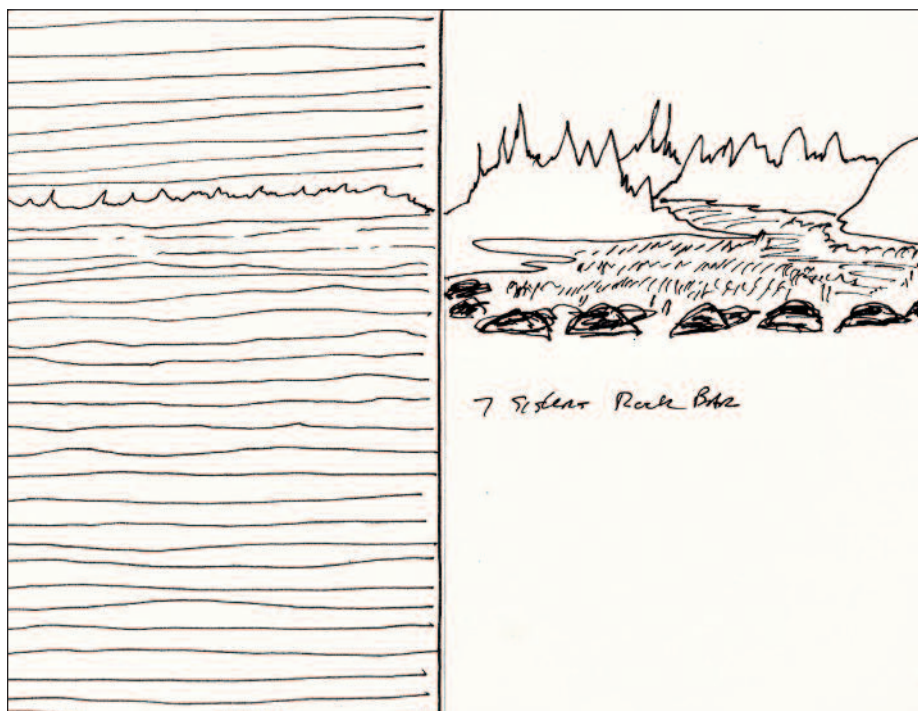
forward to our arrival at Cat Lake settlement. On that trip, we battled strong westerly cross winds as we went north up the lake towards the settlement. Camp was made on a sandy poplar point to the east of the Hudson Bay post and connected by a short trail to the store. Indeed the classic red roof of the post marked our approach to the area. The factor and his wife invited us in for tea and together we celebrated the 300th anniversary of the HBC, founded in 1670. The couple had a special crate of treats sent out by the Company and was happy to share the cookies and other goodies with Andy Smyth and me.

Back at the campsite, a young lad came over and started talking. His name was Jerry Wesley. He later became Band Chief, an infrequent correspondent, and a certified canoe instructor. A few years later, on another trip to the village, his grandmother Mrs. Wesley, through an interpreter, marked our maps for the route up to Kinloch on the Morris River and down the Pipestone all the way to Wunnumun Lake and the Winisk.

Drag Road at Kaskego Rapids

Leaving our small rock island campsite in the northern end of Cat Lake, we paddled south under stormy skies. Slivers of silver broke the gloom as we navigated cross tail winds and the various island configurations to the last bay leading to Kaskego Rapids. Here the Cat Lake folks had built a 200-yard-long sturdy drag road of cross ties nailed to long wooden rails so they could skid their motor boats around the drop. The construction was recent as the many stumps – fresh cut – around the start of the trail and the campsite attested. A well-trodden portage trail on the right side accompanies the drag road. Drag roads found at many rapids and falls join portages, winter trails, and the extensive network of rock channels through shallows, small rapids, or narrow spots to facilitate passage along the waterways. They are sort of like public works although carried out by families who travel the waterways and live on the land.

Down on the Ogoki River, I saw a



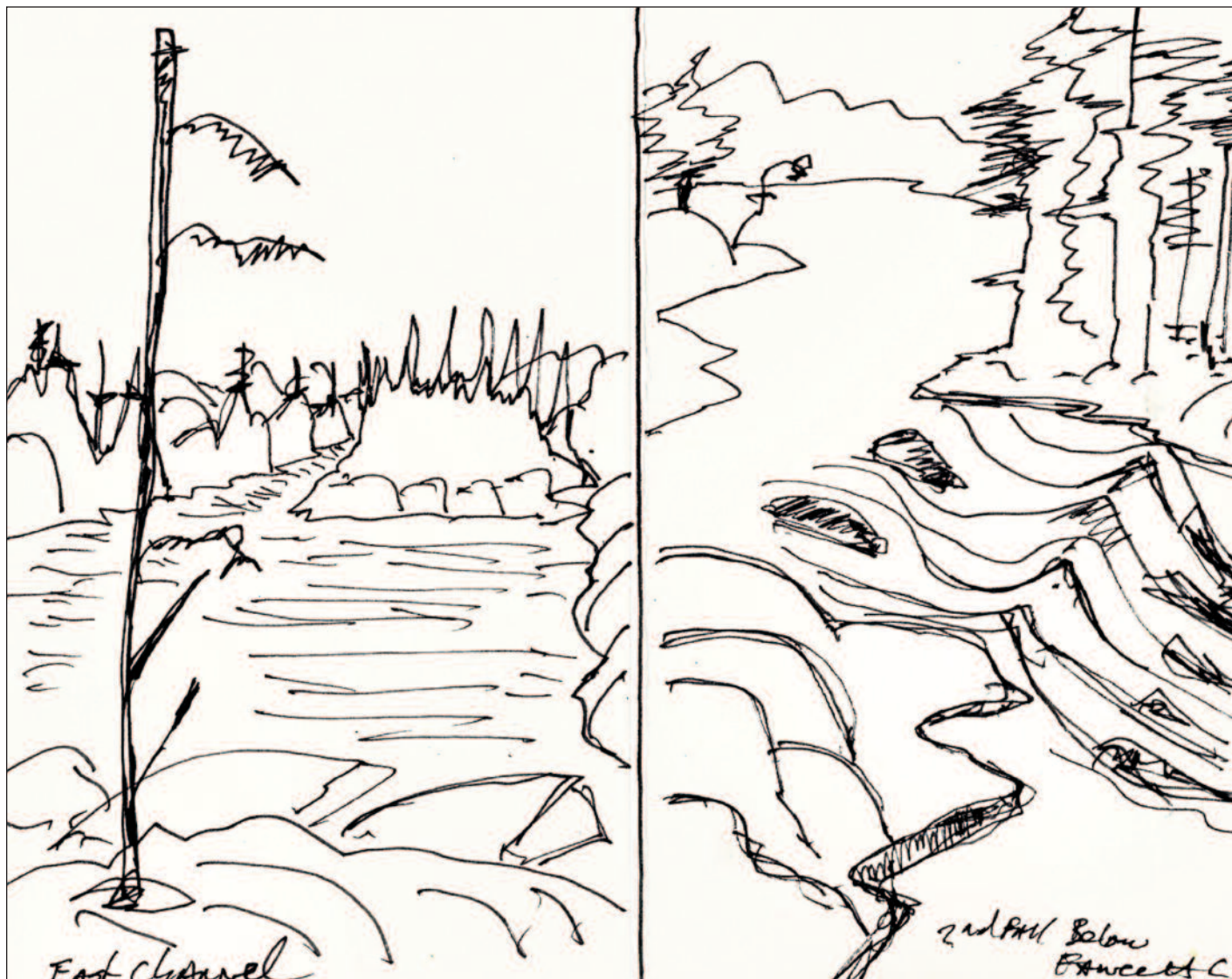
Zionz lake and the Seven Sisters

family from Nakina, travelling in three boats. They put six people on one boat at a time and at the run, pushed them over the drag road. Simultaneously others hoisted the fuel, gear, ammunition, and motors to get the load over

the trail. At Miminiska Falls on the Albany River, I saw a man from Fort Hope line his motor boat to the brink of the falls; maneuver the boat, on the line, into a small cove; use the drag road of about 15 yards to circumvent



Cat River Canyon



Back Channel After Zionz Lake

the drop; and then he and his two man crew jumped in, gunned the motor, quick as a wink raised the prop as they went over some shallows, put the motor back down, gunned it again, and shot straight down the shallow, long and very fast rapid.

After carrying our loads over and avoiding the drag road by hopping over the rails and avoiding nails exposed by rot or breaks in the wood, we ate lunch at the end of the Kaskago Rapids portage. Tom and I used an overturned boat as a table and a sled as a bench. We loaded up on the submerged portion of the drag road and set off down the current for the run towards Kapikik Lake and another set of wide open crossings.

Came This Way Before

We left our campsite that sat on a small east-facing point at the junction of three channels that lead to Kapikik Lake. An early fog had lifted and we had long views to burned shores that marked the next narrows. The bottom layer of the sky was blue while above a light silver grey layer filtered the sunlight.

We entered the main – several kilometers across – open part of Kapikik Lake via the narrows on the northwest side. Almost by reflex we gravitated to the west side. The western shore line curved with a bit of lee to the north and curved with same lee protection to the south. This semi-crescent shore with several bays and islands protected us from any wind except from the east.

Down at the bottom of the open lake we would turn and head east for the river mouth.

As we approached the south shore familiar landmarks came into view. Pete Spiller and I had camped on a small island near the southern corner of the lake and from our kitchen you could see in the distance the round island that marked the river mouth. Closer in but tucked near to the shore are two long islands with rock shores and burned cover. Their grey trees' bareley demarcate the islands from the burned shore in the background. These hidden narrows made tracking the route and matching our passage with the map a subject of conversation that broke the

usual silence of the paddle. Tom and I debated whether the land in view was an island or shore line just as Pete and I had several years before.

Past the round island we entered the river mouth, drifted down to and carried the outlet rapid portage where we camped. From the end of the portage we could see back upstream to the lake in the distance. My first four trips on the Cat were up the river on the way to the Pipestone/Winsik, Throat and Berens, and the Otokwin/Attawapiskat. On these trips, at the outlets of the many large lakes on the river, I looked forward to the view up and across the rapids to the open lake beyond.

This is not a feeling of being at

home but one of familiarity. On the Cat, we had to pay constant attention to the map and the land in order to get to the fall of water as there are many channels and many islands that obscure the way. The travel is not at all like being in the more intimate Temagami country where for 10 years as a camper and a guide I memorized all the routes and found no need for a map.

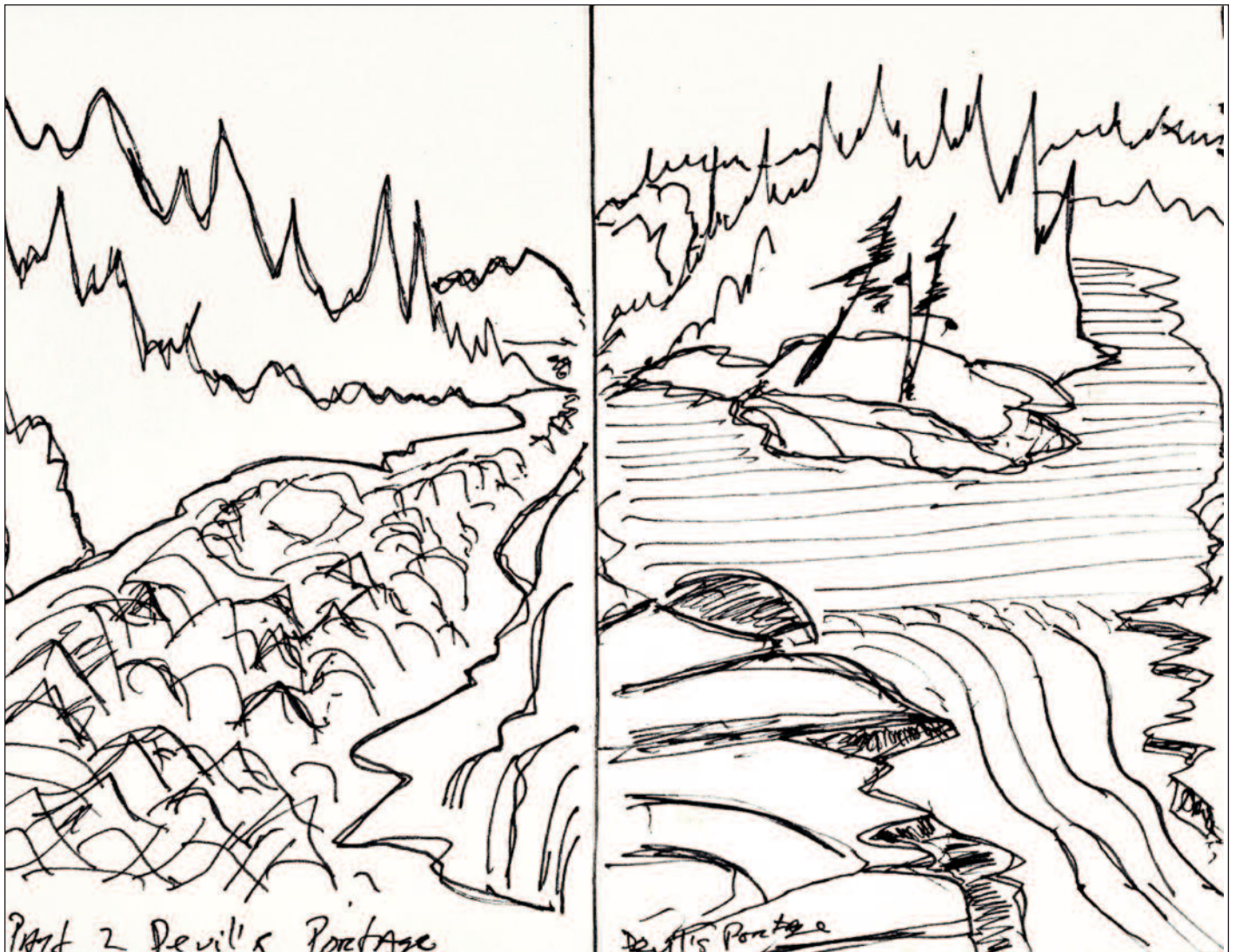
Cat River Canyon and Zionz Lake

From the outlet of Kapikik Lake, the Cat flows through a narrow channel enclosed by high banks that leads to an extended run of large rapids. An easy well-used portage of 700 meters on the west side, with a significant uphill sec-

tion, goes around the entire set. Tom related shooting the run with some of his clients and I was there when Carl Shepardson and his family lined up from bottom to top. I have always portaged.

The Cat River Canyon is one of a select few areas in the entire Little North that is navigable by experienced travelers and yet has a well-defined trail around the long set. Others that I have travelled are: Long Current Rapids on the Otokwin, Red Sucker Rapids on the Gods; the outlet of Petawanga Lake on the Albany, Polar Bear Rapids and Amasias Rapids on the Severn, and the Brightsand River above Harmon Lake.

My first encounter with the Cat



Devil's Portage



Kezik View

River Canyon came in 1970 as I guided a camp section upstream. We battled the current below, poled a couple of swifts and rapids and got into the large pool before the foot of the drop. On the left, well down from the foot of the rapids, we saw without hesitation a well-defined wide open trail going up the bank to a campsite on top of the first rise. Today the trail is well-cleared but not as well-used. Now it is just a narrow, well-trodden trace instead of the massive clearing that was scattered with old paddles, poles, geese decoys, hand carved shovels, and canoe parts.

Tom and I sat at the bottom of the trail overlooking the rapids falling in and leaving the pool below. We rested and exchanged stories about the area and previous trips. On down the river, a strong current carried us to the set of islands that mark the way to Zionz Lake. As we approached the lake, we paddled alongside a peninsula that is sometimes broken into navigable channels by high water that lead to the lake. Rounding the southern tip of the long, narrow point we sat on the calm, wide open expanse.

It is almost 4 kilometers across

Zionz to the northern tip of Thistle Island and the small channel that leads out of the lake to the zig zag rock-lined passage along the east shore of Thistle and the way to Fawcett Lake.

At the entrance to the channel is a remarkable set of more than 15 gigantic rocks that form an almost straight line across the opening. I dubbed them the Seven Sisters. The Sisters are not gently sloped like the backs of sheep in the pasture or whales on the surface, forms that characterize other sets of rocks in mid lake or river channel on the Cat, but simply emerge as monolith like features from the water. Behind them is a sinuous channel through marsh grass that leads to a rock spit with a narrow spillway sometimes blocked by beaver works.

We lifted over the rock spit and paddled out into the blowing mist. Not far down out of the wind we found another Cat River site. The ledge was wide, smooth and low yet with enough water to glide right up and unload without scraping. Of course there was protected kitchen area and standing dead wood all around. We had a view south down a narrow-walled channel towards Fawcett

Lake and our next morning's paddle. Though enclosed and perhaps with some shoals, the locals seemed to favor the route as a couple of parties in motorboats passed on their way towards the lake.

Devil's Portage

Below Zionz Lake lies Fawcett Lake and below Fawcett at its outlet is an area called Devil's Portage. The name is printed on the map. Although local travelers may have given the name to the place, it does not seem to warrant such an appellation. Naming a place or body of water after the Devil usually relates to hazardous travel. Gods Lake in northern Manitoba was called Devil's Lake by the local bands due to its unpredictable strong local storms and vast sweep such that any canoe travel had to be done no less than a paddle's length from a shore line. According to the story, missionaries asked that the name be changed from Devil's to Gods, or so says Sam Healy from Gods Lake Narrows. Below Fawcett Lake on the Cat River there does not seem to be such a narrative or such travel conditions.

On the other hand an accident could have occurred in the area of Devil's Portage. Someone could have been swept over or their boat or canoe trapped on a rock through carelessness. There is a spot at the base of Knife Rapids on the Hayes, on the river right as you ascend, that the fishing guides at Knee Lake warned us about. Here two large boulders offset, one above the other, with a fair current to form a slot that, despite its seeming innocence, could trap a canoe. The Little North is littered with such places and some have plaques and monuments to the dead.

At Devil's Portage, on the Cat, there is a large island with a falls on each side passed by an easy liftover and just downstream at the next drop there is a portage across a neck that leads to Kezik Lake in a quiet bay well down from the end of the rapids. It would take quite a flood to make the area too dangerous to paddle up or down and thus require a long portage of which I have never seen any indication.

Tom and I decided to camp and rest

the next day above these last big rapids. We found an open jack pine grove with a blueberry moss cover and well-spaced trees to support the big tent fly. Out on the rocks we had a good fire all the next day as it turned cold but clear. Eventually in midafternoon I could shed the parka and get in the cold water for a bath. The roar of the rapids permeated the campsite as did the cold wind. Most of the day, a sort of pale gold light highlighted the falls and the trees.

Off the Route

From our rest day campsite, a short trail across a narrow neck led to Kezik Lake. Kezik Lake is best described as a dispersed location rather than a connected body of water. The name appears in a variety of areas, some quite distant from each other. Barnie Island and Cross Island, large land masses, sit in what might be called the center of the lake and form many arms, bays, and channels that eventually lead through Strachan Lake and down to the Cat River Portage around the rapids that fall into Wesleyan Lake.

It is easier to describe this maze of channels than it is to paddle it. Further

in this particular case the 50K maps are not accurate. They show open water whereas the digital version on the NRCAN site, consulted after the trip, shows land bridges. And as we found out you can't paddle that way without carrying, cutting, and dragging.

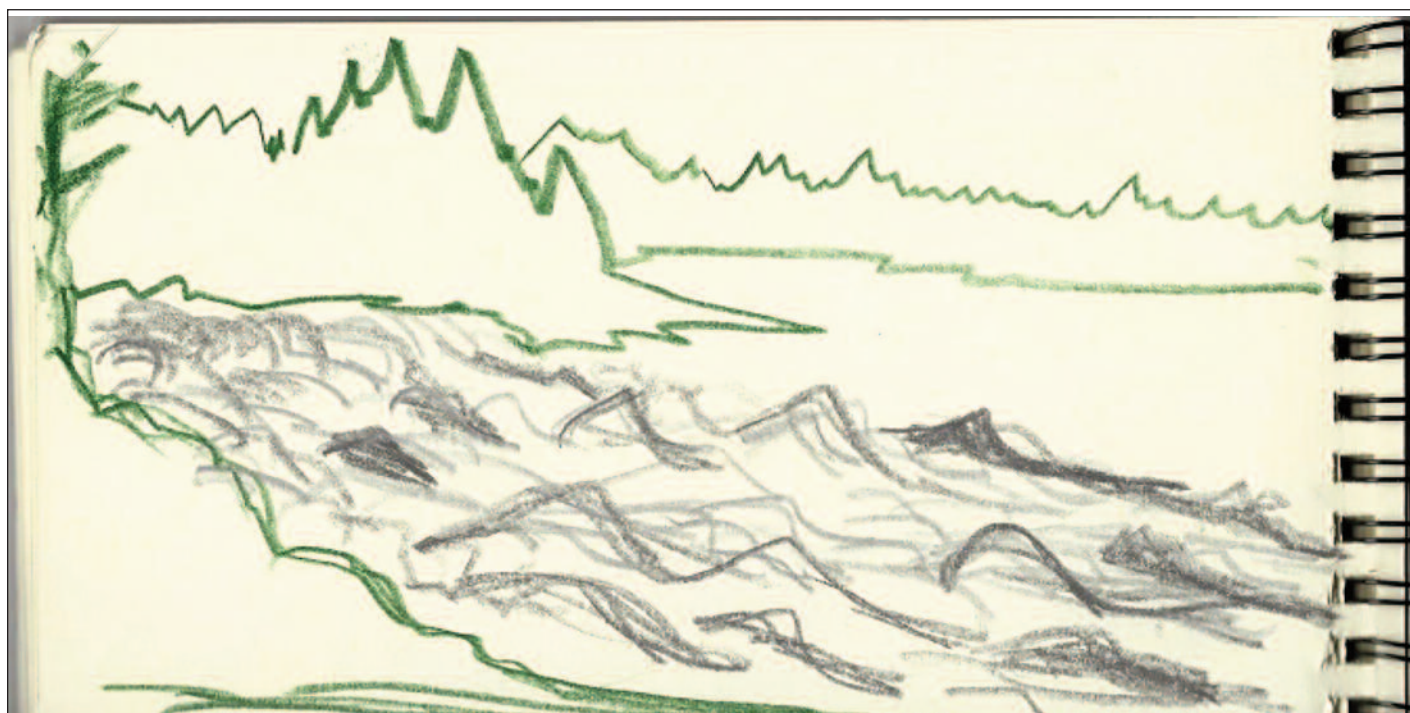
Had we paddled around the so-called long way after meeting the first land bridge we would have had to circumnavigate Cross Island after hours of battling the wind only to find that we would have had to return to the two-channel split where the side trip started. What started out to be a look for some good fishing channels ended up as just another day on the route like we used to experience when we travelled with the 250K maps and simply dealt with unmarked obstacles as necessary and travelled with the general trend of the land and water.

In the old days we would have cut trails across the land bridges, and pushed and waded shallows to make the connection. Instead we turned around and rode a strong and quite cold tail wind back towards the old route to Wesleyan and found a camp out of the wind on a smooth ledge with a view to

the next channel leading towards the Cat River Portage.

Despite over 60 years of travel, it appears I am still seduced by printed features on the map, be they open water, small streams, or falls and rapids, and I am prone to go that way. I have learned over the years that it is probably not a good idea to push on to "make it to a falls I have never visited" as sometimes these locales turn out to be really poor places to camp or the falls are even nonexistent.

On Kezik, it was only a matter of hours to backtrack from the obstacles. Other times, required a whole day or more of labor and route finding to make the connection as I have missed the travel route and had to make my own. Perhaps even after scouting we picked the wrong side of the river. Or maybe we ran across a trail but could not see how anyone got down the rapids above in order to use the trail. After some of these excursions to a "jackpot," I have found out later at home by consulting my collection of the oldest pre-1950 versions of 250K maps with marked trails that there was a bypass route in another, more logical location. Though



Fall of Water into Wesleyan Lake



Silver Rain

you would never know in the 20th and early 21st century if the locals had kept it open. The only way to know is to go.

The Little North is a vast tapestry made up of thousands of land forms and trails, human and animal, in every state and condition. Experience shows that

some likely and some unlikely routes are maintained for a variety of reasons. It is not unreasonable to think there might be a route and to find something going where you want to go. On the other hand, I can even find a route and it leads the wrong way. Given these in-

consistencies and the vagaries of human and animal use, when traveling new ground, I find it useful to always have on alert a lively sense of alternatives.

Last Days and Going Out

It was not far down to Wesleyan Lake. We

weaved through islands and came out on the wide space leading to the Cat River Portage. Along the portage we dodged around muskeg holes and circumvented the remains of the rotted drag road while a light cold rain fell. The trail was in full autumn colors with just enough maples to give every line of sight a damp, bright red sheen. We paddled to outrun of the big rapids so Tom could catch dinner.

Amidst blowing mist and rain we found a small island site towards the end of the lake above several sets of channels. It is hard to figure where the lake ends and the river picks up. We did pass a small swift though the map still names it Wesleyan.

We were close to the end of the trip and just in the area of cell service at Slate Falls. Tom got through to Carol on his cell phone to confirm our pickup at the settlement. With clouds of mist and rain blowing through we pitched the big tent fly and the kitchen tarp and

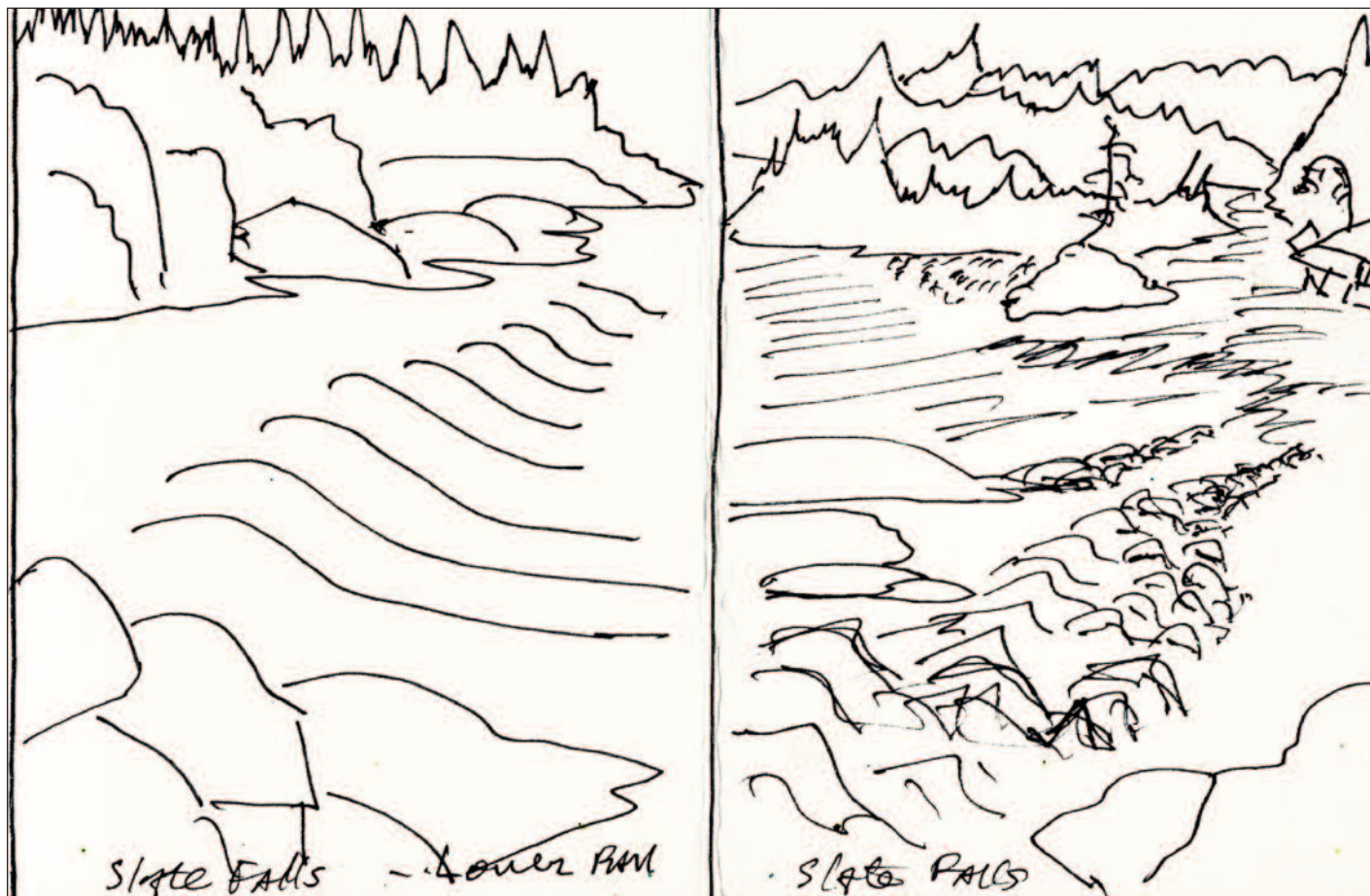
settled in with hot drinks to watch the changing light show as the mist passed through to be followed by gray light.

Morning brought bright clear weather and we headed for the last run of river through Slate Falls and associated current and rapids. The water surface glimmered and shined in the golden glow as we made our way over a couple of short trails and stopped at the last to look and sketch before heading for the landing. Bright blue clear paddling with a cool temperature led us towards the landing and we played the guessing game as to where we actually would finish given the panoply of buildings just coming into view.

At the landing, we waited for Kanina and her little boy Delor to pick us up. A plane landed and we chatted with folks waiting for freight or passengers. We talked with staff from the nearby fly-in fishing lodge, the local minister, and the nurse who runs the

health center. There was car dust and engine smells and even the smell of wild chamomile that grows in clumps in areas of disturbance and fuel spills.

As we sat around and waited for our ride I started to get stiff as I already missed the movement of the travel. From the plane dock there was a wide view across North Bamaji Lake to sets of islands. But it was no longer a travelling view. There was no map challenge and though clear with an easy riffle on the surface, there was no spontaneous coordination of travel conditions and paddle stroke. Ahead lay a two-hour car trip on a gravel road and the day after the flights back home. I would soon be in touch with Patti as my cell got service under a large spruce in Tom's yard. We had Tom's grandson, Tee Vi's 9th birthday party that evening. A headache and uncertainty was bothering me. Clearly it was time to start planning a route and a training program for next summer.



Lower Slate Falls



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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.

WCA Logo

You no doubt noticed the new logo adorning the cover page of the journal. Ben Wylie, in charge of WCA Marketing activities, summarizes recent activities on logo redesign in the “A Nod to the Past, our Path to the Future” report.

Asked to confirm if he thought that original sketched outline of two paddlers depicted on the logo was that of Bill and Paul Mason, Bill Ness (Outings Coordinator), offered these thoughts:

“A contest for a new logo was held during the winter of 1975-76. Six designs thought worthy were put to a membership vote in the spring of 1976, and in a squeaker of a race, out of 75 votes, #2 narrowly beat #6. The new logo was designed by Barry Brown and appeared for the first time on the June, 1976 Wilderness Canoeist.

This is the first time I’ve heard it suggested that it was a silhouette of Bill & Paul Mason. Personally, I think this is a little far-fetched. I guess it’s possible that Barry derived it from a photo of them, but I’d want to see it first and corroborate it with someone who was close to Barry. Sorry, but my eyes aren’t good enough to distinguish Mason’s floppy hat, but then back in those days, everyone who was anyone wore a Tilley hat. I’m surprised it wasn’t a membership requirement.

Actually, the whitewater theme seems to have been very well received originally, with the two designs that received most support both being WW-themed. It was only a number of years later, after the logo now being replaced had originally appeared on fleece-wear that the then board decided the old logo was too WW-oriented. You have to remember, in its early years the club’s leaders were very much all active river paddlers. That year’s spring trips were: Oakville Creek, Credit River, Nottawasaga River, Eels Creek, Salmon River, Skootamatta River, Maitland River, York & Gull Rivers, Kennis River, Mississauga River, French River, and Whitewater Training Session at Palmer. These were the kind of people who paddled rapids in cold weather without wetsuits, swam, unwrapped aluminum boats and hopped back in for more. To them, the new logo was very much a reflection of their paddling passion.”

A Nod to the Past, our Path for the Future

A few months ago we launched a new logo for the club. If it looks familiar, you were probably a member back in 1976. The new version is a nod to the old logo but it’s also something else.

Last year we issued our first WCA member survey which was conceived to guide our strategic direction for the next few years. The survey’s aim was to get a pulse check on membership, help us understand our brand, and uncover our members’ top concerns.

It provided a huge quantity of insight, and informed our new mission statement: The Wilderness Canoe Association is the best place to find friends who share your passion for the outdoors. But one of the most salient themes was our members’ collective concern about the long-term health of the club. Members were worried that their experiences and knowledge wouldn’t be passed on as the club aged. They wanted recruitment of new, younger members to be a priority.

While we’ve made an impressive headway towards our goal, we knew from the moment we read the survey results that our branding would have to change to align with our new objective. We also knew our logo should reflect this objective. It should show we’re a dynamic organization and should resonate with younger audiences.

But coming up with a new logo wasn’t as easy as going back in the archive and dusting something off.

Over the past months, our board undertook a significant effort to see if the previous logo could be modified to fit our needs. While we all appreciated the vision behind the previous logo, it didn’t strike a chord with younger members, some of whom weren’t keen to put a WCA sticker on their boat or car.

After countless mockups and heated discussion, we all agreed that it wouldn’t work, but we didn’t have something to take its place. Our very limited budget against the significant cost of logos, and our lack of in-house creative talent put us at a standstill until a fateful board meeting.

A sticker on one of our board members’ laptops caught everyone’s eye. It was a stencil of Bill and Paul Mason. Our young board members loved the “retro” look of the font and the crisp branding colours. Much like the tight jeans or old Seda PFD your teenager discovered in your closet 20 years after they were cool, the logo was an instant hit.

With a few rounds of modification and feedback, support for the logo was unanimous. All agreed that it incorporates contemporary design elements while paying homage to our club’s history. The logo effortlessly communicated our club’s vision of fun outdoors with friends. While the logo had a mixed reception in 1976 due to its whitewater depiction, it’s that exact depiction that portrays us as a dynamic and exciting organization. It’s also that exact depiction that is stirring up fervor in our new millennial membership.

Now that we’ve nailed down a logo, we’re moving on to producing creative materials for club members so stay tuned for more stickers, cards to help you recruit new members, and t-shirts! We hope you’ll all join us in showing your support by picking up, using and sharing some stickers at the next outing.

WCA Board

Arctic Terns

By Greg Went

Paddling the big lake. The winds are calm today so my nervousness about being on such a big body of water so far from shore is at a low ebb. I know that if we pay attention to the weather we can easily make it to shore. If we move at the first sign of the wind picking up.

As we were paddling down the length of the lake, we started passing small islands that were barely above the surface of the lake. They were really mostly boulder piles rising just a meter or two above the water level. Too small to be anything but bookmarks on our travels. But as we got closer to one of the bigger islands we raised a ruckus among a nesting seabird colony. Arctic terns. They were raising young there. As far as I could tell the nest site was a good choice. The islands were way too far out into the lake for wolves, foxes, or bears to swim to. The arctic tern young would be safe there from all predators with the exception of seagulls. Given that no place is ever safe from gulls, the island was probably the best choice possible.

We tried not to paddle too close to the island. Arctic tern parents have enough trouble raising a brood without these strange interlopers appearing from the mists so close to their island. Even as we angled away to put more distance between us and the island, the parents started to dive bomb us. We meant no harm, but their idea of what constituted a safe distance away from their young was obviously much greater than our idea of a safe distance. We moved away and calm soon returned to the colony.

That evening as we pondered the experience we knew that the arctic terns had completed their journey north. However, they were only fifty per cent done with their yearly travels. They still had a similar journey in distance going south that awaited them after their brood was raised. It is the longest round-trip migration on the planet. Almost pole to pole. Beyond our ability to comprehend. It exceeds anything that any other species on the planet goes through. Who were we to add further complications to their yearly struggle to raise young?

So we didn't.



Kawartha Raven

By Fred Emery

*I lie awake most of the night,
there are no stars, no moon shines
bright.*

*I hear no haunting call of loons,
they're far away tonight.*

*I do not hear the water
crashing on the shore,
but for a moment I imagine it
and long to be there more.*

*No scent of pine, nor campfire
smoke,
there are no raindrops tapping on my
tent.*

*No wind blows against her walls,
only silence is sent.*

*I hear your whispers in the air,
your wings I cannot touch.
I play within your shadow,
taking pleasure just to watch.*

*Oh magic raven bring me back,
that I may live another day,
to watch you soar and feel the air,
beneath your feathered wings.*

*Come close by and feel me breathe
and let me stroke your wings,
that I may go where the raven goes
to find the magic that it brings.*

*Much of my life is lived in dreams,
competing with what is real,
and in these dreams I seek my peace,
interpreting life's tale.*

In the Footsteps of Herb

Story and photos by Dave Greene



On the Northbound train to Menihek Landing

There is no book I have read more times than Herb Pohl's posthumously published, *The Lure of Faraway Places*. Herb's words are filled with magnificent imagery which the avid paddler cannot help but to dream up when they recall their own fantastic routes crisscrossing Northern Quebec and Labrador. And that

is what we did, with this book in hand a dream was created, to piece together three different Herb Pohl routes and make it into one fantastic journey to the fabled Mistastin watershed.

If the first day of our 667-kilometre expedition through the Labrador wilderness was any indication of how the rest

of it would go, we were surely fooled. We set our canoes in the water by the train tracks at Menihek Landing, just north of Labrador City, on a day that remained as clear and calm as it was when the sun first broke the horizon. With all the enthusiasm four excited young men could muster, we fired out of the gate and covered a cool 54 kilometres by dinner — little did we know that this would be the longest distance we would travel on any day during our 35-day, Boreal 2 Barrenlands canoe expedition. That first evening around the campfire, with the sunlight fading, the sky grew overcast and rain began to fall. And the rain continued to fall almost daily for the rest of the trip.

In order for us to reach our objective for this expedition, the Mistastin watershed, we portaged, paddled, lined, tracked and grunted our canoes up six river systems and down five. To begin, we paddled through a series of large lakes: Astray, Dyke, Freeman and Attikamegan, reaching eastward toward the Labrador/ Quebec border and over a height of land into the De Pas river, a well-established canoe route. We were required to leave the well-trodden path of the De Pas and strike out east toward another height of land at the Labrador border. In order to do this we used a portage route pioneered by Stew Coffin in 1982, also used two years later by Herb, the same year I was born. We followed this unmarked portage trail for three days alongside Parly's Creek and through a series of small lakes to an unnamed river which carried us down to the George River. Once we reached the George River we tracked our canoes upstream, holding onto the bow and stern lines, into Geolands Lake or White Gull Lake. Here we were forced to take our first rest day due to a nasty front which brought strong easterlies and thunderstorms. It was on this nondescript island that we stumbled upon a previous traveler's fire pit, long since forgotten and filled with lichen and bits of charred wood. Could it have been one of Herb's campsites? We took the day to replenish our stock of fish, to nap,



Group photo on the Quebec/Labrador border and the headwaters of the De Pas River

to catch up on our journals and to prepare ourselves for our first big open-water lake crossing.

Goeland Lake is an expansive body of water. We woke before the sunrise in an attempt to put as many kilometers behind us as we could before the wind kicked up. By mid-afternoon we had paddled 34 km and found ourselves basking in the sun at the foot of an esker running east-west in the northeast corner of the lake. Clothing and equipment spread out far and wide as if there was a garage sale. From here we followed a portage route pioneered by Herb, through the headwaters of the Dumans River to reach Lac Mauchault. It was a tricky 14-kilometre stretch of black spruce bog, boulder fields and rivers. On our maps the route appeared to be navigable but as Herb had noted in his journals it would take considerable work. On one particularly memorable moment we found ourselves standing on individual boulders in the pouring rain, shivering with cold, eating chocolate bars and wondering, how are we ever going to get our canoes through this.

Beyond Lac Michault our route took us over another height of land, continental divide of watersheds, and back into Labrador through a series of lakes. It was in this section that we were finally rewarded for our hard work and toil. Through the headwaters of the Notokwanon River we paddled through lakes surrounded by barren hills, void of almost all trees. We took time to explore these hills. The water runs cold and clear, filled with landlocked arctic char, remnants from the last ice age. A short portage took us into the Mistastin watershed and the beginning of our descent to the sea.

All the rain we had received up until this point of our expedition actually helped us negotiate this section of river. Herb passed by this point on his way north in the summer of 1996 noting that the passage was "Too steep, too rocky and not enough water." He returned to this place years later with fellow paddler Pat Lewtas and added another caveat to the list, too many bugs. He wasn't wrong. Our experience travelling through here was without a doubt very different from that experienced by Pat Lewtas and Herb in 2001. The upper Mistastin River presented us with the challenge of paddling a highly technical, very steep, boulder-



Portaging over the Quebec/Labrador border into the De Pas River watershed

filled waterway. There was no way to portage and we would spend hours precariously lining and wading our boats downstream, usually fumbling with our footing on the slippery, awkward river bottom. The sections we could paddle required an ability to make accurate decisions in moving water, quick reactions and a strong backpaddle. We spent two days negotiating the upper Mistastin River.

When we finally reached Mistastin Lake, we had endured 17 consecutive

days of rain. By some miracle, that evening around the campfire, the fog lifted and for a brief moment in time the sun came out. In complete silence we all stopped what we were doing and just kind of stared, pulling our hats off and running our hands through our hair in total disbelief. The sun and calm weather that followed was a gift, a true honour to be able to experience Mistastin Lake in all its glory. With the fine weather we took the opportunity to paddle out into the lake to explore the large island inhab-



The confluence of an unnamed river we travelled down and the George River



The bugs were relentless and very effective at keeping one present!

iting its centre. We wandered its barren hills for hours, gorging on blueberries. From here we undertook our longest open crossing of the entire trip. Nearly 7 km of open water separated the island from the point of land we aimed our canoes toward. All along the northern shore of the lake the barrenlands stood, layer after layer of growing hills spanning off into the distance further than the eye could see. Snow lay on the flanks of all

the south-facing hills, often reaching the edge of the lake.

The characteristics of the river changed dramatically below Mistastin Lake. Here there was a significantly larger volume of water that ran crystal clear and very cold. The Mistastin River has carved a path through the lake's surrounding hills which were created by a meteor impact. As we paddled through what appeared to be giant gates, we could

see mountains rising steeply out of the river on either side only to be cut off by the low grey cloud cover, creating an ominous scene as the river began to take grip of our canoes and pull them downstream. An insistent drizzle and steady wind did not make the paddling very comfortable. The river now flowed fast and steady with many rapids along its course, many of which were too long to accurately scout, leaving us to run them on sight. The power and size of the water surprised all of us.

Without incident we reached a series of small lakes contained by an esker running north-south on its east side. From the bottom of these lakes the Misitastin River begins a wild and boisterous ride to its confluence with the Kogaluk River. Little did we know that the work we had undertaken to get to this point paled in comparison to what lay ahead.

We would travel a mere 6 km on this section which would take us a grueling two full days of portaging dispersed with the odd paddle. The first obstacle we faced in this section of the river was a waterfall dropping over 45 metres from start to finish, falling into a geological fault running perpendicular to the course of the river, creating a spectacular scene.

Below the first drop the river enters one of the most incredible places that could be imagined by any paddler. For a kilometer the river flows dead calm through a narrow canyon of only 30 feet wide with sheer walls rising above the river to over 50 feet in height. The surface of the water remained calm as glass, yet moving steadily. Only the sound of water dripping from the heights above echoing between the walls reminded us we were not in a dream. At one point in the middle of the canyon, a paddler cannot see a start nor an ending, only rock walls all around him. The only caveat of entering the canyon was that it contained two sets of rapids which required a near-heroic scout over the top of a mountain to see if it was even possible to paddle at all. Once a commitment has been made to paddling through the canyon, there is no turning back, no exit strategy and no possible portage. The rapids must be negotiated.

Looking from above, the rapids looked like a manageable, straightforward series of maneuvers, but again we were all caught by surprise at the sheer



A rare bit of blue sky to cook the dinner under



"Boreal to Barrenlands" team poses for a photo with the RCGS flag at the height of land between Quebec and Labrador. One canoe on one side of the border, and one on the other. The team would now be re-entering Labrador

size and power of the water. Sitting in our boats, spray decks on, paddles in hand, at the top of the exit rapid from the canyon, it was impossible not to be scared. A giant slide of blue-green water flowing in the shape of an S, wrapping around a massive boulder on the left and a rockslide a little bit further downstream on the right. The river built up its energy only to release it at the bottom in a series of towering haystack waves which ran out directly into the base of a cliff.

From this point the river continues its furious course over six more unrunnable drops which all required arduous scouting of portages before even carrying a load over. Often we found ourselves shouldering our loads for frustratingly long periods of time only to find the most suitable place to launch the boats being over a cliff back into the water. It was painstakingly slow work. Between each portage a strong current needed to be negotiated, often forcing us to cross the

main flow of the river at the bottom of a cliff face just to get to the beginning of the next portage. With persistence we moved forward. Our last obstacle was yet another massive waterfall dropping over 60 meters in a series of powerful cascades. To avoid this and the remaining unrunnable section of the Mistastin River we once again followed in the footsteps of Herb with a two-day portage up and over an adjacent mountain. Only 5.5 km in length, the portage had us climb abruptly out of the river valley to a barren plateau. We travelled across this, paddling two small lakes in the process before beginning our descent. We travelled through some of the thickest bush any of us had ever experienced, to reach an unnamed creek which would in turn carry us down, back to the Mistastin for a brief section before spitting us out into the mighty Kogaluk River.

The Kogaluk River has been used by indigenous groups and European explor-

ers for centuries. A big-volume river that allowed us to slow down for a few days and enjoy the fruits of our labour. We built a catamaran and hoisted the sails to propel our canoes across Cabot Lake. We floated with the current taking time to cast into every eddy and backpool to experience some incredible brook trout fishing. As we moved further downstream, the surrounding hills grew in size, their treelines crept ever closer to the river, and the current picked up steadily. The Kogaluk River culminated in a cascade of whitewater falling over two significant drops. Our final camp on fresh water would be at the end of a long portage around this waterfall. It was truly a remarkable place.

Once out into the Labrador Sea the final challenge of our trip was to paddle 65 km north through a series of islands and inlets to Labrador's most northern community of Nain. We crossed Voisey's Bay and many others without incident.



Noah and Dave gaze over one of the lower Mistastin River large waterfalls. This place fascinated Herb Pohl for many years



Noah with a Kogaluk River brook trout

Seals would often stick their heads out of the water to investigate this strange red vessel floating through their territories, leaving us to wonder about their intentions. Further on we were surprised by a pilot whale breaking the surface of the water ahead of our canoes. First the blow hole, followed by the dorsal fin and finally the tail. It was an unforgettable experience for all of us.

At our final campsite of the expedition, only 3 km from Nain, we stayed up late. The fire crackled at our feet, we relaxed to the sound of the incoming tide rolling over the beach cobble, pilot whales swam by blowing their breath high into the air. A full moon rose over the eastern horizon and for the first time through our whole trip, the aurora borealis danced in the north. It was as if Labrador, the Big Land, was giving us a gift, as it so often did along our route, only exposing its magic to those who have travelled respectfully through its land.



Our hands had been thoroughly worked



Campsite on Labrador Sea en route to Nain

Vegas Chips: Tales from a Silver Canoe

Story by Erin Merrick. Drawings by Frank de Jong.



Magnetawan River

Editor's Note: This story, like many other good stories, landed on my desk courtesy of Bob Henderson. Bob's daughter Ceilidh, who was one of the campers on this 2003 trip, shared Erin's letter with Bob recently. Normally, Nastawgan's staff closely edits submissions, but in this case decided to leave much of this letter untouched and to place the Author's Note at the top, in an effort to provide enough context for you, the reader, to enjoy largely unedited "honesty and imperfection of 20-something-year-old Erin and her chosen words."

Author's Note: Though tempted to correct a few errors ("topographical"!) and wordy sections, I am choosing to honour the honesty and imperfection of my 20-something-year-old self and her chosen words. There is something entirely sincere in this letter to my campers, my extended family, and perhaps that is more important than a vigorous edit. Our route east from Flame Lake through the Biscotasi region to Lady Evelyn, south via the Ottawa River and eventual re-entry into Algonquin Park was raw, far from extraordinary and magic, without question. I believe this letter was intended to protect all the sacred pieces we

collected along the way.

Vegas Chips: Tales from a silver canoe

It's hard to know how to introduce this tale, as I'm sure many other journeys could recount similar beginnings. There we stood on the morning of our departure, double-bagging food and throwing extra matches and duct tape into our ever-bulging packs, the corners of our eyes still held at the mercy of sleep. Despite the series of warm good-byes and frenzied waving from the barge as we pulled away, the morning was surreal, heavy with a tangible disbelief that this was actually Day 1.

Day 1. After months of planning, volumes of checklists and a sea of great expectations, our journey was now unfolding. Nervous chatter filled the bus as we wound our way north, Ontario's face changing from the careful collaboration of cottage country to forgotten gravel roads and fishing lodges. Arriving at Flame Lake, the seven of us quickly unloaded our gear and soon found ourselves planted by the water's edge. I looked out at the far shoreline, a distinct meeting of dense green to blue, and felt the hugeness

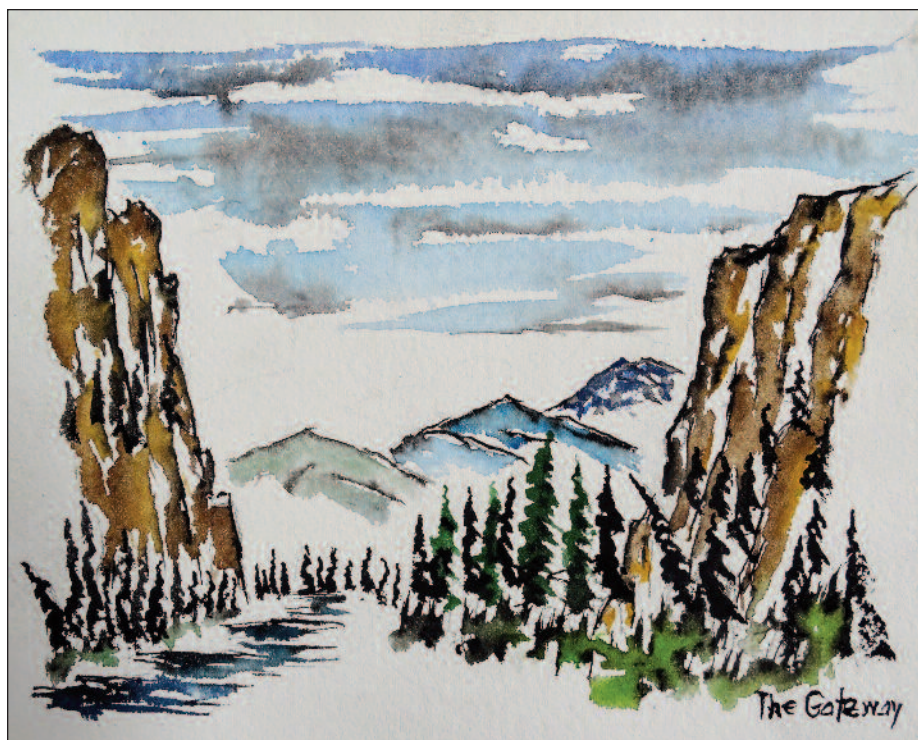
of our endeavour climb around me. Fifty days we would travel; fifty days to fumble and be re-born. We would be welcomed each night by random clearings and old campsites, the endless lakes and rivers of northern Ontario graciously leading us to these makeshift homes. Each day would unveil a changing face, the environment we were travelling through offering sharp, breathtaking contradictions, harsh meeting ease, bare clasp beautiful. This would be new territory for all of us, large expanses of wilderness that we knew only from the snakes and ladders of our topographical maps, our trust placed like Vegas chips on the cartographer's generous translation of the region. Fifty days, 7 girls, 4 packs, 3 boats, 2 tents, 1 barrel... and an infinite source of possibility.

Our aluminum canoes were stacked neatly off the grassy shore, their scratched, silver bottoms feeding us slick promises of invincibility. We looked them over well, knowing these boats would soon become beloved, trusted friends. It is a necessary relationship to pursue in canoe tripping, I reckon, especially when the proposed route leaves little opportunity for alternative modes of travel. Agreeing the boats seemed a perfect fit for our trip, we grabbed rolls of blue foam from our packs and carefully wrapped the canoes' metal thwarts. I could feel a slight anticipatory ache creep into my back and shoulders, acknowledging the kilometers of portaging that, inevitably, lay ahead. It is a strange rejoicing you take in carrying a boat this size, hoisting her to your shoulders, balancing her 17 feet, 75 lbs with a precision in direct contrast to the crude dance executed when faced with precarious natural obstacles on any given portage. This would be but a piece of the rough puzzle, I considered, smiling, foot travel connecting a web of open-water paddling, river stints, and an endless negotiation of streams, creeks and wetlands.

As we sat around the campfire that night, patching together a few rituals of our own, a swell of hope and fear met cautiously in the open flame before us,

the group now loosely connected by a common vision. It was beautiful. There we sat, ignorant to the challenges and triumphs that waited patiently in the creases of the weeks ahead, fuelled by the desire to explore, wanting to stretch our bodies and spirits in deliciously uncomfortable ways, to connect with the natural world, each other, ourselves. True, I'm sure we took with us large, sloppy helpings of ego, as well, pre-planning the vivid tales we would weave amongst family and friends after the trip. But, perhaps, this is one of the greatest pieces of such wilderness tripping. Ego alone has a difficult time keeping straight its spine in the face of long, rain-drenched days, ravenous bogs, the audible assault of mosquitoes. It soon bows to Mother Nature's sword, and a person is pushed to grapple with more honest motivations for pursuing such an adventure. There is an exactness in this travel as careful doses of adversity and fulfilment manifest, triggering a very genuine purging process for those who are game. We are allowed to come clean to ourselves, to accept either our comfort or uneasiness in such a setting. You can see it in our actions, a fantastic rawness that emerges in both the brilliant and difficult times. It is real and gritty, and one of the most valuable gifts offered by the journey.

Day 2. We set off from Flame Lake, self-conscious of our movements, searching old memories of past canoe trips for details that proved unnecessary in our typical urban realities. Following bullets of penciled instructions framing our first map, we moved slowly through creeks and suggestive trapping trails, mud engulfing our surface apprehensions and reminding us of the unpredictable world we had just entered. Sure, there were a few tears that day, a few looks of uncertainty shot in my direction – I sighed, repeating silently my trusted mantra, “The best lessons are not always the most comfortable ones,” crossing my fingers in vain that such words would still apply in this context. Any hesitations were washed from our finely scratched and aching bodies that evening, our canoes cutting through a lake of glass, water rippling off the boats in perfect symmetry. There was magic in the air as the sky erupted in



The Gateway, Blackstone River

colour, the setting sun throwing a palette of pinks, purples and blues across the horizon. Smiles crept across our faces, and though exhausted by this long day of travel, our soft voices were playful and reassuring. Over the next 48

days we fused with both the blessings and curses of wilderness travel. We hoisted our rain gear close to the rank of deity, battling both the promise of hypothermia after spending hours in icy downpours and the fevered onslaught of



Cliffs, Blackstone River

blackflies as they fed heartily on our ears, faces and hairlines. We perfected the long-respected tradition of “air raids,” jumping with abandon into the cool waters of a given lake, the building sweat and heat stripped quickly from our skin. Days spent dueling fierce headwinds, dragging canoes up rocky streams and maneuvering around inherent river obstacles began to shape our bodies, newly defined muscles cleverly concealed under a thin coat of bruises, scrapes and bug bites. “My body is a wonderland...” echoed playfully in our ears many mornings, the sarcastic sere-nade in entertaining opposition to the unforgiving muscle spasms that clenched our shoulders and backs. Our conversations stumbled from absurd to enlightening, all of us growing into our relationships with one another, learning careful details about this collage of individuals and often relearning our own idiosyncrasies in the process. We woke with the sun, simply listening for the first few moments before opening our eyes, trying to predict with some accuracy what weather might greet us that morning. Exhaustion often consumed us in the evenings. After eating, cleaning dishes, packing away our food, we would fall like giant timbers into our sleeping bags, surrendering to a fatigue of such satisfying quality. There were times when we held our breath, caught slightly off guard by the perfection of a moment, our paddles moving in unison, the elements aligned. Rolled ankles taught us about the meaning of teamwork. Infected eyes and swollen hands reminded us about self-care and the humbling task of asking others for help. We were overwhelmed by the generosity of strangers, amused by the way we tried to converse intelligently about bait and lures with skilled fishermen, often frustrated by our own limitations. It’s human. We each engaged in new challenges: navigation, cooking, group living, educating, flipping a canoe, starting a fire. Now, they weren’t all terribly pretty attempts, but we grew into these new skills, branding a certain degree of competency in each. Yes, our failures were as valuable as our successes, adding a richness and certain flare to the

adventure. As the works began to meld together, a timelessness surrounding our modest fleet, we no longer assumed this to be just a canoe trip. This was becoming our life. It felt natural, as though we began to fit seamlessly into the wild spaces that we moved through. As a team, we grew more efficient, certain routines having been established both on and off the water. We took comfort in the unknowns, trusting, with a growing confidence, our instincts, now excited by the unexpected discovery of a logjam or near-vertical portage. It forced us to be resourceful, applying the experiences and knowledge we had been collecting neatly in our dry bags along the way. Coming full circle, the initial disbelief that opened our journey transformed into a vivid scepticism that the end of our excursion was actually approaching. Having committed to the trip, engaging fully in the realities uncovered in cedar forests, rocky shorelines and muted daybreaks, a confusing mix of emotions pulsed through each of us as we tried to digest the inevitable transition. Armed now with somewhat indescribable certainties about ourselves, an understanding of our capabilities, a level of fascination in the way we embraced, skillfully, what was once considered impossible, we searched for ways to bring this awareness with us, from the wilderness into our “normal” lives.

Day 50. It was a perfect day on Canoe Lake, our small island home looking strangely unchanged after the years we felt we had been away. There was silence as our canoes landed solemnly on the sandy shore, the crowd looking at us with apprehension, curiosity, excitement. Everyone waited to see what would happen, what our reaction would be, unsure if this moment was heaven or hell for us. I don’t know if I was sure, either, my body awash with an intriguing numbness, a detachment. Looking around at my six companions, their dark faces blurred by the swell of tears cradling my eyes, I tried to read them carefully, like I might read the quivering of my own hands. We held our breaths, and waited safely in that moment.

I dare profess that this trip was one of

the few times in our lives that we experienced true freedom. There we were, seven women in canoes, making our way through the wilds of Ontario. No longer able to categorise ourselves by any standard definitions, miles away from starchy societal norms, we were allowed to shed our skin and emerge, bold, beautiful individuals. Having little room for our own inhibitions and doubt, we realigned our focus and made space for a new type of learning. We paid attention. We became aware of the sun’s path through the sky, the changing direction of the winds, the snaking body of a river. We grew humble, understanding further our inherent dependency on the natural world, our dependency on each other. We acknowledged how small we were in the grand scheme. We took responsibility for our actions, and tried to make sound, conscious decisions. We sang and swam naked through clear lakes, the gentle evening light bathing us in moments of quiet reflection. We were not afraid, for this journey had become our own. Ah, maybe it wasn’t freedom. But it was something. Something real. We were able to smile easily, to be playful and frustrated and vulnerable and strong, without apology. We were alive, present and open to all the intricacies of the experience. It was amazing: not perfect or without struggle, but amazing.

As with all good things, time begins to blur the finer edges of these memories. Faltering for but a moment, I slowly let go, trusting the learning I pieced together over the seven weeks is now an inherent part of me, as basic as the fold of my elbow, the lines on my face. I know I can’t go back, and so choose to venture forward, my steps, perhaps, now animated in a new way. Sure, I’d love to be in my canoe again, my dear companions close by, but appreciate other adventures await us. Besides, our journey hasn’t really ended; rather, just a different place of it has begun.

Erin Merrick is a proud Canadian living close to Wyoming’s Teton Mountains. She continues to carve out time to explore wild spaces with skis, boots or paddle, and misses the Motherland every single day.°

WCA Fall Turkey Outing

Report by Sandra Squeo

Photos by Emmy Hendrickx, Jon McPhee and Gary James



Sandra, a new WCA member, joined Gary James and the gang for her first-ever turkey trip. Here's her take on what is easily the most creative, and certainly the tastiest annual WCA outing.

"The WCA turkey trip was a huge success. The rain didn't dampen our experience, it actually brought us closer together.....literally. Great tarping job guys, risking life and limb, climbing trees to get just the right pitch.

On Saturday, as I walked amongst the trees, I came across many 'pop-up' kitchens creating delicious appetizers from stuffed jalapenos, bacon-wrapped oysters, fresh spring rolls and fried halloumi cheese. Closer to the shoreline, our chefs were busy with garbage can turkey and a new addition, a leg of lamb. Add to this some potato and veggie dishes and then some cranberries and mint jelly – topped off with many wonderful desserts. Wow!! All this created in the wilderness.

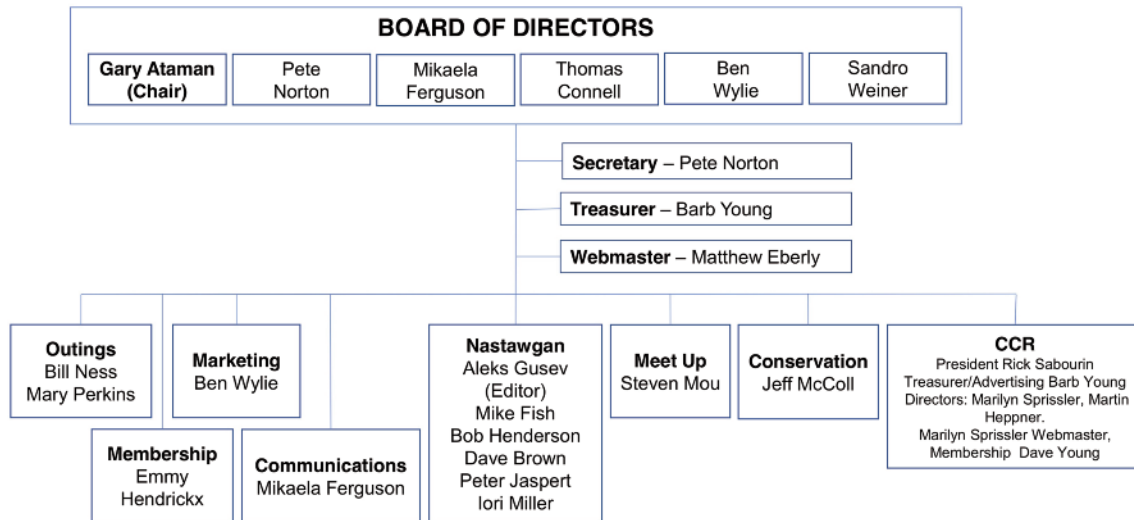
That evening we were entertained by Mike and his ukulele around the fire.

The food didn't end there. Sunday morning, Fred and Penny treated us to back bacon, cheese and egg on an English muffin. Yummy! This was my first WCA trip. Do you guys always eat like this?!

Thanks to all who helped put together this fantastic feast."



WCA Governance Structure



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