



Image from the "Heart and Stroke" calendar.

AGAWA!

Story and photos by Jeff McColl

This report, which is a little different than what you are used to reading in *Nastawgan*, is an accumulation of information I've collected during more than 30 years of running the Agawa.

We all know someone who has become smitten by a particular area, and when I started paddling the Agawa I did not think it would happen to me.

I became aware of the Agawa in 1976, on the way west to compete in the White Water Nationals, when I crossed over it on the Highway 17 bridge. The Agawa is a natural-

flow river, but you can't really call it a "wild" river because of changes due to logging and because of the railway tracks. Finding evidence of logging has become much harder in the last 10 years as the forests and river reclaimed the area.

Finding out information on the Agawa and many other watersheds in Algoma is much easier now than when I started. The Historical Forestry Database online at the Sault Ste. Marie Public Library is amazing! Many maps are over 100 years old and still incredibly accurate.

The First Nations Peoples of this area deserve credit for



View of Agawa Rock looking south across Agawa Bay.



Eleven Mile Creek where it enters the Agawa River.

guiding early surveyors through this area, even though their history was oral. Pictographs at Agawa rock reveal that the First Nations were there for thousands of years.

Access to the river for paddlers can be a little complicated now because the passenger train stopped running in 2015.

The Missanabie Cree First Nation is in the process of restoring train service from the Sault to Hearst, which will offer wonderful access to a host of rivers and Crown lands. If you Google Mask-wa Oo-ta-ban, the Bear Train, you will find their site.

When the passenger train ran, it was a perfect one-car shuttle, as you could park at Frater Station, and when you finished your trip, you could hike from the takeout at Highway 17 and the Agawa River back up to Frater Station.

Nowadays, you are limited to two logging roads where logging operations are ongoing. I recommend a high-clearance, 4x4-drive vehicle. Frater Road exits from Lake Superior Provincial Park and takes you to Eton, where the road crosses the Agawa and is over 70 km from Highway 17.

The other access route is the Agawa Crossover road which is approximately 35 km east of Wawa along Highway 101 and about 28 km down the logging road to a bridge that crosses the Agawa. Both make for very long shuttles from the park and the mouth of the river.

Rapid ratings can vary greatly due to water levels.

It is about 74 km from the Agawa Crossover Bridge to Highway 17, and if you paddle across to the Agawa Bay campground you can add another 4.5 km.

Upper Agawa – Crossover bridge to the falls at Millwood – 17 km. Rapids are I & II and the falls is III.

Middle Agawa – Falls at Millwood to Frater Road bridge at Eton -19 km. Rapids are II & III.

Canyon Stretch – Bridge at Eton to Canyon Station – 9 km. Rapids are III – V.

Lower Agawa – Canyon Station to Highway 17 and Lake Superior – 29

km. Rapids II to IV, also Agawa Falls, 25 m high.

In the “olden” days before the internet and water gauges online, figuring out the water levels was always a crapshoot unless you were lucky to have a local contact who knew what running a river was all about. I arrived at a quasi-scientific system of guessing the good flow levels. Besides my own experiences, I have made contacts through the Canadian Canoe Routes forums with paddlers familiar with rivers in the area. The Agawa does not have a gauge, but the Batchawana to the south and Wawa Creek to the north do. The “Real-Time Hydrometric Data Map search” (which can be found at wateroffice.ec.gc.ca) can remove some of the guesswork.

These are the levels based on the Batchawana gauge.

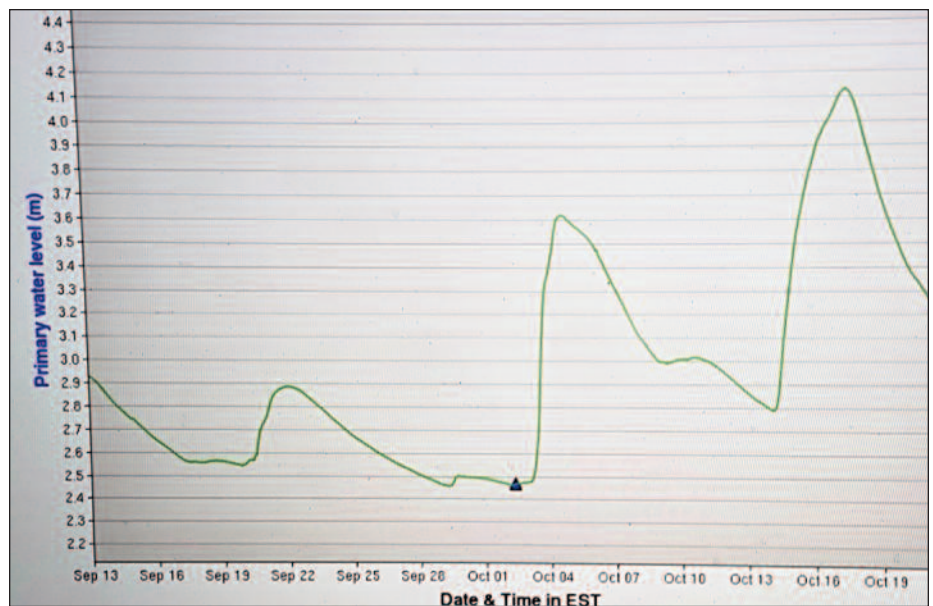
2.2 – near-drought conditions, most rapids will involve dragging the canoe.

2.37 – start of the mid-range, still a little rocky and the occasional get-out-and-drag, depending on how the river changes from floods. There are a few places you could wrap a boat. This level is similar to what the Group of Seven encountered on their Box Car trips.

2.8 – River is high, getting very “pushy,” starting to approach top of banks, harder rapids become much more challenging. Lining the canoe along the banks becomes very difficult.

3.0 and above – River is in flood stage!

The Wawa Creek gauge is a “little” sporadic, but I use it to see if the rain events occurred in a larger area. I still start watching the weather radar images a month before because that can give me an idea on how fast the river might rise. Historically, there have been flash floods in the area, from the Hudson's Bay Post flooding out at the mouth, to various floods documented in the Forestry records, to three recent events – the flood in Wawa, one closer to the Sault that washed out a trestle and one at Montreal Harbour that washed out a section of the Trans Canada highway. While it's something to be aware of, the waterfalls coming off the canyon walls



Hydrometric Data Map graph showing levels.

can be spectacular.

This is a graph from the Real-Time Hydrometric Data Map search site that shows just how fast the levels rise. The Batchawana is also a free-running river.

Something to remember is that modern technology does not work well in the canyon and the big hills. Even ice climbers with satellite phones know they have to get to the top of the hills to get a signal out. The camps and those that run Canyon Park rely on FM radio phones. Environment Canada has

boosted its signal so you can now get weather reports all the way through the area, which is a real bonus, especially with extreme storms coming through in the shoulder seasons.

If you want more information on the Agawa, I recommend “*The Forest*,” by Stewart Edward White, published in 1903. It used to be tough to find a hard copy, but with Project Gutenberg going online, it's easy to find. (gutenberg.org)

I was lucky to start paddling in the late 1960's because remnants of logging



View of the middle Agawa River from the camp looking south.



Canyon above the falls on Eleven Mile Creek.



A.Y. Jackson painting location of the Falls.

were still very visible on many rivers of southern Ontario, making it much easier for me to recognize similar features on the Agawa. When you start at the Agawa crossover bridge you can see how loggers made their task easier.

River is quite quiet from here to Millwood, even though there is a logging road down the south side. The forests and the river are recovering nicely from the logging days. The only thing you really have to be aware of is the occasional sweeper, but it is a very pleasant paddle. The falls at Millwood look like a straightforward Class III, but because of the amount of blasting that took place and the fact that I was paddling solo, I carried around because I could not see how sharp the debris rocks were. There is an old spur-line path that comes right up to the falls, and it would make a great campsite because it is flat, protected by the regrown forest and provides easy access to the river.

It is here at Millwood that the Agawa goes from an east-to-west to south flowing river through the fault in the Canadian Shield. From here down to O'Connor on the west side of the tracks is the northeast arm of Lake Superior Provincial Park, and there is some logging in the hills on the east side. The banks are mostly sand and clay, and the river meanders pretty vigorously. The vegetation along the banks is a dense mix of alders and small trees as the forest is reclaiming the area. It is a big change from when I first ran this stretch in 1985, which is good to see.

There are six railway trestles between Millwood and Eton, and only the third is of any consequence. When I first ran the river in '85 we had one of the long-time, old-guard conductors – his train, his river, his canyon. I was questioned extensively on my paddle skills and what gear we had, and I can understand his concern as he had previously dropped off a pair who had drowned downriver. He warned me that while the rapid at the third bridge was small, there are old log trestle posts hid-

den in the fast water. Between the second bridge at the old Agawa Station and the third bridge there are 2 rapids, class II & III, about 500 m each. The first gets really bony in the last third, and the second has some real good vertical drop in the middle and some good pinning possibilities in that drop.

The next stretch from bridge 3 to 4 is not spectacular, but is probably the most interesting – a fun run of Class I & II that offers the best riverside camping, lots of sand bars to sleep on and driftwood for campfires. And because canyon walls are not that big yet, you get great night viewing of the sky. Another fun thing about this stretch is that they actually “straightened” the river for logging, over a kilometer-long stretch to bypass some serious meanders. It is very noticeable in the satellite images but not so from the river. It’s been fun to watch as the river starts to slowly recover these old passages.

From bridge 4 to 5 at O’Connor the river is fairly quiet with a few swifts, and the canyon starts to show you what is ahead. At this bridge Black Spruce Creek, a major tributary, joins the Agawa, and just upstream from the confluence is a series of waterfalls, the second one of which is gorgeous and a possible J.E.H. MacDonald painting location. If any of the camps are occupied, be prepared to be asked if you have read “*The Forest*.” Did I mention it is mandatory reading before coming here? The people I have met on the train and at the various camps all have a deep, almost spiritual attachment to the canyon that is hard to explain.

From here to the logging road bridge south of Eton the river is mostly quiet. Eton is still really active even though the passenger train does not run anymore. Logging continues and a number of fishing and hunting camps are located in this stretch. Until the passenger train starts to run again this is probably the best place to start, where the fault in the earth that forms the canyon really starts to narrow.

Even before interest in the Group of



The narrowest part of Agawa Canyon.

Seven locations started to pick up, when asked to describe the canyon, I said it was like paddling into a Group of Seven Painting: it is beautiful, it is rugged, it is raw! Another question I get asked a lot is how can I spend 7 days in a stretch of river that is just over 30 km. For one, there is so much more here than just the river. To see the secrets hidden here one must be patient. Yes, you could easily run this in a day and a half, but you would miss out on so much and the canyon will not show you its secrets if

you are in a hurry.

From the bridge at Eton you immediately notice that the canyon walls are bigger and steeper and that the canyon floor is much narrower. There are several easy Class I’s and swifts, depending on the flow. Just over a kilometer above the narrowest part of the canyon you are distracted by Eleven Mile Creek as it joins the Agawa on river left. In low and medium flows, it is an untouched landscape for the ages. In high flows the water throws itself off



ACR tracks looking north into the narrows.

the top of the canyon in a spectacular fashion.

In 1992 in low water, we stopped by to hike up the falls and the gorge above and the old growth forest that was protected by these natural barriers. Those who have walked in an ancient forest will know the feeling. A.Y. Jackson painted the one lower section of this falls, but to get that view he would have had to canoe to it just like us. In 1992, long before the G7 location craze took hold, I snapped and framed a picture of the same section of falls at the same level he painted at, which was pure luck.

The stretch to the narrows of the canyon is just flat water and a good current in high flows. This is the most dangerous section of the river. Not only does it narrow down to less than 25 m at the start, but also the river goes from flat to class V, with no take-out eddies on either side. River left is the sheer canyon walls, while river right is the tracks with bush and very loose aggregate sides. You must get out at least 150 m above the narrows, river right, where you can get a better exit. If you don't, you may face the same fate as the two canoeists the conductor told me about in '85 – this is where they drowned. The danger increases when you're up on the tracks – you have to be vigilant because there are few places wide enough to avoid a train coming from the south. What with the sound of the rapids and the "bowl" below the narrows, it is next to impossible to hear an approaching train. It is about 800 m to the first path to take you down to the river.

This gorge here has been known by several names over the years. The Algoma Central Railway named it after one of their executives – The Goudge Gateway; the loggers named it The Prince of Wales Rapids; J.E.H. MacDonald in his biography called it The Dark Canyon; and the kayakers who took the train to run it in the early

2000's called it The Black Canyon. I have asked the Missanabie Cree First Nation if they knew the original name for it, and they are looking into it.

There have been rock falls from both sides of the river. The most recent (2016 to 2017) was from the top of the wall



The Agawa Canyon Bear, a natural rock formation.

river left, and it is showing signs of more to come down. There are a couple of historic images where boulders fell onto the tracks, and those would have just been rolled into the river.

In the 1950's they blew a huge gap into the canyon wall to run a hydro line down the canyon. The good news is the hydro line and all the poles were removed in the early 2000's. Many of the famous painting sites were not too recognizable or were completely un-photographic. Pictures from the '50's, '60's and '70's show a pretty desolate canyon floor. In the '80's it was very easy to scout the river from riding in the train.

So, who was here before us? We

know the First Nations peoples because they were also the guides for the early surveyors through here. There was the Group of 7 in the early 20th century, a few photographers in the 1920's, and George Agnew Reid in the 1930's. And, A.Y. Jackson brought many of his prodigies through. I knew the campsite at the bottom of the narrows was long used just by the evidence of the famous paint sites in the area – but no hard facts.

Then fate steps in and sends you in another direction. On one of my hikes from Highway 17 back up to Frater, I met Sidney Wilkens, grandson of Sidney Johnson, the surveyor who marked the Algoma Central Railway through the narrows. Wilkens was trying to find where he stayed during the '30's in the Canyon with his grandfather and thus started a new friendship that continues today. We shared pictures and info in an attempt to find out where he stayed. What led me to find the campsite is not only funny but also shows you what you are looking for may be right in front of you.

Jim and Sue Waddington, long-time canoeists who have documented Group of Seven painting locations and wrote "In the Footsteps of the Group of Seven," have shared many paintings with me, helping me identify locations.

Once, they showed me a Frank (Franz) Johnston painting of a waterfalls in Algoma that I didn't recognize. Wilkens, when I showed him, immediately identified it as the falls where he camped in the 1930's. In 2014, while staying there, I noticed the outline of an old baker tent foundation, cleared enough debris to confirm logs were there, and then left it alone. The evidence had been there all along, I just had to know what I was looking for!

This is not your typical Ontario camp spot – you can spend days here hiking to famous and not-so-famous vistas and painting sites. If you plan on hiking the canyon walls, a rope and harness make for good safety partners. This is an A.Y.



Image of watercolour by Sydney Johnson.

Jackson painting location looking south from atop the narrows.

The canyon here has its own micro-climate – fog, cold air, hot air, bouncing winds – a mix that makes for amazing

photographic and artistic opportunities. If you are in the area just for the Group of Seven locations, it is still going to take some time to add to your collection. There is leaf colour, water levels,



What it looks like today.

weather and in the case of Lawren Harris's "On the Agawa," you have the extra fun of trying to catch the distinct shadow at a specific time of day, in the fall.

Another thing I try and do when I plan my trip is to choose when the moon will be full. Once you see the silhouettes of giant white pines as the moon rises over the canyon, you will want more! Walking around the canyon in the moonlight is magical, offers another realm of photographic opportunities, and gives new insight to the chapter "The Man Who Walks by Moonlight," in *"The Forest."*

When riding up on the train in 2011, I met a young couple who were backpacking through the area and looking for a good spot to camp. They had heard about the one at the train trestle at Mile 112 south of Canyon Station, but I said this one was much better. I gave them the site and headed down to camp on a sandbar I liked. They started a new tradition when they found an empty glass jar and put in a birch bark sign-in sheet.

When I decide to paddle to the next location, I try to start by just after 8 a.m., but I like to paddle through Canyon Station before the tour train pulls in.

There are 4 rapids down to Canyon Station. The first is a straight-forward II, the second is a III + depending on the level, and debris and quarried rock has fallen in from the track side on river right. There is no portage trail. You can line or paddle it, but if the level gets up to 3, there is no place to line. The third rapid is a short III, a little bouldery, and is the same as when Lawren Harris painted on the Agawa.

Even though this part of the river includes several famous painting sites, the most excitement I felt was from a 1920's postcard location. I bought a mint-condition copy of it, and even though it is identified as being at Mile 114 (Canyon Station), the photographer actually shot from right above the Mile 115 sign. The bonus is that the river has recovered from the hydro line and looks the same as it did 100 years ago. The fourth rapid is a simple II to



1920's view of the Canyon.



The view as it is today.

start and turns slowly to the right, but then picks up speed and forms a river-wide “V” that runs into the rail bed and has very strong eddy lines in higher flows. It’s not a tough maneuver, but don’t let the great views distract you from your run. There is a swift in high water and a shallow I in low water, and you are then into a long flat-water stretch through Canyon park. There are a couple of G7 locations, some looking forward, some looking aft. When you are photographing in the canyon, remember the five-minute weather rule: it can shift from dull to spectacular to dull in just minutes.

I have hiked the Canyon Park trails but only after the train is gone. It is a courtesy extended after a talk with the long-time Ranger, who just retired, who told me it was quite a task keeping the Tour Train customers in the area of Canyon Park. It is much more fun having the whole area to yourself! About 1 km downstream of Bridal Veil Falls is what is known as “Good Hope” rapids – worth a scout if you have never run it. It starts off gentle but quickly picks up a lot of speed and has several boulders. There was a drowning at this rapid late one fall.

Below this rapid leading up to the trestle at Mile 112 the canyon narrows again, a beautiful spot.

The campsite on the northeast side of the trestle is nice, gives you lots of great central hiking and Group of Seven locations, and ice climbers have a Baker tent set up here. I met Shaun Parent, who has mapped many of the ice climbs up there. The canyon is narrow here with only a few minor rapids and swifts to Mile 111 on the tracks, but what is really interesting here are the winds. What with the way the winds come up from Superior, mixing with the walls and narrows, you can have relatively calm before and after, but in the middle you can have really strong headwinds.

The rapid at track mile 111 is a bony beast! Not particularly hard or big, just a lot of rock. Even at medium and high levels it is easy to get hung up, and in low levels you will be dragging and/or pulling your canoe. Here the canyon



Canyon Campsite.

opens up as it turns west to Lake Superior. It is here that Frank Johnston of the Group of Seven named a painting “The Mouth of the Canyon,” and this is where you paddle alongside the biggest rock face of the river.

In the rapid that turns west it is a

roughly 700 m-long Class II, and in medium and high flows it’s a beautiful float where you can just breathe in the river. In low flows, it’s a lot of work finding a channel deep enough. After a long Class I there is a large lake-like pool until you are back in the park



Bridal Veil Falls, lower part of the falls.

where the Little Agawa enters the main river. There is another amazing campsite here, another “bunch” of Group of Seven locations, great bush whacking possibilities and more logging history.

I always knew there was logging here because we saw this old wood stove on our first trip, but it was not until last year that I realized the campsite is the old Baker tent location. From this site I have watched great sunsets, shadows moving up the west wall of the canyon, incredible dark skies, aurora dancing along the top of the canyon, amazing fall colours, and fog and mists, making for surreal landscapes. A neat natural phenomenon happens when cold air flows into the widening for the canyon from several little side canyons, and as the sun warms up the opening, the cold air continues to flow in and keeps the mists from breaking up. Depending on the winds it may slowly disappear, or you can get these fog balls flowing down the main canyon.

Deciding where I want to spend days on my week-long trips here can be very tough – what do I want to look for, where do I want to hike, is it a full moon, how are the levels, the colours, are the fish running below the falls? Unless the weather is really off, there really isn’t any downtime.

If you were just taking waterfall photos you could spend more than a day along here. There have been some changes here due to major rains. The last 100 m to the mouth of the Little Agawa is wider, and the gravel debris has created a dam-like effect on the Agawa in low flows, raising the flat-water stretch above the Little Agawa over 30 cm. The 150 m-long rapid still has a good channel the first two-thirds, but the bottom has much more of a very shallow washout. The river below the Little Agawa is wonderful, the first 2 km of it a very relaxing class II, but it can get shallow in low flows. You are really deep into the valley now, and you don’t see the tops of the hills beside you. The view at the end of these rapids is amazing at the best of times, especially in full colour!

On one trip well past peak colours



One of those 5-minute weather windows where the natural lighting is magic.

and with most of the leaves down, I was trying to decide whether to do a lunch hike at the start of the pool. It was typical fall weather, squalls and threatening to get worse when one of those five-minute weather phenomena happened and, maybe with a little push from the spirits of the canyon, a sunbeam broke through in a small gap in the hill. A small creek entered the river here, and the general rule for bushwhacking in the canyon was to follow creeks, especially

in lower levels because the vegetation is less dense. When I got up top there was a large beaver meadow, and the beaver was in the process of reclaiming his washed-out dam. As I started to head back to the canoe, a flat area caught my attention. There is no natural “flat” like a road on the hills in Algoma. This was about a lane wide, but flat, all the way back down to the river – where the horse teams would have taken the logs down to the river. It is cool finding an

unmarked logging trail used more than 100 years ago. About 100 m above the old logging dam site is the historic portage around the rapids, falls, and small gorge. Like everywhere else there are more than a few options, and if you see the campsite on the small pool between the rapids and small falls, you will want to camp here.

There have been a lot of changes to this rapid from logging. From what I understand the old wooden logging dam got washed out in a flood, but you can still see how they cleared the first 200 m for the logs to go down. The flood that changed the outflow at the Little Agawa caused several boulders to move into the once-clear channel and in medium flows offers some good places to wrap your boat. Depending on flows the rapids here are III – V. After the first 200 m you have another 200 m of really boulder-shallow rapids that in medium and low levels are a lot of work to get down without getting stuck. If the water is high, take the historic portage around the whole rapid, or you can portage along the river to the campsite.

If you decide to stay a few nights here, the hike up to the bottom of the cliff face to the north will take you about one hour, but the hike up through a boulder field does offer you some good exercise and some amazing views. Also, along the cliffs you will see twisted ancient cedars and black spruce. The hike up the “cone” hill also offers some good views, and with luck, you can spot one of those logging trails for horse teams.

Don’t forget those mystical mists. This is where I got a great shot that appeared in the Heart and Stroke Lottery Calendar a few years back. I had broken camp, carried all my gear except my camera barrel when I decided to have one more look upstream. And this “ball” of fog came rolling in. I actually like the shot of the rapids and the forests engulfed in the mists, but they chose the one with the fog just above the trees and river.

Just after you start on your way to Agawa Falls, it is worth the stop to check out the views. There are two



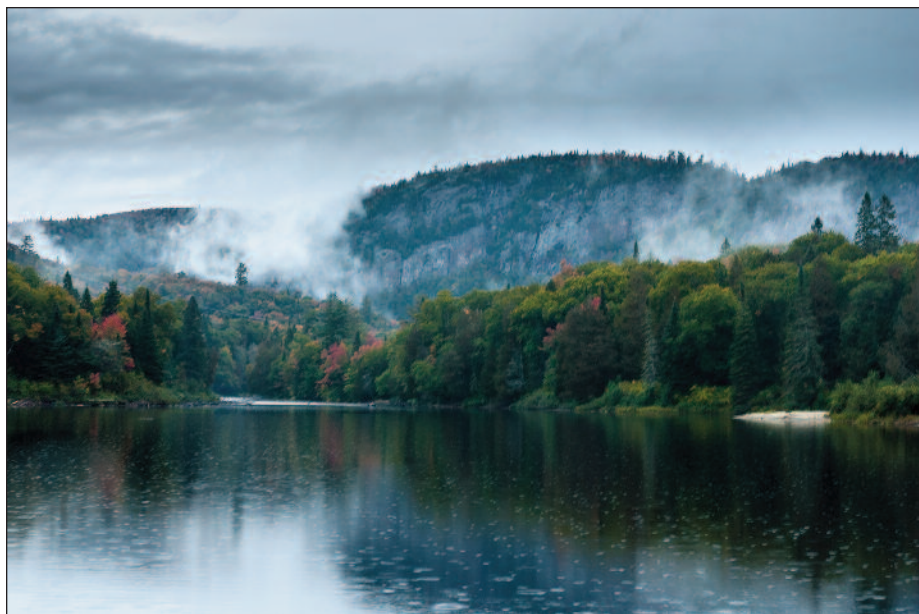
Mouth of the Canyon, a Franz Johnston painting location.

portage take-outs for the falls, depending on your skill and comfort level. The first is almost 800 m. The description of the second takeout in the Park info is not an exaggeration, 100 m above the falls in rapids, which is class II/III. Being that close to the falls, you cannot hear it because the river falls into a large “bowl” that muffles the sound. When you take new people down, you have to be clear about what’s coming, and I start to aim early for the takeout because there really isn’t much of an eddy and the falls are surprisingly close.

There is a campsite at the takeout that was hardly ever used even when the train ran. This, too, is an historic portage that is marked on some of the earliest maps. There are two steep descents where a rope comes in handy, especially when it is wet. If you don’t plan to camp at the falls you can leave your gear and paddle an empty boat up the small gorge, and it is easy to line up if you want to paddle at the pool at the bottom of the falls. Historically this is not the falls that existed before 1900. In an attempt to make the falls more log-friendly they blasted the falls and the lead up to it, so much so that the first logging company went bankrupt. You can still see evidence above the falls by the unnatural shattered rock.

Three times I have camped at the bottom of the falls because of approaching storms. My favorite image of the falls is from our first trip, when the river was already at about 3.0 at this point. The image I have mounted was taken with a colour slide, but because of the storm it looked black and white. What it did though was not only capture the dark, ominous feeling of the storm, but the raw power of the falls at high water. The Towab trail shares this campsite and because of that firewood can be scarce. The falls also seems to have its gentle side. In 2013, sitting in one of the small channels right below the falls, was this glass fish aquarium without a crack or severe scratching.

The river from the falls to Highway 17 is different from the one above Agawa Falls – it’s now a gravel river



The mists of the Canyon.

with the rock gradually getting smaller and then sand where river meets lake. It is a beautiful trout and salmon stream, another reason to run it in the fall. There was always the fall rainbow run, but now there is also a major pink salmon run. The pink were not stocked on the Canadian side of Superior, they just started to show up and liked our rivers.

We had seen osprey fishing the trout runs but did not see eagles in the fall here until 2004 and only saw a few pinks in 2005, plus a few more eagles.

The eagles like to hunt in the morning light, so you are more likely to see them then. Another show is when the sun warms the air and creates updrafts in the canyon, and seeing the eagles playing in those air currents is quite a sight. One year I was awakened when an eagle dropped a pink right by the front door of my tent. I found out later that I should have eaten the fish because in First Nations culture it was considered a gift from the eagle. I moved the fish to an opening on the



Bushwhack hike up the Canyon walls to look west to Superior.



Silhouette meditation.



Cloud shape looks like a face looking down at you at Agawa Falls.

river, hoping the eagle would come down so I could get a close shot. That did not happen, but later that morning one did let me get within 30 m as I paddled/floated by. There is a bit of art to get images of eagles on the Agawa. An early start, knowing which rapids and shallows that the fish will collect or spawn in, learning to spot the eagles early, juveniles generally keep to the lower leafed branches to hide, the adults tend to hang out in the large white pines, up higher. If you spot an adult, there is a good chance a juvenile will be down below. Then there is “be a log,” floating quietly in a very shallow river where you can be bouncing off the rocks, which can be tough, especially while you are trying not to move too fast or erratically. All this while your good camera and lens are set up and exposed to falling in the river. Well, you could set up a blind and wait, but that would be kind of fun, too!

At a distance of 800 m downstream from the campsite a new channel is emerging. The old 80-metre-wide channel is now dry, even at medium flows. The new channel is a tripper’s nightmare. With soft, small gravel banks the first 150 m has a constant change in sweepers and log jams, and because of the forest canopy reaching over and covering the river, it is very difficult to recognize the danger. Even in lower levels this new channel is a beautiful, deep trout stream, at only about 600 m long it is a great float, and when you join the old channels again you are greeted with the huge vistas of the canyon walls and hills.

Even though you can no longer see the G7 painting locations from the tracks high above you on the south side due to forest regrowth, you are paddling through them. There is even a little-used campsite right in the middle of a J.E.H. MacDonald location. There are still some amazing vistas to fill your senses.



View from “Halfway Pool” from “The Forest.”

Even though below the falls it is pretty well continuous rapids, there are only two technical rapids of consequence. The second-to-last one is known by some paddlers as “Z” because of the way the river turns, but it is also mentioned in “*The Forest*” as the rapid at the top of “Halfway Pool:” “He saw the boiling eddies of the Halfway Pool, capable of sucking down a saw-log.” That is a perfect explanation. The fluctuating whirlpool on river left as you pass the house rocks can be intimidating – one second you are reaching the water, the next you have nothing but air.

If you look at the old, historic maps and where the river was at that time, this pool really is halfway to the falls. This is a great spot for a short lunch stop and hike. Besides the rapid, there is a nice little beach on river right and



Staircase to the top, one of many side creek falls.



Burnt Rock pool, a view that has hardly changed over 1000's of years.

a small stream that enters here. And just a short distance away is a series of very pretty waterfalls that takes you almost to the top of the hills.

The last technical rapids is not that bad, but if you are not paying attention you could get into trouble. In lower flows it is bony, and in higher flows the current can pull you into the house rock. At the bottom of this pool is a great campsite on river left that is shared with the Towab trail. A bonus for canoeists is the firewood from the river right shore that is replenished by high water every year.

You are not actually that far from Highway 17 now, but it makes for a great early morning jump off for eagles and watching the morning sun as it lights up the valley. It is not a far float to Burnt Rock Pool, which is called

“Burned Rock Pool” in *“The Forest.”* It is a really neat feeling to look at the same view that many others have seen over hundreds of years.

From Burnt Rock Pool down to the highway the river slows, its pools and riffles constantly changing year to year. Sometimes there are long pools and other times long shallows that require walking your boat through. There can still be sweepers, submerged root balls and trees, so be aware. It is worth getting out and investigating the larger, high-level sand bars for fresh bear and wolf tracks, and on a couple of bars, you will see some of the old log booms.

The takeout is almost anticlimactic because your senses have absorbed so much. In 2013, we went up for our annual trip right after getting back from 2

weeks in Iceland, which is eye candy overload. It was well past peak and we were worried that we would feel “flat,” but the canyon did not disappoint! If you get a chance and can paddle out into the lake and look back at the valley, the first paragraph of Chapter XII in “The River” will come to life. When you visit the Agawa area you are not paddling alone. You are paddling with the Spirits of the past. This story is dedicated to Sidney Wilkens, grandson of Sidney Johnson. I met Sidney Wilkens by chance in Lake Superior Park in 2005, when he was 82 years old. He set me on a quest to find much more about the history of the Agawa than I could have dreamed of. I hope this story helps keep the memory and efforts of those who passed by this beautiful area.

tawâw – There Is Room, Always Room for One More

Poem by Naomi McIlwraith

Mom tells the story of how
you didn't barge in, how
you waited until the other guy
didn't even know what he had lost,
how you told him
you were an opportunist
moving in where others leave room.

You saw the space,
saw lots of room for living.
kikî-wâpahtên ê-misi-tawâk
êkwa ita ka-wîkîhk.

You asked her and she said, "Yes."
There you were, the two of you,
your life to fashion together.
Lots of room, but no directions,
so off you went stepping gently,
leaving just enough of a trace
and just enough room
for others to follow.

ê-kî-tawatahamêk.

Along we all came, your children,
grandchildren, foster children,
cats, kittens, too many to count,
even a bird or two once or twice: you and
Mom cleared a space

for all of us.

kiya êkwa nikâwînan ê-kî-tawinamawiyâhk.

There was so much space around me
I couldn't see it
until, your circle complete,
you made more space.

ayiwâk nawac kikî-tawinikân.

There was room in your mind
for this Cree language
ôma nêhiyawêwin,
for this Cree culture
êkwa ôma nêhiyaw-isîhcikêwin,
but I didn't hear you.

Too busy, I wasn't listening.

ê-kî-otamihoyân êkosi môya
kikî-pêhtâtin osâm môya ê-kî-nitohtâtân.

Now, I wish I could have seen
and heard more,

anohc êkwa pitânê ka-kî-wâpahtamân
mîna ka-kî-pêhtamân ayiwâk kîkway,
wish I could have been more open
to your special way of living,
nimihtâtên êkâ ê-kî-nâkatôhkêyân
pîtos kâ-kî-isi-waskawîyan.

What do you think of me, Dad,
writing this in Cree?
Could there have been more room
for a Cree conversation,
for a Cree understanding,
for a daughter's understanding
her father's honour
in the space between, *tâwâiyhk,*
your childhood and your passing.
Is it enough that I've
cleared a space on my desk
to light this candle for you?

Would that I could
have made more room.
pitânê ayiwâk ka-kî-tawinamâtân.

A Wee Biography of Naomi McIlwraith

Born and raised in Edmonton, Alberta [amiskwaciwâskahikan (Beaver Mountain House)], Naomi is the author of *kiyâm*, a poetry collection in English and Cree. Naomi's family is her main inspiration, and it hurts her heart that she can speak neither Plains Cree nor Scots Gaelic, two important ancestral languages. *kiyâm* is an expression of her search for truth and reconciliation. A peacemaker by nature, she has learned many things and can light a fire with flint and steel, make a tasty pemmican and fluffy oven-baked bannock, tan a hide, and speak publicly. Naomi can teach all the aforementioned skills as well as how to tie a half hitch, a trucker's hitch, a taut-line hitch, a clove hitch, and other truly useful knots, how to light a fire in a deluge, how to do the J-Stroke and the Canadian Stroke, how to write a proper sentence complete with a subject and predicate, and how to quote Shakespeare and other people properly. Naomi has worked for several seasons as Historical Interpreter at Fort Edmonton Park, and she loves sharing what she knows to excite visitors, young and old, about Canadian history! Her favourite words are *imagine* and *tawâw* because we need our imaginations to make the world a more welcome place! Ever the adventurer, Naomi became a certified, bona fide, electrified English Language Arts, Social Studies, and Aboriginal Studies teacher at the age of 54 and just completed her first year of teaching 14, 15, and 16-year-olds. With the end of the school year, Naomi is sleeping 10 hours per night and dreaming of moving water and something about a red canoe.

You can find more information about Naomi online, search for "Athabasca University Press", "Meditations on the Medicine Line", "Storytelling in Times of Turmoil" and, of course, "Naomi McIlwraith".

nikî-pê-pimiskân – I Came This Way by Canoe

kayâs-âyiwan anima mêskanâs ê-kî-pisci-
miskamân, kâ-kî-âpacihtâcik
nitâniskêwiyiniwak

I stumbled upon that ancient trail, foot-fallen
by my ancestors,
overgrown with green, bramble, centuries of
former lives.

That green, wet place where my grand-
mother's
mothers lived, breathed, died:
Lac du Bonnet, Manitoba.

June, 1989:

nikî-pêtâpoyon,
There, on another river:
êkota kotak sipîhk,
wînipêk sipîhk.

We pulled our canoes up on shore,
stood there sweating,
swearing at the buzzing in our ears, peering
through the peepholes of our mosquito net-
ting.

Comrades paddled those canoes with me,
sharing food, bugs, sunshine, rain;
travelled with me as I explored
former lives.

Others, a convoy of my ancestors,
in my paddle,
in my pack,
in my experience,
wraiths insisting on a presence.
Shoulders, backs, abdominals, we are
our muscles. We move those canoes.

We are

perpetual
motion.

nitihitmaninâna, nispiskwaninâna, ni-
taskatayinâna,
ê-maskawisiwiyiniwiyâhk.
nitâhkami-mâ-miyo-pimâtisinân.

êkota ê-kî-nîpawiyân.

There I stood: worn like our trail,
weary like the grip on my paddle, smeared
with mud, sweating like the river, straining
to hear the whispers of my foremothers,
searching for the footprints of my forefathers.

Eavesdropping on my ancestors,
now I hear footfalls that echo through time.

ê-kîmohtawakik nitâniskêwiyiniwak.
anohc êkwa nipêhtên ê-matwê-pimohtêcik, ê-
paswêwêki, kayâs nâway ohci.

My grandmother knows that insect-infested
place,

Lac du Bonnet. Her uncle drowned there,
her mother was born there,
and her grandmother before that.

Here I stand: looking, leaning back.

I breathe,
live,
want to know who I am,
search for who they were.

ê-na-nîpawiyân ôta: ê-âpasâpahtamân, ê-
âsôsimoyân.
nîyêhyân,
nîpimâtisin,
ê-nôhtê-kiskêyihitamân awîna niya,
ê-nanâwâpamakik awînipanak wiyawâw.



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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.

Fall Meeting September 14 to 16, 2018

Join us for a weekend of flatwater and whitewater paddling, hiking and friendship at our Annual Fall Meeting to be held at Cedar Ridge Camp, located on 150 acres just south of McArthurs Mills. You can access the Mazinaw trail system for hiking from the camp and will have a guided hike on Sunday. There will be flatwater and whitewater trips planned for Saturday. The lodge has 10 rooms with 8 beds in each. It also has 4 heated cottages available. There are a number of unheated cottages as well, with indoor washrooms and showers. Camping is permitted, for those who prefer the whole outdoor ex-

perience. Food will be provided from Saturday breakfast to Sunday lunch. Vegetarian options are available at each meal. The cost for the weekend is \$140.00 plus \$18.20 HST per person. Children under 16 years will be \$80.00 plus \$10.40 HST. You will need to bring sleeping bags and pillows, and perhaps a tent. You can arrive anytime Friday afternoon. There will be flat water canoes available for our use at no charge. We will have 1 or 2 speakers on Saturday evening.

www.cedarridgecamp.ca
57 Cemetery Rd.,
McArthurs Mills, Ontario K0L 2M0

Events Calendar

WCA Fall Meeting will take place at Cedar Ridge Camp just south of McArthurs Mills on 14-16 September.

Wilderness and Canoe Symposium is planned for 22-23 February 2019 at the same location – Monarch Park Collegiate at 1 Hanson Street. Details at www.wc-symposium.com

Articles Wanted

Consider submitting your story – they are all worth sharing, no matter how “big” or “small” your trip was. Glad to help, if help is needed. Reach out to Aleks Gusev, Editor, for encouragement, tips & tricks!

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

2019 Wilderness and Canoe Symposium

Next WCS is planned for the 22-23 February, 2019. Save the date!

In the meantime, continue to send feedback and presentation ideas to gusev@gmail.com under Subject line “2019 WCS”. We hope to see many of you at Monarch Park again!



Assistant Editor Found!

Mike Fish, new *Nastawgan* Assistant Editor, worked for more than 30 years as a reporter for three newspapers, most recently The Post-Standard, of Syracuse, N.Y., where he lives. He's now a communications consultant.

Since being introduced to the great north by Keewaydin Camp on Lake Temagami in the late 1960's, he's paddled many lakes and rivers in Ontario, Quebec and New Brunswick, including the Eastmain, Rupert and Moisie. He is the proud owner of a 17-foot wood-canvas Fraser canoe, which seems to get heavier by the decade.

He and his wife, Marion, have three grown children, Mike (NYC), Jeff (San Francisco) and Ruth (NYC), who still help them break out the wannigans, dust off the fire irons and head north to carry on a 30-year-plus tradition of family canoe trips.

Minesing Swamp – A Day Trip

Story by Peter Burkinshaw

Photos by Emmy Hendrickx

Just after a very rainy and windy Friday, on Saturday, May 5, 2018, ten of us enjoyed a wonderful day trip down Willow Creek and in the Minesing Swamp. We met about 9 a.m. at the Willow Creek Canoe Corral access point off George Johnston Road, which is about a 15-minute drive northwest of Barrie, in Ontario. After driving our six cars to the end point, leaving all but drivers behind and then returning in one vehicle, we were able to launch about 10:30 a.m. In the five canoes, the pairings were Emmy Hendrickx & Gary James, Mary Glendinning & Ian McGillivray, Kay McGillivray & Frank Dempsey, Jaromir Zubicek & Daniel Burkinshaw, and Chloe Burkinshaw & Peter Burkinshaw.

Enjoying the sun and fresh air, we set off down the lazy river. After about 20 minutes we faced a fork in the river where we saw the water going mostly in one direction, but we needed to take the other fork. We ended up coming back after going the wrong way, but in doing so we worked on paddling skills, navigating amongst, through and over log jams – the change of direction had its benefits.

The river was quite swollen due to all of the recent rains, including an ice storm from a few weeks prior, and so it became quite open amongst trees, where we stopped for a snack. After that it opened up even more as we entered the swamp area. We are very appreciative for having a GPS to help guide us (thanks Gary), but unfortunately the winds also picked up in this area, and with no trees to help block the strong winds, we (Chloe and I) needed some assistance being towed (thanks Kay and Frank). After clearing the swamp area, it was then back in amongst trees where we stopped to have some lunch. Sitting in (and on) amongst the trees to eat is quite a unique and serene place. Following this was a nice easy paddle to the end where we pulled out at Edenvale Conservation Area off Highway 26 about 4 p.m.

Chloe (being 11 years old) summed up the trip this way: it was a lot of fun, and we saw lots of interesting things. Paddling into the wind was hard, but we met a lot of nice people and they helped us when needed. Her highlights included the sun shining off the water; spotting only the heads of some people in front of us; getting pulled because of the strong wind in a very wide open area where we saw a giant Osprey nest; paddling through a forest, seeing fallen trees and the Snow Valley Ski Resort; and, near the end, going under a wire and a bridge.

Thanks to Emmy for taking photos and organizing the trip, along with all the others who joined us! Looking forward to doing this again next year, and hope many people will consider this enjoyable day trip!



Route-Visual



Towed by Kay and Frank



Lunch time



Turn via Emmy

No Place for Sissies: Paddling the Lower Petawawa River

Story by Gary Storr
Photos by Graham Bryan and Gary Storr



Below the Big Thompson Rapid

Growing old is not for the faint-hearted. And for ham-handed relics, neither is being launched in an open canoe down a raging rapid. Unfortunately, when both events came into play, I found myself at the centre of the storm. There was no one else to blame – our paddling group, the Canoeing Legends, had been planning this trip for a long time.

Dan Bell, Graham Bryan, Geoff Ching and I stood above the Rollway Rapid and stared into a boiling cauldron

of thunder. A ledge spanned the river and the current surged over it with murderous intent. A memorial to Blair Fraser, the Maclean's editor who died in this rapid in 1968, was a portent, a sober reminder of the consequence of miscalculation. George Drought's *Petawawa River Whitewater Guide* instructed us to find the Class II route through Class III and IV rapids. I studied the river but couldn't see the route. None of us could.

Even Geoff, who works magic with a paddle, seemed perplexed.

"Screw it," said Graham, finally. "I've got a helmet. I'm going."

The summer of 2016 had been the hottest on record – air conditioners had spun the dials off hydro meters. We fully expected to drag the canoes 50 kilometres down a dried-up riverbed. Three years earlier we'd been thwarted by a flash snowmelt that, combined with heavy rains, had washed out Lake Travers Road. Repairs hadn't been made in time for our intended arrival. With heavy hearts we'd cancelled the trip. Now, as we swung our packs into the boats, the Poplar Rapids cascaded into Lake Travers from the west. Our anxiety was laid to rest: after a fortuitous two-day deluge the Petawawa River was alive, coursing between its banks at robust levels.

As we paddled across Lake Travers our life jackets came off and the sun warmed our backs. We were eager for a glimpse of the chutes downriver – the Big Thompson and Little Thompson rapids. George Drought suggested the Big Thompson was merely a warmup for the wild and woolly stuff farther down. I took this to mean it was a novice run: it could be accomplished easily if I affixed training wheels to my canoe and my partner held the back of my canoe seat. Of course, I misunderstood. But personal ratings don't exist on a fixed scale – they are relative to our abilities.

As we approached the practice run our jaws dropped. The Big Thompson Rapid was huge. Boulders studded the river like a minefield, setting off small-scale explosions of froth everywhere. Partway down was a ledge. It would have to be avoided at all cost. Below it was a rock garden that had the potential to abruptly and horribly terminate our run.

Geoff and I began our descent by sliding over the remains of an old logging dam. Catching the dam at an angle, we dropped awkwardly into the rapid. It wasn't pretty but we were still afloat. Our strategy from this point was simple: don't hit rocks. We should have given it further consideration because from the get-go, there wasn't a rock we didn't hit. Turning broadside to the current, we slammed into yet another boulder and instinctively I grabbed



Big Thompson Rapid

the gunwales. I knew it was the wrong thing to do, and I was instantly admonished by Geoff who instructed me to brace with my paddle. I muttered an oath under my breath.

Straightening out we fared better but while we executed a zigzag pattern to dodge flare-ups, I lost sight of the ledge. Moving water never looks the same from a canoe as it does from the riverbank. Suddenly the shelf was at our bow! Jabbing at the river with my paddle I pulled us sideways and we missed the drop by a hair. We finished the exercise somewhat shell-shocked but none the worse for wear.

The Little Thompson Rapid was shorter but no less daunting. There was a roller coaster ride down the right bank but the entrance looked dicey – we weren't eager for a swim here. The left side was a technical run. A long, sloping slab of granite formed the riverbed and shallow water washed over its surface. It didn't appear deep enough to float a boat. At its base were two boulders, a canoe's beam apart, and beyond that, a rock face. Graham and Dan elected to take the left route. Geoff and I watched from the riverbank as they slid over the watery embankment and split the boulders, bouncing wonkily off one. Quickly regaining their balance, they cut to the right and then pulled in behind the wall at the end of the portage. Geoff and I decided to go right. Scraping past the rocks at the top of the chute, we jockeyed through the sprays and then eddied out beside our comrades.

Our confidence was growing. We'd pinballed through the amateur stuff and were ready to take it to the next level. We pulled ashore and set up camp on a positive note, but I had reservations about the long day ahead.

The next morning, we packed up our gear and pushed out onto the river. We lily-dipped and let the current carry us briskly along. Then we enjoyed a tune-up on the Grillade Rapid. Despite having had whitewater training, I was the least accomplished paddler in the group. I couldn't help noticing that Dan, who freely admitted to feeling fear at the sound of rapids, now sported a grin at the end of each run. Conversely, I experienced a growing sense of apprehension.

In an article for the *Globe and Mail* dated August 27, 2016, Roy MacGregor described former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's final trip down the Petawawa River. At the age of 77, Mr. Trudeau was joined by friends and his paddling partner, Wally Schaber. Negotiating the challenging Crooked Chute Rapids, they'd encountered difficulty. Attempting to land above the



Graham and Dan shooting the Little Thompson Rapid

chute they flipped their canoe. Mr. Schaber rescued the prime minister and then went downriver to retrieve their gear.

Had I seen this story a week earlier, I might have had second thoughts about shooting Crooked Chute. Reading the article after the trip, I had a clear mental image of the place the mishap occurred. There was an outcrop on the right bank blocking the take-out. It was crucial to make this landing – pinwheeling past it would send a paddler down a gnarly set of Class III's that funnelled into a narrow cataract. Only a select few had bragging rights to this feat. Smashed canoes attested to the skill set of the majority.

The Crooked Chute Rapids were long – a kilometre and a half in extent – and there were three take-outs above the chute. We landed at the first take-out and carried our

packs to the second, a tiny beach and the perfect spot from which to scrutinize the boulder-strewn expanse above the cataract. There we decided, "What the hell," and portaged our gear to the last take-out. It was here that a rock face obstructed the landing. We'd have to kiss the rock and quickly tuck in behind it to avoid catastrophe. Fortunately, we were triumphant...and with only a few new anecdotes gouged into our hulls.

A connoisseur of whitewater is rarely intimidated by the look of a rapid – it's the sound that plants the seed of doubt. For the paddler, the trickle of glistening water over the smooth stones of a Class 1 is the song of the siren – it triggers a Homeric longing for the pleasure the rapid has to offer. The splash of a Class II heightens the senses – a challenge lies ahead. The turbulence of a



Splitting the boulders and dodging the wall, Little Thompson Rapid



The Rollway Rapid

Class III ushers in a tangible threat: the roar of the cascade crescendos and with it, the call of calamity – the sirens beckon; the paddler risks dashing his boat on the rocks. For the whitewater aficionado, this is his odyssey.

We landed our canoes above the Rollway Rapid and scouted the waterway from the riverbank. The upper stretch comprised a lengthy chain of standing waves, thrashing and undulating like a watery serpent. We would have to eddy out at its base to determine what lay around the bend. The next half-kilometre was problematic, a chaotic no man's land of crashing sprays that would require split-second decision making. Then came the ledge: the route

over it was either to the left or right...but how to get there? Below the ledge lay the icing on the cake – 300 metres of Class II whitewater that emptied into the pool at the base of the rapid.

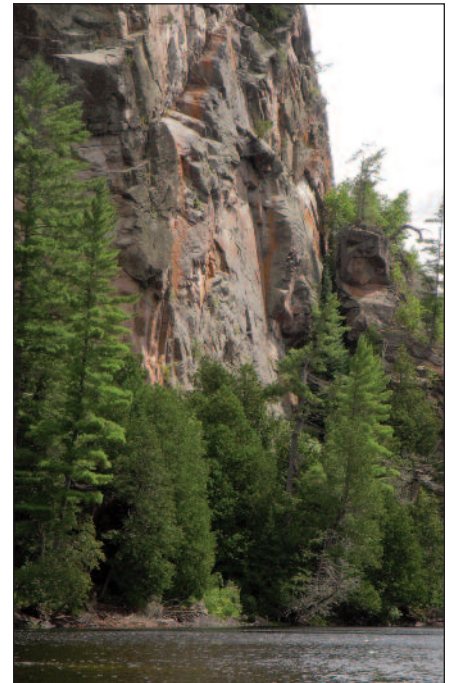
Only one of us would make it.

In the business of canoeing, Geoff and I were silent partners: we didn't talk much, but rather, sensed each other's moves by intuition...some of the time. The Legends' annual spring paddle down the Credit River in Ontario was often preceded by an early April run, an occasion marked by only Geoff and I. Last year, as we approached Erindale Park in Mississauga, we tackled a set of Class II's that unknown to me in the bow, had compromised our canoe

– we had taken on too much water. At the base of the rapid was a cluster of haystacks. With no time to empty the boat, but knowing my penchant for a wet ride, Geoff gave me just that: he steered us directly into the upheaval. I was unable to see the water in the boat but I felt its effect. As we came down off the last wave, the water in the hull surged forward around me and at that moment, I knew we weren't coming up. The canoe dove into the river and we were in to the gunwales.

The rapids on the Credit paled in comparison to what lay before us now.

Graham and Dan pushed off first. Geoff and I backpaddled where the water swirled lazily, coalescing before it began to pick up momentum. It was here that Blair Fraser and his partner had attempted to escape the



Drifting through the canyon below the Natch Rapids

grasp of the current. They were seen paddling upriver at the head of the rapid. Digging in against the flow, they lost their bid and were swallowed by the haystacks. Mr. Fraser's partner survived.

Graham and Dan crashed through the waves, heading toward a precipice that jutted from the left bank 100 metres downriver. They bounced along the left side, shipping water as they went, sinking lower and lower until, in front of the wall, they appeared to hit a rock. On the opposite side of the river from the portage, they had no choice but to line their canoe around the obstacle. At the campfire that night I commented that Geoff and I could have



Approaching the canyon below the Natch

watched *Deliverance* in the time it took them to self-rescue. Graham and Dan seemed surprised.

After they disappeared behind the outcrop it was our turn. Geoff and I steeled our nerves and let the current pull us into the haystacks. We paddled to the right to avoid the same fate as our compadres, but the water was too high and near the bottom, we swamped...almost. With a few inches of freeboard we were able to eddy out to the right, near the portage. We climbed onto the rocks and dumped the water from the canoe. From our vantage point we could see the fury of the rapid and assess our situation. I knew at a glance the run was beyond my ability and, not wanting to jeopardize either of us, I opted out.

Geoff chose to stay the course.

I held the canoe while Geoff prepared for the run. He kneeled nervously behind the yoke and fiddled with his rescue gear. His stony countenance told me that his resolve was not yet in lockstep with his physical readiness. When he was set he waved me off and I let go. I waited a moment and then climbed up to the path and hurried along it in case he needed assistance downriver. He was obviously doing well because I didn't catch sight of him again until I neared the end of the portage.

"Hello," he chirped from beside the trail, startling me. He had successfully weathered the maelstrom! I admired the savvy that made shooting rapids second nature to him. We watched Graham and Dan labour along the far bank to a spot below the ledge. There, they climbed into the canoe and rode out the remainder of the rapid. At the bottom of the portage they celebrated their accomplishment with satisfied grins and a spirited high-five.

With barely time to exhale, our next challenge came into view – the Natch Rapids. We lugged the packs across a rocky portage that, in the words of George Drought, "You have to be a mountain goat to do..." Then Geoff and Graham guided the canoes over the first drop in solo efforts. Dan and I watched from the sidelines, Dan wielding a throw-rope and I, a camera. We'd learned from the school of hard knocks that bow paddlers are dead weight in an upsurge: we cause canoes to torpedo through waves, taking on water, rather than to ride up and over them.

Geoff stood in his canoe above the drop and surveyed the lip for the sweet spot. Finding it, he dropped to his knees and gracefully slipped into the chute that carried him out to the left. Graham's performance was less than photogenic but he prevailed by employing his unique seat-of-the-



Geoff running the upper Natch Rapid



The Natch



Geoff and Gary negotiating the Natch Rapid



Graham and Dan – the calm between the storms

pants technique.

Geoff paddled to the riverbank to collect me into the boat for the second section of the Natch. Two ledges, a couple of canoe-lengths apart, spanned the river. Each had to be cleared on opposite sides of the rapid. The first opening, near the left bank, would butt us up against a rock wall if we didn't immediately jam on the brakes. Then we'd have to backferry across the river to the right bank without moving downstream. We almost made it. We hit an opening a paddle-length shy of our target and bumped through. Less than perfect but no harm done.

Bill Mason relates, in his book *Path of the Paddle*, that while camping on the Petawawa River he went down to the shore to fill a pail with water. He noticed an or-

ange backpack floating in the pool below the rapid. Paddling over to retrieve it, Mr. Mason discovered that the pack was actually a life jacket – still worn by a man who had perished in the rapid.

While Mr. Mason and his cameraman, Ken Buck, unsuccessfully tried to revive him, the man's partner found his way to the campsite. He explained that they had not intended to run the rapid. They had landed at the take-out bow first and the current had swept the stern away from the riverbank. The man toppled into the river and drowned in the rapid.

This begs the question: why do we do it? What makes people leap from perfectly good airplanes to dangle by strings from giant swatches of cloth? Why do others drive the flimsiest of automobiles around

racetracks at breakneck speed when they know that clipping the wall will send them cartwheeling down the track, wheels flying in all directions? Why do we shoot rapids in open canoes?

I can only answer for myself. It's fun, it's challenging and, as long as I'm wearing a PFD and a helmet, what could possibly go wrong? I've dumped in rapids often enough that I consider myself, like a youth who only engages in reckless behaviour, to be invincible – at least, I hope I am.

With the upper Natch Rapids behind us we dragged our canoes out of the river and set up camp. We ate supper in a light rain, too tired to raise a tarp. After sipping a dram of the Captain beside a faltering campfire, we retired to our tents. It had been an exhilarating day and we'd earned our rest.

In the morning we shot through the bottom of the Natch and then paddled past granite cliffs that towered 100 metres above us. The sun reflected off the water, blinding us with its glare. We bobbed in our canoes at the base of the canyon and basked in its grandeur. An osprey circled overhead. After a while we heard the Schooner Rapids calling so we reluctantly applied paddles to water and left the canyon behind.

Before long we entered the first Schooner Rapid and began an extended, hell-bent for leather joyride through Class I and II whitewater. We darted past jagged rocks and lunged through downstream Vs; we sidestepped ledges and cheated hungry boulders. We revelled in our tiny glories and shook off the sprays of success. We were as jubilant as hounds in a fox hunt. Reaching the final stretch of moving water above the hydro cut, we slowed, collecting ourselves.

Below us, near the bottom of the rapid, a bull moose thrashed in the river. We backpaddled patiently in our canoes and enjoyed the spectacle. Colliding with a moose wouldn't be in anyone's best interest. Eventually the bull swam to the left bank. We waited until he stumbled out of the rapid, and then we began our descent. Suddenly a cow moose emerged from the forest and entered the river. It was an unexpected development and I prayed that they would let us pass. At this point the moose were unaware of our approach. Then their heads came up and they saw us. The cow was directly in our path and there was no stopping the canoes. Instantly a puzzling thought struck me.

Humorist and travel writer Bill Bryson cheekily wrote that a moose was a cow drawn by a three-year-old. On closer in-



Lunch break on the Five Mile Rapids

spection, the creatures in front of us were something altogether different. If indeed they were moose, they'd been drawn by a primate on jello shots. They clambered up the riverbank as we passed by and their white rumps gave them away. Elk! Granted, their presence was the result of a relocation program but still, we were thrilled. They were the first elk we'd ever seen in the Ontario wilderness.

We relaxed under the hydro towers at the mouth of Moosehaunt Creek, then tackled the second, shorter stretch of the Schooner Rapids. Re-energized, we crossed Coveo Lake. The final measure of our paddling prowess began at the Coveo Lake outflow. The Five Mile Rapids were, in reality, three and a half kilometres of sparkling Class II's and we ran them with exuberance and a newly-heightened proficiency. Invigorated and restored, we made our last camp on Whitson Lake. Geoff declared this to be the most enjoyable day of the three. The rest of us raised our mugs in agreement.

On the drive home from McManus Lake I reflected on my earlier misgivings about paddling the Petawawa River. Although my concerns were justified (given that I remained a clumsy gray-beard), I was no longer afraid. If I were to return, I'm confident that I would slip into many of the rapids like I might an old pair of loafers. Except for the Rollway. When I recall the unrestrained fury that swept between its banks and think of the lonely cross next to the trail, I shudder. But I also know that if the sirens beckoned, I would be powerless to resist.

"Screw it," I'd have to say. "I'm going."

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Additional information:

James Raffan, 1996, *Fire in the Bones*, HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.

Roy MacGregor, 2015, *Canoe Country: The Making of Canada*, Random House Canada

Sidebar:

How not to run the rollway rapid: Double take from a single canoe

"I remember dodging rocks (boulders!) and barely glancing off one only to find another right in our path and no chance to avoid it. The canoe leaned upstream and caught on the rock and the bow started filling with water. Graham was yelling to jump clear so I did. The canoe was full and wedged between two rocks but Graham was able to keep it from going sideways. Together we managed to haul it upstream out of the current and from a rocky shore,



Evening on Whitson Lake

we bailed and tipped out the water. From there we simply lined the canoe down the rapid – treacherous work climbing over boulders and wading chest deep in the river. But we enjoyed it immensely and were both shocked to find it took us an hour and a half to do."

– Dan Bell, bowman

"I watched Dan bail out and scoped the riverbank he was heading to while I disengaged from the canoe. Or it disengaged from me. I was floating – it was actually pretty deep. I turned my attention back from Dan to: 'Where is the canoe?!' – only to look down and see it float downstream underneath me. I knew it wasn't jammed on rocks yet and I reached down to see if I could stop it. It was surprisingly easy to grab and pull underwater upstream. At this point Dan was grabbing debris – we ended up only losing one paddle. Anyway, it seemed safe to rescue the canoe – I got it

over to the rocks. I have no idea how we breached a canoe full of water atop a boulder but we did. The helmet made a great bailer.

"I don't recall the wedging between two rocks but I think more than anything, Dan's exit from the canoe and weird river physics freed it. I don't recall hitting a rock before we sank so much as just watching water leap in the canoe from everywhere. Mind you, Dan in the bow had a front row seat to disaster.

"And yes, I agree with Dan: it was actually fun. Even capsizing has its adrenalin-infused charm. The last bit we paddled was no more than Class II. We couldn't get back in the current from where we bailed the canoe and by the time we lined to any place with a passage into the big water, well, we were just too damned spent. Yup, it was a very good afternoon."

– Graham Bryan



Striking a pose, the Canoeing Legends (L-to-R), Dan Bell, Gary Storr, Geoff Ching and Graham Bryan

Where it is...



...in this issue

- 1 Agawa!
- 15 There is Room
(Poems by Naomi McIlwraith)
- 17 Minesing Swamp
- 18 No Place for Sissies

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