



The crew on a beautiful day getting ready to head out on Racine Lake. From L to R: Gary Ataman, Ginger Louws, Larry Hicks, Matt Eberly, Jeff Haymer, Gary James, Mary Perkins, Richard Griffith.

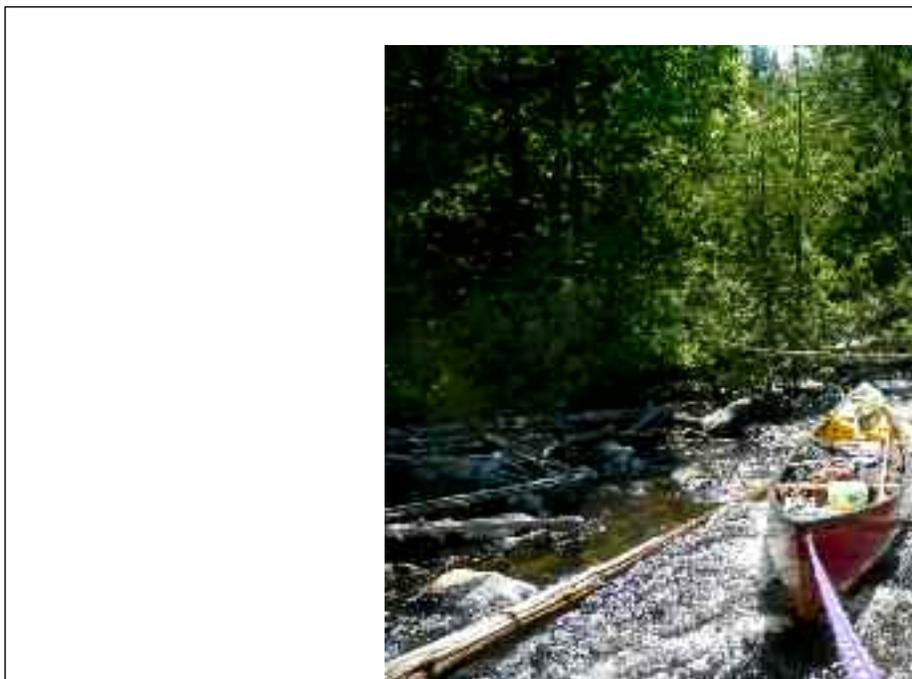
Chapleau River 2013 **by Richard Griffith**

For lovers of whitewater, Chapleau-Nemegosenda River Provincial Park, west of Timmins, ON, presents a unique and interesting loop. The two rivers flow north on their way to James Bay, and run parallel to each other for about 90 km, until they meet at Kapuskasing Lake. One can paddle down one river and up the other, finishing close to the start, thus minimizing the car shuttle. Good plan. That's what we thought, but it didn't quite work out that way. The trip was capably led by Gary James. The other participants were Gary Ataman, Mary Perkins, Larry Hicks, Jeff Haymer, Matt Eberly, Ginger Louws and myself.

The Chapleau River originates somewhere in the hills south of the town of the same name. However, because the river actually winds its way through lakes for a considerable distance, we travelled farther north, to Racine Lake, and

spent the first night at Missinaibi Headwaters Outfitters. Racine Lake is huge, and I'm sure that crossing it on a windy day would present a formidable challenge. Fortunately for us, starting out in warm weather on Canada Day 2013, it was a sheet of glass. Calm as it was, it still took a long time to cross.

When we emerged from the lake, the river narrowed and, after some miles, practically disappeared into an almost impenetrable thicket of downed trees. We couldn't find the current. We couldn't find the portage either, though we had a theory that one did exist. So we decided to muddle our way over, under and around the fallen trees and branches and although progress was slow, this worked for a while. When, eventually, the water route closed in almost entirely, we elected to climb the bank, where we finally found a trail.



Lining down the log-jammed Racine Creek heading to the Chapleau River.

Larry and I managed to find a similar way of celebrating this achievement: we each tripped and fell, hard, on our faces. That's never fun when you're under load.

One way or another, we spent a lot of time on that portage and the day kind of got away from us. By the time we eventually reached another portage, people were tired and, although it was only ten days past the solstice, we were starting to lose daylight. When voyaging down a

river with current, daylight tends to be an essential asset. On the other hand, this particular location was just another rough portage. There were no immediately identifiable tent sites, and the bugs were as ferocious as anything I'd encountered in my 45 years of canoeing. I, for one, wasn't particularly tired. I wanted to continue on to a more comfortable campsite, but I was overruled and we stopped for the night. I remember being annoyed by that, but it cer-

tainly turned out to be the correct decision. The following morning we travelled for hours before finding anything that would have been an improvement on the rude location we settled for. This river doesn't see many visitors! So we erected the tents, someplace, somehow. We also put up the bug tent and boy, did that ever make a difference. Sanctuary! I still don't own a bug tent, yet, but for northern Ontario in July, it should be the first thing you pack.

On the second day, the river got wider and we began to encounter some serious rapids. The decision to run each set was up to each pair of canoeists: no pressure. As things turned out, Gary Ataman and I ran more of them than anyone else, but that's more a tribute to his skill set than mine. Paddling in the bow, I did manage to avoid seeing a critical rock on a few occasions. Once, early on, we hung up on one of the ones I failed to identify in time. We were near the shore, in fairly shallow water, so I decided to disembark, feeling that the canoe would float free without my weight. Things being as unstable as they were, though, the canoe decided to lurch to one side, liberating my personal pack.

Gary, ever the practical observer, commented "There goes your pack." Yes. One of the other canoes, though, was downriver and close by, so the pack was quickly recaptured. Sleeping bag stayed dry.

Later that day, Gary and I ran another demanding set. We portaged the first half or so and put in again just below a ten-foot waterfall. From there it was a tight, technical class 2, in a narrow channel, and what made it all the more exciting was the chunky-looking overhanging branch, or maybe there were two of them, that we each had to quickly duck beneath, and just as quickly recover, to finish the set.

Day Three was the day of the "Matterhorn Rapid". We knew there was something there because that particular portage is at least a kilometre long, and we were sensible enough to portage all the packs. Our rather incomplete trip information didn't say enough about the river, though. We would have liked to have scouted the rapid, but that



Campsites are generally small but we usually found enough space to fit all the tents.

isn't always possible on these expeditions. The portage was nowhere near the water itself. No one, of course, wants any portage to be any longer than it has to be, and this one just disappeared, as per usual, into the woods in a more-or-less straight line. In this case, however, the bends in the river effectively create a peninsula, which is what the portage goes across. We briefly considered walking the shoreline, but it was rugged, thick, unyielding, and of course, full of bugs. On a hot day. Scouting was laughably impractical. So we turned our attention to the river, took a deep breath and plunged on. You may ask why we didn't portage the canoe? Why run what you can't see? Well, in retrospect, this may not have been our most brilliant moment, but...*because it's there.*

I must point out something else about my paddling partner, Gary Ataman. He is a breezy, laid-back engineer and nothing flusters him. I have yet to see him angry or agitated. In regards to this particular rapid, he just said something like, "Well, I can see the first 100 metres and it's easy, and [having portaged the gear] I've seen the last 100 metres and it's easy, so that just leaves the middle. How bad can it be? Let's go." Away we went.

That first 100 metres was manageable enough and nearly all class 2. We certainly had to be awake but it was no big deal for experienced paddlers. So we ran that and came to a pool where we stopped to take a breather. The river took a bend and the rapids resumed. More class 2. Then we went around another bend, and we suddenly found ourselves at the top of a really complicated class 3, which of course we hadn't scouted! Huge rocks everywhere. Huge waves. No real discernible V anywhere... I couldn't think ahead farther than about ten feet at any moment. Gary was hollering orders in the stern: "Left! Left! Slow it down! Right! Other right! Left! Draw! DRAW! Centre! Left!"

The rocks seemed to be almost flying past, right and left, left and right. Suddenly this HUGE black triangular rock loomed up straight ahead. I'm convinced this particular rock was grinning. No chance to avoid it. I placed the paddle flat on the gunwales and braced my knees for the impact. **WHAM!!!** We hit straight on and I expected the stern would swing around, but Gary was bracing hard and we just kind of slid over to the left side. I named that rock the "Matterhorn". Miraculous!! Breathing really hard!

The rapids continued. We were only halfway through this class 3. We were the second canoe down and out of the corner of my eye I could see the first canoe, with Gary James and Mary, stuck on something off to the right. No way to help - no way to even tell exactly what was happening to them. Couldn't take my eyes off our own rocks. "Right! Left! Slow it down! Centre! Left! Cross-bow! LEFT!" At last it flattened out, well, sort of, then took one more bend and finished with a relatively benign gravel bar, but still definitely a class 2.



Richard named this rock the Matterhorn. The plan was to move from river right to river left above it.



Our route from Racine Lake to Elsas covers around 90 km of class 1, 2 and some 3 paddle-friendly rapids.



Lining the boat around a boulder section.

That final flattish stretch was the “last 100 metres” that Gary had actually seen.

That was July 3 and that’s how I celebrated my 55th birthday. For that instant in front of the Matterhorn, it felt

like it might be my LAST birthday. Swimming that class 3 would have been an extremely nasty experience. That was one of the longest, most demanding rapids I have ever run, and we had not scouted it.

Gary and I agreed that the two other canoes shouldn’t try to run it, so as soon as we reached the shore, I scrambled out and up the portage, hoping to warn them before they left. But a hilly, rocky portage isn’t a sidewalk and one can’t sprint, especially when it’s a kilometre long. I did meet Matt and Ginger. They had decided, on their own, not to try it. But I did not get back to the beginning in time to speak to Larry and Jeff. All I could do was turn around and march back down the portage. I arrived back in time to see Larry and Jeff on their feet, sloshing through the water near the far bank. They were slowly lining the canoe down the last hundred metres. We tried to yell instructions but we couldn’t be heard over the roar. Eventually they worked their way down to the bottom, but neither one seemed very interested



Jeff and Mary are working around the cascading pools and ledges.

in discussing the experience. At the foot of these rapids there was a beautiful campsite, and this time there was no question about calling it a day. As I said, it was my birthday, and the chefs hadn't forgotten. We had wonderful cake!

In the following couple of days there were more sets of rapids, some of them great fun, but they paled in comparison to the Matterhorn Rapid. There were more portages too. One of them was memorable for being short but ridiculously difficult. It was almost straight up and straight down. There was no real takeout but rather just a bunch of huge boulders to clamber over. We had to use a human chain to get everything out of the water and up the hill.

By the end of day 4 we had run most of the Chapleau, but the next issue became the health challenge suddenly facing Larry. Larry was 61 and he had had a history of heart trouble. I could tell he was having some kind of problem. I was about to say something to Gary James but he was already aware of it, and he took Larry into his canoe. Because they're both big men, this meant the canoe rode low in the water, but it was the responsible thing to do. It was the easiest way for Gary to keep an eye on Larry and besides, most of the rapids were by this time behind us. Although Larry had begun to complain about pains in his chest, he was still paddling and still walking around and we thought well, pulled muscle? Cracked rib? Some other minor thing that you really can't do anything about in the wilderness? He had fallen down hard on that early portage, but that in itself didn't seem to mean much. We progressed down the river, and he got a bit worse every day. Although he was still paddling, at each campsite it was obvious he needed rest.

We reached Kapuskasing Lake, another large body of water. There's a fishing lodge near the north end called Gosenda. Gary J. had, by this time, decided to evacuate Larry one way or another, so we stopped at the lodge. They had a telephone with a poor connection, but Gary managed to get a call through to ORNGE. Helicopter coming! The chopper needed an open space of at least 50 metres by 50 metres. The lodge



Scouting on the river and around bends sometimes required rock climbing and bushwhacking skills.



Fresh fish tonight.



The engineer in Gary Ataman is apparent in this tarp sail.



We sailed into Gosenda Lodge on Kapuskasing Lake.

didn't have anything that big, but at this point we were only a mile or two from Elsas, which is on the main CNR track. Having actually been to this town on two previous trips, I remembered a large field. So we set it all up with the authorities and off we went again. By this time, the wind had built Kapuskasing Lake into HUGE waves which, thank goodness, were in our direction. We sailed, literally, to Elsas.

We landed at the dock, scrambled up to the field with Larry and with Larry's huge pack, and we waited, but not for very long. To help them locate us, Gary Ataman used a signal flare that promptly started a small grass fire which we hastened to put out. (Note to self: be careful with signal flares.) Very soon thereafter, the big old orange ORNGE came roaring out of the sky,

circled a couple of times to get a good look at things, and then landed about 200 feet from us. It's a pretty remarkable thing to have a helicopter land, at your own behest, in the middle of the Ontario wilderness!

There were two pilots and two medics. The medics chatted with Larry and he walked to the helicopter under his own power. One of the pilots glanced at Larry's pack. "I'm not taking that," he laughed, and he walked back to his machine.

The big engine cranked up again and away they went, leaving us with four canoes and seven people and the gear for eight people. After much discussion about what to do next, Mary volunteered to take the train out. We were sorry to lose her, but it would certainly ease things for the rest of us since one



A family of curious foxes made the abandoned town of Elsas their home.



Larry's ride has arrived in the open grass clearing at Elsas.

canoe and all of Larry's gear could go with her straight to Toronto. So we found a telephone in Elsas and Gary James made a torrent of phone calls – his wife, Larry's wife, Fred Argue, (our primary contact with the outside world), the outfitter, VIA rail, and the OPP. Permutations and complications everywhere. The rest of us made camp and I made dinner, in a place that I would ordinarily have stopped for nothing more than lunch.

On Sunday morning we awoke to pouring rain and 7°C. A few days earlier, it had been at least 30°C. We erected tarps but the rain was persistent and we got steadily wetter. Elsas, for all its many old buildings, doesn't have many in which seven people can make themselves comfortable in when it's wet and cold. We spoke to the local CNR employee and we took a quick look at the forecast on his TV set. Steady rain all day and a high of no more than 14°C. Much better weather was expected for Monday. At this point I really regretted that I had not brought my rain pants. Gary told me to open Larry's pack and take his rain pants. I did. That improved my situation a bit. Nevertheless, I was quite uncomfortable and I told Gary, "I'm sorry, but I'm not going in that canoe today. I will go Monday but if I go today, I'll be hypothermic and you don't want that." Gary acknowledged this. So did Ginger, because she was also wet and cold, but she hadn't said anything because she "didn't want to let the rest of us down". I told her, "well, I'm an experienced canoeist. I understand my body's reaction to this weather and I know I can't take this".

The upshot was that we all decided to cancel the remainder of the trip in favour of the train. Gary James agreed with my assessment of my own situation, but if we had waited around for a Monday departure on the water, heading up the Nemegosenda, that would have put us two days behind schedule, which in turn would have entailed another whole round of phone calls with the outfitter, the OPP and everyone else. Although Gary had handled things extremely well up to that point, the dreary weather and its complications were weighing on us all. Ginger, Matt and I were all pretty uncomfortable that day. (All three of us have since invested in better rain gear.)

We had arrived in Elsas about 3 pm Saturday and we had to wait until 7 pm Monday for the train. We did have a nice party on Sunday night with Nelson and Michelle Brazeau, who actually live there at least part of the year. Other than that, we couldn't find a whole lot to do in Elsas. It was a great relief when the train pulled in, 52 hours after our initial arrival, and we climbed aboard for the 40-minute ride to Foleyet, where vehicles waited to take us back to Racine Lake.

So ended, rather anti-climactically, our Chapleau-Nemegosenda "loop" trip. As the old VIA ad used to say, "Take it easy, take the train". We did.

P.S. Larry's diagnosis was a bout of hypokalemia, which mimics a heart attack. The hospital in Timmins took good care of him and today, he's fine.

P.P.S. Many thanks to Gary James for guiding us safely through, not just the rapids, but a complicated, pressure-filled wilderness adventure. And thanks to Gary Ataman for helping me survive the Ride of the Matterhorn. *However, I do not recommend that you ever run big, remote rapids unscouted.*

If you want an adrenaline rush, Gary Ataman and Matthew Eberly have both posted videos of the Chapleau River Odyssey on YouTube.



A drizzly rain, mud and cool summer temperatures made our stay in Elsas a bit of challenge.



When you have to wear your life jacket for extra insulation you know it's cold.



Jeff waiting for the train and dreaming about future adventures.

My Trip Down the Chapleau

by Larry Hicks

July was hot. Really hot. It's taken us two sweaty days to get here. Three of us jammed into Gary's car with enough gear for a two-week canoe trip. We ate in restaurants and diners along the way, knowing our diet for the next while would be "bush" fare. I for one welcomed Tim Horton's. I was facing two weeks of Gary's coffee!

We struck out across Racine Lake in the early morning, wanting to make time before it got really hot. We were doing fine until we got to the other side. No river. No portage. Were we lost? The GPS said we're in the right spot. So we humped, dragged and hacked our way cross-country through a tangle of fallen trees, thick bush and rocks until we found open water. We'd just skirted one of the biggest, overgrown log jams I'd ever seen. And on one of the hottest days I can remember. A couple of lakes, rapids and portages later we reached our campsite. We were beat. Darkness was approaching and it was still hot. We tanked up with water, ate supper, and tanked up again. Have to stay hydrated.

Three sweaty dudes in their underwear lying on top of their sleeping bags in a small steamy tent is not conducive to a good night's sleep. Someone was snoring, I blamed Richard. An elbow from Gary suggested that perhaps I was awakened by my own snoring.

I got up the next morning and had a good pee. Nice colour. Satisfied that I was not dehydrated, I had two cups of Gary's famous coffee with breakfast. Off we went. Great white water, short portages and good fellowship, but boy was it hot. I drank about three liters of water that day, sweating it out as fast as I could take it in.

What should have been an easy portage for me became a bit of a slog. I was tired and dragging my feet. I stumbled a couple of times and did a really good face plant with a heavy barrel on my back. I went to bed early that night, after the customary top up of water and a little merlot.

I woke up the next day still feeling

tired and listless. My tripmates seemed concerned about my failing condition as each time we stopped for a break, someone would pass me a water bottle. Maybe I am dehydrated? Drink more water.

Then I started to have a stabbing pain in the left side of my chest. Did I break a rib when I fell yesterday? Am I having the big one? The team decided to pull me out. We paddled to Nemegosenda, found a phone in a fishing lodge and Gary called his contact in the OPP. He handed me the phone. On the other end was a guy from ORNGE saying they were coming to get me, and for me to chew some aspirin. I packed a change of clothes into my small



pack and told the guys to share the rest of my stuff. In retrospect, I should have taken the flask of whiskey with me.

We paddled across the lake to Elsas where a field provides a landing spot for a helicopter. The wind was howling and the waves were high, but we beat the helicopter there. The crew was in a rush because of the approaching storm and made good time getting out of there. I worried about my tripmates travelling back to Chapleau short a paddler, but after a shot of Demerol I forgot all about them. But I do remember lying on my

back in the ER in Timmins and the doctor telling me "This is a heart attack."

I spent two days in the hospital. The medication they gave me settled my heart down but I wasn't improving overall. They must have eventually figured it out as they started me on potassium pills. Big ones. I started to get better quickly. After another day, they decided to let me go. My wife drove me all the way home to Toronto in one of the worst rain storms in Ontario history. I worried about my tripmates in this weather but was relieved to hear from Gary that they took the train back from Elsas.

It wasn't until my final interview with the doctor in Timmins that I understood fully what happened to me.

The Direct Cause. My heart was acting up because my potassium levels were critically low, a condition known as hypokalemia. Potassium is an electrolyte essential to cardiac and other bodily functions. Although my heart responded well to the initial medication, they kept me the extra days out of concern for my kidneys.

The Immediate Cause. I was drinking and passing so much water that I literally flushed the electrolytes out of my system. They have to be replaced on a constant basis, normally through the food you eat. Supplements work well too, but sugary drinks like Gatorade come with their own set of problems. The pain in my chest is believed to be from fluid buildup in my lung.

The Early Cause. I take a low dose diuretic pill daily to help keep my blood pressure down. Diuretics work by removing excess fluid from your system. Together with Gary's coffee, this may have accelerated my fluid loss.

The Prevention. I now carry whole potatoes and canned spinach with me on trips. I yam what I yam. Your pack will be noticeably lighter by the end of the trip too.

My thanks to everyone who helped me through this adventure. Go easy on the water!



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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.

Articles Wanted

If you haven't noticed it, do take notice – the Summer issue of *Nastawgan* is only 24 pages long. This is a sure sign that our content well has dried up! As you pack your bags for this summer's dream paddling trip, remember to throw in a pencil and a notebook. You'll need them to draft your first (or next) submission to the Editor for the Winter issue of our journal. Please reach out to Aleks Gusev, Editor, to consult about tips & tricks that will help your writing more fun!

Contributors' Guidelines

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

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

Luste Lecture

WCA, in partnership with the Canadian Canoe Museum, is pleased to announce that 3rd annual Luste Lecture will take place on Sunday, 27th September 2015. Event will be held at the CCM featuring David Olesen as a guest speaker. Dave is known to many in the wilderness paddling community as the pilot, author, sled dog racer and wilderness guide who, with his wife Kristen and two daughters, have lived on the shore of McLeod Bay near Hoarfrost River for 27 years. Dave recently published his new book "*Kinds of Winter*", detailing four solo journeys by dog team in Northwest Territories. This is an event you don't want to miss. Please plan to attend and show your appreciation for everything George Luste has done for the paddling community over the past 30 years.

2015 Wine and Cheese

Will take place on Saturday Nov. 14 at 7:00 p.m. at the Toronto Sailing and Canoe Club, featuring Frank Wolf as the Mike Wevrick Memorial speaker.

Frank is a Canadian adventurer and movie-maker. His self-propelled trips include canoeing in every province and territory of Canada with distances from 620 km to 8000 km over the past 20 years. He has also biked the Yukon River from Dawson City to Nome Alaska in winter and rowed 1850 km in the Arctic Ocean.

Symposium Update

Date and location for the '16 WCS have not been confirmed yet. Our preference is to return to Monarch Park Collegiate, if possible, and to keep the same dates – 19th and 20th February 2016. Sadly, Canadian Ski Marathon organizers moved their event (again) to the same weekend. We'll likely collaborate again with the Ontario Adventure Show, which is also taking place on the same weekend.

Exciting news! Most of the '15 presentations have been digitized and are available online for viewing at WCS website www.wcsymposium.com. Work on digitization continues.

Your help is required. Please send your recommendations for presenters to wcsymposium@gmail.com. Even more importantly, start spreading the word in your circles and communities about this unique event. Digitized online content will now make it much easier to explain and inspire others why they don't want to miss this gathering. If you haven't done so yet, visit WCS Facebook page for more frequent updates.

Events Calendar

Fall Meeting will be held at the Cedar Ridge Camp on 18th-20th September 2015.

Luste Lecture will be held at CCM on Sunday, 27th September 2015.

Wine & Cheese will take place on Saturday, 14th November 2015 at TSCC.

The Skills Story by Greg Went

Sitting around the fire. The buddies have all turned in for the night. I'm the last to go. Right now I don't think that it will be much longer before I follow them into the tents.

There are four of us on this year's wilderness canoe trip. All of us have been on trips into the deep wilderness before. A couple of us have been on many trips.

As I sit here watching the embers of the fire I'm thinking about the skills that each of the four of us has that have made our wilderness canoe trips that much more enjoyable. Good camping skills are highly valued on wilderness canoe trips. They can make the difference between just surviving a trip or traveling through wild country much more easily.

One buddy is expert at rigging a tarp. He can set a tarp up and get it to stay up, even in very windy and pouring rain conditions. When the weather does not allow canoe travel, it is much more pleasant sitting outside the tent and enjoying the fire under a tarp. Without his skills we would be trapped in the tents during bad rainstorms.

Another buddy is great camp organizer. When we are on shore for the night he secures the canoes, stacks the duffel bags where they are readily available, collects firewood, and gets water for dinner. Almost before the rest of us have processed the fact that we are staying here for the night, he has turned the flat spot where we are standing into our overnight home. He does it automatically, turning canoes full of gear into a secure refuge for the night.

A third buddy is a great map reader. He knows every second of the trip exactly where we are on the map. A GPS unit is almost an unnecessary gear item if he's on the trip. At every stop during the day he pulls out the maps and updates us--how far we have come, the location of the next rapid or falls, where possible campsites might be. The last canoe has barely grounded on the gravel bar for a stop and already we are crowding around him to look at the maps. It pleases him greatly to be of such use.

Another buddy can get a fire going despite the severity of a rainstorm or how many days in a row it has been raining. An evening of hot food and a warm campfire are always guaranteed thanks to his skills.

Back Blaze: Memory of a Canoe Trip Review by Erika Bailey

A fictionalized memoir, *Back Blaze: Memory of a Canoe Trip* by Jonathan Berger draws us through the flow-and-ebb experience of remembering a long life of paddling.

A current-day dialogue between Uncle Nick and his daughter, Erika, frames the narrative arc. Their conversation bookends the wisdom and experiences as Uncle Jack reflects on his 1962 trip as a much younger, lithier, stronger man, on the Chivelson Lake - Attawapiskat Post route. During this 1200-mile trip, he taught his three young travelling companions, Penny, his niece, his nephew, Mac, and Joe, his nephew's friend, a lifetime of collected canoe-wisdom.

Berger's passion and care for the land and a legacy of canoe wisdom appears in his foreword, like a top-ten packing list, including number one: "The next best thing from being on a canoe trip is telling stories about it." From here, *Back Blaze* launches into how each of these ten insights took place on this trip.

The detailed route account, woven with a haunting series of intimate river sketches by Uncle Nick and by Penny, deepened my appreciation of this powerful place. During the most evocative chapter, we see the now-expert crew enter the Attawapiskat-proper. The description of the land, the waters, and the spirit of the land is beautiful. And like the limestone islands that punctuate that part of the river, Berger places his tripping lifestyle reflections as landmarks to contemplate.

In deep contrast, I recently read *Indian Horse*¹. Both stories take place in this same region and time. However Richard Wagamese shares a stark, and importantly critical perspective on the context of a survivor's story from Canada's Residential School System. It is important, I think, to

As I sit here at the fire I've come to a conclusion concerning skills that each of the buddies has. It will not be enough to tell the buddies that their talents are appreciated. It will not be enough to tell them that the use of their talents has brought great comfort and safety to our wilderness canoe trips.

Here's what I am going to tell them. "Together we were better."

reflect that in some ways, Uncle Nick and crew were travelling through this same landscape; the two stories could not be more different.

Yet it appeared to me that Berger's Uncle Nick held admiration and respect for the river knowledge and resiliency of the First Nations communities along the canoe route. "For each river, each watershed, each waterway, there is a people or layers of people through time who are bound to the land and to the water by a canoe."²

Back Blaze is a comfortable read for anyone wishing to delve into the internal explorations of a seasoned paddler's mind. It will resonate with readers who share a passion for this northern landscape, and for paddle-educators who advocate for the benefits of imparting canoe-travel wisdom to future generations.

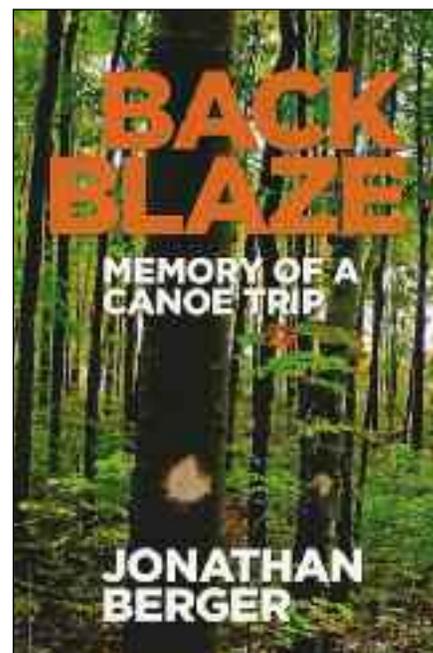
Berger's writing often evokes Sigurd Olson's lyric prose. I borrow from *Back Blaze*'s start to encapsulate what he is trying to reach:

*If my runes have touched something of man's ancient dream, revealed some of the common origins of his long past, and restored some sense of balance, wholeness and perspectives, then my gatherings will have been worthwhile.*³

¹Wagamese, 2012

²Raffan, 1999, p. 2

³Olson, 1997



How to Wipe in the Woods:

A quasi-scientific study on the biodegradability of the toilet tissue

Story by Angie Williams

The Premise

I have a confession: I don't take toilet paper on a canoe trip. True, after reading a whole bunch of websites on the topic, I realize there are a lot of wilderness die-hards who don't use TP in the back-country, but my actual confession is this: even though most experts insist on using only white, single-ply, unscented toilet tissue, my husband and I use Kleenex. To be specific, we take several pocket-sized packages of facial tissue, because it is convenient to carry and pack. We each keep one tissue package in our pocket, and the rest are tucked into our other packs, wherever they fit. Convenient? You bet! But I, like most of us, always strive to do what is best for the environment, and the plain white, 1-ply, unscented paper is said to biodegrade faster than anything else.

An avid reader of back-country how-to guides, I have encountered many varying recommendations for dealing with the wilderness toilet, and most of them assume the use of toilet tissue. Some of the main strategies for dealing with the dis-

posal of the tissue are outlined below.

Pack it all out, both human waste and paper. In fact, there are some areas, such as in the Grand Canyon, where that is required.¹ Probably very few canoeists in Canada are following this protocol.

Bury your waste and pack out the paper.² Of course, the conscientious camper will pack out most garbage, but let's be honest: anything that can be completely and safely burned (i.e. anything made of natural fibres, such as paper) is probably not going to be packed out.

Don't use any toilet paper.³ Use only natural materials to wipe, such as snow, smooth rocks, leaves, sticks, etc. The idea is that you would bury your waste and also your wiping implement. Alternatively, you could hide your rocks/leaves/sticks under a bush somewhere where nobody is likely to encounter them. There are many pros and cons to this. I believe the bottom line is, when we are unable to enjoy the comforts of our bathroom, most of us are reluctant to also give up the comforts of our bath tissue.

Bury your own waste and burn your paper. I think that's a great idea, but if you've ever actually done this, you know it's not as easy as it sounds. To begin with, you are advised to never burn it along the trail, as that creates a risk of a forest fire.⁴ It's actually pretty hard to ignite and completely burn anyways, unless you are adding it to an already-blazing campfire. You will have to keep your soiled tissue, and carry it to a proper fire pit; it's unsavoury at the least, and certainly unsanitary, plus who wants your dirty TP on their cooking fire?

Bury both waste and paper, in a "cat-hole" away from campsite and trail.⁵ This is our usual practice, unless there's already a fire conveniently burning nearby. Most agree that our secretly buried matter will soon decompose, although I've never seen a definition of "soon" written in any camping guide.

Bury your waste but leave the paper on the surface. I don't remember where I read this, but the idea was that the paper will not decompose properly unless exposed to the elements of sun and air. That sounds kind of intelligent, but leaves us with wads of nastiness adorning an otherwise pristine area. We've all seen it. Yuck!

During a canoe trip up the East Montreal River, in July 2014, I thought a lot about this topic. We had another less-experienced couple paddling with us, and so I found myself taking on the role of advisor in matters pertaining to wilderness camping and ecological best practices. As I tried to be a role model in environmental stewardship, I began to notice all the ways in which I was falling short. I began to feel guilty about the Kleenex. I decided that when we got back home, I would conduct a mini-study to compare the biodegradability of toilet paper and Kleenex.

The Study

I chose three types of personal cleaning materials that I thought were most relevant to my situation. My goal was to find



out which would biodegrade the most quickly, and whether it would degrade more quickly above the ground or buried.

The three types of materials sampled were:

1. "Selections" (Metro store brand) Eco 2-ply toilet paper, made of 100% recycled fibres;
2. "Kleenex" brand tissue; and
3. "Cashmere" flushable wipes, which are supposed to be biodegradable.

I used the "Selections Eco" paper because that is the brand we mostly use at home. If I took a roll of toilet tissue on a canoe trip, that would probably be the one, even though it is 2-ply. I chose "Kleenex" facial tissues because that is what we actually do bring along, in the small pocket-sized packages. The flushable wipes were included because a couple years ago we started using them for extra cleanliness. As they are labelled "flushable" and "biodegradable," I believed that they were safe to burn or bury.

I placed a similarly-sized portion of each above the ground, and 3 more equal portions just below the ground. They were buried only about 5 cm below the surface, as I needed to be able to dig them up occasionally without causing too much artificially-induced breakdown of the samples. I labelled each sample with a popsicle stick, and used the sticks to hold the above-ground samples in place. Periodically, I visited the site and recorded my observations regarding changes in appearance and apparent degradation.

The six samples (three above ground and three below) were placed in the back corner of my yard in Hamilton, in an area that would likely not be disturbed much, by humans, anyways. The nearest vegetation, aside from a few weeds and straggly bits of grass struggling to grow, were a large Spruce tree overhead and raspberry bushes nearby. Basically, the soil is dry and acidic and quite shaded much of the day, because of the tree.

The Results

I set up the samples on July 14, 2014. It rained that night. By the next day, the surface of the toilet tissue was already beginning to disintegrate. The other two samples looked wet but otherwise undamaged. I did not attempt to dig up the below-ground samples, but planned to do that when the above-ground samples were

quite well degraded. I spent some of July 15 searching the internet, trying to find out more about the wipes. Very little information was disclosed, other than that they are "made from renewable resources."

On July 19, there were still no visible changes in the above-ground samples. The weather had been dry.

On July 28, following a night of heavy rain, the toilet tissue was noticeably breaking apart. The facial tissue had some damage to its top layer. The wipe was dirty and wrinkled but otherwise appeared undamaged.

On August 1, the toilet tissue was further degraded, but the other samples had not changed.

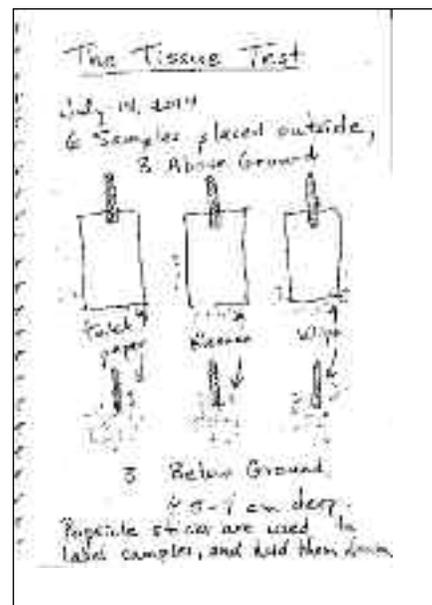
On August 8, the above-ground samples still looked the same as they had on August 1. Using a small garden spade, I carefully lifted the soil off the below-ground samples and had a look. They looked about the same as the above-ground samples, except for being dirtier.

On August 12, the above-ground toilet tissue was further degraded, quite broken apart, but still recognizable as a piece of white toilet paper. The facial tissue had maintained its basic integrity, although it had turned from white to a tan colour, as if it had been dipped in weak tea. The wipe had not degraded in any way visible. Again using a garden spade, I gently lifted the soil off the below-ground samples and could barely discern that any toilet tissue or facial tissue had been there. The wipe was still there, quite well intact.

I removed what remained of the samples and the popsicle sticks on August 12, partly because the popsicle sticks were getting broken and moved around (wind, squirrels, raccoons?), and partly because I felt that I had accomplished my goal with this project.

My Interpretation of the Results

Although initially the toilet tissue seemed to be degrading faster above ground than below, and the above-ground facial tissue was taking much longer than the toilet tissue, both degraded in approximately one month below ground. That process would have undoubtedly been accelerated by the addition of human waste in the hole. (No, I did not bury poop in my backyard.) I will, therefore, continue to use pocket-sized packages of facial tissue instead of



toilet tissue, and I will continue my usual practice of burying it, or sometimes burning it.

I will have to rethink the use of wipes. They definitely should not be left behind, either above or below ground. Burning them may be an acceptable option, but I would like to learn what they are made of. Packing them out seems like the best choice, or perhaps going back to a good old-fashioned wet washcloth.

In conclusion, I would suggest that it is quite all right to use either TP or Kleenex, as long as you dispose of it in a responsible manner - bury it, burn it, or pack it out. My conscience is relieved. I guess it's true that confession is good for the soul. Happy tripping!

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Dating in the Time of Forest Fires

Article and Photos: Jason White



Waiting in Air Tindi.



Lucy's rubber boots.

It's a problem we've all had; You've used an online dating site to arrange a 26-day canoe trip date with a girl from Michigan you've never met, painstakingly spent 4 days in Yellowknife preparing everything for the date, and then on the day of her arrival you discover your route is on fire and you're not sure what to do. It's awkward and we've all been there.

I spent the winter of 2014 struggling in various ways to find a canoe partner. I had takers for weekend trips, but as I had the whole summer off, I wanted to take full advantage of the time. I very much wanted to do a long trip in the Far North. My usual paddling friends were tied down by newborns or jobs. In some cases they had both of these problems!

In my panic, I turned to a dating website, where after months of being a

total creep online I was finally able to convince a waitress from a small town in Michigan to come canoeing with me. Lucy was 25 years old and lived in a barn. Her employer thought her decision to spend 26 days with a complete stranger off the internet was 'beyond stupid'. However this same boss was kind enough to allow her nearly a month off work to pursue her stupid choice. Lucy spent her only \$1000 on a round trip plane ticket from Detroit to Yellowknife. To help reduce the cost of the trip I offered to cover the groceries, as guys often do on first dates.

I arrived in Yellowknife 4 days before Lucy as I wanted to take care of all the boring stuff and set things up, so that when she arrived we could jump straight to the fun part, the actual adventure. I also didn't want her first im-

pression of me to be one where I was in an excessively preoccupied mode, which would certainly have been the case at the start of a trip if the check list of tasks was too long. I would be too focused on organizing things and not focused enough on being charming! Four days gave me enough time to go over all the gear, grocery shop and arrange our flights to Wha Ti. I needed to pick up bear spray and bear bangers. I bought a new pair of rubber boots at Canadian Tire, and collected the paddles I left behind the year before in a friend's shed.

During my time in Yellowknife, I had done my very best to ignore the continual news of forest fires. It was hard though. Friends would email me articles showing large pictures of fires. And Yellowknife was very smoky. A constant grey haze over the city at times blotted out the sun and made ignoring the situation very difficult. I occasionally glanced at newspaper headlines in town. Two in particular stood out; "NWT's One Hundred-Year Fire Storm" and another containing the expression "Fire Tornadoes."

I started wondering what the dating etiquette was for forest fires. Should you tell your online date beforehand that everything is on fire? Or just wait until you are beside a forest fire before discussing it? Dating has only gotten more complicated with the advent of technology, so it's really hard to say what the answer is in this day and age.

Lucy and I were in daily contact over email, still messaging about food, preferred spices, and last-minute items to bring or not bring. I decided I should perhaps mention the fires, albeit in a casual way. I typed a sentence or two about the one hundred-year fire storm but something felt wrong about it. I deleted it and tried again. But any use of "fire tornadoes" didn't look right either.

I don't really know much about women. Like all of us, I realize they like shoes and shampoo. However in my experience I've noted they're not

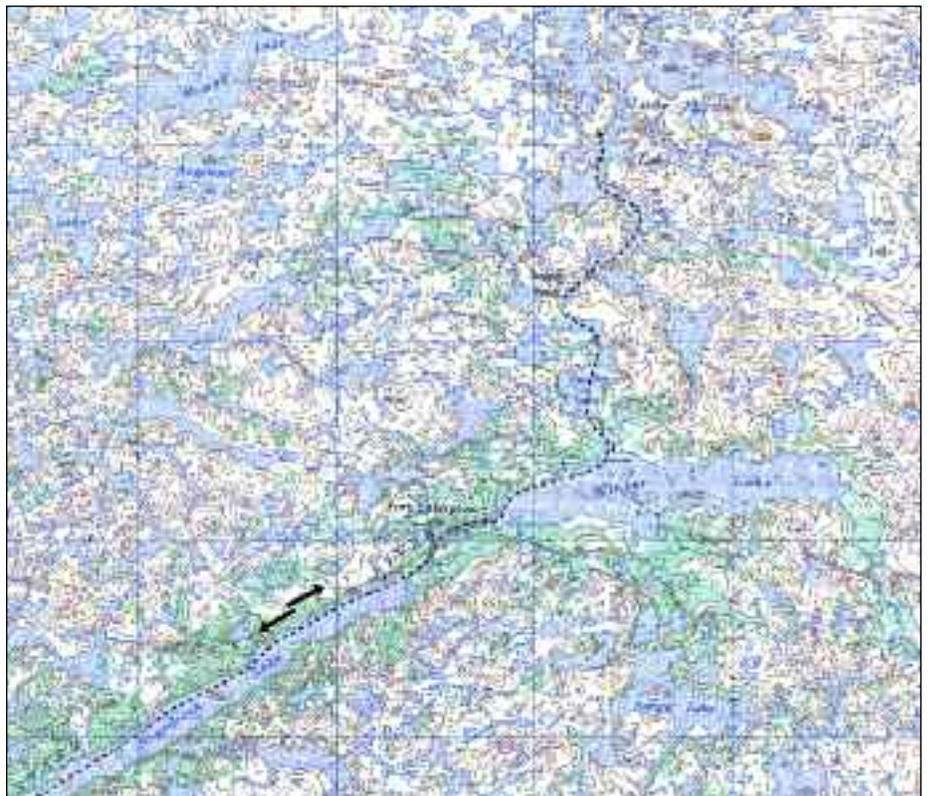


Snare Lake.

particularly keen on forest fires, or being directly in an environment that's on fire. And it just seemed like such a negative thing to interject into our conversation. I decided to keep it positive and instead wrote "Can't wait, see you tomorrow!" and signed off. I'd tell her once she was off the plane.

The next morning I woke up with a

full day of relaxing ahead of me. All of my tasks were done and Lucy wasn't arriving until the evening. I walked into town to use the internet at the public library. One of my daily Yellowknife activities had become checking the NWT online fire tracker and confirming there was nothing worrisome on our planned route. Everything had ap-



Snare-Winter Lake-Little Marten Route Map.



Distant fire.

peared good for the 3 days prior. However on this day, when the site loaded, I immediately noticed a brand new cartoony fire icon directly on Rivière La Martre, the first river we

were set to travel on.

I left the library and went to the visitor's centre to ask if there was any way to get more details on specific fires. They redirected me to the Environment

and Natural Resources office in Old Town. I hoofed it to Old Town and located the office. Inside and outside the building things were obviously busy with fire-fighters from across Canada wandering about and various rooms full of people in discussions. I was able to speak to a woman who showed me a more detailed map and gave me a verbal summary of the fire. The Rivière La Martre fire was new, having just broken out the evening before. It was out-of-control, and directly on the river, and had hopped sides that morning. Meaning both sides of the river would be on fire. The good news of this description was there wasn't much room for interpretation - the trip wasn't going to work. I would have to come up with a new idea.

The next stop was the print shop to get their business hours. A new trip would need new maps. Thankfully I had a USB key with digital copies of the entire collection of topos for Western Canada. Five o'clock became my deadline as that was the latest time they could receive files and print them off before closing. I had four hours to pick a new route.

A paddle around Great Slave Lake came to mind as an idea, but much of it was on fire as well and I'd already done such a trip a few years back. I fired off some emails to friends to get some additional ideas. I was looking for a trip that would be affordable, about 20 days in length, and not on fire.

The pakcanoe I brought with me from Toronto offered a lot of flexibility for a last-minute change. We could basically fly into any community that had an affordable scheduled flight. Costs narrowed these options down to Gameti, Lutsel K'e or Wekweeti. Of those three choices, Wekweeti was nearest to the tundra. I reasoned that in the tundra there would be no trees to burn. A trip starting in Wekweeti and heading northeast to Winter Lake seemed interesting. That would only occupy a week of time but there were



Lucy and cranberries.

lots of options from there, going further north or looping south. The other great thing was that this trip would require me to print just one map, the Winter Lake map.

I called Air Tindi and changed our flights from Wha Ti to Wekweeti. At 5:30pm, before closing, I picked up the Winter Lake map from the print shop. The day had not been the relaxing one I had hoped for, but after all was said and done I didn't feel too bad about the new route. I was kind of excited that my summer was now suddenly going to include some time in the barrens.

That evening, I went to the airport to greet Lucy. After six weeks of correspondence, this was to be our first time meeting and would also be our first time hearing one another's voice. It would have been easy to have spoken on the phone at some point during our planning but Lucy thought it would be "funnier" if we didn't. The plane arrived and passengers entered the terminal. Most of them were large males, possibly fire-fighters, which made Lucy easy to pick out as she was clearly the small blonde by herself.

She'd had sixteen hours of flight and airport time to prepare her first line which was "Oh, are you Justin?" – intentionally getting my name wrong. I got confused and was about to correct her before understanding it as a joke.

Since Lucy was broke from spending all her money on the plane ticket, we decided to walk rather than take a cab. In what was to be our first of many portages, we carried from the airport parking lot to the Fred Henne campground. Along the way, Lucy found a \$5 bill in the ditch, turning our decision to portage into a handsome profit. On the walk I explained that our route had to be changed because the old one was full of fire tornadoes. She didn't really care. The impact of this last-minute change was to be felt more by her uncle who was now to spend the next month staring at the wrong location on his map, falsely imagining her progress along a path we were no





Tundra berries.



Winter Lake.



Us

longer traveling. By the end of the walk we were both feeling good, and slightly relieved. We were getting along. All of the imagined worst case scenarios, self created or from others, faded away in that first half hour.

The next day we packed up all the gear and headed to the Air Tindi terminal for our flight to Wekweeti. This was the part of the date where we were both asked to announce our body weight. Lucy weighed so little I'm certain they immediately realized they could add a few extra flats of Orange Crush to the flight.

From the air a few distant fires were visible. On arriving in Wekweeti, most of the other passengers had rides or relatives waiting to pick them up. The airport was located a fair way out from the town proper. Having no family to greet us, we traveled in the van with the Doritos. As the van rounded corners or hit bumps, the boxes would shift and bags of Doritos would fall out and spill over us. A wolf skirted across the road on the edge of town.

We were dropped off in town, at the water's edge, by the docks. Facing the choppy waters of Snare Lake, we began to get ourselves organized and started to set up the canoe.

Lucy had taken a much larger risk coming out here than I had, not just the male/female variable but also in trusting that I was capable enough to organize and execute such a trip. For her, the whole experience was brand new. She enjoyed nature too but had always done so in more of a park-the-car-to-pick-mushrooms kind of way. This was to be her first full-on wilderness experience. Besides hoping I wasn't a serial killer, she also had to trust I knew what I was doing and had the skills I claimed I had. This is why it was all the more embarrassing when the empty canoe began to blow across the lake. I had placed the pakcanoe by the water's edge and was about to load the first bag but got distracted by some duct tape on the paddles. Lucy shouted "the canoe is blowing away!" which drew my attention to the canoe blowing away. Under normal circumstances the canoe would simply have been gone. It was empty, had caught the wind, and was moving off shore too quickly. However, the dock was the game changer. It allowed me to pursue the canoe at a running speed. At the end of the dock I jumped into the lake with my arm outstretched to grab hold of the gunwale. Lucy was delighted. She instantly declared this to be the single best thing she'd ever been witness to. I modestly accepted

the accolades and went behind some bushes to change into new clothes. I was a bit torn. Clearly jumping into the lake had made Lucy explicitly happy, but I was also disappointed I'd made such a mistake. Mixed into this was also immense relief at having avoided a trip up the hill into town to explain how we'd managed to lose the canoe 20 minutes after having been dropped off. That embarrassment had thankfully been avoided.

The next 3 weeks were just as fun. We traveled the Snare and Roundrock Lakes and portaged three times on the upper Snare River to get ourselves into Winter Lake. From here we decided to ascend the Winter River as far as Little Marten Lake. On the way back we included a hike up to the top of Dogrib Rock, a large plateau rising out from the barrens.

Lucy much preferred picking berries or finding caribou skulls to portaging or paddling, and it was easy to cater the trip to these activities as we didn't really have a lot of distance to cover. It was a particularly good berry season. There were tons of half-dried cranberries from the year previous, as well as lots of blueberries and cloudberries. We saw a few smaller fires on the more heavily treed lakes, but they felt far off and harmless.

We returned to Wekweeti 23 days later, both of us happy with the trip, or first date, or whatever we just did. It had gone well. The last minute stress caused by the fires now seemed a distant memory. Lucy was looking forward to her return to normal life, seeing friends, and eating an ice cream cake. She flew back to Yellowknife. I wasn't as eager to return to civilization; I never am. Thankfully there was still lots of summer left. I stayed behind with plans to begin a solo trip. As I'd lost a rubber boot in the Winter River, Lucy was to pick me up a new pair in Yellowknife and ship them in to Wekweeti on the next flight. When the package arrived, the boots contained a few chocolate bars and a very thoughtful 3-page letter thanking me for the wonderful experience. I'd never gotten anything like this on previous dates, particularly the chocolate bars. Nobody just hands over 4 chocolate bars at the end of a date. But maybe they should. Imagine how many chocolate bars we'd all have if that were the case. Anyway, I guess the point is that we both took some risks, and by doing so we made a fantastic adventure possible.



Roundrock Lake.



Newly Burnt Forest.



The summer of 2014 was a record year for forest fires in the Northwest Territories.

Fort Selkirk on the Yukon

Story by Bob Henderson

Photos by Bob Henderson and Vivian Wood-Alexander

The expression usually goes, “Don’t make my mistake”. But, in the case of my visit to Fort Selkirk on the Yukon River in 2014, the more apt comment would be, “Do make the mistake I made”. Here is the story.

I was part of a canoe tripping/symposium for the outdoor, environmental and art educators. This was the brain-child of a retired Lakehead University professor, Bob Jickling. We were to spend two nights camped at Fort Selkirk on our route from Carmack to Dawson City. I had thought Fort Selkirk would be like most other “forts” in the Canadian North. It would be a too long weathered, too long ignored cabin or, at best, a complex of too long ignored cabins.

Now look, I think one should still be excited to visit first hand such cultural heritage sites that can help imagine a long by-gone era, too long weathered or not, but Fort Selkirk has no comparisons in Canada. Fort Selkirk is a town, not a fort. Simply put and, strangely, I did not know that. I had seen a brochure but only its cover. That should have been a tip-off. It suggested to me a single complex of buildings, and I rel-

ished the anticipation of visiting the site but I was unprepared for what followed.

The brochure describes Fort Selkirk as a living cultural heritage site, an archaeological site, and most importantly, a place for spiritual and cultural renewal. Local groups of Selkirk First Nations peoples inhabit and continually work at preserving the site. There’s lots

This involves carefully poking about at all the ins and outs, reading all the interpretive signage, and chatting with folks who were working on the grounds. The day included two highlights; a visit to the restored First Nations cemetery and an evening guitar singsong in the St. Andrew’s Anglican Church with noted Yukon recording artist and fellow canoe trip mate, Remy Rodden.

Here are a few details to showcase the well-preserved (a better phrase would be “lovingly cared for”) Fort Selkirk. There are over thirty-five buildings here; some restored, some rebuilt and some left as they were. The Taylor and Drury store, bar and stable complex are standouts. First built as the Dominion Hotel in 1900, in anticipation of a continuing swell of population with the Gold Rush era, the store has a bar extension along its east wall and a stable for six



horses. Liquor licenses required a hotel to be able to house six horses. The School House (1892) has functioned as a church, hospital and men’s club. The school served the community until 1953 when Fort Selkirk was finally abandoned.

There are two churches. My friend Remy had told me the acoustics in the St. Andrew’s Anglican Church (1931) were noted throughout the Yukon. We had a guitar and planned an impromptu singsong in the evening, which I will not soon forget. James Taylor sounded great within these walls. Remy played some original Yukon history ballads and sing-along songs. What could be better? The long evening light played on the distant riverbank. The only thing missing was a Sourdough Klondike man straight off a paddle-wheeler blast-

to see and inhabitants, past and present (thanks to interpretive signage), to meet.

I was leading the first group of canoe trippers down the fast-flowing Yukon River and, comically, was worried I might miss the fort. The Yukon really pushes along. It is easy enough to miss an intended stopping spot and one doesn’t easily backtrack or even ferry across the kilometer wide, eight kilometer per hour current. But as I was to learn, you don’t miss Fort Selkirk on the Yukon. That isn’t happening.

What I found was a more than one-kilometer long “town” site high on a level river bank. Now, this place demands some time, and we would have an evening and a full day to explore the site. How big is the site? Well, it took the day to properly explore the area.



ing into the room proclaiming he'd "struck it rich". It was a magic musical night full of Yukon River romance for us canoe trippers en route to Dawson City.

Other buildings include the RCMP Detachment headquarters, (the barracks are long gone but the wood was used elsewhere in construction of personal cabins); a machine shop and garage with lots of relic parts laying about; caches for storing fish and game; and a mix of trapper cabins and government houses. Later-day houses date to the 1940's. Fort Selkirk community life dwindled with the completion of the Mayo Road to the west and the end of the steamboat era. The town was abandoned in 1953, but there was always activity at Fort Selkirk.

One of the markers of thriving times is the Selkirk First Nations cemetery. Colleague Vivian Wood-Alexander and I must have spent a good hour here while Vivian sketched and I photographed. In many ways we both got lost in our thoughts, both of us in admiration and respect for the elaborate, symbolic, and colourfully painted designs. Many designs were family totems dating back hundreds of years. Early 1900's grave houses have been restored as have later period grave fences and elaborate hand-carved markings. It is a maze of variety of design and colour, showing a deep respect for past lives and a once-vibrant community so connected ecologically to the immediate site and the far-reaching Yukon, Peel River and Mackenzie watersheds.

The buildings do not tell the whole story. From them and the well-done historical signage we learned about the community and its inhabitants. But, there is much more. The murky waters we experienced paddling further downstream on the Yukon are connected to a volcanic eruption dating back 7,000 years. This event is recorded in the local oral history of Selkirk First Nation elders. Also, stone tools discovered here date back up to 10,000 years. People have been fishing, hunting, and celebrating life here for a long time. Local oral history dating back 7,000 years causes one to stop and ponder. Travel routes arrive here from all direc-

tions.

There is the mighty Yukon River of course, but the Pelly River from the east brought Klondike gold seekers from Edmonton, and the Mountain Dene also from the east via the Macmillan River and Keele Rivers arrived for trade from the Mackenzie River corridor. Here at Fort Selkirk, one is experiencing a true hub of all of the Northwest.

This trade from North, South and East was all about access between Fort Selkirk with the Chilkats from the Pacific Coast. Furs and hides from the interior were traded for coastal products such as seal fat, shells, and obsidian for sharp stone tools. By the 1790's the Chilkats gained much wealth and prestige trading European goods with inland peoples at Fort Selkirk. In 1848 Robert Campbell, an ambitious trader, arrived from the east using the Pelly River and set up a trading post. He named the post Fort Selkirk. This post upset the long established patterns of trade. It is long-established that the coastal Chilkats responded violently when he elected to bring his coastal trade items into the interior via the Yukon River and not the coastal walking route direct to Selkirk. The coastal Chilkats pillaged Fort Selkirk in 1852 forcing Campbell out of business. Amazingly, Campbell fled the site safely and later snowshoed much of Canada north to south before completing the trip from Minnesota to Montreal. Wait again! Such a sentence demands a moment to pause and consider the distances involved. In Montreal, Campbell failed to convince his superiors that they should mount a raid on the coastal Chilkats. Presumably, they *did* pause to consider the distances involved.

When you know the history (I didn't) and have seen the town site in pictures (I hadn't), then Fort Selkirk must be among the most prized destinations for the heritage-focused traveler (I am). I am dumbstruck that I had missed all of the above in years of reading Canadian history and even having had two previous trips on the Yukon River. I may be just dumb on this one. It is a good thing sometimes to be dumb. The excitement I experienced from the canoe that lovely July afternoon when I



first saw the TOWN of Fort Selkirk, rather than my anticipated too long ignored "fort" is a special memory. For two days, I was stunned, almost overwhelmed by the history of the place. It is an uplifting story. The Yukon government and First Nations Selkirk peoples in partnership are continually working to keep this history alive and well preserved for all Canadians.

We paddled on down to Dawson City in five more days on the water. We enjoyed two river bar camps. When the wind blew up and sent one of our tents about twenty feet in the air in a wind tunnel twister, I managed to save the bannock in the reflector oven at that moment while others, closer to the uproar, chased the tumbling dome and doomed tent down the river bar. We enjoyed a day at a homestead with a river (road) sign - "five kilometers to Kirkman River Bakery", and here we also enjoyed a collection of pies. I remember the lemon meringue pie best. Finally, we camped at the Ancient Voices Camp about four hours of travel from Dawson City. Here we paid for a caribou stew and local vegetables and learned about the use of the site as a healing center for troubled youth and an adult retreat center. For a canoe tripper, there is a lot to see and do on the Yukon River. Fort Selkirk though looms large as a colourful living heritage site on the vibrant Yukon River.



Hood River Diary

Story and Phtos by Marilyn Friessen



Death by hypothermia on an Air Tindi flight? A definite possibility, I thought, as we flew to the starting point for our Hood River canoe trip. The previous hot, sunny day and dip in the lake at the Yellowknife campground seemed like a blatant lie. Our float plane dumped us onto a soggy cold shore. Half of our group of twelve were already there and had a tent up. Snowflakes sent me scurrying into the tent to put on more clothes – but unfortunately not rainpants because I had wisely left them at home, confident that wind pants dry quickly!

The next day, July 5, we met our first rapid followed by a 20 km paddle into a headwind. Fuchsia blossoms of Lapland rhododendron, a few caribou, and a sunny evening were the day's highlights.

Rain and overcast skies kept temperatures low the next day. After a 10 km trip down the lake, the river made a sharp right hand turn revealing solid i.e. two-foot thick ice, shore to shore, all the way to a misty end about 10 km away! We made slow progress along the shore, paddling in a narrow strip of water, chopping at the ice with paddles, lining and portag-



ing in hops. Candle ice tinkled like wind chimes in the bobbing water. Eventually we were confronted with an eight-foot high hill of unstable ice, heaped beside the shore by the wind. Once we were on the other side, we decided to call it a day. We set out tents over pockets of willow on the cliff front. I slept like a log!

Cathy and Sally had a plan the next morning. They thought they could see water along the far shore. We just had to get there. Scootering along the ice between leads did the trick. If you've never scootered here's how you do it (the ice must be strong enough to bear the weight). Canoe is shoved onto the ice when the lead runs out. Holding the gunnels firmly with both hands and leaving one foot in the canoe, you propel your canoe across the ice with the leg that is outside the canoe. Fun! Happily, there was a strip of water on the other side so we were able to paddle to the frothing outlet. Five crossings of the half-kilometer portage and we were finally in the Hood River. An hour or so downstream we came to a rapid that Cathy and Sally, our guides in the lead canoe, decided to run. They eddied out on river-right. The other 5 canoes did the same behind a boulder that really wasn't big enough for all of us. Annie and Earl swung back out into the current, and Lianne and I wobbled out only to dump when we crossed the eddy line. "Oh my gawd! oh my gawd!" was all I could hear from my daughter. I didn't feel cold and even had the (dumb) idea that I might be able to stand up (couldn't). Our guides dragged Lianne and me out of the water onto their deck while someone else went for our canoe. Everyone convened on shore. We stripped off our wet clothes (down to naked bodies) while our new friends donated warm dry ones from theirs. Our canoe and contents had eddied out just beyond the next rapid. Time to call it a day. All evening caribou crossed the river near us while our wet things were draped on guy lines and little shrubs to dry in the weak evening sunshine. What a day!

July 8. The group tackled an early rapid with a front ferry to river R, a short portage and some lining, bad headwinds

to buck but NO rain. Further on, we scrambled up a 30-foot high sandy cliff to identify the large furry blob on top... wow! An old, solitary, sleeping muskox. Our first full portage was around a falls. The bypass method was new to me. After carrying the canoe up the hill, we just dragged it over the flat top, and then gave it a hefty shove down the other side. It stopped well short of the bottom. Near the end of the day there were two chutes. The river funneled forcefully through a very narrow gap followed by huge standing waves driving toward the second chute. Two canoes chose the short portage, two canoes ran it fine. The next canoe got turned 180° and finished it backwards. The last canoe flipped. I



watched in horror as one paddler hung onto his canoe and rode the standing waves/current well down toward the next chute. But he finally abandoned it for a pick up. His canoe flipped end over end as it jostled out of sight through the second chute. Thank goodness our canoes had been well trained to eddy out as soon as possible. Another night's stop had been chosen. A warm night!

July 9. The spectacular falls that started our day with portaging was about the same distance from chute #2 as was the distance between yesterday's two chutes i.e. not far! Thank goodness Don had let go and that his canoe had eddied out. The day was warm and sunny, the wind at our backs. Four muskox, more caribou, 2 tundra swans and an h'ors



d'oeuvre of freshly-caught grayling capped this stellar day. Next day the blustery wind was back and succeeded in breaking two tent poles that evening. The day had started warm but ended icy cold.

July 11 had a lot of swifts and rapids but only one that nobody ran. Blue lupine and bright yellow arnica lined the river banks sometimes so thick as to create a blue haze. Daytime warm temperatures encouraged some



bugs. A little ground squirrel stood poker straight on the elevated bank watching the colourful debris (us) slide past. We saw seventeen muskox this day, and Lianne and I started gathering quiviut. I only counted muskox for my diary account because they were a finite number. There was always a dribble of caribou on the shore or fording the river but we never saw the massed brown bobbing countryside of which I had dreamt.

July 12 was full of rapids and patches of snow on portages. Lianne and I had an unscheduled, exciting roller coaster ride down a line of standing waves. Nineteen more muskox. Later in the day, the flat countryside of the morning suddenly

changed to towering hills and ridges. Their chipped black stone tops gave way to lovely, green velvet lower slopes. Quite abruptly the valley widened out allowing the river to meander madly. Had the Booth River just joined us? Someone spotted one white canoe above the gravelly shore on river R and another on the skyline of a ridge, river L. We were near Wilberforce Falls. Time to go ashore and check this out. The river ran smoothly with only a little bit of splashing toward a spectacular pink and red sandstone canyon. Just before the drop, the river split into two – a quiet little side stream that eventually took a two-stepped plunge and a major channel that pushed on to the main falls. Flowers were even more lush here – lots of purple lupine. White heather and Labrador tea competed with the taller golden arnica. It was HOT and really buggy. Bugs were so bad that I dove for the tent as soon as it was up. The screen door was instantly covered. They hummed and bounced excitedly, anticipating our eventual exit. Someone found a green, plastic octopus with weighted container inside with two notes for someone who was getting married HERE later in the summer.

July 13. Hurray! A “down” day for sleeping in and exploring. One helicopter and two planes flew overhead. Unencumbered with packs, and cameras in hand, we walked the canyon. The turquoise green main falls was enhanced by a shifting rainbow that came and went as the plummeting water sent up clouds of mist. It was a buggy, warm day that ended abruptly with the cooler evening. Lianne and I had been carrying a surprise in a green garbage bag all trip. After supper we revealed our rainbow kite flying it high above Wilberforce Falls. Whereas yesterday felt like 30° C, this morning felt like 30° F. Thank goodness, because today was a PORTAGE DAY – a three-mile canoe drag wearing our packs. At one point we couldn't understand why it had suddenly become so arduous, then turned around and saw the canoe upside down! The food barrels and other gear necessitated another crossing. Lianne and I were ‘all in but our bootstraps’ when the day ended.

The plan for July 15 was to paddle about 30 km to our final campsite where we would spend the last two nights but



the wind had other plans. We had to stop early. Noted in the diary was one 25-foot falls calling for a portage.

July 16 – no wind! We had an unrunnable ten-foot high ledge right across the river to portage around before an early campsite (where a float plane could



access us the next day), then a paddle to the sea – Bailie Bay, Arctic Sound, Bathurst Inlet... Arctic Ocean. We stopped as soon as the water tasted salty.

Through binoculars we saw the gleam of brilliant, white sea ice.



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