Wilderness Canoe Association
WCA
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Spring/Summer 2019 Vol. 46 No. 1/2 Quarterly Journal of the Wilderness Canoe Association

Rory and Dwayne eddy out

Flat River

Story by Dwayne Wohlgemuth
Photos by Dwayne Wohlgemuth and Rory McIntosh

"One trip report says they began at Divide Lake. Want to start there?" I ask the group the evening before we start paddling. "Sure, yes," they all chime. The road to Tungsten, a town that closed in 1986 when the Cantung Mine closed, allows a few more places to put into the Flat River: another small lake just four kilometres down the valley from Divide Lake, and a couple spots downstream of that where the river twists and turns beside the road. But we wouldn't want to come all this way and not paddle the entire river.

Our gang of six has driven over 1,700 kilometres from Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, around through British Columbia and Yukon to reach the headwaters of the Flat River in the Mackenzie Mountains. We are Rich and Rory McIntosh, Christine Wenman, Shauna Morgan, Ian Brown, and I, all of us from Yellowknife.

The Flat River flows generally southeast from Tungsten to where it joins the Nahanni River between its third and fourth canyons. The Flat was well-travelled in

Tungsten Hot Springs

Tungsten Hot Springs building

the past by aboriginals and was buzzing with activity in the early 1900s as trappers and prospectors came to seek fortunes. In 1972, the lower portion of the river became part of the Nahanni National Park Reserve. The park's expansion in 2009 left only about the top third of the river outside of the park. These days the river is rarely travelled, likely due to the more stunning cliffs and canyons present along other rivers in Nahanni National Park. However, the ability to drive to the headwaters makes the Flat River one of the least expensive whitewater trips in the entire Nahanni National Park, without requiring an arduous upstream or portage route to reach the headwaters.

We arrive at Divide Lake in the evening, and the clouds are thick and the sun completely hidden as we prepare our camp. The only half-dry wood we can find are the bottom boughs of massive spruce trees. Waves of mist wet our rain jackets and occasionally a wave of real raindrops splatters on our tarp. This valley must receive a lot of rain and snow, as the trees are relatively huge – a few nearby are a metre across at the butt – and everything on the ground is rotten. The glaciers in the area speak to the quantity of snow. The valley is covered in sparse spruce and tangled two-metre-tall willow and bog birch. There are some sandy ridges – they look amazingly like eskers – where the bog birch is only a metre tall and exploring looks easier.

Less than 200 km to the south as the crow flies, a forest fire almost prevented us from coming on this trip. The Robert Campbell highway officially closed the night before we left Yellowknife. But there was an alternative route that included driving an extra 700 km around to Ross River and then back east to Tungsten. This meant leaving our two shuttle drivers behind since they didn't have time to drive the extra two-day round trip. However, when we reached Watson Lake the Yukon Department of Transportation was letting traffic through the "closed" highway. So no extra driving, but we'll have to drive back later, or fly in, to retrieve our two trucks now abandoned in the mountains.

We decide not to wrap the trucks in their porcupine fence for the night since we are tenting only a stone's throw away. Ian, with his light sleeping habits and good ears, wakes at 3 a.m. to the sound of chewing. He quickly bolts out of his tent, headlamp glowing, to chase a fat porcupine out from under my truck. Those porcupines must smell rubber from a mile away. He wakes a couple of us to help wrap the trucks in chicken wire. Then back to sleep for a few more hours.

In the morning we drive our gear down to the lake, attach the spray decks, load the canoes, wrap the trucks with chicken wire again, and eventually set off, still under thick, grey clouds. We are optimistic and excited for the first couple kilometres

Flat River map

Pulling over a beaver dam

where the river is a narrow, calm and meandering stream. We become suspicious, however, when we pull over a beaver dam, but we continue. We pull over a second dam, and soon the dams come frequently and the drop at each dam is higher. People don't truly start at Divide Lake, do they? We are soon fully immersed in a beaver universe that covers the entire valley and disperses the river into numerous tiny trickles flowing through a maze of head-high willow and bog birch. A couple dams have drops of a metre and a half.

When we reach Kuskula Creek flowing into the valley from the north, we scout from shore and discuss paddling it the couple kilometres to the next lake where it joins the Flat, but our inexperienced team is not ready for the challenge. It is fast, narrow, and rocky, without eddies big enough for a canoe. But it obviously has higher water flow than the Flat River at this point. We choose to drag our canoes back through the beaver universe and we eventually portage a couple hundred metres back to the road. We are exhausted and made zero progress on our first day. Our morale is a little shaken, but I decide that if our group can stay positive for a day tromping across beaver dams and through the tangles of bog birch and willow, we'll be okay.

After camping a second night at the same spot, we drive our canoes and gear downstream and start on the unnamed lake about four kilometres down the valley from Divide Lake. This is an ideal starting point and the one that I would recommend to other groups. I eventually decide that this lake should be named Paddler's Lake to make it obvious as a starting point for trips down the Flat River. I wouldn't want anyone else to try paddling from Divide Lake. The river here is gentle and calm, then slowly becomes a narrow, twisting river, but one that is easily managed. Just as the river enters the Cantung Mine site, the first real rapid is a drop of perhaps a metre over a short distance and we stop to scout. Between here and the end of the Tungsten townsite, we hop out to scout a few more rapids but are able to run everything.

The immediate river banks are

green, forested, and mostly free of mine debris, but the drab buildings and blasted slopes on the mountains are a silent monotone grey, visible from miles away against the dark green of the adjacent forests. The mine is closed but a small team of caretakers still works here. The Government of the Northwest Territories purchased the mine in 2015, and hopes that Tungsten prices will increase in the future to a point where the mine is once again viable. The town was built in 1961 to accommodate people working at the Cantung Mine, an open pit Tungsten mine. At its peak in the late 1970s, the town had about 200 mine workers and more than 500 people. Though the mine has operated for a couple short periods since 1986, the town was never reopened.

We were told that the Tungsten Hot Springs are located across the runway from the river. We watch for a campsite near the airport – just downstream of the Tungsten townsite – but there are no satisfactory options. We eventually decide to put our tents on the edge of a mine road where it crosses the Flat River just downstream of the runway, and we find a small gravel bar pull-out just upstream of the bridge. After dinner, we all go for a hot soak. A short road leads from the runway to the springs where there is an original outdoor pool that cozily fits two people and a new pool inside a wooden building that easily fits the six of us. With the building's clear plastic roof and a change room equipped with pegs on the wall, we are spoiled. A thermometer indicates a water temperature of 35 degrees Celsius.

After a great sleep and another short hot soak the next morning, we receive a visit from a manager at the mine. He spotted us walking around the edge of the runway maintenance road. He drives as close as he can and then comes tearing through the bush to tell us we need to put out our fire immediately and leave. He seems quite upset, and we tell him that we will extinguish our fire and continue downstream after we finish our breakfast. We're not sure if he's upset because we are on the mine lease or because we visited their hot springs. He doesn't respond to any questions, but instead turns and leaves as quickly as he came. For other paddling groups, I would recommend staying out of sight and only visiting the hot springs late at night or very early in the morning.

Below the mine, the intensity of the Flat River increases and we make slow progress. Over a distance of 20 km, the river drops 120 m for an average gradient of 6.0 m/km. We complete four portages in this stretch, one

Paddling past Tungsten

Sunken forest above Boiling Hellfire Rapid

of which is 2.5 km. This paddling gang likes their comforts, and we have to complete three trips to carry everyone's gear. I realize it's partly my fault. I couldn't find much info about the river and the reports I did find only mentioned a few minor portages in addition to the one major 850 m portage at the Cascade of the Thirteen Steps. So I told everyone that there shouldn't be many. Next time, no matter the trip, I'll tell everyone that there are several 2 km portages!

On the longest portage, in the middle of the river, an upside down red Esquif Canyon canoe protrudes from the rocks, silently signalling to us that we made the correct choice. The red paint is still bright and unfaded from the sun. In the evening, we spot something floating in the river attached to a strainer just downstream of our campsite. While dinner is being prepared, Rory and I ferry across and hike downstream to investigate. We return with a dark, smelly, algae-covered, and waterlogged backpack. We all conclude that most likely, this backpack is linked to the upside down canoe, and that based on the algae, it's been in the water for at least a year. We wonder if the person made it out, and how. Certainly, with all the research I did I would have discovered if someone had died recently on this river. We slowly dismantle the bag, and find a prescription that was filled in June 2017. Unfortunately, nearly all the gear has been destroyed from being immersed for so long. A unique stench wafts from everything. Amazingly, a waterproof camera, attached to the backpack and inside a Pelican case, is still dry and even has some battery life remaining!

We awake the next morning, Day 5, to a river that has risen a foot

overnight and to mountains that are now snow-capped. A pot that we left out overnight has two inches of rainwater in it. The river is easier today with higher water: there are few exposed rocks and we scout less. The waves are bigger though, the river faster, and the water much siltier. I love the new water level, the constant sponging of the boat, and the big waves. We encounter a rapid today I name Boiling Hellfire Rapid, a hundred metres of pure boiling chaos, especially in this moment with brown flood waters. Debris from an alluvial fan on river right creates a pinch in the river, and it appears that new debris has recently narrowed the pinch and raised the river's level upstream. A bouldery ridge on river left helps keep the river narrow. Above the rapid, a large number of spruce trees, some 35 cm in diameter, are now dead with their butts a metre underwater. A couple of us spread out to scout and I eventually find a well-worn trail over the ridge on river left. We paddle back upstream perhaps a hundred metres to reach it. We carry up and over the ridge only to find a section of the trail has been recently flooded thigh-deep by beaver dams on what is a tiny braid of the river. Trees cut by beavers lay suspended and crisscrossed on and above the trail. So we paddle the ponds instead, pulling over three dams before reaching the main river.

For five straight days we counted the precious moments of sunshine while being mostly immersed in cloud and rain. We've counted a total of about 20 to 30 minutes of sunshine when on the morning of day six I awake to a perfectly cloudless blue sky. I whoop and holler and quickly spread my gear to dry while watching the sunshine slowly descend the mountains towards us. When the rest

Pinned Esquif Canyon canoe we saw from our portage

Cascade Creek Campsite

of the crew finally awakes a couple hours later, muttering about someone waking them too early, the frost has disappeared from my tent fly and we are in full hot sun. I put my spotting scope on a mini tripod so that we can all watch a couple goats on the mountain across the river, and we take the morning off to dry our gear. In the afternoon we are gifted another reprieve, this time from the scouting. We paddle nearly 20 easy kilometres under a blue sky, but fallen trees are becoming a regular sight in the river and they force us to stay alert.

In the evening we find a five-star alluvial fan of sand and gravel large enough for a community campsite. A glacier-fed stream runs into the Flat River here from the south, and a wide, misty cascade far up the mountain provides a stunning backdrop. This stream deserves a name, for the countless moose prints and moose-browsed willows and for the stunning cascade. The stream also marks where the Flat River valley widens to about twice its previous width. The glacier that feeds this stream appears on the map to feed the next major stream on river right, downstream, and possibly even a few streams on the Yukon side of the border that feed into the Little Hyland River. On satellite images, this glacier appears to be the largest one whose meltwaters run into the Flat River from the south side. I settle on the creek's most obvious feature: Cascade Creek.

The sun continues to shine the next day, and we enjoy a morning of fun whitewater. But then the logjams, which have been rare up to this point, become more frequent. We pass log-jam after logjam interrupted only by sweepers and strainers. I'm not accustomed to them since I paddle mostly in regions where the trees are either little sticks or non-existent. At a log-jam where I should have stopped and made everyone line through, the last canoe through becomes pinned. Luckily, the paddlers are able to safely exit the canoe before they get wet, and we are able to pull the canoe out by tying a rope to it and having three of us pull from the opposite shore. Only a few loose items in the boat are lost. We all learn our lesson and realize that the biggest danger on this river is the logjams. At a couple locations downstream, we don't hesitate to line around the logjams that sometimes cover 80% of the river's width.

The river continues to be a mix of exhilarating whitewater and scary log-jams. We complete our fifth portage of the trip, around some rocky and challenging rapids, and pass a few scenic cliffs, including one of dark grey shale whose layers are almost perfectly vertical and running parallel to the river. Shortly after Pass Creek enters on river left, the gradient truly decreases and the Flat River becomes sluggish. Long sweeping meanders in the river nearly double back on themselves, and numerous oxbow lakes lie just out of sight behind the trees. We find one of our most appreciated campsites in this section where a stream flows directly south through a long, straight valley and ends in a network of sand and gravel braids at the mouth. This valley marks the point where the river truly enters Nahanni National Park, at the confluence of the Flat River and Gatehouse Creek. For about the last 35 km, as the crow

flies, the river has formed the park boundary with the park on river left, but here the river dives completely into the park.

About 10 km upstream of Seaplane Lake, as the crow flies, near a set of twin lakes on river right, the river gradient increases again and the river remains fast and fun all the way past the Cascade of the Thirteen Steps to Irvine Creek. I particularly enjoy the rapids in the couple kilometres just upstream of Seaplane Lake. Unfortunate for those starting at Seaplane Lake, I think. They miss the best part of the river. Our shore scouting is now over, and we read and run everything. We paddle from Gatehouse Creek to Irvine Creek in two days, camping in between at Bennett Creek and portaging the 850-metre trail around the Cascade of the Thirteen Steps.

The Flat River has distinct upper and lower stretches. The upper stretch, which I would define as Paddler's Lake to Irvine Creek, is a fun and challenging whitewater river with plenty of logjams thrown into the mix. The Flat River is named for the lower stretch downstream of Irvine Creek. Parks Canada calls this section below Irvine Creek Class II, but I would call it Class I. Perhaps at extremely high or low water levels there might be some Class II rapids on this section. This stretch was also free of any noteworthy logjams, sweepers, or strainers.

Trappers and prospectors used to come upstream on the Flat River to avoid Virginia Falls and the Rapids of Fourth Canyon on the Nahanni River, and several are known to have rafted down the river in the spring from Irvine Creek to Nahanni Butte. The famous trapper and prospector Albert Faille built a cabin at Irvine Creek and spent many years trapping and prospecting in the area.

We take two days to paddle from Irvine Creek to the confluence of the Flat and the Nahanni, covering an easy 85 km. A highlight of this stretch are the many hoodoos on the steep mountainside on river left just upstream of the Caribou River. These are limestone pillars left behind when surrounding material eroded, and Parks Canada claims that some of them are 15 m high.

We spend another 7 days paddling down the Nahanni and the Liard River to our take-out at Lindberg Landing. The good weather persists, and we enjoy spectacular sun-filled canyons. Just as we leave the mountains and stop to enjoy Kraus Hot Springs, the clouds and rain once again push away the sun. All the better to enjoy the heat of the springs.

My spouse Leanne, our two young sons, and her mother Nancy – up for a visit from Ontario – plan to fly into the mountains and drive our trucks out in time to meet us, but the plane they were going to fly with crashed and sank into Little Doctor Lake on August 16th, killing three of the five people on board. Leanne looks into flying with the only other airline in Fort Simpson operating float planes, but they also had a crash – only minor injuries this time – at Nahanni Butte on August 15th, and neither airline is flying. Leanne is told that planes should be flying soon, so they drive to Fort Simpson in anticipation of finding a flight. They stay with friends for a couple days in Simpson, and finally Transport Canada gives the green light and a flight is booked. The night

View of the Flat River from the Gatehouse Creek

Rich and Christine

The Team (from L to R): Shauna Morgan, Christine Wenman, Ian Brown, Rich McIntosh, Rory McIntosh, and Dwayne Wohlgemuth

before they fly, the Alaska Highway east of Watson Lake closes and the community of Lower Post is evacuated due to a forest fire, eliminating any possibility of driving the trucks out. Leanne sends us a message via InReach, and they return to Yellowknife. We send a few pleas for help, and Ian's spouse and a friend volunteer to drive down to get us and our gear. Their vehicles can't haul all three canoes, so we opt to leave them for some later date when the trucks return.

We relax and enjoy the drive to Yellowknife, but our two trucks are still 1,700 km away in the mountains, stranded by a forest fire. Ian begs and borrows vehicles for a few weeks, and Leanne and I are fine with the small car we own. Finally, another friend and I drive Christine's car to Fort Simpson on September 12th to catch a flight to Tungsten to retrieve the trucks after the fire risk is gone. We fly over the Cirque of the Unclimbables and a massive 12 km-long glacier just to the west. When we arrive, we discover that the porcupine fence has been breached. Only my truck has been chewed. Does Ian's have an anti-porcupine coating? The insulation has been chewed off a set of sensor wires on the motor, and one wire leading to the trailer connection is severed. There are bites taken out of the rubber hose leading from the gas fill port to the tank, but luckily, none of the bites are completely through the hose. I duct tape the sensor wires and we start the truck. Everything seems to be fine.

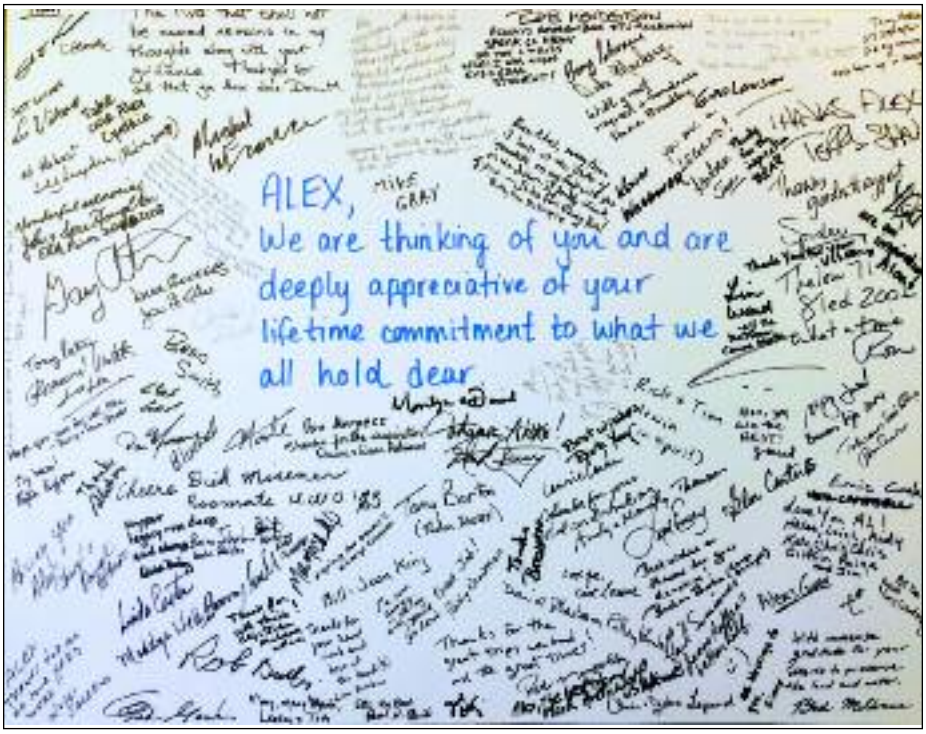
We spend a few days hiking in the mountains, enjoying sunny skies and a two-inch blanket of snow. Then we drive out, stopping to pick up our canoes at Lindberg Landing. But the trip isn't over yet. We couldn't find anyone to come along to Simpson to drive the car back, so as I write this in the short, cold days of early winter, our team still has one vehicle stranded 630 km away in Simpson waiting for someone to drive it back.

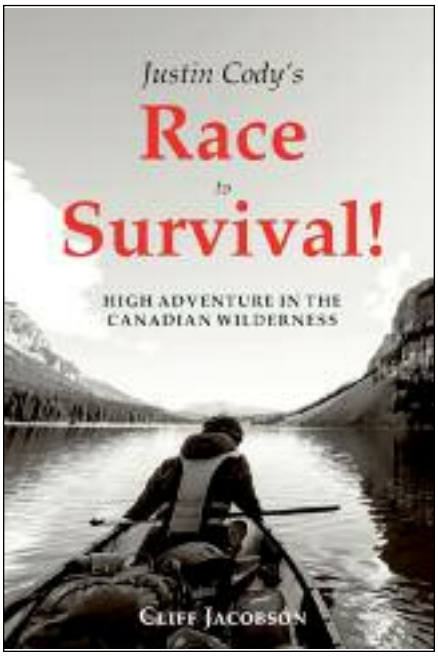
CPM #40015547
ISSN 1828-1327

Published by the Wilderness Canoe Association

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.





Events Calendar

WCA Fall Meeting will take place on 13-15 September, 2019 at Minden Wildwater Preserve.

2020 Wilderness and Canoe Symposium is planned for 21-22 February, 2020 at the same location.

Fall Meeting, Sept. 2019

This year's fall gathering will be at the Minden Wildwater Preserve. The new location is a shorter drive for many of our members. Here's what you can expect: World-class whitewater paddling on a Pan-Am course. Outstanding flatwater options in Queen Elizabeth II Wildlands PP and Haliburton Highlands Water Trails. A catered BBQ dinner. Campfires and camping. For more details and to register, visit WCA website.

Alex Hall, the longest-serving professional Arctic canoe guide in Canada, passed away only a week or so after his close friend Monte Hummel delivered an inspiring and moving tribute to him at the 34th Wilderness and Canoe Symposium. Alex was scheduled to speak at the Symposium about 46 summers spent paddling pristine "gin-clear" Arctic rivers and his fight for the preservation of those lands. Alas, it was not to be. He was losing his battle with cancer and, to his great regret, had to cancel his flights. James Raffan and Gail Simmons performed "A Song for Alex Hall" on the Symposium stage, rousing everyone in attendance to their feet in a thunderous outpouring of love and affection. Alex was able to watch the video in his hospital bed few days later, and recognized many of his close friends and clients in the audience. He enjoyed reading comments on the giant cardboard sign we created. Look for CBC's "Tribute for Alex Hall" video on the web. Alex asked that anyone wishing to contribute towards preservations of the lands he so much loved does so via WWF at www.wwf.ca/donate/

Those of us who are familiar with another great symposium – Snow Walkers and Paddlers Gathering in Fairlee, Vermont – are deeply saddened that Deb Williams, one of the original creators and organizers, passed away in March. Deb and Andy have many friends in the broader symposium family and were frequent and welcome guests in the Luste family home. Deb was a quiet, gentle giant with an enormous curiosity for the world around her and passionate interest for preserving natural places, and knowing people who lived there. She will be greatly missed.

Willow Creek Trip

Story by Annie Yin
Photos by Gary James and Alex Warnock

Okay, so we're on the launching dock. I have to admit, this morning was not a piece of cake. I stubbed my toe, found my dog chewing on a napkin, and on top of that, I had to get up so early. The morning will get better... hopefully.

On the river

There were so many twists and turns on the river! We made a right turn, but I'm not sure that is supposed to lead the right way. (I didn't say anything.) It was going smoothly until somebody said, "We have to turn back, and this is the wrong way." Perfect, how could this morning get any worse? While my mom and dad handled the boat, I almost wanted to jump out and swim all the way back to the parking lot. Suddenly, I felt the boat tip a bit to the right... We were tipping!! At that moment, my heart fell to the bottom of my stomach. Somehow, and miraculously, my dad was not paralyzed, jumped out of the boat, and saved us. (Quick thinking dad!)

Shallow and sandy

After that, I'm pretty sure that the rest was not as bad as the (half) tipping. As we sailed along, we saw some dirt sticking out of the creek, probably nothing to worry about. Wrong. As we got closer and closer, I saw the bottom of the creek, and it was shallow. A moment later, we were stuck on the sand. My dad again jumped out and started pulling the boat. Mom got out, too, and that left me (of the entire group) sitting in a canoe. After that bit, I observed that as the creek got a bit deeper, now my mom and dad could get in the canoe. That wasn't the end of the frustration, because soon enough, we were directly stuck on top of a log. We tried shifting and rocking the boat, but of course that didn't work. We were stuck until the sweepers gave us a little "sweep" and freed us.

Lost

The trip was like an arena, with many obstacles. Because of the log, we and the sweepers were lost from the group and the path. Dad suggested that we go left, so we hurried in that direction, hoping not to lose the group. We turned a left, then a right, but unfortunately came to a dead end. Great, now we were lost and we couldn't see the group. The sweepers tried blowing the whistle, but I doubt anyone heard that. My mom tried, and then passed it to me. Maybe I could do one loud enough, I took a deep breath, and blew into the whistle as hard as I could. I'm positive I would go deaf at the sound, but (fortunately) I didn't. Soon, a boat named Starburst with two ladies came and rescued us, led us to the path, and to the group.

Transferred

The two ladies on Starburst suggested that I come to their boat, and reluctantly, my mom agreed. So we connected our boats, then I grabbed my chair and stepped over to the Starburst. Turned out, the two ladies' names were Clara (The one with black hair), and Carolyn (The one with pale brown hair). I felt weird on their boat at first, like a piece of driftwood. That is until…

Annie Yin here, reporting from the Minesing Wetlands for the WCA!

The Gosling

We saw a gosling. At first, I didn't notice it until someone said, "Hey, look! A gosling!" It looked like a yellow pom-pom with brown patches. It seemed to follow us. I wanted to scoop it up and take it home, but at the same time, I wanted to leave it. I wondered why it was alone. Maybe its parents scattered at the sight of us. As we slowly paddled forward, it started to follow us! When we passed the bend, we couldn't see it anymore. That's what got a conversation going between us. We came up with all sorts of reasons why the little gosling was alone.

I took a turn in Clara's and Carolyn's canoe.

The water levels were high and it was neat to canoe through the trees

1000 Strokes and the forest

At first, the 1,000 strokes started out as just counting our strokes, but somehow, we reached 100, then we did 200, then 300 and so on all the way to 1,000. I do believe that the 1,000 strokes were the first strokes that I actually put effort and force into. It's probably because I wanted to beat all the other canoes. While we were counting our strokes, we charged through low-water weeds, and reached open water with trees growing out of the water. It was strange to see trees growing out of the water. In my opinion, the trees grew out of the water probably because there was dry land here with the trees, and then the dry land flooded and became a creek/river.

Mucky shoes

We followed the white arrows to a river inside the forest. We found dry land, and we got on and tied the boats to a branch. The land looked and smelled very weird. The land's shape was kind of a circle, with water on the interior, and water on the exterior. Then I realized, I had to go. (You know what I mean) I told mom and dad I needed to go, and hurried in the direction of a fallen tree.

There were lots of turns to make in the wetlands.

There was only one problem, and that was that, in order to cross over to the log… I would need to cross a small patch of water. There were options, 1) jump over the deep side or 2) Walk carefully over the shallow part that was infested with weeds. I chose to do 2) because #1: I couldn't jump over the deep part and #2: If I jumped, I would have 15% chance of making it successfully, 30% chance of getting my feet wet, or a 55% chance of falling in the water. Anyway, what choice did I have? I walked carefully over the shallow part and went. (I came back to the boat in one piece.)

Steering and Doggy

We paddled on after untying the boats. Not far away, there were a few fallen trees in the water. When we got close to one, just as we were about to hit a tree, Clara and Caroline steered perfectly out of the way. They did that for the next few logs/fallen trees. I noticed that the difference between mom and dad's steering and Clara and Caroline's steering was that they had some better communication. A few minutes later, we emerged out of the fallen tree path and into a non-obstacles river. Suddenly, Caroline said, "Doggy!" At first, I didn't see it until it started to move. (Its fur was camouflaged). The look of that dog kind of shocked me. Why? Because it was probably a young husky, its fur was brown. But what I noticed is that one eye was blue and another yellow! How strange. What shocked me the most was that without sniffing us, it licked Caroline's glove. Usually, dogs sniff people before licking the person, or get close to be petted! The dog followed us for a long time before it reached an old beaver dam, it probably didn't know how to cross the beaver dam.

The Race to the End

After a while, we saw farm land. That meant (to me) that the parking lot was soon to be in sight. We started to pick up our speed to catch up with the others because we were distracted by the doggy. We cut through the inner track of the river, but that was not a good idea. There were trees that we needed to cross and dodge. But soon, we beat a few boats. When we got out of the vegetation, we only had 2 boats left to beat, the green one (not mom and dad's boat), and the yellow one that wasn't ours. We started to go in sync, that would probably make the boat go faster. Yes! Beat the green one, now we only needed to get ahead of the yellow boat. (If you're probably thinking that I'm very competitive, you're correct.) Around the bend we saw some cows and calves on a farm near a road. Caroline made a quite realistic cow sound. I was quite impressed.

The yellow boat slowed down at the bend, now was our chance. Unfortunately, when we neared I scratched my paddle on the boat; the person on the boat saw us and started to paddle with a little more effort. Then suddenly, he dragged his boat over to Clara and Caroline's and bumped it against ours! He did that twice before giving up. As we neared the bridge, we passed the yellow boat! Hooray! The other boats and the yellow boats were looking at something. (It was probably the tree nursery) When we passed the bridge, the other boats were far behind, so when we turned on the dock, it was obvious that we won! In case you're wondering when the race started, (as a matter of fact, there was no race at all), I only kept the race to myself (until the end).

Never in my life have I been so happy and contented with a canoe trip.

The Life Jacket

Story and photos by George Caesar

That wonderful can of pop!

"Do you have a life jacket for that little dog?"

The shout came from behind us across a wildly chaotic sea. The "sea" was the Detroit River in full summer party mode, a thousand wakes large and small kicked up by a thousand power cruisers and cigarette boats and sea-doos, as well as deep swells from the giant "salties" and even bigger "lakers." The wakes were slamming against the high steel seawalls that lined the river for miles on both the American and Canadian shores, then bouncing back undiminished into their approaching brethren.

The scene could charitably be described as unnatural for a canoe.

I glanced over my shoulder and beheld a cruiser towering over us. A matriarch with a determined face that matched the voice was at the helm. Beside her on the seat was a small dog of some inferior breed. I shouted back that I didn't, and she immediately threw down one of those life jackets made for dogs.

"Well, now you do!" she yelled, and roared off before I even had time to properly thank her. That jacket might have been designed for a West Highland Terrier. It fit Misty perfectly. As my first mate and constant companion, providing a life jacket was surely the least I could have done for her. It had just never occurred to me. It would have been much appreciated, I am sure, when we were very nearly swamped a few days before in Lake Erie's heavy surf as we were trying to get off a Pelee Island beach. I hoped it was appreciated now.

I had not been surprised by that Lake Erie surf, but I was surprised now. I had expected the Detroit River to be tough, but not because it was something of a maelstrom on this particular day. I expected it to be tough because of its current. All winter I had thought about that current. I had seen it in action many times before, both it and the current of its northern twin, the St. Clair River. How was I ever going to be able to push a canoe up against such implacable forces? I wasn't sure of their speed, somewhere between 5 and 9 kmh I had read. I just knew for sure that it would be one almighty struggle to push a fully-loaded canoe up against them.

I could have gone down the rivers of course. But that wasn't part of The Plan. The Plan was to start at the southern tip of Canada, and see how far north I could get. The "tip" of this

country is a tiny speck of limestone in the big inland sea of Lake Erie. Middle Island it's called, although that geographic reference is debatable. North of it is Pelee Island, and north of that again is Point Pelee, end of the line, or the beginning of it, for mainland Canada. Starting from Sandusky, Ohio, I would "island hop" across the lake.

It worked pretty well according to Plan. Somewhere between Kelly's Island, which belongs to Ohio, and Middle Island we crossed the border. July 1, Canada Day no less, 1994. A blazing hot day it was too, with waves just big and sloppy enough to make it awkward to grab my poorly-stowed water bottle. But as if in divine compensation a can of pop bobbing in the waves suddenly appeared up ahead. I discovered to my delight that an unopened can of Mountain Dew floats! A perfect thirst quencher. I toasted my country and my luck.

A quick touchdown on Middle Island was followed by two campsites, both illegal and perfect, at the southern and northern tips of Pelee Island, the near wipeout in that aforementioned surf, and then the dash to Point Pelee which wasn't, thanks to being blown wildly off course by easterly winds that deposited us after a 24-km run near Kingsville on the north shore of the lake. Misty's astonishment at surviving such outrageous ordeals was fully displayed by the paroxysms of joy that she demonstrated by racing along the beach and rolling in the bushes.

The next big surprise a few days later was the river. It turned out that the current was almost no trouble at all. This was because I had outfitted my Bluewater canoe with a hinged batwing sail. I had hoped it would give me assistance from time to time. I had no idea it would do virtually all the work. Because day after day those irresistible currents going south were met by equally powerful winds heading north. Often all I had to do was steer. And while I fried in the 100+ Fahrenheit heat that the winds were sucking up from the deep south, I was far too grateful to complain. Misty had even less to complain about; she went below and kept cool under the white spray cover that I had installed on the canoe's Peterborough hull in the spring.

But the heaven-sent winds could not cover up the fact that the Detroit River is a remarkably lousy place for a canoe trip. Squeezed as it is for almost its entire length by the big cities of Detroit and Windsor, how could it be otherwise? There are those steel seawalls – impossibly high to scale from a canoe. There are the hot rod speed boats and

Sailing under the Ambassador Bridge

the working leviathans of the Seaway. I was at first unaware that one of them, the 25,000-ton Canadian Century, was pulling in to dock against one of these steel walls, and would have squashed me like a bug against it had I not swerved to port just in time.

There is no place to camp. At the end of the first day I had shoehorned the tent onto a man-made "island," a pile of slag in the middle of the river, graced with not so much as a redemptive blade of grass. The rest of the journey, I knew, would not even have this as an excuse. So I was prepared to pad-

Approaching the Bluewater Bridge

Welcoming committee (Joan) at the old house, Blackwell

dle far into the night of the second day until I left the river and reached Peche Island in Lake St. Clair. As a precaution I had installed running lights on the bow of the canoe. But as night approached this seemed to be a fool's precaution. The number of power boats still roaring around this river long after that blood-red sun had sunk into the horizon was alarming. Even if they were equipped with searchlights there would be an awful lot they could not see, especially tiny red and green pinpricks of running lights almost at water level. I hugged the shore, hoping these marine cowboys would have the sense to stay further out. Generally they did. We finally reached our island refuge around midnight.

Lake St. Clair. The world's biggest mud puddle. You can stand in the middle of it as I did as a kid in 1955, head above water, and not see land anywhere. The deepest spot in the lake, at 27 feet, is the ship channel dredged right across it. But lest anyone think there is not enough water to command respect, try paddling around that lake in the same wind that had so far been our best friend. It was now our implacable foe. Waves four to five feet high that "feel" bottom everywhere. The angle between the fronts of them and the surface was about 90 degrees, or felt like it. Sledgehammers. You're not going to "ride over" waves like that for long. The only option is to run for shore, throw up the tent, and read a book. Or get together with your wife.

Joan just happened to be home between trips. She has to have one of the world's greatest hobbies. She is a magician. She travels around the world going to magic conventions, an occupation that would soon evolve into judging magic competitions. The conventions fly her to exotic locales such as Korea or Italy, all expenses paid, where she uses her now-considerable expertise to decide who is number one, two and so on. Such frequent trips, usually in the summer (she has been to China seven times) plus my canoe trips mean that we are together very seldom for our anniversary, which falls on July 12. We grabbed this year's exception. She drove down to the shore of Lake St.

Clair, and we went on to Niagara Falls and a celebration of one of the "Big Ones," 25 years together. Well, mostly together.

Back in the water I soon finished the lake and entered the mouth of the St. Clair River, which happens to be the location of the biggest delta on the Great Lakes. It is also the location of what we used to call the Walpole Island Indian Reserve, but which has now been updated to Walpole Island First Nation or, more specifically, Bkejwanong Territory. Several natives working on a construction project there were intrigued by my journey – not a lot of canoes are seen these days in their part of the world. They were particularly interested in the sail. "You'll be in Sarnia by suppertime with that thing," said one.

It was not to be. For one thing, the St. Clair River is somewhat longer than the Detroit River, and its current is said to be even stronger than that of its southern cousin. And we were still a long way south of Sarnia. It and its American twin, Port Huron, are the only two cities on this river, both just south of where Lake Huron empties into it. For another, crucial thing, our once-reliable south winds now went on strike from time to time, particularly in a long stretch before Stag Island, across from the village of Corunna. I had spent the first five years of my life in this town. I knew Stag Island well, and was looking forward to a well-deserved camping spot and a good rest after a ferocious afternoon battle with the current. It was also not to be. My dog and I spent a sleepless night battling a local inhabitant in the form of a particularly recalcitrant racoon.

Next day, exhausted, I was facing the ultimate test. Looming up ahead of us now on the urban horizons of Sarnia and Port Huron was the iconic Bluewater Bridge linking both cities. Iconic to me anyway. Sarnia had been my hometown for most of the early years of my life. I remembered walking across that bridge as a boy with friends. Once we tried to drop glass pop bottles down the funnels of freighters as they passed underneath. We missed. No one is allowed to walk across that bridge

A post-trip outing on the Humber River

The craft and the crew

Cross-country trek: A work in progress

anymore.

As might be expected, the river is narrowest where the bridge crosses it, just south of where Lake Huron ends and the St. Clair begins. The current, at one time called "The Rapids" here, is so strong it has scoured out the bottom of the river to a depth of 90 feet. Many a boat has blithely sailed down the river, only to find that getting back up it is considerably more of a challenge than anticipated.

I had accepted defeat well in advance. A two-kilometer-long portage from Sarnia Bay on the river to the yacht club on Lake Huron was implacably tattooed onto my future. I dreaded that portage. I was woefully ill-equipped for it. Good tripping packs were at a premium in our family at the moment. Small packs and various other containers were fine for the trip so far. But now I was face to face with transporting a boatload of loose junk across a portage. How many trips would it take? Four? Five? How many kilometers would that be? Fourteen? Eighteen? And how many hours would that take?

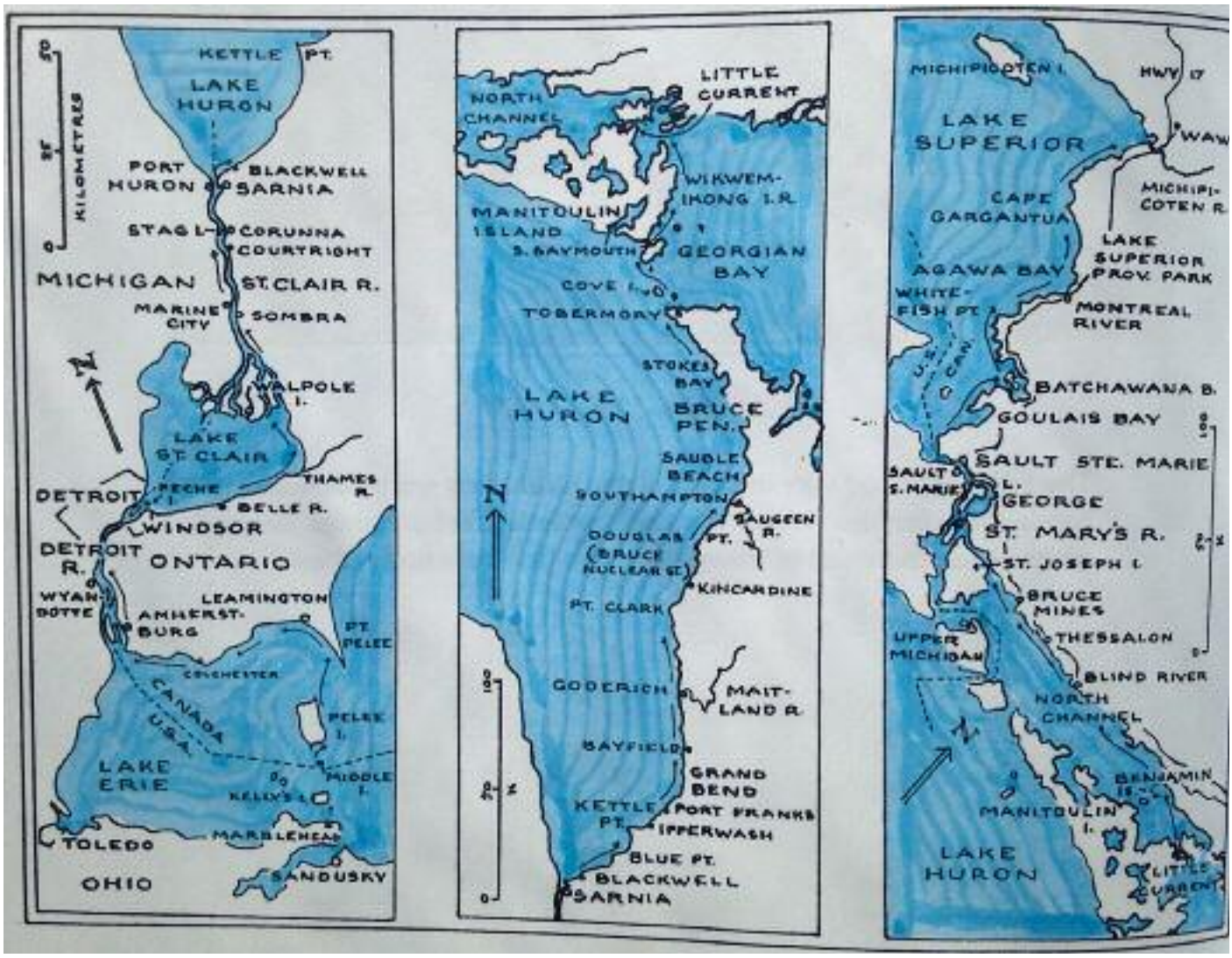
So I was depressed as I paddled ever so slowly up the river that morning. "Slowly" was the operative word here.

But around mid-morning, as I was still struggling past Sarnia's refineries, including Imperial Oil where my father had spent his working life, things began to change. A following breeze, a whisper of hope from our old friend the south wind, arrived to lift a flagging spirit and with it, the sail. Maybe I could begin and end that portage on the same day. That would be nice. As if in response the breeze morphed slowly into a wind. I was soon no longer just inching past Sarnia. I was yarding, metering past it, then even faster. The old downtown was sliding by now. Then the new waterfront that had never existed when I lived here.

Finally, Sarnia Bay. Just ahead now was the huge old grain elevator, near where I planned to pull out. But then the wind increased.

I knew perfectly well that I could never make it up under that bridge even if this wind got quite a bit stronger, but I couldn't help myself. I would just ease the canoe into the channel, then duck back toward the elevator when the current got too strong. And so I began.

That current did get very strong. But then, suddenly, so did the wind. Amazing. I kept going. Just ahead now,



Route map

Lake St. Clair campsite

Pelee Island lighthouse ruin

the Bluewater Bridge. And there, also just ahead, an impossible current. But that current was being met head on by a now-terrific wind. Waves surged up the river against this irresistible force. Detroit River-like chaos all over again, just not man-made this time. But even with the wind the sail could not do it alone, so I was paddling like mad too. I feared for that sail. If it didn't rip in half first I was afraid the back stay's eye bolt was going to rip right out of the deck of the canoe. But it didn't, and the sail didn't. And gradually, gradually we crept up under that bridge.

And then we were through. Like a cork from a bottle. A baby from the womb.

I emerged from that reluctant birth canal into the wide world of Lake Huron with equal parts joy and astonishment. Just 10 kilometers along the lake now was the old house in the village of Blackwell that we had moved into from Corunna almost half a century before, and the end of our trip. I reflected as we sailed that last stretch that this had been a trip filled with surprises. And so very often, almost always, the surprises were good ones. Sure, the wild conditions on the rivers and lakes were disconcerting at times, even humbling, such as the Lake Erie surf, but never insurmountable. What a feeling of accomplishment. We did it Misty!

And we continued to do it. The following year we left from that same beach and headed north to my brother Bill's place on Manitoulin Island. That became the pattern, always leaving from where we had landed the year before, always heading north. In twelve years we had reached the Yukon and Alaska coasts of the Beaufort Sea, with a detour to James Bay thrown in for good measure. Then, having run out of North, it was back to Manitoulin, then east and occasionally north for another twelve years until we had established a canoe route that included ten provinces, two territories and five states. Not all the family was convinced that any of this was such a great idea. Comments from my sisters, for example, conveyed this concern, although with different emphases: "You're going to die," said Eleanor. "That poor little dog!" said Mary.

We both survived but "expect the unexpected" might have been the mantra for these trips. And year after year, the surprises have kept coming. I was surprised, amazed

Middle Island, and Canada, dead ahead

often, by my dog. The "Mighty Mist" we called her. Absolutely fearless in the face of grizzly bear or Rottweiler or moose or musk-ox, not quite so fearless in big waves or airplanes. Faithful and steadfast for all of those first twelve years of this canoeing project, all the way to Alaska. And then she died. I had no right to be surprised. She was 16. But I was surprised by the pain of that loss. All my ventures west and east had been solo trips but the next one, without a dog, was the first real solo trip I had been on in years. I was amazed, shocked even, at how lonely an experience that was. So Misty was followed by Tess, who was followed by Bonnie, who was followed by Kate. West Highland terriers all. Tess and Bonnie were cheated of their well-deserved long lives; Tess, the best sailor of the group, at age seven by a traitorous liver; Bonnie at four by a weak heart on a brutal portage. Two terrible surprises among the sea of good ones. And Kate? You can tell just by looking at her that she knows she's going to live forever. Another Misty.

I guess I was surprised, and continue to be so, by me. I was not at all sure when I started out at the ripe age of 54, a middle-aged man of very middling physique and condition, that I would be able to do any of this. Now I'm 79. Last summer marked the 25th year of this series of interconnected adventures. I

hope to do at least one more, perhaps ending in the Arctic coastal town of Tuktoyaktuk, one of the most romantic names in Canada. I will start a little later in the summer, and Joan will also keep her calendar clear, so that we can get together for another of our rare anniversaries, this time our 50th.

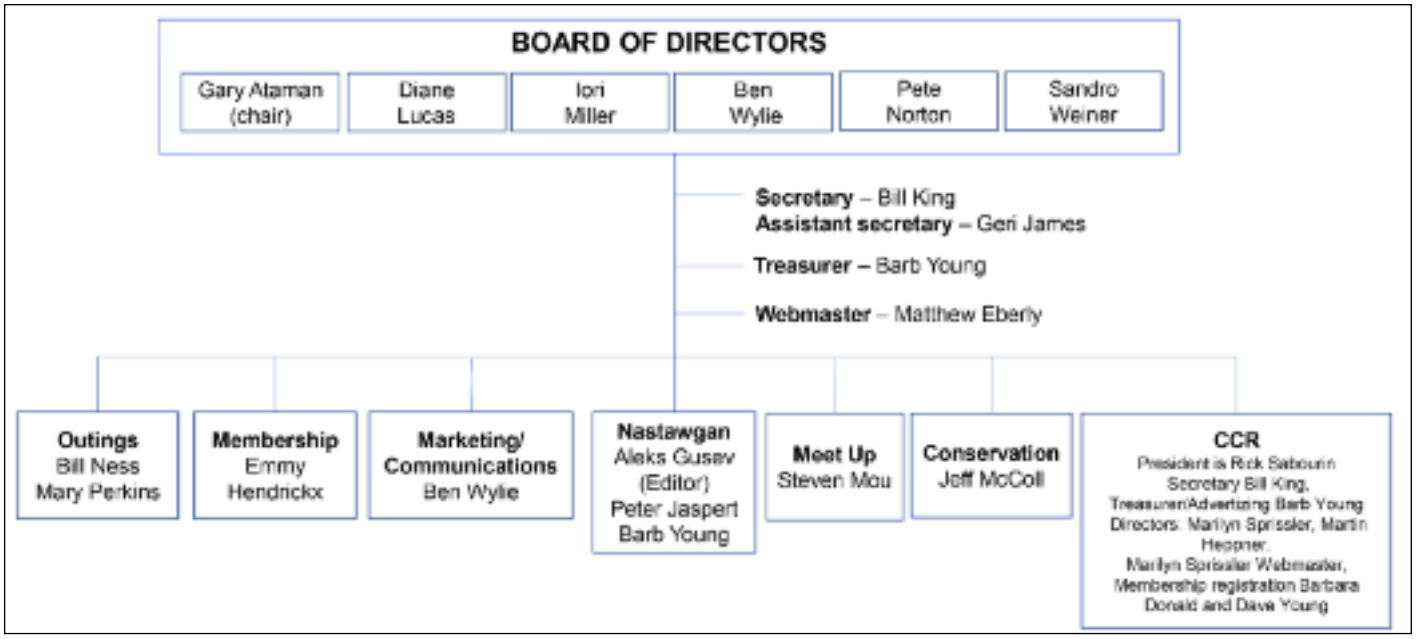
And the year after that? I will be 80. In 1990, I turned 50 and my father turned 80. He was the one responsible for inflicting all of this canoeing madness on my brother Bill and me in the first place, starting way back in the '40s. So I asked him if he would like to join me on a trip. He said sure, although it had been 34 years since his last one. He did pretty well, and was smart enough to let me do most of the heavy lifting. It was a good trip. So I am asking Joan and our sons David and Ben to join me in 2020. They have already said yes, even though they know they will be the ones doing the heavy lifting this time. We were the canoeing dream team back in the '80s and early '90s, before magic and the worlds of work intervened. So it will be another good trip, even though Daddy will be a bit on the light side when it comes to sharing the load. No surprise there.

The surprises, the big ones for me, have taken place on the solo trips. And the biggest kind of surprise of all is symbolized by that long-ago life jacket. The unexpected kindness of the unexpected act. I won't say that such acts occur only on solo trips. But I will come close to saying that. "Solo" means alone. You do not expect to have much or even any human contact along the way. But part of it also has to do with the kind of surprise the jacket represented. It was an "out of the blue" experience, by a complete stranger, propelled by no incentive other than a general humane concern. It is not the kind of thing one normally experiences. And yet I encountered it over and over again during these trips. And rather than becoming immune to such generosity, I found myself astonished every time. It is also the kind of act that is difficult to repay in kind. It is not even expected that you should. It is a gift in the most altruistic sense of the word.

The life jacket

Solo canoe trips. I expected them to be respites from the world of people, or at least the world of a large number of people. And they were. For 30 years I was immersed in one of the highest of high-octane social professions; the world of teaching. It is a wonderful world and my students, my colleagues, were and are wonderful people. I could not have lucked into a more satisfying profession. But most of us need "down time" even from wonderful professions. Being alone in a canoe for a few days or weeks, I thought, would be the perfect solution. And it was. But I have been retired now for over 20 years. I don't really need "down time" any more. So why do the trips still mean so much to me?

One of the main reasons, certainly the most ironic one, has to do with that "life jacket" kind of experience. Human contact, of the highest order, made the "holiday" from human contact work much better, I realized throughout the years, than a simple absence from the crowd ever could.



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