

the great escape

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Photos: Dave Berthelet

My last minute phone call turned out to be a stroke of genius. It set me on my way to Whitney to meet with Dave Berthelet and a very pleasant weekend, and spared me the thrill of a soggy Saturday in Southern Ontario where a near record 52 mm of acid rain fell on hapless Hamilton.

The put-in place, just below the dam in Whitney, was a wonderful sight in the early morning sun: two acres of land littered with canoes, packs, paddles, life-preservers and girls, good-looking girls, and very optimistically dressed considering that this was the height of the fly season.

We skillfully manoeuvred our canoes through this obstacle course to the water's edge, but just before we departed, curiosity got the best of me and I enquired of the young lady next to me, "Where are you off to?" "The Madawaska," she answered brightly.

Well, that set our minds at ease, for here was confirmation that we were in the right place. But still I wasn't satisfied, "I mean where do you expect to finish?" "Oh, I don't know," she smiled at my mistake, and yet seemed somehow pleased. "You see I'm not the leader."

Lead on blind faith.

What a difference five weeks can make. On May 2 we had plied the same waters with the flow rate at 5200 cu. ft./sec.; now it was down to barely one tenth of that volume, and what had been an angry and intimidating roar was now a gentle murmur; a pleasant pastoral scene, the sun's reflection dancing on the waves, all peace and restoration.

I was impressed with Dave's handling of his tub - sorry, canoe; taking turns at going first, we could observe each other's approach and style, and thoroughly enjoyed the rapids. Lunch at High Chute and on again. As we approached the rapids above the Falls I suggested to the organizer that perhaps we should put to shore, but he mumbled something in his beard and kept on going. Now, I should point out to readers not familiar with the place that the river at this point cascades over a series of ledges, each one higher than the one before it and the last one fully five metres in height. The steep rapids preceding these ledges terminate against a solid stone wall which forces the water to change direction abruptly and flow in a tight 180 turn around this obstruction. The turbulence is considerable and I had always considered it off limits.



To my discomfiture Dave calmly disappeared from view in the rocky confine; I was worried, an upset here could have serious consequences. Just before I reached the critical point of no return Dave's head appeared above the rocks, a satisfied smile on his face. Now he wanted to see how the old man would make out. In an instant I plunged down and around the rock wall - not smiling at this juncture I may add - out at the bottom and now in full exhilaration past two more ledges and to shore. After a short portage around the last two drops we came upon the remains of a canoe - a sobering example of the price for not making it.

All along Dave had expressed an interest in my boat, how easily it seemed to glide through the water, and by comparison how much more effort he had to expend. Nothing would do until I finally agreed to switch.

By 6 o'clock we were well into a leisurely supper and a wideranging discussion on the merits of long summer trips. "You know," said Dave confidentially as he leaned back against a tree and sampled a spoonful of supper from his nearly full two-quart saucepan, "it's strange, when I'm sitting in the office all day I come home absolutely ravenous." After a long pause during which the contents of the saucepan noticeably shrank he continued, "But when I'm out on a trip and work hard, I'm not hungry!" Another pause followed during which I became aware of the sound of metal scraping on metal. "Perhaps I could make this pudding for dessert."

The next morning Dave gave another demonstration of his strange malady as we cooked breakfast, while a fresh breeze kept the flies under control. By 9 o'clock we were heading down Shall Lake into the face of a steady breeze.

The Opeongo turned out to be lower than we would have liked to see and choosing the proper line in the rapids to escape the many rocks demanded constant attention. At the same time it assured that we could do the whole trip without stepping out of the canoes. Well, that was almost not true. Running a tricky spot a few kilometres below Victoria Lake my craft ended up sideways on top of a ledge, and after teetering a few agonizing moments plopped into the backwash below; two strokes and I was in the clear. The performance had an electrifying effect on Dave; he had never seen anything like this, "What a boat!"

I think this was the final push needed to decide the issue. Will Dave get a new boat? He already has three canoes, but only one wife and she doesn't know what he has decided, and will she understand? I'll find out next year when we'll get together again on these two rivers.