

friends. Though a little long in the tooth, some of us pushing sixty, we formed a strong, if not yet fully experienced party. Skills such as white-water, we learned as we went along, for there were as yet no "schools" for teaching canoeing techniques. All of us had begun to have doubts about the survival of wilderness in popular canoe areas. In fact, we considered that wilderness canoeing faced a serious problem, for which our own solution was to look west, realizing that we could find the same type of Precambrian forest-lakeland in the northern parts of Manitoba and Saskatchewan as we had delighted in further east.



In 1955, therefore, having searched the map for some large fast-flowing river that started far enough west and north to be in unspoiled wilderness, we flew to Ile-a-la-Croise near the source area of the Churchill River in northern Saskatchewan. In the next three weeks we descended the Churchill, Sturgeon-Weir and Saskatchewan Rivers for 500 miles, to take out at The Pas, Manitoba. Nearly all this distance we remained on the Precambrian Shield. We had seen no other canoe parties, which confirmed our view that it did not require merely legislation to protect wilderness. Distance, difficulty and occasional danger took care of it. Sigurd Olson, the most experienced of our party, said after our Churchill River trip (which he describes in *The Lonely Land*) that this was as good canoe country as he had ever paddled.

Looking in 1957 for another trip in the same general area, we followed the 1796 route of David Thompson, who was trying to find a way for the fur traders to avoid the 13-mile Methye Portage. We went from Reindeer Lake (north of Frog Portage) up the Blondeau River, portaged over to Wollaston Lake, and from there went down the Fond du Lac River to the east end of Lake Athabasca - good canoeing, lively rapids and beautiful scenery all the way.

The next year we paddled from Ile-a-la-Croise northward, through Churchill, Peter Pond and Methye Lakes, crossed the Methye Portage and ran the Clearwater River to the Athabasca River.

In 1959 we chose an old canoe route used by the Indians in the days before they all had motor boats. This went from Rae on Great Slave Lake; up Marian Lake and River to a summit at Faber Lake, thence down the other side through a maze of beautiful Precambrian lakes linked together by the Camsell River, to Conjuror Bay of Great Bear Lake. Leaving Great Bear we proceeded down the Great Bear River. This stretch down to the Mackenzie River is hard to beat for joyful canoeing. The whole 80 miles takes just ten hours, with Grade I and II rapids; watching through crystal-clear water the rocks flash by four or five feet under the canoe. We then continued on down the Mackenzie, where par is 50 miles a day to Norman Wells.

In 1965, I was able to complete this transcontinental trip, from Montreal, over to Alaska. We started its last stage from the Mackenzie delta, and surmounted the Richardson Mountains at McDougal Pass, 1000 feet up. This was achieved by manhandling, lining and poling up a continuous fast, shallow rapid, the Rat River, climbing at 35 feet to the mile. On top, in the pass, there is only a half-mile portage between the two vast basins of the Mackenzie and the Yukon. Thence the Bell and Porcupine Rivers lead down the west flank of the mountains, to Fort Yukon on the Yukon River. Going up had taken us nine days, making only five miles a day, whereas we descended the swift Bell and Porcupine Rivers in another nine days, doing 60 and 65 miles a day.

by now my mail and personal contacts gave evidence of a large and growing fraternity of northern canoeists, from whom I had confirmation of a widening interest in paddling such rivers. What a change had come about in wilderness canoeing! From Provincial Parks and small loops of lakes near the family cottage, wilderness canoeing now had assumed continental dimensions.

Great lakes link some of these river trips: lakes such as Winnipeg, Great Slave and Superior. These we found to offer their own special qualities of wilderness canoeing, protected from population pressure by the difficulties, and hazards arising from their vastness. The technique on a great lake was a bit different from that on a river. If a gale or a strong blow from one direction came up, we simply stopped and camped somewhere along the shore. This made it a good principle to keep within an hour's paddle (four miles) of some landfall, even if only an island. The 425 miles around Lake Superior's north shore from Thunder Bay to the Soo, as an example, we accomplished without pain in 15 paddling days, but were forced to camp, windbound, for eight more.

On other summer trips we went down the rest of the Churchill and the Burntwood River as far as Thompson, Manitoba, and the Hayes River to Hudson Bay.

But now we seemed to be running out of territory. We had travelled most of the major rivers we wanted to - mainly those we could paddle downstream - from the American border north to the sixtieth parallel, and from Hudson Bay to the Rockies. The Barren Lands beckoned. Why stop at 60 N?

In the half-million square miles of mainland between the Mackenzie and Hudson Bay, there course and tumble a number of exciting rivers, with enough volume to give great canoeing. The scenery is typical Precambrian, but without trees. This lack at first gives an impression of bleakness, but one soon adjusts to it and comes to delight in the wide vistas in the clear air and 20-hour sunlight. The land, cloaked only with willows and coarse heath, is primitive wilderness, though excessively fragile because of the months of frost and the shallow skin of soil above the permafrost. Sightings of game can be spectacular - moose, caribou, bear, wolves and muskoxen.

We spent two decades, the sixties and seventies, exploring these rivers on summer canoe trips. In excitement and sense of wilderness, we found all we were seeking. Other canoeists, in increasing numbers, are doing the same. Once again the pressures on the rivers are mounting, but for the present the usual deterrents - difficulty, danger and particularly distance - are helping to keep numbers in check. Fortunately, too, the present generation of wilderness canoeists seems to be more sensitive towards preserving the environment.

This somewhat personal account reflects what I believe is the greatest change in the sport over the last 65 years. The scene has shifted from eastern Parks to western rivers and lakes, and eventually to our northern-most and most precious wilderness left. Let it be hoped that the increasing band of canoeists will treat this with more solicitude and responsibility than our predecessors did the canoeing paradise we once had in Ontario and Quebec.



This article is the text of the address given by Eric Morse to the Wilderness Canoe Association at its annual meeting in Toronto in March 1984.