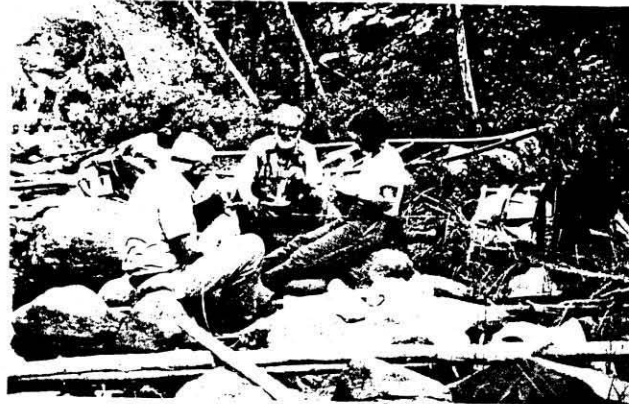


Campsites were hard to find. At first it seemed to us that every lake would have one suitable camp spot where inevitably a fishing cabin had been built. Because of very thin topsoil, trees are easily blown over. Although the forest may appear open, trees are lying criss-cross all over the place making camping very difficult or impossible. Along the banks grow thick stands of alders; away from the shore poplar, jack pine, spruce, and some birch take over. Some lakes we paddled, like St. Raphael Lake, had steep sloping rock banks which were not suitable for camping. On the other hand, some stretches of river, like the Marchington, had marshy sections or claybanks where one simply couldn't land. The first two weeks we often spent 1½ to 2 hours looking for a campsite. But once we would find an open spot we usually had no problems fitting in our three tents. We used rocks as often as pegs to pitch the tents. Lucky as we were, nearly all campsites turned out to be very nice. Sleeping on the moss was quite a treat, soft and comfortable, but sometimes we had to be content with sand which is unyielding.

The weather was mostly windy with beautiful blue skies and cumulus clouds. The last week was cold and we even became hail-bound for the night 5½ km from Fort Hope. Most of the rain occurred overnight. The river turned colder but still felt like a warm bath in the cold air. Swimming, however, was no longer a pleasure.

On our trip we met four canoeing parties, a power boat almost every day, and once a taxiing float plane. After two weeks we crossed under the bridge of Hwy 599 where we passed several lodges. The area is not that lonely.

We saw tracks of numerous animals: moose, bear, wolf, fox, deer, caribou, etc. But we only saw moose twice, and once a bear which was swimming across a rapid. Beaver lodges seemed to be all over and we saw beavers regularly. We also had a curious otter visit us at one of the campsites. Bald eagles, ospreys, blue herons, and loons were a common sight. Although it was an exception to see fish jump, there were plenty of them and we fished



successfully. Jim had a surprise when he cleaned a pike and found an undigested mouse in its stomach. Insects rarely bothered us but at some campsites they caused us to retreat to bed early.

We arrived on Thursday 24 August, in Fort Hope, just in time for a good breakfast in the restaurant. The Chief gave us permission to camp at the Point, a few minutes walk from the village, and at night we were part of a tent city with six tents. In the evening we enjoyed a popcorn party with the other eight canoeists who had paddled to Fort Hope.

Friday morning we had to check in at 11 o'clock at the airport. We were to leave with the noon flight for Pickle Lake, and our canoes and two of our packs would follow in the afternoon. Everything had been booked a month before with Austin Airways. However problems did arise.

In the following story Jim Greenacre will tell what happened.

The problems only started when the paddling was over.

austin does it again

Jim Greenacre

GOD! WE ARE TRAPPED BY A COMPANY OF "DON'T KNOW"-S, but more about that later.

Before finalizing the dates of our trip on the Albany River (see previous report), we checked with Austin Airways as to what day we could have our two canoes flown out from Fort Hope to Pickle Lake. On the 27th, Wednesday, we were told. However, as both myself and the Tissots had had previous bad experiences with Austin, we decided to double-check with them the day before we started paddling at Sioux Lookout. We phoned them and were told, "No, the canoes could not be flown out on Wednesday, but would have to wait until Friday's freight plane." We changed our plans. We also asked about payment, cash, cheque, or credit card. "No problem with Visa," we were told.

We paddled into Fort Hope early Thursday morning and, after a substantial reasonably priced breakfast in the band restaurant, we checked with Austin's agent, a local young woman, regarding flights out. No change; we'd go on the scheduled flight and our canoes on the freight. Shall we do the documentation now and get the canoes here at the landing strip? Not necessary, we were told, lots of time Friday, as the freight plane doesn't come until the afternoon.

Friday morning we had our gear and canoes outside the small wood hut which serves as an office at Fort Hope airport, long before the agent showed up. When she arrived we were informed that our canoes would not go out that day. The freight plane had flown in at 7:30 a.m. with only five minutes prior notice before landing. This was true because I was there at the landing strip with my gear and canoe and saw a D.C. 3 land, drop off a few small packages, and then take off.

When will our canoes be flown out? She didn't know. Who does know? Phone Pickle Lake and find out. Pickle Lake didn't know. We were trapped, by an organization of "don't know"-s.

In the meantime the scheduled passenger flight had arrived and the captain was getting fidgety, he wanted us aboard and we still didn't have our tickets. Documentation completed, we offered VISA. No VISA accepted here. No cheques either. Cash only. We didn't have enough cash. The captain interjected, "you should know that the North is a cash only domain." I blasted the captain with all my pent-up frustrations with Austin Airways. The captain then redeemed himself by phoning someone; I heard him say that he was going to fly us out, that he would accept full responsibility for us, and we could settle payment in

Pickle Lake. If it hadn't been for the captain's initiative we could still be in Fort Hope, trying to raise the cash. No trouble with VISA in Pickle Lake.

"What about are canoes?" we asked Austin's Pickle Lake manager. "There is a freight plane out there now picking up canoes at Lansdown House, Webequie, and possibly Fort Hope, but no one knows for sure. Come back this evening," we were told.

We watched the plane land. It had canoes on board, but not ours. The plane had been to Fort Hope, we were told, but it was too windy to land. "Come back tomorrow." We got the "don't know" run-around Saturday and Sunday. Monday, being a holiday, we didn't bother going out to the airport.

As a result of Austin Airways' inefficient ground staff, I had to drive my paddling companion Doreen to Dryden to get the train back to Toronto so that she could be at work on Tuesday. This was a 720 km round trip.

Monday afternoon a local man engaged us in conversation. (Pickle Lake is a community where, if they see strangers two days in a row, they wonder who and what you are.) We told him about the two canoes still in Fort Hope. He was puzzled. "I am a pilot with Austin Airways and on Friday afternoon on a return charter flight I flew low over Fort Hope with an empty D.C. 3. If I had been informed I could easily have landed and picked up your canoes." This confirmed our suspicions about the "too windy to land" story we had been told on Friday.

Tuesday morning more evasive answers from Austin. We walked over to the Air Manitoba office to see if they could help. Yes, they had a plane leaving for Fort Hope in thirty minutes and no problem to fly out our canoes. We told the pilot where we had been instructed to leave the canoes at Fort Hope, just inside the chain link fence at the landing strip. They returned, minus canoes. The canoes were nowhere in sight. We had informed Austin ground staff about our arrangements with Air Manitoba, even received a credit note from them, but they hadn't bothered to phone their agent in Fort Hope to tell her of the new arrangements.

Back to Austin. They didn't know where the canoes were and didn't appear to be too concerned. We suggested they phone their agent in Fort Hope. The answer: "The agent had been informed on FRIDAY that the canoes would not be picked up until Wednesday, so she had them moved to a safer location in the MT and C hangar." Those b-----ds in Pickle Lake had been stringing us along for five days!

Wednesday evening we finally got our canoes, a total of seven days later than we had originally been promised.