

# onaping river

I do a fair bit of canoeing, usually on such rivers as the Magnetawan, Spanish, etc. Until this summer, I had considered myself unusually fortunate in the fact that I had never spilled or broken up a canoe amidst a rapid. However, on the Onaping River northwest of Sudbury, Ontario, my record met an abrupt end. Although my life was never really in danger, my rented canoe was pinned against a rock and required significant efforts to free it. It was quite an experience, and doesn't it all seem to take place in split-seconds?

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John Barker

ONAPING RIVER, 2 JULY 1986 .....

.....John Barker, Don Cross, Bob Shortill

Another Shortill hot spot, eh?  
Why, John?

Swifts, slow water, and lakes. I thought you promised us whitewater.

- I shouldn't poke him like that. We all agree that last year's Spanish River was the best yet, and the bottom half of that was all swifts. Oh well, keep him on his toes.

We're not done yet.

- true. The Ministry map shows rapids and falls ahead. Davidson and Ruge say in their book that they've never seen a rapids or falls marked on a Canadian map that didn't deserve the title. We'll see.

- some swifts. I'm impressed at how this Jensen canoe handles, even if it is an eggshell. Jesus, it scratches easily. But I suppose I started the first day treating it like a Coleman canoe, and the Coleman it ain't. But the sucker moves along. Although paddling solo, I've kept up with Shortill and Don in their Scott kevlar. Well..... they've eased up, too.

Time for lunch. Hitch canoes and we'll drift.

How's the Jensen?

Fair. Trading the food pack for the Coleman stove was a good move. I probably gained a thirty pound advantage in the bargain, and I'm not having as much trouble keeping up with you guys.

We're not easing up as much as we did yesterday, either.

Yeah, it scoots well.

I was just saying to Don how you seem to be manoeuvring that solo canoe far better than I've ever see you work your Coleman. How come?

Different lines. Different keel. Different attitude -- I can't bounce off the rocks.

- enjoy poking me about bouncing off the rocks, don't you? I like my Coleman. It slides nicely, it costs zero upkeep -- Christ, I even left it outside last winter -- and it only cost me \$275. And it's not that heavy on the portages -- light compared to that Scott fibreglass ..... I'm being too hostile; he meant it as a compliment.

Cheese?

Thanks.

Nice touch with the salami.

Yeah, and at a cut-rate price.

So, how many more miles today, Don?

Well, the different maps say we've got several more significant rapids, two falls, and one four-slash rapids.

How was that last lift-over shown?

As a two-slash -- significant. I don't think we'll be out today.

- another night on the trail. Well, I've slept better on this trip than any other. But I think rain is in the forecast.

Time to hit the trail.

Yup, see you downriver. Hey, this works well with you guys going first and checking the rapids. My keel appreciates it.

- this is a rented canoe. If it was mine, I'd eagerly go first.

- that last one was tricky. But that little trick of leaning the canoe up on the left side allows me to go through gaps that are incredibly small. Just push down with the left knee, and it's just like James Bond did with a car in one of his films -- up on one side and zip through the gap -- it doesn't take as much room.

- We'll try first, John, and pull up on the right.

Okay.

- can see the still water at the bottom, so it's okay to run. No significant drop at any one spot. I can see a general trail -- yeah, they're starting left -- they'll probably go centre and then right while rounding the corner.

Looks tough at the end.

- they can't hear me. They're busy. Probably can't hear me over the river. I can see a good path until the end. All the rocks seem together. Yup, they're stepping out. They'll lift over that last rock ledge.

Any path through?

- gees, Don's pointing between those two rocks. I know I'm okay to there, but he's obviously got a better view. Well, I can always hop out like they did if I don't like it when I get there. Here goes.

- so far, so good. Just like I planned. But I don't like those two rocks. It's too much of a turn in this current, and it's too narrow. Well, I can always adjust narrow, just do the old 'Bond lift.'

- oh, my gawd, I'll never make that. It's wide enough, but the cross-current's too fast. Don's realized this, 'cause he's getting ready to give me a shove. Ouch! That was a hard hit! And now my bow's stuck up on the rock. I'm tilting -- "Never get downstream of a canoe" -- old lesson -- I'll step out upstream -- Oh, for Christ's sake, I've dropped the upstream gunwale. The water's got in.

Get out, John, get out!!

I am. I'm ok. Lift dammit!

- we've got to get the stern up. The whole canoe's under water, open side upstream, keel against a rock. Shortill, what the hell are you doing -- putting on a life jacket -- get in here and pull!!! We've got to get this stern up! Rented canoe. Never again.

Maybe a log to pry it.

There's one. No, it's too short.

We don't have time, this sucker's an eggshell. It'll be gone by the time we get back.

- if it's not already. I can't believe it's still together. Shit, I'll be taking it back to the outfitter's in a bag. Rented canoe. Never again.

Lift, lift!!

No use. Can't budge it.

What about piling rocks upstream, to deflect the water flow into the canoe?

- gees, here I am in water up to my -- where'd my life jacket go? My god, it came off. Am I ok? Yup. Wow. Better go easier before this becomes a medical emergency too. I'll pull the damn thing loose.

Don, your feet clear?

Yeah.

- there. Whew, I've never pulled that hard. Ouch. My groin hurts.

It's free! He did it!

Flip it over! Catch the air! Good! It's free! Woe, you did it.

- ouch. My groin hurts.

Bob's in our canoe. He'll collect the stuff.

It's free?

Yeah. Boy, I didn't know if we were going to get that out.

Neither did I, Don.

- rented canoe. How much duct tape do I have?

For some funny reason, I knew at the top that I should step out where you guys did.

I thought so, too, but you have a narrower canoe. Plus, I thought you were asking me where the best route was, as though you were committed to shooting the whole thing.

Ah well, nothing important wrecked.

- rented canoe. Bob's got it floating, anyway. Hope he finds my sleeping bag. Going to be a wet night. God, I feel abashed. I see blue, so he's got my pack. Close call.