

running the raging rouge

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This politician took the Wilderness Canoe Association spring run down the Rouge River in eastern Metro Toronto. Politicians are known to hedge their bets and they love publicity. Although only a small politician, Scarborough Alderman, I was being true to my profession when I accepted the challenge to run the "Raging Rouge River." I had inspected it days before and figured it was so low I could walk down the middle, if need be. A Scarborough kayak manufacturer pledged to match Scarborough Council's sponsorship of donations to "Save the Rouge," an environmental group, for every kilometre down the river any councillor survived. What could be simpler than to walk a kayak down a creek for 15 kilometres and claim fame and glory at Lake Ontario and journey's end, I thought.

Alas, my dream of a conquering hero's welcome was not to be. Instead, the T.V. cameras witnessed a wet, shivering, red-eyed, terrorized apparition, fit only for rear photography, paddling every which way into sanctuary on the beach.

It was Jim Greenacre's fault. I met him scouting the mouth of the Rouge on Thursday for the Wilderness Canoe Association River run on Saturday, 26 March. I admired his hand-made cedar strip canoe and when I admitted I was an inactive WCA member he chided me for letting others do the work. Explanations such as being too busy and only a five-strokes-each-side paddler had no effect on him and sounded lame even to me. When Rhema Recreational challenged Council to send a council member on the run it seemed like events were setting their own course and like a true political leader--I followed along.

Arriving at the starting point on Saturday, I looked over the bridge and was horrified. Instead of the babbling brook I had seen on Thursday there was a "Raging Rouge River." The ice had melted so I could not use ice as an excuse for a pedestrian short-cut. Worse still, it had rained and what normally was a 15-cm deep stream was now a 1.2-m deep raging torrent. It might even be deeper in some places, I thought. The boulders I had envisioned sunning myself upon were now submerged and obvious only by the curling-back wave they offered to anyone silly enough to go near.

When confronted with overwhelming odds I have a funny nervous reaction which I hope is uncommon--I smile. I smiled as I looked at the river. I smiled as I took the manufacturer's kayak off the roof of the car. I smiled as I met Peter Schimek, the WCA organizer of the trip, and I smiled as I met all the other kamikaze canoeists who were going to make the trip. What a nice bunch of people for a communal funeral, I thought. I smiled some more as I looked at the canoes neatly lined up like coffins on the bank, all pointing towards the water as though awaiting bodies for burial at sea. I just cannot remember when I smiled so much.

Fortunately I had some time to think between the 9:00 a.m. starting time and the return of the drivers from end point car drop off. The thought of sponsors' donations being refunded due to "Alderman's Cowardice" was no more appealing than was the muddy torrent. The weather had turned a sunny 10°C, so cancellation was improbable. I decided not to break my leg to avoid going, as it might hurt. Near-drowning by deliberately throwing myself into the river would not faze this web-footed group, I thought. The gods, it seemed, had willed my demise and there was nothing I could do about it.

Surrendering to one's fate has its advantages, for the answers to "if," "when," and "how" are all known, leaving one to contemplate higher things. I thought of the 750 people who attended Council and won a reprieve to the

urbanization of this wilderness area from sprawling housing estates. I thought of the impassioned pleas by environmentalists for the preservation of 26 species which will become extinct in Canada if development is allowed on this provincially owned land. I thought of Chief Lindbergh Loutht as he told Council of his nation's heritage on the river and how they consider it sacred. I smiled as I thought of the politicians and bureaucrats who relate how urbanization and this environment are compatible while at the same time watching massive erosion and pollution caused by urban road run-off and flash floods. A lot of people love this river and maybe a challenge is all part of the preservation process, I hoped.

Eventually, all participants were moving to their kayaks or canoes. Some skittled about in a pool immediately between the Steeles Avenue bridge and the first fast water. One volunteer held my kayak steady while another helped fasten my spray skirt. After making ready I reluctantly released my white-knuckle clutch on the bank. The organizer had said, "just do the same as the others," so I did. They manoeuvred across the river and back in elegant circles. I intended to cross the river but moved downstream broadside instead. My consternation on why I moved downriver while they moved across was short lived. Within a few seconds I had securely fastened myself to exactly balance the centre of my kayak with the centre of pressure of the moving water and the top of a half-submerged rock. Freezing water poured over the side of my kayak, down the space between my skin and the kayak spray skirt, down my trouser leg which made a convenient spout for water to fill the front of the craft. The kayak would move neither forward nor backward as the water pressure pinned it against the rock. Paddling was useless. No one but me seemed concerned. A Nastawgan cartoon came to mind demonstrating a lean out of a curve. If I leaned into the water I would surely go under so I leaned, against all my instincts, against the rock. My centre of gravity changed and I slid off the rock, backwards towards the first rapids. Paralyzing terror came to my rescue. In my paralysis the boat swirled into the ebb of the rock, pirouetted, and behold I was facing frontwards. A deep breath, a yell, and I was through the first rock maze still heading frontwards--a major achievement.

Between the first rocks and the next rocks was 10 seconds--maximum. It was not like the movies with intermittent rapids. To me it was continuous rapids for 13 kilometres. Granted, some of the kamikaze canoeists could stop and make their craft literally hover in the water like hummingbirds. They seemed to have all the time in the world. As for no-brakes-Mackie: "Loook - oout!"

Inevitably I dunked. It happened as I braced on my paddle to avoid a horizontal tree branch sticking out seven metres, 45 cm above the water. To the uninitiated, bracing is leaning on the paddle with the paddle lying flat on the water. I forgot I was holding an off-set, double-ended kayak paddle and not my one-blade canoe paddle. I leaned on the paddle with the edge pointing down where I followed immediately thereafter. Calmly my companions caught my kayak which was happily heading downstream like a headstrong mustang. Others collected my paddle and ferried me down to be re-embalmed in my coffin craft.

Peter Schimek, a handsome and capable young man, responsibly suggested I might prefer sitting in the mid-section of some other canoe while someone more experienced rode my kayak. Herb Pohl, a man more of my own vintage, noted my disdain at this suggestion and volunteered to escort me at least until I fell in again. Both Peter and Herb seemed to accept my capsize as inevitable and suggested there was no point in my changing into dry clothes.



photo: Warren Toda / The Scarborough Mirror