

north shore the cottages did not seem to be as numerous as the topo map had led me to believe. Of course most were quiet and empty and did not intrude upon my solitude. The MNR had rigged several fish traps along my route. My curiosity led me to investigate their inmates which appeared to be either young muskies or pickerel. They would probably be tagged and then released. I paddled on.

Early in the afternoon, as a light rain fell, I bid farewell to Stoney Lake and paddled upstream into Eels Creek. Distant noises faded away as I left the cottages behind and headed for High Falls. The film, "The Teaching Rocks," shown at the WCA symposium a few months earlier in January, had suggested a connection between High Falls and the petroglyphs north of Stoney Lake. Recalling the eerie reverence that I had felt when I first viewed the petroglyphs many years previous, I now approached High Falls.

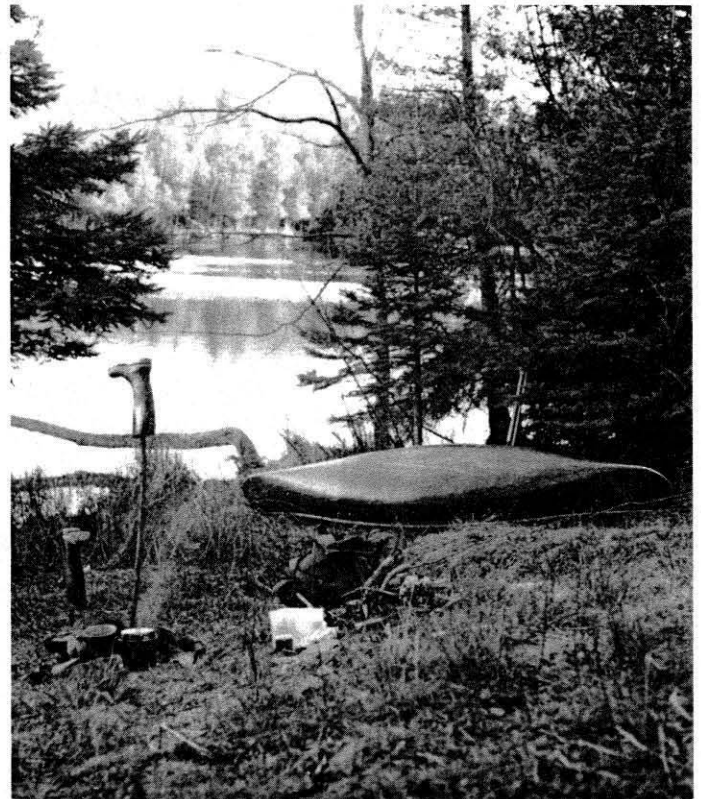
I was not prepared for the litter of the many campsites, nor the vandalized outhouses, but the beauty and power of High Falls forced such desecrations into relative insignificance. As I slid my old cedarstrip canoe into the waters above the falls, the sun broke through the clouds. I hoped that it was a sign that the spirits were pleased with my solitary quest. I spent the rest of the afternoon exploring the region upstream of the falls.

*28 April* I rose with the dawn and shook the frost from the tent fly. Wearing all my clothes I paddled further upstream. At the first set of rapids I surprised a young otter who snorted his disgust at my arrival and quickly departed. The current increased and it was a steady paddle to the falls at Haultain. An easy portage along the Haultain Road led me to Big Cedar Lake and familiar territory. Big Cedar was glassy calm and the sun warmed my back as I leisurely practiced various paddle strokes on my westward journey. Unimpressed by my presence, a pair of loons swam and fished as I crossed their bay.

At the end of Big Cedar I found a snowmobile trail across the marsh to Coon Lake. The trail turned out to be 70% water too shallow to float the canoe in, with the remaining 30% being muck and unstable hummocks. Somehow I managed to remain relatively dry. From Coon Lake my journey took me over several portages and small lakes to Shark Lake. There I spent some time fishing and revisiting the lake which I had not seen for many years. A fire had recently swept across the south shore of the lake. I noted that the burned area included a campsite and wondered if a campfire had been the source of the blaze. Across the lake, a trapper's cabin had been burned a few years back, purportedly by canoeists/campers. That cabin had been a symbol of a gentler time. It was never locked and when I was lost in the bush 20 years ago, I found refuge there. The trappers have built a new cabin further down the lake in a more secluded spot. The door is fitted with a heavy hasp and padlock.

Late in the afternoon I shouldered my pack and canoe and started across the portage into Cadge Lake. The winter frost had heaved and loosened the soil on the trail and I realized that the tracks I was leaving were the first of the year.

In the canoe once again with no wind and the spring sun striving to banish any memory of winter, all was right in the world. Approaching the end of my journey, I slowed my pace and enjoyed the ecstasy of a leisurely paddle. A sudden splash jarred me from my daydreaming. A little ways ahead a white-tail deer was swimming from the shore to an island. When it reached the island it turned its ears like radar dishes towards me. Although I tried to remain motionless as I drifted towards the island, the deer bounded out of sight. I paddled frantically to catch up with it at the far end of the island and amazingly we both reached it at the same time. The deer made it quite obvious that it had not expected to see me again and leaped into the water not far from my bow, swam to the nearby shore, and quickly disappeared into the bush.



The afternoon was fading into twilight as I crossed the final portage into Long Lake. Just a few days before, I had been skirting the edge of the ice on this familiar lake. Now, although the air was cool and the trees were not yet in bud, the unmistakable promise of summer had broken winter's siege. A large beaver had felled a poplar tree at the shore and was busy feeding. As I approached, he fled to the safety of the lake and slapped his tail on the surface. I followed him hoping to get a good photo of him slapping the water again. I only succeeded in harassing him and his raspy snarls made it clear that he was not in a mood for posing for nosy tourists.

A bank of clouds was threatening in the west as I reached our cottage dock on Loucks Lake, and within an hour a cold front had swept in with high winds and falling temperatures. A fitting end to a satisfying solo trip .