

enced Northwest Territories canoeist, scratched his head. Could these funny ducks handle the heavy whitewater ahead? With skepticism all round, I was relieved when Misha motioned that the four of us might paddle together. Slava commanded a second cat and Bruce Conover, our translator and 'heavy-water expert, the third. Encased in protective dry suit, wet boots, helmet, and life-jacket — with collective paddling time approaching two centuries — we were ready for whatever the Katun would dish out.

Stroking around an early bend, I saw us fast closing on trouble. A large rock in centre stream left no space on either side for our broad-beamed craft to pass. Bob and Ron were poised for a command from the stem. I shot a worried look at Misha, got no response for a few long seconds, then three beautiful English words, his first to us: "Rock in between." A correcting move and the menace flashed between our hulls. The discovery of Misha's English and the deft performance of our once-castigated cats were bringing things together.

Though paddling at about 5,000 feet elevation and still in sight of Mount Belukha, we were not alone. Cattle trails crisscrossed the valley, a shepherd's yurt was a quarter mile inland, and we watched with fascination as a distant Altay rider and his dog herded 50 horses along. All reflective of settlement patterns developed over the millennia. An exotic land, I concluded, but not a wilderness. By day's end all of us had come to terms with our cats, terms of affection and respect.

Stark Biddle knew exactly what to do for dinner. A Vermont sheep rancher, he took one look at the piece of meat the Soviets produced, then went to work. My role was to gather wood — a basic, mechanical task for which I am well suited. When the evening meal was announced, Chez Biddle served up deboned leg of Siberian lamb marinated in garlic, lemon-butter sauce, boiled new potatoes, and melange of vegetables.

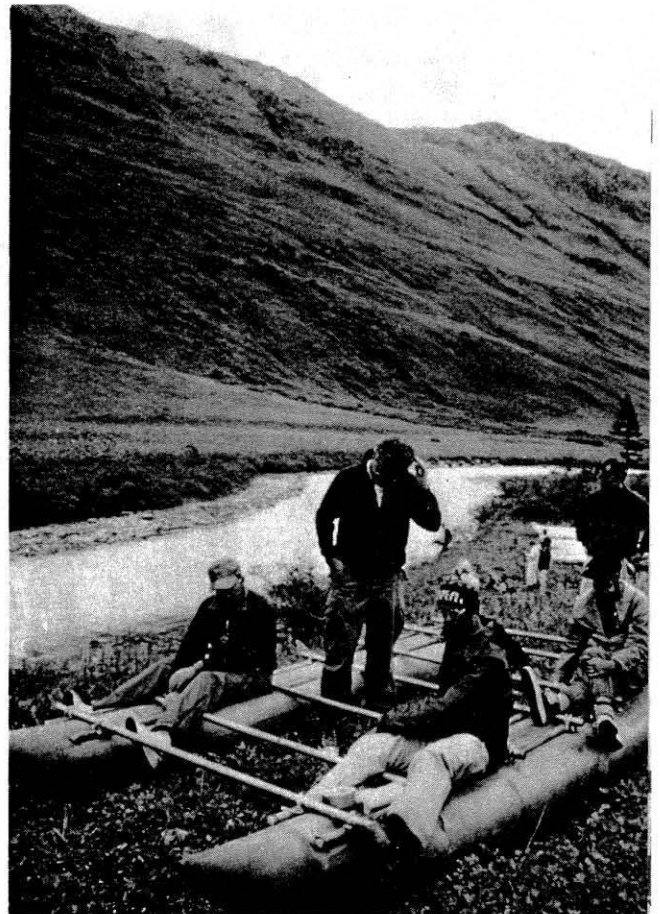
Later on we compared maps. It has usually been problematic, if not impossible, for Soviets to get detailed scale maps of their own country. After looking over our U.S. Government four-mile-to-the-inch series, Misha produced something like a Chinese scroll. His six-foot, pencil-drawn sheet was a bend-by-bend depiction of the Katun with rapids and campsites noted. This most accurate yet private creation told me that the official Soviet renderings were unsuitable for basic navigation.

Next morning we entered the Katun's steepest gradient. Falling 80 feet per mile for the next 20 miles, the white-flecked river was on a constant angle as it cascaded away in front of us. Our most intense action came in the Five Cheeks Rapids. The so-called Cheeks were actually mini canyons laced with whitewater.

We almost got masticated in the teeth of Second Cheeks. Scouting from 30 feet above the surging Katun, our choice was clear: go with the flow and combat the backwash off an undercut wall or try a tough sneak route on river right inside a massive rock. We opted for technical virtuosity: river right. Misha's perfect set-up had us hurtling toward the narrow, frothing channel. When bowmen Bob and Ron flinched, I yanked my outer leg inside the rubber hull. SCREECH!!!

Aluminum pole ends ground violently between rocky island and canyon wall. Speed dropped to first gear effort. Instinctively, we paddled like dogs to prevent a flip. Our trusty craft lurched through, but it turned the other route into a universal favorite.

In the Cheeks we first encountered Soviet recreational catamaran boaters. They began running the Katun some 25 years ago in log rafts steered by giant sweeps. Talented



paddlers and a river-loving bunch, they had to make do with basically home-made equipment. The U.S.S.R. has almost no whitewater equipment industry and little foreign exchange for imports. So the rubber hulls for their cats were protected with hand-stitched abrasion covers, poles and seats cut from the forest, while paddles and life jackets were products of their own invention.

I had an immediate respect for the esprit of these young people. Whether an engineer from Novosibirsk or a tractor mechanic out of Volgograd, they often spoke of motherland. With its powerful concept of ties to the soil (not asphalt), there should be no surprise at the depth of today's burgeoning Soviet environmental movement.

Early on the fourth day we hove into an eddy on river left. Misha led photographer Ken Garrett, Bruce Conover, and me inland to visit a classic Siberian log home. We were graciously received by a Kazakh beekeeper and his family. Over bread and tea he told us how they pass April through November tending this one-family collective farm (if that's not too much of a contradiction) with about a hundred hives,