

FRENCH RIVER, SUMMER 2006 A PRECAUTIONARY TALE

We had not canoed the French River since the nineties, in the days before the Ontario Provincial Park system was forced to become financially self-supporting. We were looking forward to revisiting the western outlets of the river for a weekend.

After paying the registration fee, we parked in the multi-level garage recently blasted out of the rock under the Hartley Bay access point. Our battered green canoe attracted some amused comments as we waited in line to purchase tickets for the jet-boat ride down-river to the West Channel Entry Gate.

Once there, we faced some initial scepticism from the hospitality staff when they realized that we intended to make our own way to the mouth of the river, rather than board a monorail car for the scenic ride through Voyageurland. However, after signing the appropriate waivers, and purchasing search-and-rescue insurance, we were soon on our way.

We decided to follow the Old Voyageur Channel, so we paddled to the rapids at La Petite Faucille where we were assisted across the short portage by period-costumed "voyageurs." The down-channel dam, which ensures a predictable flow of water for the hourly re-enactment of the voyageurs' passage, was closed, and the water level was backed right up to the foot of the rapids.

We re-embarked, and floated down to the dam on the former rapids at Palmer Rocks, where the operator helped us to lift over. Then came the highlight of our trip, as we paddled down La Dalle. Waving to the passengers in the monorail car as it passed overhead, we shot down the narrow channel.

Soon we reached the Radisson Outpost Camp on the Western Cross Channel. We were able to secure a tent pad only one row back from the water, and after setting up camp we watched a re-enactment of the passage of the fur traders, who sang as they paddled down the channel. Later, the realistically costumed voyageurs cooked rubaboo for the campers, which we ate to the recorded calls of the loon, now rare in this part of Ontario.

The following morning, we awakened to the cry of "levez! levez!" broadcast over the public address system. We arranged with the maintenance staff to have our canoe and outfit returned to Hartley Bay, and boarded the next "brigade" of motor canoes headed to the Mike Harris Interpretative Centre, on the islands at the mouth of the river. The day quickly passed as we participated in the various traditional activities organized by the staff. In the evening, we joined the line for the return trip to Hartley Bay, where we were granted certificates naming each of us a "true Northman/woman." The river certainly has changed since our earlier paddling days.

Andrew Hall

MY IMAGINARY HOME

For many years I have been fortunate to participate in yearly canoe trips. From these memorable experiences I now have a plethora of natural images which have helped me formulate what I believe to be my imaginary home. This home could not be more different from my university home, the dirty, musty, neglected piece of construction students call their 'pad.' My imaginary home contains no driveway, no expensive car, no congestion, no conspicuous consumption, few fashion trends, and certainly no video games.

My imaginary home consists of old-growth forests, fresh clean water, breath-taking scenic views, the hypnotic call of the loon, and a tent to shelter me from the elements. I travel by canoe and on foot, the same way as our native peoples, whom we all can learn from. The selection of roommates in my imaginary home is not as important as the selection of roommates in other homes, since they all contribute to the team to ensure that everyone can reach an ultimate goal.

To some, an imaginary home is as valued spiritually as aesthetically; to myself, perhaps a little of both. Using an idea from Reuben Berger in a different context, I believe when staying outdoors or in my imaginary home, even when I am alone, I can feel a-l-l- o-n-e. This feeling is a very special one. My imaginary home is the only place in which I can forget who I am for a brief moment.

I feel very fortunate that I can visit my imaginary home three seasons a year, but the increasing popularity of canoeing is slowly taking its toll on the environment. There is a theory which states that an increased level of education results in an increase in outdoor recreation participation which in turn results in the preservation of nature. But, for every theory, there is always another one which disputes the first. There is a counter theory which states that the resulting increased participation in outdoor recreation leads to a destruction of nature. Unfortunately, I tend to lean toward the latter view.

These words are not intended as a plea for help, nor to try to persuade one to join Greenpeace, but rather to raise awareness that my imaginary home may well become a figment of my children's imagination. This is an idea I only recently began to fear might come true. Let's not make my imaginary home literally imaginary.

Riley Watson

