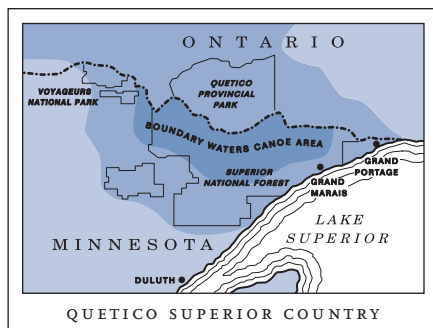


Wilderness News

FROM THE QUETICO SUPERIOR FOUNDATION FALL/WINTER 2006



The Quetico Superior Foundation, established in 1946, encourages and supports the protection of the ecological, cultural and historical resources of the Quetico Superior region.

“Canoes are perfect for sneaking up on the world. If you spend a lot of time on the water and are vigilant and lucky, you’re certain to be rewarded with wonderful perceptions—the glint of starlight on a lake, the splashing liquid motion of an otter, the way the sun paints the water with swirls of orange and gold. The pace of a canoe makes us see with wider eyes and listen with better ears. Every bend in a river and every wooded point on a lake becomes an opportunity to encounter the unexpected.”

—Jerry Dennis, *From a Wooden Canoe*



Wilderness News

Published by the Quetico Superior Foundation

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Photo courtesy of Airphoto – Jim Wark.

Digital simulation—unmanned US Customs and Border Protection surveillance aircraft patrolling the Quetico-Superior border.

Securing the Wilderness Border

By Charlie Mahler, Wilderness News Contributor

The Boundary Waters. The Border Route. Those dividing “B” words have long been embedded in the names used to describe the Quetico-Superior region. The notion, however, that a modern-day international divide cuts through the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness and Quetico Provincial Park usually fades into the remoteness of the place. The region’s ruggedness, isolation, and wildness make the area seem more like a single thing shared by two countries, than something sharply divided. The area evokes vast wilderness, towering pine, and howling wolves rather than border surveillance or the tracking of terrorist interlopers.

But the wilder qualities of the region and modern realities of border protection are intersecting in the BWCAW and Quetico with the news that the US Border Patrol plans to build a new, larger facility in Grand Marais to better monitor the region, and in light of the recently established Secure Borders Initiative which augers a more closely watched, higher tech northern frontier.

The Quetico-Superior stretch of what is commonly referred to as the world’s longest undefended border is different already today than it was prior to September 11, 2001, and seems likely to change even more in the coming years.

Tasked with Securing the Border

“We have a job to do and we don’t apologize for doing that job,” Assistant Chief Border Patrol Agent Lonny Schweitzer said by way of explaining his agency’s growing presence in northern Minnesota since the fall of 2001. “We try to do the least amount of impact that we can in the area that we’re in.”

Doing its job, the agency asserts, necessitates a larger Grand Marais facility – one that could support up to 50 agents – and an increased presence in the wildest reaches of the international border in the form of personnel or high tech surveillance or both.

“We always need manpower on the ground but we also are backstopping that with technology,” Schweitzer said, “and then also our community involvement where we go out and solicit the help of folks who live in those areas. We’ve always done that; we’ve been around since 1924.”

Since the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the Border Patrol, the uniformed law enforcement arm of US Customs and Border Protection, a bureau of the Department of Homeland Security, has ramped up its personnel across the entire northern border with Canada.

“Pre-9/11 there were less than 400 border control agents on the northern border with Canada – that’s

continued on page 2

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from Maine to Washington,” Schweitzer, who is based in Grand Forks, North Dakota, explained. “Since then, what we did within the first year, year and a half, is triple those numbers. We’re slightly over a thousand border-wide.”

In Grand Marais, an increase in local personnel and responsibilities has surpassed the functionality of the 700 square foot office space the Border Patrol has occupied since the 1960s.

The activities of the additional Border Patrol personnel and nature and extent of high tech border monitoring equipment has also raised curiosity. The passage of the Secure Border Initiative and the contract award to Boeing for high tech border surveillance equipment have prompted some to worry that the wilderness nature of the Quetico-Superior will be compromised.

Schweitzer acknowledged future high-tech plans for the border, as well as high-tech measures already in place, but emphasized his agency’s sensitivity to wilderness concerns. “We’ll be assessing the technology we have,” Schweitzer said. “It could be airborne platforms, it could be ground sensors, it could be ground-based radar or ground-based cameras. We have certain things in there at the present time – ground sensors and that – that are unobtrusive and those signals will come back into here so that we are aware of any border incursion.”

Schweitzer, who also noted that the Border Patrol monitors the area via canoes and dogsleds, said the agency is currently assessing where along the northern border resources are most needed and what technologies are appropriate for the task. “What may work very well in one location, will not work in another,” Schweitzer said offering the difference between the southern border near San Diego and that in the BWCAW. “We can look at some less intrusive technologies.”

Schweitzer stressed that when the Border Patrol operates on land under the jurisdiction of the US Forest Service, like the Superior National Forest and BWCAW, it does so under a “memorandum of understanding” that calls for a “cooperative working relationship” between the federal agencies.

The Superior National Forest’s Public Service Team Leader Barb Soderberg concurred, but stressed that the Border Patrol holds the stronger position in the relationship. “If you’re looking for bottom line,” she said, “the bottom line is they don’t have to ask us for approval for anything. We don’t have jurisdiction over the Border Patrol. I’m sure there are things going on that I don’t know about, and that’s just the nature of the business with border security. If they’re sharing everything they’re doing with folks, it going to be a lot more difficult job.”

“Where the rubber meets the road,” Soderberg added, “if they felt they needed to use a motor boat in a paddle-only area, or if they needed to fly below the 4,000 foot level, they do not have to ask our permission. But I do know they are interested in the fact that it is a designated wilderness area.”

Soderberg said the Forest Service has provided the Border Patrol with the BWCAW user education video, has offered to help in Border Patrol training sessions, and has provided knowledge of routes into various areas of the wilderness.

Soderberg refused to speculate about how the Forest Service would react to a Border Patrol request to build structures or clear forest in the Wilderness. “That’s total speculation. They have never asked us or made us aware of that kind of permanent mark in the wilderness. I don’t even want to speculate at this point,” she said.

Concerns About What Might Change

In Grand Marais, a group of concerned citizens is troubled about the increase Border Patrol presence in the area. Their concerns range from the future of the wild character of the BWCAW to feeling left out of discussions about the growing role of the Border Patrol in their community.

“The Boundary Waters is considered a national treasure,” Grand Marais’ Staci Drouillard of the loosely affiliated Concerned Citizens for Cook County said. “It took an act of Congress to create the wilderness, and I think it should take an act of Congress to make any changes whether it’s for national security or not.” Drouillard is concerned less about the new Border Patrol building, per se, than she is the manner in which site selection and public involvement is being handled. “I don’t think anyone is concerned about the Border Patrol having a new building,” she said. “The whole thing has sort of been masked in secrecy. They’re sort of discounting the local implications.”

“I think the overarching issue is the militarization of the Canadian border,” she said. “We’ve been tracking the US Coast Guard live fire exercises on Lake Superior as well as the border security and Border Patrol increases. I think the Border Patrol needs to clarify what their intentions are.”

A View From The North

Like Drouillard, Quetico Provincial Park Superintendent Robin Reilly sees the atmosphere on both sides of the border as having changed in recent years. From Americans wondering whether they need passports to visit the park – they don’t, but they will soon need them to return to the US legally – to a more literal interpretation of the treaty that defines the area, the wild borderland has changed.

“There are certainly times now when airplanes flying around the border, because of landing, may have come into US airspace on the way in or something,” Reilly said. “There’s a lot more nervousness about that and a lot more announcements on the radio. There have been people flying bush planes that are seeing fighter planes in the area talking to them about what they’re doing. Not that you say harassment, just that ‘somebody’s watching’ is a much stronger sentiment.”

Reilly observes that as Americans ratchet up border monitoring, the Canadian government often follows suit. “There’s two sides to the border,” he notes. “On our border, you see a tiny bit more

concern about border security and interpretation of things literally. To be honest, as a Canadian, my perspective is that as you folks feel a need to tighten up the border, we get pushed into tightening up the border too so that we aren’t perceived as being slack. It’s kind of a ‘me too –ism.’”

Reilly noted that the Webster-Ashburton Treaty of 1842 allows citizens of either country to travel along the border freely. A more literal interpretation of the treaty nowadays is excluding activities that were typically allowed. “At one point, ‘moving through’ would have included stopping and swimming or fishing for a minute,” Reilly explained. “It’s increasingly being interpreted more literally as ‘keep moving,’ ‘don’t stop.’ It’s a slightly narrower interpretation of things.”

Although he’s unsure of just what American officials have in mind for the border, he’s concerned about what he hears and what it might mean for his park and the entire Quetico-Superior region. “We hear, essentially rumors, about whether there are going to be jet boats patrolling Basswood Lake,” Reilly said. “Are there going to be monitoring towers along the border – there were announcements about 800 towers along the Canadian border – are there going to be one or two near Quetico? The talk of those things gives people a bit of grief because it flies in the face of their affection for the idea of a wilderness area that spans the border.”

Reilly worries about what increased security activities on the border could mean for the experience of visitors to his park.

“In a sense, Quetico feels twice as big because of the Boundary Waters and the Boundary Waters feels twice as big because of Quetico, to the people that use them. The more you reinforce and put towers and boats and a presence along the border, each of them, perceptually feels like it shrinks by half.”

—Robin Reilly, Quetico Provincial Park Superintendent

“In the larger sense of what the experience has historically been,” he added, “which is to say an area that was, a hundred years ago, construed to be a large, transnational unit, too rigorous a presence at the border would take away that experience entirely.”

Factors beyond those that usually impact the Quetico-Superior – national security, the war on terrorism – are likely to drive the future of the area more than ever before. Short of a change in the trajectory in those areas, however, the wild, open feeling that the Boundary Waters and Border Lakes region has long enjoyed seems likely to tighten in the coming years. There is a “boundary” in Boundary Waters after all. □



Quetico Provincial Park— Management Plan Under Review

By Laura Puckett, *Wilderness News Contributor*

While the plants and animals of Quetico Provincial Park settle in for the winter, the Canadian government at all levels is examining the park's management strategies and preparing for the years to come. At the Assembly level of government (which is akin to Congress in the United States), new legislation, the Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Act, has been passed that not only affects Quetico, but all of Ontario's parks. At the park level, specific to Quetico, the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) has undertaken a new Quetico Park Management Plan Review. This kind of legislative and management review is not new, and is in fact vital to the park's continued existence.

Quetico Park Management Plan

The Management Plan review is a four-stage process that started in the spring of 2006. First, the MNR invited public participation and set out "Terms of Reference," which can currently be found on the Ontario Parks—Quetico website (www.ontarioparks.com/english/quet_planning.html). The terms of reference describe the management history, provide the rationale for the current review, and outline the planning process. It is an important document because it communicates clearly to the public what is happening to their park. The "invitation to participate" ended this summer, but, as emphasized in the "Terms of Reference," feedback is welcome during every stage of the planning process. Currently, stage two, the "Opportunity to Inspect Background Information and Management Options," is underway, and will last through Spring 2007. The next stages will provide opportunities to review and comment on the preliminary and approved plans, with the whole process scheduled to be completed in Fall 2008.

Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Act

The Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Act was passed in June 2006 to replace the Wilderness Areas Act and the Provincial Parks Act. The new Act will not be in force, though, until a date declared by the Lieutenant Governor, which can only happen once new "Regulations for Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves" are completed, scheduled for the end of 2006 or early 2007.

Generally, like the Quetico Park Management Plan, the Act is important because it brings the governmental regulations up to date and ensures they are living documents. This Act initially raised the defenses of environmental groups because the original version eliminated the prohibition on mechanized travel from the "wilderness" classification, but that prohibition has since been restored in the final document. An important addition to the Act is the phrase "ecological integrity." The new Act declares it "shall be the first priority in guiding all aspects of park planning and management," bringing the parks' environmental quality to the forefront of legislation and ensuring the concept will be included in future management documents.

Despite these changes, many environmental groups still express concern about the new Act. "Ecological integrity" is a wonderful concept, but the Act does not go so far as to include the "greater ecosystems" that surround the parks and whose activities necessarily affect the environments within the parks. According to Robin Reilly, Superintendent of Quetico Park, it is a complex issue that is being examined by a sub-committee. "From the parks perspective," he says, "it would be good to have the edges

of adjacent lands managed sympathetically, but from the industry perspective, this is just enlarging the size of the parks."

Another concern expressed by environmental groups is that the new act permits industrial access roads for logging and mining in the parks. This is a complicated issue, because the act says that roads and trails are permitted to access existing mining or timber claims or such claims outside of the park. Examining the road situation means examining the mining, timber, and electricity policies as well—activities which are strictly prohibited or restricted. Also, the roads are still subject to additional policies and approval by the Minister of Natural Resources. The long and the short of it is that the Act reasserts rules and management that were in place before the Act was passed, so the rules governing Quetico are still in place, and the park is still protected from roads and mechanized vehicles. The status of roads in other parks is particular to each park's management, but they are subject to Act's overarching premise: to protect the ecological integrity of parks.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the Act does not mandate a "management plan" or even a less-comprehensive "management strategy" for each park—these are regulations that govern the policies specific to a park, like the Quetico Management Plan being reviewed right now. What the new Act does require is a "management direction" for each park. The management direction is to be reviewed regularly, and by virtue of the Environmental Bill of Rights, updates and reports shall be made available to the public. The Act also validates already existing management plans and strategies.

Not requiring a new management plan or strategy, with the requisite public input, risks looser governance for each park, but it does not necessarily mean lax environmental policies. Some parks, like Quetico, are large and well-established with meticulous management plans, plans which are reinstated by the new Act. But other parks are not even operating (parks without facilities, services, etc.), and for these the Act means some minimum of management in the form of direction. At the very least, Superintendent Reilly says, every project in every park must go through an environmental screening, "which for anything other than routine work has a public component. For environmentalists, it is important to realize that the Act is a legislative document to guide policy, but it does not determine the specific management guidelines for individual parks.

The Act's Impact on the Quetico Management Plan Review

With the Quetico Management Plan review in full-swing, Quetico will be the first old, large park affected by this new Act, thus, according to Reilly, "what happens at Quetico will shape the interpretation and form of the Act's implementation." The Management Plan review is a chance to see how the Act will be interpreted and it will set a precedent for future interpretations. It is an important time to voice your concerns. Comments on the Management Plan can be sent to Robin Reilly, superintendent of Quetico Provincial Park (robin.reilly@mnr.gov.on.ca), or you can become involved with the Quetico Management Plan process by emailing your contact information to queticoplan@mnr.gov.on.ca. Americans are welcome to respond. Comments on the Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Act should be sent to the Minister of Natural Resources, David Ramsay, at dramsay.mpp.kirklandlake@liberal.ola.org. Updates on all environmental policies can be accessed at the Environmental Bill of Rights website, www.ene.gov.on.ca/envision/env_reg/ebr/english/index.htm.

Building History

By Laura Puckett, Wilderness News Contributor

As iconic as the tall pines or the swaths of exposed granite in Quetico-Superior is the image of a canoe cutting a delicate wake across smooth water. The canoe fits in the landscape, an organic product of the Native American's efforts to take advantage of the area's unique aquatic ecosystem. Today, the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness and Quetico Provincial Park exist in large part because of this vessel. Canoeists campaigned loudly to create the parks, and the fleets that flock to them each summer demonstrate that they are important pieces of natural, and national, heritage.

Part of this heritage is the wood-canvas canoe which replaced the Voyageur birch-bark style canoe around 1875, and became the workhorse for modern explorers until the advent of aluminum, Kevlar and plastic after World War II. Today, those that seek out wood-canvas canoes are not looking for what is lightest or most rock-resistant. They are looking for a vessel that is functional, but also beautiful, and the purveyor of tradition.

These canoes are hand-made by individuals scattered across the country. Joe Seliga was such a builder for over 60 years in Ely, Minnesota. He produced 621 canoes, many of which were used by YMCA Camps Widjiwagan and Menogyn, and were thus paddled each summer by hundreds of youths, instead of single owners. With this exposure, Joe gained a reputation unknown by any other individual builder. Thankfully, though, Joe was not the only builder out there, for he passed away last December, leaving behind him a long waiting list.

In his stead remain three established, if not necessarily famous, wood-canvas canoe builders in the Quetico-Superior region. Jeanne Bourquin is another resident of Ely, working just down the road from Camp Widjiwagan. On Lake Superior, Alex Comb is building canoes in the town of Knife River. Fletcher Canoes are built by Thelma Cameron in Atikokan, north of the Quetico. These builders each have their own techniques and their own style, producing canoes that are all a bit different. What binds them is their commitment to the process: the meticulous attention to details, the ability to work on their own terms, and the alchemy of using their hands and simple materials to craft a beautiful product.

Jeanne Bourquin

Originally a Widjiwagan camper, Jeanne Bourquin paddled aluminum canoes while working for Outward Bound, but "got tired of that black stuff" on her hands, so she started learning to repair and build wood-canvas boats at Widji in between Outward Bound courses. She worked with Jerry Stelmock, a renowned Maine canoe builder, who helped her make her first form (the model on which new canoes are built), but she credits a lot of what she knows now to trial and error.

Eventually she designed her own model, the Otter, a tandem canoe for smaller people, inspired by the Widji trips that take 12-year-old campers into the BWCAW. She also produces

the Lutre (a wider Otter), the classic Atkinson Traveler, as well as many other models with the high, upswept bow and deck profiles of the Chestnut Indian Maiden. She does a lot of repairs and sells yoke pads; she teaches classes at the North House Folk School; for new canoes, she averages about three a year, and is happy with that. Seliga's legacy is admirable, she says, "he is an inspiration for how to be dedicated to something," and how when you are, "it can give you lots of life," but for her, building canoes is equally about constructing a way of life as it is about canoes.

Bourquin's craft has enabled her to live in Ely, to be accessible to her family, and to work on



Alex Comb – Stewart River Boatworks, Knife River Minnesota.



Jeanne Bourquin – Bourquin Boats, Ely Minnesota with Joe Seliga at the North House Folk School, 2003.



Thelma Cameron – Fletcher Canoes, Atikokan Ontario.



Fletcher "Fancy" 14' Wood-Canvas Canoe.

her own terms—with people and by herself, for however much time she desires. Jeanne acknowledges that she doesn't "have a wide-range, with other kinds of boats or wood-working skills," but she is good at building canoes and explaining the process to others. She is grateful that with her husband's income she doesn't have to depend solely on her work to sustain her family, so she is able to enjoy building canoes, but also pursue other activities and go on paddling trips of her own.

Alex Comb

In contrast, Alex is proud that he is able to provide for his wife, older son, and new baby with his work. Like Bourquin, he does not just build new boats. He does some repairs, he works as a building inspector for a non-profit in Duluth, and he does a lot of private teaching. He would build more if he could, but hiring help hasn't worked, and he does all he can now, popping into the shop connected to his house at odd hours to make a little progress. In the end, he doesn't keep track of how many canoes he builds, "the number kind of weighs me down," he says, "all those boats, it makes me tired."

Comb is as much a boat designer as a builder—as evidenced by his 8 original models. He had a helpful background as a professional carpenter, though when he first started, all he had to go on was an Old Town displayed in a store and what advice he could wrestle from Joe Seliga, who was reluctant to share the techniques he had spent so many years acquiring. Today Comb has responded to the continuing demand for Seliga-style tripping canoes with his own model, the Stillwater, based on a canoe built by Geo. Muller Boatworks, in Stillwater, Minnesota, around 1935. Canoe design is not radical, Comb says. He stresses that "the true success is not the extreme, the something that's way out there;" rather, it is "the something that is right in the middle, but everyone missed it." For him, this creative process is the most fulfilling aspect of his work, when he is able to see things he's been mulling over become realities.

Thelma Cameron

On the other side of the Quetico, Thelma Cameron is building the canoes her uncle, Paul Fletcher, designed: the Bill Mason Heavy Duty, a large tripping canoe, and the Fletcher Fancy, a smaller boat with high, upswept ends. Paul Fletcher started to build canoes in 1985, but wanted to retire about the same time Thelma



and her husband visited him to pick up a canoe for themselves. In 1993 the Camerons bought the business and moved the canoe form and tools to Atikokan, where Randy and their son built the canoes for 4 years. When their son decided to move away in 1997, Thelma didn't want to see the business end, so she learned all she could before he left, and today continues the Fletcher tradition.

Although she never could have predicted she would be doing this work, Fletcher feels like she has fallen into the perfect job. She has no prior wood-working experience and has never been much of a paddler, but building the canoes is an extension of the rest of her life. "My most important feature is my hands," she says, "I build the canoes, I'm an artist—I quilt and sew—everything I do, I do with my hands." She speaks in glowing tones about how "every single canoe is different" because the wood has a mind of its own, and it is up to her to work with it, to select the most compatible pieces and to marry them for their beauty. She doesn't teach, so she can keep her own hours and be there for her grandchildren, and she doesn't design canoes, because she doesn't feel she has the mechanical expertise for it. Cameron is just abundantly happy to be building, producing up to 12 new boats a year, and she is proud her work is good enough to please her uncle and her clients.

Each of these builders acknowledged that theirs is a labor of love. If they were in it for the money, they would have abandoned it years ago. They persist because of the way the work enables them to live and because of the reward in producing a thing of beauty with their own two hands. Comb always knew he would be a craftsman, Cameron never could have guessed it. Bourquin and Comb grew up paddling in the Northwoods and sought out wood-canvas canoes, while Cameron inherited the family business. However they came by their craft, whether they produce 2 boats a year or 12, they build canoes because it fits with something inside of them.

This "fitting" is at the core of the wood-canvas canoe. From the pieces of wood that are carefully selected to create a hull, to the way a loaded canoe moves easily across the Quetico-Superior waterways, the wood-canvas canoe is about finely fitting components together.

E. B. White once described how the beauty of a boat is in how well-suited it is to its function: "I do not recall ever seeing a properly designed boat that was not also a beautiful boat. Purity of line, loveliness, symmetry—these arrive mysteriously whenever someone who knows and cares creates something that is perfectly fitted to do its work."

The wood-canvas canoe is such a carefully designed vessel, but White only alludes to what is essential for Jeanne Bourquin, Alex Comb, and Thelma Cameron—the way the builder contributes to this beauty. As much as the wood fits the canoe, the canoe fits the landscape, and the form fits its function, so does the craft fit the craftsman—every piece coming together perfectly. □

Book Review

From a Wooden Canoe Reflections on Canoeing, Camping, and Classic Equipment

by Jerry Dennis

\$13.95 Paperback
ISBN 0-312-26738-X

Book Description

This engaging collection of essays explores the quintessential American sports of canoeing and camping and pays tribute to the things worth keeping, from wooden canoes to pocket knives to cast-iron skillets. At a deeper level, it is about respect—for our possessions, for the natural world, for ourselves—and about the pleasures of a life well spent. *From a Wooden Canoe* is a celebration of the good things and the simple pleasures of life outdoors. It is a book to be read on winter evenings and rainy afternoons, and to be kept handy on a cabin shelf.

About the Author

Jerry Dennis has earned a reputation as one of the finest writers on nature and the outdoors in America today. Jerry writes for *Smithsonian*, *Sports Afield*, *Gray's Sporting Journal*, and the *New York Times*. His previous books, including *It's Raining Frogs and Fishes*, *A Place on the Water*, and *The River Home*, have won numerous awards. In 1999, he was the recipient of the Michigan Author of the Year Award presented by the Michigan Library Association.

Reviews

"*From a Wooden Canoe* is the most satisfying kind of nature writing because it makes you want to get up and get out. Give these essays a good read, and then find your own canoe."
—*The Wall Street Journal*

"More than anything, Dennis offers us an appreciation of the simpler things in life that many times pass us by in our break-neck pace of living. He shows us that just off the beaten path is a slower avenue, taken by countless generations before us and still available to enjoy if only we would take the time to look."
—*The Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*

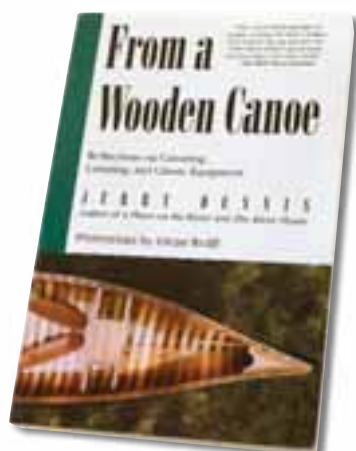


Photo by Andy Duckworth.

Widji North Canoe

Thanks to Andy Duckworth for sending us this photo of 1984 Widjiwagan Explorers portaging the camp's North Canoe to Conk Lake in the Quetico, en route to the Grand Portage. After being warned by another group that a "battleship" was coming his way, this canoe flew past his family, the girls in it waving. The North Canoe, at 26 feet and about 300 pounds, was built in 1976 from foam-core and fiberglass by Mark Ludlow, one of the camp's staff. Widjiwagan continues to send out Explorer trips [see *Wilderness News* Winter 2006, "A Place of Grace," and Spring 2006 "Paths," for accounts of this trip], though these days they travel in tandem wood-canvas canoes while the North Canoe resides at the camp, a reminder of the Voyageurs who traveled the border lakes in such vessels 200 years ago.

SPARKS FROM THE CAMPFIRE



More on the 1960s Canoe Races

In response to the story in the last issue of *Wilderness News* about the canoe races from Ely and Atikokan held in the early 1960s, subscriber Robin Baker reports that the event was held one additional time. In that last race, presumably in 1965, racers paddled from Atikokan to Ely and back. According to Baker, Walt Houtari and Mel Pauna of the Grand Rapids, Minnesota area were the victors.

Baker, who raced against Joe Meany and Gene Jensen, two of the racers featured in the original story, added that a similar race continued for a few more years in the northern portion of the Quetico-Superior before it was discontinued.

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White Otter Castle

By Laura Puckett, Wilderness News Contributor

Paddling through the Crown lands of western Ontario the last thing a traveler expects to see is a castle, but there it sits on the shores of White Otter Lake, sixty-four kilometers north of Atikokan. White Otter Castle's four-story tower rises amid the trees, adjoining a three-story main section and a two-story kitchen in back. The bright red roof and cavernous, sun-filled rooms are spectacular, but out of place, demanding the question: Why? Why such a grand effort, in the middle of nowhere, and by whom?

Jimmy McOuat was born in 1855 to Scottish immigrant farmers in the Ottawa valley. As the seventh child, he realized his chances of inheriting land were slim, so in 1886 he set out west on the new transcontinental railway and landed at Rainy River. By 1898 he had a successful farm, but like many at the time, he was lured into disaster by the few traces of gold found in western Ontario. Only two years later he was broke, trapping and looking for land.

Ever a homesteader, McOuat "hung up his hat" on White Otter Lake in 1903. He soon started work on his masterpiece: cutting, hauling, hewing, raising, and trimming more than a hundred logs weighing nearly a ton each, all by himself.

It is rumored that he even personally carried the windows, all twenty-six in their sashes, over the fifteen portages from Ignace. The walls were up and the roof was on in 1914, but Jimmy still didn't own the land. He tried to buy it from the Crown in 1917, and though they kept his money, they also kept the title deed. In 1918 he applied more strenuously, but before a decision was made he drowned netting fish; the proud builder of a monument, but not its possessor.

Perhaps it is because of McOuat's unexpected death that White Otter Castle retains such an air of mystery. Myth maintains he built the castle to welcome a love who never arrived. Although he



Photo by Laura Puckett

did once inquire after a mail-order bride, it was his refusal to go meet her family before she came west that led her to marry another. In Jimmy's recollections, an angry blacksmith made a bigger impression. "Jimmy McOuat, ye'll never do no good! Ye'll die in a shack!" the blacksmith scolded, after being hit by a projectile corncob. It was in fact Jimmy's friend who was the prankster, but the words rankled, and Jimmy swore to defy the blacksmith's prediction. Clearly he did, but whether it was this grudge, the fundamental quest for a home, or the ambition to make his mark, McOuat's motivations have been buried along with his body on the shores of White Otter Lake.

In the end it was a blessing the land remained property of the Crown. It was thus protected from mining in the 1930s. The castle received haphazard repairs by the Department of Lands and Forests in the 1950s, and in 1989 was protected again as part of a new park, Turtle River Waterway. The Friends of White Otter Castle Inc. was formed in 1986, and instigated a major restoration of the Castle from 1992 to 1994.

The detailed history is from "White Otter Castle," by Elinor Barr (Thunder Bay: Singing Shield Publications, 2003). For more information about the Castle, The Friends of White Otter Castle can be contacted at P.O. Box 88, Atikokan, Ontario, POT 1CO.

CONSERVATION ISSUES UPDATE

New Mining Era Approaching

According to media reports, the Poly Met Mining Company expects to be fully permitted by September 2007 and will then start construction of its new plant and begin the retrofitting of the old LTV Steel facility in Hoyt Lakes which it purchased. Poly Met plans to mine copper, nickel, and platinum from a pit south of Babbitt. Production could begin as soon as the end of 2008.

Environmental watchdogs still follow the Poly Met project and other copper mining projects in the area. Acid runoff from waste rock is the primary concern with mining of this type, which has yet to be done in Minnesota. Environmental groups including the Friends of the Boundary Waters Wilderness and the Sierra Club have formed a coalition called ACT NOW to oppose copper-nickel mining in northeastern Minnesota.

ATV Issues Idling

The 2006 Minnesota legislative session was a quiet one for all-terrain vehicle lawmaking. Proposals by ATV advocates to open the North Shore State Trail to ATVs were stymied during the session, although the measure seems likely to resurface in the future.

ATV enthusiasts want designated trails like the NSST for their activities, saying designated trails will decrease reported environmental damage by concentrating use to designated areas. Environmental advocates claim the NSST, which crosses 250 wetlands and 100 trout streams, is not a proper place to concentrate usage.

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