

# Wilderness News

FROM THE QUETICO SUPERIOR FOUNDATION SUMMER 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.

“... to many there is no finer canoe country on the continent. The intricate labyrinth of waterways and forests lying for over two hundred miles along the Minnesota-Ontario border between Grand Portage Post on the northwest coast of Lake Superior and the Rainy River seems made for enjoyment and wilderness travel...the ancient land of the Chippewas...here there is intimacy, vistas of rare poetic beauty—and everywhere is delight. To me it is home, a land to remember and return to.”

— Sigurd F. Olson, *Runes of the North*



## Wilderness News

Published by the Quetico Superior Foundation  
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Cavity Lake Fire. Photo courtesy Carol DeSain.

## Wildfires Strike the BWCAW and Quetico Provincial Parks

Over 31,800 acres have burned in the largest fire to hit the Boundary Waters Canoe Area region since 1894. A lightning strike near Cavity Lake on July 13th, started a wildfire which quickly grew to fifty square miles. The fire has burned an area of ‘blowdown’ from the 1999 wind storm representing about 8.5 percent of the total 367,000 acres of blowdown or 3 percent of the 1.1 million acres of BWCA Wilderness.

When the fire was spotted by a U.S. Forest Service plane on Friday July 14th it was reported to be burning in “heavy blowdown timber” and approximately 300 acres in size. On Saturday, the fire quadrupled in size to 1,300 acres and by Sunday afternoon had grown to 2,958 acres; more than four and one-half square miles. “It’s burning pretty intensely,” said Donna Hart from the U.S. Forest Service Gunflint Ranger District. But she didn’t yet know the fire would explode later that night, more than quadrupling again in size and sending balls of flames into the night sky—by daybreak Monday, the fire had expanded dramatically to 20 square miles; burning 11,200 acres of forest-land.

**Burning erratically...** According to Jim Sanders, supervisor of the Superior National Forest, which manages the BWCAW, the fire’s rapid growth and intensity was not a surprise. “The growth was all related to a (storm) downburst with 50-60 mph winds. The fire is behaving how our evaluation said the fire would behave back in November 1999,

when we did our fuels assessment after the blow-down. It’s a good thing this fire happened when it did, instead of two years after the blowdown,” said Jim Sanders.

### Too dangerous for fire crews on the ground...

For the first four days, only planes were used in an attempt to control the fire. When fire crews hit the ground on Monday their focus was to protect the Gunflint Trail from an east-moving fire, and the Canadian border from a north-moving fire. The storm on Sunday night pushed fire in all directions. Fortunately, to the east, the fire bumped up against the 6,400 acre buffer zone created in 2003 by prescribed burns. This caused the fire to slow and lose intensity along that flank. Fire crews, now on the ground, tried to keep the fire burning westward and deeper into the wilderness. However, the fire pushed north to Seagull Lake, jumped to several of the lake’s islands and was within a mile of the Canadian border. This prompted the Canadian authorities to offer expertise, equipment and crews

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# WHITE PINE: CAN WHAT ONCE WAS—EVER BE AGAIN?

By Laura Puckett, Wilderness News Contributor

**Bold against the sky, the feathery branches of an old white pine have a distinctive silhouette. Although not the most abundant species in the Quetico-Superior forest today, generations have strongly identified with the tree—an emblem of the natural resources that defined the region’s geography, economy, and character.**

Perhaps that is why white pine became such a lightning rod environmental issue in the late 1990s. On one side of the debate the environmentalists were arguing that white pine had been decimated and needed protection.

On the other side was the timber industry, hoping to cut white pine as freely as they always had. Then there was the government—the state legislature and public forestry agencies—who for years had ignored white pine, overwhelmed by how difficult it was to grow.

Environmental groups rallied behind the tree’s banner, challenged the reigning lumber barons, and took the state and federal foresters to task. Since then, public agencies have revised their management policies and Minnesota has gained more than 10,000 acres of white pine, but the question remains if the species really has a future, or are we simply in a *pax pinus*, in which the pine are doing well, so long as we don’t look too hard.

## The Quetico Superior region

The forest was never blanketed with white pine, but it was a significant ecological and financial component, with emotional significance. White pine provides important species and age-class diversity—factors that help a forest weather natural disasters, such as climate change and pest infestation. They provide habitat particularly for eagles, osprey, and bears, but also pileated woodpeckers, lynx, a myriad of insects and fungi.

This ecological balance was upset when logging began in 1837 as people sought white pine’s strong, soft wood for construction and fine woodworking. Clear-cutting destroyed the canopy, eliminated seed sources, enabled a thick deciduous understory, and slowly, as the southern part of the state was settled and hunting became an industry, deer—which like to eat the new buds—spread into the northland. With the advent of overseas trade came invasive pests, and among them blister rust—a fungus that infects white pine needles and can kill the trees. New trees were not growing, and all the while, logging continued.

## A call to arms

In 1990 Lynn Rogers, a U.S. Forest Service wildlife biologist, discovered that the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and the U.S. Forest Service were treating white pine essentially the same as the timber companies were: cutting and leaving. Instead of white pine regrowth, in its place appeared aspen and birch—species that spring up easily after a disturbance, grow quickly, and then make a good profit as pulpwood. The Forest Service’s own statistics said that only 2% of Minnesota’s original 3.5 million acres of white pine still existed, and yet they made few, if any, efforts to replant what they cut.

Having seen how important white pine was as shelter for the black bears he was studying, and now realizing the magnitude of its disappearance, Rogers took to the streets. He spent the next six years campaigning

for white pine through educational materials and lobbying congress. In 1993 he founded the White Pine Society and in 1996 he helped introduce the influential White Pine Act, with its controversial two-year moratorium on white pine cutting, which helped transform the DNR’s white pine program.

In the early 1990s white pine cutting continued rampantly. Even the Forest Service stressed the importance of white pine to maintain profits in timber harvesting. In 1995 the Sierra Club introduced the Restore the White Pine Act to the Minnesota legislature, including the cutting moratorium. The bill did not pass, but in response the DNR formed the White Pine Regeneration Strategies Work Group—which recommended the legislature take up stronger regeneration strategies, but few cutting restrictions. In 1997 the moratorium was reintroduced, but rescinded when the DNR agreed to notify the public of cutting plans, reduce cutting of mature white pines, and increase regeneration efforts. They made white pine a specific part of their agenda and increased communication with the public. Governor Arne Carlson and the state gave millions of dollars for white pine research, and the white pine movement was on a roll.

Simultaneously Minnesota’s forest management policy was being revolutionized by the 1994 Generic Environmental Impact Statement on Timber Harvesting and Forest Management in Minnesota—an enormous collection of studies and recommendations analyzing how low, medium, and high harvesting scenarios would impact Minnesota’s forests. This seminal document led to the creation in 1995 of the Minnesota Sustainable Resources Act, and its offshoot, the Minnesota Forest Resources Council (MFRC). For the first time in Minnesota’s history forests were being considered on a broad scale—landscape and statewide.

Today the MFRC is working to cooperatively establish goals and sustainable standards for Minnesota’s forests. The state has been divided into eight landscape regions, each of which is represented by a committee of concerned citizens to coordinate forest management for that region. One of their purposes is to develop specific objectives for what

they want their landscape to be in one hundred years. In North Central and Northeast Minnesota, the primary goal is to have a forest that “approximates/moves toward the range of variability . . . for plant communities naturally living and reproducing in northeastern Minnesota,” and specifically, to “increase the white and red pine component,” especially those over 100 years old.



White Pine, Itasca State Park.

These legislative changes pertain to the state, but for its part, the U.S. Forest Service has made similar strides in its management of the Superior National Forest. The 2004 Land and Resource Management Plan for the Forest strives for “diverse mixes of trees, shrubs at site and landscape levels that are more representative of native vegetation communities,” with white pine as “a priority species.” The Forest Service oversees white pine nurseries, plantations, and research, striving to increase white pine acreage where appropriate and the number of old white pines in general.

These kind of specific goals and strategies have revolutionized the way forests are envisioned in Minnesota. On both the state (DNR) and federal (U.S. Forest Service) level, the public stewards of the land are developing clear goals for the future of Minnesota’s forests. Practically, however, they still must face the challenges of actually growing white pine in Minnesota.

### **How a seed becomes a giant**

Policy changes have been essential in establishing a new perspective on white pine, but serious financial and time commitments are needed to bring the arboreal monarchs back. According to Lee Frelich, a forester at the University of Minnesota and a major contributor to the MFRC’s landscape program reports, white pine are not going to regenerate in Minnesota if we don’t manage the obstacles: insufficient seeds, lack of fire, smothering deciduous growth, and hungry deer.

Jack Rajala knows the truth of these threats first-hand. As the owner of Rajala Companies, a forest products company near Grand Rapids, Minnesota, he is one of the loudest advocates for white pine restoration in the state. For over a hundred years his family’s company has been logging white pine, and he has seen how it does not return. So he has made it his personal mission to restore white pine on a massive scale: to ensure that others will be able to experience the awe and grandeur a stand of old growth pines inspires in him.

Over the last twenty-five years Rajala has planted nearly four million seedlings on company land. Out of the 200,000 seedlings planted per acre, only five or six hundred survive into adulthood; of those, Rajala hopes to have fifty giants—pines over a hundred years old—trees he will never see, but in which he believes heartily.

Rajala’s mission has cost him large amounts of time and money to address the challenges. First, the land is cleared and the soil prepared for seedlings. Fire would naturally serve this function, but logging, too, can make the necessary space. Then, because natural seed sources are few and far between, Rajala and his team of silviculturalists plant nursery raised seedlings. They deter invasive pests from the start by balancing the canopy thickness: enough to keep the seedlings cool and dry (conditions not conducive to blister rust or the white pine tip weevil), but not so much the sun can’t get in.

Once the trees are in the ground, they monitor them to ensure they are not smothered by competing deciduous trees. Each spring they cap the buds with small pieces of paper to prevent deer browse. After about five years, when the trees are over six feet tall (out of deer’s reach), the trees have made it past the major obstacles, but the process still isn’t done. The pines must be continuously trimmed and thinned as they take up more space in the forest, and young trees must be brought up to replace the old ones as they die or are cut. As Rajala learned the hard way—having lost about a million seedlings in the early years—growing white pine does not happen by putting a seed in the ground, but rather requires assiduous attention throughout generations.

### **The threat of blister rust**

Faced with insufficient seeds, thick undergrowth, and hungry deer, it is no wonder foresters said it was impossible to raise white pine, and to top it all off, they reasoned—blister rust, an invasive fungus, made the whole endeavor a fool’s errand. Blister rust infects a pine’s needles during cool, wet days and can kill a tree by spreading to the branches, then the trunk, though older pines can survive because they only lose their lower branches. Ironically, this disease has actually helped white pine restoration by being a focal point for research that raised the white pine issue and developed regeneration techniques.

In the 1950s, long before white pine was political, Cliff and Isabelle Ahlgren began a comprehensive collection of plant materials at the Wilderness Research Centre—a project of the Hubachek family, whose devotion to wilderness led them to found the research station and later donate it to the University of Minnesota. The Ahlgrens spent over thirty years at the Basswood Lake station in what is now the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness and then, after the passage of the 1978 BWCA Wilderness Act, on Fall Lake, near Ely, Minnesota.

Cliff’s efforts to identify blister rust resistant white pine trees set the baseline for white pine research, which is continued today by University researchers at the same Fall Lake station. U.S. Forest Service researchers are also investigating white pine genetics and blister rust resistance. In the rush of funding after the legislative changes of the 90s, blister rust became a hot obstacle for research to surmount and the results have been helpful—developing techniques and new plantations—but as of yet there have been no revolutionary changes in white pine planting. Rajala takes this pragmatic perspective: blister rust has arrived to stay, but it will only kill about 25% of white pines that are planted. So plant more trees.

### **A change for the better**

Rajala has clearly carried out this declaration—a very practical approach to a complicated problem. He is, in essence, a doer, and so he attacks the lack of white pine with vigorous action. In his turn, Lynn Rogers worked hard to preserve white pine at the legislative level, and Lee Frelich is an expert in forest ecology, consulted by many public agencies and planning committees. Individuals from gardeners to governors have made it their mission to see that there will be more white pine in Minnesota’s future.

Thanks to the legislative changes of the late 90s and the swell of public support, white pine cutting has slowed nearly to a halt. Preserving and growing new white pine is now a primary goal. There are active research stations, nurseries, and plantations. In raw numbers, white pine has gained ten thousand acres in the last ten years. Yet, there are still more strides to be made.

For their part, the DNR has the resources to control excessive deer populations. Through hunting permits and emergency feeding programs, they have long worked to augment deer herds. In a series of public forums all over Minnesota in the last year, the DNR heard a resounding call for fewer deer, by as much as half in some places. Although bud capping works, it is expensive, time intensive, and needs to be done right so it doesn’t damage the seedlings; still there are the trees that don’t receive such attention. Reducing the deer population statewide solves the problem at its source.

Other advances in forest management can be seen in the BWCAW. Tracts are being intentionally burnt to reduce the threat of uncontrolled blazes, fueled by the massive acres of forest that blew down in the 1999 wind storm. Already 37,000 acres have been burned, showing that we can effectively mimic the natural fires that stimulate forest development and are especially important at clearing the space for white pine seedlings.

The Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy (MCEA) recommends changing how the forests are harvested, as well. Currently, logging dissects the forest into scattered blocks and cuts the older, more profitable trees. This perpetuates forest fragmentation and further disturbs the natural spatial patterns of the forest and its ability to sustain the native forest plants and wildlife. Cutting older trees removes seed sources and deer more easily devour these smaller stands when they are replanted or seeded to native pines. The MCEA would rather see forest management that includes younger stands and recreates the larger forest patches that are closer to Minnesota’s original conditions, and hence better able to withstand deer browse and regenerate naturally.

Deer, fire, and harvesting techniques are just some of the ways that white pine management can continue to evolve. The DNR, the Forest Service, and the Minnesota Forest Resource Council’s landscape strategy work groups have set goals for what Minnesota will look like in one hundred years, but now the public agencies must see that they come to pass.

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# Racing Across the Wilderness

By Charlie Mahler, Wilderness News Contributor

**These days, the pace in the Boundary Waters and Quetico is fairly slow. It's a place of leisure, by and large, for today's visitors. But for Ely's Don Beland and Atikokan's Joe Meany who raced across the wilderness during the days of the Ely-Atikokan Canoe Race, the pace was fast, the stakes were high, and the going was rough.**

Annually, from 1962 through 1964, the Chambers of Commerce of Ely and Atikokan organized a canoe race from one town to the other and back as a way to celebrate the canoeing tradition and promote the area. The races were a big deal in those small communities. Minnesota Governor Elmer Andersen is said to have attended one of the events. The short-lived contests coincided with the rise of recreational and sport paddling in the two countries, and were the stage for some memorable names in canoe-building, paddle-making, and marathon canoe racing.

The roughly 200 mile event was also the backdrop for a hard-fought local rivalry between Ely guide, trapper, and outfitter Don Beland and Atikokan miner and, later, Quetico Ranger Joe Meany. The two would tangle most memorably in the 1964 event, the last of the races, when one would earn a hard-earned victory and the other would survive a frightening tumble down a waterfall that would destroy his canoe and nearly take his life.

More than 40 years after the classic contests, Beland and Meany, both retired and in their mid-seventies now, remember the details of their efforts with emotion and relish.

## 1962—the first race

A couple dozen teams entered—"It ain't that I did those sort of races," Beland remembers about entering the first Ely-Atikokan race in 1962. "I guided and trapped up here full time, so I guess this is what I do. A kid that worked for the Scout Base wanted to race, so we did it. We just wanted to beat the competition to the first portage, and after we did that we kind of, sort of, just kept on going."

Beland and Barry Bain, a guide at the Summers Canoe Base, finished second in the inaugural event against well-known Twin Cities professional racers Gene Jensen and Irvin "Buzz" Peterson.

Early in the race, which started on Fall Lake, Jensen and Peterson made up the 30 minute stagger on Beland and Bain (racers started in heats every half hour) but chose to stay with the more knowledgeable local paddlers rather than rely on map and compass navigation. Through the heart of the Quetico the two teams paddled together along the most efficient route to Atikokan—from Ranger Bay of Basswood Lake, up to Kahshahpiwi, and then curving through a series of smaller lakes through Pickerel Lake to the finish on French Lake.

In Peterson and Jensen, who designed canoes and is credited with developing the bent-shaft paddle, you could catch a glimpse of the advances that were coming to recreational canoeing and canoe racing. The Twin Cities pair used laminated paddles, rather than the old "beaver" style used by Beland and Bain. While the Ely pair kneeled in the canoe and switched sides on a count, the Twin Cities team was seated and switched paddling sides before the boat turned, avoiding the costly steering strokes.

After an overnight rest interval in Atikokan—which Bain spent nursing severely blistered hands—the racers pointed their bows back toward Ely for the return leg. Peterson and Jensen were content, with their first-leg lead, to paddle along with Beland and Bain. Beland and Bain could have taken advantage of their rivals' mistake at the forked portage that leads out of Kahshahpiwi Lake, but Bain chased down Peterson and Jensen to tell them they had gone the wrong way.

While Beland doubts if he and Bain could have out-paddled Peterson and Jensen from there, he lets on that he might have enjoyed the chance to try, if Bain would have let their two rivals stay lost.

In the end Peterson and Jensen won that initial contest, and the \$1,000 first prize that attended it. Beland and Bain finished second and earned \$500. According to Beland, most of the rest of the teams got lost on the out-going leg and finished well behind the leaders.

## 1963—a victory for Ely and Beland

The second running of the event—where paddlers would this time start in Atikokan, beat for Ely, and then return—began in stormy conditions. Both the weather and the mood prior to the competition were unsettled.

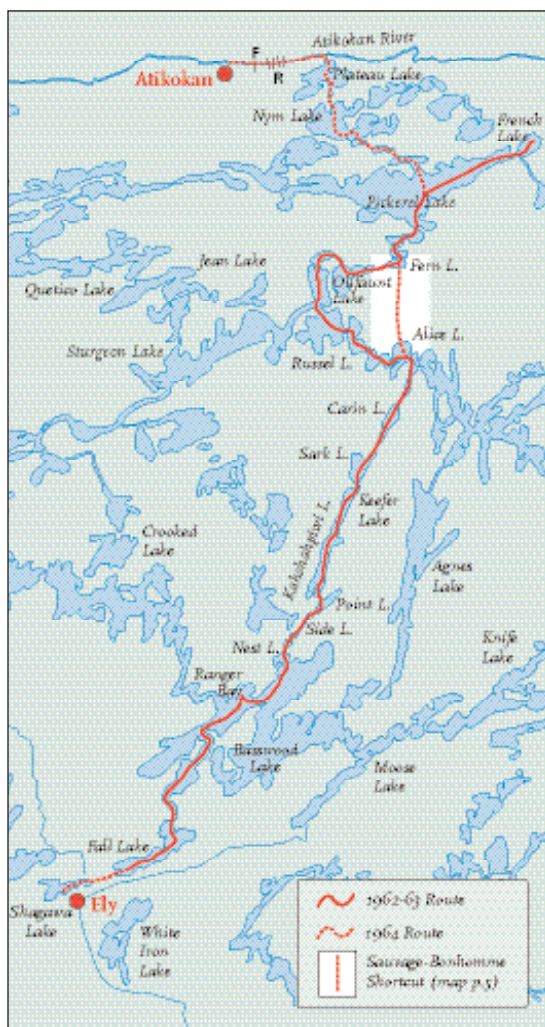
Beland and his new partner Ralph Sawyer of Michigan, the four-time winner at the time of the prestigious Au Sable River Canoe Marathon and a canoe and paddle maker himself, ended up competing with a borrowed boat after the one they paddled up to the race from Ely measured three inches longer than the allowable 18 feet. Beland and Sawyer quickly prepared to cut the canoe down and mend it with fiberglass—after they agreed to purchase it from the person they borrowed it from!—but were then informed such remodeling would not be allowed. Finally, late at night, they tracked down a damaged, 17-foot wood-canvas Chestnut that two Native American paddlers declined in favor of a seemingly less efficient 15-footer.

The weather was wild at the start too. The racers were met by huge swells whipped up by strong winds from the west. Conditions were bad enough that Beland wondered if the race should even start as scheduled. It did, and according to Beland most of the 18 boats in the contest had swamped before making it to the first island on French Lake. "The race was over in fifteen minutes," Beland said. "I had a plan, though. I knew Pickerel was really going to be swelled, and we were going against it. We had to get down Pickerel, so the plan was every 500 feet to stop and dump the canoes. That's how we made it down Pickerel."

The race was essentially won there. The winds calmed in the evening—the race legs started in the late afternoon and most of the racing was done at night—and Beland and Sawyer had a relatively pleasurable trip to Ely. The pair did repairs to their boat in Ely, which had accumulated 30 extra pounds of weight due to torn canvas. The return leg to Atikokan was a veritable victory lap, their lead after the first day being so large. The pair took only 33 hours and 38 minutes to cover the distance and earn \$1,000.

The victory eventually earned Beland a visit to New York and a spot on the game show "To Tell the Truth." That happening was so big in Ely, children in school got to watch the show during the school day. On the program, where three contestants attempt to convince a celebrity panel that they are who they say they are, Beland convinced two of the four panelist that he was indeed Don Beland, the canoe racer from Ely, Minnesota.

"The other guys did their homework," Beland acknowledged. "They went to the library and read up on canoeing. One of them was a brassiere salesman!"



Not to be lost in the results of the 1963 race was Joe Meany and his partner Eugene Tetreault, a fellow iron miner. Competing in their first Ely-Atikokan race that year they finished 6th overall.

“I was first introduced to it when I saw those American professionals come up,” Meany explained thinking of Sawyer, Jensen, and Peterson. “I’d paddled canoes before, but never raced them. When I saw how they could move those canoes, I decided I better learn.”

Meany would prove to be a quick study.

### 1964—Atikokan’s Joe Meany wins; Beland survives

In what would prove to be the final race of the series, last minute changes to the course caused a pre-race stir just as the weather and Beland’s canoe problems did in 1963. The race that year would start and finish on the Ely side. The Ely organizers had moved their terminus to Shagawa Lake in Ely itself. Atikokan organizers wanted as much excitement for their town, so they moved their finish closer to town too, adding more distance, a long portage, a road crossing, and a scary run down the Atikokan River which was peppered with whitewater.

**“They changed the route at the last minute and said you had to go down the river,” Beland remembers. “Well, hell, we’d never been down the river. Nobody had been down the river, I don’t think, except them [Meany and Tetreault]. And there was rapids and waterfall on there.”**

Adding to the controversy were the shortcut portages Meany’s team had cut in the Quetico. Beland remembers race rules allowing competitors to take any route between the start and finish, but forbidding the cutting of portages.

“Meany cut off a big arm of it by cutting portages down,” Beland said. “I never made a big deal out of it; I didn’t care. They probably worked for the Forest Service so what they did was probably legal. They just cut long portages that cut out about eight miles of paddling.”

Meany, who says he earned the nickname “Outlaw” from Beland over the incident, acknowledged having done “a lot of deking through the bush—cutting blind trails, things like that.” He contends there weren’t rules against such things and that it was all part of the gamesmanship of the wild race.

“You could go any which way you wanted—cut your own road if you wanted,” he said. “The reason we won that race is because we cut two portages out of Fern Lake to two little lakes and from those lakes on to Alice Lake. It cut off a hell of a lot of water that we didn’t have to paddle.”



The Sauvage – Bonhomme shortcut appears on today’s Quetico Provincial Park map.

Meany, who was fondly nicknamed “Sauvage” by folks other than Beland, and Tetreault, called “Bonhomme,” hid their trails—which earned the same monikers—behind uncut swaths of forest so other racers wouldn’t find them first.

“We went in about fifty feet before we started cutting,” Meany enjoyed recounting today.

What might have been just a wonderful cat and mouse chase across Quetico-Superior country turned serious when Beland and his partner that year, Carl Ketter, ran into trouble on the Atikokan River.

**“I called the chairman and he said the falls and the rapids would be flagged during the day and [there would be] fires at night,” Beland remembers. “Well, I believed him. He sent a crew out to do it, but they never did it. I damn near got killed.”**

Beland and Ketter paddled into a 15 foot waterfall. The canoe flipped in the bad water above the falls. Ketter was washed ashore before the drop, according to Beland, but Beland went over the ledge with the boat turning over him.

**“If felt myself drop over the falls,” Beland recounts. “I said good-bye old world when I was in the rapids. They were deep with big boulders, and I was hitting the boulders and I thought I was going to get trapped underneath them. You know how fast you can think sometimes. I looked up and I could see the sky and I, honestly, I said good-bye old world.”**

Beland, luckily, washed up on a reef in mid-stream. His boat was wrecked and he was bruised, if not broken. He couldn’t immediately get back to shore because of the fast water surrounding him.

“Getting banged up you didn’t know if you had broken arms or smashed ribs or what,” he said. “So I started examining, carefully, and I couldn’t find anything that wasn’t together.”

Meany and Tetreault went on to win the race, the last of its kind in the Quetico-Superior. Meany, who still jokes about needing to “beat them in the bush, not in the water” was no less adept with a paddle as he was with a brush axe. Later that same year and again in 1965 he and his brother Don, a well know paddle-maker in his own right, won the Canadian Professional Canoeing Championship, which was contested over a 33 mile course in Beardmore, Ontario.

The near-miss effectively ended Beland’s canoe racing career. He started to wonder, he said, “Where’s a nice 60 acres where a guy could buy a farm?”

Not that the long-time Ely resident stayed away from boats and water. He and his wife ran an outfitting business on Moose Lake for many years.

### A Shared Camp on Lac La Croix

Visitors to the Lac La Croix Ranger Station during Meany’s term as ranger there may remember his “Looper Board,” a hall of fame for rugged paddlers who, in the spirit of the Ely-Atikokan race, tested their mettle against the clock on the Hunter’s Island loop. Meany and a partner paddled the circle route in 33 hours, 38 minutes, and 18 seconds when Meany was in his fifties. The recognized record is 28 hours, 49 minutes, seven seconds by Dan Litchfield and Steve Park.

But ol’ Don Beland has a comment on that. “Bob Olson and I did the loop in under 24 hours,” he deadpanned, paused, and then added “with a three-horse motor!”

“If they want to know the record, that’s what it is,” he laughed.

Beland and Meany got the opportunity to spend the better part of a week together at Lac La Croix a while back when Beland and his extended family made a trip through the area. Beland asked upon arriving at Lac La Croix, “Is there a Joe Meany around here someplace?” Meany, who’d been alerted to Beland’s arrival is said to have replied, “No, but there’s an Outlaw here!”

Beland said Meany convinced his family to stay at the ranger station and do day-trips from there, so the two Ely-Atikokan champions could reminisce about their days racing through the wilderness. The two even talked about paddling the length of the Mississippi together someday.

**“It was a great race,” Beland said. “It was a celebration. It was a big deal, an international thing. The dinner was packed and the governor was there, so it was a big thing.”**

**“It’s too bad that it died, because it offered the whole nine yards.” □**

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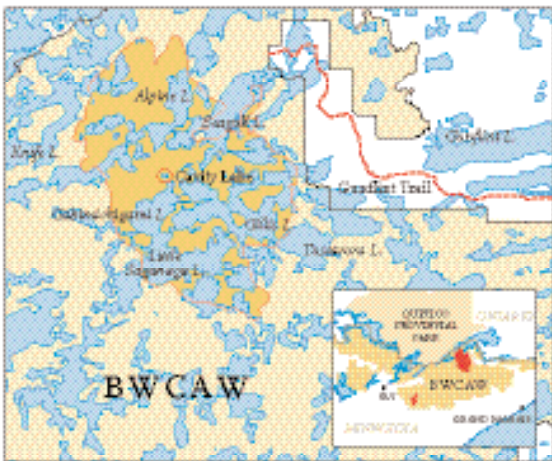
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The Cavity Lake fire ignited by lightning on July 13, 2006, burning 31,830 acres over four weeks in a 50 square mile area.

to start “control fires” in an attempt to rob the fire of fuel in key areas near the border.

Six days into the fire, 15,000 acres had burned in a 23 square mile area. The fire was burning to the south and slightly to the west. By day seven it had burned 19,800 acres in a 31 square mile area. On Thursday, July 20th, a week after it started, the fire had reached 44 square miles and had burned 28,500 acres.

**Upgraded...** Based on size, complexity and intensity, the wildfire’s severity category was upgraded on July 21st and a new national fire management team reserved for larger fires was called in to help. Total manpower leaped from about 250 to 500 by Sunday, July 23rd. Crews on the ground were supported by nine aircraft dropping water and fire retardant on the fire’s leading edge.

**Nature helps out...** On July 30th and 31st, thunderstorms dumped more than 1.5 inches of rain across the fire area; the fire was declared 80% contained. On August 10th, a few weeks later, fire crews declared it 95% contained.

In total, the Cavity Lake fire burned 31,800 acres over a fifty square mile area. This area represents about 8.5 percent of the 367,000 acres of the 1999 blowdown or 3 percent of the total 1.1 million acre BWCA Wilderness.

**Fires also burn in Quetico Park...** Nine smaller fires have also been burning in Quetico Provincial Park. These fires across the Canadian border are believed to have been started by lightning strikes around the same time as the Cavity Lake fire. The largest of these fires has burned over 1,000 hectares. According to Quetico Park policy, officials were letting these fires burn. “We’ll put it out if it’s going to burn outside the park, but if it’s in the middle of the park, we mostly let them burn,” said Quetico Park Superintendent Robin Reilly. Seven of the nine fires are still active (burning). On August 10th, the total area burned was reported to be 2,415 hectares, roughly 5,968 acres.

**Elsewhere in the BWCA...** Lightning struck first in the BWCA on July 7th near Turtle Lake, about fourteen miles southeast of Ely. This fire was designated a Wildland Fire Use event by the Forest Service and allowed to burn under supervision by a fire management team from the Superior National Forest. The Turtle Lake fire burned 2,085 acres.

**Fire and forest ecology...** The research of the late Dr. Miron Heinselman and others clearly show that fire has played the most important role for thousands of years in regenerating the forests of the BWCAW and Quetico Provincial Parks. Comparison of dates from major fires in the BWCA Wilderness suggest that conditions favorable to intense burns, dense dry fuel, low precipitation, and high winds, occurred in 1727, 1759 and 1864. Heinselman’s research reports that a fire occurred somewhere in the BWCAW at least once every eighty years from about 1600 to present. He also found that the interval between burns in a given area was about eight years.

The Cavity Lake fire and 2006 will be undoubtedly be added to the historic list of intense fires and cycles of forest ecology in the BWCAW.

**Allowing wildland fires to burn and play a role in the ecosystem will result in healthier and more sustainable forests in the Quetico Superior region for generations to come.** □

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### Looking ahead

All of these efforts, from the Ahlgrens’ research to the MCEA’s policy monitoring, have given white pine a chance to thrive in the future, but their success will not be apparent for another hundred years. This kind of timeline—stretching beyond one governor’s term or even one person’s lifetime—is difficult to sustain. Rajala’s successful forests show that “walk away forestry does not work,” but we can make a difference, if only we are diligent. As a private agent, he has been able to manage his lands with the necessary continuity. Conversely, federal and state lands are under ever shifting management. From presidents to forest supervisors to park visitors, the public stewards of the land change all the time, and with them, what are the most important issues of the day.

The white pine benefited from the rush of public support and scientific research of the last two decades, but all of these efforts will be for naught if they are forgotten when the next political hot topic takes center stage. A lot can happen in one hundred years, insists Matt Norton, a forestry advocate with the MCEA. White pine can grow into giants and forests can fill acres that were once barren. For him, the necessary commitment is clear: “If we want to work some kind of apology on the landscape for the excesses of the past we have to recognize that will take analysis, planning, intention, and resources.” For Norton, and all those who have worked tirelessly to champion Minnesota’s forests, the key is to believe this, and to invest in it. In this way, restoring white pine is a tangible opportunity to fulfill our obligation to the land, to use our knowledge and experience to ensure that the forest can thrive in the future. □

### Contact Wilderness News

Add your name to our mailing list, send us comments, feedback, or story ideas:

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