

Mattawa River

by Tim Scanlon

OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS OUR SCOUT TROOPS HAVE MADE AN ANNUAL TREK TO PLY THE waters of the Mattawa River. This adventure started with an invitation from a longtime friend and Scouter, Ian Buckham of the 1st North Bay Scouts. Ian ("Buckwheat" as he is fondly known) has remained involved in the Scouting movement since joining as a Scout in 1972, and is an invaluable part of our team.

This short canoe route is located approximately 30 kilometres east of North Bay in Ontario's near north region. The Mattawa is part of an ancient chain of rivers and lakes that has carried people and goods across the province of Ontario; a system connected to routes that transverse the entire North American continent. The tradition of the indigenous people traces the use of this waterway back over 5,000 years.

Although the eight rapids along the route are all level one classification, we always prepare our Scouts for this event in a number of ways. Our planning starts in the fall with a casual video evening meeting. We share soft drinks, juice and popcorn while we show portions of a video we shot during one of our previous trips.

The edited movie is chock-full of amusing and informative scenes intended to whet the appetites of this year's participants. We also rent a local pool and conduct an introductory canoeing class early in the new year. During this class we demonstrate the various paddle strokes, basic entry and exit techniques, a canoe-over-canoe rescue and life saving\ first aid skills.

Our provisions are a combination of dehydrated, frozen and fresh foods. A limited amount of ice is brought along for refrigeration and drinking water, which is pumped at every location. Canoes can be rented at any of three area outfitters, brought with the troops or, as is our preference, "rented" from the local Scout troop. Canoe accessories in-

clude a bow and stern "painter" (rope attached to the canoe on either end), PFD's, a 15-metre throw rope, bailing device and paddles.

We enter the water route at Pimisi Bay, a small heart-shaped bay approximately 1.6 kilometres in diameter. Having made this journey a few times, I always feel a sense of relief when my paddle touches the calm waters of the bay. Memories of past adventures drift through my mind while I ponder how this year's events will measure up, and I smile as the new Scouts shout and carry on just as they are meant to. I observe the camaraderie between the Scouts, leaders, and parent-and-child teams.

We paddle patiently toward the north shore of the bay. At times, the leaders look like mother ducks nudg-

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Photos: Courtesy of Tim Scanlon

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ing and guiding the canoes into an orderly group, while assisting those who can't quite manage to keep their craft on a straight course.

Landing with much less reverence, the excitement of staking the perfect spot for their tent overpowers our Scouts. Once the tents have been pitched and the provisions unloaded, we ask a predesignated group of Scouts to hoist the Troop and Scouts Canada flags in a prominent position and salute the flags. We choose a different group every day for this honor.

A visit to Talon Chutes, a kilometre upstream from our current campsite, is a must. We start our side trip a few hundred metres west of our campsite at a nondescript rock outcropping known as the "Humpbacked Rock". It is at this spot that aboriginals and Voyageurs would leave tobacco sacrifices to ensure safe passage on the river.

The entry into Talon Chutes follows a narrow, straight path, where eons of erosion have persistently carved the canyon walls. The black waters slowly swirl downstream, hid-

ing the fact that parts of this narrow waterway are well over one hundred feet deep. As we approach the portage, the haunting sound of the falls becomes more compelling. We hug the south shore of the river and land at the lower end of the portage.

Next morning, we depart for a series of rapids and swifts following the river's downstream path. The first swift (officially named "Portage des Perches") is rather unassuming, but historically significant. Called the "Poling Station," it is at this point in the river that travellers would discard their poles used for pushing their craft upstream. As the sweep (the last canoe down the river) I observe that some of the Scouts who have been the most rambunctious thus far are the quietest and most nervous when they are faced with the possibility of going for an unexpected swim.

One by one the successful Scouts raft up immediately below this swift, ready to face their first authentic rapid. If the leaders have managed to impart the significance of keeping a canoe headed straight downstream

then the Scouts will (hearts pounding and eyes the size of pieplates) make it down this one dry.

This section of the river is ideal for first-time canoeists. The difficulty of each swift and rapid increases slightly as we move downstream. Our next challenge (about 300 metres downstream) is "Portage de la Cave," named for the underwater caves created by centuries of swirling currents. Managing the sharp left turn at the bottom of this rapid is usually accompanied by hoots and hollers from the rest of the troop! Gathering the party, we take a short and relaxing swift to the left and enter the staging area for the most difficult rapid we'll face today - "Portage de la Prairie".

We have sometimes spotted moose browsing just above this rapid, and enjoyed swimming in the lake's shallow gravel-bottomed waters. The portage follows the contour of the river; allowing a steady buildup of anxiety as the churning of the waters turns to spray near the bottom. I am not immune to the fear and have often disguised my willingness for stretching my legs into



a portage. Ian Buckham, having made this trip over one hundred times, is undaunted and navigates this section with apparent ease.

Mid-afternoon, we proceed to Paresseux Falls. This portion of the river is abundant with beaver lodges, blue heron and otter. Inquisitive Scouts have often received an abrupt warning, in the form of a tail slap, that they are not welcome so close to these dwellings. Paresseux Falls is a comfortable 400-pace portage.

We follow the river along the canyon to "Porte de l'Enfer" (Gate to Hell) on our left. This site was an open-pit mine used over 3,000 years ago by aboriginals to extract ochre, a red mineral used as pigment for sacred rituals and drawing pictographs. The Voyageurs, upon hearing the native legend, would never pass this point in the river without smoking a peace pipe and offering tobacco to the native spirits.

The last portion of the day's paddling leads us to a campsite at Elm Point, a magnificent site cradled between two sides of an ancient fault. Although we feel the primordial call to rest shortly after nightfall, the campfire's warmth and the star-filled, jet-black sky beg to be enjoyed. We often gather round the beach at night and count the satellites, discuss the cosmos, philosophy or the latest

pop band. It is at this campsite that Ian was presented with a bottle of wine as a gift from a fellow canoeist - former Prime Minister John Turner.

With only three swifts and two rapids ahead, the last day of our jour-



ney is upon us. We continue along the river as it spills through a swift into Bouillion Lake and into "Portage de Roches" (Boulder Portage). In high water this relatively straight rapid is bouncy but navigable. In low water it lives up to its name "Boulder" rapids and is best portaged. With time on our side, we can take the three-kilometre hike

from the campsite on the north side of the lake below the rapids to the Purdy Lake mine. This open pit mine was discovered in 1941 by young Justin Purdy, and proved to be crucial in the allied war effort - providing mica used for electronics insulation.

The last swift carries us into a narrow portion of the river. Remnants of this area's logging past are evident; occasionally one can see a Booth stamp on a submerged timber and reflect upon that era.

We approach the confluence of the Mattawa and the Amable du Fond rivers. For the first time on our trip, we attempt to paddle upstream (the Amable du Fond) so that we can crab across to land and unload before we are swept down the Campion rapids. Void of our cargo, the groups are free to run the rapids as often as they wish. Satisfied that they have completed their journey, some groups run this set of rapids four or five times before gathering for Scouts' Own on the riverbank.

A good portion of our Scouts will never return to these waters again but the leaders can feel satisfied knowing that their memories of the adventure will last a lifetime. X

-When not in his canoe, Tim Scanlon can be found Scouting and living happily with his family in Precious Corners, Ontario.



Photo: Courtesy of Tim Scanlon