CANOE TRIP

North to Athabasca

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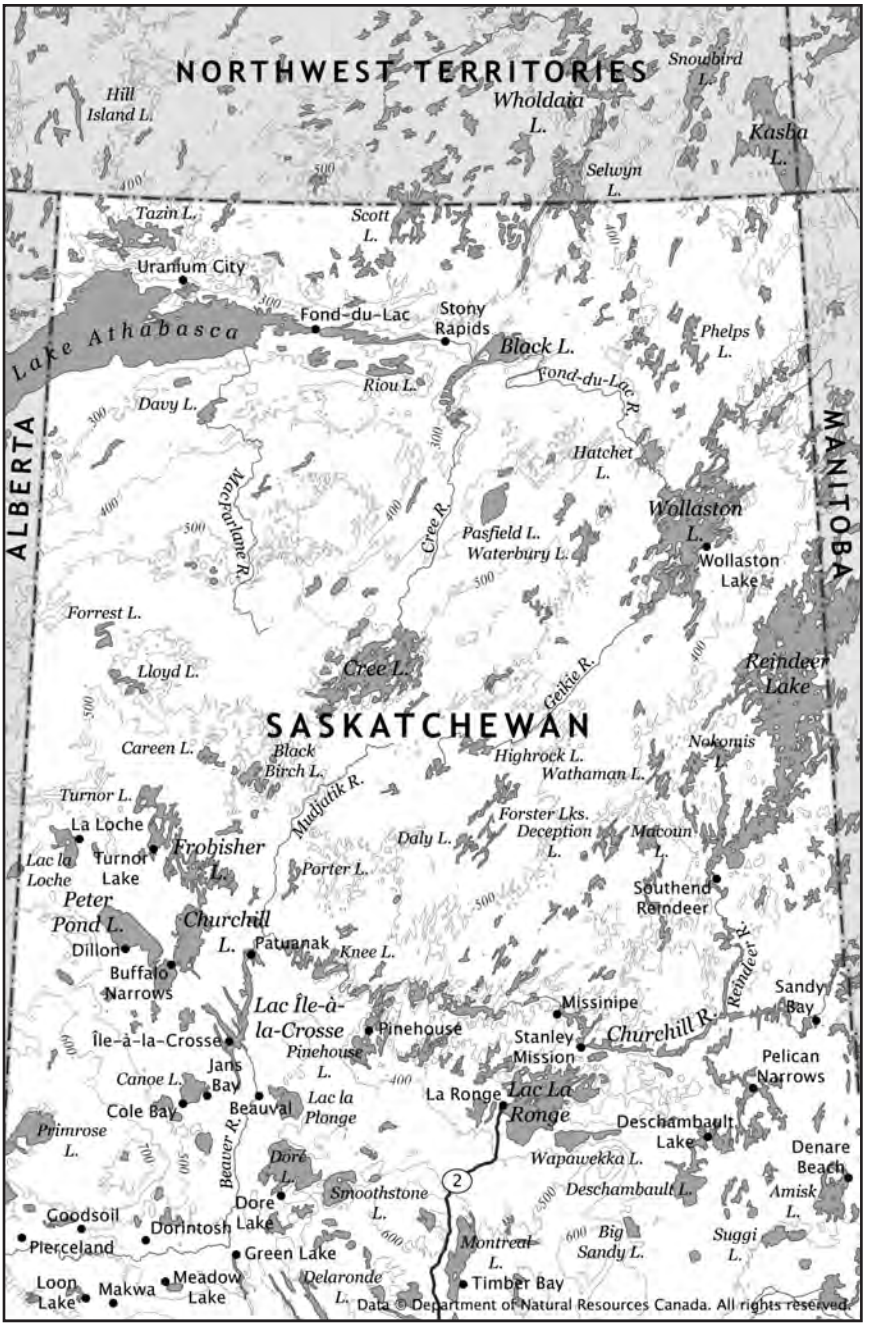

Lake Athabasca, the MacFarlane River and the wilderness region of northern Saskatchewan

Chapter I

The small plane rocked gently, a little to the right, then a little to the left. And when it did the land below rose up and replaced the sky, spreading out to fill the scene. Each time the wing dipped, the pale green land and deep blue water filled each TV screen-like window along my side of the plane. Like the sky, it was vast and empty of the work of man. For as far as I could see in either direction the stony ground, the faint forests, the streams, the rivers, the ponds and the lakes stretched out to the horizon. Some lakes so large you could not see their end outside either window, and sprinkled with far more islands than could be counted in the time it took to fly over them.

Northern Maine, where I have canoed and over which I have flown, is called wilderness. You look down and see nothing but uninhabited forests for a hundred miles or more. But men have been there. The logging roads and remnants of logging roads, old and new, mark their presence. There is the occasional bridge across a stream, a Ranger cabin. It is unsettled, but it is not unused or untraveled. There was none of that here. Since leaving Saskatoon, now a couple hundred miles to the south, we had passed over the few towns that ring the city, the squared patchwork of prairie farmland, finally reaching the woods. For the next hour it had been just the woods and the water. No more pastures, no more homes or roads. No more man-made places or patterns on the ground. Two hundred miles north of Saskatoon we came down for fuel (as I said, it was a small plane) at La Ronge: a patch of asphalt and a single gymnasium-size building. There were no other planes. We trooped out onto the pavement and into the clear cool June morning to Cokes and bottled water and the cautious conversation of men who don't know each other. My partner, Walter, and I were the only canoeists. The rest,

about twenty men and a few kids, were fishermen and bow hunters in groups of twos or threes or fours en route to the sporting lodges of the Far North. Outside, our solitary plane was being refueled and the empty forest spread out low and flat around the quietest airport in the world.

Back in the waiting room at Hangar Nine at Saskatoon Airport we'd talked a bit with a few of the fisherman. Walter can speak their language and like tradesmen they discussed in jargonese the art and mystery of fishing in words and phrases largely incomprehensible to a non-angler like me. He had been Commissioner of Fisheries and Wildlife in Massachusetts for several years during the 1980's. He has fished and hunted just about everything worth taking all over North America and knows what he's talking about. He could deal with these people. I have never hunted and am tempermentally unfit for fishing. I went once as a child. My father took four of us boys. I spent the time running around with my brother Tommy while my brothers Chris and John tried earnestly to fish. I got a hook in my ear. A trout brook runs next to my house in Massachusetts. There is a deep cool pool where I always see them congregate in a silent woven pattern of movement like synchronized swimmers without the makeup and smiles. And they stay underwater, which I wish the synchronized swimmers would do. They aren't large. The biggest look to be about six or seven inches long. One day I decided to see if I could catch one. So I cut a pole, bought a few small fish hooks and line, dug some worms and walked down to sit by the pool. The fish swam away and hid behind a boulder in the stream. In ten minutes I went home. That is my fishing resume.

We began the day very early. Our instructions were unequivocal, printed and distributed to us by Blackmur's Athabasca Fishing Lodges who were managing our long journey north and, for Walter and I, our canoe rental and flights to and from our river destination. We were told that the van, which would carry us to Hangar Nine and TransWest Air, would arrive at the hotel at 5:15 a m. It would depart the hotel at 5:20 a.m. The five hundred mile flight up to Stony Rapids at the far eastern tip of Lake Athabasca would leave Saskatoon at 6:00 a.m.

We lined up for coffee at the self-serve pot. A couple of men had teenage sons and daughters with them, sleepy, slouchy and slack-faced thirteen and

fourteen year-olds who smiled weakly at their fathers' goofy attempts at stimulating some excitement in them for what lay ahead. The mood was light. Friends kidded each other in the disparaging manner of male humor, recalling past hunting and fishing failures and gaffes, all carefully exaggerated for the proper effect. There was some interest in us and in what we were planning to do. None of them had ever done anything of the sort. We were also the only ones from the East. All of these folks were from the American West, Midwest or South. There were no Canadians.

But here in La Ronge we all seemed more uncertain and ill-at-ease in this strange silent place, feeling the emptiness and the cold and the three hundred more miles north we soon would fly in that scuffed and faded little plane over there. The fuel truck pulled away. The pilot reappeared and we climbed back aboard for the second half of the flight. I was sitting alone next to the window. Walter was one row up and over on the other side. I was glad to be apart. We had been traveling together since 5:00 a.m. the day before and would spend many more days together before we were through. I wanted to be alone with my thoughts for a while and write a bit in my journal. But all I could do was lean my forehead against the window and stare at what was below.

This land was more than simply uninhabited, untraveled and unused. It looked new, freshly formed. The forest, even the individual trees, appeared sparse and thin and looked as if still in the process of filling in. It had the look of land just emerging from a deep hard winter right after the snow has melted and the ground seems flattened and barely awake, the green still slumbering underground, the debris of winter still pressed hard into the land, a prevailing grayness where only the hardiest trees and shrubs produce their green. The last of the five great ice sheets, each a mile thick, receded from Saskatchewan 10,000 years ago. For two million years each in turn had crushed its way across the ground, then scraped it raw as it drew back, leaving the land to struggle to renew itself, only to be frozen and buried again. This land below looked as if it was just beginning, still struggling, still new.

The first humans came here just eight thousand years ago, while the great glaciers still hovered just to the north and sent their melt waters and cold winds flowing across these lands. Much of that water remains in the province's lakes and ponds, over 100,000 of them in the northern half alone, many of which are still unnamed. The people followed the big game herds

out of Siberia, along the coast and through the ice-free inland corridors heading south. Modern humans had reached the Middle East from Africa about 100,000 years ago. He arrived in Europe around 40,000 years ago. He does not appear in the Saskatchewan region until 6,000 B.C., until the last of the ice had gone. It is new land and even now man has not yet marked much of these northern parts. He has hardly set foot upon it at all. And this is how it looked to me as we flew overhead, racing above at great speed, yet for over two hours, seeing nothing but the thin trees, the rocks and the water.

Chapter II

I had canoed in northern Maine for five years. I had done all the wild rivers there that I wanted to do, at least twice. I had written a book about my experiences there. Writing and wilderness canoeing are great loves of mine. I very much wanted to write another book about it. I very much wanted to find a greater, more remote wilderness challenge. I am not sure which need drew the other. I suspect I needed something different worth writing about. So I looked north, via the Internet. I began in Quebec, looking for a river with the right blend of ingredients; a minimum of lake travel, portaging and Class III+ rapids and a distance worth doing (somewhere between seven and fourteen days). I did not want a river that tended to flow in the direction of the prevailing winds. I needed a river that didn't dry up by mid-June. I wanted one with a pretty continuous moderate current, interesting scenery and as remote as possible. Long canoe trips are hard work but I didn't want it to be any harder than it had to be.

Canada has about a billion rivers, so I figured there had to be one for me. Quebec is right above New England and once you get above the St. Lawrence River, it's increasing wilderness all the way to the Ungava Peninsula and the Inuit country. But there was always something wrong. The rivers I found were either too rough, too slow and marshy, too many big lakes or the river was too short. I found that a majority ran west into Hudson Bay and that was not a particularly good thing in my view. I read how winds and tides were often a torment to canoeists as they neared the Bay. Weather there was notoriously bad and the whole lowland area was a particular paradise for black flies and mosquitos. I had read a couple of accounts of trips in that region which did not sound like fun.

Weather stories were a deterrent for me in considering the far north of Quebec and the entire Labrador area. I must make clear that I know absolutely nothing firsthand about the rivers of Quebec and therefore everything I have just said may be wrong. Nonetheless those were my impressions.

A few rivers intrigued me. However, either I was unable to find enough information about them or the information was only available in French. I had been traumatized by the French language at an early age. My elementary school had decided to offer French classes to third and fourth graders who were in the top reading group in their respective classes. I was in third grade and apparently I qualified. I have always suspected, however, that my third grade teacher, who had for some reason taken a firm dislike for me (though I'd been such a lovely and innocent child), placed me in the highest reading group just to get me out of her class for a little while every day. In any case, my mother was thrilled and signed me right up. She had high hopes for me in general. She was a well brought up woman and mired in an epic and doomed struggle to inculcate some degree of culture and intellectualism into her six sons. She leapt at the chance to speak French at home to someone other than herself. To me it was girlie. I was the only boy in a French class of all girls. It was a girlie sounding language and my mother and teacher, both girls, were the ones who wanted me to do it.

I almost learned some French my junior year in high school, my seventh year of French. We had a fine and patient man as our teacher, an Israeli émigré who had somehow found his way to Marlboro High School in Massachusetts and my class of third year (of high-school) French students. Mr. Nahoumi impressed us all as a highly moral man, but also kind and forgiving of our incomplete development. Billy Cook sat at the rear end of my row. He was a noted artist, famous for his high quality, tastefully done, pencil sketches of female nudes. He always had his sketch pad with him in every class and often spent class time working on his drawings, such was the depth of his dedication to art.

Now and then, when Mr. Nahoumi was at the blackboard with his back to the class (something should be done about this persisting teaching technique of turning one's back to the class; no good comes of it.), a low-toned tittering would rise and swell toward the front of the room. I would turn around and there would be Billy, holding one of his drawings up over his head facing forward. He was good like that. Always generous about allowing people to view his works. And he had style in his presentation. Nothing

grinning or self-congratulatory about it. He was entirely undemonstrative. I always respected him for that, though of course I never told him. That sort of thing hadn't been invented yet among boys. Thin, pale, freckle-faced Billy would just quietly sit there with a straight face. It was clear though that what he really valued was Mr. Nahoumi's opinion. After all he was foreign, spoke French and as a very highly moral man, would be a good judge of the quality of Billy's work. And from where I sat it always looked great. These seemed to be very nice-type girls. Probably college girls. Very tastefully done. We waited for Mr. Nahoumi to turn around. It would take him a few moments to realize what was going on and to focus in on what Billy was holding up for him. The rest of us remained dead silent.

"Ah Mr. Cook, I do not think we need that type of material here." His face would scrunch up as if he had just smelled something bad. But he did not yell or get mad.

"But Mr. Nahoumi, do you think this is a good job? I spent a lot of time on this one. You didn't seem to like the last one too much."

"I'm sure it is excellent, Mr. Cook. But you must put it away for now."

Billy would put it away and that would be the end of it for that day. As I said, Mr. Nahoumi was a kind and patient man. And I did pay attention and do my work for him. But it was far too late. And that is why, despite another year of French in college, I could make little sense of the description of la Rivier Mistassibi Nord-est in south central Quebec.

I bought a road map of Canada, the best I could find, which for my purposes was just about useless. I pored over it anyway, studying territory through my magnifying glass, as if it might help me see the running water. Though you can't learn a damn thing about a river this way, I was compelled to try. But my map was completely inadequate and half the time the river I was looking for wasn't on it.

Ultimately I left Quebec and headed west. Next thing I know, I'm in Manitoba. The idea of it seemed a bit preposterous. What business did I have thinking I should go to Manitoba? It even sounded comical. I imagined myself proclaiming to friends and family, "Well, I'm going to Manitoba!" Sort of like saying, "I'm going to Kathmandu!" It sounded like the punchline to a joke. But I found some intriguing rivers there and a lot of information—in English.

I looked at the Seal, the Bloodvein and Hayes rivers. Then I slipped north. On the "Blazing Paddles" (what a name!) website I found an account of a

trip on the Thelon River up in the Northwest Territory and Nunavut. This I took very seriously. The stretch of the Thelon from the Hanbury River junction to Aberdeen Lake was the right length, with a nice strong flow, easy rapids, no tough portaging and no lakes. It had caribou herds and wolf and musk ox. I had read Cliff Jacobson's book, *Expedition Canoeing*, paying very close attention to the section on the joys and hardships of Barren Lands travel. I read the chapter on the Thelon in the book *Paddle Quest: Canada's Best Canoe Routes*.

I had decided from the start that I would not do this trip alone, as I usually prefer to do. The sort of place I intended to go this time was to be much more remote and thus more dangerous than anything I had done before or is available in Maine or for that matter anywhere in the lower forty-eight states. On page sixteen of *Expedition Canoeing*, Cliff Jacobson says, "Twenty years of canoeing experience in the Allagash [Maine] or Minnesota Boundary Waters doesn't qualify you for an Arctic adventure." When I first read that it pierced me deeply and made want to respond proudly, defiantly, defensively, moronically with, "Oh yeah?!" or something of that quality. I had just seen the release of my first book on wilderness canoeing, featuring a trip on the Allagash in Maine as the centerpiece of the story. But he had a point. I wouldn't have been looking at maps of Manitoba and Nunavut if it were not so. I thought maybe four people would be good for a trip like the Thelon. Jacobson recommends six as the safest number, when possible, for a number of reasons. One of which is that if a canoe is lost or damaged beyond repair, the two remaining ones can carry the others by only increasing their loads by one-third. Whereas with only two canoes (four people) the load on the single remaining boat would be doubled and impossible to safely manage. However, I couldn't imagine where I would find five people who could and would do this and did not want to hitch up with complete strangers or join a professionally guided trip.

A while back I had asked my friend and neighbor, Walter Bickford, if he would be interested in a long wilderness canoe trip somewhere up in Canada. A real expedition-type trip in real remote country. I asked Walter for several reasons. He is a very capable, knowledgeable, experienced canoeist and outdoorsman, a professional naturalist and, in short, knows a lot more than I do about all these things. I wouldn't consider going with anyone who knew less than me. In addition, he likes the idea of experiences such as

these and though he is sixty years old, has the will, the health and the energy to see it through. He has the build and temperment of the Voyageurs of old; short, sturdy and hyperactive, his thick pure white hair the only clue to his age. I also believed he'd have the time and money. Finally, I thought I could probably get along with him and he with me.

I made copies of all the accounts and relevant information on the Thelon and a couple of Manitoba rivers and brought them over to Walter's house for him to read and consider. I asked him to think about a couple of other suitable pairs he might know who might be able to come. I don't know people who engage in this kind of behavior. It was August when I handed him the material. Meanwhile, I kept reading.

Chapter III

The MacFarlane River rises in obscurity from a cluster of small lakes and streams in north central Saskatchewan. It flows north over sand and stone, fed as it goes by small streams, by two large lakes and by the Snare River, which joins it along the way. It weaves through a hilly terrain of eskers and kames, drumlins and dunes, the lumpy landscape of glacial remains. It cuts sandstone gorges and roars over precipice falls. Sunny jack pine forests line its banks above endless carpets of pale blue caribou lichen. It runs one hundred and eighty miles north, through remote country, emptying into the great Lake Athabasca at the northern edge of Saskatchewan, nine hundred miles north of the Montana border, just south of the Barren Lands of the Northwest Territories.

It has always been an out-of-the-way river running through an out-of-the-way region and remains so today. In this country it has always been the caribou that have determined where the people would go. The MacFarlane is not situated along the habitual migration routes of the great caribou herds. For thousands of years they have moved through northern Saskatchewan en route to the Barren Lands in spring and early summer, and then south again to spend the winter within the forests around Athabasca. The vast crescent shaped lake, one hundred ninety five miles from its eastern to western tips, forces the herds well to either side of the MacFarlane's territory behind the lake. This was and is the territory of the Dené, who have followed the herds as nomadic hunter-gatherers since their arrival on the North American continent. Like the wolf, whom their creation myths teach that they are in part descended from, they have stalked, hunted and most of all, relied upon the caribou. It was central to their history, their continued existence and their identity. They were the "wolf people," the "caribou eaters" and were known as

such by neighboring tribes. They maintained much of their traditional lifestyle into the 1960's. The caribou were not expected to be found in great numbers around the MacFarlane and so neither were the Dené. To this day, their settlements at Stony Rapids, Fond du Lac and Black Lake are all along the eastern migration routes of the Beverly and Qamanirjuaq herds, and at least one hundred miles northeast of the MacFarlane.

Europeans entered northern Saskatchewan in the late 18th century. Samuel Hearne and Peter Pond, Philip Turnor and David Thompson explored around and about Lake Athabasca. They came or were sent, to extend the voracious search for furs and for trade routes. They came searching for a water route to the Pacific and to extend British Canada across the continent. They traveled great distances along the rivers and lakes of northwest Canada, drawing maps and building trading posts. But for them the fur trade, in Dené territory, never became a success. Even for the legendary voyageurs, capable of prodigious feats of labor, access to the area was especially difficult, requiring many long brutal portages.

The Saskatchewan, Clearwater and Churchill River systems to the south offered far easier access routes and plenty of beaver. Most important, the Dené, unlike their Cree neighbors to the south, had little interest in beaver trapping or trade with the whites. The caribou provided them with virtually everything they needed. There wasn't much the white men could offer of equal or greater value that could tempt them to change their lifestyle. The caribou gave them excellent hides for clothing, bedding, bags and lodge coverings, babiche (rawhide thong) for bow strings, snowshoe lacings, gill nets, tump lines and drum heads, to name a few. Antler and bone provided fishhooks, fleshers and scrapers, awls, needles, beamers, hafts, spear and arrow points. And it gave them most of their food. The material was of their environment and worked in their environment better than just about anything else. Mainly, however, they were linked spiritually to the nomadic ways of the caribou. The relationship was woven into their mythology and religion, their calendar and gender roles, more deeply than we can know. If they could not follow the caribou they could not be Dené They could not go off searching for beaver and follow the caribou too. By the end of the 1790's the fur business in the area was abandoned, leaving the quietly out-of-the-way MacFarlane River region as unexplored territory.

One hundred years later, explorers re-entered northern Saskatchewan, this time as surveyors for the Geological Survey of Canada. In 1892, J. B.

Tyrrell and D. B. Dowling circled the area of the MacFarlane, traveling the north and south shores of Lake Athabasca and the water routes well to the south, east and west of the MacFarlane, a route encompassing an area of 60,000 square miles, of which, in the words of Tyrrell at the time, "…nothing was definitely known." But they never neared the MacFarlane, other than to skirt its mouth as they reconnoitered the south shore of Athabasca.

Others had passed it before. Philip Turnor in 1791 noted the giant sand dunes looming over the lake shore near the MacFarlane's mouth, describing them as "…a rising sandy desert of a yellowish white colour." J. B. Dowling, with his native guides, passed its mouth and was told of the many waterfalls that filled a gorge a short distance upstream. The river then was called the Beaver River by whites and some natives, and the Grand Rapids River by others. Tyrrell and Dowling finished their survey leaving the MacFarlane untravelled and its nature unknown.

During the 1930's trappers returned to the north. This time they were Canadians looking for an alternative to the joblessness of the Great Depression. Fur prices were sky-high and men fanned out by canoe and on foot when the waterways froze, moving deep into the interior. A long abandoned log cabin on Brudell Lake on the MacFarlane River is evidence that at least one trapper found his way there. Around that same time, the river also received its present name, given in recognition of the long career of Roderick MacFarlane, a former post manager and explorer for the Hudson Bay Company. This renewal of the trapping life, described wonderfully in A. L. Karras's book *North to Cree Lake*, flickered briefly and went out, and by the start of World War II the woods and waters of the MacFarlane were quiet and lonely once more.

By September, I had slipped into Saskatchewan in my ongoing research and came upon an interesting article by Doug McKnown on the "Canoe Canada" website about a wilderness river canoe trip he had taken a few years back. It had previously been published in the Spring-1999 issue of *Journal of Canadian Wilderness Canoeing*. I remembered having heard of the river before. I got out my *Expedition Canoeing* and *Paddle Quest* books. Both had sections on McKnown's river, the MacFarlane. It was described as "rarely traveled…about as remote as any river in Saskatchewan…virtually untouched wilderness, devoid of human presence…set in extremely remote country…virtually untravelled…a remote

and challenging river…you won't run into other people." Mostly though, it is unknown, and isn't referred to at all.

Dave Bober, who wrote of his 1991 MacFarlane trip in *Paddle Quest*, spoke of the thrill of "paddling a river without a written record from previous travelers." This was the one. I felt that it had found me, rather than the other way around. I copied the articles for Walter and began telling family and friends, "I'm going to Saskatchewan!"

Chapter IV

From across the aisle Walter gestured for my attention. Engine noise and a loud persistent whistle from a faulty rear door seal created a hammering racket inside our metal tube that made verbal communication impossible. He was motioning for me to look out my window at something on the ground. A river snaked its way through the land below us in curves, curls and loops. Possibly one of the ones that flowed from the south into Cree Lake. Walter was smiling and nodding. I wasn't sure why. It may have been because this river seemed to have ample water with no sign of running dry. I sure as hell hoped so. I had received plenty of assurances that the water level this time of year in the MacFarlane would be fine. But I'd been surprised and deceived before.

The previous summer I had made plans to solo canoe a seventy-mile stretch of the Nepisiquit River in New Brunswick in late June. Water levels there, as in northern Maine, had been running low and lower the past few years. Snow fall and spring rains had been light again. But I had maintained e-mail contact with a New Brunswick canoe zealot calling himself "Nanook of the Nashwaak," who ran a website about New Brunswick canoe rivers. Through him and his contacts I had gathered information and tried to keep up to date on water levels. No electronic water gauges were in place. I also connected with a New Brunswick forest ranger who ran a shuttle service in the area. He would help bring me to the river put-in and then deliver my truck to the agreed upon downstream takeout point. He was my primary source of up-to-date information on water levels. A couple of weeks before the trip I checked in to see how it was holding up. "Everything is fine. Plenty of water." At about the same time I was getting reports from Nanook that some nearby rivers had run low and were not canoeable. Rivers in the same area can certainly differ for many reasons, but I could see no good reason,

nor was there anything in the information I had gathered over the past few months that would set the Nepisiquit apart from these other rivers regarding their water flow patterns. I didn't want to obsess on it, so I left it alone and waited until three days before my planned departure before I called back. I also decided to vary my source of information. I had a phone number for a ranger station near the river and called it for an opinion. I told the voice on the other end of the phone that I was planning to canoe the Nepisiquit in a few days and asked what he knew about its current water level and its fitness for canoeing. He said he really wasn't sure and gave me the number of the ranger station right on the river, saying that they would know best. I recognized the voice, the slight Quebecois accent. It was my shuttle guy admitting he had no idea, but not knowing to whom he was admitting it. I called the other ranger station.

"Well it's running pretty low. From where you said you'd be putting in it's pretty much rocks and puddles. My son and I were down there last week and it wasn't much good. So your first fifteen miles or so really isn't canoeable. You could put in at (such and such a place) and it'd be fine from there."

I called the shuttle rangers' home phone, from which he conducted his side business, to cancel. His wife was indignant, insisting the water was fine and that they do it all the time. "Plenty of water," she said. I didn't tell her that her own husband had admitted he had no idea and that she was lying at my expense. I stuck with what the other ranger had said, the ranger her husband's station had referred me to, I added, and left it at that.

I smiled weakly back at Walter and nodded as if I understood him. But I couldn't rouse myself from the gloominess I felt. The landscape below me summoned up only images of loneliness and danger. I looked at the endless scrubby forest, the bogs and the rock-littered terrain and could only think of what it would be like if we lost our canoe and supplies in a capsize and had to walk out. I looked down at the blue-blue waters of a large lake and felt it on me, penetrating, cold and wet; felt the way it held your boat and pulled against your straining efforts. I brooded on its evil partner, the wind, like some malevolent beast crouched grinning in its lakeside lair in wait for each little canoe to glide upon gentle waters, eager to spring upon it in vengeful gusts and white foamed spray. I felt like Rimbaud, writing home from Ethiopia: "What am I doing here?"

When we'd stopped at La Ronge, we talked with a guy who'd had some wilderness canoeing experience. Smiling, he told us of getting lost with a

friend in the Quetico region of southern Ontario. It began when they came unexpectedly upon a ledge drop. They went over and capsized. They hadn't bothered to tie in their gear and it, with their canoe, quickly floated away. After thirteen days of wandering on foot, they were found by a lone camper who guided them out. Their only food in that time had been a few energy bars they'd had in their pockets. It was the early '70's and his friend had just returned home from a combat tour in Vietnam. The idea had been to get away for some peace and quiet. He chuckled as he told us this.

Cliff Jacobson, in *Expedition Canoeing* writes, "Virtually every back country canoeist I know secretly admits some inner fear (call it profound anticipation, if you will) that his or her own skills are inadequate to meet the challenge." Famed writer and canoe explorer Sigurd Olson said he had put the question of "fear" to Charles Camsell (noted Canadian explorer and former Commissioner of the Northwest Territories) at the Explorer's Club one day. Camsell replied that he'd spent "most of his adult life exploring the bush and had been scared during nine-tenths of it."