

# RETRACING CANADA'S HISTORY

A canoe journey following the Voyageur water route from the Rainy River to  
and across Lake of the Woods.  
(August 26 – September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2017)  
Jan Soukup



Ah, what a feeling to hold the paddle again. The digits of one hand in fingerless leather glove impatient to encircle its shaft and the palm of the other to wrap around the bulbous Tee on its end in a firm grip. The arms trembling with anticipation of propelling the canoe to unknown adventures beyond the distant horizons. It all is long etched in and familiar; no need for any refreshment practice. It is the same routine as is riding a bicycle, swimming, the kick from the wax zone of a cross-country ski, the press down of the heels in the stirrups and pumping up the horse for a jump over a fence – something that cannot be forgotten. To move again on one's two legs over the surface of the Mother Earth, to live without a ceiling over one's head other than the high sky, to feel the warming sun on the bare back, to draw in the aroma of coniferous resin, or the fresh moisture of the wind-driven rain during a healthy movement under the protection of a Gore-Tex windbreaker. The refreshing scent of ozone after the passage of a thunder storm. The alternating scenes of the daily transformations in the nature's beauty culminating with the radiant therapy at the embers of an evening campfire. It is that old familiar yearning that beckons me akin the instinct driving a salmon to spawn at its high hatching flats. It is the return that liberates in me the instincts inherited from the ancestors as distant as those from the Stone Age. Are, perhaps, even the few percent of the Neanderthal genes calling, which I carry among others in my genome? It all elevates the spirit, sharpens the acute alertness and spurs on the flow of adrenaline for overcoming that what makes adventure an adventure – unforeseen obstacles and dangers, including that ultimate one - the one that for a true adventure has to lurk somewhere in the dark background, yet must be constantly held in check with wisdom and experience – the danger of death.



The launch on the Rainy river

Today is excitingly different than all the prior days associated with my lonely water voyage in a solo canoe from Montreal to here. Though it is a day that is chilly and windy, with an overcast sky laden with rain, for me, there is a festive atmosphere in it. Why? It is because from today on, I will finally paddle with my proven partner again, the only one that I can rely upon and with whom I can get along in this crazy undertaking – my wife, Milena. How was all this suddenly possible? Both of us have agreed on a joint decision that Milena would finally join me in retirement. She had enjoyed a very well paid management position in which she could have stayed for many more years. Yet, the politics-charged toxic work environment kept placing on her an ever higher weight of stress, undermining her health. She took a leave of absence to rest and contemplate the details of her important decision, while regaining her best sanity for it in the caressing arms of the nature on a canoe voyage through the wilderness. We made quick preparations. It was nearing the end of August, not much remained of the summer. Both, the tandem canoe as well as a lightweight tent with comfortable space for two was ready from two years ago, when Milena was to join me for the voyage along the Boundary Waters – Quetico canoe route from Lake Superior to Fort Frances. Alas, at the time she broke her foot two days before the planned departure and had to cancel her participation.

All that remained now, was to sort out the logistics of the starting out. Where do we launch the canoe and where do we safeguard the Jeep until we return for it? During the whole drive from Edmonton across the Prairies, I speculated that we would go all the way to Fort Frances, where we would pay my proven taxi driver, Doug, to take us to the place on the Rainy River, where I was forced to abort last year. Then, we would let him take the Jeep to his home in Fort Frances and keep it for us till we would return. Yet, when we woke up into a rainy, windy morning at the motel of the first settlement, where we had reached the river, a new idea emerged in my mind. Instead of diverging through a large detour upstream to Fort Frances, we would turn downstream and try to find the property with the house on the river bank, where I finished last year. We will ask, if they would allow us to launch the canoe - exactly, where I had pulled out – and, perhaps, if we could leave the Jeep with them. The idea worked to a tee. I managed to find the place and the elderly lady, Maureen, who was taking care of her young grandchildren here, while the parents were at work. She recognized me right away, remembering me from the last year. She willingly agreed with our request and showed us, where to park the Jeep. Following this unexpectedly smooth phase in our logistics, Milena and I changed clothing and we carefully loaded the canoe, launched in the reeds at the edge of the river. It was a miserable day that demanded Gore-Tex outfits. Milena wore a toque, while I wore my brim hat pushed all the way to my ears. Yet, we were warmed by the happy feeling from our successfully executed start of the voyage. To my delight, Milena liked the situation and was full of humor from the final feeling of freedom. Luckily, the chilling wind blew from behind, in the direction of the river current, hence the voyage was passing quickly. Sometimes around two o'clock, we floated under the bridge of the highway crossing to the US and the further paddling was rapidly leaving the last signs of civilization. Two hours later, we were already looking for some camp site. The land along the banks was still divided into private parcels, yet now, those were only farms with sparse habitation, which was not visible in the greenery. In the light of my unfortunate last year's experience with the poison ivy, we were extremely cautious about selecting a spot for the camp. We were seeing poison ivy in practically everything that grew on the shores. Consequently, we rejected several otherwise appealing spots, until Milena finally spotted a narrow strip of a low water level-bared beach beyond a band of reeds, which looked promising. We enjoyed here a



relatively comfortable evening, if in the morning, we were awakened in the tent by the voice of the farmer – owner. He thrashed his way here only with difficulty through shallows with his motorboat, to announce to us that we were finding ourselves on a private property. We apologized, but since we were leaving the place in a short while anyway, all ended on a friendly note. There was no point arguing, even though technically, the flood zone of the river bank up to the high water mark is classified as Crown Land and hence we were not trespassing on a private property.



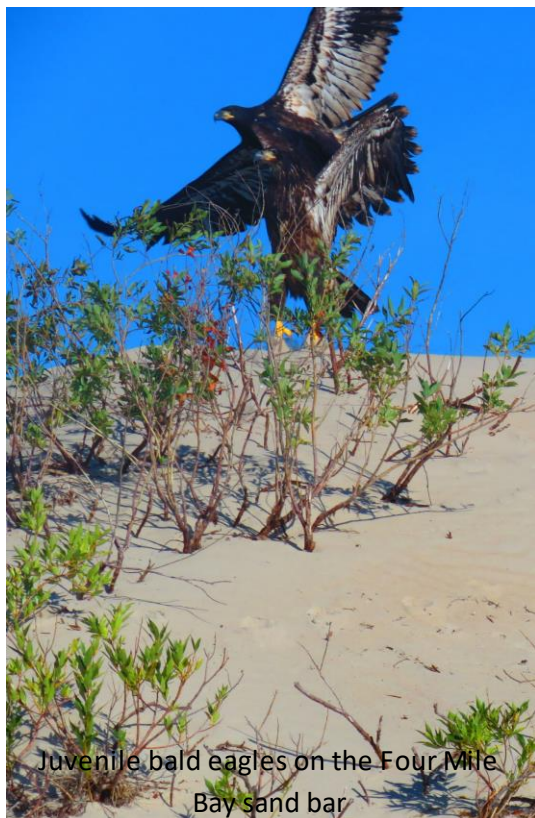
The chilling wind had endured till the morning. To top it off, it changed its direction against us. We thus sought a feeble wind shelter in moving close to the bank. Though the speed of our progress had markedly dropped, we sensed that we were not far from the mouth of the river into Lake of the Woods and this was injecting us with strength and good mood. The mouth of the river prepared a challenge for us in the form of a labyrinth through a vast spread of reeds. We had followed a kind of a canal through it, which followed the border, but we managed to orient ourselves in time to the degree that we correctly diverged to the north and the Canadian side. Milena's sharp eye then registered something on the kilometer distant shore that from afar looked like a sand beach. After a while of paddling, there was no longer a doubt about it. With gratitude, we sledged the prow of the canoe onto the sand of the shore and went to explore it for camping. The place was nice and except for a freakish clamoring of a large crowd of Canada geese, who conferred in the neighborhood, before they left about two hours later, it was heavenly





The first morning on Lake of the Woods

quiet. The location with a deciduous woods around was far from any farm buildings, which were nowhere visible anyway. Our steps were still wearily avoiding leafy shoots growing out of the sand that could look like poison ivy, but gradually, we had accepted a conclusion that we must have been dealing with the seedlings of maple, which grew all around. Our exaggerated prudence had gradually subsided to a new self-confidence. We went to sleep early and in the morning, we got up with the daybreak. The surface of the lake was as smooth as a mirror and it reflected the rising sun through the low morning mists above it. All above the water, a clear sky was spreading without any clouds. We quickly struck the tent and loaded the canoe. After pushing off, we turned the boat north, parallel to the shore, moving away from it only to avoid the vast spreads of the shoreline reeds. The wind had already started to blow from the west, thus from our left. But from my two-year studying of the map of the lake, I had wisely chosen a route that was to a great degree protected from the resulting westerly waves. It is because the southern end of Lake of the Woods is relatively shallow. Due to an interaction between the inflowing river, which brings sand, and the west winds-driven lake surf, a huge barrier of a sand bar formed around the whole mouth of the river, which is in places up to some eight meters high, twenty meters wide and over six kilometers long across the front of the mouth. On some of its sections, mature trees are growing. It has several gaps, which allow a boat traffic to pass through. We were moving through a protected lagoon, which had formed between the shore and the mentioned sand bar, in the direction of its northern end. There, it was opening up again onto the lake. On the map, this lagoon is named as „The Four Mile Bay“. It was a nice day and soon, the



Juvenile bald eagles on the Four Mile Bay sand bar

exploring expedition aimed at the discovery of the hypothetical „Western Sea“. He invested all his possessions into the venture, including three of his very young sons. Only with great difficulty, he finally obtained a permission for the voyage from the king's bureaucracy, yet he was denied any financial support for the undertaking. He was supposed to make money for his expenses from trading furs. During his prior two-year stint as a commandant of a post at Nipigon on Lake Superior, he met an Assiniboine native by the name of Ochagach, who described to him a canoe route to the west from the Superior and sketched him the map of it on a scroll of birch bark. It was the line of the today's border that also I had followed on the part of my journey west from Grand Portage. La Verendrye set out on the voyage with a fleet of birch bark canoes and a crew of some fifty recruits from Montreal in the spring of 1731. The group included his nephew and his three sons. He was envied by numerous enemies of his, who had been putting obstacles in his way right out of Montreal. Following some initial glitches, when several of his men had defected, the expedition arrived at the end of Lake

sun was merrily burning. A short break to rest and to explore a pretty spot on the bar was very interesting. Just before our bow touched the sand bar, two juvenile bald eagles, still all brown, without the white plumage on its head and tail rose from its ridge. They had to be nesting here, judging from the numerous prints of their talons and wing swings in the sand of the high dune. We concurred that this place would make for a very romantic, gorgeous camping, alas, today, it was still too early for it. Bad timing! The view from the ridge of the sand dune toward the west opened a broad panorama of the enormous spread of the lake. It only reconfirmed the wisdom of our strategy to avoid its mighty waves.

Looking over the vast water expanse of the southern part of the lake reminded me of the tragically rough history of its discovering. I recalled Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, sieur de La Verendrye – already in Quebec-born Frenchman, who had fought heroically as a soldier for the French king in Europe and suffered several wounds. After he had returned to Canada, at the age, when others retire, he planned an



Four Mile Bay sand bar

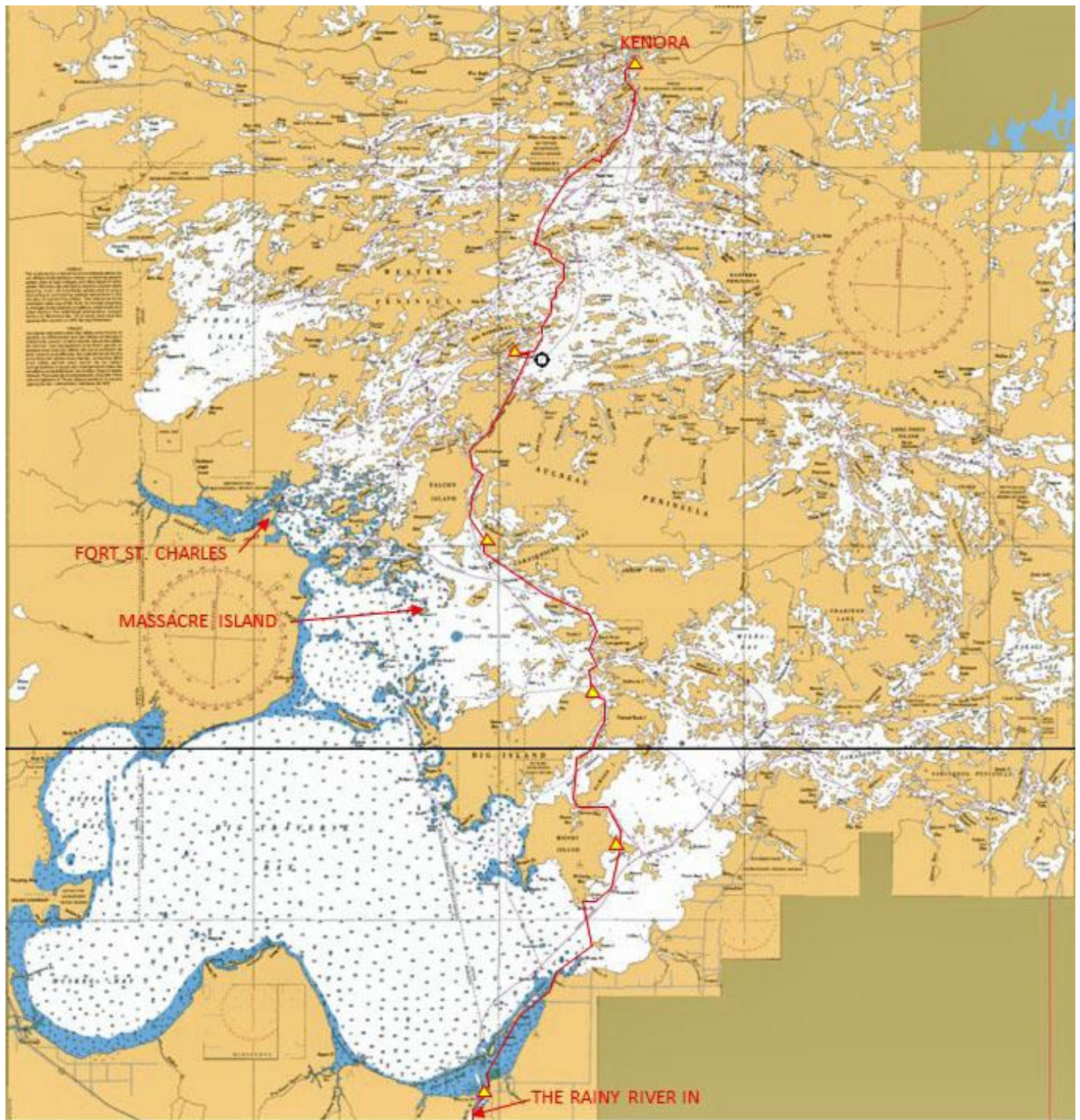
Superior and to Grand Portage at the end of August of the same year. I have found, how the voyage on the Superior was viewed by La Verendrye himself and my own experience could intimately relate to his every word:

*„It was now the end of July, and we still had a long way to go. After a brief rest, I gathered my men together. We embarked once more, and steered our way on that great inland sea, Lake Superior. All that had gone before was child's play to what must now be encountered. In contrast to the blue and placid waters of Lake Huron, we now found ourselves in the midst of a dark and sombre sea, whose waves, seldom if ever still, could on occasion rival the Atlantic in their fierce tumult. Even in this hottest month of the year the water was icy cold, and the keen wind that blew across the lake forced those who were not paddling to put on extra clothing. They must needs be hardy and experienced voyageurs who could safely navigate these mad waters in frail bark canoes. Slowly we made our way along the north shore, buffeted by storms and in constant peril of our lives, until at last, on August 26, we reached the Grand Portage, near the mouth of the Pigeon river, or about fifteen leagues south-west of Fort Kaministiquia“ (where Fort William now stands).*

The troubles for La Verendrye had not ended at the end of Lake Superior. As I had already mentioned, his crew mutinied against the hardship of the Grand Portage. La Verendrye was forced to split his outfit. Only the half of his party consisting of the most faithful and most courageous was sent by him to Rainy Lake under the command of his most reliable man, Christoph Dufrost de La Jemeray – his nephew, together with his oldest son, Jean-Baptiste. The rest had returned under his command back to spend the winter at the mouth of the Kaministiquia. The first group reached the outflow point of the Rainy River from Rainy Lake still during the same fall and managed to build a post, Fort St. Pierre. The next year, 1732, they were joined by rest of the expedition and together, they then reached Lake of the Woods in the early summer. Here they built a new post, Fort St. Charles. By now, La Verendrye was drowning in financial debts. Hencetofore, his men had never been paid at all yet. Still, he continued his explorations up to Lake Winnipeg and his sons then carried on even further into the region of the prairies. During this time, they established a number of new posts. In spite of his enthusiasm, he would be struck with a significant degree of tragedies. First, he learned that his faithful nephew, La Jemmeray had died in an outlying post during the winter of 1735. Perhaps as part of the intrigues, plotted against La Verendrye back east, Fort St Charles had not received its order of goods before the same winter. Jean-Baptist, who had been made commander of Fort Saint Charles, therefore organized an expedition right next spring, consisting of three large canoes and twenty one men, including himself and a returning Jesuit priest, Father Aulneau, to obtain the supplies themselves from Fort Michilimackinac on Lake Michigan. The party left Fort St. Charles in the west of the lake and moved in a straight direction across the southern expanse of Lake of the Woods towards the mouth of the Rainy River, whence we ourselves entered the lake. After about twenty miles, the fleet stopped to rest and smoke a pipe on a small island. Through an unfortunate coincidence, at that time, also a large war party of the Sioux, the cruelest savage warriors, who in those times enjoyed regular terrorizing raids onto the relatively peaceful tribes living in the lake country of the Shield. The group numbered some hundred warriors in war canoes. The traditional territories of the Sioux nations Lakota, Dakota and Nakota used to be the prairies. Hence they entered from the south-west reach of Lake of the Woods, around what is even now called Warroad. Fate had it that the routes of both parties were to roughly cross. It so happened that a sharp eye of some



# MARINE CHART OF LAKE OF THE WOODS





member of the war party penetrated the morning mist above the surface of the lake and discerned the fleet of Jean-Baptiste, as they were about to land at the small island. The plan of the Sioux crystalized instantly. Noiselessly paddling, they landed at the opposite side of the island, sneaked quietly through the forest growth on its top and ambushed the non-expecting resting Frenchmen with a shower of arrows, followed by tomahawks and scalping knives. Those, who with multiple injuries tried to swim to the neighboring island were left to drown. Today, the island carries the name „Massacre Island“. The bodies had not been discovered at the time until some three weeks later. It was a scene of utter horror. Jean-Baptiste's body lied head-less on its stomach with deeply cut up back and with the genital area completely missing. A chapel was built on the island, where Fort St. Charles was situated and the bodies of Jean-Baptiste and father Aulneau were buried under its altar.

It ought to be noted that La Verendrye was not necessarily the first European, who reached this land. The Hudson's Bay officials, who had trading connections with this territory from the north, reported at this time, when La Verendrye was penetrating to the land from south-east that there had been an unusually lively activity of „coureurs des bois“ – the independent gutsy, yet illegal traders of furs, who were getting here most likely by the same way, or very similar, as La Verendrye. There are, however, no official records of these people and La Verendrye does not mention them.

The moving legacy of the Verendrye story remained in the back of my mind for the whole voyage through the lake. I had constantly imagined, if what I was seeing, was what they had seen and in what our impressions differed. It is quite obvious that they were finding themselves far far on a limb from the security of their starting settlements on the continent, relying only on the knowledge and advice of their befriended local natives. They had to be constantly on the alert against unknown dangers of the landscape, climate, and natural obstacles of the water courses, wild animals and unfriendly wild savages. They definitely had not met with the cottages and cabins of fishermen and hunters, like us. Yet those had started to appear only once we reached the northern half of the lake and proportionately so to the nearness of the town of Kenora on its northern shore. Ergo here, on the south half of the lake, we were in fact discovering it just like them in their time. As soon as we reached the end of the sand bar of the Four-Mile Bay, we emerged onto the open water. During the prior study of the marine chart of the lake, I felt great apprehension about the danger of being caught in a stormy, or at least windy weather. I was therefore choosing a line, curving from the close vicinity of one island to another. But in the end, a long crossing of a large span of open water surface did come anyway. We had to reach a large Bigsby Island. There is nothing on it, except dense forest. It is protected as a provincial park. We viewed it during a brief stop for a rest in the boat at the last little island only as a dark line in a misty distance. After a while, we set a racing pace to it. It was hot and we faced waves from the west, where we headed, yet our eighteen foot tandem canoe behaved in them much more stable than, what I had got used to in my solo canoe. When we discerned a sand beach on the shore of the island in front of us, we aimed our course straight to its widest middle.

During something over half an hour, we finally gently pushed the prow of the canoe onto the yellow sand of the beach. Here, I will mention one of the strange experiences that Milena and I had in this part of Canada, as the new ones to those that I alone had already had before on the route between Lake Superior and Fort Frances. The entire area was absolutely people-less to as far as the eye could see and the reason could extrapolate. There was no one on the kilometer-long

beach. Nowhere, could one see any boats. We were sweating from the hot day and from the vigorous paddling, hence we stripped naked and immersed ourselves into the clear water of delightful temperature. Yet still before that, thanks to Milena's good ear and a sixth sense perception, she registered for me an incomprehensible noise coming right from the inside of the edge of the deciduous, rather impassable forest. She said that the sound could not be described, but I remember that she related it to something of the water movement, like lapping of a surf, or rumbling of a waterfall. Therefore she automatically perceived that there had to be another shore of the island right beyond the first few rows of trees. When, consternated, I assured her that the nearest lake shore in the direction into the trees does not occur until after some ten kilometer width of the island, she started feeling a little apprehensive. I in the meantime walked aside to the edge of the woods to urinate and, in spite of my not exactly lynx-like hearing, I with a great surprise was listening to something that sounded like a muffled mumbling of women voices. Originally, we had wanted to have here a break for lunch. But when Milena's sound suddenly stopped as if cut off and a deadly silence ensued, she had had enough. She decided that we pack and paddle somewhere else. Some sort of a strange energy in the air dictated her that it would not be wise to linger in this place. I am no scaredy-cat and am not naive, but already for long many years, I have had a hobby of researching the subject of the existence of the Sasquatch/Bigfoot. I have studied hundreds of reports by witnesses, classified on scientifically presented web sites, as for example bfro.net. I have personally written about my conclusions and presented a number of public lectures on this subject. From what I know, the above described one and further experiences, which I have already described from my solo water voyage and will still describe from the present voyage, fully agree with the typical behaviour and presence of Sasquatch. I also know very well that in modern times, Sasquatch has never hurt a human. His aim is to scare the intruder into leaving his territory. In this regard, he is performing an excellent job.

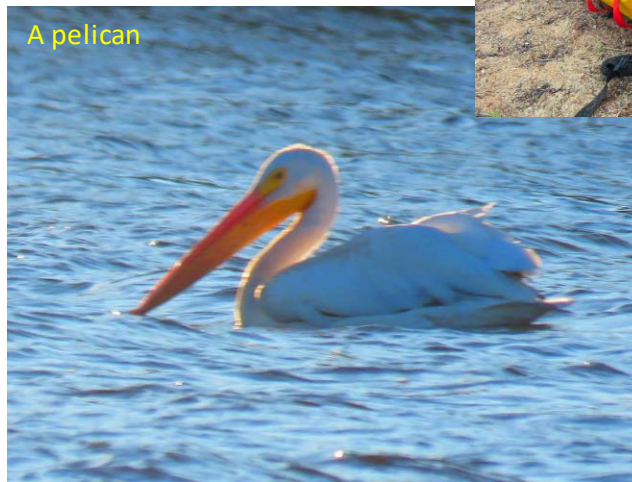


In about another two hours, an opportunity to make camp at last opened up. Our route skirted the east shore of Bigsby Island, where we had hoped to find a nice camp. But in this, the sandy and shallower part of the lake, the shore of the island and its bays were mostly obstructed with dense and extensive spreads of reeds and wild rice. At one time, we were almost getting lost in it, before we finally found the way out. We eventually gave it a wide berth in a large detour toward the middle of

the open water. Our camp now rested on a point of a sand bar, which jutted into a narrows between Bigsby Island and another, smaller island. Swimming was wonderful here with a soft access on the sandy bottom. I noticed that the whole bar was printed with the small feet of mink.



My assessment was confirmed the next morning. While I was packing gear to load the canoe, my eyes were looking just in the right direction to catch the fleeting moment when a mink emerged from the edge of the forest, quickly crossed the beach and submerged under water surface. A few seconds later, he was followed by another one, likely his mate. From what I had observed during my water



voyages, these animals of rapid movements and cute looks feed mostly on water crustations. Their crushed shells can often be found densely scattered over some spots of the shore that are the mink's favorite hangouts. While resting from a strong head wind once in the lee of a small island, a mink suddenly emerged from the water at the rocky shore right in front of my canoe, unaware of my

presence. His small muzzle was full of little crayfish. The next day we moved through narrow passages among islands, at first still skirting Bigsby Island. Gradually, granite had started appearing again of the Canadian Shield, into which we were returning in the







After the storm in camp #4 on a granite point

advance to the north. Beautiful little granite islets then facilitated romantic rest stops for us with joyful swimming. Our camping was now finding splendid scenic places at the end of each day. The next camp was situated on a smooth, gently sloping into the water granite



Before a storm in camp #4 on a granite point

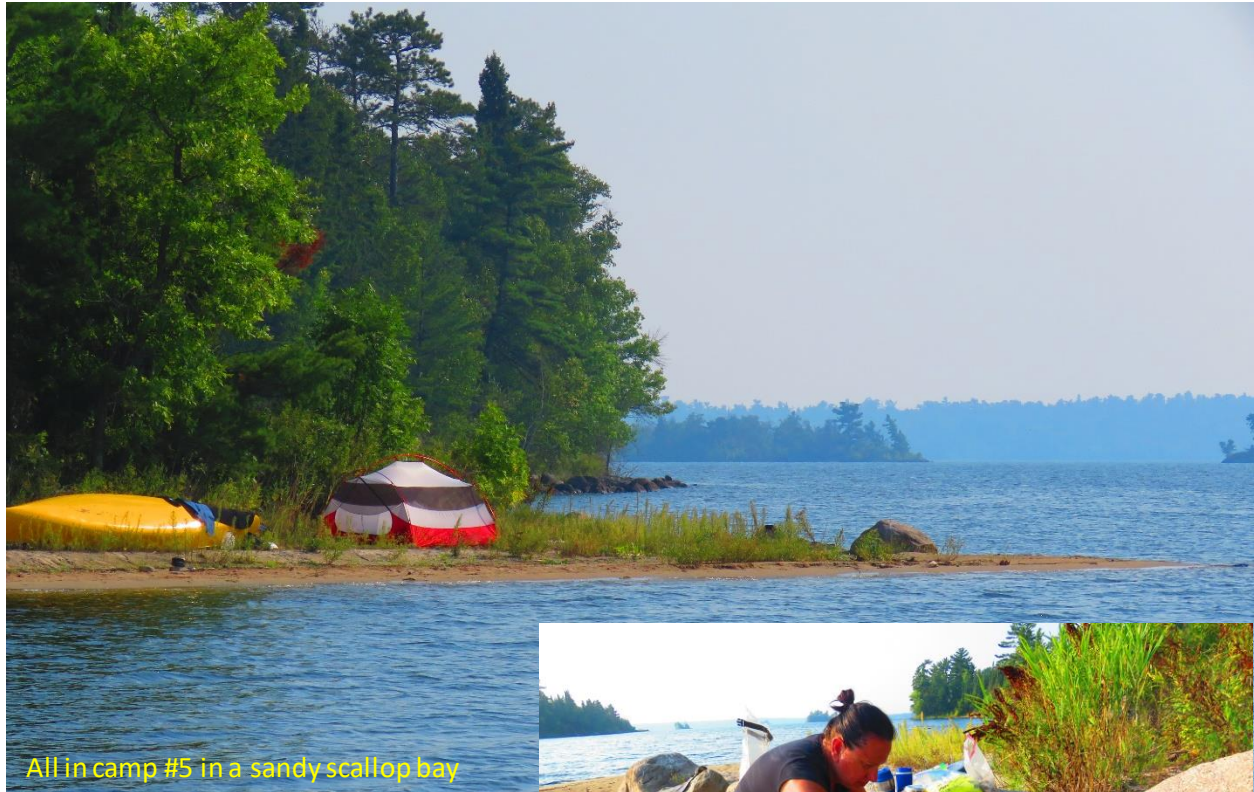


slab that jutted out as a cape at the end of a long narrows. Already from afar it called our attention to evaluate it. The day was especially hot and the light grey smooth granite served as a welcome cool down, when we lied down on it while waiting out the cooking of the supper. We walked here as on a marble floor. In the evening, a series of two thunder storms arrived, one marching after another, with a noisy band of thunder and lightnings. The drumroll of the band were downpours of heavy rain from the ruptured sky that threatened to flatten our tent. Yet, the finale of the whole hoopla materialized in spectacular dramatic skies in the east with anvils of cumulo-nimbus clouds radiating the reflection of the last sun's light. The scene would have made a stunning landscape painting.

A strong wind blew from the north the next day. Luckily, our route was to lead us along the south shore of a huge peninsula to the west. This thus should have provided us with a wind shelter. The peninsula juts into the lake from the east and it covers perhaps more than a quarter of its area. It is named after the father Aulneau, the French Jesuit priest, who with Jean-Baptiste de La Verendrye and another nineteen Frenchmen perished, massacred by the Sioux. First, though, we had to wisely strategize by choosing the course through the passages among islands, to work our way to the lee of the peninsula avoiding big waves. Interestingly, the north wind obscured the atmosphere with a forest fire smoke, which it had carried in from the far north. The smoke could be even smelled in the air.

As the essence of adventure goes, we were not always just fortunate. We were not spared a share of bad luck. To that, we then had to react with a self-help improvisation. So it happened on the previous campsite that I broke the plug end of the little cable from the solar charger into the iPhone through an unfortunate coincidence. I had a navigation app in the cell phone, which reliably showed me my location on the map of the lake. I had downloaded the maps into the phone while still at home in Edmonton. This function worked even in the absence of the normal mobility signal, which is the case on most of Lake of the Woods. But now, the navigation app worked only until the charge in the phone battery lasted, which ended the very next day. Since then, I only navigated by the shape of the shore, which I compared with the map. Following several navigational errors, which are hard to avoid with this method of moving, I later recalled that I had always carried also a busola compass as a backup to my high-tech electronic gear, which I had never heretofore used. I fished it out successfully from the bottom of my small dry bag with electronics and with it I was then able to orient the map and set the azimuth for the direction of moving. Another faux pas that had befallen us was that just as we were paddling along the shore of Aulneau Peninsula, I lost my barometric „Pathfinder“ watch. It happened as I was turning around to reach for something in the back of the canoe. Just as my hand was outside the gunwale, the already cracked wristband of my watch broke and the watch immediately sunk to the deepest spot of the lake. I felt urge to go jump after it, yet when I saw, how fast it was disappearing in the dark depths, I gave up my effort. Since this episode, we would determine time only by the sun. With the lost watch we also lost the information about the changes in the atmospheric pressure and the ability to predict bad weather. Our water voyage thus acquired a much closer taste to, what La Verendrye and the voyageurs must have faced in their time.

At the west end of the Aulneau Peninsula, the late sun of the day found us in a scenically romantic campsite in a small scallop of a bay with sand beach. It was situated the closest to the



All in camp #5 in a sandy scallop bay



Fort Saint Charles out of our entire route through Lake of the Woods. The post used to be about



twenty five kilometers distant from here, directly west. Our tent rested on sand surrounded with sparse stems of Goldenrod and backed by a warm dry pine forest. With repeated delight, we enjoyed the swimming with a sand bottom. While cooking, we savored the views from a sand point, taking in the panorama of the silhouettes of small, tree-crowned islands strewn over the copper-hued lake surface like theatre props against the setting sun. Even the sleep tasted sweeter on the soft sand under the tent. From the push-off in the morning, we first fought wind and waves for about an hour. But soon after, we were paddling through narrows, where the wind played no role. It is so that the area of Lake of the Woods is covered by a great multitude of



The map and busola navigation

islands and peninsulas in its center so that it consists more of a dry land than of water. Only narrower passages avail themselves here for the connection to the northern area of the lake. The one that we had chosen is situated in the central area and it connects a relatively long series of really narrow straits, of which I had expected that it would be especially immune from the effects of wind. It is



called “the French Portage Narrows”, as during the era of the fur trade there was a short section of the narrows here, where it was necessary to portage. This is because the natural water level of the lake used to be some meter lower, before the dam in today’s Kenora raised its surface. We passed through here in some sort of a gate with warning signs for motorboat traffic without any problems. When we again emerged onto the open water and got our hands full of fighting with wind and waves, I had not yet been careful enough in my determining our course of moving to a sufficient degree that after several kilometers of paddling, we would correctly enter into another, protected passage. Thus it happened that in the end we missed the aimed for passage, overshooting it towards the east. While I was solving, how to correct my disorientation, a strengthened wind and waves arrived from the east. It was the high time to set up a camp anyway. We decided to escape the wind by entering a pocket-like narrow bay of the nearest island. Originally, we had speculated that the narrow strait would lead us back to the passage that we had missed. Yet eventually, it would show that the strait had a dead end. But before its end, a flat granite point appeared, which jutted from the densely wooded shore into the bay. This was immediately inviting for a cozy camping. The spot was nice, but most of all, it was heavenly serene. The inside of the narrow bay was thoroughly protected from the tumult of the wind and waves on its outside. The flat granite point, though excellent for a camp, was somewhat out of the way and definitely outside the routes of the water traffic. Hence it had not apparently been very often discovered, to be used for camping. As the first task after unloading the canoe, we pitched the tent. It stood here again on the hard flat granite with the corners weighted by rocks over the pegs passed flat through the corner loops of the tent. My immediately following task



Camp #6 on a granite point in the fiord of Kennedy Island





Vwas to spread the marine chart on the granite and determine, where in fact we ended up. This, I accomplished by transferring the coordinates, obtained with a GPS unit, onto the map. I had to stretch a string across the map, as it had no grid. It turned out that we were finding ourselves in an out of the way fiord of Kennedy Island. After this, we already enjoyed the safety and peace to

allow for a relaxed recreation in the form of swimming and even in the chores of cooking and baking a „bannock“ – Indian bread by the fire. As I had promised above, I will mention further, definitely weird, if not outright mysterious experiences and feelings. The thing is that as the situation had evolved due to the weather, we were forced to spend two nights here. As I had already indicated, Milena has the sixth sense. As an example, she has the ability to read a person's mind. I can never hide anything from her and I have







Milena as a bannock artist in camp #6



already learned not to even try. Another Milena's gift in this regard is her capacity to quickly gain trust of animals and to be able to emotionally communicate with them. Be it a dog, cat, horse, squirrel, or a raven, they become friends in a short order. In spite of these, aetherically sounding lofty abilities, Milena's feet are firmly planted on the ground and she would not be bamboozled with any superstitions and fairy tales. I have yet to find a woman, who would, like Milena, maintain a cool composure facing a bear in a close encounter. In my conviction of

the existence of Sasquatch, Milena has always been my most skeptical opponent and a cool brain, who has tried to cure me from my „obsession“. After our experiences during the voyage on Lake of the Woods together, though, Milena has started to somewhat change her opinion. Not that she would already believe in the existence of Sasquatch (she argues that she has not seen one yet), but she has accepted that there was something wildly strange that could not be explained with normal phenomena. It's because her good hearing and the sixth sense were telling her that

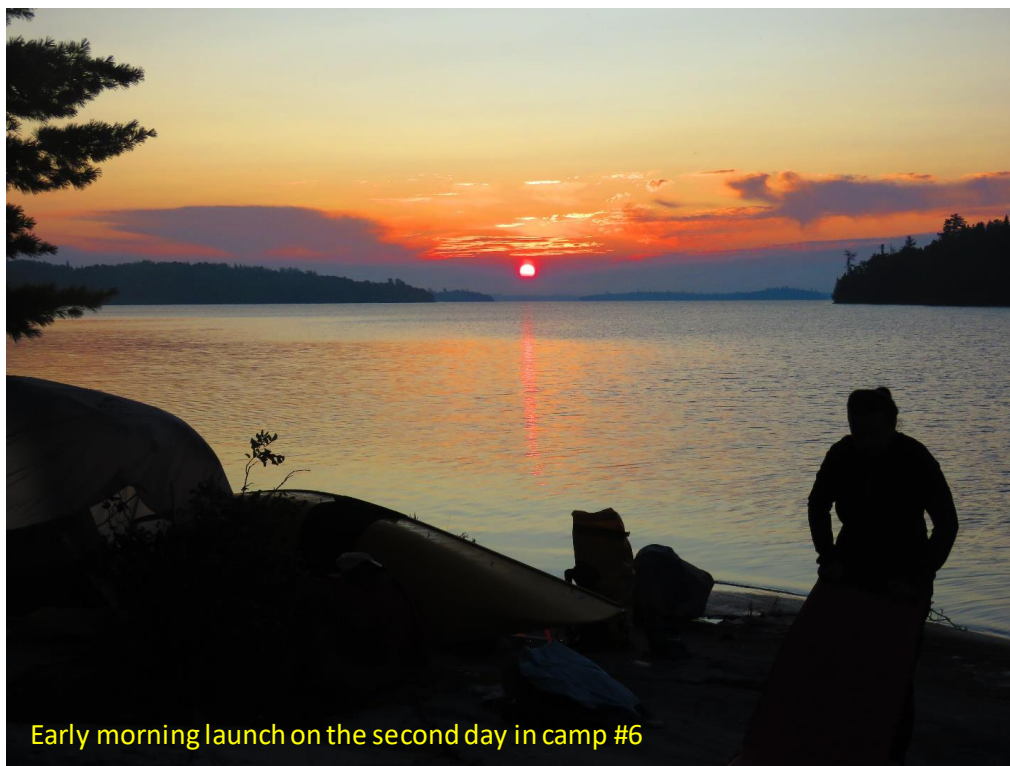


in this campsite, we had been constantly secretly watched by somebody, or something. During the bread-baking for example, she heard a branch crack no farther than ten to fifteen meters away in the thicket, but no little branch – she estimated that from the sound, the limb had to be over ten centimeters thick! And there was no wind at the time. Not a leaf stirred. My attention was just distracted by something, so I did not hear the crack, but there is no wonder anyway. My hearing is not the best and indeed, following the hearing tests that our family doctor had prescribed, I was recommended to get a hearing aid. During my prior solo voyaging, I might have thus outright frustrated the Sasquatches more than one time, when in my ignorance, I did not respond to their acoustic provocations. So, as it is now, I contribute the experience and strength into our travels through the wilderness, while Milena fills in the eyes and the ears. Hence, we perfectly complement each other and are armed for anything. Well then, before the first night, on Milena's suggestion, I mounted a wildlife camera on a tree trunk, which was motion-activated and could take pictures and videos even in total darkness thanks to an invisible infrared flash. Milena slept lightly, alert to strange noises. I, on the other hand, fell asleep right away like a log. Yet, however soundly I slept, even I was woken and startled, when in the middle of the night, something slapped the wall of our tent hard. „What was that?“ whispered horrified Milena. „Well, it had to be some bird “I tried to calm her down. Yet to myself, I was not able to explain the happening. Those birds that fly at night can see in the darkness. Bats are navigating by echolocation and are able to perfectly avoid much more complicated arrays of obstacles than is the wall of a tent. I kept listening for quite a while, before I was able to fall asleep again. In the morning, it turned out that due to my beginner user inexperience, the wildlife camera was still waiting for the last pressing of the start button since last evening. Hence, it had not taken any images.

On the following day, we had ahead of us a risky circumnavigating of the east shore of Kennedy Island, which was exposed to the huge open expanse of the lake from the east. We thus got up before the daybreak and immediately started packing and loading the boat. It was quiet in our camp, yet when we looked up to the tips of the trees, it became immediately obvious that on the outside of the bay, wind had to rule with fury. As it was dawning and the sun started pushing its fiery edge from beyond the water horizon, looking from our fiord, we could see with binoculars very rough whitecaps in the distance. In spite of that, we finished the loading and set off toward the exit from the bay. We knew that the effort would be risky, but we hoped that we would somehow survive the skirting of the island and then find shelter in the more protected passages among islands. At the moment, though, when we emerged beyond the sheltering edge of the bay, we were caught in mighty waves racing from the right – the east. We fought with them for three hundred meters, precariously maintaining balance. But, when water started splashing to terrified Milena's bow over the gunwale with no possibility of landing at the steep rocky shores, it was time to implement emergency measures. We carefully turned the front of the canoe right, against the waves and we continued to turn the direction of the boat through 180 degrees back. It was clear that the only way out from the acute crisis rested in returning into the safety of the fiord. We thus kept on precariously holding balance racing back in the side waves that were coming from the left now, and prayed that we would not tip before we would reach the lee of the bay. Once there, we were at peace again. It was obvious that we would have to renew our camp on the granite point, where we would then be forced to wait, until the weather would wise up. Milena apologized to the Sasquatches as soon as we landed and stepped on shore again. In a little while, the tent stood in the same spot as before.

The rest of the day in the re-established camp was spent mostly in cooking around the fire, because the weather was windy and not exactly too warm. In the evening, even a series of three violent thunderstorms arrived with lightning, thunder and downpours. But I have to mention a rather intimate experience, which I would otherwise not write, yet it is important again in regards to the possible signs of Sasquatch. At one point, I felt the nature's urge to fulfil my daily duty. I wanted to go as far as possible from the camp, yet since the bushes and trees behind it were very dense, I tried to gain distance along the edge of the water. The growth reached up to the water, so I was moving in acrobatic lurches, catching a hold of branches. With a surprise, I noticed several game trails to the water that I was cutting across in my movement. As it often is, my call of nature waned and in repeated lurches, I returned back into the camp without having performed my ritual. Therefore I was stumped, when Milena, holding her nose, chastised me with the words: „I hope that you had thoroughly buried it!“ Yet, at that moment, it hit my nose too. An unexplainable and indescribable stench was exuding from the thicket, which was a mixture of rot, carrion and waste dump. After some five to ten minutes of our perplexed questioning looks at each other and at the direction of the source of the odor, it stopped as suddenly, as it started. I have read about these cases and was only surprised, to maybe even a bit honored, that this kind of episode would happen also to me. For the uninformed Milena, though, the event had exactly the result that affects the majority of witnesses, i.e. it brought up an urge in her, to leave the place as quickly as possible. But this was close to the evening yet and our attention was distracted by a more tangible threat in the form of a rapidly approaching storm with thunder and lightning. The drum roll of a downpour, bombarding the forest foliage from the south-west, chased us into the sanctuary of the tent. The deluge had come in multiple waves and the water accumulated on the impervious granite, flowed under the polyethylene ground sheet of our tent. Yet, besides my quick momentary exit from the tent to add weight to its corner rocks and Milena's quick assembling of a small rock dam for the deflecting of rain water from flowing

under the tent, the night had passed in peace.



Early morning launch on the second day in camp #6

The important thing was that the storm had changed the direction of the wind. It blew from the south-west in the morning and when with the sun, just floating up from the water horizon, we pushed off the





Off into the sunshine

scene of our possible coexistence with the Sasquatch, we had it in our backs. The sky had cleared up after the stormy night and it was reflecting blue in the waves under our paddles. We watchfully sailed out of our bay and this time, we were able to continue through the mist of the early morning around the east point of the Kennedy Island and northward to a reconnection of our movement with the pre-planned route. From now on, I was carefully orienting the map and with the use of the busola, I was very meticulously determining the azimuth of our direction across the spreads of open water.

I originally planned a much safer route straight west from the north tip of an island following Kennedy Island and then move along the west coast of the lake. This route would be especially justified, in case of the prevailing westerly wind. Yet this detour would be much longer. It might add, perhaps, a whole day to the overall voyage. Presently, though, the wind did not blow from the west and hence we decided for a bolder and riskier, yet much straighter route that was following a chain of small islands across a spread of open water. At its end, we were to have an opportunity again to move through protected narrow passages among larger islands. Along the way, I pondered, how ideal the environment of the isolated, food-source-rich islands of Lake of the Woods should be for the theoretical Sasquatch. They would enjoy a relative peace from human disturbances. Yet how would they get to them? Are they such good swimmers? But then it struck me: Isn't the lake frozen over during winter? They could simply just march to the islands on the snow and ice, babies and all. Indeed, I later learned from a local man in Kenora That during the winter, there is a regular multi-lane winter highway on the lake, which by the

way, allows to supply the cottages and fishing/hunting lodges on the islands. It also explained to me how the cottages are built. All these constructions are performed during winter.



When we successfully conquered about a half of the mentioned route connecting the series of islands across the span of open water, Milena raised for me at first a naive question: „Is there any chance that we could paddle all the way to Kenora today?“ I understood, where the question was coming from.



Our yesterday's layover due to being wind-bound made her worried, clearly because of waves and wind that we might never be able to finish the voyage. Now, that it had become apparent that



under today's conditions, we could with caution proceed, she would rather have it all with certainty behind her. I explained that if she didn't know that, we still had about thirtyfive percent of the total length of the lake remaining between us and Kenora. To my surprise, Milena declared that so far, she was not at all tired and that she could paddle really long today. To shore up my manly role of a tough leader, I responded that I was accustomed to long paddling myself and could endure if she could. We both agreed to try and see. During the first half of the day, we sailed predominantly to the north. The wind blew from the north-west and made waves, yet not such that they would be causing any serious problems to us. In the later phase, we should be moving towards the north-east. I now meticulously focussed onto the accurate determining of the azimuths of the directions of our progress so that we would enter the passages between the islands correctly and follow the correct line of the narrow straits. The day was warm to hot, hence, I paddled stripped to shorts, yet under a hat, while Milena toiled in a sleeveless shirt. While constantly moving, the wind was relatively welcome in that it cooled us. As we were nearing the north of the lake and the city of Kenora, the density of cottages grew more and more. On some islands, whole villages were sprawling. It happened to be the Saturday of a just beginning Labor Day Long Weekend. As a consequence, everywhere, the lake was lively with fun and recreational pleasure activities of families, teenagers and people of all ages. In the straits a humming rush hour of traffic of motorboats of all sizes and powers of the motors just ruled. As we approached to within some twenty kilometers of Kenora, we suddenly realized that we would not, perhaps, even find a spot for camping. All the useful places seemed to have a cottage or a log cabin on it. We thus continued further and further. In the end, I finally succeeded in guiding the canoe to a distant light house, which marked the entrance into a long final narrows before Kenora. Its designation on the marine chart sported no less a disquieting name than „Devil's Gap“. In some places, this was merely about ten meters wide and it stretched for some three kilometers. It quickly revealed itself as a favourite race track of the local hormone-packed younger show-off population. The motorboats were zooming through it in both directions trying to outdo each other in showing off, how powerful their motor was and how quickly and riskily they could maneuver the turns through narrow curves, where they could not see around the corner, with the finesse of the off-bounds skiers. Threading its humble way in all this madness was our fragile craft. Some boat captains were courteous and slowed down, not to make big waves, when they were passing by us. Yet, on the contrary, there were also such, who wanted to show us that we had no business being in the channel and they would shoot right by us in full speed. At the end of the narrow gauntlet, Milena terrified turned around, when right behind us, totally quiet and tall like a three story house, a towering sightseeing MS Kenora was slowly shuffling on its way through.

I had known about a beautiful public campsite at the south outskirts of Kenora. The park carried the name of „Anishinabe“, by the indigenous confederation, who owned the campsite and managed it. I knew that it had a lake front with a boat pier. Yet, I had only visited the campsite briefly from the road with my Jeep, when I was traveling to Fort Frances two years before. Now, from the water, I could not recognize, where it might be located in the complicated shoreline of many small bays. We so suddenly emerged in the middle of Kenora with the buildings of hotels, shopping center, hospital, etc. on the shores around. It was clear that we had overshot past the campsite. A local man at the city docks fortunately knew the campsite and was able to describe to us how to find it. We had to retrace our paddle strokes for about a kilometer. But in the end, we succeeded in docking at the right place and securing a scenic tent spot with a nice lofty view

of the bay and of the boat traffic emerging from the Devil's Gap. The campsite served mostly to visitors with vehicles and RVs. Since it was the long weekend, it was almost full. Yet, because the tent spots were located on terraces of a steep grassy slope toward the water and thus less conveniently accessible to the RVers, they remained unoccupied. In the evening and at night, though, a storm arrived that changed the weather. The hot Saturday turned into a cold, rainy and windy Sunday. As a result, most of the campers packed up and left. Had we not overdone ourselves into reaching Kenora on Saturday, we would have been hopelessly stranded. Wind bound now somewhere in an emergency camping spot within the over-crowded zone of the lake.

Only once reaching Kenora, we for the first time received news from home. Due to a combination of circumstances regarding the sale of our house in Edmonton (we had received an offer), as well as finalizing of the official details of Milena's retirement, we decided that for now, we would terminate the voyage. We determined that we would return here the next summer and continue down the Winnipeg river to Lake Winnipeg and further, as we would wish. We would not be limited by time then. First, though, we had to find a means of getting back to our Jeep. There was no public transportation service between Kenora and Fort Frances. Milena then came up with an ingenious idea. I could not have used it in my previous lonely mode of travel and thus I had never thought about this option. Well, she suggested that we try to rent a car. We were two of us. We would drive the rental together right up to the Jeep. On the way back, Milena would drive it, while I would drive our Jeep. Fantastic idea! Yet, it was the long weekend with a holiday also on Monday and the single car rental company located in Kenora was closed till Tuesday. When the two beautiful young native women, who ran the Anishinabe park's office, extended our camping in it until Tuesday morning, we gained beneficial time to get to know Kenora. We walked a lot of kilometers during the Sunday and Monday and visited the historic town's many interesting sites. We enjoyed an excellent breakfast in a native-owned cafe every morning and the indigenous personnel became to like us so much that they even tried to find us a ride to the Jeep. Alas, nobody was found after many phone calls, who would happen to have a way to the boonies-like neck of the woods, where our Jeep was left. We thus booked the rental vehicle over the internet from the cafe. At eight in the morning on Tuesday, the manager of the rental agency brought the vehicle right up to the gate of Anishinabe Park just as Milena and I reached it walking from our tent site. Following our returning of the manager to his office, we set out right away. Everything worked out splendidly. The car was brand new. Its rental fee was a less than fifty dollars for the whole day and it performed very economically. After we had achieved our purpose, there was almost nothing needed to refill its tank before its return. When canoe-voyaging in two, we will now always practice this idea for the returns to our vehicle. With the Jeep back in our possession, we now explored Kenora on a farther ranging scale. Hence, we surveyed the site of the portage from Lake of the Woods into Winnipeg river that we would tackle the next year. It used to play a very important role during the era of the fur trade. The Voyageurs called it the „Rat Portage“. By the „rat“ in this case was meant a muskrat, who also used to be an important commodity of the fur trade. An initial settlement of Rat Portage, which had formed around this spot would eventually grow into today's city of Kenora. In the end, we extended our camping in the park by still another night. In the evening, we loaded the Jeep with everything, including the canoe on the roof, except for the tent and the sleep set. The weather now worsened to the degree that overnight there was frost. With a frosty windshield, still in the dark morning dawn, we said good bye to the Anishinabe Park and left the city behind in a freezing fog.



