

RETRACING CANADA'S HISTORY

A canoe journey following the Voyageur water route from Kenora on Lake of the Woods down the Winnipeg River to Lake Winnipeg.

(July 29th – August 9th, 2018)

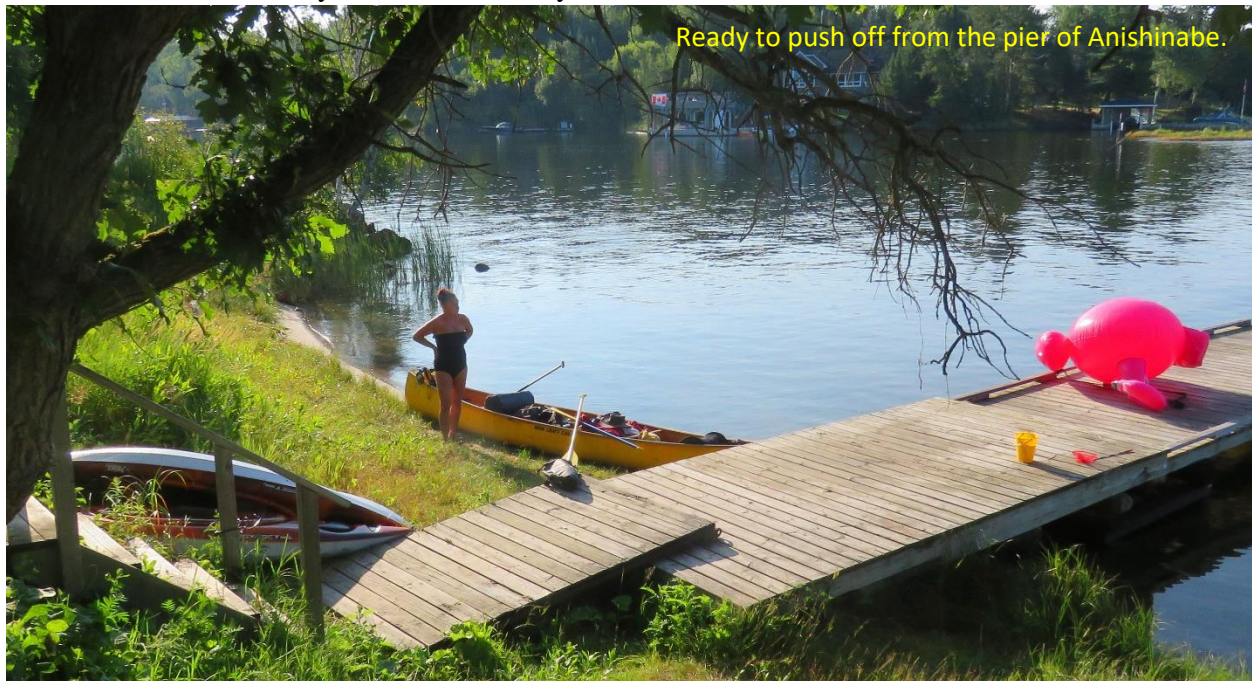
Jan Soukup

Well, how else than back into the embracing with the Canadian wilderness? With the return of the spring in Edmonton, ice floes started to churn down the North Saskatchewan river („Swift Running Water“ in Cree) and Vees of migrating birds up on the blue sky aimed their points to the North. As every spring, with them, my wandering instinct had begun to gain an ever mightier strength, to rip free from the ties of the settled urban life. It whispered in my ear to set out in an easy lope of a tireless wolf once more and head for the forests, meadows, mountains lakes and rivers. The return to the physical declaring of love to the Canadian Nature by steady paddle strokes in a silently slipping canoe is by now routine. Still, like before my first launching out of Montreal, it is anticipated with a joyful trepidation and with the vision of a thrilling adventure. Once again, my wife, Milena, joined me as a faithful partner. The distance of the yearly return eastward from Edmonton to a renewed continuation of our canoe voyage along the Water Highway of the Canadian fur trade, is getting shorter with each new stage. This time, we for the last time are returning into the largest Canadian province of Ontario. And this only to its westernmost city, Kenora. From it, we leave behind Lake of the Woods and along the Winnipeg river, we will head northwest, towards Hudson's Bay. We at last will cross the boundary of Ontario into the first prairie province, Manitoba.





Our road return to Kenora with the canoe on the roof of the Jeep had its start from as far as British Columbia. That is because this time, we set out from our log house in the mountains above Lake Kootenay. There, we had already moved all the household, following the selling of our house in Edmonton last October. In Edmonton, we now only keep a cozy condominium. We traveled through Edmonton, where we took my niece and her daughter, to fly back home to Prague after visiting us. Having dropped off a trailer that we had needed for the extra cargo, we set out eastward. Gone are the days, when it would take a five-day trans-Canada trip to return to the start of each new leg of the voyage. With the shortening trip back to the water route, we arrived in Kenora already on the second day.



Ready to push off from the pier of Anishinabe.

We were starting again in a public campsite Anishinabe, where we ended our voyage last year. During two days that we spent there, we successfully managed to arrange for the safekeeping of our Jeep at the house of a friendly park custodian. We were thus able to push off with peace of mind right on the second morning, which was the Sunday, July 29th, before the most of the



camping population woke up. The day hatched out splendid right from the cockcrow and a smooth surface of the lake, sliced only by the prow of our seventeen-foot Kevlar canoe and dabbled by the paddle stroke eddies, reflected blue sky with scattered little white clouds. It was Sunday morning, hence the north shore of the Lake of the Woods, which is rimmed by the city of Kenora was still free of a normally busy motor boat traffic. We needed to cut across it in roughly an hour of paddling, to reach the outflow arm,



Rat hole under the railway to the portage

through the causeway under the railway, to allow paddling through to its other side. Shortly beyond, the canal ends in a boat launch ramp to serve motor boats. About two

Portage Bay, of the lake. This was near the suburb of Keewatin. A portage used to be situated there, called „Rat Portage“. Even the city of Kenora itself that sprouted in this locality, used to originally bear this name. The topography of the historic portage, though, is obstructed today by an embankment of the Canadian Pacific Rail causeway. A short tunnel is therefore cutting



hundred meters from it is a similar ramp, this time sloping into the Winnipeg river. The latter has its water surface some five meters lower than Lake of the Woods. For canoeists, though, there are metal steps here that lead directly from the first ramp to the



Ready to set out onto the river Winnipeg

river, shortening the carrying of the canoe to some twenty – twenty five meters. The price of the shortcut is, perhaps, a break-neck-steep



descent on the steps and the launching from a bank of sharp rocks.

It was only around ten in the morning, when the transfer of the load, including the canoe from Lake of the Woods into the river was finished and the loaded canoe waited to be pushed off into its waters. Soon, the hot morning made us take off our tops and spread sunscreen on the exposed complexion. The character of the Canadian Shield reflected itself in the landscape of the river. Though the water had a barely discernible slope here, it was spreading into multitude of crooked arms, filling cracks of irregular widths in the Earth crust of granite outcrops. In this way, it was forming numerous lakes and islands, spiked up with resin-scented coniferous growth. Based on the images from my life's experience, it was difficult for me to attach the term "river" to what I was seeing in front of me. From a bird's eye view, this land would have to remind one of a granite sponge, saturated with innumerable lakes, lakelets and water arms interconnected by inconspicuous junctions in the forms of narrows, or short flows. The surplus contents of water from the periods of rain and from the spring snow melt, as well as the inflow of the similar excess from the watershed starting as far east as the divide that I had crossed shortly after leaving Lake Superior behind, drained here in an average northwesterly direction towards Hudson's Bay. What was meant by the river here, was an imaginary crooked curve that connected a series of the outflow narrows. Only in them, any current was discernible. It was not until the river neared the boundary of Manitoba and started to leave the granite Shield, that it gained more slope and a clearer definition of its river course. The name of the river derives from the indigenous name of Lake Winnipeg, which in the Cree language sounded like Win-nipi (Murky water). Many partners of the Northwest Company spoke of this river, as the most beautiful part of the water

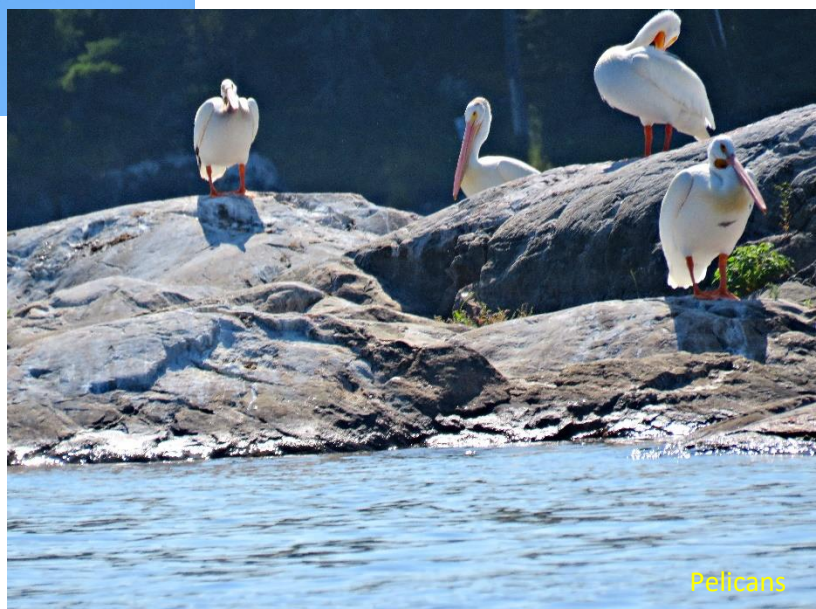
A bald eagle on a dry White pine.



absolutely indispensable here. Without these instruments, one could not avoid getting hopelessly lost.

Although we still moved for quite a while through the thinning density of human dwellings and communication structures, the wilderness was already asserting its territorial claim here in a combination of picturesque crag formations,

highway of the fur trade. In that time, there used to be a number of dangerous waterfalls that had to be carried around. Today, they have been tamed by a series of hydro-electric dams that to a great extent flooded them. The step-like topography, though, under the water of the waterfall narrows remained. And this is still posing challenge to the canoeists in the form of large waves and unpredictable chaotic eddies. A map and vigilant navigation were



Pelicans

wild tree growth and in bare rock outcroppings, strategically occupied by birds. High upon the tips of the majestic White pines along the banks here and there, sharp-eyed bald eagles watched over us; on the bare rock islets in the water, lily-white pelicans were congregating. The white of their plumage contrasted with the orange of their long pointed beaks, the underside of which was fitted with a landing net-like sac, of a volume capacity good for fish of trophy size. The presence of pelicans is therefore an indicator that fish of the mentioned caliber are indeed living in the local water. It is joy to observe pelicans in flight. It is unbelievable, how these large birds can shorten their cumbersome neck by folding it into a compressed „S“ and point the long spear of the beak straight forward. The result is an aerodynamic transformation, envy-worthy from the modern aviation industry. At the same time, the appearance of a flying pelican can remind one of an image of a pterodactyl from the age of the dinosaurs, which, in fact, the pelicans are, like all birds. At one moment, a wing-squadron of six pelicans silently flew by us, moving like fighter planes in great speed without wing flapping, perhaps only twenty centimeters above the water. Despite its prehistoric appearance, pelicans seem to be uncommonly intelligent and socially organized. They can exactly estimate, when the degree of danger from an approaching water craft with a human reaches the level, when it is necessary to spread the mighty wings and take off in an aerial evacuation. Hence, it would not be very easy to try hunting them. The experience of native hunters, though, tells that it would be foolish anyway, due to an unusual toughness of the pelican flesh. Seeing pelicans always reminds me of a joke that I heard at one time from a native of the Canadian North:

The recipe of, how to prepare a pelican:

Take a large pot. Cut up the pelican into it. Fill all with water. Make a big fire and set on it the pot with water and pelican. Cover the pot and boil it for three days and three nights. Meanwhile cut up a two-by-four into short pieces. After three days of boiling, open the pot and add into it the pieces of the two-by-four. Continue boiling for another three days and three nights. Then take the pot off the fire and let stand to cool off a bit. Then eat the two-by-fours.

Before we camped the first evening, the last remains of people-built structures had long petered out and the sun slipped past its zenith. As every time on the first day of the water voyage, the fatigue arrived early. We thus aimed our attention into finding a suitable camp site. The rocky, wooded banks of about a hundred meters wide, mutually criss-crossing water channels, did not offer such spot immediately. Only after another few kilometers, we at last espied a friendly looking tip of an island that was formed by low, flat granite with a sparse tough vegetation. It was a high time, because we ended up on the very boundary of an Indian reservation that was beginning just ahead of us. This was called The Dalles Ojibway Indian Reserve, by the narrow, several kilometers long water channel that the voyageurs used to call Les Dalles. It means tiles, or paving in French, perhaps relating to rock slabs that might be lining the bottom of the channel. It is one of the locations on the Winnipeg river, where a somewhat strong current is felt. It was waiting for us to pass through the next day.

The evening in the first camp yielded pleasant contentment and tranquil rest with swimming in the lukewarm water that surrounded the flat platform of the narrow granite projection of the island. The sun, lowering itself to sunset on a clear sky, warmed us long, while we were walking barefoot on the glacier-smoothed rock floor, before it finally burnt its way beyond the flat horizon.

Already in the camp during the evening, we had opportunity to observe several dwellings in the not distant reservation with binoculars. With a surprise, also the next morning after we set



The first camp on the river at the border of the indian reserve



A pier at a house on the reserve

out for the continuation in our voyage, we admired the apparent wealth of the owners. Our route wound through the reservation past them, as besides the luxury fast motor boats that were moored at the piers, we were looking even at an occasional float plane. The houses, set on small islands, abounded with artsy log architecture, some possessed complex curving water slides for the children. Following about a kilometer of paddling through the reservation, we sensed current and entered into a long narrow

channel of Les Dalles. It felt comfortable here that the current carried us, yet other than the need for an occasional paddle stroke to correct the change in the aiming of the canoe by eddies, we never met with any technical challenge. We could thus admire the crags and the greenery on the confining high cliffs, as well as game, including deer, beaver and water fowl.



Emerging from Les Dalles, the river widened. The day was hot again and Milena protected her back when paddling with a Superwoman-like cape of a silk scarf. After a few hours of paddling, a rail bridge appeared in a distance ahead of us of the Canadian National Railway Company, at the native community of Minaki. As I would find out later, the name means “Blueberry Grounds” in Cree. Quite probably, the indigenous people used to pick the berries here in season and mixed them with dried and pulverized to a pulp bison meat into a practically

non-perishable concoction, poured over with melted lard into long moose hide, or deer hide tubes. This was then called pemmican. It used to be the basic staple for the nomads of the time, whether they traveled on foot, or by water, as were the canoe brigades of the fur trade. Pemmican thus enjoyed the role of a good currency in the market of the time. Today, though, the surroundings are populated, not just by indigenous people, but also by weekend cottages of the white population thanks not only to the railway, but also to a road that passes through here. It is due to note that the no less important item of nutrition that was a subject of natives’ trading with the passing by canoe teams of the Europeans, used to be wild rice. This plant appears in a great abundance throughout the lake country of the western Ontario, where it like reeds covers many quiet shallow bays. The locals bent the stems of the rice over the gunwales of a floating canoe and thrashed the seeds with sticks straight into the bottom of the craft. In camps on shore, they then winnowed the seed and the separated grain was bagged for trade. The camps for this purpose had existed in this area until the fifties of the last century.

After passing through the narrows, spanned over by the railway bridge, the water sprawled into a vast elongated Sand Lake containing numerous islands. It was here that we experienced the first of a series of disappointments related to the disappearing nostalgia of a canoe travel through a deserted wilderness on a Canadian heritage river. The impressions of a below described kind would later surprise us and bring bitter taste to our lips more and more frequently, as we neared and crossed the Manitoba border. As we followed the west shore of the lake, a time arrived to start looking for a camp site. Yet, the shore was steep and rugged. It was not offering a suitable spot. If a low usable platform would ever appear, it was occupied by a private cottage. The islands were low and had a shore of broken rough angular rocks. When we finally discovered a place on an acceptably flat granite tip of a roughly half-a-kilometer island, we unloaded our gear on it. We just unrolled our tent and were about to start erecting it, when a man appeared sitting on a plastic kayak, with a question of, what we were thinking of doing there? He sternly informed us that the island was private. We responded that we had already searched fruitlessly for a long time and that we just needed to sleep over somewhere. To his objection that we could not have fire, we countered that we did not need one, we could eat dry food. The next objection was: “And what about your waste?” The ensuing exchange started to acquire a bit disgusting



The first deployment of the home-sewn spray cover

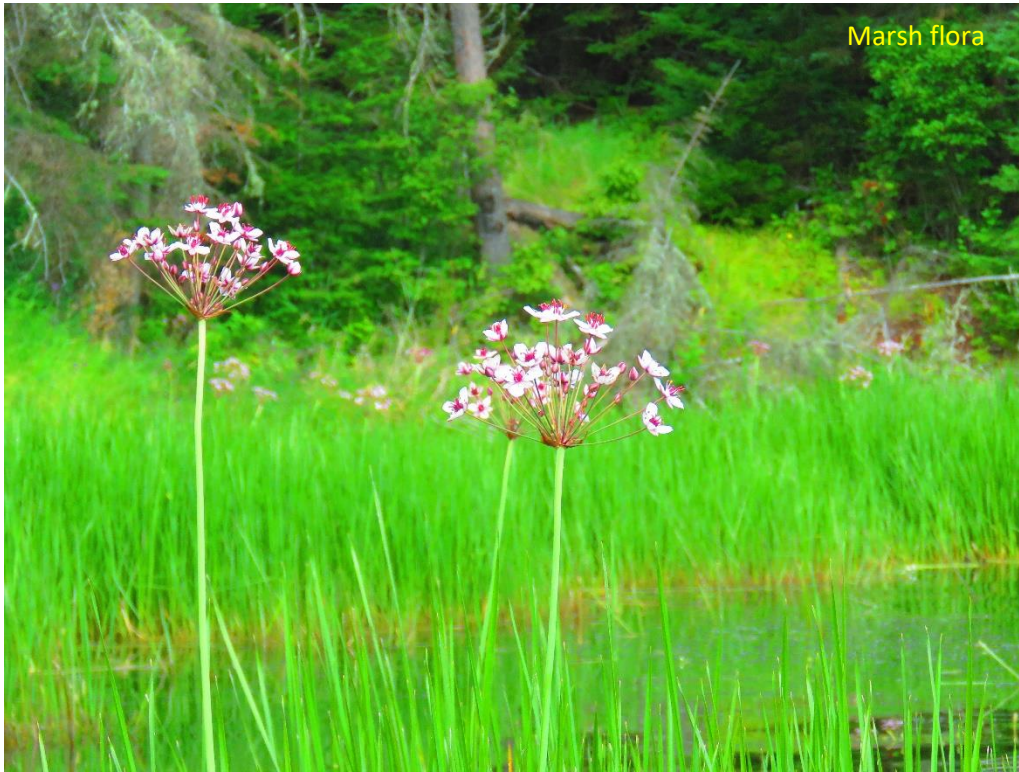
taste. Yet, thanks to Milena's diplomacy, the man eventually reluctantly agreed for us to stay on the spot. From his constant hesitant turning back, however, it was more than obvious that he rued his decision. After the man disappeared, Milena and I mulled our situation for a while. In the end, we decided that his unwilling help was not worth it. We packed everything back into the canoe and set out to look farther. It cost us another two hours of paddling, before we finally, exhausted and late in the evening, discovered a

roundish head of an igneous granite tongue, on the pate of which we were able to erect the tent. We were now situated far from the access road in Minaki. Thanks to that, the whole vast surroundings appeared wild and deserted. In the advancing darkness, the place seemed somewhat spooky to Milena, but our fatigue finally took on the responsibility for making sure that we would quickly fall asleep to wake up from the bad experience into a bright new morning.

Yet, the third morning on our water voyage quite bright was not. The sky was almost completely overcast and the threat of rain was imminent with a high degree of probability. Hence after loading the canoe, we for the first time, stretched on its brand new, home-made spray cover that we had already carried with us last year, but never needed to use then. It now sat on the boat splendidly and its colors could not have better harmonize with the color of our slender, seventeen-foot canoe. With a great pride from the successful job, we immortalized the covered canoe for posterity in more than one picture still before setting out. The spray cover not only protected the load of the canoe from rain and accumulation of a rain puddle on its bottom, but it also protected the bottom half of our bodies and the contents of the canoe from getting blown away on windy, chilly days on the water. A couple of rain



The rain threat on Roughrock Lake



showers indeed caught us, when crossing the water spread of Roughrock Lake. At the same time, a wind from the southwest rose, while on it, i.e. from the port side. The paddling exertion in the waves then demanded a short scenic break for a rest with snack in the boat in the lee of a small

island that hid an entry into a new long narrows. This ushered us in the direction of an old indigenous village, which bore the name after a one time waterfall „Wabassimong“, which in the

Cree language means “White Dog”. White Dog is today the name of both, the indigenous village and a dam on the river, the only one on the Ontario side, at the location of the so named former





waterfall. After about a kilometer of paddling in the westerly direction through the narrows, a dark sky appeared in front of us, foreboding of a storm. After the exhausting long journey of yesterday, we had already been planning to camp early anyway. Hence, when a scenic point of flat granite appeared jutting out of the left bank, there was not a long decision making to terminate the

cruise here for the day. We spent a short rain spell under the protection of the just erected tent. We then whiled away the rest of the late afternoon and evening in a pleasant rest with cooking of supper on the base of the smooth granite. Again, we were finding ourselves totally forlorn in the entire range of visibility.



The camp on a granite point

In the morning, following the loading of the canoe, we set out conscientious that we could not be too far from the White Dog dam. When at last we spotted the distant dam structures in front of us, we proceeded warily. We closely skirted the right bank, where our old map indicated a



portage. We indeed found its start on a flat granite slab, just as the map described it, if now, it was surrounded by trailers of a construction company that worked for the Hydro dam. We thus carried the gear on our backs, including the canoe, through the industrial camp first and along a nice dirt and gravel road through woods from there. The portage route was well marked and about 800 meters long. It was ending on a beach of coarse sand below the end of turbulent water of



Portage around the White Dog dam

the outflow from the dam. Following a few zig-zags, the narrow passage after the dam widened up and in the distance on a high right bank, a silhouette of the White Dog settlement emerged, dominated by its water tower. According to the records of the partners of the Northwest Company, *the early name of this locality was "Wabartim", where there existed various posts*



Discovery of a beach for a camp



including one possibly operated by *coureurs de bois* prior to 1730. (Note that this was before Pierre Gaultier de la Verendrye appeared on the scene here.) “A very old French fort” was noted by David Thompson in 1797. 1789 Toussaint Lessieur & Simon Fraser maintained “Fort du Portage de l’Ile” for the N.W.Co. 1793 James Southerland and John Mac Kay of the H.B. Co., arriving via the English River from

Albany, set up nearby. Alexander Henry remarked that it took 5 days for the N.W. Co. brigade to reach Lake Winnipeg from this point.

When the course of the river changed to the north-north-west again, having left the settlement of the White Dog in the distance behind, it broadened up here into an elongated Lake Tetu. Before its narrowest point, in about one third of its length, an island of medium size appeared, in front of which left side a tall, craggy, but small island was situated that appeared to be to it very close. As we were coming closer, I discerned a sandy beach on the bigger island that stretched all the way to where it became hidden behind the small island. As we had neared even closer, it became evident that the two islands were



The Winnipeg river near Manitoba border



connected by a sandy isthmus with a tree and bush growth on its ridge. The whole configuration thus created a cove of serene water with a splendid beach of fine sand curving into shape of a horse shoe. It was surely a gorgeous campsite, more over completely deserted. About an hour later, when our camp already stood and we were cooking supper on a granite platform, a fleet of six red canoes emerged from behind an island in about a kilometer distance back, from where we arrived. We had seen them earlier, as it was forming from young people with guides and leaving a log cabin camp on an island extending the trend of the peninsula jutting from the White Dog village. We had guessed that it had to be a camp of some Cristian organization, like YMCA, or simply just some “Bible Camp“. It is likely that the fleet had originally aimed for the campsite with the beach, where we were now situated. We were ready to share the paradise with them. Yet as soon as they saw that somebody was already camping on the spot, the canoes stopped and it became apparent that the group was deliberating. Then the crews began to survey the island, where they just were. For about a half an hour, we observed with binoculars how they circled the island and stepped on shore in different places. In the end, they pitched the tents on a rough and more over sloping terrain. The distance made it impossible for communication to invite them over. This was the only appearance of canoes, or any kind of muscle-powered non-motorized craft for us that we would see traveling on the entire length of the Winnipeg river.

We paddled the most of the length of Lake Tetu along its left shore the next morning. When on its end, we again entered a narrow course, where the current was felt. On a high crag we spotted strange looking big birds. They were black with featherless red heads and part of neck. We



quickly realized that they had to be turkey vultures, as they were hopping and bobbing, most likely about a carcass of some large animal resting on a rock ledge, where we could not see it. Having passed through another narrows, we finally arrived at a place that we had anticipated with some trepidation. Our old map placed a waterfall here, which was to have a portage, “Portage de l’Île” over a scree of blasted rock on the tip of an island on the left. The location happened to be very close to today’s boundary between Ontario and Manitoba, hence now it is called “Boundary Falls”.



Nearing the Boundary Falls



A stop with a lunch break.

In 1760 Alexander Henry the younger gives a tragic account of one of his canoes that tried to shoot the rapid: “But alas! He sank under a heavy swell, and when the bale arose the man appeared no more.....”

We had been aware that some hydrological elements on the river Winnipeg have changed since the times, when the voyageurs were passing through here, but some of them have not. As of the



A beaver house

present state of the Boundary Falls, we knew nothing. We thus advanced very slowly and warily toward the tip of the island on the left, where the portage was to be. Yet fortunately, a motor boat was moving ahead of us that was

very cautiously progressing toward the water falls. Naturally, we glued our eyes onto it. After it crossed the line, where we estimated the lip of the waterfall, the boat momentarily disappeared from our sights, as it dropped over the horizon. In an





instant, though, it reappeared again and continued on. When we came to within thirty meters of the drop, I stood up in the canoe and studied the water. I could see the whole passage without any kind of obstacle, besides smooth fast water dropping over a shiny ramp of a low wave.

With a pounding heart we then passed through the narrows without a problem. About five kilometers through a long narrow course later, we finally crossed the boundary into Manitoba.



Now, we found ourselves on about a twenty kilometers long Eaglenest Lake that curved to the north. Since a north-westerly wind blew, we kept to its left (western) shore. It was already time to find a spot for camping, so we closely studied both, islands and the left shore. Roughly at two thirds of the length of the lake a small bay of quiet water emerged, where at last a nice setting appeared on a flat area of a granite beach.



The late afternoon and the evening was passed in a peaceful tranquility in the camp, while cooking supper and the obligatory four litres of tea for the next day. By the next morning, though, the tranquility vanished. The sky was overcast into a gloomy half-light and a strong wind blew from the south-east, thus diagonally across the width of the lake and partly from the rear. Occasionally a rain drop fell to maintain a damp wind chill. As we set out, we planned to cross the small bay of our



camping and otherwise, keep closely along the left shore of the lake. In a violent battle with the side waves that occasionally splashed over the gunwale of the canoe, we only fixed our eyes to the nearest point of shore on the other end of the bay and struggled to reach its proximity as fast as possible. In that, we did not notice that the western shore of the lake was masked as part of a very narrow gap, which separated from it a large island. Instead of moving north along the shore of the lake, in a continuing melé, we thus followed the shore of the island toward a north-east. Hence we had waves coming at us from across the whole length of the lake, practically straight broadside. When we reached the end of the island, we continued in the extension of the same direction, assuming that we were following the direction of the main shore toward the north. After a merciless battle with the waves across a vast spread of open water, we finally arrived at a shore, the geographical

features of which did not agree with our presumed position on the map. As always, at the loss of orientation, I again invited the advice of whatever electronic navigational tools at our disposal. The Gaia App in our cell phone indicated that we had actually cut across the whole width of the lake diagonally to its north-east end. From here, we had to follow the north shore back to the west to an outflow narrows that extended from its northwest end to the west. Now, the wind already blew from the aft and only a tad from the left, so we were able to finally relax and rest. In the narrow channel with its entry protected by a group of islands, the wind at last played no role. Moreover, the sky now cleared and the warming sun graciously made appearance on the set. The long scenic channel with numerous islands and wild deserted banks now led us to the west through a flat arc. After the center of the arc's bend reached the northern-most point of the river Winnipeg in that its part that still finds itself within the Shield country, the river began to curve toward the south-west. And just here, according to our old map, we were to expect the next, potentially dangerous challenge. Our map announced it as:



“Chute à Jacques” – 1760 – “Lamprey Falls” – dangerous waters – portage across point on right side – 100 paces (campsite & shelter)

“We passed the “Chute de Jacques” so called from a man thus named, who, being dared by one of his companions to run his canoe over a fall of fifteen or twenty feet, an exploit never attempted before or since, unhesitatingly essayed the bold feat and pushing off his frail bark, jumped into it, and on rounding a small island darted down the main sheet, his companions meanwhile anxiously watching for his safety from shore. As might have been expected, he was dashed to pieces and no more seen.” – Paul Kane, June 9, 1846.

Same as the last time, we knew nothing about the contemporary state of this waterfall. We were approaching it therefore very prudently close to the right side, prepared to land for the portage. When close enough to the line across the narrows, where one would expect the edge of the waterfall, and being able to study it from a standing position in the canoe, I could see that the waterfall was flooded by a dam that was located farther downstream. It was therefore navigable, but the fast current of the water that was backstopped by the constriction of the waterfall narrows still had a significant drop over its drowned edge. As a result, there were chaotic waves and eddies here that stretched for more than two hundred meters downstream.

After some four hundred meters below the waterfalls, the water opened broadly to the right into a vast lake held up by the first hydro dam on the territory of Manitoba, „Point au Bois“ that displaced another two drops of the river, some fifteen kilometers farther downstream. It was the very high time to find a campsite. Prodding us to it was both, the fatigue and a strong wind from left and against us that was forming whitecaps on the suddenly open vast surface of the dam-formed lake. We had hoped to find something in the narrow bays on the right, yet the shore there proved unsuitable for camping. We were already almost desperate, when I finally put my last bet on a small tree-covered island that was rising about a kilometer toward the center of the lake.

Following the experience that we had had earlier involving a private island, Milena was highly skeptical. We almost blew up into argument, when she predicted that the island would be private and settled. I was arguing that without making sure by inspecting it, the similar objections were pointless. You must know that reaching the island in the waves straight against the wind was no simple matter. We had to literally battle our way to it. Until the last moment, Milena insisted that she saw a motor boat tied at the shore. Yet it turned out that it was just a drift wood tree stranded on shore. Similarly, what Milena identified as a through trees showing wall of a cottage morphed after circumnavigating the whole island into bare bark of a different, higher clump of coniferous trees. Indeed, the island was undeveloped and unpopulated. It was simply empty of human sole. We touched on the lee side of the island. Yet even so, it was not easy to disembark the canoe and haul it upon the steep slippery granite. I then shimmied hand-over-hand grabbing tree branches to a higher granite point, where I expected a possibility of an emergency spot for the tent in a more or less horizontal little saddle. As soon as I reached the spot, though, I immediately discovered that just beyond it, somebody already cleared a flat protected spot for a tent on a bare mossy soil in a group of thick young spruce trees. Given our present conditions, the place emerged to be an ideal campsite. We just dragged away a few dead trees that had fallen since the time somebody camped here last and we erected the tent. It was thoroughly protected from the wind here that was now bordering on a tempest on the open water. Before I retired to the tent to sleep, I revisited the canoe and in the just starting rain, made sure that it was secured even more reliably to the trees with ropes and straps and that it rested still higher from



The island of our salvation from the other side



closer to the high center of the island might be struck by lightning with a resultant forest fire. The entire west of Canada suffered from them this summer and the land was shrouded in persistent smoke that stretched eastward

the reach of the ever increasing surf. The main storm struck around midnight. The lightning and thunder seemed to be exploding directly above our heads, all accompanied with a howling of the wind and a machine gun barrage of the pelting downpour. We were protected by the surrounding thicket of spruce, but I feared that some of the tall trees



The navigation in the Shield country is a brain teaser



across the continent almost up to here. In the giant waves and the darkness, there would be no escape from the island for us. Only after we had finished the expedition, we learned that not too far from our storm survival island location, on the same night, a tornado touched down and tragically, claimed a human life.



In the morning, the surface of the lake was quiet. We got up early and without much dilly-dallying passed the acrobatic process of prudent lowering of the canoe onto the water from the steep slippery granite, its loading with the gear and embarking ourselves, successfully dodging the high probability of somebody ending up to the neck in the water. The fly sheet of the tent was still wet after the night storm, hence it was draped over the load in the boat as the last item to quickly dry from the wind and sun. Now, in the morning, only a gentle breeze blew from

the west, so far only an indication of from where it would rise around ten. We thus aimed our course in a straight line to the west shoreline, in the lee of which closeness we intended to move southwest towards the dam. We still had some fifteen kilometers of paddling to it. While paddling, we could not resist to congratulate ourselves again and again to the good fortune, with which we yesterday found our island oasis of safety to happily survive the night of the dance of devils. According to our map, the portage around the Pointe au Bois dam, was to be on the right. The original name of the portage prior to the building of the dam sounded in Cree as „Ka-mash-aw-aw-sing“ (Where one carries twice). Now, the map described it as seven hundred paces across the parking lot of the Hydro plant. Before we had arrived at its start, the sky grew overcast and a threat of storm loomed inescapable. We quickly disembarked and divided the load into three burdens for the back plus the canoe, besides a few smaller hand carry items. I set out first with the heaviest and misshapest load strapped on a pack frame, which contained two crosswise laying dry bags with food, together with one paddle and bags in hands. Milena followed, carrying the waterproof frame pack and a second paddle. I was surveying the route and hurried to have the agony of the mule's work over with as fast as possible. It turned out that since the description of the portage on our obsolete map, the crossed parking lot grew, was fenced around and became a vast machine park of the hydro plant. It now had to be trekked around. On top of this, fenced around was also the place, where the boats used to be relaunched below the dam, so that one had to continue carrying for another three quarters of a kilometer downstream. The overall length of the portage so suddenly grew from seven hundred paces to some two and a half kilometers. In my tortuous Calvary, I lost Milena quickly far behind, leaving her desperate and in tears, when she lost her way. After shedding my burden at the end of the portage, I therefore immediately turned around and trotted back to meet her. Before we again reached the end, it started raining. Hence we quickly selected a spot for the tent and hurriedly unpacked it. We almost started putting it up, when we realized that we did not have the fly sheet for it. It this time ended up in the yellow dry bag with the hardware and that was still at the beginning of the portage now. The tent was therefore quickly stashed away back in the waterproof pack again and I set out at a trot back to the start of the portage for the missing load. Exhausted and demoralized Milena stayed at the end of the portage, to protect the already delivered load. I almost trotted out my second carry with the heavy yellow pack, because I knew that Milena was waiting at its end in a downpour. Fortunately, at the end of the portage happened to be situated a billboard that had a small roof over it. Milena thus covered whatever needed protection from rain with her Gore-

Tex windbreaker and sought a standing refuge under the narrow roof of the billboard. Now we finally and immediately erected the tent as quickly as we could to avoid getting its inner walls too exposed to the rain. While Milena organized its interior, I set out for the last load, which comprised the canoe and bags attached at the waist. It was pouring for both directions and lightnings blasted. The thunderstorm just reached its climax. With my hands holding the gunwales of the overturned canoe on my shoulders, the sleeves of my Gore-Tex windbreaker collected the water draining from its surface like the eave troughs down pipes. Every once in a while, I just had to turn my arms downward one by one to empty the sleeves. The adversity-packed story ended happily after all. Following our thorough drying with towels, the cozy comfort of the inside of the tent, protected from the downpour, tasted even sweeter contrasted with the just passed toughness exam outside. In a well-deserved sleep, we then whiled away the rest of the storm and rain.

In the late afternoon, the storm was displaced by a warming sun. It would soon turn out that the location of our semi-emergency camping at the end of the portage, where our tent stood on a granite platform next to a small sandy beach, happened to be a favourite swimming spot of a local family. The father of the family foggily remembered that during his youth, he canoed with a group down the river and that they had to carry around another dam, which was waiting for us tomorrow. He was thus able to weakly confirm my suspicion to me that there had to exist a much shorter and better portage there than the one that was described by our old map. It is that the map recommended a portage around the dam on the right side, while a satellite view revealed a possibility to keep to the left side above the dam and then land on a smaller island that divided the dam wall into two. The left part of the dam was a great deal smaller and removed some three hundred meters downstream. There was evidence that it should be possible to portage across the island to the right below the main dam. As for us a sobering and a caution invoking reminder, the man added a mention of a tragic incident, which happened almost exactly a year ago. According to it, a solo kayaker left the spot, where we now camped at around five in the morning. He had to carry around our dam of tomorrow, (which, by the way, was called “Slave Falls“ after the falls that it replaced), and continued on. After some while, he arrived at another waterfall, „Sturgeon Falls“, which today, are flooded, yet still dangerous due to waves, rock reefs and chaotic eddies. A tragedy had to happen here then, because the items of the kayaker’s gear were later found scattered over the surface of the lake below the waterfalls. The drowned, life jacket-fitted body of the kayaker was not found until quite a while later.

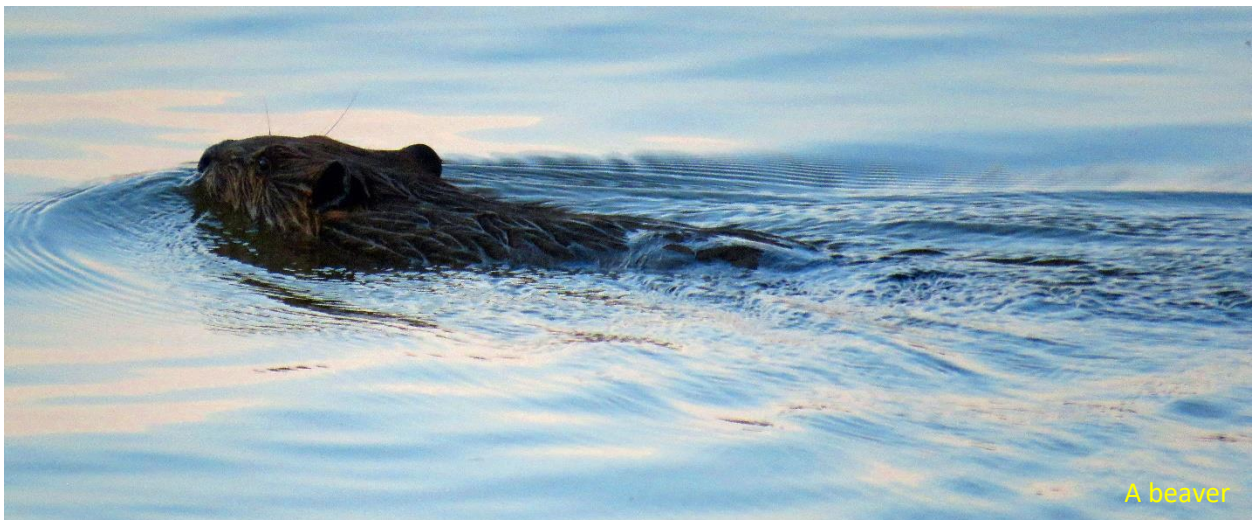
Next morning, after some three hours of paddling, we were carefully approaching the Slave Falls Dam. We were not sure yet, whether our speculated portage on the left over the island would be



possible. We dreaded the chance that we might have to backtrack a long distance upstream if the opposite side portage proved the only choice. Yet surprisingly, besides the orange signs warning against approaching the zone of the dam wall, I could spy already from a great distance a sign board on a tiny island at left with a blue text. When at last my on it fixed eyes could discern what the sign had to say, my expectation that it would give instructions for the portage on left was happily confirmed. It recommended to closely follow the left bank, where signs with a



symbol of a walking figure with an overturned canoe on shoulders would appear at reasonable intervals. When we got close to the dividing island, the same, but much larger sign indicated the landing spot for the start of the portage over it. Oh, what a luxury and a welcome confirmation that we had invested our physical energy correctly! The landing at the portage was at a low bank with mowed grass. A roughly four hundred meter long portage trail led through a cutline along the island first, which also had a mowed path, and then slipped down from it through woods to a river beach on the right. The setting at the end of the portage below the dam was inviting to set up a camp here. It possessed peaceful atmosphere with a flat base for the tent, this time on sand. A plenty of dry driftwood for fire was not lacking here either. The view across the river indicated that the portage along the right bank could prove to be not only long, but also somewhat arduous thanks to a rocky terrain. The dam itself was visible from here only partially. I have managed to



A beaver

find a source that explained the origin of the name of the onetime waterfalls and of today's Hydro dam:

„Chute aux Esclaves“, or „Slave Falls“ “Tradition tells that a slave of a ferocious master, maddened by long continued cruelty, calmly stepped into a canoe above these falls in the presence of the tribe, and suddenly pushing off from shore, wrapped her deer-skin robe round her face and glided over the crest of the cataract, to find rest in the surging waters below.”– Y. H. Hind – 1857.

Only when one hears this touching story, one ought to regard the name of the mentioned place completely differently. Unaware of its origin, one can take it like any name (name like a name) – simply a geographical designation. Yet now I know that in its background a very soul-stirring sad history lurks that attests to a cruel character of certain types of humans, who, intoxicated by a possessed power feel that they can control and turn the life of another human into pain and suffering ending in tragedy. Apparently, similar situations could have existed and still exist anywhere on our planet. Could it be some character aberration in the DNA of Homo Sapiens stretching back to archaic times? As far as the present locality, the typical props on the scene were: birch bark canoes, waterfalls, deer-skin dress a stop for a portage. Musing about the above story, I even more value the freedom that the destiny generously dealt to me. I savor it in full gulps.

A new importance in our attention for the challenges of the river Winnipeg was conquered by another waterfall, the Sturgeon Falls. As already La Verendrye reports in the 1730-ties, lethargic sturgeon, harvested in these waters by the ton, used to be the staple fish of the local natives. Until the time, when we heard the tragic news about them from the father of the family that bathed at our campsite below the Pointe au Bois dam, - this time from the modern time – only from last year, we again knew nothing about these waterfalls. Our old map warned: “dangerous waters – portage to the left, or canoe close to the left shore, keeping away from the center.” Towards the evening, two jolly fellows beached their motor boat at our camp at the end of the portage below the Slave Falls dam and went to look for something on the portage trail. On their return, we gleaned another advice from them for running the Sturgeon Falls. They had to pass on the left, but there, allegedly, were big waves and eddies. They recommended to pass at the right shore, where there is quieter water. It was to be shallow there, but with the canoe we should be O.K., they said. After some fifteen kilometers, we were finally approaching the location on the next morning. Already from a distance, the rock outcrops were visible in the middle of the falls' narrows that we were to keep away from. On the advice of our visitors of yesterday, we aimed for the right side. For as far as could be viewed among the boulders, there was indeed timid water. Yet, as it turned out very early, there was not enough of it. When the bottom of the canoe touched the flat bottom of the passage, we had to back up and turn the canoe back upstream. We then ferried in a big arc to an approach on the left side. When I stood up in the canoe thirty meters above the narrows, I could see: O.K., there were big waves there. Yet through a simple maneuver, it was possible to almost avoid them. This was, provided that one could perform a very aggressive swerve right immediately past the waves and return to the main train of current, before the waves could thrust the boat against a barely sticking out long crosswise “wale back” of a smooth granite that extended from the left shore to almost the center of the left passage. After that, I just allowed the canoe to follow the main train of the current waves, just steering hard to prevent eddies from playing a game with the boats aiming. The waves continued gradually dissolving into Lake Nutimik below the falls for some three hundred meters, before we could only feel the current under the canoe for another half a kilometer.

Looking back, I have been trying to understand the tragic incident at the Sturgeon Falls of the year before. I indeed found the news of the accident on the web. The victim was a very capable and qualified individual, who loved and enjoyed the outdoors and the outdoor adventure. It turned out that he was a former chief of Kenora police, who retired in his fifties to enjoy his adventure hobbies. Among them figured even base jumping from a hot air balloon in California. He set out alone down the river from his town in mid-May, 2017 with the aim to cross Lake Winnipeg and continue on to The Pas, Manitoba. I imagined that in May there had to be a significantly higher level of water in the river. Perhaps it just submerged the “whale back”. If he struck it, he might have hit his head on it and drowned unconscious, floating face down in his life jacket?

Lake Nutimik led through a narrow channel into the next lake, Lake Dorothy, which was accessed from behind by a road. As a result, its shore was lined with one cottage after another. Already as we were emerging to it from the channel, we could see youths in motor boats, as buffeted by their turbulent hormones, they described mad curves and jumped with their boats on the roiled up waves that they created themselves. All was accompanied with drunken yelling of the Apaches preparing for the war path. It did not bide well for the paddling of the miles ahead. Every cottage along the shore had its own harbor, the technical equipment of which was competing with that of its neighbor. Moored to each was a motor boat, if not two with as powerful a motor, as possible. This is, of course, if they did not just slice the surface of Lake Dorothy barreling like an ICBM missile, or describe undecipherable Brownian motion zig-zags



of a “mad house fly in a milk canister”. A handful of marinas clearly ruled supreme, as they even harbored a float plane. With mere muscles and paddles propelling our craft, we represented here an absolute zero – nada. In a humiliating role of total misfits, we had to exercise our paddling motions for the almost ten next kilometers, before we could shroud ourselves again in narrow, unpopulated channels. The river divided itself here into two channels. The northern one, Pinawa, which used to be run at times of sufficiently high water – today closed, and Rivière Blanche, which is turbulent – leading to the west. In it, one has to be wary of rocky reefs and waves. Surprisingly, we found ourselves here surrounded by a small group of sea kayakers - all retired



The slavery of paddling to the Seven Sisters dam

teachers, who lived nearby, on a day outing. We were already prepared to camp at the first opportunity, when a town emerged on the right bank. I must admit that I had not studied the map far enough for that day, to expect that. It was the town of Pinawa, which, as a nuclear physicist and nuclear engineer I soon realized, included besides summer homes of recreation users also a famous research laboratories of nuclear reactor technology. Never, during my professional career had I the opportunity to visit this place. Counting the research institute in Chalk River, this was the second famous place of the Canadian nuclear research alongside of which I paddled on my water voyage from Montreal..

The river bank along Pinawa was again lined with an uninterrupted chain of summer cottages. It was clear that our chance for camping had to exist only past it. Yet, alas! As soon as we passed Pinawa and the cottages, the landscape radically changed. We had left the Canadian Shield. All of a sudden, the granite crags disappeared, the land opened up into a vast plain with a horizon of a forest of reeds surrounding a rapidly sprawling dam lake. One could see only individual trees here and this beyond the reeds in a great distance somewhere. The prospect of camping appeared suddenly impossible. What could we do? The end of the day was nearing, yet nothing remained, but to paddle. A seemingly infinite Lake Natalie opened ahead of us, filled by the „Seven Sisters“ Hydro dam. This is how the voyageurs named a onetime series of seven portages that went so closely one after another that, as sir Alexander Mackenzie writes: *“Here are seven portages, in so short a space that the whole of them are discernible at the same moment “*. Today, this series lies at the bottom of the lake of the Hydro dam that assumed its name.



The tent on Seven Sisters dam

silhouette of the Hydro power house atop the dam wall. When we finally stepped up the berm of rough rocks right at the right end of the concrete wall, there were no signs of instructions, or any hints to how to go around it. Everywhere just signs forbidding entry and no trespassing. It was past six in the evening and moreover, it was a long weekend. Ergo, there was not a living soul in the whole huge building of the power plant for one to ask for help. Whatever the outcome, we had not an iota of energy left to start any kind of a portage. “We will deal with it in the morning”, we decided. I left a few voice messages on the phone that was hung on the wall at one of the entrances of the plant building. Then we erected the tent directly on the concrete of the dam wall and retired to rest. In the morning, I was out before six. I had to catch someone among the employees, as they were arriving for a shift. They might be able to help me. I obliged a young secretary, who kept shrinking away from me like from a homeless hobo that she

The horizon, flat as a pancake, was proving that we at last on our water voyage, had arrived at the Canadian Prairies. The sun had now lowered to the west and reflecting on the surface of the lake, it blinded our eyes from two angles. The brim of the hat screened only one. On top of all, however late, the sun still blazed hot. It was clear, that up to the dam, there would be no possibility to camp. Yet to that, we still had at least some nine kilometers. In a slavery stupor, we thus continued sweating in monotonous paddling with our eyes hanging onto the finish point - our salvation, which was represented by the growing





would find the employee, who should be responsible for that kind of issues and send him to me outside. In the meantime, I went to search for the possible portage alone without load. When I ignored a warning sign and continued along a gravel road on the right side of the river below the dam, its route suddenly became obvious. Yet, I was shocked by its length. It had to be, perhaps, two kilometers long. When I returned to the tent, Milena was already in conversation with two friendly energetic

men, who apologized for the difficulties that we ran into in regards to carrying around the dam. As I had in fact hoped, they suggested for us to pack everything, while they would return with a company pickup. They were willing to load everything, us included and take us to the end of the portage. This shortly happened. We thanked them warmly and they wished us Bon Voyage. The river under the Seven Sisters dam was relatively narrow and hence the current could be felt here. Its banks were at first, perhaps, up to thirty meters high. One thus could not see the surrounding land. Later, though, the river gradually widened before the town of Lac du Bonet into another large Hydro dam lake. Also the banks became lower. First, one could see grain fields upon them, later, both banks were lined with recreation cottages. For the water traveler, whose design was to re-enact the way of traveling along the historic river, when it was the only artery of connecting the east and the west of the country, this situation was crushing. No campsites existed here. Wherever a suitable spot would avail itself, a cottage was occupying it. Remaining were only second rate spots among the reeds, in low bogs, etc. One was unable to plan the day. Frequently, he was forced to paddle long into the evening, till such place would turn out. When wind and waves arrived, one was risking, because there was nowhere to come to shore. Also the landscape had changed here since the time of the voyageurs. The Hydro dams flooded the fast water and spilled it into vast lake spreads with flat drab horizon. The remainder of the river Winnipeg up to its mouth into the lake of the same name left in us only the impression of slavery under a searing sun on the waves and on the portages.

We bade farewell to the Winnipeg river on its south bank, opposite to the bank with a promontory, where a modest fort, Fort Maurepas, once stood built in 1734 by the advanced party of the exploration recruits of Pierre Gaultier de La Verendrye, surrounded by a palisade wall of sharpened poles. Involved in the construction were mainly his most trusted second in command, his nephew Christophe Dufrost de la Jemmerai, and La Verendrye's oldest son Jean-Baptiste. Christophe succumbed here to an illness during the following winter and Jean-Baptiste together with a brigade of twenty others was massacred a year later by the Sioux near Fort St. Charles on Lake of the Woods. The explorers named the fort after the French minister of the Navy, the count of Maurepas, who oversaw the colonies, in hopes that they would glean his support. Somebody has recorded already in 1793: "not a vestige remaining except the clearing".



The Coat-of-Arms of the NorthwWest Company, the motto of which was "Perseverance".