

WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIEND

by Jim Carrier

Look closely at passers-by on your next trip into Quetico or the BWCA. I'll wager, as often as not, a gray head nods back at you and a seasoned hand waves in acknowledgment of the precious wilderness you share. If my luck continues, it might be me waving back. We park enthusiasts are an aging crowd: "golden years" paddlers collecting golden experiences as long as they can.

That pretty much sums it up for me. I'm in my 60's and "hanging on"... especially this year. Leg pain and numbness from bone calcifying around my sciatic nerve made walking more than a couple hundred yards excruciating. Having exhausted all other remedies, I elected to undergo back fusion surgery last winter... my choice of last resort.

Ever-determined to make my pilgrimage north, this promised to be an "interesting" summer for wilderness canoe travel.

Family and friends - while supportive - sometimes joke that overpacking has been the real source of my troubles. I confess to overpacking but "genetics" is the more likely culprit. Dad suffered similar symptoms at my age. As much as we enjoyed the outdoors and fishing together, he could never join me on any of my beloved Quetico canoe trips... something I will always regret.

That memory troubles me, doubling my resolve to keep going as long as I can. I cherish my trips with friends and family.

Dr. Wayne Spence of Texas, one of those very good friends, was well-aware of my limitations this year. He agreed to go with me, anyway. We planned to cross Quetico Park in late July via the northern tier of lakes, entering at Beaverhouse and exiting at French Lake. This route would minimize portaging, which figured to be my biggest challenge at this stage of my rehab.

After our long drive north, Wayne and I opted for comfort, convenience and amenities the night before entering Quetico Park. We investigated a newly-available "lodging and meals" resource that our outfitter, Doug Chapman of Canadian Quetico Outfitters, had informed us of. The Quetico College School is located on Eva Lake, just a few miles northeast of the Dawson Campground. An educator by the name of Michael Heaton is converting this business conference center into a "prep school." Located on 100 beautiful acres, we had our choice of lodging in cabins or dorm rooms, use of a well-equipped Recreation Hall ((billiards, ping pong, basketball), and access to WIFI and other luxuries. While enjoying Michael's hospitality and affine steak dinner, we learned the project-based learning philosophy of his school and how he is building wilderness education into the curriculum. After a comfortable stay in the dorms, Wayne and I enjoyed Michael's tasty omelets before departing early the following morning.

The Quetico College School turned out to be a real treasure, ideal for canoeists planning to start or finish their travels near the Dawson Campground at French Lake.

The next morning, after the CQO shuttle deposited us at Beaverhouse Lake, it was a short ten-minute paddle to the very first portage. This trail would take us to a No Name Lake en route to Cirrus Lake. Though more than a half-mile long, this old railway bed is flat as they come.

Nevertheless, about mid-way across with my first load, I found myself limping, hurting, and - worst of all - second-guessing my wisdom in tackling a Quetico trip this year.

The fact that Wayne - nine years my senior - was practically skipping his way across this easy portage served to drive home the fact that I could be in some deep guano this time!

Maybe I should have "passed" on this entire season and waited a year to fully rehab? The thought was to cross my mind more than once this trip.

I allowed Wayne to move on ahead while I rested, slapped mosquitoes, and considered my lamentable options. I figured I should be OK for a while (if and) when I reached Cirrus Lake. You can go miles and miles on Cirrus with nary a portage. I needed to gather my wits about me and calm myself down. I reminded myself that I had crossed this stretch easily - almost mindlessly - more than twenty times on past trips. Nevertheless, as Wayne trucked on down the path, my mind wandered as I rested my back and considered my plight.

Rather fortuitously, a graphic memory came floating back right about then. It had been etched in my brain in almost this very spot almost twenty-three years earlier.

It was my first father/son Quetico trip with 8-year-old Benjamin tagging along behind me on this very same portage. He was proudly hauling his own little back pack and singing the theme song from "Gilligan's Island," the re-runs of which he and his brother watched endlessly! Meanwhile I lumbered on ahead with a large pack and our canoe. Somewhere in the middle of his eighth or ninth rendition of that maddening tune, he suddenly became quiet. After a distinct pause, his young squeaky voice shouted, "Dad, Dad, Dad!" in a very nervous but excited sort of way. He kept repeating himself, more and more urgently. I kept answering "What? What? What?!" until I was forced to begrudgingly spin around - whacking branches with the canoe that was balanced on my head - to see what the heck his problem was. As I tipped the front of the canoe up to see, I discovered his problem looming large right in front of me. Towering over little Benjamin on the portage path was the largest bull moose I have ever seen, its jaw directly above Ben's head! I had passed right by without even seeing it! I fumbled for words but finally composed myself enough to cough out, "Stand absolutely still!" As you might guess, a million emotions washed over me in that moment! Somehow Ben kept his cool. Eventually, the huge beast lost interest and ambled off noisily into the swamp.

I'm not entirely sure why that memory popped up just then but I am glad it did. I found strength in it. I had been feeling a bit sorry for myself that this couldn't be a year when either of my two strong sons (now aged 27 and 30) could join me. They both love Quetico but, as young professionals, they find themselves short on PTO. Despite their absence, a vivid memory of that first father/son trip did me some good, serving as salve for my psyche. To panic and give up this early would be ridiculous.

My challenge was as much a "mental battle" as anything. I would just have to be smarter about things. I had a good partner... the best. I... we would get by somehow.

So, I girded my loins for war and resolved to "tough it out" and think it through.

It was becoming evident that triple-portaging was my "new norm," probably until the end of my canoe-camping days. So what? I would quadruple-portage if I had to! I set down my big plastic pail containing pots, pans, and other cookware beside the trail. I dropped my way-too-heavy fishing tackle bag on a pine stump. I'd grab these items lighter loads later. A note would go on the pad tonight regarding ditching about half of my lures for my next trip! I tightened up the "back belt" I was wearing and readjusted the big Ostrom Outdoors pack on my shoulders, grateful for its internal pack frame. Resuming my march, I found these adjustments made a big enough difference. I

survived my panic... often half the battle when dealing with things that go wrong in the wilderness.

The next loads weren't so bad. Nevertheless, I was an aching mess by the time we piled gear into our solo canoes. After the short crossing of No Name Lake we negotiated a short but twisty trail, full of ankle-buster rocks. Picking my way carefully through the minefield, I was much relieved to see the familiar Cirrus Lake put-in. We shoved off into a refreshing east breeze under overcast skies.

Wayne could tell I was already physically exhausted and mentally-drained. We've tackled some truly challenging adventures together in recent years, "bushwhacking" in remote provincial parks, located much further north. He has seen me play the role of "pack mule," hauling the heaviest of gear. This time, Wayne was staring at a mere shadow of my former pack mule self. I suspect we both were silently "re-calibrating" our expectations for this trip right about then. More adjustments than anticipated would be necessary. Despite this acknowledgment, his reassuring look gave me confidence... very much needed at the time. While I dreaded messing up his trip, my more selfish fear was my canoe-camping days might be over.

So, less than three hours after put-in, barely mid-day with plenty of July daylight left, we found ourselves eyeballing campsite options. We grabbed the five-star site on the southern shore, not far from the north/south corridor connecting the upper and lower tiers of Cirrus Lake. Once settled, we enjoyed our steak and salad supper.

Sunset unfolded unexpectedly on the horizon with the last rays of daylight, fanning out in shades of purple, yellow and orange on dark undersides of an overcast sky, Frankly, it changed the entire complexion of that day in just a couple of moments. As the thrumming of mosquitoes grew more insistent, we hastened our steps and buttoned up camp. I retired to my hammock tent, glad there were no roots or rocks to contend with and anticipating a sound sleep. However, the clamor of squawking herring gulls rising above the din of buzzing insects shed some doubt on the matter. Before long, they quieted down. My tired body and the forlorn song of distant loons - punctuated by the hoot of a persistent owl - lulled me to sleep.

The birdsong serenade resumed at dawn as I awoke to the quavering melodies of white-throated sparrows. Their song, "Oh sweet Canada" lasts all of four seconds but stays with you a lifetime. It is by far my favorite Northwoods tune. Decades earlier, long before I knew Quetico Park even existed, I heard that melody for the first time in early spring. I was so intrigued that I went to the library and listened to three hours' worth of birdsong... just to identify it. Years later, I was absolutely delighted to discover that Quetico was full of their music!

"Birders" should take note regarding this area of Cirrus Lake. In 2014, my son Ben and I had camped on a small island near the opposite shore. A park ranger had encouraged us to listen for whippoorwills as rumor had it that a small population had returned to the park for the first time in many years. Ha! As it turned out, there was no doubt about it; the place proved to be absolutely infested with whippoorwills! Believe me, sleep did not come easily! We later reported back to the ranger office that they had a very healthy colony on Cirrus Lake.

Fortunately, Wayne and I did not have to contend with a plague of whippoorwills.

I emerged from my hammock tent cocoon well rested but with substantial backache and leg issues. Putting on my left sock and left boot became exercises in painful contortionism. I found myself wishing my buddy Dr. Spence was a medical doctor and not "Professor Emeritus of Information Technology." I was going to have to take it easy. It would be a sunny bluebird-type day and the

decision to stay at this camp for a few days was an easy one!

Fishing proved to be a little slow. Wayne picked up a couple of nice walleyes near the big cliff on the south side, just across our bay. My "take" was mostly smallmouth bass and one beefy 40 inch northern, all released. Back in camp that afternoon, I decided to wash up and swim off our rock shelf canoe landing. Bad idea. We discovered not one, not two, but THREE large snapping turtles patrolling that ledge! All three followed us around like pets wherever we walked the shoreline. The smallest, still quite formidable by any standard, would crawl out of the water towards my feet when I sat nearby in my camp chair!

Swimming and bathing at this campsite was out of the question. Fortunately, there is a marvelous sand beach just across the cove. We did our bathing over there each afternoon.

Despite my issues, I found I could still do a fair amount around camp without too many complications. Gathering wood and cleaning dishes were my primary chores. Wayne might contest my prowess as "dishwasher," I suppose. His "kitchen" is well-appointed, featuring fancy titanium cutlery and utensils... of which he keeps careful inventory! More than once I found myself in the dark, searching the bushes for elusive "whisks" and other items I had inadvertently tossed out with my pail of soapy water!

By the fourth day, I was rested and ready to move on. Bluebird skies and atmospheric high pressure had impacted fishing. I hoped a change-of-scenery might improve our luck. Wayne hadn't spent much time in this part of Cirrus and he was thoroughly enjoying our great campsite. Besides, there were some great blueberry patches over on the north shore. So, I enjoyed Wayne's delicious blueberry pancakes with rehydrated apple sauce and agreed to stick around another day.

I was soon glad I did! Big thunderstorms rolled in very quickly while we were out fishing that morning. I returned to camp under flashing skies. Just as the torrential rain began, I noticed Wayne's Souris River Tranquility a couple hundred yards away, beached in the back of the cove. He had been cleaning walleyes but had to hoof it back into the woods for protection.

Later that afternoon, an even more fierce storm hit us at the dinner hour with 60mph gusts. Wayne and I moved away from the water's edge deeper into the woods for shelter as sheets of water blew off the lake. Fifteen years earlier, during a similar storm, my son Wes and I were fully exposed in a campsite across the channel to the northeast. Pines had snapped all around us and fear about another "big blowdown" - it was recent history, back then - consumed me. Twice I grabbed my youngest son and trotted him out of the tent and off to the windward shore thinking that, there, we could avoid falling timber. Wes soon tired of that exercise, however. When I got up for a third time, he just sat there. Raising his voice above a howling wind, he said, "Dad, can't we just stay in here and play cards, instead?" So, I listened to my kid and it turned out ok. Nevertheless, we envied the folks camped over here, so well protected from big winds out of the west. This camp has been a favorite of mine ever since.

The following day was moving day. We considered heading all the way to Soho Lake but changed our minds as we saw several parties entering the park at Sue Falls. Some headed into Soho. As there is only one decent campsite on that lake, we elected to camp in the Sue Falls basin, saving me from another dreaded portage... albeit a very short one. We chatted with some passers-by from Chicago, then enjoyed some bean and beef burritos for supper. Wayne tied a very long and colorful "twist tie" around his whisk so that I could find it more easily in the bushes that evening.

We experienced a significant change in the weather. Days became hotter. Wayne provided me with a "cooling towel" which, when soaked and worn about my head, made a big difference! Nights were quite cool under clear skies and a full moon. Our fishing luck changed, too. During the second morning alone, I nailed a "grand slam"... well, sort of. I caught a small walleye and several good-sized bass early on. Hoping for "big game" between the two huge cliffs that straddle the deep northern cove to the west, I switched to my bait-caster, heavier line and deep-diving plugs. I soon harvested two huge pike. The second of these was easily the largest fish I've ever caught. Just try to take a picture of a huge, upset Northern in a solo canoe in windy conditions! It didn't happen.

My best guess is that it went nearly 47 inches long, per my rough paddle shaft measure, and it was as wide as my thigh! No more than ten minutes after that long battle, I caught my first lake trout of the trip - about 6 pounds' worth - and subsequently lost him when he flipped around as I attempted to insert the stringer hook under bouncy, windy conditions.

Upon my return to camp, I immediately reported my alleged fishing "success" to Wayne. As he looked over at my empty stringer, he greeted me with a skeptical eye!

Camping in the Sue Falls basin had many plusses. The area is popular with moose and, before dawn one morning, one was working its way down a game trail to the water when it encountered my hammock tent... still occupied. Fortunately, he changed his mind and retreated into the woods. Also, though my debility gave me trouble reaching down to them, blueberry patches were abundant. Wayne enhanced a good many meals with his harvest. He also thoroughly explored the area, taking some fine photographs of the nearby pictograph and of local wildlife. Finally, recent rains had the cascades singing welcome lullabies most evenings as the winds grew still.

Our stay there was pleasant but after a few days it was time to move on... and time to make a big decision. Our original plan had been to take the "big-hump" portage into Kasakokwog Lake.

However, given my limitations and, especially, the wet conditions (we had yet another thunderstorm that night) the wisdom of keeping to this route came into serious question. Other parties we ran into were avoiding it. Wayne made it abundantly clear he was prepared to backtrack several hours and take a less arduous route, even if it meant exiting the park somewhere other than French Lake.

The decision was mine and my decision, if not entirely "wrong", proved to be incredibly humbling and painful.

My wife and I had completed this half-mile portage in past years - under dry conditions - easily in approximately two hours. Halfway across with my first load, I found I was essentially making every ascent and descent - over slippery wet rock - on one leg. I had zero confidence putting much weight on my left side after nearly falling down several times. So, I slowed what was essentially "funeral march speed" down to a painstaking crawl. Where the turf was uneven, which seemed most of the time, the good leg went up (or down) first. Then I would ease the troublesome leg directly under my torso to "catch up" and center my gravity. Repeat process, again and again. Warm conditions didn't help any. After what seemed "forever," I felt the breezes coming off Kasakokwog on the far side... then realized I still had three more loads to run across!

Quadruple-portaging it (me, at least), it took Wayne and me over five hours to complete this ordeal!

Wayne couldn't have been more encouraging and supportive. Struggling, utterly exhausted and limping badly during my third load, I had to set it down just over halfway across. I returned to Cirrus for my last load, figuring I'd regain some strength walking empty-handed on the way back (which was trouble enough!). An hour later, when I got back to that spot, the burden I had left on

the trail was missing. Wayne had come back and grabbed it after his last load. In another twenty minutes, I joined him on the far side.

Believe it or not, I had very mixed emotions about this episode. While the misery of my passage-through-hell was over, "relief" dueled with the self-doubt I was inflicting upon my macho-self. I could still hack it, couldn't I?! I wasn't through with real Quetico adventuring, was I?

The "jury" on these questions was out. I had a lot to ponder. In the final analysis, I was thankful I didn't have to use the "Emergency" button on my SPOT Messenger device, fastened to my belt always.

By mid-afternoon, Wayne and I were enjoying spectacular sunshine and vigorous breezes at Kasakokwog's mid-lake campsite. We washed both our sodden-sweaty clothes and our nasty selves. Later, I swayed to the rhythm of gentle breezes in my Clark Jungle Hammock, enjoying a much-needed snooze!

As one who has done more-than-his-share of tough portaging and bushwhacking over the years, I never cease to be amazed how restorative such simple things can be for the human body. By evening I was feeling relaxed and much recovered. I smiled to see the eagle's nest occupied at the edge of the small island to the south. A couple years earlier, my wife Nancy and I watched as a late fledgling made its initial spasmodic flights across the narrow channel. It had afforded us some great entertainment!

I found myself wondering if I don't do these trips, in large part, to relive such rich experiences from my past. I guess that's not such a bad thing. In any case, I am glad for the memories. and I very much wish to keep creating them!

We enjoyed mostly windy, dry weather on Kasakokwog. Fishing was good, too, with Wayne slaying the walleyes and providing a couple of fine meals. Being wind bound a fair amount wasn't so bad, either, as it was the occasion for some truly fine and much-welcomed napping! My left side was still tender and my prescription wasn't putting much of a dent into what I was feeling. While sitting in my canoe I was just fine. It was getting in and out of it that proved somewhat challenging. I experimented with technique and, eventually, found a way to raise and lower myself safely and with minimal pain. Debility such as mine certainly makes you better appreciate just how much extra "moving around" you do in camp versus at home. It seems like one is always reaching for this, bending for that, adjusting rocks in the fire pit, tying ropes, flipping canoes, stowing gear, etc. and so on. Anyway, my back was feeling the cumulative effects of it all and, consequently, I walked around camp gingerly and very deliberately.

Strong gusty winds for several consecutive days caused us to worry about our upcoming passage across the length of big Pickerel Lake. As we consumed Wayne's delicious "Shepherd's Pie" during supper one evening, we agreed that a tail wind from the west wouldn't be so bad. Even a head wind could be managed alright; my Wenonah Prism excels in those conditions. However, should a Norther blow in or a bad wind from the south, cross-winds could give our solo canoes some trouble. We had a long way to go yet and wouldn't accomplish it all in one day but we began to chart our exit strategy.

We broke camp by 7am the next day in hopes of getting as far as we could before the inevitable afternoon winds kicked in. Nevertheless, a short time later, we were "surfing" McAlpine Lake, beneficiaries of a stiff west wind.

To reach Pickerel from McAlpine you have the choice of the longer portage to the north, sometimes referred to as "The Garden Path", or three shorter ones further to the east. My wife and I had strolled across "The Garden Path" just a few years earlier and did just fine. However, Wayne and I opted for the other option as it seemed to be a more direct route for our exit. Wrong move! I should have paid better attention to notes I had made 23 years earlier. The three portages might be short but two involved scaling steep surfaces made dangerously slippery by the wet conditions. Again, I struggled. Again, we were prudent and took it slow. Again, I was much indebted to Wayne who exercised great patience throughout and handled a load for me over difficult rocks covering the last fifty yards of one trail.

As we finished crossing the second of these portages, a troop of eight energetic 15-16-year-olds, all young ladies, was marching in the opposite direction. We cautioned them about the difficult terrain they would encounter. I was very impressed by their confidence and teamwork. Having encountered so many older canoeists already on this trip, it was encouraging to run across such a youthful group. Sometimes I wonder where all the young folks are these days. As we parted, I felt envious of the many years of wilderness paddling adventure that lay ahead of them. I hope they stick with it.

Batchewaung Bay and, shortly afterward, Pickerel Narrows, were indeed breezy - much accentuated by the west-east "funneling" effect of the surrounding land mass. As we approached the Narrows, waves ricocheted off the sheer rock wall to our starboard side, creating choppy conditions. Far from being dismayed, I was up for the challenge, being thrilled at the time to finally be through with the last portage trail of this trip! We found a fine campsite near the far end of the Narrows. Wind or no wind, it was all "downhill" from here as far as I was concerned.

Luckily, big Pickerel Lake was stunningly mirror-like and quiet as we broke camp early the next morning. I've never seen that big lake so still. Wayne and I, making the most of our good fortune, crossed its entire length well before Noon. Not ready to end our adventure, we decided to make a last camp at The Pines on the far east end. It proved to be timely as afternoon breezes kicked in, right on schedule. So, we set up an overnight camp, then kicked back in the sun on a sandy beach with waves lapping at our feet.

I'm an avid fisherman and there was still plenty of time to go after that last trophy. However, fourteen days in the park had afforded me plenty of good fishing. For some reason, I just preferred just to sit there, take it all in and reflect on my good fortune. I had survived. Sure, I was limping a little but I still had real hope I would recover and get stronger. I knew then I would do it again (which, in fact, I did on an eight-day true solo trip to Pickerel Lake in late September).

Around mid-afternoon a couple of very friendly park rangers literally "blew in" from the west and set up camp right next to us. It was then we learned just how fortunate we had been. They informed us of two deaths that had occurred on the Canadian side of Basswood Lake during one of the bad storms we had experienced!

It can be tough coming to terms with the effects of aging and debility. Throw in the rigors of wilderness canoe travel and it can become especially challenging and humbling. I can testify it's not for everybody. In fact, it might not be for me, either, sooner than I might care to admit. We'll see. I hope my rehab has me getting stronger but that jury is still out.

As I "hang on", hoping for a few more years of paddling adventures, what I can say with certainty is this: I sincerely appreciate the friendship and real teamwork demonstrated by my friend, Wayne.

His encouragement and support made crossing Quetico possible this year.

I guess I'll tackle the future when it gets here.

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