

WHERE THERE'S A WILL THERE'S A WAY

Jim Carrier

I read the "Collective Wisdom" column in the Fall 2017 issue of the BWJ with great interest. In it, Darrel Brauer wrote about his challenging bushwhack entry into the rugged, undeveloped east side of Quetico Park along with fellow adventurer Lawrence Donley. Darrel, who mentioned he was in his early 60's, is a contemporary of mine. Lawrence is almost ten years our senior. Up until recently I have enjoyed aggressive bushwhacking adventures with each of these gentlemen. Darrel's story caused me to reflect how, for me, the aging process has been less gentle and, consequently, how my paddling choices have changed.

My metamorphosis into an "aging paddler with a debility or two" happened rapidly. Only three summers ago, I labored as #1 "pack mule" for three bushwhackers (including Lawrence Donley) in remote, rugged, and virtually unheard-of Opasquia Provincial Park in far northwestern Ontario. My body cooperated nicely during that adventure and I was feeling pretty good about turning 60. Since then, however, I have been falling apart. First came major back fusion surgery. A year later I received a prognosis that hip replacement is imminent... maybe two of them! Then, my optometrist told me I had better start getting used to "floaters and flashes" in my deteriorating vision. To cap it off, I recently learned I am a prime candidate for hearing aids. Ugh! Perhaps that last affliction is a blessing in disguise? I'd simply rather not hear any more bad news!

Last summer I struggled mightily during an easy two-week paddle across northernmost Quetico Park. Those trials and tribulations were described in my story, "With a Little Help from My Friend", appearing in the BWJ 2016 Winter Issue. At times, the pain was so bad - and my ego so battered - I just wanted somebody to scrape me off of the portage path and deposit me in some nice, comfortable home for decrepit canoe campers. There, I could dream away the balance of my declining days, fantasizing about yesteryear and living, vicariously, through adventures of others recounted in the BWJ. I freely admit, last year I was in a very bad state of mind concerning future park adventuring.

Not yet ready to give up my dreams, I decided to do something about it. Maybe I could not turn back the clock but I was determined to return to Quetico. Resolving never to endure such misery again, I developed, out of necessity, strategies to ensure future canoe-camping success. Those strategies - and a healthy amount of determination - have made four separate canoe trips possible since then. I returned home from each with both my physical health and my pride intact. This is how I did it.

Back in the Saddle Again...

My struggle crossing Quetico happened in July, 2016. Like a batter hit by a pitched ball, I felt it best to step back into the batter's box right away to re-build my confidence. So, just two months later in late September, I shoved off from a sandy beach near the Dawson Trail in my Wenonah Prism and headed, solo, for big Pickerel Lake. My thinking? There's plenty of beautiful country to be explored, fished, and enjoyed around the perimeter lakes of the park.

On the north side Quetico, especially, you can paddle a LONG way without portaging... my biggest nemesis. "Routing" now looms more important than ever in my pre-trip planning. Don't be fooled by innocuous-looking lines marking portage rods on typical maps. There are good resources available to help you differentiate between "easy" and "hard" portages. These include: the BWJ's "Trips Program" (offered free to subscribers), the PaddlePlanner.com mapping website, portage databases on

websites like QuietJourney.com, the park service itself, and local, experienced outfitters who assist paddlers regularly and know current conditions.

So off I paddled into sunny, breezy conditions on Pickerel Lake that early autumn afternoon. "Paddling" gives me no trouble whatsoever; I can go all day long. This day I seemingly had the park to myself as I paddled into the westerly breeze. In less than four hours I reached a preferred southside sand beach campsite not far from the dam above Bisk Lake. As managing afternoon chop on big Pickerel is always an accomplishment, I was pleased with myself. It was a welcomed confidence-builder. I wasn't "helpless" out here... if I stayed within my limitations. As there were still a few days left to "lake trout season" I quickly pitched my tent and went out and had some fun.

My buddy Lawrence Donley, was to join me a few days later. While waiting, I made careful notes about those camp activities which aggravated my hip, causing instability or pain. Portaging wasn't the only thing that gave me grief. There is simply a lot of up-and-down activity in a typical camp: stooping to pick up firewood, hauling a canoe in and out of the water, moving gear around, and even getting down on my knees to crawl into my tent (I should have brought my hammock tent; there's less bending involved), etc.. My left hip "spoke to me" a bit those first few days, even during this easy trip. During the upcoming "off-season" I would need to figure ways to avoid putting so much pressure on it.

Lawrence literally blew onto my beach one afternoon, deposited there by a howling wind which he had no business paddling in. I ran down the beach to chastise him for his foolishness and to lend him a hand getting out of his canoe. I held my tongue, however, when he placed an adult beverage into that extended hand. It helped to ease my cares. In return, I offered him some late-season lake trout caught in the waters below Emerald Island. It was a fair exchange.

Our next four days together featured more wind, wet weather, and lessons re-learned about the downside of choosing west-facing campsites. Learning to cope and even thrive under adverse conditions is one of the great gifts of outdoor adventuring. We had a blast together despite what some would characterize as nasty conditions. All told, I spent eight days enjoying the south side of Pickerel Lake.

On my last day, I waved goodbye to Lawrence, who elected to stay another day, and paddled off into extreme fog-bound conditions without the benefit of electronics. I was proud of myself after negotiating the length of big Pickerel and French lakes in such "soup." The park can humble you in a hurry but it also teaches me a great deal each trip. The independence and confidence it has fostered in me have been great blessings. My resolve to return was reinforced after this trip. During my long drive home, I concentrated on all the actions I might take during the upcoming "hard-water" season to make next year's paddling season a little easier.

An Off Season of Diet, Exercise and Careful Planning...

My first action was to see my doc, notes in hand. Motions involved in loading, unloading, bending, lifting and portaging raise havoc with my hip and cause me to lose precious stability. I have trouble with inclines and declines, load or no load. It gets doubly-bad when conditions are slippery. The doc informed me that my big problem was severe osteoarthritis in my left hip, rendering me "bone-on-bone." A "hip replacement" would fix it but, given my active lifestyle (I'm in the gym every day, take multiple Quetico trips/year, etc.), he didn't recommend surgery just yet. He likened my hip to a "beat-up old Dodge Caravan", suggesting it might be best to drive it "until it dies and you simply can't stand the pain any longer." He feared that, if I had surgery now, he would end up "replacing

the replacement" in less than 10 years. His recommendations: 1) postpone surgery until I slow down, 2) get quarterly cortisone shots, and 3) shed 10 pounds. We would re-evaluate in 6 months.

I've always worked out. 1-2 hours daily, every day, for a long, long time. Due to changes in metabolism that come with age, I don't burn calories efficiently anymore. The weight I've put on since my "glory days" contributes to all sorts of issues. It has taken its toll on my back and hips (as has osteoarthritis, genetics, sports injuries, and a host of other contributing factors). Weight, however, should be a factor I could control... or could I? Physical debility has made it even harder to exercise effectively (no running, jumping, or heavy pounding on my legs due to the lack of "shock absorbers"). Bottom line: exercise, alone, wasn't cutting it any more... leaving me with but one truly dreaded alternative. I'd have to - gulp - go on a diet IF I was serious about weight loss! Yikes, there goes my beer, bread, and cheese!

Different diets work for different folks. My wife, Nancy, and I settled on, "The Fast Metabolism Diet" promoted by Haylie Pomroy. Combined with daily exercise, I lost twenty pounds in just a few months, double my doctor's recommendation. My wife did far better. Nancy's positive experience encourages me to continue to eat healthy as I still have a few more pounds I want to shed.

The doc offered another suggestion: focus on core muscle development. Despite all the hours I already put into exercise, I was simply not targeting muscles that would take stress off my hips. As noted, even my portage-free September experience included lots of aches and pains. He recommended workout tips that might address those problems. Consequently, I began spending a lot of time on a gym floor mat, emphasizing abdominal exercises, various yoga postures, wall sits, stretching (especially hamstrings), and numerous foam roller and large ball activities. I do about an hour's worth of this four times a week in addition to everything else I normally do. Results were gratifying. In addition to getting me ready for canoe season, diet and exercise took my waist size down a notch or two!

Stability while portaging is a big issue for me. My worn-out old boots weren't helping any. Therefore, I sampled numerous offerings from vendors at the annual CanoeCopia event in Madison, WI. Every year I attend that event with the goal of upgrading my canoe-camping outfit, little-by-little, to lighter, stronger, more high-performance gear. This year I walked away with a brand-new pair of Caney Fork portage boots. These proved to be a fine investment, providing more traction and stability on the portage trail.

As springtime approached, I was still not where I wanted to be physically. If I wanted to do a trip I'd better put something "on the books." My big questions were: where and with whom? The "whom" really affected the "where." Without help I could rely upon, I was likely to limit myself to the park's peripheral lakes.

My two sons - both with strong backs and legs - love to paddle with me in Quetico. Either would be happy to assist where I might struggle. Unfortunately, neither could get away from their busy lives this year. Happily, I also have a nephew, Galon Hall, an outdoors enthusiast who had been dying to join me on a wilderness fishing trip for a long time. Galon is a National Working Lands for Wildlife Coordinator, a Certified Wildlife Biologist, and an avid hunter and fisherman. He also had the prerequisite strong back and legs necessary for helping "old Uncle Jim" in his quest to do another canoe trip!

An Excursion to Sturgeon Lake...

I thoroughly enjoy introducing folks to the Quetico wilderness. I delight in showing them around and helping find the experience they're after. In the case of Galon, it would be the fishing and, given his profession, maybe an opportunity to spot some of our more notable wildlife. He also looked forward to sharing a camp and swapping tales with some experienced outdoorsman friends of mine would join us after a few days. With only a week to spend on the water, I figured Sturgeon Lake would suit both his goals and mine while offering great sampling of the Quetico experience.

I had decided that, with my re-tooled body and with Galon's help, I should be able manage the three 100-150 rod portages involved in reaching upper Sturgeon Lake from our entry on Pickerel Lake's north side. Wet conditions, however, made those portages difficult for me. Right off the bat, the trek down to the put-in from the Stanton Bay parking lot was a veritable stream! Fortunately, Galon took to canoe-tripping like a pro, assisting where he could and exercising great patience with my methodical, painstaking progress throughout. On the bright side, the wet conditions which made the portages challenging also made negotiating the four beaver dams below Twin Lakes on Deux Rivieres a breeze! We floated over these obstacles without missing a beat!

Just below Twin Lakes I surely impressed Galon as somewhat of a park "guru." Less than two minutes after declaring this to be "prime country for moose", out sauntered a big, dark bull with large velvety antlers! He slowly ambled west-to-east across Deux Rivieres. We gave him the right-of-way and sat back to enjoy the show. While Galon was mesmerized in awe of the majestic creature right in front of him, I fumbled for my camera. What is the best camera for park-tripping? The one you can lay your hands on when the precious moment arrives! I started redeeming my value as a paddling partner by snapping a few nice pics of "Galon's moose," mementos that I hope he will regard with fondness back in his office in Washington, D.C. this winter.

We pitched our shelters at the 5 Star campsite at the northeast end of upper Sturgeon. Before the evening was through, Galon was landing 3 and 4-pound smallmouth. He seemed a happy camper. We were off to a good start and I felt like I was earning my keep.

Good times ended the next morning, however. I had decided we would day-trip over to Antoine Lake. Galon had heard me brag about how I once nailed the grand slam there in single morning on the same lure. I was anxious to give him a taste of such action. Unfortunately, wet conditions turned the two portages into boot-sucking quagmires. Moreover, after our mighty struggle, we managed only one tiny bass on Antoine Lake. So much for me being a guru! We salvaged the day, however, by trolling Ram Lake on our way back. It was a winning choice. Our two nice lake trout made a very fine supper!

Our trip really came alive over the next few days. An on-line friend known as "Solotripper" had suggested that I check out the far northeastern corner of Sturgeon and the three short portages into Oliphant Lake. It was great advice! In the marshy area before you approach the first of those portages, we encountered groups of whistling swans and their cygnets. Further along this beautiful paddling route, smallmouth bass fishing proved to be outstanding, especially below the rapids. Over on Oliphant Lake, we each landed elusive missing links in our respective quests for fishing grand slams. We were happy campers, again!

Less happy were my friends who set out to meet us on our fourth day. We expected these three guys to arrive for supper... in fact, we counted on it. They were bringing the steaks we planned to eat! However, at 8:00pm there was still no sign of them. These campers were very experienced so I wasn't terribly worried but I was a bit surprised. Conditions were quite wet but I knew these fellows were up to it. Convinced they were still coming, Galon and I built up a big fire to dry them out and

warm them up upon arrival.

Like a moth drawn to our flame, a tandem canoe finally pulled into camp around 8:30pm. "Pine Knot" and "Wally13" climbed out. Wally13 used to be known as "Wally12." He ditched that on-line "handle" after he landed his first 12-pound walleye a few years ago. He hoped to graduate to "Wally14" before this season ended. Galon was anxious to glean what he could from such fishermen! Sadly, our third friend didn't make it due to poor health. Rather than ruin the trip for the others, he elected to "bailout" that morning at the last minute. Packs required reshuffling and lodging needed to be arranged for the buddy left behind, causing their delay.

Of all possible bad scenarios, that would rate as one of the worst for me, waiting around in town until the friends I traveled with exited the park a week or two later. Like me, these three guys are in their 60's and, perhaps, more prone to this sort of trouble. But for the grace of God, that could have been me having to stay behind. It reminded me just how precious my remaining canoe-tripping days really are.

After a full day of enjoying the company of our friends, Galon and I opted to leave the park a day early. We sought out our missing comrade and squeezed him into our packed vehicle, giving him a lift most of his way back home. Galon and I counted our own blessings every step of the way!

Checking Out an Alternative Approach....

Only a week later I had yet another opportunity to introduce friends to wilderness canoeing and fishing. My brother Gary and I had not seen our childhood friends, Dr. Gary Grover and Dr. Edward Grover, also brothers, in over 40 years. They lived on the East Coast. Upon "reconnecting", both guys mentioned they enjoyed smallmouth bass fishing. When I told them that Quetico was one of the best smallmouth bass fisheries in the world, they were all in!

Sadly, we learned that one of the brothers has some significant medical limitations. Imagine that... my "club" of old guys with physical debilities and "restrictions" seemed to be growing! After much debate, "camping" was decided to be ill-advised. Nevertheless, my motto this year seems to be: "where there is a will there is a way!" We evaluated our options and came up with a plan that promised to accommodate my good friend's limitations yet offer a taste of canoe-country fishing.

We rented a large house on Eva Lake, located just outside of Quetico Park. It belonged to The Quetico College School. When my portaging days are done, such an approach might be my logical next step. While I was eager to size up the experience, I was skeptical as to how I would respond to such a change of pace. We would make day-trips, fishing Eva, Windigoostigwan and Crooked Pine lakes. We would even venture over to Nym and French lakes, at the edge of the park itself.

This plan kept us in the same watershed as Quetico Park. Indeed, most of the terrain we visited was like what I am accustomed to. The upshot: we had a fine time reminiscing and did pretty well fishing for smallmouth bass. Each of my long-lost buddies boated smallmouth that exceeded four pounds. Coming home to a warm, dry, and mostly mosquito-free shelter each day was also a nice plus. While I enjoyed the trip, the presence of housing – sparse as it was – and the occasional motorboat were much like itches that I could not scratch. Ultimately, I decided I am not ready for this mode of engaging the north woods on a regular basis. Not just yet. By my accounting, the experience simply does not "measure up" to my memories of more full-blown adventures deep inside the park.

As long as my rickety-old body cooperates, I'll pursue dreams that would put me on more ambitious paths. In my heart, I know I would prefer to have shown my very good friends "the real thing." This

may be the alternative path I must eventually follow. Nevertheless, I hope to put "eventually" off a while longer.

Finding Inspiration in Another Old Friend....

When September rolled around, I planned a solo trip that would cover the entirety of Cirrus Lake, located in the far northwestern quadrant of Quetico. I was pleased that Lawrence Donley would once again join me, as he had the previous year. You can't beat tripping with old friends with compatible habits and styles of travel! Lawrence was familiar with my limitations but agreed to join me anyway. There are really but three not-so-bad portages required to access Cirrus Lake from the Beaverhouse Lake entry. Therefore, I didn't feel I would represent too much of a burden or liability. More likely I risked "boring him" as he waited for me to finish "triple portaging." As it turned out, Lawrence, known as "Magic Paddler" on-line, was not one to stand idly by. Ten years my senior, he would grab my "third load" a few times during this trip, unasked by me!

Lawrence is an incredibly efficient tripper. He packs the essentials, no more and no less. Well, ok, this time, maybe, he did pack a little less. When we reached the put-in at Beaverhouse Lake, he discovered he had left his paddle behind back in Chicago! Fortunately, I had a spare, a "relic" that was ancient when I bought it at some garage sale twenty years earlier. I feared it would splinter apart on the first rock he hit. We took our chances with it, anyway. Clearly, with our minds as well as our bodies failing us, we old codgers needed to stick together!

The beauty of Cirrus Lake for guys with limitations like mine is, once you reach it, you can paddle a long way without portaging. In fact, we wouldn't portage again until we exited the park. Our pace would be leisurely, featuring three camps - all located on Cirrus Lake - over ten days of travel. Aided by a blustery tail wind, we reached our first camp mid-way along the upper tier of Cirrus Lake in the early afternoon. We did not see a soul on the water, a very positive aspect of September travel if you are seeking "solitude."

Overcast skies seemed to aid our fishing during our first couple days. Trolling a red and white flatfish bait, I managed a grand slam in one day. We both put fish in the pan for dinner. Lawrence gives me a lot of flak about my hauling in my heavy aluminum BWJ fry pan, given my aches and complaints. I guess that just goes to show you where I draw MY line as to what gear is essential, even in my condition. That well-seasoned BWJ fry pan is essential to my eating well; it goes on every trip. It's funny how I never hear complaints or jibes about that frying pan around dinner time!

I admit to bringing a few luxuries on this relatively portage-free trip. One luxury was my lightweight "director's chair." Bending is a problem for me. This chair provides great support and sits high, making it easy for me to get in and out of. When the sun came finally out during the afternoon of our third and last day at this camp, I plopped that chair down at the water's edge and treated myself to one of the great satisfactions I find in camping... the chance to shave, bathe, and clean up a bit. A lot of guys tell me I'm nuts, as in "Who cares, so why bother with hygiene?" Truly, I'm not exactly certain why I find this activity so pleasurable. I find it immensely satisfying to bask in sunshine while a breeze dries my freshly cleaned skin.

So, there I was, eyes shut, sunning myself in my director's chair, soaking it all in when the coolness of deep shadow enveloped me. I opened my eyes and there, above the treetops on the northern horizon was one of the darkest, most ominous-looking, towering clouds I had seen in a long time. Lawrence was equally oblivious, so I quickly got his attention and we hustled to batten down camp.

We knew we were in trouble when we witnessed “white caps” being wiped off the lake in the fury of the blast! Almost simultaneously, a wall of wind and water walloped us! My last glimpse of Lawrence was of him racing to his hammock tent some thirty yards away. That old boy could sure move when he had to! Me? I held the kitchen tarp tightly with both hands, pulling it down over my head, doing my best to keep it from blowing away. Wind, spray, trees, and falling debris made an amazing racket, interrupted at one point by a large crashing thud at some undetermined distance. I was too focused on saving our kitchen tarp and trying to stay dry to risk popping my head out to see what all was going on. Ten minutes later, the tempest simmered down. I peeked from under my still intact kitchen tarp which was now wrapped around me. Lawrence was OK, headed in my direction, and looking curiously at my feet. A 300+ pound branch had blown off the top of the tree where Lawrence’s hammock was hung, sailing over thirty yards and nearly crushing me! Well, at least the mystery of the crash was solved.

After chasing down a few pots and pans and cleaning up the campsite, I jotted down a couple notes and words-to-the-wise: “Next time all hell breaks loose, forget the tarp! Hustle your butt over to the windward edge of camp near the water’s edge. Trees can’t fall on you there!” Yet another strategy for extending my tripping years, I suppose.

Thankfully, life at our second camp, near Sue Falls, proved less eventful. We finally ran into other folks, a pair of “sixty-somethings”, like myself. “Nile” and “Tom”, an attorney and dentist, respectively, from St. Louis, were “day-tripping” down to the falls from Cole Lake to the north. Both were big fans of The Boundary Waters Journal. I was really pleased to learn they have been active introducing youth to the park through the Boy Scouts and other organized groups. They lamented the fact that so few younger folks seem to embrace canoe country these days. Lawrence, contentedly jigging while we chatted, treated us to a display of fishing prowess, landing a very nice lake trout in the basin below the falls. After exchanging a few tips about staying in shape for our canoeing adventures, we parted company.

A day later, Lawrence lost another lake trout, a real lunker, as we headed to our third camp, back on the lower tier of Cirrus Lake. Despite being teased by that encounter, windy conditions and bluebird skies seemed to dampen the appetites of most other fish. Therefore, I spent much of those last three days in my director’s chair on one of my favorite sand beaches, taking great delight in bathing and doing my hygiene thing. This time Mother Nature cooperated and didn’t pitch a stormy fit over it.

Soaking in warm sunshine, I noted the fiery autumnal displays of red and yellow already appearing in a few trees across the lake. Sadly, these reminded me: this would be my last trip of the season. In a wave of nostalgia, I reflected that I had struggled a good deal less this year than last. I attribute this result to preparation, planning and especially to supportive companionship on each adventure.

Oh, I would be remiss not to mention that I also had more than my share of good fortune. Case in point: during the pre-dawn hours after a last and particularly windy night on Cirrus Lake, I marched along the path to the latrine area. My head lamp was on. I didn’t get very far at all when the path suddenly disappeared, not thirty yards from my shelter. Thinking maybe I had gotten lost in the dark, I flipped my head lamp into “high beam.” Then, suddenly, I understood. Not one but TWO huge trees had blown down during the night!

Later, I told Lawrence about it and chuckled. Here, at last, was an actual “dividend” from my aging experience. I had long since learned to NEVER to pitch my shelter under “widow makers”!

I do my best to dodge Mother Nature and cheat Father Time. Paddle on.

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