

Paddling and Camping along the Saint John River circa 1947

William MacIntosh (1867-1950) was a curator of the Museum of the Natural History Society of New Brunswick in Saint John from 1898 to 1932. He had a summer home on the Nerepis River near the Brittain Rd. He participated in planning a provincial museum and became its director two years later. MacIntosh collected specimens, arranged exhibitions and gave educational lectures to museum visitors. For many years, he took local children in canoes on camping trips throughout the province almost every summer – famously launching each excursion by performing a handstand in his canoe! The following story is written by one of those fortunate campers.

Mister's Canoe Trips

For many years on "Dominion Day", a gathering of young, enthusiastic New Brunswickers gathered on the shores of the Saint John River at Harding's Point on the Kingston Peninsula. They were to commence a unique experience in their lives, for this was the launching point of the annual canoe trip led by Dr William Macintosh, otherwise known by his admirers as "Mister". The number of years Mister led these informal trips is now lost in history, but they were many. This story relates only a small portion of these outings.

It was in 1947 that I as a 14 year old first encountered Mister's wonderful leadership, knowledge and expertise of the history of the Saint John River, its tributaries and adjoining lakes. He was 80 years old at the time. He was then the curator of the New Brunswick Museum, a geologist by training, and had an endless knowledge of the Mi'kmaq Indian culture and their stories which he learned first hand from them in his younger years.

It seems that every July first was hot and sunny and the river was calm. Just as well, as the first day of paddling was a 20 mile route to Gorhams Bluff, the campsite of choice at the mouth of the Belleisle River. An early start was required if the group was to set up camp by 4:00 pm. Many paddlers brought their own canoes which were destined to hold two paddlers and gear carried throughout the trip. The canoe of choice was the Chestnut canoe, manufactured in Fredericton. It was most stable and could carry a lot of heavy gear and still float high in the water, regardless of the weather and river conditions. Personal gear, consisting of duffle bags, sleeping bags, cooking gear, tents and tarps, was divided among the canoes. Non-perishable goods were also carried, such as canned baked beans, canned meat (Kam), sacks of oatmeal, sugar, loaves of bread and bottles of peanut butter and jam. These goods plus the two paddlers added quite a weight to the canoes. However, there was never a need to unload goods to portage, as all water access of the many lakes and tributaries off the St John River was provided by wonderful, attractive, narrow winding thoroughfares.

Fresh vegetables from the farms along the river were obtained when needed. The cost was negligible as the accommodating farmers would allow the group to swarm the fields and pick the crops themselves. Nothing tasted better than those freshly harvested Carrots, peas, potatoes, corn and seasonal fruit. A daily supply of fresh milk in a gallon pail was a regular purchase from the farms. It often was quite a hike to a farm, so volunteers were not terribly enthusiastic to make the trek. Personally I found the task a delight and volunteered often, especially at the MacDonald farm on Grand lake. It was a long hike up a steep grassy hill, but I discovered that

timing was crucial to arrive at 4 pm. That was when the fresh pies came out of the oven and I always received an ample sample. I managed this rouse for two years before others caught on!

Upon arrival at a campsite, a regular routine was followed: gather firewood, set up the cooking "chip" (chipnawagon from the Mi'kmaq name) and finally set up the tents, tarps, or canoe sleeping areas. "Girls upstream, boys downstream" was Mister's call. After that one could swim or sit and chat until supper.

Three people would prepare a meal and serve it; another three would clean up. One exception was that Mister always prepared the breakfast coffee and "porridge with bugs in it" (raisons!). The group toasted their own bread with cut sticks over the ebbing fire. Meals were cooked in three large gallon-size pails hung from the "chip". A frying pan and a good sized coffee pot seemed to be the only other cooking gear needed.

Memorable suppers still linger in one's mind, the three cooking buckets of fresh corn at Douglas Harbour for one. The group devoured the sweet buttery taste of the freshly picked corn while sitting on the beach sands watching a huge, full, orange harvest moon rise on the horizon. It was framed by the small opening of the half circle entrance to the harbour, like a tropical atoll. I remember a succulent dinner of roasted chicken on a spit, served with all the fresh vegetables available, followed by a wonderful peach shortcake (from a small store), topped with whipped cream which had been beaten by hand in a bucket at a surprised farmer's kitchen.

Many of our campsites were situated on original Mi'kmaq camping grounds. Mister would describe the Indian activities which would occur on the site. The group would listen, glued to every word spoken. They became "moments of learning. At one site on Grand Lake near the head of the Jemseg River, a beautifully formed quartz arrow head was found. Mister explained that being white quartz, it was from the Edmunston area, a long way up river. Grand Lake had only red quartz deposits. The group guessed a battle might have occurred, but Mister assured us that it was more likely a hunting trip.

Crossing calm but foggy Grand Lake, Princess Park came into view through the mist. At the edge of a sandy beach stood tall red sandstone cliffs. A beautiful old red sandstone staircase had been built into the cliffside on private property. Climbing the stairs along the cliff, some of the group found beautiful rocks embedded with perfectly formed ferns and leaves. Mister thrilled the group pointing out the 500 million year old fossils. It was difficult for the young enthusiastic campers to grasp such numbers at the time. On the same Grand Lake, the group of 15 all sat astride a huge petrified tree trunk which had fallen eons ago.

It is interesting to note that no one ever heard a command or an instruction from Mister. He led us through our excited finds, answering all our questions and telling tales of Indian exploits related to our new discoveries, never teaching, but taking the proper teaching moment to release his magnitude of experience and knowledge.

There was a time when the group paddled into Macquapit and French lakes via a thoroughfare off Grand Lake. The narrow waterway shone black in the shade and was long and winding as in a tropical jungle. As the waterway started to open, a few canoes took a short cut across some very shallow water, saving a half mile of paddling. One had to walk beside the canoes in less than ankle deep water over a comfortable sandy bottom. Suddenly, there was a quiet splash:

the bow paddlers were swimming the crawl across 10 yards of deep water and as quickly, they were standing on shallow sandy ground again in ankle deep water. This occurred three times until we reached solid land. One lad made a surface dive into one of the channels, coming to the surface with bloody nose and ears. When Mister arrived, he was not pleased. It is the one time he ever spoke sternly but quietly about not staying in the thoroughfare. He refused to explain his reasons of concern. It was later learned that Mister had discovered the glacial channels years ago, proving that glaciers had formed in the lower areas of New Brunswick; until then it was not recognized as glacial area. A magnificent discovery!

There are memories of trying to maintain one's balance while walking along the slippery edge of a log boom while pulling the canoes toward Grand Lake. Log booms frequently filled the narrow Jemseg River from side to side. It was a challenge not to fall in between the logs.

While camped on Macquapit Lake, a ranger who was about to release a newly banded bald eagle, paddled to the campsite and asked if we wanted to see it released. Of course! We watched in awe at the bird's flight took it skyward, slowly circling over us before gliding away to freedom. The ranger explained it was a young eagle, having no white head, which came after the age of five. He said the wing span of the 3 year old bird was seven feet!

In the late forties, one could watch the salmon jump in the Saint John River, hear the loons lamenting their nightly evening song and see the northern lights in August, close enough to hear them crackle. These are experiences which remain with one forever.

One year a trip commenced at Fredericton, and the group travelled with all their gear on the Purdy, an old era river boat, from Saint John to Fredericton. From there the campers paddled to Grand Lake and back to Harding's Point. The large cement wharves located on opposite shores of the St John River served as landing places as well as providing a diving and swimming area for the group.

Travel on the water was pleasant and easy most times. Occasionally high winds combined with large waves would last as a three day "blow". During those times, the group would stay put and perhaps hike along a rural road to a store for an ice cream cone and soda pop. Can you imagine a 5 scoop ice cream cone costing five cents a scoop? Other times the group would venture out through the waves and tidal currents, especially by Cedar Island near Oak Point. Sometimes to combat the rough weather, the group would rise at 5 am and set out on the quieter water, stopping for a mid morning breakfast when the wind returned.

The highlight of the day was the restful evening sing-songs by the fire, followed by an Indian legend told by Mister. After an hour, Mister would stop, sometimes with the story incomplete. We would plead for him to continue, but he always refused, saying "Tomorrow". He apologized that his story might take an hour or even three days for him to relate, but he would explain it took the Indians a week to tell the same story. He would not do an injustice to the Mi'kmaq people by finishing a story too soon! The stories were of Gloosecap's tales - how the beaver got its tail, the raven's ability to glide so high and far, of Ojistisquaw - a cultural village experience and the story of the pine trees. That one closely resembled the white man's story of the pied piper, except in the Mi'kmaq version, the parents pleaded with the piper to release the children so they could return home. The piper agreed, and as the music stopped, each child stopped dancing, and as they touched the ground, they turned into a beautiful white pine trees.

From that day on the wind can be heard through the pines as the children continued to dance forever. So many of these rich stories have unfortunately been lost with the passing of Mister.

The group always retired around 9 pm with the singing of taps and the Lord's Prayer. This became an automatic gesture that seemed to fit the quiet of the night and sent all to bed tired and relaxed with a good night's sleep for the start of another day.

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Note. Anne is a native Saint Johner who lived at Mount Pleasant Court and Glen Lyon on the Kingston Peninsula before leaving the province for university at McGill and a career as a professor at Queen's University in Ontario.