



# REFLECTIONS



## SOMMERS ALUMNI ASSOCIATION

### Crossing Portages 2005-2009 Campaign Nearly Half Way to Goal!



To date, eighty-four Sommers Alumni have committed themselves to "Making A Difference" by crossing Prairie, Meadows, and Horse portages, and single- and double-packing Grand Portage. Cash and 5-year pledges totaling \$120,000 thus far were generously made by:

Thomas Beaton, Kent Behnken, Douglas Bender, Paul Bruns, Chuck Buenger, Robert Cargill, Thomas Carr, Christopher Clay, Roy Conradi, Nigel & Cyd Cooper, Patrick Cox, Tom Derrick, Travis DeWitt, Blaine Diesslin, Richard Doolittle, Julie Engle, William Erickson, John Erkkila, Gene Felton, John Fenoglio, Wendy Fevig, Monte Fronk, John Graham, James Guldán, Keith Gutierrez, Dave Greenlee, Dale Hanson, Larry Hanson, Mark Hayman, Scott Hedges, Dallas Hill, Doug Hirdler, Mike Holdgrafer, Paul Holte, Tim Huemiller, Dave Hyink, Ken Klein, Dave Kvam, Greg

Kvam, Robert LaFortune, Eric Lawerance, Doug McDuff, Kevin McKee, Michael McMahan, Robert Morgan, Alex Nepple, Steven Neidorf, John Nicolaus, Bob O'Hara, Ralph Olsen, Richard Olson, Jack Parker, Kevin Parsons, Jerry Patterson, Jon Pederson, Rodger Peterson, Shawn Piel, Steve Pratt, Mike Quinn, Greg Ralph, Douglas Ramsey, Dean Rau, Paul Reitemeier, Allen Rench, Chuck Rose, J. Pat Ross, Richard Russell, Louis Sabatini, Steven Schwen, Richard Shank, James Shepherd, Steven Spencer, Bruce Tannehill, Robert Thies, David Trampe, Thomas Turpin,

Michael Varner, Terry Wall, James Wedge, C. Raymond White, Larry Whitmore, Dennis Wogaman, Christopher Wolfe, and Hal Wolfe. Thanks to each and every one of you who have returned your pledge cards!

Follow-up "reminders" will be sent in a few weeks to encourage SAA members and friends to participate. You could help our efforts by mailing in your pledge today. If you have misplaced the materials, pledge forms may be downloaded by visiting [www.holry.org](http://www.holry.org). Each and every pledge and contribution makes a difference! Please allow us to add your name to the list.

#### SUBMISSIONS TO:

##### REFLECTIONS

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Nanaimo, BC, Canada  
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or email in MS Word or Plain Text to:  
[mbingley@telusplanet.net](mailto:mbingley@telusplanet.net)  
with the subject line  
"Reflections"

Pictures are appreciated  
in high quality .jpg  
format or by snail mail.

**DEADLINE for next  
issue is - October 15th**

## The Return of the XY Company

*By Jon Nelson*

The XY Company was a Canadian fur trade enterprise that was formed in 1797 by a group of men that were disenchanted with Simon McTavish's leadership of the North West Company. They were in direct and sometimes rabid competition with the North West Company who labeled their packs NW; hence the new group called them-

selves by the two letters that come after W. The North West Company, Hudson Bay Company, American Fur Company and the XY Company all had posts and vied for trade in the boundary waters area. In 1802, Alexander Mackenzie gained control of the XY Company and when Simon McTavish died in 1804 the XY Company

rejoined the North West Company. Although it had a short life span, the XY Company was a relatively small and innovative company that had a big impact not only on this region but on the fur trade in North America. Currently, in Atikokan, there is a different XY Company. This company is still small and

*(Continued on page 8)*

## President's Message

by Patrick Cox

The recent tragic events of the Jamboree brought back memories of my own attendance at the 1977 National Jamboree in Moraine State Park in Pennsylvania (we called it "More Rain" since it rained more than the sun shined during the course of the Jamboree). I was, at the time, a kid who had never traveled north that was from a family of small town folks from the deep south. I was joined by three or four kids from my troop in Nacogdoches, Texas who were part of a council troop for the trip to our nation's capital and to Jamboree. I can still recall that we were shocked to find no Dr. Pepper in the vending machines or at the fountain in the Trading Post – we thought we had been dropped right into middle of a bunch of heathens.

The reason for the memory coming up was that this was my connection to Ely and the SAA. One of the older kids at Jamboree from my home town troop created a group of Minnesota/Canadian canoe enthusiast in the middle of deep East Texas by the simple act of picking up some literature. The weird thing to me is that I can actually remember when we were in the Jamboree activity tent talking about it and took some of the information with us. His name was Rusty and, although I can no longer recall his last name, I do recall that moment when our lives changed.

The information made its way back to our troop leaders who decided immediately to go canoeing in Canada. They put together two crews for a trip to Ely in 1978. Canute Nisswandt and Dave Bryce were our guides. My crew was Dave's first crew – information which he volunteered. If the advisors

had any concerns about the fact that our guide was relatively inexperienced, we kids never knew. We paddled over what I later discovered was the Fall's Chain and took the long portage from Kenny Lake to bypass all the short portages on the way to McKewon and Louisa. My troop in Nacogdoches later delivered at least two other trail staff to work for Charlie's Place and made trips every other year for a number of years. Brian "Hawk" Hawker guided one of those crews in 1980. Brian also became a good friend a short couple of years later when I had the pleasure of coming to Ely in 1982 to become a Charlie Guide. I also came to know our guide Dave as a senior member of trail staff whose knowledge was then coveted by every Swamper. Canute reappeared at a reunion a couple of years ago when we shared a few memories of that trip in 1978.

The memories of the canoeing and fishing on that trip are vivid today nearly 30 years later. The impact was positive and long lasting. The reason I bring this to you in my column is that it is easy to forget the impact the guide can have on the kids in the crew (those we lovingly called "Grubs"). Of course, it has an even greater impact on us as their guides but it is an impact we do not come to fully understand until a few years after we retire as Charlie Guides.

The contribution made by the staff of today have the same impact on a new generation of youth who share a love of the wilderness. As alumni, we can help make the job easier for them by our contributions of time, money, and information. Most of the Alumni give very generously of their money as

*(Continued on page 10)*

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**Volume 15, Number 2 Reflections** is the official publication of the Charles L. Sommers Alumni Association, Inc., P.O. Box 428, 5891 Moose Lake Road, Ely, Minnesota 55731-0429. **Reflections** is published three times a year (Mar., July, and Oct.). The Charles L. Sommers Alumni Association, Inc. is a nonprofit Minnesota corporation. The IRS has determined that the Alumni Association is an organization described in section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. Donations to the Alumni Association are tax deductible. Membership to the Sommers Alumni Association is open to all persons 18 years and older. Association dues are \$10 for Annual Membership, \$25 or more annually for Sustaining Membership or \$150 (one time) for Life Membership. The Association's dues year begins January 1.

**MOVING?** Please let the Alumni Association know so they can update the Alumni database. Please provide your new address, phone number, etc. We will include your e-mail addresses in the member directory. Send your address changes or additions to P.O. Box 428, Ely, MN 55731-0428 or to Chuck Rose [cloose@stcloudstate.edu](mailto:cloose@stcloudstate.edu)  
**The US Postal Service will forward your newsletter to you - HOWEVER – they do it at the Alumni Association's expense!** The statement "Address Services Requested" on the newsletter tells the USPS that we want them to forward your newsletter so you don't miss an issue. It also provides us with your new address. For each issue we have between 50-100 address corrections that we pay \$.80 a piece to the USPS for this service. Please help us reduce this cost to the Association!

## Editor's Notes

Wow, my first issue as editor of reflections! I'm somewhat humbled by this opportunity and chance to serve the Association in such a public way. Let me start my service by thanking those who have gone before and made the way easier for me – Roy Conradi, Mark Nordstrom, CT Hart, my thanks go out to you. I also would like to thank Chuck Rose and Barb Hall for submitting so many articles for this issue – quite literally, there might not have been an issue if it wasn't for them.

This is the first issue that we're going to be publishing from both sides of the Canadian/US border. As usual, we're printing in Ely, but I'm editing from beautiful Nanaimo, BC, Canada (motto: Quetico, with mountains, and the water doesn't get hard in the winter) and our graphic artist, Sharon Girard, is put-

ting this together in Calgary, AB, Canada. I understand she lives near the river, so I think that qualifies her as a canoeist.

We've worked very hard on this issue and we're going to try to get another one out for wintertime! I've always loved reading the winter edition – it always brings such nice day-dreams about canoeing season that is right around the corner. Look forward to it!

So where from here? Well, for starters, we always need submissions – I would love to see some stuff in here from people from the more recent past and from the present. All you current interpreters, we'd love to hear from you! Pictures are always welcome as well.

Enjoy the newsletter and always remember to keep the curvy side down!

Bing

## Rendezvous Planning Underway for 2006



*Mike Zieghan, Cory Kolodgi and Barb Hall leading the hymnsing (or 'HOLY'RYE as they like to call it) in the Lodge on Sunday morning*

This last Rendezvous (2004) was exceptional and the hard work of the committees was rewarded by good turn out and a fun weekend of reuniting with Sommers Alumni and friends.

The Reunion Rendezvous Weekend is the strongest equity we have in keeping and growing our membership. With that

in mind, we are seeking input for our next Rendezvous, Labor Day weekend, 2006. There will be an emphasis on building a bridge between past Alumni and new Alumni. The format will be pretty much the same as in the past; Registration on Friday afternoon, Friday night Campfire/Sing, special events and programs around

## Red Renner Memorial Work Week - 2005 Plan

**When:** Work week for 2005 is scheduled for the fall – October, 2005. The place is Bissett. The exact date has not been set so contact us if you want to join in the fun and we will work with you on the dates if possible.

**Project:** Work with JJ on fixing the Bissett canoes cached out at Scout Lake. This will involve a fly out to Scout Lake in Bissett. The flight from Bissett to Scout Lake costs \$150 per person round trip. Please note that this cost is at your own expense. There will be time for fishing on Scout Lake in addition to the canoe work. Scout Lake and most of the nearby lakes have excellent walleye and trophy northern fishing. For the Charlie Guides from the late 70's and very early 80's, a portage trail was opened via a brush crash into the lakes north of Scout Lake in the mid-80's and is used regularly by the crews flying out of Bissett. The fishing is excellent in these lakes.

**Where:** Bissett is a small community of about 75 to 100

people located northeast of Winnipeg off the eastern shore of Lake Winnipeg. The crews primarily fly to a lake known as Scout Lake located north of Bissett where the canoes are stored. This is a rugged area and the canoes take more of a pounding than they will get in Atikokan or Ely. It is expensive to fly the canoes out for repairs and fly in replacements. The alternative that is less expensive is to fly the tools and the people to the canoes to make the repairs. JJ handles the repairs and normally does this in the fall. The Base will supply tools and food. You supply fishing gear and personal gear plus pay the cost of your flight out and back. This should be good fun and valuable service to the Base. Come join us. Advance notice is required to assure adequate food.

**New Work Week Coordinator:** Director Dick Shank has volunteered to take over as the coordinator of the annual Red Renner Memorial Work Week.

the Base Saturday with the Banquet at the Grand Ely Lodge that evening. Hymn sing Sunday morning in the Lodge. Good food, good music and reuniting with guides past and present. Family participation is encouraged.

There are exciting milestones coming up that the Association would like to recognize: The Base celebrates 85 years in operation in the year 2007. 'The Lodge', which has long been inspirational to many

of us, will be celebrating its 65th year. SAA has started a worthy project to restore the Lodge with interior renovation artifact cataloging and display projects, culminating in a Rededication in the year 2007. There will be a 'Mini' Alumni Reunion at that time.

Watch for more details in upcoming issues of Reflections and let us know what you think.

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## In Memorium - Ron Walls

I was sorry to hear of Ron Walls' passing as reported in the Summer 2005 Reflections. Though I knew him for only a couple summers, I consider him one of my early mentors. As with most such people in our lives, I had never taken the opportunity to tell him.

I first met Ron the summer of 1961 when I began the season as a "swamper" under Jeroux Sharp; then immediately began guiding, making the princely sum of \$35/month, as I recall. Ron, Gar Mulrooney and Mike Miler were the base staff "go-to" people when things needed to be accomplished. I initially lodged with them in the attic loft above the main lodge. I was just 18; Ron must have been all of 21! The Kingston Trio albums appeared to play nonstop. Between trips, I would always seek out Ron who invariably had an encouraging word for me plus a couple interesting stories to relate regarding goings-on while I was out.

Because of my lodging with them, I would often accompany one or the other on their frequent forays into Ely over the then-gravel Fernberg Road in the "Green Machine", the "Blue Gnu", or the "Red Rod", three well-worn pickups in service at that time, large Charles L. Sommers emblems emblazoned on their dusty doors.

Having just begun to drive, I recall marveling at how Ron was able to throw a truck into a tight sliding curve with a snap of the steering wheel.

That summer passed too quickly out on the trails and among the comradeship of the guide staff. A high sense of

adventure pervaded all we attempted. As I began college that fall, I had the feeling of a whole new world opening up to me.

The following summer most early-arriving staff spent a couple weeks "in the mines" replacing pilings supporting the original Bay Post. This was Ron's project; dirty, wet and muddy - employing wheelbarrows, picks and shovels in limited headroom. It was a high spirited time with lots of good-natured banter and competitiveness between work teams. Rope harnesses were attached to the front of each wheelbarrow by which loads of dirt would be run out of the ever-lengthening trenches; the wheelbarrow handler balancing the load and hanging on for dear life. At times the barrow would tip, yet be dragged out empty with derision showered on the errant wheelbarrow handler. The teams had established a humorous pecking order among the toilers. This consisted of "niminuts", "nebishes" and "nematodes". Though I disremember the specific hierarchy, I recall hilarious arguments as to the virtues and shortcomings of being one or the other. What appeared to be raucous fun accomplished some essential but backbreaking work in a very short time.

After departing the canoe base that fall our lives diverged, however Ron's friendship contributed essential pieces to my growing-up process.

Bob Vouk  
1961-62  
[bvouk@sysconn.com](mailto:bvouk@sysconn.com)

## From the "Canoe" listserve on the internet :

Mornin' everyone....

**I'll be up to NT next month to drop my son off -- he will be an interpreter this summer and is very excited about being on the NT staff for the first time. Since I will be "already there," I am going to bring my canoe and take 4-5 days to go fishing! I am thinking of doing a small loop from Moose to Knife Lake via Birch Lake. I might hook back down to Ensign Lake via Vera Lake to head home.**

**I just read a portion of the 2004 MN fishing regulations that said "Anglers who have a MN resident or nonresident license may fish only the MN portion of Canada's border waters." How strictly are these rules enforced on border lakes like Birch and Carp? Will I be OK if I just don't fish the northern shore of these lakes? (Sometimes it is hard to see that border line painted on the bottom of the lakes).**

Nat Davis

Hi Nat,

The issue with fishing border lakes is not so much one of fishing rights as it is one of citizenship. Canadian fish for the past several years have been considered as citizens under what was once known as Bill C-614-1997 which when it came into law (on April 1st, 1999, the same day

that the territory of Nunavut was created) extended "non-voting citizenship to all water creatures residing in Canadian waters and absolute sovereignty over the lake bottoms and waterous regions of the country" to them. All fish residing in the Canadian portions of border lakes at the point were issued "citizenship chips" a small microchip implanted in their left gill. As such, when fishing border lakes, it is prudent to use an "american fish only" lure which when it comes close to these Canadian fish emits a loud noise, thus scaring the Canadian fish away.

However, under the so-called "Fishy Soylen Green" act of June 1999, permits are permitted for the legal catching of fellow fishy citizens by Americans and Canadians alike.

Bing

Seriously though - the Canoe listserve on the internet (<http://usscouts.org/lists/>) is a great resource for advisors taking a trip through Northern Tier and is a great opportunity for Charlie Guides to pass a little bit of wisdom on to the next folks down the trail. Jason Herman, a guide who I worked with in Bissett in 1999, once told me that he who travels best makes the path easier for others - this is a great way for us to do that!

# The Novice

by Jerry Patterson

In a community such as Robinson Lake (nine miles west of Ely) thirteen and fourteen year old boys were an indispensable commodity. We were now a useful addition to many adult activities. Being big enough to carry a pack would get you an invitation to come along for spring beaver trapping. During the summer, the main preoccupation was trapping minnows. This involved emptying traps in the minnow swamp into buckets. The buckets hung from carved wooden yolk as we made our way from the swamp to the boat a half-mile away. These were day-long expeditions.

By age fourteen and fifteen, it was time to begin serious employment. Each of us would go to uncle Hank, who was the foreman of the track gang at Robinson Lake. He and several of my uncles rode the speeder every day to check the rails. In spring they would add extra men and continue the perpetual battle to keep the roadbed from sinking into the muskeg. We would replace the oak ties that had rotted out. Sometimes we laid steel for new spur lines on new roadbeds. Each day was slightly different. But after a few weeks scything grass, smoothing road beds, raising tracks, cutting brush, laying steel, it all blended together in a comfortable pattern.

This was a course followed by both of my brothers and all of my cousins. It was a kind of family trajectory that was understood and valued. It contained a set of subtle but gentle constraints that kept each of us moving in a

clearly delineated path. Being on that path meant having enough money. It meant that everyone understood who you were and what you were doing. You could be sure that every day would be like every other. There would be few surprises. If you accepted the virtues of this path you could be comfortable for life knowing that you had found your place in the sun. However, my adolescence brought experiences that eventually led to new paths that moved me far away from Robinson Lake. When they started, I had no idea that they were of any importance at all.

It was a chance encounter at school that deflected me ever so slightly from the family's path. In the spring, the school had announced a birding contest. At that time of year, Robinson Lake was a part of a major annual bird migration. A huge variety of birds loved the swamps in our lake basin. I bought a bird book and began making my list. Each day of the contest, I appeared at the top or close to the top of the list. There was one name that kept appearing above or right next to mine, Robert Olson. Eventually, we met. I don't remember who actually won the contest but the event set the occasion for a friendship that has lasted several decades.

Bob was smaller than many of us but well set up. He had a sort of a lean racer quality to the way that he moved. He was very quick and easy to laugh. By the time we entered high school we had become close friends and spent a good deal of time together exploring algebra,

girls and the other great mysteries. I had no access to a car so any evening activities often led to my staying over night and experiencing the warm hospitality of the Olson household. Bob's mother, Elizabeth Olson, had that marvelous ability to hold each person in such high regard that inevitably you find yourself rising to the occasion and actually being a better person. She never lost that ability. Even in middle age, I would find myself surging out the door looking for dragons in need of slaying. Our evenings often ended sitting in front of the fireplace. It was here that his father, Sig, would often sit with us for a few minutes. The conversations that ensued covered a huge array of topics, many of them related to wilderness and the history, philosophy and geology of wilderness. Bob and I could not claim to be students of Sig's, but by the time we had started high school we were reading many of the books by Emerson and Thoreau.

My family noticed that I was spending a good deal of time in Ely and with the Olsons. The family objected strenuously to the environmental problems that Sig and his colleague were introducing that would limit access to the primitive area. At one time or another, these limitations included removal of resorts, roads, outboard motors, and air access. These restrictions protected the wilderness area but made it extremely difficult for residents living in Ely to get into the area. That debate continues in my family, to this day.

In the spring of our sopho-

more year, Bob called the section house to say that his father had heard that they were opening a Boy Scout regional canoe base up on the Fernberg Road at Moose Lake. They wanted swamper guides, taking Scout groups into the Boundary Waters. It seemed unlikely that we would earn very much, but we might be able to spend a lot of time in the wilderness area up on the Canadian Border.

We drove to Moose Lake and eventually arrived at the newly constructed log out-buildings of the outfitting base. Hod Ludlow, the manager, was tall and slightly stooped, without an ounce of fat anywhere that I could see. He had big hands and there was a lot of eye contact as we talked. His laugh was infectious. There were no formal agreements, no contracts to sign. The nature of the tasks to be performed was left unspecified. Bob and I were the only locals. The base was jammed with young men only slightly older than we were and from all over the country. The first task was to get the Base ready for the first groups of scouts who would arrive in the next two weeks. The logs forming the main lodge and warehouse had not even been stained yet. Everything smelled new and fresh. The area outside the lodge was littered with logs, wood chips and piles of gravel. Inside there was a virtual symphony of odors, ranging from the smell of linseed oil in this corner to varnish, wood stain and new canvas tarps in another. In the warehouse, ☞

we were constructing bins for dehydrated fruit, milk and potatoes, counters for packs, tents, ground cloths, axes and army blankets.

Each of the staff went through practice sessions in canoeing, packing, first aid and plant identification. Those of us unfamiliar with Scouting were sent off to Wisconsin for a week's course at the Waterfront Director School. I was entirely innocent of any Scouting experience, so was sent off in the week prior to the Base opening. For the first time, I learned about the technology of paddling a canoe, J-strokes, bow rudders and sweeps. A tiny man with a huge voice, appropriately named "The Major", pushed us from dawn to dark. We learned how to empty a canoe full of water, whether you are in the water yourself or in another canoe.

Admission to the mess hall required that you observe the knot the Major had tied as he stood in the doorway, and then reproduce it yourself. I was always last to get into the hall. Classes in lifesaving were interspersed with classes in waterfront safety, rowing and swimming. It was not enough to be able to paddle a canoe; it was also necessary to learn to propel it without a paddle. To do this, you stand on the gunwale behind the stern seat and pump with your legs. It is still a great trick. If you also paddle while you pump, you can get an astonishing rate of speed going in a short period of time. My added move was strictly playful and therefore was not a part of The Major's manual.

By late early summer, I had become a full-fledged swamper. Brand new Jefferson logger boots with the long laces tied in a square knot in back so that six inches of lace hung down. Fringed dew flaps

were laced to hold across the toe. The long knife was worn on the right side with a bright red handkerchief hanging like a sash from the belt on the same side. The handkerchief was used as a headband, pot holder or bandage, but its main function was to add color and movement when you walked. Each of us added festoons of rope, string and leather to the belt, which enhanced the whole effect. It was a special, boots freshly greased: we were forerunners for the 1960 hippy costume. However, the eighteenth century voyageurs had dressed in the same exuberant style and probably for very much the same reason. The clothing and equipment were statements about what is functional in the bush and what is not. It is only in the city that it seems like a costume and out of place.

The Scout Base reflected an attitude toward the wilderness that was very different from the Robinson Lake perspective. For the family, going into the woods was as functional as going shopping in Ely. You went to the city for a purpose. In the same vein, when they went into the woods it was for a clear purpose, to get wood, to get fish, to lay in meat or to put up ice. Sometimes it was beautiful, and sometimes it was frightening. You enjoyed being a part of all of that, but it did not involve you in any sense of mission. The Scout Base was different. It communicated many of the ideas that Sig had discussed. There was a huge history left over from the fur trades of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that included the primitive area north of Ely. The voyageurs had portaged through this very country only a few hundred years ago. There was a real sense of excitement to learn-

ing that you could become part of a mission. Even the geology of this country was unusual. You could find yourself walking upon some of the original earth crust, some of the oldest rock in the world. The adults in this setting portrayed an intense sense of mission to protect and to understand this wilderness. To be a part of it required that you steadily acquire an enormous range of skills and be able to practice them at a very high level. Some of the adults who talked to us about this larger mission had all of the characteristics of a Zen master. They had incredible knowledge about nature, including a very high order of skills as outdoors men.

I do not think that many of the swampers were very articulate about being on a mission. The grandeur of the setting and the absence of experience, presided over by surplus adolescent hormones made us about as articulate as young salmon moving upstream. The growing sense of personal worth could be calculated by the most simplistic of formulas. It was something like  $\text{Speed} + \text{Distance} = \text{Success}$  as a Voyageur. Whoever could cover the greatest distance in a day or a week was obviously a high status person.

Scouts were assigned three to a canoe, so that portages could be covered in one trip. Three paddlers instead of two also meant that impossible distances could be paddled in a single day. We cruised to the edge of the map, paddling from dawn 'til dark and sometimes traveling after dark as well. Each return to the base brought news of lakes and rivers from the far edge of the map. Going from Mack Lake, to the east of Kawnipi, required following the twenty miles of the Wawiyag River to

the edge of the Quetico map. Alternately, a party of Scouts traveling at their normal speed could get to Pickerel Narrows at the northern edge in four or five days. Three paddlers traveling very light could perhaps do it in one or two days.

Living at the Scout Base with several dozen boy-men was like being in an area frequented by summer rainsqualls. Moments of calm could be pierced by a lightning burst of excitement. "The wind is howling down Moose Lake tonight pushing waves two or three feet high. Let's paddle to Basswood Lake! Let's go, just us three guys!" Black water, wind, rain, three boy-men laughing, howling at the sheer joy of riding the canoe over waves that lifted and surged like horses. Newfound Lake and Sucker before dawn, then roll up in sleeping bags on the first big island in Basswood Lake.

Given the emphasis upon speed, there was little time given for fishing, the reading of books or cooking. Unless we were short of food, fishing was time taken away from traveling, therefore time wasted. However, an early ten-day trip to Kashipiwi and down Sturgeon Lake to Poobah Lake was a notable exception. By the fourth day, the guide knew he had misjudged. We were short of food. We were deep into the Quetico and no one was willing to turn back or shorten the trip. At the end of each day, fishing became a very important activity. We consumed enormous amounts of filleted walleye and northern pike, but there was simply not enough food. The guide decided that as his swamper, I and two stalwarts would take a sixteen foot Old Town canoe and cut across at Miner Lake to M'Acree, Crooked, Basswood, back to Moose 🐾

Lake. There we would load up a hundred pounds of supplies and retrace our route to catch up with the party.

The magnificent three were given extra rations of peanut butter and hardtack as fuel for the "mission". Our one pack contained sleeping bags, rain gear and a tent. While leaving, we passed the group standing along the burnt-out shoreline, eating their breakfast of cornmeal mush, fish and dehydrated fruit. We stormed off under full peanut butter power. Fully conscious of our mission, we raced fourteen hours a day back to the canoe base at Moose Lake, where we were treated with utmost deference as men of grave purpose. Would we rest the night there? No indeed, our comrades await us somewhere north of the Crooked River. As we pushed through Newfound and Sucker Lakes, the wind rose steadily. We made good time across the first protected bay in Basswood Lake. Ahead, we could see the huge rollers coming in from Bailey Bay. We rounded the corner at mid-afternoon to face a wind from the west. It had a full ten-mile sweep. Magnificent black combers rolled across the bay right into us. We slipped briefly into the lee side of an island conveniently placed in the neck of the channel leading out to the full fury of the bay. We had a hero's feast of chocolate, hardtack, and peanut butter. We failed to notice that our sixteen-foot canoe with 450 pounds of fringed, beaded muscle had very little freeboard. Throwing in 100 pounds of rations, three pairs of heavy boots and an equipment pack put the operation in real jeopardy. None of us had ever paddled in waves of this size. However, there was

never any doubt in our minds that we would prevail.

Our only concession to the wind was to remove the boots and tie them to the thwarts. We backed into the lee for sixty feet or so to give us a running start on the situation. The three of us straining at the paddles lifted the bow out of the water with each synchronous stroke, added to our mounting sense of purpose and invincibility. We cleared the point by a good 60 feet before encountering the full force of the wind. The first comber rose gracefully under us as we powered into it. The front half of the canoe slid endlessly into the sky. The bowman's paddle could not reach the water. When we slammed down into the trough, he was thrown out of his seat but stayed in the canoe. The remaining two paddlers kept up the stroke and drove into the huge mass of water rolling in behind it. The tiny canoe cut through the top of it, but the wave continued to swell and dumped in a bathtub of water over the sides of the canoe. The next two waves filled the canoe to the gunwales. The canoe had become so unstable that all three of us were forced to sit on the bottom. We sat in stunned silence as the waves roared past us, our boots floating about in the canoe. There are things bigger than life. The combers in Bailey Bay were a case in point. Actually, this was just the first of many episodes where it is learned that, by themselves, spirit and unlimited energy may not be sufficient. We paddled backwards with our hands until the wind deposited us once again on the lee of the island. We landed, made soup, dried out and with our new found respect, we waited for the wind to die

down. We eventually caught up with our fish eating colleagues and were accorded a proper hero's welcome.

The end of the summer marked the end of a 90-day introduction to the bush. I had traveled through most of the major routes in the Boundary Waters and the Quetico. I could say that I "knew" the details of three or four simple standard routes, such as the Agnes Silence Lake chain, the Kashapiwi and Kawnipi loops and the Sarah, McIntyre to Side Lake trip. I knew a little about camp cooking, how to find portages and reading maps. I knew a lot about paddling and I could rig a mast to run before the wind. I returned to Robinson Lake in September badly in need of a haircut, my new boots fallen apart, clothes shredded, a long, sharp knife and ninety-seven dollars in cash. The family was shocked and pointed out that I could have made that much money in two weeks on the track gang.

At first, the Robinson Lake family listened politely to my accounts of trips to lakes with unfamiliar names. Then it was time to make wood, put up the ice and hunt deer. Everything slipped back into place as it always had been. But for me, a new piece had been added to the pattern. I was no longer content with life just examining the edges of the bush. I was going to be part of it. Also, as a swamper, I had come to define myself in a slightly altered way. In the bush, titles, age, income, or college degrees did not count for much. In this ultimate meritocracy, I was treated with respect because of what I could do. I had the vague sense that I wanted to grow. There were no specifics but I wanted to learn more. I wanted to become the best that I could.

I could only sense this as being a new path. I did not describe it that way to myself or to anyone else; it was more of a positive sense that something had changed. I did know that I would follow this new path and see where it led. Over time, this slight deflection from my family's path was like the first tentative finger reaching out from the river-bed just before the spring flood arrives and cuts it into a new course. ■

## Teepee Locker #32

by B. Cary Hall

Down in the locker room the Teepee held court,  
To music and laughter and stories and more.  
Several held instruments; old Martin guitars,  
Brought out to share on warm nights filled with stars.  
Guides like young Gossman and Varner and Vowell,  
Would sing and play tunes that made everyone howl.  
The years have sailed by, but this remains clear;  
Those old Teepee lockers held more than just gear.



*(Continued from page 1)* **The Return of the XY Company***Spence and Don Meany*

innovative, but it specializes in making canoe paddles. The paddles, made by the Don and Spencer Meany, are named after great Canadian explorers and voyageurs such as Alexander Mackenzie, Simon Fraser, William McGillivray, George Simpson, David Thompson and La Verendrye. They all paddled through Quetico and Don Meany says "it is our way of keeping an aspect of Canadian history alive". Some remnants of the fur trade are still visible throughout the boundary waters. Where fur trade posts stood, there are now clearings that are slowly but surely reverting to forest. The site of a Hudson Bay post on the Canadian side of Basswood Lake is noticeably more grown over than it was when I first saw it twenty-five years ago and will be hard to find in another twenty-five years. Broken clay pipes and trade beads can still be seen at the ends of portages and on campsites along the voyageur routes.

One of the founders of the XY Company is one of Canada's most famous explorers. He paddled to both the Arctic Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. He became the first European to reach the Pacific

coast north of Mexico traveling cross-country. When his crew reached the Pacific Ocean, he wrote on a rock in red ochre: "Alexander Mackenzie, from Canada, by land, the twenty second of July, one thousand seven hundred and ninety three." Traveling primarily by canoe, he reached the Pacific twelve years earlier than Lewis and Clark. The early Europeans in North America adapted the canoes and paddles that were used by Native People. According to Kennicott, who traveled with voyageurs in 1849, the most common paddle was made of red cedar and had a blade about two feet long and three inches wide. Adney and Chappelle, in their book *The Bark Canoes and Skin Boats of North America*, stated that "no voyageur in his right mind would use a blade wider than between 4 1/2 and 5 inches wide, for anything wider would exhaust him in a short distance. ....The paddles were of hardwood, white or yellow birch or maple, as hardwood paddles could be made thin in the blade and small in the handle without loss of strength, whereas softwood paddles could not." Interestingly, divers at Fort Charlotte on the Pigeon River

recovered a badly eroded paddle from the bottom of the river that had a blade just 5 inches wide. Fort Charlotte, located at the west end of the Grand Portage, was abandoned at the end of voyageur period and the paddle is thought to be from the voyageur period. Paintings of voyageurs from the 1800's, such as the well-known *Canoe Manned by Voyageurs* by Frances Hopkins, show long, narrow paddles that fit the descriptions found in journals. Today's canoes are obviously not only smaller than the voyageur canoes, they are also designed differently. It wouldn't make much sense to use a paddle that is a direct copy of a voyageur paddle to propel a contemporary narrow, 2-person canoe. However, the voyageurs preference for a light, durable paddle with a narrow blade, can also be successfully used now. The current XY Company makes a paddle that incorporates the voyageur design but has a recurved blade, a bent handle and is laminated. Two hundred years of evolution have altered the paddle, but not beyond recognition.

Don Meany started making paddles with his brother Joe in 1964 in the basement of the Rockton Hotel in Atikokan. Don began making paddles because he was active in canoe racing and thought he could make paddles that were better for racing than what was available. Both Don and Joe were very active and successful in many canoe races even though they were competing against the likes of Buzz Peterson, Gene Jensen and Ralph Sawyer. Don was a key member of the Ontario team that raced across Canada as part of

the Canadian Centennial in 1967. The route, which covered 3,300 miles and took 104 days to cover, was from Rocky Mountain House in Alberta to Montreal in Quebec. It has been called the longest canoe race in history. This race was a way of paying homage on Canada's one hundredth birthday to the explorers and fur traders who played such a crucial role in the opening up of the country. The 1960's were a time of fierce competitions in canoe racing and many radical innovations were made in both canoe and paddle design. The changes made in canoe designs were subsequently adapted for recreational canoes and Gene Jensen, Ralph Sawyer and other racers were leaders in both making changes in racing canoes and bringing these changes to recreational canoes. The vast majority of canoes used today in the Boundary Waters are the result of adaptations that were originally made in order to improve canoe performance for racing.

Major changes were also made in paddle design. These changes in canoes and paddles resulted in a modification of paddling techniques. The bent shaft paddle, the "hut" stroke, and an increase in tempo were all the result of canoe racing. Two major innovations in canoe paddle design originated with Don Meany. He was the first to use the "recurved blade" on a canoe paddle. The blade is curved from side to side in a similar fashion to what is used in kayak paddles. He also experimented with spooned and cupped blades but found that they did not work well.

Don also placed a bend at the top of the shaft so that the wrist is in a more natural 

position when paddling. That evolved from trying to keep the wrist straight and still have the paddle vertical in the water for as long as possible during each stroke. This is commonly done on bent shaft paddles but the XY Company also makes straight paddles with the bend at the top of the shaft. Almost twenty years ago, I bought a Meany paddle with the handle bent backwards at the top of the shaft. It was, and still is, so comfortable that I have continued to use paddles with this feature that looked so strange when I first saw it. In the early 1970's, Don worked in Quetico Park and served as chief of the portage crew. This was prior to the can and bottle ban and portage crews were used to clean campsites as well as maintaining portages. He also participated in a full park survey of campsites in Quetico where the crew working for him were Junior Rangers - young men experiencing the park for the first time. It was Don's philosophy to teach the crews as much about the park's historical significance and the role it played in Canadian history as he could. I was told by people who worked with Don during this period that they vividly remember his stories around the campfire. He felt so strongly about emulating the voyageurs that he insisted that the food packs had a good supply of dried beans and jerky so that they could also eat like voyageurs. Don, known for his ability to carry heavy loads on portages, took part in a contest in Atikokan in the mid 1970's to see who could carry the heaviest load for ninety feet. Don won by carrying 642 pounds. Don's son, Spencer, grew up in Atikokan and canoed from an early age. He was an excel-

lent hockey player and went to St. Lawrence University in New York on a hockey scholarship. He was drafted by the Buffalo Sabers in 1991 but decided to continue his college education and obtained a degree. He subsequently played pro hockey from 1994 until he was injured in 1998. He returned to Atikokan with his wife Samantha in 2000. He now works with his father and is a co-owner of XY Company. Since returning to Atikokan, Spencer has become interested in marathon canoe racing. He has purchased a Hassle racing canoe and is now starting to race. Spencer is also crafting his own style canoe paddles. He has inherited his father's experimental nature and is currently working on a paddle with a refined design that weighs under one pound. His wife Samantha is an integral part of the company and uses a laser engraver to place designs on paddles.

Meany paddles are now sold all over the world. They have filled orders from Malaysia, Serbia, France, Australia, England and a few African countries. The "Raid the North" adventure race held in Atikokan in June, which had competitors from many countries, was won by a team from France. The prize for one section of the race, which went from the Pines on Pickerel Lake to the beach on French Lake, was won by a team from southern Ontario. The French team was so impressed with the XY paddles that were given as prizes for this section of the race, that they had Don and Spencer make four more of the paddles and had them sent to France. The Meany's have heard many stories regarding the use of their paddles. Spencer's favorite is about the

young couple that came in to purchase a set of XY paddles because they were passed on French Lake by an elderly couple using XY paddles who hailed them a good morning before rapidly vanishing into the distance. Many canoeists stop at their shop in Atikokan to buy paddles or simply talk about their canoe trip. Once you have stopped and heard the Meany's tell stories, it is almost impossible to drive by the next time without stopping. Local historians and archaeologists do their best to make connections to people who lived on the land that is now the boundary waters of Ontario and Minnesota. These written connections to the past are usually not very successful in making the past seem vivid and alive. People who work with wood rather than words, such as the Meany's making paddles and Joe Seliga making canoes, are probably more successful in showing that the past can be materially expressed in a form that is still relevant and works effectively today.

Gary Snyder, in his book *Practice of the Wild*, quoted a Crow elder. "You know, I think if people stay somewhere long enough - even white people - the spirits will begin to speak to them. It is the power of the spirits coming from the land. The spirits and the old powers aren't lost, they just need people to be around long enough and the spirits will begin to influence them". As much as anyone I know, Don Meany has been influenced by these spirits and he can effectively make the past seem compelling and alive. When he talks about voyageurs, canoe racing, changes in paddle design, or working in Quetico, the past and the present become effectively melded together. His is

an animated oral history that allows you to feel a connection to the people and the traditions of those who came before us.

*Originally from Minnesota Jon Nelson fell in love with the Quetico on a canoe trip and immigrated to Canada. He and his wife were Quetico Rangers at Prairie Portage in the mid-1980s. He is now a teacher as well as free-lance writer and photographer who lives in Thunder Bay, Ontario.*

*This article was originally published in the Boundary Waters journal and is reprinted with permission. ■*

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## Morning On Side Lake

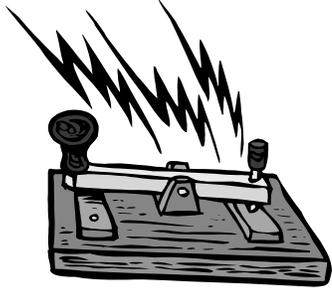
by Erik Sakariassen

On the rock slope above our camp,  
I stand, squinting in the pink light at dawn.  
Three canoes, I count,  
swift in the lifting mist,  
bound for Sarah and points north.

Across the lake, an echo:  
"Hol-ry!"  
and juncos rise, startled from the pines.  
My shout finds them.  
A paddle flashes.  
"Red eye!" they return.

Back in camp, the coffee waits,  
quiet, save the ring of tent poles tossed,  
the Primus stove and bacon hissing.  
On a weathered log, a young boy sits,  
rubbing sleep from his eager eyes

# From the Portage Telegraph:



## Mike "Bing" Bingley

(Atikokan/Bissett 1999-2000) will be getting married on November 12th, 2005 to Lindsey Wiggill of Lethbridge, AB. on Vancouver Island

## Don MacDonald

(Director of Canadian Programs, 1997 – current) is taking this summer off from working at the base because of bypass surgery. He came

through with flying colours and should be back at the base and available for Tilley Hat beatings come fall.

## Veronica Haliniak

(Atikokan/Bissett 1999, 2004) is getting married this fall in Toronto to her fiancée Matt.

## Matt Smith

(Atikokan/ Bissett 1999, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2004) is staging a repeat to his solo canoe trip across Canada this summer with a Voyageur Canoe trip to the Arctic via the MacKenzie River. This time, he's bringing a crew of six other Charlie Guides with him: Kent Bratton, Brooke Suwala, Candace

Vinke, Kristen Vinke, Scott Read and Nathan Prather. Follow along with their trip at: [www.SummittoSea.net](http://www.SummittoSea.net)

## Evan Durland, Brian Dobry, and Tom Copeland

completed their trip from Ely to Hudson's Bay on July 27th this past summer – read about it at [www.hudsonbayboys.com](http://www.hudsonbayboys.com)

## Dea Miller

(Ely, 1999) got married and had a baby girl named Olivia last year.

## Larry Hanson

( guided 82,83,84,85,86 ), and his wife Shannon are expecting thier second child in November.

(Continued from page 2)

## President's Message

can be seen in the results of our fund raising campaigns and the programs that the money supports. We can also share some of the tricks and secrets we used on the trail that we learned in our years as Charlie Guides by helping with staff training. We can help the trail staff of today understand how vital the role of the base staff is in making their trip successful or not. We can share our precious time with troops in our local area to help make their trip a little more enjoyable. Through all of this, we can help develop the next generation of Charlie Guides... ■

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