

Night Paddling

by Dave Greenlee

I have thought about writing this for quite some time now. While part of me is quite content to continue procrastinating, another part is not going to be happy until I put it on paper. As I write, we have about 6 inches of snow on the ground and it is about 10 below zero. The only thing that seems warm around here is a memory that I have about my last canoe outing of the season.

It was early in November and sixty degrees outside. I recall thinking that this might be the last warm weather for awhile, so I should take advantage of it. Early in the morning I strapped my solo canoe on the car before going to work. It was a long day at the office, and I completely forgot about my plan until I got to the car. There was the canoe, patiently waiting. Even though I had lost most of my desire to go canoeing, I went over to Covell lake to "grind" for awhile. After all, the canoe was already on the car...

Once on the lake, I recall looking at the position of the sun in the sky and thinking that it would be getting dark soon. I resolved that I would train hard for the short time I had before sunset. After a couple quick laps around the small lake, I warmed up and started to feel better. Slowly the tension that had built up from a day at the office was working its way out. As the sun went down, the lights from the city began to glisten on the water as I rounded the island and headed back to the car. As I slowed the pace and began to cool down, it occurred to me that I was not really in a hurry. I remembered that paddling at night is one of the most pleasurable things that a person can do. I had been in such a hurry to go paddling and use the last daylight that I had not really thought about why I was out here.



It was then that I realized that this was one of those "special times". Maybe you have them too. Sometimes it feels like a light has come on and I suddenly can see things more clearly. Often I realize that something that I thought was complex and confusing is really very simple. Seldom does this occur to me when I analyze a problem to death. More often, it happens as I wake from sleep or while I'm standing in the shower in the morning. Sometimes it can happen when I'm just paddling down the lake and thinking about nothing in particular.

As I paddled slowly around the lake, I recalled a memory of my first night paddling experience. It was in 1965, when I had gone on a Scout canoe trip into Quetico Provincial Park, Ontario. Our guide was a handsome and rugged looking fellow named Donan Christenson. I was fourteen years old, and I thoroughly idolized that funloving and adventurous Dane. He took us to places that we never dreamed our arms and legs could carry us. Four years later, I began my guiding career at the Canoe Base, and I got to know Don as a fellow guide. I never lost the sense of awe and respect that I gained for him on that canoe trip.

At some point in our 10 day trip, Don told us about a small trading post called the Paul Bunyan Store that was on the edge of the newly defined Boundary Waters Canoe Area (BWCA). It was one of the last commercial outposts left in the area, and it had recently been bought up by the Forest Service. On the eighth day out, we paddled a long day and didn't make camp until late in the afternoon. We were all pretty bushed, and nobody seemed very excited about making a side trip to see some old store. After supper we rallied a bit and as we sat around the fire and talked, the topic of the store finally came up. Don told about the beaded moccasins, wolf pelts, cold pop, and candy bars he had seen on some previous trip. With a trademark smile and twinkle in his eye that only Don can sell, he observed that "we haven't even gone *night paddling* yet". With the Paul Bunyan Store a short way away and a full moon to light our way, it did seem like the perfect time.

Before long, we were moving quickly down the lake in our unladen canoes. As I remember the store, it was not much of an event. I think we barely had enough money to buy pop and a candy bar. The lasting memory for me was the leisurely trip we made back to camp with the moonlight on the water and the stars in the sky.

Night Paddling. We can't do it now, 'cause where I am, the ice is two feet thick and getting thicker. But we can keep it in mind for next Spring when things thaw out. For now, it's enough that we can reflect on some treasured canoeing memories, and look forward to the next time out. ce was used to prepare this article.