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Memories of the Centenary Journey

Tracing the voyageurs' path to celebrate Canada's 100th birthday

by Greg Brown

Forty years ago this summer, thousands of young Canadians helped celebrate our country's 100th birthday by paddling or hiking along sections of the historic path of the voyageurs, a path that ultimately linked together the scattered regions of this land. I was one of those young campers.

The idea for the 1967 Centenary Journey was born more than four decades ago when members of the Canadian Camping Association sought a way for this country's youth to celebrate Canada's Centennial. In the words of Kirk Wipper who wrote the forward for the official *Log of Canada's Centenary Journey*, "What more appropriate method of celebration could have been envisioned than to traverse this great country essentially

This beaver pelt, inscribed with the names of all participating voyageurs, was passed from group to group all the way from Yellowhead to Victoria.



by canoe! That primitive craft carried in its frail but seasoned form the explorers, voyageurs and other adventurers who were lured by a vast magnificent unknown! Young Canadians, like their forefathers, are willing to be tested and to cooperate in adventurous challenges, and so the journey project gained early acceptance."

A document prepared by the Ontario Camping Association in February 1966 outlined the three main phases of the Centenary Journey: "The first is to map the famous transcontinental water highways used for exploration and commerce in the 17th and 18th centuries. The second is to co-ordinate a program of youth canoe trips during the summer of 1967 along its entire system. The third is to develop an appropriate form of publicity which will make Canadians and visitors to Canada aware of these historic waterways, and which will encourage their continued use in the years to come."

From the Camp Deka boys ...

My involvement with the Centenary Journey began in 1966 at Camp Deka in British Columbia where, at the age of 16, I worked as a councillor-in-training. According to the BC introduction in the official *Log*, "The British Columbia section of the Centenary Journey was planned as a continuous nine hundred mile trek of forty days, July 7 to August 15. Continuity was maintained by the carrying of a beaver pelt from group to group. ... Names, dates and areas covered were inscribed on the pelt and transferred to the next group."

Our camp was responsible for travelling the 700km from the BC-Alberta border at Yellowhead Pass down the



Fraser River to Quesnel. Obviously an undertaking of this scope required a lot of planning and preparation, part of which was to scout much of the route ahead of time since there were no canoe route descriptions available. This task fell to Brian Creer, our experienced, highly respected trip leader, and myself. Brian and I headed to the upper Fraser River in August of '66 and scouted the main rapids and canyon sections. My recollections are vague, but I do remember paddling and drifting down the river for three very long days, often eating and napping in the canoe. I have visions of Brian cooking porridge in the bow on his Primus stove while I steered in the fast, steady current.

One of the great things about being a teenager is the feeling of being invincible ...

The nine boys selected for the trip were all seasoned campers and skilled lakewater canoeists, but some intensive training was in order due to the nature of the "mighty Fraser." In the spring of '67 we were introduced to whitewater on the Squamish River and en route to the upper Fraser, we stopped in Prince George and honed our paddling skills on the Nechako River. We then loaded the five canoes in boxcars bound for the Alberta border and followed on the passenger train.

As I read through our canoe trip log recalling the details of the adventure, I'm reminded of the value of a trip journal. We all had opportunities to make entries in the log, which mentions times, activities, distances, weather and water conditions, personal feelings and observations,

plus the most important item on any canoe trip – the food. Those ten days on the Fraser River were an experience I will not forget. One of the great things about being a teenager is the feeling of being invincible, and to follow in the footsteps of one of this country's intrepid explorers on one of the more powerful rivers, although at times a daunting challenge, was one we took in stride.

The first couple of days, catching glimpses of Mount Robson through the clouds, were perhaps the most physically challenging as we navigated the steep descent from the summit of the Yellowhead Pass along a small tributary to the Fraser River proper. Along the slower, meandering section of the upper river the challenge was "mind over mosquitoes," with sandbars in the rivers offering only a slight respite from their ravenous appetite.

Several 100km days were also a challenge, not only for the arms, but for other body parts that endured 12 to 16 hours kneeling and sitting in the canoe. Those also happened to be the days when some of us took turns having a 24-hour stomach upset, and we often had one canoe in tow.

The good part was the river carrying us along several miles an hour even when we were resting. There was still runoff from the snowpack in the mountains and the water level was fairly high, which determined the nature of the rapids. The main objective was to avoid the whirlpools that could spin a canoe around and if large enough, could suck it under. But

most of the rapids became long stretches of very fast water with large rollers providing an exhilarating ride.

... to the Quesnel Land Rangers

After 10 eventful days we eased the canoes onto the riverbank in Quesnel, three minutes ahead of our scheduled arrival, to the greeting of a couple hundred townspeople, members of the press and dignitaries. In a flurry of ceremony we handed the beaver pelt to the Quesnel Land Rangers, a group of girls who hiked the next section of the Centenary Journey. Ten guys living out of packsacks for two weeks with hoards of mosquitoes and cooking over smoky fires must have been quite a sight, but in spite of our appearance we were treated royally by the Centennial Committee.

Looking back 40 years to this canoeing adventure, I can now appreciate the planning and preparation that was required to make this undertaking such a success. Beginning with a group of Canadian camping leaders who brought the idea of a Centenary Journey to youth groups across the country, to camp directors, leaders and youth who accepted the challenge, and to community Centennial Committees who supported the project, it was an adventure I will always remember, and set the stage for my life-long passion for canoe tripping.

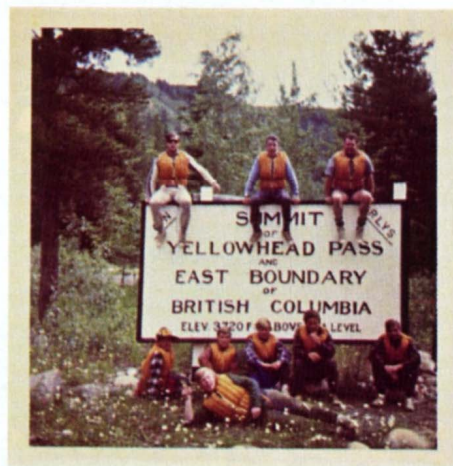
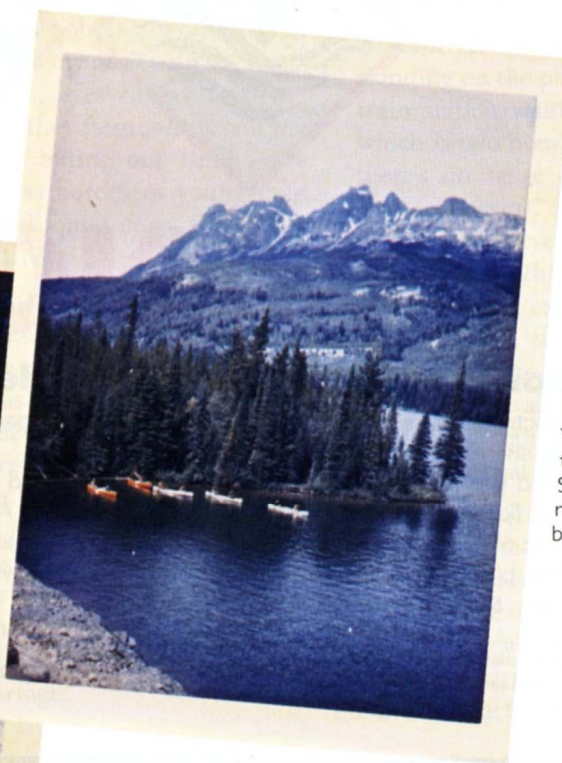


Photo by David Esau

The paddlers pose at the start of their journey on July 7, 1967.

We are now almost two generations removed from that time, and I hope this story encourages younger paddlers to seek out participants of the Centenary Journey for a story or two around a campfire about their canoeing adventures in 1967.

Greg Brown began canoe tripping more than 45 years ago and has paddled thousands of kilometres of Canadian lakes, rivers and coastline. He taught canoeing for many years and is recognized by Paddle Canada as a master canoeist.



Left: Dave Esau (left) and Fritz Daz in the Grand Canyon of the upper Fraser River

Right: The group at Yellowhead Lake, BC, with the Hazelton Mountains' Seven Sisters Peaks, which rise to 2,755m, in the background