

Darkness to Dawn

Canoeing the Columbia River

Journal Entries from the Summer of 1992

By Steven Pointer

One Saturday last spring our Outdoor Club took an excursion to Pleasant Valley, and I chaperoned. The bus bumped thirty miles down the hot, dusty Nine-Mile road from Myton, Utah, past the ruins of Smith's Wells Station, through the narrow defile of Nine Mile canyon—where Butch Cassidy and the Wild Bunch had eagerly waited for the paymaster's stage—past names dating back to 1890 fingered by pioneers on canyon rock with axle grease. We headed west through the bottom of a thin valley inhabited a thousand years ago by generations of Anasazi Indians, and parked next to one of many rock outcroppings. Eleven junior high kids piled out and walked over to the smooth dark surface of the canyon wall. There, chipped into the desert patina, stood five rows of dots symbolizing a calendar, and an angular etching of a human being. And perhaps it was just the oohs and aahs of the clambering students, but I thought I could hear the voices of the Anasazi, the conversation of the settlers and outlaws in the sage-filled breeze: "I was human. And I was here."

The scene renewed my interest in the journals Lisa and I wrote during our canoe trip down the Columbia River in 1992. At the time—the summer of '92 I mean—a 1250-mile expedition was both a dream and an adventure. Now it's solely a memory. I developed and expanded the journals in an effort to preserve that memory because it was a landmark episode in our life and in our marriage. We want our children to have something tangible from the trip, something to equal, as much as possible, all the intangibles of a good remembrance. And when they see the river, the river will speak of us like the petroglyphs speak of the Indian and like the blackened names of settlers speak for all who made the journey.

Steve Pointer

December 23, 1998

Duchesne, Utah

Way up in that Northwest, the land of the skies,

Columbia River's headwaters rise.

Mountain to mountain covered with snows,

I'll follow that river wherever she goes.

-Woody Guthrie

Original journal entries in italics.

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I've tried to trace the source of the idea to canoe the entire Columbia River from its headwaters to the Pacific, but it eludes me. The concept of it being possible appealed to me mostly, and the idea gained impetus with a force that would haunt me for five years.

After college, I traveled to Tokyo for my first teaching position. After culture shock wore off, I further developed the Columbia River plan in an effort to keep myself busy and to avoid loneliness. I never expected my dream to turn into reality. I was a day-dreamer, conjuring up schemes, plans, and fantastic journeys that I would never do because the average person doesn't usually do anything on par with climbing Mt. Everest or rafting down the Mississippi like Huckleberry Finn.

I often thought of the Columbia while riding the trains. The greater Tokyo-Yokohama area has a few million more people than Canada, so the press and humidity of hundreds of patient bodies on public transportation always gave me claustrophobia. I remember one of my students telling me, with characteristic Japanese stoicism, "I thought I was going to die on the train tonight. So many people." When the train was really packed—when the white-gloved conductors physically packed passengers into the cars worse than sardines in a tin—no one needed to hold on to the overhead straps or the support poles. We just leaned against each other. On one trip, a woman's head leaned against my shoulder, my nose pressed into the collar of a gray business suit and someone's elbow dug into my back. Often in Japan, there was no escape from the crowds—only in one's mind could one feel free. And in my mind, I paddled a canoe.

* * *

Planning and funding *Expedition Columbia* was as much fun as the trip itself. I wrote Powerfood, Inc., from Berkeley, California. They were interested in our idea to canoe the river, and sent sweatshirts, stickers and 180 Powerbars for the trip.

Other companies, too, helped out. One day I visited Mountain Gear in Spokane only intending to look at their canoes. I hadn't shaved for three days, hadn't showered that morning and didn't even have my shirt buttoned. As I walked through the door, however, the store owner was the first person to greet me.

“Hello. How can I help you?” he asked.

“I’d like to make a down payment on a canoe.”

“Okay. What do you want?”

“I want a Kevlar *Itasca* with aluminum gunneling and the sliding tractor seats”

“What for?” he interrupted.

“My wife and I are going to canoe the Columbia next summer and, as a matter of fact, I’d like to talk to you about sponsoring our expedition.”

“No kidding? I’ve thought about canoeing the Columbia too. Listen, we’ll help you pick the gear you’ll need and outfit your canoe. Okay?”

He sold us the canoe at cost. I wrote the check for the down payment and left the store knowing that this trip would finally happen. We received much advice and assistance from Mountain Gear.

Other companies, too—Sawyer Paddles, Cascade Designs and Colman—either donated gear or sold it at a discount. And after all was said and done, family and friends had offered much time and assistance to our effort.

We made purchases after each paycheck, since we could only afford one item at a time—rainpants one month, wetsuits the next, then twenty rolls of film, a good first aid kit and other emergency equipment, life jackets, paddles and drybags.

I called various agencies to see where we could camp, and found that the Army Corp of Engineers practically owned the Columbia River in Washington and Oregon. BC Hydro also gave us permission to camp anywhere along the river in Canada, and both agencies offered to help portage around dams and declared we could pass through their locks.

I studied maps of the river, and we traveled to Canada to scout several sections of the Columbia. I laminated map sections of the entire river and bound them with a large key ring. We visited dams and stopped on overlooks whenever we drove by the Columbia.

Our idealistic canoe trip increasingly became complex, and it would be only safe and fun if we

planned for the worst experience imaginable.

* * *

We also needed to learn about canoeing. I had been on one overnight canoe trip; Lisa had never been in a canoe. I read books on canoeing, looked at canoes in stores, came up with lots of questions that would have to be answered. What would we do for fresh, clean, drinking water? Would it be possible to average the twenty miles a day necessary to complete the Columbia before I had to return to school? What happens if the canoe tips over? Would we really make it? Are there bears in British Columbia? Are we gonna die?

To help answer some of our questions concerning reality, we plotted a 23-mile course on the Snake River that would take us through Little Goose Dam, rented a canoe, and started down the river at five o'clock on a beautiful June morning. After paddling backwards in a circle for a few minutes, we left the dock moving generally forward.

For three hours the river was calm and serene. We had traveled eight miles before a hurricane headwind hit us, and soon we bucked three-foot waves and tried our best to keep the canoe right side up. Four miles and five hours later we reached the dam. After going through the locks and paddling to shore Lisa collapsed on the grass and refused to go any farther.

As we called my parents to pick us up, I felt depressed and defeated. After a hard day's work we had only gone twelve miles. It seemed like too much work. I flopped down next to Lisa and asked myself if this dream was really something I wanted to do, and whether or not I would have the will to see it through. Then, Lisa said, "We're definitely going to have to get into shape before we do this next summer. We need to plan on experiencing wind and other hindrances on some days, and just take advantage of the good days to go farther."

Whoa. I figured I had the right partner, and the dream was still alive.

* * *

We made several practice runs in our new canoe by Upriver Dam in Spokane, experimented with different ways to load the canoe, bought all our food supplies from Costco. We were ready by early

June.

* * *

Bill and Florence Sylvester, some friends from Spokane, escorted us to the headwaters, Columbia Lake. We drove into Cranbrook, B.C., for breakfast at a donut shop. In charge of the donut shop was one lone waitress, fortyish with red hair.

"Ma'am, we bought six donuts at forty-five cents each," Bill proclaimed. "That's \$2.70. Now, your sign says four bucks for a dozen. Shouldn't I be able to buy the remaining six for a dollar thirty?"

"Sorry," our waitress laughed. She mumbled something about the owner and original purchase.

"Okay," Bill said. "Only Steve and I bought a cup of coffee. Your sign says that these cups are refillable. If Florence wants a cup, is it okay if I give her my refill?"

"Sure," she said, smiling and wiping up some spilled milk and donut crumbs.

"How much do you charge for the use of a cup? Empty."

"Nothing. Why do you ask?"

"Could you give Florence her own cup, and just put one of my refills in it?"

The waitress' hand stopped wiping. She lost her smile and took a deep breath. "Sorry. I couldn't do that."

Just as Bill was saying, "It doesn't say anything on your sign about . . ." I could see her eyeing the dishrag and calculating the distance.

"Come on, Bill. Let's go," I said. Our bill came to about five bucks and Bill tipped the waitress another five for her patience.

* * *

Columbia Lake gave us a sample of what we would experience on the river: calm water, white-caps, windy, uncomfortable camps, quiet havens, improvised meals, a variety of wildlife.

We waved goodbye to Bill and Florence. I felt they were returning to a comfortable, "normal" world while we paddled off into a life that came without expectations, bare without the familiarity of our apartment, phone and my truck. A year of planning seems like it doesn't make a lick of difference now.

Even though I know it does. I've spent hours studying maps of the river and feel like I don't know it at all. This is not a training run; this is the real thing and it feels different.

Sticking our bent-shaft paddles into the sandy lake-bed, we pushed the canoe into a soft glide. Shallow water parted to let us through, then quietly closed behind us. Reeds waved gently, like a crowd of well-wishers nodding goodbye.

Maneuvering the canoe, especially paddling in a straight line, remained a new skill for us. I sat in front and powered forward while Lisa tried to keep us going in the right direction. Between us, two hundred pounds of gear lay neatly strapped in place: clothes, food, water, cameras, ham radio, tent, sleeping bags and pads, and more. The light tailwind helped push our load, but after paddling nine miles, we were whupped. The helpful breeze had soured to an annoying gale, and water had splashed up on the white cooler. We pulled to shore. Not knowing how long we would be there, we set up camp, and started learning about the realities of life on the river.

We tried to pitch the tent on bare river rock. It was an REI Half-Dome—inexpensive, fairly stable length-wise, but susceptible to wind from the side. Our challenge was to get the tent lined up with the wind and to keep it from blowing away. The yellow plastic tent stakes we had bought for their advertised dependability only loosened in the rocks and our tent twisted and billowed like a sail. Eventually the wind blew away our preconceptions of how to pitch a tent, and we ended up tying it between a tree and a rusted-out fifty-five gallon drum. It worked.

This was my first chance to try the stove in windy conditions. The MSR Whisper-Lite came with an aluminum shield that surrounded the stove to keep heat in and wind out, but it wouldn't light in such an exposed area. Walking up the bank, I crossed the railroad tracks, found a flat area sheltered by some blackberry bushes, and cooked chicken and noodles.

We ate sitting on the tracks, using the rails for chairs, and feel delighted to be here. Even the smells of garlic and creosote are pleasant and compatible. White-capped waves play in the distance. Across the lake looms the harsh, stony walls of the Rocky Mountains. Our canoe gently thuds on stone as water shushes on shore. I no longer feel so exposed—we have a shelter, some food and each other.

* * *

By five o'clock, my anxiety at making an inadequate nine miles peaked out. I had planned on twenty a day. I still lived in a mentality where distance and time were related. If time had not been such a concern, we would not have found ourselves in the mess we got into that night.

"Let's pack up and go," I said, wanting to complete the last remaining mile of Columbia Lake. Reloading the canoe took an hour and a half, and in that time the wind picked up.

"Are you sure we should go in this?" Lisa asked. "It's... pretty bad."

"Let's go anyway," I said. The weather was terrible. I just had to make that last mile.

The last mile skirted the north edge of the lake, the northerly wind having had ten miles to bulldoze waves up the lake and grow them into monsters that slammed old reeds and debris against the shore. Rollers broke twenty feet away, slapping the canoe silly. We couldn't keep away from shore and the breakers, nor could we keep the canoe upright much longer. Water poured over the sides.

"Let's get out!" Lisa shouted. "Let's walk!"

So for a mile we walked waist deep in glacier-fed water, holding onto the canoe with both hands to keep it from capsizing in the broad-side waves. Mud sucked at our shoes, which came off. We tossed them in the canoe and hoped to not step on broken bottles. The algae was bad enough.

It was getting dark, and we had nearly reached the breakwater of a small marina when Lisa yelled for help. I turned around and saw her clinging onto the canoe. She had stepped into a hole and couldn't touch the bottom.

"Are you alright?" I asked, up to my neck in water.

"Yes, just get around this point into the marina!"

We both swam to the breakwater and climbed out. Resuming our seats, we paddled over to a small peninsula beside the marina to set up camp. It was 8:30; we had gutted out that tenth mile in two hours.

Three stacks of pallets screened the tent from the wind. Preparing for a storm I draped the tarp over the tent and staked it down too. Lisa was almost asleep by the time I finished drying off and

putting on sweats.

“We only go when the going’s good,” she mumbled.

“Right,” I agreed.

“Otherwise, we stay put.”

“Yep.”

* * *

I hadn’t noticed it when we set up camp, but the Canadian Pacific railroad ran a mere fifty yards from the tent. So at 2:00 AM, when a thousand tons of diesel locomotive overwhelmed our camp, I sat bolt upright and Lisa yelled, “What?” The tarp buzzed. The train horn blared three times as he passed our tent—I think there was a crossing—and we about lost it when he did. If you’ve ever drank a full pot of coffee you know how we felt as the last car rumbled off: wide-eyed and wired.

I crawled out of the tent and shone my flashlight at the water—it looked like a black mirror. The winds were calm. Shivering in the chilly air, I crept back into the warmth.

“Hey Babe,” I whispered. “Remember what we talked about last night?”

“What?”

“The going’s good,” I announced.

Lisa emitted a muffled sigh from deep in her sleeping bag. “Okay,” she muttered.

We dressed in warm clothes, broke camp in the starry silence, then launched the canoe and headed into darkness. Somewhere in its northeast corner, the lake emptied into a small river, and we had to find it. Clumps of bushes and reeds and partially submerged logs created a maze out of the northeast shore of Columbia Lake even though we had headlamps. The logs looked like water demons trying to grab us and as tired as I was I couldn’t tell the difference. My mind said they were logs; some innate voice warned against the demons.

Night grayed and blueed into morning, and we switched off the headlamps. Something about the water seemed new and I looked over at the near shore. Slim V-shapes streamed behind each reed, pointing to where we came from, and spreading indefinitely to where we were going. We had found the

Columbia. Misgivings vanished. The infant river crawled through the brush and we followed. Our dream of reaching the Pacific Ocean was bound to this current, and we moved on its frail power.

* * *

A small series of rapids marked the entrance to Fairmont Golf Course. We pulled to shore and walked up to the Highway 93 bridge and peered over. The safest passage shot straight down the middle between a jammed log and a rock pile. I slowly climbed back into the canoe, gripped with fear of tipping.

All I could think about was last January's chilly spill into the Spokane River. A friend and I had decided to try out our new canoe even though temperatures were cold and we were inexperienced. Knowing little about canoeing, and even less about rivers, I consulted the Spokane Telephone Directory maps for where to put in and take out. To me, the Spokane was merely a pretty blue ribbon gracefully winding through sections eight and nine.

We encountered some moderate rapids soon after putting in, and felt the exhilaration and confidence building of adventurously bobbing up and down the waves. I heard a roaring up ahead and asked Chris if he thought it was rapids. He felt for sure it was traffic on Trent Avenue, and I agreed as we innocently forged on. Rounding the corner, however, I started back-paddling even before I saw the gigantic souse-hole of the Flora Rapids in front of me. The water sped swiftly over a large submerged rock, dove straight down and then shot back up, creating a canoe-hungry pit. I was swimming before I hit water, abandoning the canoe and my paddle in a desperate bid for survival. Chris was close behind me, and we dragged our sodden selves to shore.

We ran to Sullivan Avenue to hitch a ride and drive along the river since we had to retrieve the canoe. I noticed swarms of policemen driving along the river and poised along bridges with binoculars. Chris spied a helicopter. Someone had spotted the canoe floating bottoms up and called 911. We snagged the canoe but also procured an admonishment from the County Search and Rescue team. Regrettably, we cost the county taxpayers a large bill, lost some pride, and got an embarrassing spot on the 10:00 news.

* * *

Lisa and I bumped and dipped safely under the bridge and started through the narrow bends of the golf course, but bad memories, the water demons and the harsh wake-up call had left my nerves standing on end.

"Watch out for those rapids!" I yelled.

"What rapids?" Lisa asked, as we rocked to slight undulations in the water. "We'll be fine."

My eyes widened at the sharp turn ahead. "That bend's a tight one! Let's cut it on the right so we don't swing into the shore!"

"Good grief, Pointer! Just go."

Lisa tried to encourage me, but my nerves were shot and I couldn't think. "Let's stop and do some breakfast," she suggested.

We're sitting on the eighth green eating pancakes. I've just tried one with peanut butter and maple syrup, Lisa's favorite, but nerves seemed to warp my stomach as I chewed the globby mess. I promise to never eat pancakes like that again; for the rest of the summer I'll top them with strawberry jam.

We meandered through curves and small rapids and under ornate, white-painted bridges. Nice homes lined the river below Fairmont, and we enjoyed waving to people as we passed. An older couple saw us on one bend and hustled to the next one to ask about our trip.

"Where you folks from?" they inquired.

"From the Spokane area."

"You doing the whole river?" they asked, after seeing *Expedition Columbia* painted on the side of the canoe.

"That's our goal. This is just our second day."

"That's a long way. How long will it take?"

"We figure about ten weeks."

"Good luck, and be careful, eh? And watch for bears, eh?"

* * *

The river gradually widened at the south end of Windermere Lake to encompass marshes and floating trees, and gradually slowed and stopped. The water mirrored the calm of a cloudless, windless sky. We had been going since two in the morning, but the going was still good. We ate lunch to prepare for the long, hot afternoon, and took a brief nap by the same rail line that had brought our wake-up call.

* * *

Sweat trickled down my spine and into my shorts. Lisa and I both felt that wearing “shorty” wetsuits helped insure our safety in case we capsized in the icy water. But in the heat, I felt like a shrink-wrapped hotdog. Lisa started to fall asleep.

Lake Windemere’s north shore crept toward us at a petty pace. The calm tempted us to the middle of the lake, the shortest distance between two points. We shouldn’t have given in, because just as the north shore was coming into view, a stiff wind came out of the northwest, betraying us in our exposed position. Cold spray leaped over the bow. The canoe bucked. The end of the lake seemed miles away. I nearly panicked, because if we tipped there was no way we could swim that distance to shore. So we changed course, quartering the wind, and paddled for the nearest land as hard as possible. The wind screamed and water was in the air and everywhere and I couldn’t even hear Lisa but could feel the steady pushes of her paddling.

We reached the smooth, gravelly beach exhausted. Never again did I want to be caught in the middle of an angry lake. And just like the day before, we were left with about one mile of lake to cover before the day was over. Then the wind died and we continued.

* * *

The north shore of Lake Windermere was as populated as Columbia Lake’s was unpopulated. Houses of Invermere crammed the beach tighter than bodies on Waikiki. Sidewalks, retaining walls, manicured shrubbery, stairways, docks and boats seemed to signal success: a big house, a great location. I glanced at the yellow dry bag containing our tent—our only home, even though we would be moving into another small apartment in August. Our material possessions amounted to about twice what was in the canoe.

We pulled up to James Chabot Park, where people played volleyball, picnicked, and swam. I felt conspicuous. Everyone wore shorts and tee-shirts to frolic in the hot sun while we staggered up the shore in six-mil neoprene tights. Insects swarmed the stuffy restrooms but we changed clothes anyway. It was six o'clock. We had canoed for fifteen hours.

Some people pointed out a nearby bar, and we gladly went. Hank Williams vibrated through the door handle of the Lakeside Inn. After two days hearing only sounds of nature, the din jarred my ears. The hamburgers and fries, however, tasted superb. And just sitting there in that smoky room listening to pool balls click and a variety of country music felt better than anything we had done all day. As it was, the room seemed to be spinning. We were bushed. An hour later though, the music had pretty much pounded out our worries and lifted our spirits. Canoeing the river was, after all, an awesome adventure.

A brown park sign prohibited camping at James Chabot and warned that violators could be subject to prosecution. Desperately wanting to remain there, we called the park authorities for permission to camp. They reiterated that camping in the park was banned and told us to head downriver.

Fishermen and run-down houses populated the west bank, and steep hills clogged the east bank. A half-mile downriver we found a tiny inlet barely large enough for the canoe. And up the hill was a bench little wider than the tent. I unloaded the canoe by reaching over a submerged tree and hauling our bags out, Lisa holding the canoe to keep it from drifting. We hoisted our gear twenty feet uphill, stumbling through thorny bushes on slick grass until we reached the site. Lisa set up camp while I secured our craft.

I'm proud that we've made twenty-five miles today, thirty-five in two days—more than we have ever canoed in our life. And we are also learning some valuable lessons: don't ever underestimate the Columbia; don't underestimate our own abilities either.

* * *

Morning rose perfectly. We woke at five o'clock and shoved off. Sun warmed the right side of my body,

and lazy mists surrounded our silent journey. We pulled out onto a rocky shoreline crowded with driftwood and the CP Rail.

"We can tie the canoe to some rocks," I said.

"I'll tie up to this log," Lisa said, grabbing the rear painter and heading for a large piece of driftwood. I opened the white cooler which stored our stove, tea, Bisquik, and cooking supplies.

"I'm carrying everything to the other side of the tracks," I said, over my shoulder. "Can you get the cups and cornbeef hash?"

Lisa reached under the back seat to the mesh bag containing all our canned goods, and joined me in a breakfast nook of sorts, a dirt road between the tracks and a grove of alder.

When the stove water started to boil, I mixed water into a Zip-lock bag containing a pre-measured amount of Bisquik, and placed the bag in the kettle on top of a Bakepacker, an aluminum grid that held the Zip-lock bag over steaming-hot water. In fifteen minutes we had a fresh, softball-sized biscuit. Immediately, the pan of corned-beef hash went on the stove and boiling water from the kettle went into cups for tea—English Breakfast for me, Orange Spice for Lisa.

Over the rim of the tracks the mist still rises in silence. A slight breeze rustles the alder leaves. We sit cross-legged on the dirt road, eating fresh biscuit with strawberry jam, listening to the hash sizzle and pop, and watching a beautiful day come into being.

* * *

We paddled for two hours and reached the town of Radium. Radium boasted a hot springs as a main attraction. I had been there the previous year, and since our map showed the river running parallel to Highway 93 going through Radium, visiting the springs was a must. Besides, by the third day of our trip I figured we would have earned a nice relaxing soak. We hid the canoe and all our gear under a small bridge and began our walk up a graveled road that headed for town.

The problem was that the "walk" evolved into a four-mile climb; and though I had remembered the hot springs not too far from the town, they were actually a mile past into Banff National Park. So we hiked all the way, coming to the springs three hours after leaving the canoe. We

wondered if the effort would nullify the reward of soaking in a hot tub, but paid \$7.50 at the gate and went in.

I quickly finished with my shower and settled down in the pool. Tilting my head, I noticed thunderheads mounting in the grey, overcast sky. A weather forecast was pinned to a bulletin board—it would rain in the afternoon. We couldn't remain at the springs very long, unless we wanted to set up camp in a downpour.

Lisa came out of the women's changing area in her new swim suit, her body oddly patterned white and sunburnt red. I waved, and she walked over.

"Alright," I said. "You've got five minutes, Babe. Look at those storm clouds rolling in. We're gonna get dumped on pretty soon."

"Five minutes! But we spent three hours busting our tail to get here. I'm going to soak for awhile."

Lisa slowly lowered herself into the hot, steamy water, and quickly pulled back her beet-red legs.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"What's wrong? My body's fried!" She shook her head in disappointment. "Fine. I just can't believe we came all this way for five minutes. This is ridiculous. How are we going to get down to the river before the rain comes?"

"We'll call a taxi," I calmly replied, and headed for a pay phone.

Although Radium has many services to offer its year-around tourists, taxis are not one of them. I even asked the lady at the front desk.

"Nope. No taxis. No shuttles."

"Rats," I told Lisa. "We'll either have to jog back down or beg a ride."

"Well, go beg a ride," Lisa said.

Feeling sheepish, I approached a group of men who turned out to be members of the Provincial Park service, one of whom gladly offered a ride to the river. He had many questions

regarding our trip and we answered quickly, knowing that our ride would only last a few minutes. His interest, and that of the elderly couple the day before, made us feel like we were doing something grand.

Our trip sparked an interest in people's imagination. It wasn't the river itself because they mostly lived on the river day in and day out. The concept of "the journey"—canoeing from the headwaters of the Columbia to the Pacific Ocean, the idea of starting small and local and traveling to the great and infinite—held all the appeal. Everyone we talked to wanted to do something like that. By the time we got back to the canoe, I felt famous.

We paddled for one hour. Rain descended, roused by thunder and lightning. Bears inhabited this general area, so we took precautions against them. I had brought rope and a pulley to suspend our food from an overhanging tree branch, just like the canoeing and camping books from the Spokane library had said. But there weren't any decent trees in sight—just short stubby ones. So we set up our tent in one area, stored the food in another area, and cooked in a third location assuming that if a bear came, he would leave the tent alone.

We shared a seat on the cooler and ate chili-over-biscuit and corn off Tupperware plates. Except for occasional claps of thunder, it's quiet—the rain falls silently. The river continues past us, ever onward. If we could continue with it we would be farther on with our journey when the sun rises. But our journey is not the river's journey—we have to stop and eat and sleep. Our strength is only good for a day, and even though the river is still tiny sixty miles from its head, it never needs to rest. It feeds on the rain and small rivulets from the bank.

* * *

We developed a certain terminology from loading and unloading the canoe. In action, it sounded like this when we set up camp.

"Hand me the Green Bag," Lisa said from inside the tent. "It'll go next to the Blue Bag. We can leave the Red Bag with the canoe."

"Okay. Here's the Yellow Bag with my clothes bag in it."

"Just take your clothes bag out of the Yellow Bag, and leave it out of the tent."

"Leave what out? The clothes bag?"

"No, the Yellow bag. We don't need it in here."

"Okay, I'll drag that Mesh Bag up here and start dinner over by the White Cooler."

"Aaahh!"

"Well, just step on it before it crawls under the Thermarest!"

* * *

The river broadened slightly above Radium—perhaps fifty to seventy yards across at the widest points. The Columbia snaked back and forth so much we could only see ahead a hundred yards at a time. This was where one canoeist said he pulled off the river, walked ten yards, and peed a mile downstream.

I once went to an "amaizu"—a maze—in Japan, where people pay money to get lost for a couple hours. I had to find my way to four stations to get my ticket stamped, then hunt for the exit. And they piped in this timeless sort of music to mask any sound. Time no longer mattered. I simply had to get through the maze as best I could.

This part of the river seemed just like that. Soft dirt banks continually collapsed into the stream, leaving a one- to two-foot cliff overhung with grasses and small trees, so we could never see anything but one short section of river at a time. The river carried much debris, and was a labyrinth to weave through instead of an easy direct float.

To help pass the time, we invented stories. Instead of using the word "switch" to change paddling sides, we simply told one word of our story. Every ten strokes, the story would continue.

"Once," I said. I could see some baby ducks hiding in the reeds close to shore. Two were riding their mother—the rest clustered close behind her.

"Upon." They weren't the only wildlife around. We saw Canadian geese and about three other variety of ducks, three bald eagles and some deer.

"A." The scenery on both sides of the river was gorgeous. Columbia slowly wandered through a valley flanked by the Rocky Mountains and the Selkirk Range. The peaks were rugged, flecked with

snowy tops . . .

"Time." . . . and separating them from the river were forests, grassy meadows—typically beautiful British Columbia. The Selkirks were more majestic than the Rockies, which were no more than tremendous ridges; but the Selkirks were rugged, pristine mountains.

"There." Access to these mountains would be difficult and time consuming; only a hardy adventurer would climb here. Although this range had probably been explored in-depth, this country seemed untouched by humankind.

"Was." Time for another bathroom stop. It felt good to pull down our wetsuits. Our skin could breathe. But we struggled to put them back on—they were wet and sticky. They functioned like a crock-pot in the sun, and therefore we smelled lightly rancid by day's end, but we figured it was safest to wear them. The water was wintry and indifferent.

As we set up camp beside the Parson bridge, Lisa could hardly concentrate on anything. We had canoed about forty-five miles that day—a record for us—and felt a tremendous amount of accomplishment even though we could barely move. We had left from just above Radium at seven o'clock and reached the tiny town of Parson at five-thirty. We had hoped Parson would at least have a café where we could get a milkshake, but no such luck.

"Steve, I thought for sure we'd have more time in camp; you know, sleeping late in the morning, sunbathing. But reality is getting up early and being on the river all day long. When we finally stop all I want to do is get out of the sun and lay in the tent."

"Yeah, I know. Thanks for going with me, by the way." She smiled.

"Good grief! Look at my feet," she said. I walked over and looked. The straps on Lisa's sandals had left her sunburnt feet looking like the red and white stripes on Old Glory.

We took a cold soak under the bridge to clean up and cool our sunburnt skin. The river kept pouring over our legs, and we laughed at the long hike up to Radium and how I had misjudged the distance. We chuckled again at Lisa stepping into the hole in Columbia Lake and floating beside the canoe in the storm. We talked about the Columbia and how far we have come—eighty-five to ninety miles

already—scarcely considering we have well over a thousand miles to go.

* * *

I walked to the local convenience store in Nicholson and phoned some friends, Lou and Alice Belanger, while Lisa unloaded the canoe. At the store we dumped our garbage and bought some Diet Coke, a bag of chips, and four cans of chocolate pudding—our first "real" food in four days.

Other than seeing several bald eagles, nothing exciting has happened on the river; in fact, I sense this trip will simply evolve into a way of life leaning toward the ordinary rather than the adventurous. Each day, we fix breakfast, break camp and load the canoe, and start exploring a new section of the Columbia, hoping to travel at least twenty miles. We talk, take pictures, make dinner plans, hunt for a camp site when we want to be done for the day. The tent goes up, dinner and the sun go down, we read or write in our journals, and sleep.

* * *

Belangers, an older couple in their eighties, lived in a three-bedroom trailer house and were anxious to take us into Golden and show us the sights. Golden, a town of about four thousand people, bustles with tourism in addition to its logging industry. The nearby Rockies offers prime recreation opportunities to hang gliders and white water rafters in the summer, and to skiers, snowmobilers, and ice climbers in the winter. Golden is also a gateway town to Yoho and Banff National Parks and the pristine Lake Louise. Lou insisted on stopping at the Overwaitea food store to buy his day's supply of tomatoes. He claimed to eat one tomato with every meal—breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

* * *

I called Dave Wurzer of Big Lake Resort on the south end of Kinbasket Lake to see if he could pick us up at the Donald bridge for a portage around Redgrave Canyon. At Redgrave Canyon the Columbia squeezes down to about eighty feet across and shoots through serious rapids. Since the last five days were virtually the first five days in our lives that we had even been in a canoe, attempting this canyon was out of the question.

Redgrave Canyon fails to match the beginning canoeist's category. Robin Cody, a Portland

author who canoed the river in 1990, hired a river guide and his aluminum boat to navigate this stretch. He described his experience in his book *Voyage of a Summer Sun*: "River smacked the boat and threw icy spray over the bow as we corked among whole trees and lesser debris through the next chute and toward a towering straight-ahead cliff, where huge scissoring waves kicked out from the wall." Cody warned us about this section, vowing never to attempt his ride again. Obviously, this was no place for our canoe.

Cody had given us Dave Wurzer's phone number and said Dave would be glad to portage us around the canyon. Dave, in fact, was thrilled to help us, but because of his work schedule, we had to get to Donald by six o'clock if we wanted a ride.

Reluctant to leave Belangers, we said goodbye and embarked on our worst canoeing day yet. Logs and bark clogged this twenty-three-mile stretch, and our passage zigzagged through this obstacle course. To make matters worse, the Kicking Horse River joined the Columbia at Golden, and because the river didn't increase its width to accommodate the marriage, Columbia practically doubled in speed. Negotiating log jams and sand bars at this hectic pace kept our minds busy and arrested time.

At one point, the river surged toward a cluster of logs jamming its straight-forward progress. Columbia sundered in two, the halves sliding along the logs and turning an abrupt ninety-degrees around the ends of the jam. We headed at breakneck speed towards it and tried to decide which end was best to go around, but the river chose for us, grabbing the canoe and shuttling us along the log and to the fast twist at the end. This was gonna be interesting in a nineteen-foot canoe, I thought. Then I noticed the tree root snaking out over the turn barely three feet off the water. We ducked and leaned to the left. Water grabbed the bow and flipped us downstream and we sped past the jam, barely comprehending how we made it.

The river also split and wove into countless forks, and finding the main branch proved difficult. The main branch was safer because it was broad and deep; the creeks had rapids and shallow areas. Once, we suddenly lurched to a halt, grounded on rocks, the river rippling past. We had to drag the canoe across the shallows. We finally made it, though, to the bridge at Donald right at six.

We dragged our gear up a steep, grassy hill, lifted our canoe onto a narrow logging road, and walked up to the highway. No one was there.

"Do you think he's been here and left?" Lisa asked.

"I don't know. Let's wait a little bit longer," I said.

By seven o'clock depression hit us. We had not relaxed in six days; we were dogged-tired, in the middle of nowhere, unable to continue because of the canyon. And stranded as well. Lisa was ready to quit. At seven-thirty we hailed a passing car, gave them Dave's phone number and some money to see if they could contact him.

At eight the car returned. Nobody was home at that number, but a few minutes later Dave drove up in his blue pickup. He had completely forgotten about us, and said he was half-way through his chicken dinner before he remembered.

On the way to the resort, Dave voiced frustration at the state of the Columbia, because without a sizable lake the Wurzers have little clientele. "I don't know what we're going to do," he said. "We have worked hard on this place and spent a lot of money. But with the river so low, no one comes here." Part of the reason for low water was little rainfall and part was the Columbia River Treaty which we would learn more about down river.

Big Lake Resort is a clean, quaint camping place on Kinbasket Lake. And plainly, when the water's high, Wurzers enjoy the resplendence of a wilderness lake. But when the water's low—as it is now—no one can ignore the vast mud flats bisected by Columbia's thin green ribbon.

We rented a cabin to stay in for the night. After tenting, these quarters felt like the Hilton. We had a stove, oven, two beds, a bathroom, and a roof—luxury for twenty bucks.

Kinbasket Lake was next on the agenda. Except for a few logging roads, trails ended at Kinbasket Lake—Highway 93 headed west for Revelstoke. Cody warned us about this isolated section: "You have to be careful there. I ran into huge peat bogs and floating trees. They didn't log the lake-bed before they backed up the river from Mica Dam. Some people say that old trees from the lake bottom come shooting up." He was concerned enough hire a fellow and his motorboat to check on him each

day. We went alone.

* * *

Rita, Dave's wife, had said little to us during our short stay at Big Lake. Dave left for Revelstoke early, so Rita drove us down to the lake, which actually was a lake, although we crossed four hundred yards of mud flats. She watched us as we unloaded our stuff from their pickup. We packed our dry-bags and coolers, the mesh bag and camera case, and told Rita goodbye.

* * *

Sun glared mercilessly off the river. No breeze. No current. Even though we used a brand of sunscreen that promised six hours protection, we covered our face, shoulders, and legs frequently since we sweat a lot, especially inside our wetsuits. It may seem ridiculous that we wore them in the hot weather, but it didn't seem so at the time. Part of the beauty of wilderness was also its threat—the water was icy cold.

I kept three Powerbars right on top of the flotation tank in the bow within arm's reach. A 1.5-liter water bottle with Gatorade rested beneath my seat. Lisa had Powerbars and a peanut-raisin mix balanced on the lid of the white cooler to break its glare and a bottle of Gatorade squeezed between the sleeping pads and the side of the canoe.

We camped near a logging camp on Kinbasket Lake. 8000-foot peaks surrounded us, and to the west loomed Mt. Sir Sanford, 11,555 feet. A massive, contorted glacier hung down its east face with a scythe-shaped ice-cliff.

After setting up our tent, I walked up to the collection of buildings and trailers to check things out. I had never visited a logging camp before and was interested to see what one looked like. I entered the mess hall and struck up a conversation with a couple loggers named Harry and Pierre. Pierre was eating a large, fresh slice of cantaloupe. Juice ran off his spoon as he carved another bite. A tall burly man in overalls approached and asked if I was eating. I replied, "I not with the group, I'm just visiting. How much for a slice of cantaloupe?" He mumbled something, went to his kitchen, and came back with a monstrous cantaloupe.

"Here you go," he grunted, and put it on the table.

"Thanks! How much?" I asked.

"Nothing. All the food's free here."

Frank was the head cook, and asked about our trip and invited us to eat at the mess hall. I felt we had better eat our own dinner at camp, so I said, "Well, I'll tell you what. . . ."

"I'll tell *you* what," he insisted. "Go down and get your wife and come on up for supper. I close in twenty minutes."

We had roast beef, potatoes and gravy, french fries, corn, brussel sprouts, and punch—the best meal we'd had since Belangers. Harry gave us helpful information on the remainder of Kinbasket Lake, especially the windy Narrows just ahead, and Frank insisted we come up for breakfast and make a sandwich for lunch.

Harry and Pierre visited our camp. They paddled around the bay and expressed their admiration for the canoe.

"What kind of canoe is that?" Pierre asked. "It sure handles nice."

"It's a Wenona brand, called the *Itasca*. An outfitter in Spokane recommended it for our trip. At nineteen feet long, it holds a lot."

"What does it weigh?"

"When we first got it, it weighed 59 pounds. But we've added some extras like these thigh pads and seat pads." Lisa pointed out the gray closed-cell foam which covered the tractor-seats and lined the inside of the canoe where our thighs would naturally lean against. The seats were mounted on a track system, sliding forward or backward so that our weight would adjust the plane of the canoe to its peak efficiency—level for calm water and straight-forward paddling, or with the bow slightly inclined for high waves.

The Itasca's narrow bow flares to disperse waves. Then the gunneling curves inward by the front seat so I don't have to reach out so far to paddle. The middle of the canoe curves out again to keep high water out, recurves where Lisa sits, and back out again at the stern. The overall design gives the impression of an arrow—sleek and fast.

Pierre and I went for another ride while Harry talked to Lisa.

"So you're from the States?" Harry asked. "My wife loves to visit the States. She goes down there just to shop, and takes days to wander through the malls, sometimes never even buying anything. Can you understand that?"

"I love to shop. I'd do it all the time if I could."

"Really? Somehow you don't strike me as the type."

Lisa laughed. After lifting weights all spring and canoeing 120 miles, she looked more like a bodybuilder than an mall-cruiser.

* * *

Contrary to Robin Cody's description, Kinbasket Lake is beautiful—no peat bogs, no shooting logs and no floating trees. True, the shoreline is completely logged and we see little wildlife, but the distant mountains look fresh and undisturbed and the calm, blue-green glacial water appears Mediterranean through my camera lens.

We came up for breakfast at five-thirty, and the only people here are Frank and the dishwasher, since the crew have eaten and gone. Frank has made French toast for us and chatted for an hour on a supposedly incipient Indian takeover of the Canadian government, and how he feels his own life is in danger, and how we better beat it to the border, else be imbrued in civil war. He has made us each a couple of large sandwiches and put them in bags with a bunch of other goodies.

As we passed through the Narrows, the wind suddenly picked up. We were paddling in four-foot swells before we even realized it was getting windy. Pierre had told us stories of people drowning because of sudden, catastrophic winds, and of heavy equipment barges going down in ocean-size waves. With the deadly threat of others' misfortunes in mind, we rode only a canoe-length from shore. We hurriedly pulled off on the levellest piece of land available, but still had to pitch our tent on a 10-15 degree angle.

Everything had to be tied down—dry bags, canoe, tent. Standing around was miserable; blowing sand stung our faces, so we entered the tent. The midday sun turned the tent into a sauna,

where our sticky bodies spent the day trying to relax, eat, and play cards. Sand rained down on us. Nothing we could do would keep it out. I tried to rig the tarp around a couple of stumps to act as a windbreak; I thought it helped a little, although Lisa didn't agree. Our key options were to get blasted with sand or get rained on with sand. We napped rolled against the lower side of the tent—two sticky, stinky people crammed together in a gritty steam room.

* * *

I was frustrated because even though we got up early and left by four o'clock, the wind hadn't changed. We canoed a little, stopped a little, never going very far. The headwind took a lot out of us, and at our breakfast break we wondered if the lake was always that windy and if we should just keep on going, or if it would calm and should we wait until then. We also wanted to notify our parents that we would be late arriving at Mica Dam so they wouldn't conjure pictures of two dead bodies washing up on shore somewhere. Discouraged, we clamored up a steep, overgrown creek bed to the logging road, and flagged a passing trucker.

The truck slowed in a cloud of dust, and the driver leaned out of the cab. "Hello," a friendly face said.

"We're canoeing this river and getting bogged down by this weather. We were wondering if you could call this number collect and tell them we'll be late to Mica Dam."

"Sure," he said. "We been wondering where you been. The guys at camp radioed that a red canoe would be coming. So we been watching for you. And just ten miles down the lake the weather's great; water's calm as glass."

"You're kidding. It's so rough here we can hardly move."

"Yeah, it's always a bit choppy here. Keep going though. You'll hit some nice water around Gold Arm."

We thanked him for his time and news and continued for several miles despite the wind and waves, comforted to know people were watching out for us in this wilderness area.

We stopped for dinner in the early afternoon. The water was clear enough to see about twenty

or thirty feet into the river, so we bathed and washed our hair. Leaving our wetsuits and underwear on a piece of driftwood, we walked across the pebbly beach and stepped into the water. And stepped out. I had goose-bumps over every inch of my body. The water looked inviting, especially since it was a hot day, but was absolutely frigid. And yet we needed a bath.

Gritting my teeth, I waded in. The headache started as water rose above my knees. I started to crouch down for my plunge, and slipped on a rock. I fell face-first, the icy water slapping my chest before enveloping me. I sprinted to shore, lathered up and headed back in. This time I held my breath, dove in, quickly twisted to rinse, and returned to shore before exhaling. We dried off standing in the tantalizing sun.

The tent was pitched on a beach with an entire layer composed of garnets. They must have had a certain density to filter through sand and rock to a distinct level on the shore. I walked up from the water and stepped across the long maroon band. Turning back, I reached down and grabbed a handful. Each piece was a multi-faceted wonder. I held one up to the light and noticed its purplish translucence. I knew they had some value and here they were—I was standing on shovelfuls of the stuff and felt rich.

The garnets had fallen off gargantuan volcanic boulders that resembled blocks of melted plastic. The rocks contained these garnet crystals, and I imagined the rock slowly eroding, over thousands of years, gradually releasing the garnets. They would fall to the beach where wind and wave action would eventually transport them to their peers on the maroon band. Our tent was pitched next to these plastic, garnet-studded monstrosities. I wondered if any would fall off by morning.

I sit on a throne of solid white granite—a nice addition to a rose garden if someone could haul it out of here. Loons cry in the distance, the setting sun shimmers off the water—we are camped in the front row of Kinbasket's amphitheater.

* * *

We aren't sure how far we have to go to finish Kinbasket. I don't have a map for this section of the Columbia. Earlier today I felt sure Mica Dam was only a short way, but I must be wrong. Harry, at the logging camp, told us we'd reach a cable ferry just before the dam, and all day long we kept expecting to see

it just around the next point.

A brisk headwind assigned us a full day of work. Cutting waves, staying straight and trying to make significant progress kept our minds occupied—no more lengthy, one-word-at-a-time tales. The wind kept us from cutting across small inlets and bays to make the next point; instead, we had to trace the shoreline for safety. We'd round a given point expecting to see Mica Dam, but all that would appear was another point.

We finally reached the ferry and one of the operators said it was ten kilometers to Mica Dam—so we paddled a trifle further and stopped for dinner. We accidentally used pancake mix to make the biscuit, and it tasted disgusting. Biscuits shouldn't taste like pancakes. The fried potatoes tasted great though.

By eight o'clock we were ready to canoe again. We were so far north it didn't get dark until about eleven; the wind had completely dwindled, and once again we were paddling a glossy surface. We played "twenty questions" to keep ourselves awake. Eventually, however, we were so brain-dead we couldn't paddle and play the game at the same time. We found a spot and made camp—tired, but happy to know that we were within a mile or two of a major goal. We had canoed almost fourteen hours for a total of thirty-five miles.

* * *

Knowing that Mica Dam was virtually around the corner, we decided to eat breakfast there. Before we headed out, though, we each ate a Powerbar. Lisa puked.

"That's the last Powerbar I'm eating, Steve," she said, slumping over the water. "From now on I'll eat granola bars or something." That suited me fine, since I liked them.

Mica Dam was a welcome sight. We had reached a major goal and had canoed two hundred miles. We left the canoe and our gear at a boat ramp and began walking toward the dam.

We reached the dam, which looked deserted, but saw a sign for the Visitor's Center, and opened the door. The lobby was also deserted, but had a phone with a number to call. Someone answered with a voice that sounded like it was coming from a submarine, and I explained our situation

to him—that we needed a portage around the dam—and he said he'd send someone right up.

Mica Dam is entirely an earth-fill dam. Forty-three million cubic yards of gravel, sand, rock and glacial till went into its construction and at 180 feet higher than Grand Coulee Dam in Washington it easily qualifies as one of the largest dams in the world.

Herman Bloomstein, an employee of B.C. Hydro, came about ten-thirty to pick up our gear and dropped us off about three miles below the dam. It would have taken us about four trips—three miles each way—to transport it on foot. Herman had immigrated from Holland with his family a few years ago. He was an amiable conversationalist, and even helped us unload our stuff. No offense to Lisa, but it was pleasant to talk to someone else after a few days. I think she enjoyed it too.

Just below the dam was Mica Creek, a village practically owned by B. C. Hydro. We had a lunch of fish and chips, salad, cake and pie in their staff house, then stocked up on nectarines, plums, and some bread and paddled for an hour until we found a decent campsite.

Revelstoke is only seventy miles away. I can hardly believe we've gone over two hundred miles in ten days, and hope to reach the border by the Fourth of July since that sounds like the American thing to do.

* * *

On the map, this section of the river looked treacherous—narrow and in a valley. To me that meant a swift river, possibly some rapids and too much excitement. On the contrary, this water hardly moved at all. The Columbia was small, the river constantly fed by Mica Dam, but for the life of me, I couldn't detect a current. As a result, we had to earn every mile we paddled.

We pushed from eight o'clock to seven that night. The unfolding view resembled all that we had just passed: some cliffs, some trees, an occasional house, a duck—turn the bend and see it all over again. We were the only object that moved, except we felt as if we were going nowhere—like playing a simple arcade game. The race track was a loop—the same features marked every straightaway.

Our camp smells like fresh mountain air; so fresh, in fact, it smells like someone has sprayed air freshener. A literal perfume of flowers, trees, streams and mountains "wafts over our senses" like a cliché setting in a 9th-grader's description of her favorite place. We pitched the tent near a dead stump

surrounded by firewood, and lit the wood to make our first actual campfire. We've just finished unloading everything from our canoe and washing it. The fire roars, and hot water is boiling on the stove.

I started reading *The Return of the Native* by Thomas Hardy. The story took place on “Egdon Heath,” a place Hardy described as “a face on which time makes but little impression,” which was precisely my sentiments for this section of river. Hardy made the prediction in Chapter One that “the time seems near . . . when the chastened sublimity of a moor, a sea, or a mountain will be all of nature that is absolutely in keeping with the moods of the more thinking of mankind.” Certainly the Columbia has been subdued and chastened so people can use her strength. But Columbia has undeniably preserved her sublimity—her grandeur, nobility, and impressiveness. And I could appreciate its tameness, too. Canoeing the original river and its wilds wouldn't have been feasible for me. I didn't have the time to reenact David Thompson's two-year voyage, nor did I have M. J. Lorraine's five months and the will to do it alone. I was married, had a strong sense of self-preservation, and one summer.

* * *

A canoe is a unique craft—an object of romance and adventure. If you've had the sheer willpower to read through any of James Fenimore Cooper's novels you'd agree that the canoe is the ultimate American watercraft. When you paddle, human sounds seem extinct, and quiet tones of the outdoors prevail. Canoeing is typically associated with glassy waters, beautiful sunsets, nice campsites and people getting in touch with nature. Even though the reality of our journey does not precisely equal this romanticized picture, I still feel this way about canoeing.

* * *

Sunday's not a day to go canoeing. When a person does not feel like canoeing, the scenery, the river, and everything else lose their interest. The trees were boring, and barges along the river were boring, the mountains were boring, the food was boring. We didn't wake up until about eight-thirty, and had a mediocre breakfast of pancakes with strawberry jam. We read our Bibles, shared some thoughts, and broke camp.

Thirty minutes downriver a horn honked up on the road. Paul and Linda Trevithick, my grandparents, had driven from Spokane to meet us at Revelstoke. They came a day early and found us by the flashes of our paddles. We pulled off the river and they pulled off the road; there were hugs and kisses, and watermelon and Gatorade, and nacho chips and Macintosh-brand toffee: everything we dreamed of having.

Trevithick's make for super grandparents. Grandpa "T" never really had any grandparents himself, so he executes that role immensely. During my sophomore year of college I lived with them and developed a habit of eating watermelon. Once, during the hot summer, I ate 75 pounds of the stuff in three days. Macintosh Toffee was a real treat too. It's only marketed in Canada, and whenever T's go north of the border they buy some for everyone.

Grandpa was dressed in grey slacks and a polo shirt that matched his full head of white hair. He could've been an English butler enjoying a day off. Grandma wore a blue print skirt and white blouse, her usual traveling outfit.

We made plans to meet them in Revelstoke the following evening, and looked forward to staying in a motel and eating the steak, potatoes, garlic bread and milkshake Lisa had been craving since Lake Windemere.

T's arrived at the beginning of our day, and since we still had two full days of paddling to reach Revelstoke, it wasn't enjoyable to tell them goodbye. We were discouraged for twenty-two hard and slow miles until we set up a late camp about twenty miles north of Revelstoke. We needed a day off badly, but settled for tuna-noodle casserole and another bon-fire.

The driftwood fire crackles. Hat Peak Glacier flows between craggy ridges across the river, and south of that stands Frenchman's Cap—my favorite mountain in this area, resembling a 9500-foot Matterhorn.

* * *

The dam at Revelstoke was the newest on the Columbia. Two of the four generating units came into operation in 1984. The dam was beautiful and looked powerful. T's picked us up at the west side of the

dam at an abandoned construction ramp. They had to borrow a key to open a gate to reach us. I later met the gregarious sailor who lent the key. Bill Barnes, an Englishman, spent five years in England making a 36-foot sailboat, passed two years sailing from there to Vancouver, B.C., with his wife and three little kids. I imagined them living a while in various ports, soaking up the culture, then sailing on.

We loaded up our gear into T's Oldsmobile and proceeded to the motel. After showering and donning clean clothes we went to Denny's for a steak dinner. T's were amazed that Lisa ate everything that came before her and was still hungry. I was a bit shocked as well: she consumed the entire steak, all the potato including the skin, ordered two refills of bread, drank about a gallon of water and ordered dessert.

True to form, Grandpa told the waitress all about us, how we were canoeing the entire Columbia River, how we had spent a year planning this trip, how I was an English teacher and their first grandson as well. Luckily for her, the restaurant wasn't very busy. Grandpa crafted a bow-tie out of a five dollar bill as a tip.

* * *

We drove to Mt. Revelstoke, hiked to the top and are enjoying the resplendent view of the Columbia River. To the north, I can see about twenty miles of river slowly pouring its broad, hill-to-hill width down from the north as from a cornucopia basket. It's not hard to visualize the silent sluggish river below Mica Dam, the long windy Kinbasket Lake before that, and the narrow, twisty Columbia that started at Columbia Lake. We've got a long ways to go, but look at what we've done. To the south, and below the dam, tiny ribbons leak through a broad valley. This is our next water, ready to take us to Upper Arrow Lake, where it will again flourish into a mighty river.

Grandpa's knee was bugging him, so we stopped hiking and went to a German restaurant. I ordered knackwurst and bratwurst served on red cabbage. Although the knackwurst tasted like an regular hotdog, the bratwurst was delicious. The red cabbage had a sweetish-sour taste and was a fine compliment to the sausage. A side dish of egg noodles, called "spitzel," tasted a bit bland, so I mixed them with the cabbage. Tasted great.

* * *

Before starting our expedition we had packed five supply boxes and, with the help of friends, distributed them along the river. One came with T's to Revelstoke, others waited in Spokane, Wenatchee, Tri-Cities and Vancouver. Each box contained Bisquik and Krusteaz mixes, sun tan lotion, white gas for the stove, Powerbars, canned vegetables and fruit, two varieties of noodles, Gatorade and lemonade mixes. Since we couldn't carry two and a half months worth of food effectively, this system worked well.

T's couldn't believe that we could pack all our gear, which occupied half the hotel room, into our canoe. And it did look like a daunting task, but our canoe held a lot of stuff, and it all fit.

We had a good breakfast and were on the water by seven-thirty. A strong current flowed below the dam, and we put thirty miles behind us in just six hours. We paddled until we saw the ferry that crosses Upper Arrow Lake at Galena Bay.

We carried hotdogs, oranges, and Diet Coke up a hill to eat in the shade. A grey fox looked at us from a short distance. He seemed more scared of us than we of him, but Lisa didn't want to camp with him around. So we moved to another area and read our books until the sun was setting. Then we set up camp and crawled in.

* * *

Grandma had come up with an excellent idea: instead of canoeing across Galena Bay's three miles of open, windy water, why not just take the ferry? It sounded fun, and would provide an interesting diversion from our routine. We loaded our canoe first, then our gear, alongside a few cars, bicycles and motor homes. As the ferry pulled away, a family vacationing from Germany asked us what we were doing. We enjoyed discussing our trip, because it was a tale about one of America's great rivers and of the Northwest. They admired what we were doing, that we were on an adventure, exploring our world. I felt they were doing the same thing: traveling. It's good to travel and to see things. It's good to see your country as a foreign country—your way of life as unique to the rest of the world.

Morning was hot, and by two o'clock we were searching for shade. You know how it is when

the sun beams too intimately on your shoulders and thighs—next time you take cookies out of the oven, try hunching over when that heat roars up, and stay there all afternoon. The air was steam-room humid, but we were past sweating. I think we were on the verge of heat exhaustion—we felt nauseated, dizzy, thirsty. We hauled the canoe up a rocky beach, just enough so it wouldn't float away, grabbed life jackets and water bottles and hopped up a rocky incline to a dirt road that had perhaps been used back in the day but was of no use now. Tall trees shadowed it, and before I lay down and went to sleep I could just imagine a couple of lovers driving along in a new Model-T Ford and parking here to view the river through leafy tree branches, and to smooch. Me, I just drank half a quart of Gatorade, rolled on to the life jacket, and fell asleep.

Much later, we paddled until we got to an old ferry landing we had spotted on the map. We were glad to be done with this day—twenty-three scorching miles in twelve hours.

Camp was on smooth and level sand nestled among boulders and bordering a creek flowing into the lake. The stove cooked a biscuit, but we just felt like drinking. A young man stood on a boulder fly-fishing the mouth of the creek; I talked to him while Lisa put the finishing touches on our camp—stocking the tent with Thermarests, sheet and pillows.

The man gave us a trout. So that night I cleaned and burnt my first trout. We had no clue how to cook it. Dad always cooked fish in a skillet. So we flopped it in our pan. Now, our gas stove gets really hot—we had it on high to boil water—so the fish hit it, sizzled, flipped and curled up tightly as if it had still been alive. One side was seared black and we couldn't get the other side to lay flat in the pan. We stuffed it in a Zip-lock bag and steamed it in the Bakepacker. When we figured it was done, we lifted the lid—the fish had died a second death. The bag was a mess of bones, meat, and charred skin. We threw the whole thing out, knowing we have made the right choice regarding fishing: we just don't have the time to mess with it.

* * *

We only had eight miles remaining to Nakusp, where we had arranged to meet Mandy, Pat and Judy, friends from Spokane who wanted to visit us for the weekend. We paddled in the extreme heat of

another scorcher, the sun beating us again, and those eight miles drained our energy severely. I was afraid we might get heat stroke, so we drank plenty of water and paddled slowly. Occasionally we would canoe alongside a huge cliff where the temperature probably radiated 120 degrees.

The water level at Nakusp was extremely low; in fact, we left our canoe about two hundred yards from shore and walked up a wide beach. The United States and Canada have signed a *Columbia River Treaty*, a 1964 agreement which mandates—according to an irate Canadian we met the day before—that forebays behind America’s dams get filled before Canadian ones. Apparently ours weren’t full yet; the river had dropped fourteen feet in less than two weeks—pretty dramatic. Swimming buoys formed a limp rectangle on the beach; four or five docks with all their sections lay twisted like vertebrae from a long-dead animal, pilings sticking up like so many ribs. We also learned, however, that the *Treaty* allowed construction of dams to end the annual threat of flood damage in British Columbia, Washington and Oregon.

On shore we found a park. Surprisingly, the Friday afternoon recreationists were nowhere to be seen—no water, no people. We waited in the shade for three hours before Mandy arrived. Mandy was a cat-loving, vivacious lady who taught English at Eastern Washington State University. She was a great friend and did just about anything for us, including this visit. We paddled to the only usable dock around, chained the canoe to a beached piling, unloaded stuff from the wharf and packed it all in Mandy’s Geo Storm.

The Geo Storm is probably the smallest car on the American market. I doubted all our stuff would fit, but we started loading. In went two large dry bags, one small one, two large coolers, a mesh bag full of canned goods, two paddles plus a spare, camera box, sleeping pads, life-jackets; everything fit. For \$6000, a million miles to the gallon, and all this room, the Storm’s a steal. Just don’t have a head-on with a mile-post marker, or it’s all over.

* * *

We all slept in and had French toast and bacon over the camp fire for breakfast. I spent the entire day at camp, eating and reading *Return of the Native*. Meanwhile, the ladies left and found a good sunbathing

place, spent three hours laying there and got fried, except for Lisa. We had a lunch of hotdogs, pork and beans, fresh veggies and dip. Everyone lazed around for awhile, then went into town to get ice cream and make phone calls.

Lisa heard news of Madame Wulff. Wulff was Lisa's junior high French teacher. Many teachers leave lasting impressions on their students, but Madame Wulff went a bit beyond that. She was the most demanding teacher Lisa ever had. However, Wulff would frequently invite Lisa's class to spend the night at her farm where they rode horses, cooked, talked, did chores, learned about life and the genealogy of each of Wulff's twenty cats. Last year we visited her and she immediately put me on a spinning wheel and told me to learn it before I left. And I did.

Now she has brain cancer.

That night we had smores, roasted marshmallows and caramel corn. My body craved sugar—the two blistering hot days on Upper Arrow Lake must have depleted my carbohydrate stores. At any rate, the caramel corn tasted terrific. It's my Grandma T's recipe; in fact, she made it and sent it up with Pat and Judy. It's classic, it's addictive, it's extremely low-calorie and worth trying.

All you do is mix two cups of brown sugar, a half cup of Karo syrup and two cubes of butter. Bring them to a boil for five minutes before removing from heat. Stir in a half teaspoon baking soda, one pinch cream of tartar and a dash of salt. Pour this concoction over eight quarts of popped popcorn and mix. Bake it at two hundred degrees for one hour. Enjoy! I did. I consumed about three-quarters of it and felt great.

* * *

Our three friends waved goodbye from the dock at Nakusp as we headed into Lower Arrow Lake. They waved until we could see them no more.

We sent our warm clothes—jackets, extra sweats, wool socks, stocking caps—home with Judy. Since the days had been so hot we thought we wouldn't need the extras. Weather was fine when we were waving our adieus, but waxed windy and culminated in a lightning storm. Among the wooded hills of the east shore we noticed a flat, grassy place—a perfect campsite. A small house occupied a tiny

place on this property. A man and a woman were strolling about the grounds when we pulled up to shore. We asked for permission to set up a tent, and they told us to camp somewhere else. So we left, even though the rain came briskly now and the lightning was close. We found a small camp site only five miles from the Nakusp dock.

* * *

Rains came again. The water began pinging with little circular warps. The multiplying drops soon turned the river into the type of translucent glass you see in bathroom windows. We kept paddling in spite of it since we had Gortex raingear. The problem was that the temperature was too warm for jackets. The Gortex got soaked clean through from sweat and rain, and we started to get chilled.

Finally, we pulled off the river to get warm and dry in the tent. We spied a grove of trees that promised shelter, but had to go through a hundred yards of sandal-sucking mud to get there. We paddled up to the shore—the first five feet of shore consisted of a band of low viscosity mud. We couldn't tell where river ended and land began. I swung a foot over the gunnel, down the side and into six inches of mud.

“Gross!” I shouted. My water-socks had vanished.

“It can't be that bad!” Lisa replied, stepping out with her Reeboks. They disappeared, along with her knees.

We struggled to pull our feet out; the mud stole my water-socks since they weren't strapped on. Lisa's tennis shoes were tied, and the mud barely let her escape. I reached a hand into the muck, pulled hard, and saved my shoes. Loud, sucking noises accompanied our every move. We quickly dragged the canoe up, yanked drybags out, and started wrestling gear over to the grassy shore. Our shoes were caked with mud, our pants were soon covered with it. We hated it.

After a tremendous struggle across the mud flat with our gear and then erecting our tent and tarp, we have strung lines between small bushes beneath the tarp to hang soggy clothes. But now that we've carefully placed socks, shoes, jackets, underwear, and a slightly wet sleeping bag to where they might dry, the rain has stopped. Suspicious, we'll stay here anyway for a couple hours.

After going about eight miles in fairer weather, we reached the town of Burton and a campground. Burton was a summer recreation center on beautiful Lower Arrow Lake. A dock extended out into a quiet bay; stairs lead from the dock up to the camp, which was probably fifty feet higher than water level. The campground had about thirty sites, garbage cans appropriately placed, but the place was totally empty. Not one person was camped here. Like at Nakusp, we had to walk through several yards of mud to reach the end of the dock, which resembled a long-skinny, dehydrated tongue gasping for water. At any rate, we set up the tent in the parking lot, since the campsites were too far away.

A lady in a muddy, paneled station wagon drove up. She was the park manager, and had as much personality as a brick.

“Hi!” we said, ambling up.

“Yup,” she mumbled.

“Is there a store nearby where we can buy some food?”

“Yup.” She started picking plastic garbage bags from the piles of dirty laundry in her car.

“Okay, is it down this road here, or that one over there, or . . . ?”

“That one.” She pointed to the gravel road supposedly leading to the store.

“Thanks! Well, we’ll be off then.”

“Nope. Too far. I’ll drive.”

The Burton store was little more than a bait and tackle shop. We did find some fruit and bread there. After our new friend was finished with her business, she drove us back to camp. We helped her collect garbage and tidy up the place from the weekend.

“Is it alright to camp here in the parking lot?” we asked.

“Yup.”

“Thanks for the ride.”

“Yup.” And she drove off.

* * *

Today is the last day of June and we hope it's the last day of rain. It's about eight in the morning and rain is still pouring down. I've got the corned beef hash sizzling away, and am drinking jasmine tea while waiting for breakfast. Lisa's getting the clothes and stuff ready for loading into drybags. It's nice to have the confidence that our gear won't get wet. The dry bags are from Cascade Designs in Seattle, a company most famous for their Thermarest mattress, a fairly light, ultra-comfortable, self-inflating sleeping pad. We use those too.

* * *

The canoe trip is an effort to meet with the different. And the first few hundred miles did seem like we were living an adventure. But three weeks into our journey, we are firmly entrenched into an alternate way of living—not romantic, but practical; less dream to live out, than a simple purpose: get to Astoria. These are good times.

* * *

We knew that when thunder and lightning arose we wanted to be on the lowest relative ground as possible. Our tent was pitched on a large sloping beach—not the highest point around, but a dab exposed. It was one o'clock and lightning was two seconds away. We hunkered in a fetal position to have minimum contact with the ground, and put our arms around each other. At three we woke up stiff, and still in that position. The storm had left and we had fallen asleep.

"Do you think it's okay to lay down now?" Lisa asked.

* * *

We tried to get to Deer Park, where the wilderness of Lower Arrow Lake met the end of the road up from Castlegar. After canoeing about twenty-eight miles though, another storm came up. The wind had built steadily from the north until we had a strong tailwind. Behind us we could see rain and lightning popping the north end of the lake and headed south. Nowhere could we find a spot to camp. The eastern shore was steep and rocky.

Just before the rain and lightning hit, we came to the mouth of Two-Bit Creek and spied an old cabin about a two-minute hike off the water. We pulled the canoe up to the rocks and quickly

unloaded it. We had to camp here, no matter what, since the storm was nipping at our heels. While Lisa anchored the canoe to some rocks, I walked up to the cabin. I didn't know if it was inhabited or not; if so, what kind of people would I find? Was this their property? What if they kicked us off like the last people? Cautiously, I went around back to the front door. It looked unlocked.

I slowly pushed it open—it was quite vacant. There are many things I could say about this cabin—it was dusty, had a musty odor and a few spiders—but here's what was posted in block letters on the back wall: "Feel free to use this cabin, just leave it the way you found it and take your garbage."

"Hey, Lisa!" I yelled. "Start hauling stuff up! We'll stay in here!" I met her halfway up. "We'll probably want the tent anyway. The floor's a tad grimy."

The canoe was anchored upside down and stream-lined with the wind. Other items which wouldn't blow away I left. Throwing a dry bag over my shoulder and hoisting the white cooler, I picked my way among rocks to our home for the night. We shut the door and the first sharp crack of lightning hit the sky. Rain showered down, but I detected no leaks in the roof.

We sit on rickety chairs around a rickety table, eating a satisfying dinner of fried potatoes, corn, hot biscuit, and clam chowder. We'll wash dishes at the creek when the rain lets up. A moss-covered outhouse with a real toilet seat supplies a bathroom for us. A small water pump has been installed with a plastic pipe leading to the cabin. The sink doesn't work since the pump has no electricity; whoever owns this cabin relies on a generator. A medium-sized fridge is empty. The cupboards have some silverware and an assortment of plates, glasses, and spices. Part of the floor is rotting away, and most of it is covered with a dirty area rug. A barrel stove stands in the center with a small sign on it saying, "Please don't steal the stove. I've had to replace it twice since I left this cabin open." I wonder who this generous person is, and would like to thank him for his kindness.

We set up the tent on the floor to avoid the dirt, crawling spiders, and drafts. When it started to get dark outside, it got really dark in the cabin and really, really dark in the tent.

* * *

We slept soundly for ten and a half hours. Morning dawned beautiful and calm—and we left our

opportune and cozy shelter for Castlegar, where we would meet Mom and Dad.

We saw a small bear and five California Bighorn sheep right beside the river. I tried to photograph the bear, but it was a long way off and disappeared through the brush as I removed the lens cap. The rams were another story. We almost missed them. We were paddling about forty feet off shore when I spied a piece of driftwood boasting a unique curl. As we slowly advanced toward it, it didn't move. The bow touched gravel and I snapped pictures with the telephoto no more than eight feet away from five rams. Either we appeared completely non-threatening, or they were totally apathetic to our presence.

At Springa Park Marina another storm hit, so we pulled in and called Mom and Dad at the Sandman Inn. It was good to see them. Leaving the canoe chained up at the marina, we packed all our gear into their car, and headed to town for a prime rib dinner.

* * *

Mom and Dad dropped us off above Hugh Keenleyside Dam. Keenleyside was built in 1968 and serves mostly commercial traffic in the form of logs to the pulpmill and sawmill downstream. It's not a very high dam, about 170 feet, but traveling through the locks still proved an interesting experience.

Five of the fourteen dams on the Columbia have navigation locks. They provide a means by which river traffic can travel past the dam unimpeded, instead of pulling out at a boat ramp, driving around the dam, and putting in at another boat ramp.

We sidled up to a concrete peninsula where the controllers had installed a phone. Picking up the handset, we told the lockmaster we had arrived. The upstream gates were already open, so he gave us permission to enter. We paddled to a floating buoy on the side and wrapped a loop of rope around it. We had clear instructions to not *tie* the rope to the buoy, lest the buoy stick on the descent and leave us dangling in midair.

The upstream gates closed. Water was pumped out of the lock until it matched the level of the downstream river. During our descent, the upstream gates began to pop and snap as they buckled against the pressure. Large rivulets streamed from the seals. Lisa had the heebie-jeebies. If the gates

broke, we were done for. Meanwhile, Mom and Dad were standing on top of the dam and getting farther and farther away as we kept sinking. We didn't want the canoe to touch the algae-coated sides of the lock, so we had to push off with our paddles; and the water was swirling around, jockeying the canoe back and forth. We were all alone in this 50-foot by 300-foot box.

Actually, we only descended twenty-five feet. The downstream gate opened, I released the rope and we paddled out. The entire process took about thirty minutes.

The wind picked up and it took us a while to get to where current became significant. After working through small rapids and a moderate headwind, we met Mom and Dad at Zuckerburg Island for lunch and a short hike. A troop of girl-scouts were exploring the island, so we took their picture. One of their guides was an older man who had canoed this stretch of the river a few times.

"It's a good trip," he exclaimed. "Keep's you on your toes. It shouldn't be too bad until you reach the Rock Island Rapids. Be sure to stay on the right side. That's the side for chickens; that's the side I always go on. The left side'll give you a lot of adventure."

I thanked him for his advice.

"No problem. I've done this whole section."

But it was a problem. Because the only place called "Rock Island" that I knew of was on the Columbia, but south of Wenatchee, central Washington. Rock Island Dam was there. What did the old man mean when he said "I've done this whole section"? Past Wenatchee? True to form, I didn't think to ask him until we were already on the river and downstream.

It took us four hours to get to Trail. Columbia was cruising through Trail at fifteen miles an hour. Numerous rapids extended from one bank or the other. We couldn't simply choose one side and stick to it. We'd see foaming water ahead and start for the middle. But entering the main stream was a hazard in itself. The slower side water met the fast middle and created a kind of friction that begot a line of whirlpools. So to avoid rapids and rocks, we were constantly shuttling closer to one side or the other, never staying completely in the middle and always crossing whirlpools. Each time we crossed, we ducked slightly to lower our weight. The canoe would jerk and twist and either start moving faster or

slower in these disjunctive waters.

“Side water” also presented another canoeing challenge. Sheets of surface water shot sideways from shore. We would be focused on whirlpools when, out of the corner of my eye, I would notice an entirely different river flowing swiftly perpendicular to the Columbia. And we were headed for it. Just before the bow entered this contrary current, we would hunker down and lean the canoe into the current so we wouldn’t topple over the other way. The canoe would be pushed sideways toward shore, but then the bow would enter the old current again which was a new current relative to our current situation, and it was hectic paddling to say the least: lean the canoe... watch for more whirlpools... rapids ahead... switch to the other side.

One more water problem: “swirlies.” Out of nowhere, and often directly in front of the canoe, water would shoot straight up in the air and start spreading over the surface like a thirty-mile-an-hour lava flow. We could do nothing about these since they appeared so suddenly, so we just shouted.

“Swirlies! Water from the left! Whirlpool! Water from the right!” This is what it was like for fifteen miles. Then we learned the truth about Rock Island Rapids: they weren’t around Wenatchee—they were here. Now. And we were on the left side.

Luckily, we were close to shore. We grabbed fistfuls of grass and made a screaming halt. We climbed out onto these boulders and overlooked the left-side rapids. Water streams through a narrow chute, over a babble of boulders, calms, then dives through another series of rocks. Actually, it doesn’t look too awfully bad. There’s a chance we could do it without tipping. But who wants to tip? We’re at wit’s end, and not sure what to do. After a good cry, our frazzled nerves feel more collected.

We decided to try the rapids. We might tip, but after all, who cares? You’re supposed to tip on a canoe trip, even just to be able to tell a good story. We’d get a bit wet, a lot wet actually, but everything was tied down well, we were in wetsuits and life jackets. I got in the back of the canoe, Lisa in front.

Just off shore I got another idea: why not just canoe upstream a ways, cross the river, and go down the right side? The right side looked relatively calm. We eased up the east shore about a quarter of a mile, and hightailed it for the west side. Lisa paddled for all she was worth. Her braid was flying

from side to side, her green corduroy shirt a blur of motion. Rock Island loomed closer and closer, but about the time we needed to gain the far shore we got there. I turned the canoe downstream and let her float. Barely past Rock Island was a small inlet of motionless water. We stuck the bow into it, and leaned hard to the right—the canoe flipped around like it was nothing, and we stopped, facing upstream and able to relax.

Downstream, but back on the east side, was the small town of Waneta Junction and a McDonald's. We crossed the river again, but this time in much calmer waters, beached the canoe, and hiked up to town.

After a Quarter Pounder, Big Mac and fries, we headed for the home-sweet-home border of the United States, and got here about eight o'clock. We are glad to be in the US—by the Fourth of July at that—and five hundred miles downriver.

* * *

Many borders are physical, as well as political. The Columbia forms a border between Washington and Oregon, just like the Rio Grande serves as the border between Texas and Mexico and the Great Wall once separated Mongols from Chinese. The Canada-U.S. border has physical features as well. Swaths of trees have been removed all along the border. Standing at the border marker, which resembles a miniature Washington Monument, one can look due West and East and see exactly where the border is—a notch in the forested hill. Our two countries don't mind if our citizens intermingle freely, but the line has got to be there. As Robert Frost said, "Good fences make good neighbors."

A gray-haired customs inspector ambled down to our boat and camp site asking many questions regarding our trip and hardly any regarding customs. Lisa told him we didn't have any fruit, but he didn't seem to care. He said, "Be careful of those rapids 'bout a mile from here—they've ripped the bottom out of boats"; and "I suppose you two shouldn't have any problem though"; and "Wish I was going with you"—as if he was progressively getting younger the longer he talked. He kept looking around like something was holding him back. There might have been, but I enjoyed seeing the adventurer in his eyes.

We had a good canoeing day except for the last hour. We had wanted to make Kettle Falls, where Grandpa Pointer would meet us, but a storm came up and it was all we could do to make Marcus Island. The rain was pounding down as from a showerhead. As lightning thundered loudly a few drunken Fourth of July partiers bobbed in two-foot waves in their boats trying to get their pal up on skis, electricity popping all around them.

As we crossed the river, a malevolent squall burst down the valley, slamming our canoe from wave to wave. Desperate, we summoned our remaining strength, and finally gained the shore. We hauled our bedraggled bodies up the beach, campers looking at us curiously. One offered to watch our gear while another gave us a ride to Highway 25 between Kettle Falls and the border.

Grandpa Pointer finally met up with us after canvassing the area and notifying some local authorities that we were on the river in this storm. We stowed our gear at a park ranger's house, picked up a hamburger at Barney's, and headed to Spokane.

* * *

We left Spokane at five o'clock with Grandpa and Grandma and Uncle Russ and Aunt MaryAnn. Russ's car was crowded, but we made Kettle Falls with no mishaps. Breakfast at Barney's put us in a canoeing mood, and after a late start we went about ten miles. A wind arose, so we pulled off for a few hours.

We were on the northern tip of Lake Roosevelt, a huge reservoir behind Grand Coulee Dam. Lake Roosevelt is about 120 miles long, and is a popular site for summer recreationalists. In fact, many people rent houseboats and ply the waters for a week. We looked forward to seeing this area, even though it had no current and would potentially be windy.

After our rest, we canoed until dark. We were paddling in the wind, watching the sky for rainstorms, when we saw a sign on shore advertising ice cream. It was the only store in the small town of Daisy. We bought two cones and met Sally Shute, who—with her dog Idaho—claimed to own half the town. We set up camp just above the Gifford Ferry.

* * *

Eighteen miles by eleven this morning—and done for the day—gives me a hearty sense of accomplishment. We set up camp in time to actually enjoy a thunderstorm instead of trying to escape one. We are at Hunters Park, where Eugene and Susan Lantze picked us up for dinner. They drove us to sundry points that overlooked the river and then went to their house for a sublime dinner: chicken-fried steak, potatoes and gravy, fresh peapods with carrots, fresh-fruit salad, and blueberry pie with ice cream. I ate so much I could barely walk, and tried to camouflage my bent posture so they wouldn't think I was an absolute glutton. I pretended to examine every article that required some bending over to examine. I walked slow and talked slow. My stomach ached to high heaven and they asked if my back hurt and if I wanted a vibrator. I said, "No, I'm fine."

* * *

Friends came to see us on the river. Frank and Dolores Lehrman motored ahead to scout out a camp site for us, since we wanted to get a few more miles in. We paddled for another hour and set up camp in a tiny inlet just north of Seven Bays. We hopped in Lehrman's boat for a cruise up the Spokane River, where we saw some interesting rock formations and an ancient Indian burial ground. Frank explained about the burial ground since he knows Indian history and once taught on the Colville Reservation.

We turned around, went back to Miles and met Bill and Carlene Gest. Gest's loaded coolers of food into the boat, and we headed back to camp for dinner.

Carlene spread out a linen tablecloth, poured strawberry soda in real glasses, and put candles and a Styrofoam-cup vase with flowers in the center. Dinner was fried chicken, fresh fruit, tortilla chips, fresh-cut vegetables, pop, and a delicious chocolate cream-puff dessert. I had four helpings.

Frank constructed a monument of driftwood by the beach. Dolores told me that he always builds some sort of a monument wherever he goes.

Gests and Lehrmans were canoeing enthusiasts, along with Wes and Bonnie Carlson, some more friends from Spokane. Dolores told the story of how they were all canoeing a lake once, and staying in single file, when Bill quietly grabbed the stern of Carlson's canoe. Frank joined in, as well as a couple other canoes, and soon five canoes were all strung together, and only Bonnie—way up in

front—was paddling. She continued paddling, never looking back, and everyone continued their conversations and paddling sounds as normal. About twenty minutes later, Bonnie, sweating and puffing like a locomotive, turned around. Nine people were loafing and relishing the joke. Dolores ended the story right there, and I was afraid to ask how things turned out.

* * *

The unrelenting drizzle was cold and uninviting. And about ten o'clock the wind picked up. But we wanted to make Keller Ferry since we knew of a good campground there, so we kept going. We were canoeing as we never had before. Our confidence in our abilities was high after a solid month of paddling. We knew what we were doing, and even when we would dip into a trough and when swells came over the bow, we didn't worry.

I had been scared to death of tipping at Fairmont Golf course, six hundred miles back, riding those little ripples, but these waves and even the water coming in, didn't even phase me.

After a while, though, we got tired of battling the waves and rain and stopped at a small rocky peninsula jutting out from a cliff on the south bank. The only available shelter was our tarp. We lay down on the wet rock and pulled the tarp over us. We talked about the trip, our future, and our past, while the weather disinterestedly played forte staccato tunes on the tarp.

* * *

Pools collected in the tarp and the tapping sounds quieted to pianissimo. Even though the clouds hadn't lifted, our spirits had. We made the final two miles to Keller and set up camp. Rain continued to drizzle while we got dry. At seven it stopped, and we took a ride across the Columbia on the Keller Ferry.

This is one of the few times on our trip that we've been surrounded by fellow campers and recreationists. Most are either in motor homes, trailers or large tents. We sit beside our small Half-Dome, hunched over a tiny stove, eating off Tupperware plates, almost feeling alienated from these people. They are on vacation; this is our way of life.

Our tent is apart from the main tent area. We've set it up on the north end of camp, close to our

canoe. A park official has told us that if her boss sees us, we'll have to move, and that we can move now or risk moving later. We'll risk it.

At nine-thirty we went to a presentation of ferry crossings on the Columbia River, and in particular, the Keller crossing. The Columbia used to have ninety ferry crossings in the U.S., six on Roosevelt Lake. Our trip would have been quite different back then. The danger level was pretty high a hundred years ago: swift currents, shabby log raft ferries, eccentric ferry-men and crude crossing methods. President Roosevelt crossed at Keller much to the chagrin of his body-guards. Now only two ferries bridge the Columbia–Keller, and one up at Gifford. We rode the *Martha S.*, a small, diesel-powered ferry that crossed the river in about fifteen minutes.

* * *

We never had to move the tent, so enjoyed a good rest. We started at six with no breakfast. We had eaten so much in the last few days we weren't hungry. The weather being beautiful, we made our usual three miles an hour, and came to our pull-out point just south of Grand Coulee Dam at 11:30.

We finished lugging our gear out of the water, and I took a refreshing dip in the small bay. Rod and Arlene Frazier, some friends from Spokane, pulled up with greeting smiles on their faces. We loaded everything up, and Mandy came after a few minutes. We decided to do lunch in town, and drove to the A & R Café.

Lisa and Mandy left for Vancouver and Rod, Arlene, and I left for Steamboat Park to find a camp-site. Steamboat Park was choked with campers, but we found a few vacant sites at Spring Canyon Park and claimed a cool spot in the shade with some welcoming green grass.

Spring Canyon Park has a nature trail with a guide book pointing out a variety of desert flora. We left a little confused as to which plant was supposed to match the description in the guidebook, but enjoyed the hike all the same. Rod and Arlene are fishing down at the dock—I hope they catch something.

For dinner, we went to That Italian Place, whose pizza is rated number one in Eastern Washington. We wanted to see the laser light show at the dam, so ordered a Combo-to-go. We reached the prime viewing area, a large parking lot facing the dam, and chowed down. Before the show started,

a cascade of lights came winding up from town. Coulee City had hosted a Honda Goldwing National Convention, and every participant was coming to the same parking lot. The parade of lights was undeniably impressive. Cyclists had congregated from the four corners of America. Those from the West sported bright green lights mounted on their bikes; another section of the country was represented by blue lights, another red, another yellow. And they all moseyed down in perfect formation, staying “in color.” I expected them to be Harley vet types, but these bikers all seemed to be senior citizens loving their ride.

The laser light show told the history of the dam. Lasers from across the canyon hit the spillways—rushing-white water served as a gigantic screen. To listen to the narrative we had to tune the car radio to a certain station. Rod’s radio, however, wouldn’t work. We had to eavesdrop on the radio beside us, belonging to a rusty pick-up and camper whose driver was drinking Coors and cussing out his wife. We missed 90% of the narration, but certainly had an entertaining evening.

The motorcycle light parade streamed out of the lot as soon as the show was over, and cars followed, but it still took an hour to return to camp.

* * *

Rod and Arlene drove me to a boat launch down river from Grand Coulee. While I waited, an old fisherman came in from the river in an eight-foot aluminum barge. He had caught two trout, and started talking about his younger days.

“I would hike all through this area before people and the dam came in. At night I’d lay down in the damn woods and pull branches and leaves and bark over me to stay warm. None of this damn bag and tent stuff. During the day I’d fish the damn river. Spend weeks at a time living like that.”

He continued for an hour and a half. He could cuss, but it was fun listening to his experience.

“So what are you doing here young man?”

“Well,” I replied, “I’m waiting for my canoeing partner. We’re canoeing the whole river this summer.”

“Well I’ll be,” he said. “That sounds like a great trip. Sounds like something I would’ve done if

it warn't for my damn wife. Sure couldn't take a woman on a trip like this. She'd have to take everything but the damn kitchen sink."

"Actually," I confessed, "my canoeing partner is my wife."

"Really?" he back-paddled. "Well. I guess women aren't all that bad."

I took a picture of him, his boat and the two trout.

"And how would you like a Hostess Apple Pie?" he asked. I took it from him and offered him a Powerbar. He looked skeptically at it, but took it anyway.

I helped him load his boat onto its tiny trailer. "I enjoyed talking with you," I said.

"Yah! Nice talking with you," he said, and drove off eating the Powerbar.

I followed his dust up the road, and in about ten minutes came to Spirit Ridge Resort. The resort was under construction, but when completed it would offer horse-back riding, horse-shoe pits, a chuck wagon, tee-pee tents, concessions, and a swimming pool. A fellow named Trent Harris had put plenty of labor into it—beautiful woodwork, artwork, and the like—although it seemed to be coming along slowly. This place, however, would offer tourists many things to do besides just look at the dam and get a sunburn.

A conglomeration of sandstone cliffs stood across the river from Spirit Ridge. Trent explained the ancient Indian legend associated with them. Indians would pass through this area en route to winter camping grounds on the Sanpoil River. They would camp on the east side—by Spirit Ridge Resort—after crossing the river and before continuing their journey. But once, one family decided to camp on the west side. This family had three boys. They all went down to the river to fish, all the while being observed by a coyote. The mother and father went back up the hill to camp and left the boys. The boys kept fishing and playing in the water. Then one boy fell in. The others started to yell. The parents, who had left, couldn't hear the cries for help. So the second boy jumped in to save the first. He started to drown too. The third boy jumped in and managed to save the second, but didn't have enough strength to save the first boy. The coyote, watching this, was so impressed with their bravery, he jumped in and rescued the first. Later, he was so mad at the parents for not watching after their

children, he turned the three boys into sandstone. To this day, if you look long enough and hard enough, you can see the boys' faces and their ever-changing expressions in the gradually shifting formations.

* * *

We camped on the edge of an alfalfa field. About twenty feet away was a small nest with two baby sandpipers and two eggs. The mother was crying and circling around, trying to figure out if we were friend or foe, and leaning toward the latter—especially since I grabbed the camera and came closer. The tiny chicks, fuzzy with down, didn't seem to mind my presence.

* * *

The Columbia is truly in the desert below Grand Coulee. The hills are covered with sagebrush and cheat grass, two hardy plants that thrive in the desert. We paddled on the north-western edge of the Columbia Plateau, where, thousands of years ago, the river was pushed to its current course by encroaching lava flows. The Cascade Range effectively halted the lava's westward progress, just as it halts precipitation's eastward progress, keeping the Plateau a desert.

Cows comprise the major population here, and the Columbia is at once their sewer and drinking fountain. We have stopped for lunch at one such watering hole—cows walk around us, sticking their snouts in our dry bags.

I love this country that reverberates with the right sounds: crickets, small breezes, birds, the river trickling over pebbles on the bank. Some people would call this silence, and I would too. I wouldn't mind living in a place with sounds and smells like this—even cow smells.

We canoed twenty miles and reached Chief Joseph Dam by noon. Luke and Verla Greneveld, friends from Bridgeport, met us at Bridgeport State Park. They planned to meet us just below Wells Dam the next day. An Army Corps of Engineers truck arrived about two o'clock. The driver, Judy, took us to a marina in Bridgeport. Lisa and I played Rook and ordered a pizza since the weather was too hot to canoe. We camped that night an hour down river just beyond the Wells Wildlife Refuge. Birds flew everywhere. Lisa even got hit on the leg as she was tying up the canoe.

* * *

Wells Dam is colorful, with its sunny yellow cranes, royal blue electrical buildings, and red buildings and railings. We arrived at the east side, called the dam authorities and scheduled a 2:30 portage. We decided to tour the dam before the portage. I stayed behind to dig my camera out of the canoe, and Lisa went ahead. I lost sight of her and went down to the Visitor's Center to see if she was there. She wasn't, so I decided I would look at the exhibits. By the time I surfaced, our canoe and gear were gone.

When Lisa reached the dam, a man asked her if we were ready for the portage. I must have just gone down to the visitor's center when she was returning to the canoe with the portaging crew. They drove to the canoe, and ferried our gear down river to a loading ramp by the fish hatchery. They radioed the control office looking for me, but no one had seen me. Soon the whole crew was combing the dam. Eventually I was found, but it felt embarrassing to not help with the portage.

The crew was intrigued by our trip and seemed glad for an excuse to get out of their offices and do something different with their time. They shared information about the dam, like how generators are turned on in response to communities' need for electricity. In fact, the water rose five feet in about five minutes because one generator was switched on, discharging that much more water downstream. We stood by the canoe on the ramp and turned our backs to the river so the crew could take our picture, and by the time the shutter was clicked water lapped at our feet.

We canoed a mile and set up camp on the fringe of an immense orchard in a region below Wells Dam owned by A. Z. Wells and nicknamed "Azwell" by the locals. We didn't know whether the river would repeat its dramatic rise or not, so we dragged the canoe past the high water line and set up camp higher still.

Grenevelds picked us up. We went to their house for barbecued chicken, muffins, green beans, and potato chips. Alta Hershey lived with them. Alta is Verla Greneveld's mother. My parents lived in Oklahoma when I was a kid, and Alta and her husband Vern became good friends with my parents. "Gramma" Hershey constantly amassed scraps of polyester—boxes and boxes of them—to sew quilts; she still does.

I enjoyed talking with her again, and hearing her accent. “Five years after Vern died in ‘78,” she said, “I moved to Washington to be with Luke and Verla.” That’s when she would visit us. She came from Missouri originally, married Vern, and helped him farm in the dust bowl of Kansas for nine years. “I’s pregnant with Verla in some of the worst of them days. You couldn’ keep anythin’ clean ‘afore dust cover’d it. I’s laying in bed and couldn’ get up an’ the dus’ kep blowing in, coverin’ m’arms. I rubbed ‘em raw they itched s’bad—looked like I did it wi’ san’paper.” Vern got a job with the railroad in Oklahoma in 1943. Several years later, when I was only three or four, he took me for a ride in a diesel locomotive.

I reminded Alta of Vern’s fishing joke about the Texan touting the size of Texas fish. “Those Texans, you know, are always bragging ‘bout the size of ever’thing,” she replied. “Like when a Texan went out East to see some frinz, they put a terrapin in his bed. The nex’ mornin’ he said, ‘There was a terrapin in my bed last night.’ His friends said, ‘That was a bedbug actually.’ The Texan replied, ‘Little bitty thing, ain’t it?’”

She had just turned eighty. I inquired after her health, and she stated that her heart bothered her now and then, but that she was lucky to have the health that she did. “Life’s been well-pressed down and runnin’ over. I can’t do what I used ta—I had to give up m’car, ‘cause I jus’ didn’t drive it enough to keep in practice—but Luke and Verla take care of me now. If you show kindness to others, others will show kindness to you.”

* * *

We slept in because we had a mere thirty-seven miles before reaching Hamon’s just north of Rocky Reach Dam and all of three days in which to paddle it. We left Azwell at ten, and reached Chelan Falls at noon.

We sat in the part at Chelan Falls, just watching people. Kids ran around swearing, throwing rocks and dirt at people, peeing in the river and throwing candy wrappers in it and in our canoe. Finally, one kid got pushed against a tree and started crying, and the dad, who had been sitting in the shade with a beer and a twisted cigarette, raised himself enough to shout a string of vulgarities before

returning to a conversation with another guy over the contents of a baggie.

But the heat is worse than this—which is why we stay at the park sitting in the shade, watching our backsides and the canoe. There’s nowhere else to go. I keep wanting to reach up and grab a pull-chain for a fan that isn’t there.

* * *

The river below Grand Coulee travels at a pleasant pace, allowing us time to relax. We tarried for a day of rest at Daroga Park, a beautiful recreation site that was so new it wasn’t even on our map. The only direct access to the tent area was via boat. We docked and unloaded. People who arrive by car need to ferry their camping gear with small rickshaws supplied by the park to reach the relatively isolated tent area, a spacious grassy meadow surrounded by several clean and expansive tent sites. And, when we arrived last night, the sites were all empty.

We set up our tent and fixed for dinner what we had dreamed of having all day: fresh cabbage salad, complete with sesame seeds, crumbled ramen noodles and their seasoning packet, slivered almonds, in an oil and rice vinegar coating. We substituted boiled egg noodles for cabbage, water for oil and vinegar, nixed the almonds and seeds, but retained the ramen and seasoning—not great tasting, but not bad either.

We overslept and showered. I’m sitting on a picnic table in the quiet shade of a row of poplars. Today I don’t try to paddle a certain number of miles. I need not work or play. I don’t have to watch weather brush the river or listen to leaves recite an ode to summer; but I do, because they are here.

John and Lucille Dissmore, some friends, brought a picnic dinner. Their son Ray, and his wife Linda, also came. Linda and I went for a ride in the canoe; she had never been in one before. She’s a Chinese native and had only been in America a short while. After paddling the canoe for a while, she said she would like to try canoeing to China. Ray folded his arms and said, “Hmm. Yes. Well.”

* * *

Lyle Hamon, one of our friends in Wenatchee, was picking peaches when we paddled up to his riverside orchard. I ate two Red Havens while he picked and talked. He explained much about peaches,

when you should pick them and how to separate them.

“We usually pick a tree four times a season,” he said, “because the peaches come ripe at different times. You know they’re ripe when the background color turns from green to yellow. The blush on the surface, like the redness on these Red Havens, is not an indicator of ripeness. You have to go by the background.” He then showed me one he just picked. “This one won’t go to the market. It has a split pit.” I couldn’t see any difference between it and the rest. “If you look down at the stem, you see the core’s starting to split. Also, the peach looks more like two halves of a peach put together instead of a whole peach. It’ll go in this box of culls, and Julie will slice it up for lunch.”

“Why do some of the pits split?” I asked.

“In the early growth period of a peach, its entire insides are all the same stuff. If you take a knife and cut it through, you won’t be able to see a pit, just all peach. But later there’s a pit hardening stage, where the pit becomes a distinct body in and off itself. And if the water balance isn’t just right, it splits.”

Hamon’s keep the culls for friends and relatives since they don’t want to take those to market. They tasted sweet, wet, and cool—just what a person needs on a July day.

* * *

On Saturday we went to Lincoln State Park for a picnic. A typical weekend crowd filled the place to maximum capacity—picnickers like ourselves, sunbathers, Frisbee throwers, water-skiers, jet-skiers, and beer-drinkers; too much skin hanging out of too little clothing; sunbathers trying to catch up on their summer reading in spite of the volleyball rolling across their blankets; a dozen varieties of potato salad on paper plates; smoke from a hundred barbeque grilles composing the only cloud in the sky. If Custer crested that rise over there, he would think we were in another Little Big Horn Valley. A woman hauled a cooler out of a mini-van and a crib fell out. A man spread a checkered cloth over a table and relatives flocked around it. A kid took one sip out of a can of grape pop and poured the rest on the grass. Frisbees overflowed everything. Light puffs of air lifted corners of napkins and sent some tumbling off the table. Pickups plucked ski boats out of the water while foreign cars jockeyed for position on the ramp

to plunge in jet skis to ride the hot afternoon ripples. A barefoot man in a wetsuit climbed a dock piling with a ski rope handle in his hand. Reaching the top, he stood up. A boat idled just off the dock with approximately thirty feet of slack rope between them. He yelled “Hit it!” The boat screamed away. When the slack rope hit the man, he flipped up, straddled the rope with his legs and smacked the water on his back. He skied that way—feet first, on his back—for awhile, before eventually pulling himself upright and skiing barefoot.

* * *

“Food” is objectively defined by Webster’s as “nutriment.” The provisions stored in the canoe certainly matched this interpretation. Julie Hamon’s cooking, thankfully, went beyond Webster’s. Here’s her menu for one weekend:

Saturday lunch: sandwiches, pizza, fresh peaches.

Saturday potluck at Lincoln State Park: pasta salad, ham, bacon and beans, peach pie,
blackberry pie, rolls, pop, tea.

Sunday breakfast: waffles and fresh peaches.

Sunday dinner: pork roast, apricots, peaches, potatoes and gravy, peas and corn, green beans,
iced tea, rolls, pasta salad.

Sunday supper: sandwiches, popcorn, peaches, apricots, ice cream cones, rootbeer floats.

Monday breakfast: cereal, fresh blueberries, cantaloupe, peaches.

Shakespeare’s Macbeth says that sleep “knits up the raveled sleeve of care . . . [it’s] sore labor’s bath.” That’s probably true. But a good meal comes a close second. Imagine yourself paddling a canoe for six weeks, eating only basic grub day in and day out, then sitting down to a weekend of festival eating. It’s not that we haven’t had good meals along the way—we had that memorable picnic on Lake Roosevelt, dinner with Lantzes, steak in Castlegar and German cuisine in Revelstoke before that. It’s just that good meals are few and far between.

Lyle has a row boat, and we spent Saturday evening playing in the water with their kids, Kaarin, Korinda, Colin, and Ashley. The weekend was a perfect reprieve from our labors.

* * *

Today we have made thirty-seven miles including portages around Rocky Reach Dam and Rock Island Dam, an hour lunch and an hour and a half nap. That's what Julie Hamon's cooking does for you.

The authorities at Rocky Reach Dam literally had us canoe up to the spillways. We shuddered at the thought of them opening suddenly. We hauled our gear over a vast, rocky embankment, and it took quite a while, balancing on top of the rocks with the canoe on our shoulders.

Just before reaching Rock Island Dam, we stopped at a small park for a break. A fellow told us of a man and his daughter who had canoed the whole Columbia several years ago. Lisa felt disappointed that she was not the first female to canoe the whole river, but maybe it was just a story.

Columbia conducted us to some sand dunes across the river from the town of Crescent Bar. This camp is as close to being tropical as I've seen—all we need to do is substitute bamboo for willows and we could be in Tahiti, alone on a beautiful beach, water softly rolling in. The tent is down in a hollow, and we walk up to the dunes to feel the evening breeze. The bouquet of the Columbia is intoxicating: the combined essences of quiet, home, adventure, promise, love, pride and power, all moving and rolling and mixing together. The breathtaking sunset simply adds to a night that needs no additions. With a few more evenings like this, Crescent Bar should be in Conde Nast's Traveler.

* * *

We canoed to Vantage in fairly good weather and in about six hours, but a windstorm arose. Dave and Lori—my brother and his wife—came to see us. We had prime rib sandwiches at the Wanapum Inn. By the time they left, the wind had picked up tremendously. The only place sheltered enough to pitch our tent was behind a fetid dumpster since sprinklers commandeered the regular camping area. Lisa began to feel nauseated. She laid down in her bag and fell asleep with a grimace on her face.

* * *

After a restless night, Lisa was sick. The weather looked about as bad as she did. We had planned to continue through to Vernita Bridge, but couldn't since Lisa was feeling so poorly. I called Mom and Dad from a pay phone so they could pick us up for a few days while she recuperated.

* * *

Lisa has the flu, so we've stayed at Mom and Dad's these five days. We have gone hiking, attended the time-trials for the annual Columbia Cup hydroplane races, helped Dad stake out his new house, read a lot, ate a lot, slept a little, went to Ritzville to see Dave and Lori, and Shaun and Sandy, my sister, and their kids. We were also interviewed by the Tri-City Herald.

It was good to spend time in Kennewick, my home town. I saw Kamiakin High School from which I had graduated, Vista Airfield where I had earned a pilot's license, the Safeway store I had worked at and hills I had hiked. I remembered student teaching at Richland High School and attending a seminar called "Dreams, Visions and Possibilities," hosted by civic-minded citizens of Richland to brainstorm ideas for improving their town. I had sat there thinking of the Columbia River, and how fun it would be to canoe all the way from the United States border to the ocean. I mentioned the idea to Robb Maxey, a man sitting next to me—and he encouraged me to go for it all, to canoe the entire length from headwaters to the Pacific. The thought had never crossed my mind, but it started to at that moment, and I could never leave it alone.

* * *

Dad drove us back to Vantage. We canoed to Wanapum Dam and, after a quick portage, had a comprehensive tour. A few of the turbines were being refurbished, and we descended to the bottom of the dam where water cascades ten stories before colliding with the fans of the turbine shaft.

Priest Rapids Dam was seventeen miles below Wanapum. When we pulled up to the dam, a few Indian boys were swimming. Then a carload of three adults arrived. The doors opened and they rolled out. They gabbed with us for over an hour, talking about tee-pees, fires made with sticks, wampum, fish, frybread and scalps.

* * *

We were setting up camp at the Vernita bridge when a beat-up Buick drove up. Two slightly hungover boys got out and began surveying the bridge. One walked over to me.

"Hey!" he said. "Do you think I can jump off that bridge into the water?"

“And live?” I answered.

“Hey, I can do it. What’re you guys doing here?”

I told him.

“Way cool, man. We’re just coming back from the Meatloaf-in-the-Gorge concert. Wild, dude.”

“I’ll bet.” I said. “Look, I don’t think you should jump off that bridge. I mean, you don’t even have a good audience, man, ‘cause I don’t care if you jump or not.”

“You . . . you wouldn’t be impressed?” he hesitated.

“No, not really,” I said. “I do that stuff all the time.”

“Oh. Well, let’s go home Bob.”

The Buick’s rusty doors slammed shut and it rattled off.

* * *

I have been anxious to canoe the Hanford Reach since I grew up so close to it. I’ve heard that it’s the only remaining free-flowing portion of the Columbia River. In truth, however, the only natural, free-flowing stretch is between Columbia Lake and Redgrave Canyon in Canada. The Hanford Reach occupies the original river bed; that is, it’s undammed—but Priest Rapids Dam controls its flow and water level.

The Reach is a popular place to canoe since it’s close to Tri-Cities. The only drawback is that it’s fifty miles long, and the Hanford Nuclear Reservation—for security purposes—prohibits anyone from camping or even lingering on shore. Some friends of mine canoed the Reach once and planned to spend the night along its banks. They spent the night in jail instead.

But the river flows pretty fast. We left the Vernita bridge early, breakfasted and lunched in the canoe to save time and arrived at Richland by late afternoon. The day was hot and drawn out, but we had already canoed nine hundred miles and were fully capable of the Reach. The Columbia Basin sunshine, heat and sagebrush-covered hills—along with deer, pelicans, geese, cranes—built the beauty of this desert river.

Fifty miles is a record day for us.

* * *

The *Tri-City Herald* placed us on the front page with a large color photo. We had fun canoeing past Kennewick, since everyone knew about us from the paper and would honk and wave. People cheered us on and wanted to meet us. At the Columbia River Golf Course, five lady golfers stood in a row and hoorayed for us as we slid by.

We paddled until nine that night, searching for a place to camp. The shore of the river was nothing less than large jagged basalt boulders—riffraff—that supported the railroad bed but only yielded decent campsites sparingly. Ten miles past Wallula though, a tiny peninsula slid out from the tracks and jutted into the river for about fifty yards. We sidled up to a weed- and lumber-choked shore, stepped gingerly onto shipwrecked timber, and began unloading our camp supplies. The grass was stiff and tall, so when we set up the tent it dangled off the ground about two feet. We just had to throw in pads and bags and let our bodies push the tent floor to the earth. The bad part was that the perimeter of the tent wanted to stay risen, so we ended up sleeping in the base of a funnel.

* * *

The railroad tracks were only about thirty yards off, and trains sped past intermittently all hours of the night. Once, Lisa sat bolt upright in bed as the ground-shaking diesel engines thundered past, but she remained fast asleep. Tired of putting up with the noise, we rose with the sun and were paddling by six.

The dawning Gorge, lit and warmed by a calm, saffron sky, was magnificent. Layer after layer of basalt flows, cut through by the force of our river, glowed brown-orange. These layers were formed between sixteen and six million years ago by tremendous fissures in the earth's surface in parts of Eastern Washington and Oregon and Western Idaho. Lava flooded out in massive quantities and crept over eighty thousand square miles of what is now called the Columbia Plateau. Successive flows pushed the Columbia River to the north and west, completely filling the old channel.

Then, fifteen to twelve thousand years ago, when the Wisconsin Ice Age had crept down into the northern area of the United States, the Bretz Floods occurred. More than forty tremendous deluges of unbelievable force and scope swept across large parts of the Columbia River drainage. Nearly sixteen thousand square miles were flooded hundreds of feet deep. Swollen by flood waters, the Columbia

grew to contain ten times the flow of all the rivers in the modern world.

Here at Wallula Gap for example, the flood flow has been calculated to have been approximately forty cubic miles of water per day for at least ten days. The water, with its mud, ice, and rock debris, traveled at fifty miles per hour. The present highway 730 would have been submerged by over a thousand feet of water.

What would it have been like to have experienced this phenomenon? Lawrence Palmer, in *Northwest Magazine* (June 26, 1983), writes:

Imagine the kind of velocity the water had when the flood came through, the tremendous air blast caused by the wave front. Its roar would have built for a half-hour at least, arriving as a series of pulses. Following on the great wind came the crushing turmoil of water, piling onto itself in the breakthroughs. Had the observers been at high water level, they might have been able to run a few hundred feet for their lives.^{1*}

On one hand, that's not a really comforting thought when you're sitting in a small canoe; actually, it wouldn't even give me a feeling of security if I were in a thousand-foot ocean liner. On the other hand, though, the Bretz Floods are has-beens; no ice age extends into Washington, no Purcell Trench dominates North Idaho; hence, no dam blocks a gigantic Lake Missoula. We drove through the Purcell Trench area to get to Columbia Lake over seven weeks ago. No glaciers, just the peaceful towns of Coeur d'Alene, Bonners Ferry, and Cranbrook.

* * *

^{1*}The Bretz Floods are named for Harlan Bretz, a geologist who recognized the effects of catastrophic flooding on the Columbia Plateau in 1919, and conducted a great deal of research in this area. I learned much of this information from John Eliot Allen, Marjorie Burns, and Sam C. Sargeant, *Cataclysms on the Columbia* (Portland: Timber Press, 1986).

We reached McNary Dam and went through the locks after waiting for four barges and a tug to pass through. After dropping seventy-five feet without a hitch (except fending off a large spider which tried to crawl from the floating buoy to the canoe), we paddled to Plymouth Park, where we cooled off for a few hours. Three miles from Irigon we set up camp on a thin peninsula. I had just started a biscuit when I heard someone yelling my name. Mom and Dad had come to see us way out in the boonies. We paddled across a swampy section and went into Umatilla for burgers and fries.

* * *

The body, on a hot, humid day, is basically a sponge. Fluids are quickly squeezed out and need replaced. On these days we easily drank two gallons apiece. Afternoons and evenings were sultry and oppressive. Even though the temperature was unhealthy, the windless Gorge provided prime opportunity for canoeing. We felt we had to go, since the going was good, and pressed on. We frequently dipped our shirts and hats in the river and put them on again. The cool, wet fabric felt refreshing, and kept us cool as the water evaporated.

West of Umatilla, the shore of Columbia smelled like a stagnant swamp. Algae and milfoil choked the shallows, and two- to three-foot carp lazily rolled around in the mixture. Carp are a type of overgrown goldfish, and although the Japanese prize them and buy them for up to \$10,000 each, they are the garbage fish of America. They're partially blind. They resemble miniature sharks with their dorsal fins slicing the water. Carp would fail to see the canoe until we were almost on top of them. Then, with a tremendous burst of energy, they would disappear in a miniature explosion. These bursts would always scare us; sometimes the fish would slap the canoe. I'm sure they never would have tipped us, but still the fear of landing in that hot, swampy, weed-filled water kept our nerves on edge. Once, the canoe glided past a carp without disturbing it. When it came alongside me, I jabbed the paddle sharply down between its eyes. Like a bomb, it detonated furiously and hammered the canoe. Lisa jolted so quickly, we almost tipped.

Earlier in the day, we stopped at Boardman Park for a break. We rested in the shade to avoid the heat of the day and watched the swimmers. Four women swam out to the swimming dock, and tried to

climb on board. Unfortunately, they kept slipping back into the water. Up they surged; “ploosh” back in the water, giggle and talk. Up they went, “ploosh,” giggle. At least they would drown happy, I thought. But then two of them landed on the dock, and lurched over onto it. Together they helped the third lady, and then the three of them made a Herculean effort to haul up the fourth lady.

Days like these are simply an endurance test. Early morning temperatures start around seventy degrees, signaling a warm one. By noon, and six hours of canoeing, temperatures have easily peaked over a hundred and ten. We stop for a few hours to avoid the worst heat. But by about three o'clock, it's time to go again. Just because it's still hot, doesn't mean we can lay around. We have work to do. After summoning the mental focus it takes to paddle the rest of the afternoon and evening, we leave the shade. The burden of the sun again rests on our shoulders, where it will stay for the next few hours. The seats are hot. The water we pour on them instantly boils. Just kidding. But they are hot.

We drank Gatorade, lemonade and water constantly to replenish body fluid levels. And even though Ban de Soleil guaranteed its Sport Lotion to last six hours, we replaced it every other hour. Each time we reached ten strokes we switched. All day. And soon we had paddled ten hours, eleven hours, twelve hours, and called it a day.

* * *

We woke at five and canoed for only an hour before the swells forced us off. Continuing to Arlington was out of the question. We pulled into the Willow Creek inlet and dug out the ham radio.

Before we left on our trip, I felt I needed to be able to communicate with the outside world in case of an emergency. So I bought a study guide to the two tests I would need to pass in order to operate a ham radio. This was two days before the test date. At the back of the study guide was a pool of exam questions. Instead of learning the concepts, I memorized all the test questions and their answers. On test day I missed one question on the first test and none on the second. The proctor said it had been a long time since he had seen scores like that and he would be pleased to have me join the Spokane Ham Radio Association. And before the week was out I had forgotten everything on the test, but knew how to change frequencies on the radio and push the talk button.

Ham radios depend on repeater stations to boost their transmissions. Otherwise, they're only effective for about fifty miles. If you're in an area with no repeaters, or even down in a valley like the Gorge, it's hard to use a ham. I walked up to the railroad trestle where I could get a strong signal from the Rattlesnake Ridge repeater, because everywhere else it was weak. And six ties onto the trestle the signal came in full force.

"N7YCL. N7YCL," I called, hoping to attract someone's attention. "N7YCL. This is N7YCL, wanting to make contact."

"N7YCL, this is"—and I forgot his number, like I always do—"from Richland. What can I do for you?"

"Could you make a local call for us? We've been canoeing the Columbia River and the wind has us pretty much pinned down. I need someone to call my parents in Kennewick."

"Are you the husband and wife team canoeing the whole Columbia? I saw you in the *Herald* the other morning."

He agreed to call Dad with the message to call Lisa's parents in Vancouver to pick us up. Sounds complicated—Richland having to call Kennewick having to call Vancouver, but that way Richland didn't have to pay for a long-distance phone call.

* * *

Madam Wulff called and said that Lisa could visit her if she came immediately. *She looked awful—a dying woman. She seemed frail, small, not the dynamic teacher drilling me on French verbs and sentence structure. She had no hair, and was dressed in a simple shirt and pants. She didn't talk—didn't seem to have the energy. So I had a good conversation with Randy, her husband.*

Randy had a good attitude about everything. He had been reading an Agatha Christie mystery to her for the last few days. He told me about her illness and her treatments. Madam Wulff's breast cancer had evolved into brain cancer. Both of them were preparing for her imminent death. And she seemed ready to go—she was thin, her coloring was pale and she was drifting in and out of sleep.

She no longer had an interest in showing me her cats, her new dishes or her spinning wheel. I kept

remembering the quilt our 9th-grade French class had started. The plan was to eventually piece it together after we had worked on it throughout the high school years. High school was over and gone now, and I hadn't heard anything about the quilt. I wanted to have it, to finish it, at least to ask her about it, but I just couldn't ask. I wanted to reach out to Madam Wulf some way, but I didn't know how.

* * *

After a late start from Vancouver, we reached Heppner Junction about eleven o'clock. The wind and waves were still rollicking across the Columbia. Paul and Eric, Lisa's dad and brother, stayed with us under the train bridge until one; we held a rock throwing competition which Paul won. At five we loaded the canoe and left, only making one and a half miles before being beset by four-foot swells.

We set up camp on a small but accommodating beach, well-sheltered by a short sand cliff and sage brush. The roar of surf—its futile efforts to smash a large boulder and its rhythmic shushing on the desert sand—and the hot Columbia wind fanning sage and cheatgrass, surrounded our tiny pocket of civilization. We built a shelter out of driftwood poles and the tarp.

The river is low. A mere foot or two drop in water level has born a half-moon shaped beach maybe twenty feet long, fifteen feet wide, and two feet lower than the bank. A driftwood wall on the west and a stout sage on the east protects us from the wind. The sage and cheat-covered bank behind us slopes up past the railroad tracks, crosses I-84, and spreads into the farms and lonely towns of Gilliam and Morrow counties. We have explored this area to stay active. Even though we're grounded, it feels great to stretch our legs, hike around, and walk the tracks.

There were actually four tracks here—they merged about a mile east where the trestle crossed the Willow Creek inlet. Freight trains slowed to a crawl waiting for other trains to cross the trestle. One morning I pulled myself onto a hopper car while the train was creeping by. I knew when the engine reached the trestle because the train picked up speed. If I had been alone on the canoe trip I might have stuck to the hopper, just to see where it would go. And then the ground was going by faster, so I jumped off and hit the rocks running.

* * *

After three days at camp, the wind lightened. We crept a few miles to Arlington and slept next to the railroad.

* * *

We left Arlington at daybreak in nice weather, and ended up bucking waves for three hours to Blalock Canyon. We enjoyed a nice lunch break using the freeway overpass for shelter from the wind, but after Blalock the weather just broke down completely. Choppy water splattered over the riprap. A menacingly dark Columbia reached with frosty hands for whatever it could grab. We paddled in it for two relentless hours that left us both exhausted. We pitched the tent on a shallow island by Philippi Canyon and slept hard for two hours.

* * *

I watched Lisa walk to the edge of the island. She stood solidly on the broken basalt that formed the shore, gazing downstream and into the wind. Columbia's waves crashed at her feet. Columbia seemed to imitate the Pacific Ocean Wind warred with gravity—the river flows west; wind pushed it east—and their stalemate did nothing but keep us off the board. Lisa seemed to be patiently waiting out the storm, knowing that someday she would make it to Astoria.

The Columbia River is our life, and our life and its life are so intertwined that however it feels, we feel, and right now it's frustrated at this wind keeping it from Astoria and the Pacific, and we can relate because we're traveling partners. I remember an old Belemy Brother's tune that romanticized the south:

*Pine trees grow so tall in the bright sunlight,
Young boy steals his daddy's fishing line,
An alligator lies on the bank of the river bed,
If you didn't know any better you'd think he's dead.
These are a few things I'm in love with,
A small part of the reason I go back. . . .*

I love everything about this trip: sleeping in the tent, pushing a paddle, lighting the stove, looking for a

camp sight, putting on sunblock, switching sides, putting the canoe in the water, Lisa putting her braid through the back of her baseball cap in the morning, emptying water out of my watersocks, drinking tea on a nippy morning, waiting for a fresh hot biscuit, rolling out the Thermarests.

Even waiting out a storm.

* * *

Our camp was right up against some tall brush, sheltered from the wind. The island wasn't a full island—one sliver of land spanned a small slough and joined the main shore. The relatively soft ground, covered with short grass, induced a good night's sleep.

* * *

Storm surges up the Columbia like a shark looking for another meal. We have made only twenty-five miles in a week and feel daunted by the wind.

Crouching by a small signal shed, we watched for Don and Claire Egge, our friends, who had planned on meeting us in this section. They drove right by us but never saw us. We were in plain sight of the freeway but couldn't reach them. There were no phones and no repeaters for the ham radio. Willing drivers relayed phone messages, but nothing worked.

Paul and Glenna came and got us. The week was awful, and we didn't feel like hanging around another inclement campsite for the weekend.

* * *

At three in the morning, the Vancouver air was calm and fresh. Paul drove and the rest of us slept. Paul's a fine night driver. Give him a thermos of Starbucks coffee, a bag of M & Ms and a can of Planter's cashews and he rides high for several hours.

We breakfasted at Biggs Junction, where the diner's flashy neon signs were already losing out to the peach desert dawn. No matter whether you're a big breakfast eater or not, you ought to eat a strapping morning meal at a restaurant, especially when there's a sizable day ahead doing something you want to do and starting out with friends, and when someone else does the cooking. The mood was jovial, even though we were groggy. We wanted to make The Dalles Dam from Philippi Canyon.

We found the canoe—right where we had left it—and removed the sage brush and driftwood. Even in an area as populated as the Gorge, we had still felt that we could leave the canoe unattended for the weekend. I-84 and a train track ran right next to it, but there's no way anyone could have seen it. The water line was too low. Only river traffic itself might have spied the red, but not after our camouflage job.

We returned to the river because the Portland weather forecast was for ninety-plus degree temperatures. We were told that hot temperatures would stifle the wind. And sure enough, the river is like glass.

Smoke still spanned the sky in long wispy ropes—the brush fire from two weeks earlier was still smoldering. A couple miles brought us within sight of John Day Dam, barricading the Columbia like the Great Wall of China, dividing the Basin desert from the misty Gorge. John Day's forebay was a three-mile-wide sea—and we had to cross it, since the locks were on the Washington side. We rarely crossed large expanses but this one felt safe, especially since it was early morning, and wind doesn't usually happen in the morning; it's more of an afternoon occurrence.

Like McNary, this lock was massive, capable of holding four large barges and a tug. This time, we shared the lock with a thirty-foot pleasure boat. We threw a bight of painter around buoy #7. The hulking upstream gates closed, and we descended 125 feet, as if in a giant elevator. Lisa still flinched at the cracking and popping of the gates, but soon we arrived to the first floor: the downstream Columbia.

Indian gill-net platforms extended over the river. Gill-net fishing is a controversial issue between the Native Americans and conventional fishermen. The fisherman needs to buy a license, put a hook on a string, and chaperone that hook for as long as he wants it out there—and he only catches one at a time. The tribal members spread out a net with gaps large enough for salmon to stick their snouts through but not large enough to get their bodies through. When they try to back out, their gills snag on the net. Then they sell the fish in their stores.

We met Paul and Glenna for lunch at Maryhill State Park, a shaded recreation area in

Washington, directly across from Biggs Junction but connected by the Biggs bridge. Overlooking the park, hundreds of feet above the river, stands a stone castle—the Maryhill Museum. It was built in 1914 by Sam Hill, an eccentric fellow who helped build the Columbia River Scenic Highway. He built the castle for diverse reasons: a fortress, a residence, a place to entertain friends. He called it Maryhill after Queen Marie, the Romanian monarch who visited him in the 1920's. The museum is an oasis of culture with its expansive, well-watered lawns, flowers, shrubbery, peacocks, and impressive collection of sculptures and drawings by Auguste Rodin.

I had visited Sam Hill's replica of Stonehenge—a few miles east of the museum on Highway 14—on a hot May day a few years ago. It, too, overlooks the river. I had just completed a solo climb of Mt. Adams. I had gotten lost on the descent in white-out conditions and had to spend the night huddled around the base of a tree from which the ice had receded. The next morning I found a way out, and gained a new lease on life. Driving home I stopped at Stonehenge—an eerie, timeless place, with harsh suggestions of Druids and human sacrifices—which reminded me of the film productions of *King Lear*, with Sir Laurence Olivier, and Thomas Hardy's *Tess*, in which the main characters meet their tragic fate at Stonehenge, and of my own close call with death. And then the wonderfully warm wind of the Columbia Gorge comforted me and obliterated all that was mortal, whispering that life is a river and goes on and on and never ends.

We made it to the Dalles Dam and pitched the tent beside a small fisherman's dock just east of the locks. I couldn't seem to get our stove working properly. The flame wouldn't heat anything. We ate cold food.

We still want to "go when the going's good." Even though it's hot, we plan to really push it these next few days, knowing that the Gorge is a temperamental beast at best.

* * *

Canoeing seventy miles in two blistering-hot days debilitated us inordinately. Twice I truly thought I would pass out in the glare and the sweat and aching skin and eyes burning from sunscreen and knots in my shoulders and nausea in my stomach. Temperatures were sweltering, but the going was good,

and we were still in the Gorge and didn't want to be grounded again. So we just kept going and drank plenty of water.

It's too hot to sleep, so we're sitting up and talking. Besides this heat, people are fishing from the dock and walking around our stuff and have been all night. We keep getting up to see if they're stealing things.

The hot weather reversed the wind direction; we had a tailwind—unusual for this region—as we cruised through The Dalles and Hood River. We had lunch at Taco Time in Hood River and made camp adjacent to Viento Park. This camp reminded me of Gilligan's Island: lush vegetation, clean sand and blackberry bushes surrounded us, detaching us from the clamorous, jam-packed Viento Campground.

* * *

After breakfasting on granola and Power Bars, we hoped to clear Bonneville Dam and push onward to Beacon Rock. A constant tailwind prodded us down river, but by eight-thirty it had gradually picked up to a brisk gale. Waves would come up behind us, lift the canoe, and we would surf down the front side. The shore was slipping by faster than usual, so I knew we were making good time, but the stronger the wind blew, the less pleasant the sensation.

The wind eventually elbowed us off the river, and surf-boarders appeared from all sides. I took a hard nap. After five hours, the squall died and we left.

* * *

Edwin Lockard gave us a tour of the new locks at Bonneville Dam. The dominant structure as we neared was the “ship's prow,” a concrete divider that forms the upstream wall of the locks. Its purpose is to split oncoming water into side channel pumps so they can fill the box more quickly. Looking down into the lock itself we saw construction workers that looked like small insects crawling around great fissures in the lock floor. These fissures were water inlets for the tremendous pumps that drive the water in or out. Paul and Glenna met us there. Paul and I went through the old locks discussing how much water it had taken to lower our canoe on this voyage. Between the five dams that had

locks—Hugh Keenleyside, McNary, John Day, The Dalles and Bonneville—it had taken about 200 million gallons of water to send us on our way. Remembering Canada’s need for water—and how the Columbia River Treaty insisted that the US fill its forebays before BC could begin stockpiling this vital resource—I felt guilty using the locks’ availability since they let so much water escape to the ocean.

Splendid scenery—evergreen trees, waterfalls and misty cliffs—flanks Columbia’s passage through the Gorge. We met Paul and Glenna at Beacon Rock for a picnic and Paul and I went for a hike. Lewis and Clark named the rock in 1805, and today a trail goes all the way to the top. In spite of its intimidating 850 vertical feet, Beacon Rock is an easy climb. The trail is gradual, fenced off and has a protective railing at the top. Despite the tameness of the trail though, several warning signs are placed at intervals to remind hikers of the unforgiveness of stepping off the path.

Multnomah Falls also has a trail to the top. A small wooden platform barely protruded over the lip of the falls, and standing on the edge, we watched a meager stream innocently bearing toward the fourth highest waterfall in the United States.

* * *

We breezed through the Port of Vancouver and farther into a river that was less an inland waterway and more an industrial shipping lane. Huge container ships cleaved the Columbia heading for Portland to unpack cars and other goods, then loading up with grain and whatever else America wants to export, and heading home. It was risky being too close to the beach when one of these ships passed by—the swells were big, and broke far off shore. A canoe can ride large swells, but we’d probably tip in a large breaker.

We camped on a relaxing beach on the Washington side of the river, our tent cozy between a string of birch trees and a wire fence.

* * *

Madam Wulff died. And the wind is gusting—we haven’t canoed for three days. On the only adequate canoeing morning we went to Madam Wulff’s funeral, and discovered at the church that the service isn’t until next week.

* * *

The wind-infested river challenged our patience. We portaged to the Oregon side of the river thinking that if we moved to a different state the wind wouldn't carry the same velocity. We paddled all the way to the Clatskanie River in relatively good weather. Past that though, the wind climbed. The closer we got to Jones Beach—an infamous windsurfing area—the greater the river tried to climb aboard. The gales of the Gorge seemed to be following us. We dipped behind Wallace Island, thinking the wind would be tolerable, but we were wrong. We chopped away for probably an hour; the crests were high enough so that occasionally our paddles grabbed at nothing but air; we yelled to communicate; our strength was sapped.

We gained the mouth of a tiny slough where the water was entirely still. We had had enough for the day. However, there was nowhere to camp. Thick brush crowded every tent site we could imagine. Ten minutes later, no decent campsite in sight—not even a place to get out of the canoe—and getting frustrated, we found a dock and ramp that ushered us to a few houses and a road.

Our intent was to ask permission to camp on a lawn, or call some friends and leave our canoe at this dock for the night. A man drove up in his truck. But just as we started to ask him for a phone, Paul and Glenna pulled up. Their sense of timing was extraordinary. In our greatest need came our greatest help. We ate shrimp at Hump's Restaurant in the nearby town of Clatskanie and camped at the ferry terminal that runs between the Westport Slough and Puget Island—our last night in the tent.

* * *

Day dawned cold and cloudy. We canoed between marshy islands in hushed sloughs, eventually passing the John Day River and mooring at an Army Corps of Engineers dock a few miles east of Astoria. The land is notably wet and overgrown; we can't set up the tent here. Trevithicks are staying at the Red Lion and we want a good dinner, shower and bed.

Walking up from the dock, we discovered that the field office was wholly encompassed by a chain-link and barbed wire fence. We wormed around the compound and wandered up to the road. I dawdled at the road, not really wanting to hitch a ride to town, but what could we do? Finally, I stuck

out my thumb. The first approaching car was Trevithick's.

* * *

I lowered into my seat and took up the paddle for the last time. Our final destination was Astoria's Maritime Museum since this year was the 200th anniversary of the discovery of the Columbia River by Captain Robert Grey in 1792, and because Jerry Ostermiller, the director, invited us to end our journey there.

We paddled the closing mile. Canoeing past the Coast Guard cutter, cheers from the boat hailed us and a large banner welcomed us home. Our parents, Trevithicks and Eric were all there waiting for us. I climbed out of the canoe, hugged my dad and cried. Lisa and I were both given long-stemmed roses: an homage to accomplishment and the end of a long and beautiful journey.

* * *

Jerry invited us into the Museum for coffee, a free tour and gave us a family membership. People congratulated us and we felt like heroes. Jerry wrote us a congratulatory letter:

Dear Steve and Lisa Pointer:

Congratulations on completing your epic journey of canoeing the length of the "Great River of the West"! Imagine, almost exactly 200 years ago, the first Americans entered and explored this river and named it after their ship. The Columbia River, as seen by Captain Robert Gray in May of 1792, has undergone profound change since his visit. However, the energy of this mighty river continues to roll along as one of the largest single drainages on the North American continent, second only to the Mississippi. And even today, the Columbia River Bar is rated by Lloyd's of London as the third most hazardous river entrance on earth. The sights and sound from the water, the uncountable strokes of your paddles and the variety of the warm earth as it rolls by has been and always will be, an awesome experience. Again, congratulations on your marvelous adventure.

* * *

We drove to the South Jetty of the Pacific Ocean. Lisa and I strolled out to its crashing waves to throw

in a Canadian loony that we had picked up on a sidewalk in Cranbrook, British Columbia, 75 days ago. We hugged each other tightly, alone with the pounding surf. Westward was water—only water. Westward was the Columbia River still—rolling on and on and on; coming in, going out, just like ripples on the quiet stream between Columbia Lake and Fairmont, the water gently lugging reeds back and forth and slowly rousing its heart for its mighty voyage.

* * *

That was the journey, minus uncaptured memories. I think of that Woody Guthrie song—“Roll on Columbia, roll on. Roll on Columbia, roll on. Your power is turning our darkness to dawn, Roll on Columbia, roll on”—and love thinking of the Columbia and all that it taught us. We learned how to paddle a canoe. We began to comprehend the river itself, its moods and depths, its struggles and joys. We learned that we could easily do without the usual amenities of living, that the river could be our home, and was, in fact, home to many beings. We learned that people are attracted to journeys and that the heart yearns to be moved. We came to understand that growth comes from small beginnings and that it is vital to place ourselves at the headwaters of greatness in order to reach greatness. Canoeing the Columbia River showed us we are capable of fulfilling distant goals; that great things are done by ordinary people who refuse to buckle under the enormity of their dreams. More than anything though, the river strengthened our marriage. We learned that in addition to being husband and wife, we were best of friends—because even though we can impart memories with our children, family and friends, only Lisa and I can share the aura and undercurrents of spending seventy-five days together on the Columbia.