

The phenomenal growth of canoeing in the 1970s has brought two kinds of alarming tragedy — one of destruction in the wild country, the other a needless and rising annual toll of Canadian lives

By landing here, the paddler is committed to portage: an earlier landing for inspection would have revealed in time the clear passage on the far side of the rapid.

Recreational canoeing in Canada: its history and its hazards

Eric W. Morse

Murder of wilderness and suicide of participants are two tragic components of the fallout from the explosion in wilderness canoeing which began with the 1970s. An old sport has become a "new ball game"; the fresh perspective makes this an interesting point in time to review a subject so much a part of Canada. But to many who are aware, much of

what is happening has become a source of concern.

Eric W. Morse, C.M., author of "Fur Trade Canoe Routes of Canada: Then and Now," is a pioneer of recreational canoeing in Canada's North. He is a consultant on Canadian canoeing rivers for the Topographical Survey, and a member of the National Advisory Council on Fitness & Amateur Sport.

Given Canada's geography (rocky wilderness, vast distances, a fantastic river system) its transportation until as recently as a century ago had to be mainly by water. Given, moreover, the character of the navigation of these inland waters, frequently interrupted as they are by falls and unrunnable rapids, the craft adopted by the natives had to be

easily portable. The Indians evolved the birchbark canoe, a vehicle weighing sometimes only a tenth of its payload and as splendidly adapted to its conditions of use as is a camel in the Sahara or a dogteam in northern winter.

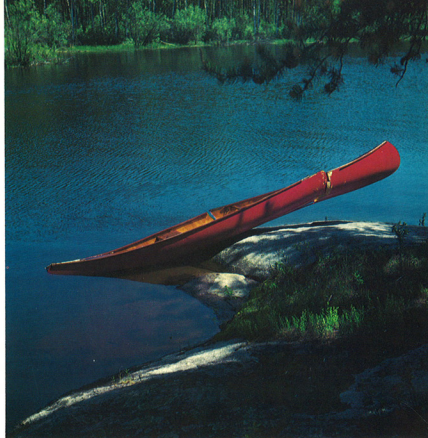
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Overall in Canada there are two essentially different eras of canoe use, utilitarian and recreational, separated by the historical watershed of the end of World War I. Each era tidily falls into three distinct periods.

The first utilitarian phase, of course, was native use; the Indian used his canoe for moving the family, for fishing, hunting, war, and sometimes for trade with neighbouring tribes. Utilitarian phase II was the fur-trade period, which overlapped the Indian phase for more than two centuries ending around 1870. This had to do with the transport by freight canoes of furs and trade goods, Canada's first major commerce. The third and last phase started shortly after Confederation as government surveyors, both geological and topographical, began to find and map our resources. In the absence of road or rail the prospectors and surveyors had to use canoes; ordinary travellers and mail, too, continued using canoes to cross Canada till the Canadian Pacific railway was built.

The end of World War I marks the start in Canada, not of a period but of an epoch, the air age; flying was past the experimental stage. The boost given to aviation by war had immediate impact on the northland. The bush pilot had come; and the rivers soon were no longer carrying freight. But river traffic while slowed was not stilled. Something quite different — recreational canoeing — was beginning.

Before World War I it is understandable that very few Canadians relished the thought of anything as strenuous as a wilderness canoe trip for a "holiday." Many were not far past the pioneer stage of farming;



A paddler, seeking to imitate the rapid-running of fur canoes of the past, deliberately paddled at full speed down a short rapid in order to gain "steerage": here is the result. At a slower speed, the rock could have been avoided.

to these wilderness was still the enemy. Others, recent immigrants, were slaving to establish themselves in a new land. Any records of pre-war recreational use of canoes which I have run across were of well-heeled city men on fishing parties, mostly with guides.

Here I must introduce a personal, Rip van Winkle note: I was there. My canoeing began with recreational phase I. By a mere coincidence of timing and the good fortune of having a school friend with unusual parents, I found myself as a teenager in 1918 holidaying at a summer place in Haliburton County, Ontario, with what — as I look back today — must have been one of the very few canoe-tripping families in all Canada. Haliburton then was a canoeing paradise, including stands of virgin forest near Redstone Lake. Lumbering was going on but some-

how even that seemed to "belong"; and lumbering certainly helped to keep portages open. Algonquin Provincial Park already had its first canoeists and its boys' and girls' camps, but, outside Algonquin Park and until the early 1930s, I cannot recall a single instance of meeting another party on a canoe trip.

In those early days of recreational canoeing, things were certainly different from today. We lacked small tents, sleeping bags, air mattresses, flashlights and dehydrated foods. To save taking a heavy tent we normally slept under the canoe, voyageur style, with just a mosquito bar. Two warm blankets fastened with big safety pins served as a sleeping bag. Our "air mattress" was cut fresh each night from bracken and balsam boughs — a shocking practice by today's environmental standards. A candle in a can did as a flashlight.



Top: early surveyors and geologists explored much of the Canadian wilderness by canoe. This 1892 photograph shows a party from Geological Survey mapping an area near Canol in the Northwest Territories. Bottom: an old photograph shows an Indian party in a birchbark canoe.



We were nourished on the usual hoary diet of beans, bacon, flour, sugar, butter, and a nearly insoluble powdered milk called Klim. A few goodies were tucked away for difficult days. Berry-picking and fishing were much more purposeful than on trips today. The trolling line, a heavy reel of copper wire fastened to the gunwale, was always out when we were paddling on lakes.

Phase I of recreational canoeing was a period of undramatic and gradual growth; it was just a preview of the potential, for none of the

factors which later stimulated change and development were present in the 1920s and 1930s. This first period lasted about 25 years, ending with the second World War.

Phase II covered the next 25 years, 1945-70. This middle phase of recreational canoeing bridges an interval between two contrasted extremes; it carries over traces from the past, yet it foreshadows the future.

The two most marked changes of phase II were in white-water skills and in equipment. But first, one

notes there were some new people on the river; no longer was canoeing the sport only of quiet types characterized by uncomprehending associates as "bird watchers." The new ones included many adventurers who found it hard to settle back into unzealous city life after war; they craved excitement and the challenge of white water.

Another major change, too, had taken place in Canada since the days before the first World War: instead of one-third, now two-thirds of Canadians lived in cities. New urban horrors, including pollution, had arrived. In short, the wilderness instead of being hated and feared had come to have a new, escape value; and the canoe remained the best way to penetrate it.

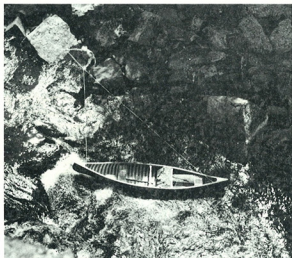
With canoeists' urge to get away into remote wilderness came a greater stress on skill, particularly in reading and running rapids. Though the practice at last seems to be dying, generations of Canadian canoeists have suffered from a curious fur-trade hangover. A big freight canoe was too long and bulky to have any real manoeuvrability in rapids; it could do neither a cross ferry nor an eddy turn. Its only hope in answering the helm was to gain steerage through increased speed, and so the crew plied the blade as they sped down a rapid's leading slick. The fur-trade canoe's design enabled it simply to belly its way through the big waves.

Canoeists in Canada for years had followed this approach, relying on spirit rather than skill to get down a rapid. Radical advances in white-water canoeing came with the early 1950s from Europe, particularly Czechoslovakia, and soon these made their influence felt on the sport in Canada.

But not only new skills came with the 1950s: canoeing was touched by technology's magic wand. The romantic red canvas canoe and the cedar strip were splendid, beautiful craft for lake, regatta and cottage use, but were much too vulnerable for rough travel in remote areas. A



Top left: running the canoe unloaded gives it additional freeboard. For added buoyancy in the bow in such high waves as these, the bow paddler kneels in front of the centre thwart. Top right: a canoe of adequate length, not overloaded, gives a desirable 8" freeboard to handle big waves. Bottom left: the thread of water indicating the canoe course is black among the white confusion of rocks and ledges. Right: instead of portaging or running a difficult rapid, it may be possible to line the fully-loaded canoe past a dangerous section.



major breakthrough, a by-product of war, was an aluminum-alloy canoe manufactured by an American aviation firm with a view to stability and near-indestructibility (of course at the cost of certain disadvantages). Other "indestructible" materials, like fibreglass, followed. Freeze-dried (not just dehydrated) foods became available and made for better-fed, wider-ranging parties. Plane charter companies sprang up at rim points where scheduled flights ended. Even a northern canoe-rental service was set up in 1964 by the

Hudson's Bay Company. It was called U-Paddle.

What all this meant — new skills, new equipment, new food, and total access — was that Canadians could now canoe with confidence in the wildest areas of the country. However, wilderness as late as the 1960s was not yet seriously damaged nor were its travellers often novices.

Now in the 1970s when we are well into the third phase of recreational canoeing we can see the beginnings (and only guess the end) of what is going to happen to wilder-

ness — particularly in parks and other districts within easy access of large cities. There have been unleashed on fragile areas hordes of humans, some of whom show scant evidence of belonging there.

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Viewed as a social phenomenon of the 1970s, the canoeing explosion is but a facet of something bigger. The new mass urge to get out and about, self-propelled, extends as well to backpacking, cross-country skiing and bicycling. This general urge was born not just of fad but of



Top: since stopping or turning back in mid-canyon is almost impossible, extra care in pre-inspection for a way through is required. Bottom: the price sometimes required for a long, wilderness canoe trip is crossing a divide by small, interconnecting streams.



better equipment, greater mobility, increased affluence, and increased leisure — the latter perhaps supported sometimes by Unemployment Insurance benefits!

Three of the above sports reflect the existence of two quite different types of people. The wilderness canoeist has counterparts in the cross-country skier and the hiking backpacker. The other recreational canoeist, the white-water man, has counterparts in the downhill skier and the rock-climber.

The latter three tend to concentrate on a limited area calling for high skill and special equipment: a particular group of rapids or ski hills or a mountain rock-face, which are often done several times over.

The former three, by contrast, while revelling in runnable rapids, sharp drops in powder snow or some less-than-precipitous rock-climbing, don't want to be limited in mobility by special heavy equipment. Their satisfaction comes from a long steady progression on their own steam through wild country, with whatever exciting interludes or challenges turn up *en route*. Their particular joys are encounters with wildlife and change of scenery.

The white-water canoeist, with his special equipment and need of a road to go back up again, tends to practise his sport closer to home. He also is less self-destructive in that he has probably joined either a canoeing school* or a club to master necessary skills. The white-water canoeist or kayaker usually travels in a sizable mutual-support group, which simplifies the logistics of car shuttling, to say nothing of rescue. This branch of recreational canoeing therefore has little part in some alarming happenings on the river, which comprise the balance of this article.

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Only a dolt would dream of tak-

* Good canoeing schools can be contacted through the Canadian Recreational Canoeing Association, 441 Ridout St. N., London, Ontario, N6A 2P6.



A foundered canoe is not as laughable as it appears — especially if there are falls or dangerous rapids a little way below.

ing up serious rock-climbing without lessons or some practice with an expert friend; a slip on a rock-face could be so final. Yet literally hundreds are attracted to canoeing, in ignorance either of its white-water hazards or of any difference between a lily-pond and a large lake.

Official statistics of canoeing tragedies, I feel, are not complete, perhaps because many inevitably occur in far and isolated places. The Canadian Red Cross listed over a thousand drownings from all causes in Canada in 1976. The two largest categories (139 and 140) were swimming and “non-power boats.” Unfortunately there is no breakdown for the latter category, but I am convinced from what I see and hear every year that quite half of the “non-power boats” are canoes. If so, that would mean an average of a dozen canoeing fatalities a month across Canada during the six-month season — a frightening figure which speaks for itself.

Every experienced wilderness traveller has his own catalogue of

canoeing tragedies personally known, or heard at first hand. My own selection below is representative rather than exhaustive; it omits such elementary precautions as life-preservers and not shooting a rapid in a 14-ft. canoe. All the instances cited occurred within roughly the past 10 years:

Case 1 (The overloaded canoe): In the Northwest Territories a father with his teenage son and another man set off, three in the one canoe, down the Back River. Though it was an 18-ft. canoe, they foundered in the first rapid, and two were drowned. Certainly having three adults (with their gear and provisions for a long trip) in anything less than a 20-ft. canoe is asking for trouble. Through proper self-discipline, a crew can keep its cargo to 100 lbs. per man, even for an un-reprovisioned three-week trip in the Barren Lands. In a 17-ft. canoe with two paddlers this load allows for a safe, eight-inch freeboard.

Case 2 (Failure to communicate a move; travelling alone): Two lads

travelling alone on a remote river in the N.W.T. paused, holding on to willows to inspect a rapid they were about to run. Without a word both at the same moment let go, then both — without a word — leaned over and grabbed for another branch. The canoe lurched, overturned, and was off down the rapid, leaving them on a tiny, bare rocky island in light clothes without food, shelter, matches or bug-protection. That they were rescued a fortnight later was only the chance result of previously having been taken by the ear by the Yellowknife HBC manager to the RCMP to register their “flight plan.” One more canoe in the party could have prevented a near-tragedy.

Case 3 (Running a canyon; mis-estimating height of waves): The Rocky Defile on the Coppermine River, N.W.T., in four recent consecutive years claimed five lives. The dangers are from its big waves and one’s inability, once in difficulty in a canyon, either to turn back or to escape. Waves need to be pre-



Top: the advent of the airplane opened up remoter areas of the wilderness to canoeists. Bottom: paddlers believed that they had left their canoes safely beached at the head of this canyon only to find that rising waters swept them away. Stranded in difficult terrain, they were rescued by mere chance.



inspected from water level; it is impossible to judge their height looking straight down 45 metres from the Rocky Defile's rim. Friends of mine recently came on a corpse washed up on the first island below this canyon — a sobering experience on a canoe trip.

Case 4 (Inexperience in reading and coping with white-water): The steersman in a canoe approaching a rapid which he knew had to be portaged had the choice of running down some rough water heading directly toward the portage, or of starting first down a smooth stretch flowing toward the rapid, already loudly audible. Misreading the smooth water which was actually "slick" (betraying its extra speed and strength), he evidently chose that course merely because it was smooth. He still could have saved himself by turning upstream and making a cross-ferry to the portage; instead the canoe was allowed to swing helplessly sideways to the current and was swept into the rapids. One of the paddlers was drowned.

Case 5 (Failure to brief oneself thoroughly): The Mackenzie River flowing mainly through erodable silt has but one rapid whose name, the Sans Souci, could be freely translated as "No Problem." But this applies only to one side of the river; on the other side a ledge causes a drop and a whirlpool. Three youths, explicitly warned *en route* to find out which was the correct side to be on, could not be bothered to stop and inquire at an RCMP post they had passed. Running the wrong side of the river the canoe overturned on the ledge and one of the party lost his life in the whirlpool below.

Case 6 (Poor map-reading; inadequate pre-inspection): A party of two canoes on a river came to where an island was marked on the map with a rapid immediately below it. On one side of the island a straight channel offered good visibility for an approach; on the other side the river flowed around a bend so that



White-water canoeists gather at particularly difficult stretches of water to compete, as well as to learn, teach and show their special skills. This is more dangerous in some ways than long-distance recreational canoeing, but support groups can facilitate rescue.

the rapid was suddenly come upon. The leader of the group oddly elected for the blind course. The rapid turned out to be a falls. When he came round the bend it was too late: he was swept over the falls and drowned. The contour lines on the map were close together, indicating that the river was dropping fast, and signalling the need for extreme caution. Fortunately the other canoe did not follow the leader but took the more open approach.

One of the more hair-raising spectacles of modern canoeing, which I have often witnessed, is gang rapid-running. A large party including novices is led down a long rapid by a lone expert. His "leading" consists of disappearing down the rapid. Violated here are two white-water principles: first, a canoe party which includes non-experts should be kept to a controllable group of no more than four or five canoes; second, each canoe should keep contact, not with the canoe ahead but *behind*. Thus a party is kept together; those who need to do so can watch where and how to run a tricky spot; and rescue in an emergency is faster.

In Algonquin Park on the Peta-wawa River, celebrated for its

springtime rapids, I once saw an extreme instance of this dangerous game. A party of young girls, all of them soaked from repeated spills, turned out to be a high-school class; the teacher had rented canoes and had recruited any and all who wanted to try a new thrill. The teacher, seeming not the least concerned about how (or how many of) his flock got through, was out of sight down river.

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A pageant passes. Colourful groups of canoeists each symbolizing a period of Canadian history file by: an Indian before the white man came; a lone *coureur de bois*; a brigade of *canots de maître* with flashing paddles and sweating voyageurs, their *bourgeois* (boss or master) sitting amidships in his beaver hat; a prospector; a geologist; a government surveyor; a couple of first editions of recreational canoeists; and at the end modern canoeists, impossible yet to characterize finally, but often identifiable as a large group of joyful young with big guitars and small packs.

What is ahead? The fate of wilderness in areas near big cities is probably sealed; but there remains

a degree of control over what wilderness is left on park canoe routes. It is no distortion to suggest that five canoe parties of eight do less damage than does a single group of 40. But parties of 40 are reported as still being admitted to parks, to sensitive canoeing terrain with thin soil and limited tenting sites. More remote wilderness cannot be protected from entry but at least it need not be advertised by publishing more and more canoe-trip descriptions. Can something not be left to discover, on the assumption that experienced "explorers" are less apt to leave trace of their passing? Let us hope that our tourist-industry lobby and recreational policy-makers will see the writing on the wall.

So much for murder. As for suicide, if the current estimate of 70 a year is valid, each decade is seeing about 700 people in Canada lose their lives canoeing. This grim annual harvest is rooted in occasional bravado and bad judgment of even experienced canoeists, but also and increasingly in the failure of novices to class white-water and wilderness canoeing with rock-climbing, as a dangerous sport requiring some sort of lessons and training.