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Oh, my aching shoulders

Paddlers on commemorative trek in Keji find fellowship, blackflies

By SANDRA PHINNEY

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The caption for this illustration from The Tent Dwellers: "It's all in a day's camping, of course."

IN THE SPRING of 1906, Albert Bigelow Paine and Eddie Breck left Boston for Nova Scotia. They hired two guides (Del Stout and Charles the Strong) and set out on a 100-kilometre journey through Kejimikujik, part of the Tobeatic, the Shelburne and Mersey Rivers in search of trout rumoured to be the size of a man's leg.

Two years later, Paine wrote *The Tent Dwellers*, a book about that journey. Popular on both sides of the border, the story is poignant, insightful and at times hilarious.

Bob Thexton is a huge fan of the book and has read it over 15 times since 1974. "Most of it is now committed to memory, and the characters seem like family," said the retired park warden. So, when it came time to retrace that historic journey as part of *The Tent Dwellers* Centennial Festival, Thexton was happy to be one of the eight paddlers on the trip.

After a successful send-off at Milford House on May 17, followed by a launch at Jake's Landing in Keji and bon-voyage party at Jim Charles Point, the paddlers got down to business. About 180 kilograms of gear (tents, sleeping bags, food, first-aid supplies, clothing and fishing tackle) were loaded in four canoes. They paddled across Lake Kejimikujik to the first carry — just over three kilometres (mostly uphill) to Mountain Lake. There was a tougher carry ahead.

Between Sand Lake and Tupper Lake is a small stream. A huge log blocked the way. Rocks and riffles made upstream paddle difficult. So canoes and gear were hauled through a maze in the woods. Thexton said, "The route became more puzzling when the canoe on my shoulders wedged between two trees, or I discovered that a trail I was on just stopped."

In spite of these challenges, occasional hordes of blackflies or bouts of sideways rain, Thexton found the trip inspiring. The paddlers also formed a "book club" miles into the backwoods. "We often looked up a specific phrase or word then debated and mulled things over,"



Bob Thexton, foreground, and Colin Gray prepare for a week long canoe trek through Kejimikujik National Park and Tobeatic Wilderness Area. (Beverly Ware / South Shore Bureau)

FROM THE BOOK

"If you are willing to get wet and stay wet, to get cold and stay cold, to be bruised, and scuffed, and bitten, to be hungry and thirsty and to have your muscles strained and sore from unusual taxation; if you will welcome all these things,

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not once, but many times, for the sake of moments of pure triumph and that larger luxury which comes with the comfort of the camp and the conquest of the wilderness, then go! The wilderness will welcome you, and teach you, and take you to its heart. And you will find your own soul there; and the discovery will be worth while."

Albert Bigelow Paine

said Thexton. At night, they took turns reading a chapter. At one point the author says, "It is a place to find one's soul."

Colin Gray knows first-hand what that means. "It was 20 years since I'd done something like that so I was a little nervous. It was great to discover that I still had it in me," Gray said, "And it was also a rekindling of the soul. The connections we made to the land and each other were important. Great friendships evolved."

At first, Gray was floored by the amount of gear (and "real" food) people packed. "But after a couple of days I started to appreciate all this food," he said. Individuals

prepared their own breakfasts and lunches and took turns cooking a communal meal at night, which included curried squash soup, beet salad and smoked trout, spaghetti with garlic bread, multi-bean chili and bannock. And lots of dark chocolate.

Fishing was high on the agenda. Early on, forestry student Alain Belliveau sent this e-mail to fellow paddlers: "Let's make a deal: if anyone can teach me how to master the art of fly-fishing, I'll carry their gear across the Big Hardwoods Portage." In less time than it takes for a trout to nibble, he had an offer. By the end of the trip, Belliveau had caught the biggest and the most fish.

More important, however, was the overall experience. "Spending time outdoors with others remains, in my opinion, one of the purest forms of camaraderie which is something Albert, Eddie, Charles and Del demonstrated a century ago," Belliveau said. "It's something our group of eight paddlers all shared."

Another feature of the trip was that much of the wilderness is the same as it was in the early 20th century. That certainly hooked Peter McInroy, a lawyer who's a huge fan of *The Tent Dwellers* in general and wilderness canoeing in particular. In spite of his experience, however, McInroy had never seen a moose tick, so he found them quite bizarre but he quickly learned how to determine their sex. (Males have two stripes on their backs; females have a marking that resembles a horseshoe.)

The highlight for McInroy was reaching Little Tobeatic Lake after an arduous paddle, a tough walk through the woods and a long stretch of hard tack. "But we did it, and I was pleased. This is what Eddie and Albert were aiming for in the book, where the fish were as big as your leg and no white man had ever been."

Although McInroy didn't catch any trout, the banter between him and his paddling partner provided much humour. For example, coming back from the trek, McInroy had a hard time mustering the energy to paddle the next lake. "You didn't eat your sardines. No wonder you're hardly paddling. You need to eat your sardines!" his partner said. "I thought he was crazy," McInroy quipped, "but at the next stop, I ate my sardines."

Although the paddlers did this trip on their own, they consulted with staff from Kejimikujik and the province's Environment Department.

They also had the support of the Tent Dwellers Centennial Festival Committee, which is spearheading a number of events from now until fall. (

www.friendsofkeji.ns.ca/td2008/index.html)

Freelance writer Sandra Phinney accompanied the group on their journey. Her shoulders are still sore.

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