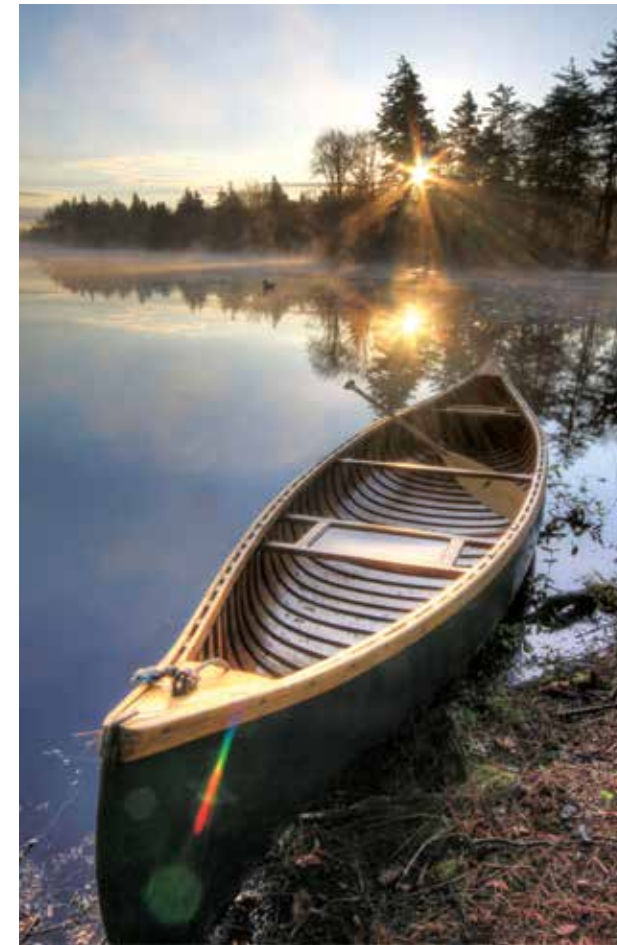




The invitation

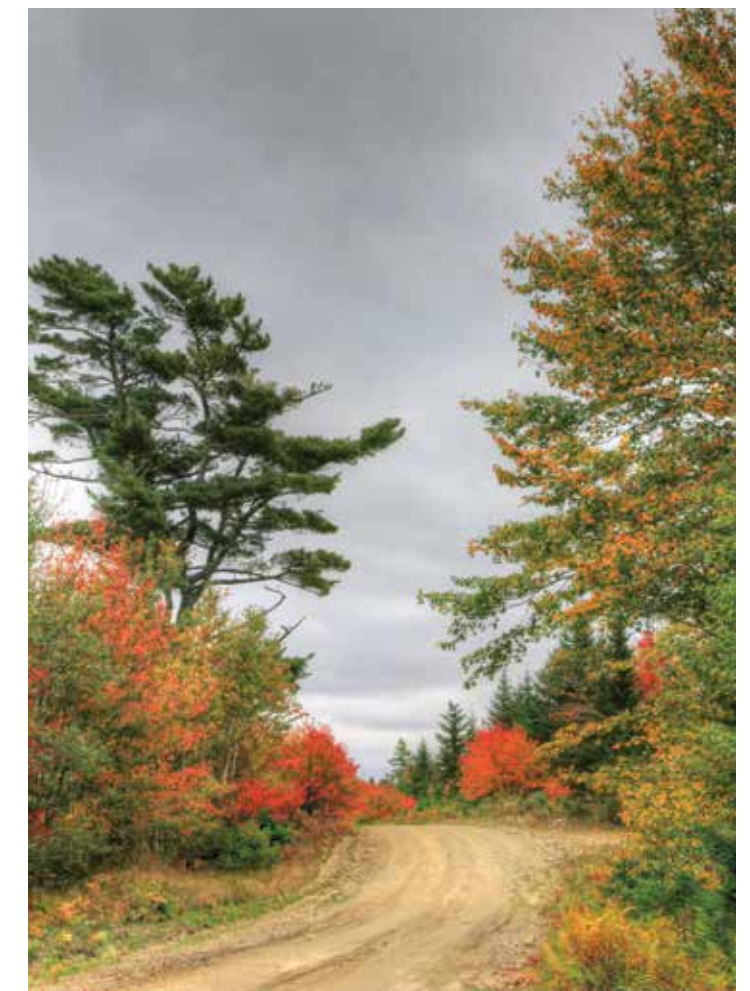
Reflections on how one simple word led to a lifetime passion

Story and photos by Sandra Phinney



Each time I plan a paddling retreat at Birchdale I always look at the topographical maps of the region to review the options for day trips and wonder, "Is the water high enough in the stillwaters to get into the Barrio?" Sitting on the verandah at the lodge overlooking the lake, my mind wanders back to 1951.

Willard Hewey (canoe) resting on the Tuskett River.



Clockwise from above: A small island rises out of the morning mist close to Birchdale; the road to Birchdale; foam on a waterway.



Above: Map of the water systems above Birchdale, located at the base of South Carrying Road Lake (locally referred to as First Carrying Lake); ; Hackmatack cabin at Birchdale.

At six, I was beckoned by the word, *come*. It was summer, and I was with my family at Birchdale, a remote hunting and fishing lodge just north of Kemptville, Nova Scotia. This is where I discovered that real castles were made of logs and had giant fireplaces that took six armloads of wood to fill.

One day, while my parents were occupied with big-people things, I sat cross-legged on the ground playing with pebbles next to the stand of canoes stacked by the shore. John, one of the guides, had been splitting wood nearby. He strolled over to the canoes, lifted one up, flipped it over and put it in the water. He turned to me with a grin and said, “Come!”

Then, there I was, exactly as I had imagined—in a canoe. “I want to paddle too,” I told him.

“The paddle is too long.”

“But I can do it. I want to paddle.”

“A paddle should come up to your chin or nose. This one’s over your head.”

“But I want to paddle.”

“OK. I’ll find you something later.”

He paddled me around the cove and, when we returned, promised to meet me by the canoes after breakfast the next day. John kept his promise and presented me with a rough-hewn paddle that came up to my chin. I felt as if I had been hon-



oured by the grand chief of all the nations. John showed me how to paddle, like the Indians did—smoothly, silently, on my knees. By the end of August, I could paddle across the cove by myself and scoop armfuls of stark white lilies without tipping. He said, “You’re ready for a trip.”

My heart pounded with the force of a hundred beating tom-toms. I felt grown up. “We’ll leave after breakfast,” he said.

We paddled up First Carrying Lake, through what John called a “stillwater” (which seemed skinny and snake-like to me) into Second Carrying Lake. He showed me a beaver house. As we paddle closer I could hear the yips and mews of the babies. They sounded happy. I wondered what it would be like to live with them. Later, I saw loons for the first time on that lake and heard their eerie yodel.

The next stillwater leading into Third Carrying Lake was longer and snakier, and I could hear strange sounds that seemed to get louder and louder.

“Cicadas,” John said. “They’re big bugs with wings, but they’re harmless.”

“What do they look like?”

“Kind of odd-lookin’ creatures.”

“But what do they look like?”

“They have five eyes. Red eyes. Two stick out of their heads like baseballs. Three smaller ones form a triangle in between the ones that bug out.”



I didn't let on that I didn't know what a triangle was. Eventually, we pulled up onto a small sandy beach where John started a fire, boiled water and made coffee. We ate fat ham-and-mustard sandwiches for lunch and molasses cookies for dessert. He put a lot of canned milk in my coffee. It was the weirdest thing I had ever tasted. John said that there was one more stillwater before Barrio Lake but it was really long and we should return or we'd miss supper. On the way back, I tucked my paddle under the front seat and curled up in the bow. The canoe wrapped its cedar-ribbed arms around me and swayed me to sleep as John paddled. Back at shore, John nudged me awake. I rubbed my eyes, climbed out of the canoe, and gave him a big hug. "You'll be paddling into the Barrio and going down the run before you know it," he said. I still didn't know exactly where or what that was. I just knew he believed in me.

* * *

The next summer, my father bought an old farmhouse for a get-away near Somes Lake. Papa owned a Grumman canoe. After a few drinks one night, he said he'd give me the canoe when I could swim the lake, not thinking that I would—or could.

We went the next day. Halfway across, my shoulders felt like they'd been pierced by arrowheads and the water felt thick as mud. As the strokes became more difficult, I thought of Birchdale and imagined John cheering me on.

Then my belly scraped a rock. The Grumman was mine.

* * *

I've paddled for 65 years. I own four canoes: *Cleo*, *Clementine*, *Willard Hewey* and *Stupid Canoe*. They each have their own peculiarities, stubbornness and foibles—as do I. I've been up to the Barrio (a massive lake) and down the run John mentioned—a stretch of whitewater that ranges from benign to fury-wild depending on the water level.

I've paddled the lazy Green River in New Brunswick and the moody Miramichi, the troubled Churchill in Labrador, and countless others.

I've paddled in stinging downpours, blistering heat, and moonlit nights so still and exquisite that I could hardly breathe for fear of breaking the spell.

I once believed I paddled to get away from it all. But it's not that simple. Wildlife photographer Peter Dombrovskis said, "When you go out there, you don't get away from it all. You get back to it all. You come home to what's important. You come home to yourself."

Perhaps that's what John meant when he looked at a lonely little girl and said, "Come." 🐸



Clockwise from top left: Nature as art; a frosty November morning on the Tusket River; the stillness of a dawn paddle; spring riverbank reflection as seen from *Clementine*.