

Paddling the historic St. John Wolastoq River Brigade

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The Amisk, one of 10 Voyageur canoes that took part in the historic St. John Wolastoq River Brigade. (SANDRA PHINNEY)

It is mid-afternoon on a scorching July day. I'm one of nine people in a 26-foot Voyageur canoe and we are paddling down the storied St. John River in New Brunswick.

We've been on the water for hours and my shoulders feel as if hunks of hot lead have lodged in my joints. As beads of sweat trickle down my brow and between my breasts, the person in the stern provides a non-stop dictum: "Stroke! Stroke! Stroke!" Paddling in unison in this blistering heat, I entertain visions of mutiny.

Suddenly we're told to ease up; it's time for a break. We slither to shore, park our big boat and disembark. Within seconds I'm in the water, clothes and all. After a few dunks, I roll over on my back, close my eyes and float. "Ahhh. This trip isn't so bad after all," I think to myself.

Two days earlier, 10 Voyageur canoes had slipped off the banks of the St. John River in Florenceville-Bristol embarking on the St. John Wolastoq River Brigade, a seven-day, 262-kilometre trip which would eventually finish in Saint John. It was all part of a series of cross-Canada brigades in celebration of Canada 150.

Big boats range from 22 to 36 feet and weigh 250 to 900 pounds. After making several inquiries our team captain, Dusan Soudek (family physician by day, paddler whenever time permits) located one for our team that had been in the 1967 brigade when paddler made an epic 109-day race cross-Canada from Rocky Mountain House in Alberta to Montreal as part of the centennial celebrations: My guess is that it weighed 700 pounds; it was a sluggish beast.

We initially dubbed our canoe the FOC — the polite name being the Fathers of Confederation. But wisdom prevailed and it became the MFOC (the Mothers and Fathers of Confederation — or some such.)

The Brigade

We were a motley crew of more than 120 people, ranging in age from pre-schoolers to septuagenarians. One canoe, the Amisk (Cree for beaver) had travelled from Saskatchewan with its captain, Wayne Elliott. His crew included paddlers from Wisconsin and Washington.

MacDonald added, "Then to learn the intricacies of managing a canoe large enough to transport goods was in itself an art, and a team-cohesive science. It wasn't easy. Tempers and disagreements could flare, muscles ached, breaks were few."

The River

The Wolastoq is the largest watershed east of the Mississippi and the St. Lawrence and has a vast array of birds. My heart skipped a beat when I saw a convocation of eagles shortly after we left Florenceville-Bristol. Lucky for us, we saw eagles almost the entire length of our journey.

Referred to as "the road to Canada," this river played an important role for both French and British settlers and was also an important communication route between Upper and Lower Canada and the Atlantic.

During the War of 1812, New Brunswick's 104th Regiment of Foot marched along the river more than 1,100 kilometres from Fredericton to Kingston, Ont. during the dead of winter to thwart an invasion and is still regarded as incredible feat in military history. Of course, this river has 10,000 years of Wolastoqiyik history and more than 400 years of European settlement by French, British and other significant cultural groups.

Highlights of our journey included being fêted with everything from songs and smudges to feasts, fireworks and special educational programs.

Personal Pleasures

Every member of MFOC had a different take on the trip. For Marilyn Manzer, a music teacher from Wolfville, it was a dream come true. Manzer grew up in Fredericton and recalls driving up and down the river visiting relatives in various communities. Yet growing up her family couldn't afford a boat so she never ventured out on the river.

When the opportunity arose to join the brigade, it took Marilyn less than three seconds to sign up. "It feels like that river is part of my soul," she says, adding, "And I was very excited and proud of myself for paddling several hours a day for seven days, at age 70." During our occasional breaks, Manzer played her recorder and I forgot about the heat and how bloody heavy our canoe was.

Massage therapist and MFOC team member Darlene Ricker summed it all up rather nicely: "It's very simple: Approaching Woodstock, a young family on the shoreline held up a large Canadian flag to cheer us on. I knew then that our paddling adventure was something deeply inspirational to many average Canadians. And I took great pride in being part of it all."

I echo those sentiments.
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