

# The Sault Star

## Backwoods Bonding

**A four-day trek through the wilderness brings two sons closer to their fathers**

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I hear my father stirring in the sleeping bag beside me but neither of us is in any great hurry to crawl out of the tent. The song of birds and chattering squirrels blends with the dull roar of distant rapids as we relax in the realization that we're finally on the river. The silence from the tent beside points to the same scenario where Mike Cotterill and his father Ralph appear to be thick into the unwinding process. Eventually I fight inertia, push back the dew drenched tent flap and step into the cool morning to continue our father and son descent of the Oba River.

Mike and I have been paddling partners for years, but our fathers first met each other yesterday, when we pulled up to the red brick train station at Hawk Junction. As we set our canoes and gear beside the Algoma Central Rail Line the ticket agent tells us the train is at least an hour behind so we take advantage of the unhurried pace and cross the street to the venerable Big Bear Hotel. Any reservations that this father and son duo would not gel are as fleeting as a pitcher of draft. Conversation flows around canoes, fishing and wilderness exploration as well as the obligatory review of our proposed route on a topo map. Our plan is to take the train just north of Oba Lake and paddle about 40km downstream to meet the train at a whistle stop called Akron a few days later. On the train's arrival we file out of the Big Bear, load our gear in the baggage car and sink into the reclining seats of the passenger car.

As the great iron beast rolls into the wilderness all the energy so recently expended on preparing for the canoe trip is now clearly focused on relaxing. As if planned, the casual atmosphere of the train is the perfect precursor to an outdoors adventure in the Algoma wilderness. After about an hour we're dropped off at a trailhead leading to the Oba River. As the train pulls away the conductor pokes his head out of the baggage car, "Where are we picking you up?"

"Up around Akron, on Saturday," I say. He nods and retreats into the disappearing locomotive.

The section of the Oba River we're travelling flows close to the tracks for convenient drop off and pick up by train. Mike and I are hopeful that the reputed easy rapids, short portages and good fishing materialize because our respective fathers, though in good shape, are hovering around the 70-year-old mark. I've had my father on many over-ambitious routes over the years and although he's never uttered a word of complaint I'm determined to make this an easier trip. Though a keen outdoorsman Mike's father is not an experienced canoe tripper. For these reasons Mike and I

make a conscious effort to do most of the work but it's our fathers who load up with the heaviest packs and trudge down the trail.

We launch into the chalky coloured water where alder, birch and aspen share the banks with groves of cedar arcing over rocky narrows. It's a short and easy paddle to the first portage where we need to portage gear, find a campsite, get a fire going, set up tents and get supper on. It's under the encroaching darkness that the father and son dynamic continues to unfold; while fathers are illustrating that they can more than pull their weight, sons are operating under pressure to show their confidence in the bush. The resulting efficiency is quite welcome considering growling stomachs and waves of fierce mosquitoes. However, a glance toward my normally unflappable companion betrays a wrinkle. "I forgot the tent poles," Mike says casting a longing eye toward our tent. "We'll never fit," I say and while Dad and I get a fire going and supper on Mike and Ralph use rope, saplings and a centre pole to rig a feasible shelter. Though drooping and pathetic, it's a lot better than nothing.

It's out of this sorry shelter that Mike and Ralph emerge for our first full day on the river. After breakfast under darkening skies we slide the canoes in at the base of a wide and shallow rapid. Brook trout and walleye are said to swim the water so Dad throws a spinner and I work a jig along the bottom of a deep pool and it's not long before I hook into something heavy. It holds deep with suspiciously little fight and finally emerges as a green rubber boot! We take this as our signal to move on through a series of short rapids where rounded dark boulders funnel stained water through intricate paths. While the drops are fairly gradual there are some technical stretches that require eddying out and inspecting half way through. Often we have to get out and wade or line the canoes through tricky spots. Our progress is further slowed by the need to plumb the depths of intriguing pools that yield nothing.

The grey skies that have threatened rain all morning finally deliver. We tire of waiting for a break in the rain for a well-deserved lunch break and pull under a thick grove of cedar where the needled ground is still dry after hours of incessant rain. Bagels, cheese, hot Italian sausage, carrots, humus and chocolate emerge from the food barrel. As we fall on the feast rain is replaced by an onslaught of black flies and mosquitoes. It's been a cool, dry spring and the bugs have been keeping a low profile, until now. The onset of damp warm weather has unleashed ferocious swarms. Just as I'm wondering if our fathers might regret joining us Ralph comments on how nice and warm it is as he picks a few struggling mosquitoes from his humus. My Dad nods his fly bitten head in agreement, "Yes, quite pleasant." I smile to myself, secure in the knowledge that mild adversity is not going to get in the way of this crew's enjoyment of the wilderness.

Though it rains most of the day it only makes the spring greens more vibrant along a wide and marshy section of river. A noise along the bank betrays a cow moose and two spindly-legged light brown calves trotting into alder and spruce cover. There are otters, beaver and bird life is everywhere: hooded mergansers, mallards, black and wood ducks, grey and blue jays, hawks, osprey and bald eagles. Ralph trains the binoculars on some of the less obvious saying "sap sucker" or "crested fly-catcher."

Toward the end of our first full day on the river she begins to narrow between lichen streaked rocky walls where over hanging cedars shroud rock encased passages of dark water. We finally start to pick up a few walleye and my Dad even lands and releases a few 14-inch brook trout. The good fishing coincides with a break in the rain but with evening approaching we make for shore to execute a portage to our campsite on the brink of 20-foot Jumper falls. It's a bit of a struggle getting a good cooking fire going from thoroughly drenched wood but in the end seasoned rib eye steaks are successfully grilled to accompany rice, coleslaw and red wine, consumed amidst the roar of the falls.

Our next day on the river is marked by great walleye fishing that begins at the base of Jumper Falls and continues through a series of rapids not marked on the map. A lunch of hot soup amidst the ruins of an old logging camp does little to help situate us on the river.

All we really know is we've spent too much time fishing and not enough time paddling so we reel up and paddle past a procession of walleye rich pools in order to find a campsite close to our pick up spot the next morning. Finally we arrive along the rail line at Coat creek but the marshy shoreline is inhospitable to camping. We end up shooting several sets of easy rapids before finding an established campsite near the tracks just before dark.

Now practised and travelling with a bundle of thin sapling poles custom cut to slide into the sleeves of their tent Mike and Ralph set up the latest incarnation. Tonight it has a rather rakish appearance and over a meal of walleye filets we discuss whether it exudes a Medieval or Byzantine look. Mike holds up well to the ribbing, confiding that he'll never again bring poles, preferring to fashion his own from wood. "Poles are over rated," he says.

The bugs subside into evening but return with renewed zeal in the morning. We break camp and pile our gear beside the track and wait for the train, as we huddle around a smoky fire. We douse it when we hear the train and board smoky, unshaven, fly bitten but happy.

As with virtually any trip into the wilderness those who view the proverbial glass as half-empty could find a lot to complain about. But with our cast of characters it's no surprise that incessant rains, horrific flies, challenging fishing and accommodation issues are easily eclipsed by four pleasurable days of meeting the challenges of the wilderness; as father and son and as good friends.