

14 Weeks x 2 Guys

Equals a 2,250-mile canoe trip.

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

One of the epic canoe voyages of this century was the monumental 2,250-mile trip completed by two Minneapolis youngsters who, in 1930, paddled from Fort Snelling, Minn., to York Factory, Manitoba, on Hudson Bay.

The youngsters were freshly graduated from high school: Walter Port, the class president, and Eric Sevareid, who would go on to become a world-famous reporter on the CBS news team assembled by Edward R. Murrow.

Sevareid kept a diary of that legendary trip, and from it emerged his first book, *Canoeing with the Cree*, published in 1935. In 1968 the Minnesota Historical Society reissued the book, to which Sevareid appended the following:

"This brief book was written when I was 18 years old. It is about a canoe voyage of more than 2,000 miles. I made the trip when I was 17 with a remarkable companion, two or three years older than I. Without him the idea for the expedition would never have been conceived, and without him, in the last terrible days of the adventure, I would not have survived.

"This story is republished now, many years after the event, as a simple and, I hope, honest account of the glory and the misery that a teenager can experience if he tries hard enough. Our journey was an example of what very young men can do—once in their lives, but never again!"

Sevareid's book belongs in the Duluth pack of every canoeist who dreams of dipping a paddle into wild Canadian waters. It evokes the open horizons of Sigurd Olson's writings, the lure of the far country, the back of Beyond.

It is the very stuff of dreams: A canoe trip to York Factory, to Hudson Bay! A canvas-covered wooden canoe...2,250 miles...60 portages...14 weeks. Who would dare attempt it these days?

As it happens, two Duluth youngsters, Scott Anderson and Steve Baker, got the same itch to see York Factory in 1987. They did it—and Anderson has written an account of their trip titled *Distant Fires*, published by Pfeifer-Hamilton Publishers.

Anderson and Baker were 22 when they began their journey to York Factory, but they had been thinking about "a big trip" since they were kids.

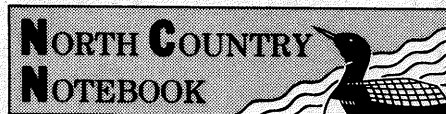
"In some ways," Anderson writes, "we had been waiting since our dads first took us to the lakes and taught us to carry a pack and paddle a canoe. From those days on, we knew we would go. We didn't know where, but we knew we would be ready."

In the summer of his 16th year, Anderson recalls, his dad gave him a copy of *Canoeing with the Cree*, and the die was cast. The boys wanted to head

for York Factory the following year, but Anderson's dad permitted them to go no farther than Ontario's Quetico Provincial Park. Instead of a whole summer, they were limited to three weeks. When the boys were juniors in college and 22 years old, they decided the time had come. It was now or never. Anderson carried their 47-pound, 18½-foot We-noh-nah Odyssey with its Kevlar shell and PVC foam core, plus a light food pack, from his house four miles down to Lake Superior.

Baker started out carrying a 130-pound food bag on his nine-mile trek to Lake Superior, but after a half-mile, he jettisoned the food bag into his brother's pickup truck and carried on with the gear pack. After all, Anderson notes, the carry was only intended to be symbolic.

They paddled up Lake Superior's north shore, rolling in the heavy swells past Two Harbors, Split Rock, Tofte,



Lutsen, Grand Marais, Hovland and Hat Point. They did the long back-breaking carry on the Grand Portage and reached the familiar lakes of the border country.

"The voyageurs, we had been told," Anderson notes, "held to the tradition of draining their unwieldy kegs at this spot. I think that if Steve and I had had a keg, we would have finished it about the time the pack straps broke on the Grand Portage."

As the Odyssey presses on, it is to Anderson's credit that he makes you feel the journey, sweating and being eaten alive by the hellish mosquitoes and no-see-ums, dipping through rafts of mayflies for drinking water, capsizing, smelling of campfires and smoke and soggy sleeping bags. Feeling like you'll never be clean again.

It comes as no surprise that, after picking up fresh supplies, they burn their underwear on the 10th of June.

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Later, crossing an arm of Lake Winnipeg under a jerry-rigged sail, they come very close to losing not only their underwear but their lives on the reefs of the wind-whipped lake.

"Once past the horrible rocks," Anderson recalls, "and within the protection of a small bay, I felt that I could breathe again. I looked back and saw how lucky we had been. That water was no place for a canoe. Steve was the first to speak. 'Good thing nobody died, eh?'"

In Sahamattaw, about 100 miles from York Factory, Anderson makes an observation wise beyond his years.

"In the past," he observes, "the Hudson Bay Company had refused to trade in cheap trinkets. Instead, it had offered useful items, such as knives, axes and blankets. Looking at the array of cheap plastic toys brought in hundreds of miles through the wilderness, we wondered when this had changed."

Eric Sevareid and Walter Port would be proud of *Distant Fires* and the young men who lived the adventure. So would the beloved stern paddle Sigurd Olson. *Distant Fires* belongs in your packsack, along with the maps and stuff that keep us all from losing our way. ■

George Vukelich reads selections from *North Country Notebook* Sunday nights at 10 on Wisconsin Public Radio, WERN (88.7 FM).