

From Mattice to Moosonee — Travelling the Missinaibi River

Third Place Amory Adventure Winners

BY THE CARLETON PLACE VENTURER COMPANY

Five kilometers of portages, 251 kilometres by canoe; 28 sets of classified rapids; 400 kilometres by rail; 1780 kilometres by car; 9 days. Just a series of numbers but these numbers represent one of the most challenging, historic routes that we had ever conceived of attempting.

Planning

As a group, we determined the route to take, appointing Eric and Amanda to take care of the route details. Gen and David became the kit organizers, both personal and group. Hanna and Matt created a menu that wouldn't require too much preparation. Nick and Kevin were put in charge of fundraising, due to the large expenses such as train tickets, gas, and food costs. Ben was to research alternative means of communications. Hearing stories about sailing on the straight stretches of the Missinaibi River, we transformed some old tents and flies into sails for the trip.

In May of 2008, we had a preparation trip in Algonquin Park, canoeing the Barron Canyon. We learned to double-check that all the gear was accounted for, that some people couldn't carry canoes, and how to survive big storms.

July 19, 2008 — A Long Day Driving

Meeting at Scouter John's house at 6 am, we packed our group's brand-new trailer with personal gear and prepared the seven canoes and nine barrels for the 12 hour (including stops)

Looking for a canoe route that would meet the Amory Award requirements, as well as the Adventurous portion for the Duke of Edinburgh Award, the Missinaibi River fulfilled our needs indeed. It provided us with flat and white water canoeing and a place to further ourselves physically in an area that we had never been before.

drive north. After driving practically all day, everyone was ready to pile into their tents at the campsite in Mattice.

It Begins

Snapping a picture of us in front of the infamous statue of Mr. Canoehead for luck, we finished loading the canoes. David was appointed the leader on land and Gen as the leader on the water. Each one had to establish the situation, determine the risks, and manage the others to act accordingly in the case of emergency, such as a first aid circumstance or a thunderstorm.

After about five kilometres of smooth paddling, we got to our first rapids, Rock Island Rapids. Too fast to paddle, we needed to line our canoes. The rocks along the shore were slippery and sharp. First Amanda slipped, cutting her leg. Then Gen slipped, and let go of the rope on the canoe. One of the painters got stuck on a rock and the canoe bobbed upside down for about twenty minutes before we could cut the rope. After attending to Amanda's leg, and warning the others to be careful, we continued on without any further trouble.



Photos: The Carleton Place Venturer Company



It didn't take very long until Black Feather Rapids was in sight. Even with the high water levels, it was very rocky. Somehow, Daniel and Eric managed to get their canoe stuck sideways on a couple of large boulders near the shore. It took a while to get them off, because the strong current kept their canoe pinned on the rocks. By this time we all were exhausted and wet, so Gen and David told everyone to go ashore and set up camp.

We had only travelled 16 km on the first day; we had a lot of ground to cover in the next few days.

Going the Distance

This day turned out to be a lot better than yesterday. We ran a few C1 rapids, some swifts, and rafted up while eating lunch, making good time. We decided to stay at the campsite about three hours away from Thunderhouse Falls. We got a good night's sleep and prepared to leave early, for we were excited to get to Thunderhouse...

Caught Up

Breakfast was simple and we quickly set out. We ran a few swifts, scouted and ran a couple of C1s, and then went for a C1-C2-C1 combo. People were in a very good mood because we had caught up very well, and the weather was absolutely gorgeous.

After another 45 minutes or so of paddling, we arrived at the beginning of the 1.7 km Thunderhouse portage. Happily, our campsite was only about 1.2 km from the beginning. While a few set up tents and began cooking lunch, others transported canoes and some gear down to the end of the portage, about 500 m away.

Due to the beauty of the campsite, the wetness of clothing, and the exhaustion that everyone was experiencing, it was agreed that we would remain at this campsite the entire next day. Everyone was delighted. Without the need for a quick pack-up the next day, clothes were hung up to dry and people slept peacefully under the starry sky.

Thunderhouse Falls

Day 4 of our trip was spent as though we were in paradise. A chance to sleep in, fish, sort gear and finish portaging the canoes to the end of the portage. During lunch a large storm system with black clouds approached the site very quickly. Ear-splitting claps of thunder and lightning accompanied nails of rain and the powerful wind. It even hailed. The whole storm only lasted about ten minutes, but had done its damage. We were forced to cut away fallen trees and branches across the portage and could hardly walk without stepping in a puddle.

Hell's Gate

Leaving around 8:30 or so, we ran a couple of simple CIs and then got to Stone Rapids, our first portage of the day; 875 m of mud and trees. There were 26 fallen trees in the first 600 metres!

It took a couple of hours for that portage. After paddling a kilometer, we arrived at the Hell's Gate portage. It was 2.35 km long with steep slopes, mud, slippery gravel and more mud. Another 24 trees down on this trail as well. After completing that portage we couldn't proceed any further.

Avast Me Hearties!

The morning started pretty sunny, but it rained in the afternoon. Rafting up, we tried our sails. We made good progress – up to about 15 km/hour – and relaxed quite a bit, because all we needed to do was keep the sails full and steer slightly. Near where we wanted to camp, there was a historic fur trade post where the Pivabiska River meets the Missinaibi River, and we stopped to look for it. Unfortunately, we couldn't find it. Continuing on, we camped at an abandoned hunter's site.

The next day, after being delayed while a storm passed, we passed a gravesite maintained in memory of an infant who died on the river. Paying our tributes, we continued on, sailing most of the way to our next campsite. After setting up and cooking supper, we agreed that if it was still raining significantly the next day, we would leave the river at the train crossing.

The Final Decision

We woke up once again to cloudy skies with drizzling rain. Due to the risk of pneumonia and hypothermia because of poor weather and lack of dry clothes, the vote ended up as 8 to 2 to stop the trip at the Moose River crossing, 70 km from Moosonee. Although disappointing, we knew we had made the right decision.

Catching the train at Moose River Crossing, we travelled to Moosonee, where we stayed overnight before taking the train to Cochrane. While the advisors went to fetch the cars, we toured the town and the Polar Bear Sanctuary. It was exciting to see a polar bear up close, with only a pane of glass between us.

The next morning, we literally threw everything into the trailer, had oatmeal and snacks for breakfast and loaded ourselves into the cars. As fun as the trip had been, after nine days away, we were all eager to get home.

We recommend this trip to anyone who is up for a challenge. The river is just glorious. What got us so far was our wonderful group and how uplifting they were in the rough patches. X

— The Carleton Place Venturer Company

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