

# Six Day Paddle on the Upper Mississippi



The author and his 9-year-old son joined a leisurely canoe flotilla from the headwaters to Lake Bemidji State Park. Storytelling, campfires, quiet water, history, music, wild lore — it was an idyllic outing

Reis H. Hall

**I**T WAS Sunday evening. Thirteen of us were gathered around a campfire on the shore of Lake Itasca, not far from the Mississippi River Headwaters. Our leaders were telling us about the six-day family canoe trip we were about to undertake. They answered our questions and gave out various assignments to be carried out in the morning. The month was June.

Our outing was an important part of the celebration of the river that has been carried out annually for a number of years. The Upper Mississippi River Revival, an organization dedicated to restoring this great river to the purity that characterizes this first 60 miles, is the sponsor.

For a family, the cost of the trip is modest (see sidebar). The UMRR bears all food and camping costs. Participants provide their own canoes and camping and personal equipment. The fleet is limited to 20 people.

The trip offers high adventure, yet the danger is minimal. The stream is rarely more than waist deep. About the worst that can happen is that a canoe will tip, dumping its occupants into the water. The leaders are experienced canoeists, and every precaution is taken to ensure the safety of the group. People from all parts of Minnesota and neighboring states have participated.

After breakfast on Monday morn-



ing, we loaded the canoes and got under way. The leaders rode in the last canoe. The first portage occurred as we left Lake Itasca at the headwaters fewer than three miles from our starting point. Here are the celebrated stepping stones that mark the place where the river begins. From this source, the Mississippi begins its winding way 2,552 miles to the Gulf of Mexico.

Before we portaged around those stones into the ankle-deep stream, however, we had a light lunch and visited the interpretive center at Itasca State Park. There we learned about Henry Schoolcraft who located the headwaters of the Mississippi and documented his find. We also learned about other figures who played roles in the exploration, exploitation, and protection of this area: Brower, Weyerhaeuser, and Nicollet to name a few.

**First Portage.** After visiting the headwaters area, Armond Brattland,

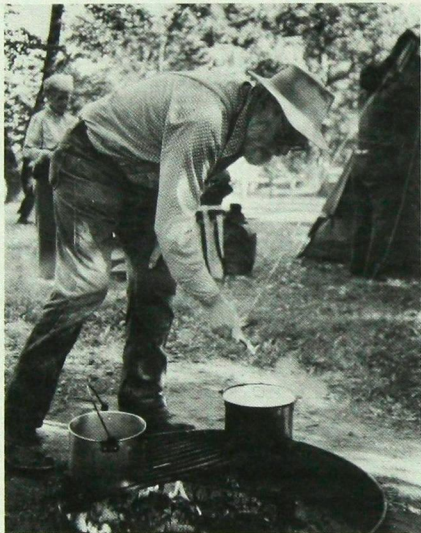
a lifelong outdoorsman and one of our leaders, my 9-year-old son, Norwood, and I returned to our canoe and made the short portage from Lake Itasca to the Mississippi. We waded the first hundred yards guiding our canoe with a line attached to the bow. We then placed Norwood in his nest of gear in the canoe. With Armond at the stern, we paddled north through the park, past Highway 200, and on to Wanagan, our first campsite.

Shortly after supper, our guest for the evening, Earle Dickinson, arrived. A third-generation logger, Dickinson is a leader in preserving the history of lumbering in this area. We listened to his old logging stories and looked forward to joining him in a symbolic log drive the next day.

Tuesday dawned warm and bright. We broke camp and joined Dickinson and his 'lumberjacks' who were driving several logs around bends in the river. We were en route to Vekin's Dam, built in the early 1900s to help







**Left:** Armond Brattland, a tour leader, prepares breakfast on grill for author's 13-member group. **Above:** Joyce Stillwell entertains group in evening with fiddle recital of old-time tunes and songfest.

logs float down river to mills in Bemidji.

We had a firsthand view of difficulties loggers once faced. Dickinson fought with several obstinate logs jammed in snags in the river's narrow, shallow channel.

Back in the water on the downstream side of Vekin's Dam, we paddled a stretch of easy rapids. Nonetheless, there was always danger of tipping. Dragging our canoes over several beaver dams added to the adventure.

Lunch ashore was a leisurely meal of cheese, sausage, crackers, and punch before returning to the river

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A resident of Bemidji, **Reis H. Hall** is a human technologies consultant. He and his son, Norwood, took the trip on which this story is based in June 1987.

on our way to Coffee Pot.

That night's guests were Cleve and Joyce Stillwell, lifelong residents of this area, who have written and lectured about the history of the headwater area and its people and their ways. After Cleve had related his stories, Joyce honored us with a fiddle recital of old-time hand-clapping tunes. She played our requests, and we sang along.

Early Wednesday morning, raindrops pelted the tent awakened us. As quickly as it began, the downpour stopped. The sun poked through the fast-moving clouds as our group began to stir.

After a long morning of canoeing and lunch at the halfway point, we faced Stumphges Rapids where the water moves very fast. The paddlers shifted their paddles from side to side, drawing, prying, and fending to avoid rocks and maintain control. An exciting experience.



**Afternoon Stories.** About 4 p.m., we rounded a bend in the river and saw a dock on our left: Bear Den. We found a level camping area covered with pine needles from surrounding trees. We erected tents and laid out bedding to freshen in the afternoon sun.

Many in our group were experienced campers and knew how to maintain themselves in relative comfort. All seemed to have some innovative idea or unique equipment to show off or tell about. Supper featured a hot dish of wild rice which could have come from any of the many paddies we'd seen along our way.

On Thursday morning, we broke camp and headed for Pine Point — an easy four miles of canoeing — and our rendezvous with Diane Morris from the Audubon Society. We arrived at 11 a.m.

After lunch, Morris led us along an old logging trail. She identified various species of birds and told how some species used songs to define their turf. We sampled several wild plants including fiddlehead, a fern used as a salad, and wintergreen berries. We saw beautiful lady's-slippers that live 15 to 20 years before putting out their first blooms.

As for wildlife, so far we had seen a beaver ducking into his lodge, an otter swimming near the river's bank, and a porcupine high in a tree on the far side of the river. Numerous ducks and loons had shown great irritation over having to share their waterway with us. We saw turtles sunning

themselves on warm rocks. Finally, we discovered a hummingbird with her babies in a nest on a branch directly over the spot where we had eaten lunch the day before.

By 3:30 p.m. on the fourth day, we reached Iron Bridge and set up our camp on a grassy bluff overlooking a wide marsh. Our food was kept in two large Duluth Packs — large canvas backpacks. Last Sunday when these packs were fully loaded, it had taken one very strong man or two average men to carry each one. We estimated that, together, they weighed more than 250 pounds. Now, all food left would fit in one pack.

Food was separated in the packs by category: breakfast foods in one pack, lunch in another, supper in a third, and general purpose foods in the last. Each tent group planned particular meals, but everyone just pitched in. And there always were surprises. That night's surprise was a "no-cook" cheesecake topped with dried-fruit sauce.

**Last Night.** We were a tired, content group around the campfire that evening. Even our Minnesota mosquitoes seemed to leave us alone. The repellents we all used had something to do with it.

We sat by the fire looking over the water and at the full moon. We talked about the bison hunters, voyageurs, explorers, and Indian guides who had passed this way before us. Never again would these people and the events of those years be just words in a book.



## Canoe Trip

On Friday, we paddled almost 14 miles through a wooded scenic area. Fallen trees frequently blocked the river. That stretch required the best of our now sharpened paddling skills.

In mid-afternoon, we passed under a bridge near the outskirts of Bemidji. Moments later we turned a narrow channel on the left bank of the river and landed at the home of Bill Sliney, a prime mover in the UMRP and a frequent leader of this annual trek from the headwaters.

After we set up camp in a meadow behind Sliney's home, we were guests of the Bemidji River Revival Organization at a delicious potluck supper. The next morning we broke camp, loaded our canoes, and paddled through Lake Irving. We had lunch at Cameron Park on the western shore of Lake Bemidji before making the final four-mile paddle to Lake Bemidji State Park on the northeastern shore.

We crossed the lake as a flotilla. A 26-foot voyageur canoe with seven voyageur paddlers escorted us. On landing we were greeted by hundreds of people who had gathered to participate in the annual UMRP Festival. A celebration followed — music, food, games, storytelling, and voyageur

## Canoe Voyage Starts at Itasca State Park

The sixth Upper Mississippi River Revival Canoe Voyage is scheduled for June 12–18, 1988. Sponsored by the non-profit Upper Mississippi River Revival, the 60-mile guided trip is limited to 10 canoes.

The trip consists of 6 to 7 hours of canoeing each day. An evening program will be featured at each campsite.

Participants provide their own canoes, paddles, life jackets, rain gear, tents, eating utensils, and sleeping bags. Two outfitters in the Bemidji area can supply equipment.

Tour sponsors will provide food, educational materials, guides, cooking equipment, first aid supplies, and car shuttle service between Itasca and Bemidji.

Cost of trip: \$60 per person or \$90 per couple.

For more information, write: Upper Mississippi River Revival Canoe Voyage, 4326 Trillium Court N.E., Bemidji, MN 56601.

canoe rides. A fitting climax to a great week on the Mighty Mississippi.

Finally, we exchanged goodbyes and headed for our homes and to the routines of our lives. Our spirits had been nourished by our adventure. We were ready to step into the future with just a little extra spring in our stride. □



## Delay Pruning Oaks

MINNESOTANS who didn't prune their oak trees last winter should now delay pruning until July 1. The reason: the threat of oak wilt. The disease has spread slowly — north to North Branch and St. Cloud and west to Mankato, including the seven-county metro area around the Twin Cities. Oak wilt spreads two ways: by a fungus moving from an infected oak to a healthy oak through a root graft and by insects. Most infections occur between April 15 and July 1.

— UM Minnesota Extension Service