

KEEP YOUR STUFF! An Ode To The Eastmain
PRESENTATION TO WILDERNESS CANOE SYMPOSIUM, 4 FEB 06.

Many of you have done a lot more canoe tripping than I ever did -- or ever will -- probably most of you. This presentation is not about some exciting new route or adventure -- but about some things I have learned by way of reflection over the past forty years. I'll be making a point -- probably overstating it, as is my wont. I want you to take something home with you.

And the pictures... don't pay any attention to them -- unless you get bored with the speech. All of the stuff being projected is on my web site -- along with other stuff from other trips. Originally I had posted it for the enjoyment of the people who tripped with me. If others enjoy it and learn from it -- so much the better.

Also, I would not be speaking today but for George's kind invitation. I would never have done what I did do if it hadn't been for three persons: Andy Smyth, Jon Berger, Heb Evans. Their encouragement, wisdom, intelligence, and generosity of information cleared the way for the likes of me.

A FRAMEWORK -- It's the CULTURE!!!

First, to be addressed is the frame work of this speech. After the frame work is up, everything falls into place.

It's all about culture.

All culture is a function of our conversation (or is it the other way around? Not really...) And what we *****SEE***** is a function of our culture -- given its strengths and weaknesses.

A-1 The Vikings -- Which is the superior culture?

A year or so ago I saw on TV one of these quasi documentaries. It was about Vikings or some sort who landed and settled for a while on the Atlantic coast of North America. There was a mystery in the documentary. Where did they go? Did they die? Did they leave? What happened?

I suppose that any study like this one would have to employ a lot of imagination. In this documentary, the Vikings -- or whoever they were -- lived, as best they could, in the way they had lived before they arrived at North America. They had little farms -- with barnyards, animals, hay -- that sort of thing. And, according to the documentary, that just couldn't work. This was a different place with a different climate. And they left -- one way or another.

Meanwhile there were other humans in the general area. They learned to harvest their sustenance from the sea. They survived. I presume that their descendants are still here with us -- doing -- as often as they can, in this day and age -- the same thing?

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Which is the superior culture? The one that clung to its old gods? Or the one that adapted?

Read any paper. Talk to any one of numerous people, and you will hear all about the dysfunction of Native psyches and communities and culture -- in vivid and graphic and knowledgeable detail. Often there is feeling -- venom, even -- in the tone of voice. And these remarks have been going on since day one. Even the missionaries told them they could not be the people they were or were born to be.

But they knew how to survive. And the only reason the white man survived at first was because the local people then took pity on him and accepted him into their circle.

A-2 The Culture. Some comments and observations.

Paul Goodman, I think it was, in one of his books, commented on the weakest and the frailest of the culture -- those in prisons and in mental hospitals. His comment was that they may well tell you the most about where the culture is going. They can be a window on the movement of the culture -- the canary in the coal mine. Their sensitivity to cultural change has led to their breakdown. But, in the context of cultural change, their issues are OUR issues. We just don't know that yet. And we don't want to know it. And in the end we are self-destructive by perpetuating our ignorance and/or denial.

There's another piece to this in the North -- at least around James Bay and The Cree. That is: Native people -- especially those most hurt by cultural change -- may find healing in discovering -- or rediscovering -- or even re-inventing -- the roots of their culture.

I had a conversation about this experience of cultural change with an Elder -- Lawrence Cheechoo -- who died a year or so ago. I only knew him for about a year. But we had got this far into the conversation. Lawrence believed that the next generation of Native kids will NOT just fade into the white man's world. They are different now. They will be different then.

They will adapt -- as they always have adapted. That's the genius of the culture. It's in the soul and in the genes. That's what Lawrence said. And I think he is right. AND, given who WE are, we have a stake in their success.

Before we leave the framework, then....

- ◇ The broken may find healing in the rediscovery of the world of their Elders' -- by reconnecting with the subliminal roots of their culture.
- ◇ We -- who are white and who have traveled in their homeland -- have a window on that culture. We see something -- very close up -- on how it

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works -- or how it worked. I call it the technology of physical communication and transportation -- the canoe routes. (How did they put those routes together? How were the routes used? Who used them? Those routes are one of the languages of that economy.)

◇ Understanding this culture -- how it works -- how it relates to its environment -- may well be instrumental to our culture's survival.

REALLY!

B. WHAT I DID

Now I want to say something about what I DID.

In 1953 my Daddy sent me to Temagami to learn how to paddle a canoe. I learned.

In those days every group (We called them SECTIONS.) had a native guide. Usually that was someone from Mattawa, Ontario. The day came eventually when we had to learn to do without them, generally. But I was around them long enough to worship the ground they walked upon. Any one of those guys could go into the Bush with only an ax, any time of year, and do just fine.

At first I was simply mesmerized by their skill. Only in time did I come to understand that I was looking at a culture that was different from mine. And I knew I wanted to know more of it.

And eventually I got to THE BAY -- James Bay -- and ran The Albany, At-tawapiskat (twice) and The Eastmain.

Then I quit -- but not before promising I would return. I wanted to spend some time on a longer visit and live amongst the people I so admired. And so I retired from my work in the States. And, since 2002 I have been living in Moose Factory, Ontario.

C. AFTER 40 YEARS, WHAT'S UP?

One thing is that I am looking at the materials I accumulated in a very different way. Those materials included and include:

◇ Slides/Pictures/Photographs -- basically just to share with family and friends.

◇ Trip Reports -- Notes on the actual location and condition of the route -- stuff that would be helpful the next time I (or another) was on that route -- the information we share.

◇ Journals -- what I did -- when -- why -- small talk -- diary.

And all of my stuff has gone or will be going to Trent University's Archives.

**KEEP YOUR STUFF! An Ode To The Eastmain
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What I didn't realize then was that the people 20 or so years older than me are the generation that came OUT of the Bush. Their children -- people my age -- rarely have the same skills. They have had to learn to adapt -- for a variety of reasons -- Residential Schools being one of the most obvious experiences marking the transitions.

But the routes were falling into disuse by the 1970's. Those who worked and lived in the Bush often traveled by air. It was cost effective, if they were running trap lines.

James Cheechoo (who is the brother, I think, of Lawrence, whom I just mentioned) is doing a remarkable project with his son, Clayton.

Together they are going over large scale maps -- that are available now. The family traditionally lived in and worked the land roughly from about the Village of Eastmain to roughly the Highway that now crosses The Eastmain -- on the south side of The River. James is pointing out places he remembers, and why: They camped there in the spring for the Goose Hunt; fishing was good there; that's where they usually made winter camp. Stuff like that.

All of this had been hard wired in James' head. This is the first time in his life, I am told, that he has looked at a map of his family's territory. It all was in the head.

Now there will be something tangible for future generations to look at -- and learn from.A family lived there. This is what they did. And this is where they did it -- the stuff you start to look at intently when you are trying to understand people now long gone.

And you and I have that stuff -- on our marked maps, in our journals and trip reports, and in our pictures and slides. The materials you and I accumulate as we trip in the wilderness are the raw data for future research into a culture that once was. Our stuff is priceless. Any description of those routes is the raw data that can be used to explicate how they lived.

**4. NOTES, JOURNALS, PICTURES & REFLECTIONS
USING THE DATA**

These years later ... here are some of the things I have pondered.... And, now, maybe I'm just beginning to learn about the trip down The Eastmain I took in 1973.

Talking Falls is something I began to think about even before I took the trip.

Somewhere in the literature, Talking Falls is referenced. (Maybe in AP Lowe.) The story was that families went into the Bush from Eastmain in the

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fall each year to their winter camping grounds. One extended family camped near or at Talking Falls. However, that particular winter, the caribou did not migrate along their usual routes. Every single person died of starvation. (I was told recently that what threw things off was forest fire somewhere in the preceding summer.)

The story continues -- that you can still hear the voices of the departed family members at Talking Falls.

Now I get into the story. I had read this somewhere. I was pondering the matter on our approach to Talking Falls. (My bowman insists I was asleep.) I DID hear an antiphonal quality to the sound of the Falls. I was entranced. The Falls were talking. Or the Spirits were. I was in the midst of a conversation! Which promptly changed as we went over a ledge, swamped, rolled, and played with an eddy -- actually two eddies: one that was going around and around and another that was going up and down -- not all that many feet above the actual Falls. My bowman still remembers that ledge. I remember the Falls. I keep asking around: does anyone have any stories -- more stories -- about those Falls?

The animals we saw on the trip on The Eastmain in 1973, and which I mentioned in my journal included:

- ◇ An Osprey or hawk or eagle.
- ◇ A beaver.
- ◇ An Otter.

I already had that sense of wonder when I saw them. It was more than curiosity. All of us in the group shared a sense of wonder at being in a place more remote than any place we had ever known. There was a beauty to it. And we knew that this was not our world -- however much we admired it or wanted to be part of it

Since then, there are folks who would tell me that, in fact, the Spirits were presenting themselves: that each of these experiences was a view given into a more basic reality -- something deeper, more profound. We get close to this sometimes in our own fantasy literature. In Neil Gaiman's AN-ANSI BOYS, all you have to do is talk to a spider and one of that god's sons will then show up.

Now, before I dismiss this kind of talk out of hand, I remember a story Clayton told me about his Dad, James. James was very young, ten or eleven. His Daddy had been teaching him all along of course, about finding your way through the bush. It had to do allowing everything -- *everything* -- around you seep into your mind. (There actually is a description of this kind of process, sort of, in one of Christopher Paolini's books. Also, the pivotal scene in William Faulkner's THE BEAR comes to mind.) The lad remembered what he had learned, one day, when a snow squall hit when he was miles away from camp. Everything was WHITE. And he had learned to observe sufficiently to get home easily.

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PRESENTATION TO WILDERNESS CANOE SYMPOSIUM, 4 FEB 06.

It's a different head working here. It's a different culture. And it works. You and I would be dead meat.

So, some reasonable questions:

- ◇ How do we -- who are white -- deal with the mystery of nature, or of the world around us?
 - ◇ Or do we have no sense of mystery?
 - ◇ And if we don't, are we any better off?
- ◇ And, whatever sense of mystery we do have, how is that like or unlike the Cree's?
 - ◇ Or, how can we understand and be conversant with their sense of mystery? (I believe that to have been instrumental to their survival in the Bush, and it may have a lot to do with our own survival, as well.)

CONGLOMERATE GORGE is what you see when you take the James Bay Highway and cross over The Eastmain River -- on the bridge that was being built when we went through in 1973. It is now tamed. The water is gone. And the Spirit sleeps.

At the foot of Conglomerate Gorge (over which you pass on the bridge) the three mile portage comes out of the Bush at two places. One landing is for high water when the current is too dangerous. The other -- which we took -- was for low water. You saved a few steps and put in right after the rough water -- and I do mean rough.

Also, at the foot of that Gorge -- and right off the end of that (shorter) portage -- is a mega eddy. One of our canoes headed into it at just the wrong angle and rolled over. The guys got their stuff together and got out ok. Wet but ok. (Each of them remembers that moment today as though it happened yesterday morning. Interesting, that 33 years later each of them should call me to tell me just that.)

A few weeks ago I was talking with James Cheechoo. He told me there was a practice -- a tradition: They always threw some tobacco on the The River at just that place -- to pacify that eddy. EVERYBODY knew all about that eddy.

Wouldn't you know it..... One of the guys in the canoe that rolled, was a smoker. Maybe not a very serious smoker. But serious enough to buy a lot of tobacco for the trip. (You know how it is when you're sixteen. There are just SOME things you just HAVE to do....) And he FORGOT his tobacco. Left it behind at the last minute -- somehow. And the eddy didn't like that -- at all.

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PRESENTATION TO WILDERNESS CANOE SYMPOSIUM, 4 FEB 06.

FINALLY....

So, I'm just learning -- about some of the places I have been.

So, if I'm here basically to urge two activities on anyone who paddles in the wilderness:

◇ WORK to understand the cultures of the people whose land you traverse. (And it IS work.) But we can do the work. And we are beneficiaries.
◇ Save your stuff! It's priceless -- to you and to others you will never meet -- but who will remember you. Mine is going to Trent University in Peterborough -- for now. Maybe the Canoe Museum there will be able to take stuff some day. In time there will be a veritable industry of going through the materials you and I save from our trips (marked maps, notes of all kinds, slides & pictures.) Folks will study the canoeists' observations the better to understand how/where/why the Natives were able to do what they did.

I guess I left my heart somewhere in The Eastmain years ago -- and have come to understand that more recently.

I am comforted by the thought that:

- ◇ Some day people will take the old routes again.
- ◇ Some day the water will be free, again.
- ◇ Maybe not in my life time. Maybe not in yours.
- ◇ But IT will happen.
- ◇ The spirit never dies.
- ◇ It only sleeps -- for a while.

Some day we will be at one with the world about us. And then we will be healed.

I hope.

thank you.