

Portage Out Of The Blondeau

From Peter Kazaks Book (1981)

We kept going past the burned-out district and began to look for the portage to the chain of small lakes and portages that would take us over the height of land to Wollaston Lake. People who had canoed there in the previous five years (this is 1981) had told George about a log house that marked the start of the route. After considerable searching we found a caved-in log house in a bay on the west side of the Blondeau. Two centuries earlier, when portages had heavier use, David Thompson perhaps found them more easily. Native guides would certainly have been of great help then.

Two-thirds of a mile was rather long for our first portage but a good firm path made it relatively easy, and then a light cooling rain began to fall too.

Most of the portages that fifth day were short, and many routes were easy to find – wide cuts cleared for snow tractors that supplied the native villages in winter. We traversed nine portages totalling about four miles. The longest was a killer, not because it was one and a quarter miles long, but because one fifth of it was through bog.

We ended the fifth day on the east shore of Compulsion Bay

Sigurd Olson (1957 account)

July 24: We only found the Swan river after going up a bay that led to a stagnant creek where the spruce and jack pine had criss-crossed themselves into a maze at points where the banks were undermined. The water at this end of the lake is brownish, less clear, and warmer. Pulling the canoes up the first of the Swan rapids tomorrow

July 25: We have come up the Swan river for 10 miles, then 2 miles on Swan Lake and are camped on a point on the east side of the gut between the south and north parts of the lake. It has taken us from 7:45 this morning until 4:30 this afternoon. There have been seven portages, four of them of about half a mile, the last one about three quarters and the first two quite short. All but the last were easy to find and all were well traveled as this river is still the main highway between Wollaston and Reindeer Lakes just as it was before David Thompson first came this way in 1796. He called it Lily river for the white plants, shaped like Calla Lilies but smaller, that line the banks.

The portages start in a moss bog where the track forms a deep, wet rut and end the same way. The centre generally over a ridge, is dry and comfortable, the moss orange, red and green with signs and sometimes tracks of moose, caribou and timber wolf. The exertion, exercise, often hard work, and wet shoes; the solitude under a canoe on a portage, the companionship of a partner in the canoe and the community of the campsite make these good days. Omond, quoting his Mother, described them as days that "take the wrinkles out of the soul." Tomorrow we go up the Blondeau River.

July 26, Blondeau River:

We have traveled two miles on Swan Lake to the mouth of the Blondeau River and up the Blondeau to the beginning of the portage to the lakes that lead to Middle Lake.

The Blondeau is a winding river with steep grassy banks, that flows at one-half to three-quarters of a mile per hour. We have paddled against this current, or portaged around its rapids, since about 7:40 a.m., arriving at our campsite at 6 p.m.

Both portages were good ones, the second was longer and over an esker (a sandy ridge of about 70 feet) covered with jackpine but no underbrush—something like a well-kept picnic ground.

We pulled over beaver dams, forced the canoes around hair-pin turns, dodged rocks that lurked below the surface, ready to embarrass the unwary bowman, saw moose tracks on the reedy banks, ate a hasty lunch harassed by mosquitoes and finally settled down comfortably on sandy gravel and moss amid jack pines beside an abandoned log warehouse.

Saturday, July 27, Wollaston Lake, After 12 Miles:

This has been what Tyler calls one of our shorter days. We woke up at 5:30 in a shower brought on by an east wind that stayed with us all day, blowing away flies and bringing clouds to screen us from the sun. By seven o'clock we had eaten breakfast, broken camp and started on the first of nine portages that took us through eight small lakes, over the height of land separating the Hudson Bay drainage from the Arctic and into Wollaston Lake, Compulsion Bay.

The lakes, with the exception of Middle Lake, have been small and the portages, several of them Winter caterpillar tractor roads, easy to find. All of them have started in boggy, mossy, swamp, gone over a gravelly ridge, sometimes with a boggy area in between, and ended in a like swamp at the far end. Two have been close to a mile long and all of them hard work under the canoe. Tyler and Eric have each sunk above the knees in the wet moss. All feet were wet, all shoulders sore when we came over a ridge and saw the broad, clean, bug-free, rocky shore expanse of Wollaston ringed by blue hills at 4 o'clock. An hour's paddling (almost drifting) on course with the wind and we were at a comfortable campsite, pitching tents, eating supper, telling stories and fishing, just as if we had arrived at the portage by car and come over by motor boat. David Thompson, with Indians to carry his canoe, could not have felt better. After a full week we are getting into the swing of it again.

Bill Layman 2002

June 22nd / 23rd Anyway, at about 10 we got to the Swan. We moved up to the bottom of the first major marked rapid on the 1:50,000 scale topographical map, paddling almost all of the way. We had a quick lunch of fresh bannock, tea, and curried potato soup... ah, thank you Bear Creek.

After lunch we lined up the rapid. It went really well as lots there is enough water that we could pull over everything. The Swan is as pretty as her namesake. It is on average 25 to 50 meters wide (except for a few lake like expansions). The banks are solid with black spruce and grass. At the 8 places we had to line, the river has steep about 3 to 4 meter drops. Each drop is littered with boulders and lining is a chore due to the slippery rocks. The banks of each of these rapids are lined with huge stately white birch that branch out over the river. This isn't a place where the lining is bad due to alders and willows. In fact you are as often as not 30 feet from shore. All together great fun even if we both got the requisite number of bashed shins and twisted ankles. Worst of all was the periodic up to your chest surprise as you walked into a huge hole. We made great time and we are now on the banks of Swan Lake at a narrows. The entire south shore has been burned but for the tiny little spot where we are set up camp. According to some notes I got from Ric Drediger, Eric Morse camped at this very spot. As no doubt did countless hundreds of Dene. And perhaps even Paddy, Kosdaw and Thompson. More recently perhaps Nora Lueken and Fred Darbyshire sat in this very spot and thought of what their winter's trapping on Close Lake might fetch, when they got back to Big River. The thought of these folks coming up here in huge wood and canvas canoes with a winter's supply of material and food puts our trip in perspective.

Lots of Cree trapped this far north coming in each winter from La Ronge or Southend or Stanley Mission. The late Bart Dzeylion knew some of them.

(From "The Dene Elder's Project" edited by Lynda Holland) "I know the Cree guys' names. They were William McKay, Jimmie McKay, Miles Ratt and his father Joseph Ratt, Joe Ratt, Sedley Clarke, William Clarke, Thomas Clarke, George Clarke, and Alec Clarke, Tommy Clarke's old man. They all moved here (Wollaston Lake)" Wouldn't it have been something to show up here on Swan bake in the thirties and find a bunch of your friends.

June 24th / 25th Today, in spite of all I had read about the difficulty of this section of the route, was fantastic. We have hit the Blondeau at a perfect water level, I think. In spite of having to fight a HUGE north wind to get off of Swan Lake (two miles took over an hour!) we are now about 2 1/2 miles from the portage passed the old fur trade post where we leave the Blondeau. Other notes made me think we were in for a very tough day. I feared lots of carrying and dragging up shoal rapids. We only carried once and it was mandatory at any water level. The notes I have called it "bouldery," but it is excellent, and largely over dry sandy ground. This, and dragging up over one beaver dam and cutting two sweepers were all we

had to do all day. It was tough paddling, as the current is quite aggressive. Combined with the river turning back on itself at corner after corner it was a day of pry pry pry pry draw draw draw draw. But we are now camped on a bug free esker at river's edge, having stopped at 4:00. The place was just too lovely to pass by.

The river has been narrow, deep and lovely all day.. A fringe of grass fronts a backdrop of black spruce. There are lots of alders hanging out over the water. The banks are about two feet high and it makes for hard getting in and out of the canoe as they are muddy, as is the bottom. But we only got out of the canoe once for lunch and once to portage.

Where we are camped now, we have a little sand/mud beach so unloading was a snap. We both had a swim and it was great. In spite of this being perfect moose country, we only saw one, a bull in full velvet and very close. I had put my camera away and predicted it would appear. It did, within 20 minutes. We also saw one otter at the bottom of the rapids we portaged.

All day I thought of the countless hundred of Dene and Cree and the handful of white folk that have been through here. It really is quite overpowering to think that David Thompson with Paddy and Kosdaw went right past this point where I am sitting. Or what of Fred Darbyshire and his wife of about 4 years, Nora Lueken? Perhaps they camped in this same spot. It was her first big trip into the north, I think. I can almost hear Fred telling her how lovely Close Lake will be. How they will spend the winter in a snug cabin. How the fur will be thick. How they will feast on bannock and moose meat and tea. How jumbo white-fish will fill their nets. And if Lynda and I feel even half of what they felt for this land and each other we are blessed. So many more days stretch in front of me 'til trip's end. I am happy for them all to come. So many adventures and camp spots like this one. So many nights to share with Lynda. Such a wonderful life this life of wandering irresponsibility.

Day #17 June 25th, 2002: So we only made six miles today. And it was a long hard day at that. We got a bit of a late start, getting up at 7:00. The section of the river from where we camped to the portage off the Blondeau is gorgeous. With a large unburned esker on our right, we wound our way up toward the old HBC trading post. We had to line up five tiny rapids. It was very easy, but time consuming. Finding the point where the portage leads from the Blondeau to the first of the four small unnamed lakes before Middle Lake was also easy. Finding the portage was a chore that took about 45 minutes of wandering about before we were sure we had it. We cleaned it up a lot, and added lots of flagging, so it should be much easier to find now. At the far end, I made a claim post like I did in my mining exploration days and left the following note: Trail Improvements by Layman and O'Rourke June 25 2002).

Did I mention that we heard there is a couple from Regina going this way and then on to Black Lake via the Fond du Lac? They should have a much easier time finding the trail. We left a note for them in a bag at our last camp, telling them we were ahead. We recommended that they camp on the spot we used last night as it was so gorgeous. We made a quick lunch at the end of the first portage and I jumped into the lake, clothes and all, it was that hot. When we woke in the morning I thought it was going to be cool and overcast, but when we got up, we realized that it was a smoke haze from all the fires in the area.

The portages from Lake 1 to Lake 2 and from Lake 2 to Lake 3 were great, short and easy to find. The one from Lake 3 to Lake 4 was a real pain. Partly our fault, as the trail takes a hard 90 degree right turn at the point as you enter what appears to be a huge muskeg. I missed it completely and knew immediately that I was off of the trail. So where's the problem? Well, as I am wont to do, I kept going and started zig zagging to right and left to try and cut into it again. After a hundred meters we had to drop the packs and re-scout. After about 20 minutes, we were back on track but I am still convinced that there has to be, or should be, a much more direct portage. What should have been about 250 meters turned into about 500 meters. The last portage and the next two we will do are really winter-roads. This road we are camped on now has trees about six to eight feet high. Down the center there is a trail that is kept open by winter ski-doo traffic.

These roads were originally opened by Svein Sigfusson in 1944. A big time commercial fishing and freighting operator, Svein had crews as large as 100 men working at any given time on Reindeer Lake. In his book Sigfusson's Ice Roads he says that there were as many as 500 men in a typical winter fishing

Reindeer Lake. Mostly Icelanders from southern Manitoba, they fished for trout and whitefish. Fish was in great demand due to war time shortages of beef, and Reindeer and Wollaston had lots of fish. Svein's crews freighted the fish by cat swing to the rail head at Flin Flon and he pioneered most of the winter roads into northern Saskatchewan and Manitoba and into Ontario. They also freighted supplies for the HBC and other trading outfits all though the north. To think we are camped on one of his roads!

How did he find the route into Wollaston when the recently elected CCF asked him to make a road? The same way David Thompspon did in 1796. He asked a local. This time it was a Cree, Frank Cook, who snowshoed the trail for him. And, just for the record, the CCF, bless their bleeding hearts, paid him about 1/5 of what his expenses were. Gotta' love those leftist governments. In any case he cleaned up on the fishing but had little good to say about the CCF.

Today at the portage from the Blondeau we saw the remains of the HBC outpost camp supplied from Brochet. This was set up to trade with the Dene who now live in Wollaston. (From " The Dene Elder's Project" edited by Lynda Holland. To be published in early 2003)

Louis Benoanie told me one time when he was a little boy, his father, Jerome Benoanie, helped the store manager from Swan River. Louis was with him too. The store manager asked Louis' dad to help him take supplies and groceries to Indian Village in Compulsion Bay with two dog teams. When they got there, no one was there. Everyone had gone to live in Waterbury (Lake). So they went there and found about ten houses." Later he says, " The manager was a good guy because he helped the people.. He knew it was a long way to Brochet to buy supplies so he would go look for the people. This always happened after freeze-up, just before Christmas." And we are camped where Jerome's dog teams traveled. So much history along this route. We should see Wollaston after another long hard day tomorrow. At the latest the day after next. This Swan Blondeau route is fantastic. I'm outta' here. I gotta' get some sleep.

Day #18 Wednesday June 26, 2002: Wow! Some day. It was hard times ten. But now, sitting under the kitchen tarp on one of the nicest little sand micro beaches I have ever seen, it is easy to forget the all-day slug. We made it to Wollaston about 6:00, having started about 8:30. The portage where we camped was long, but excellent walking. Dry and an easy road. On the way back for our second load, I found the remains of an old freight sleigh, a huge contraption that must have failed to the point of abandonment.

So many memories on this trail. The cat "skinner" working a 12 hour shift through the night. The cook making a pie in the kitchen sleigh, like the caboose on a train. The "Boss" sleeping until his shift on the cat. The "brakie" (gopher) doing all manner of odd jobs and hoping like hell that he can get a shot at driving the cat. "Maybe next year I'll get a shot at being a skinner, if I can impress the "Old Man.". And the stories and the celebrations at the rail head at the Flin Flon Hotel. Ollie, or Fritz or Hans swearing, "There's no damn way I'm freighting next year. Christ, if I keep this up, I'll drown with that god damn cat. When she went through on Reindeer River this year, I thought I was a goner. But then Svein remembered the damn big advance I had from him. He pulled me out so fast my socks hardly got wet." Story after story and round after round. And you know that they always went back. Once you're bit by the north, really bit, there's no place left for you. These men found that out and I found it out.

We opted to go to the south to Cairns Lake even though most people, I think, go to the north and west at Middle Lake. We had some hard lining-dragging between Middle Lake and Tighe Lake and even harder dragging into Cairns Lake. After some scouting about we found the portage to Wollaston. Wet and boggy all the way. To make it worse, the Wollaston guys don't seem to go this way often. So we had a hell of a time keeping to the trail toward the north Wollaston side. We did a lot of extra walking, and it was over horrible sucking bog and through thick tangled alders, black spruce and larch. We didn't find the real trail at this side until we were doing our last carry across. It was more fluke than good planning that we found it at all. I dropped the canoe at the 950 meter mark (I had the GPS running) and said something like: "Well I don't have a freaking sniff of a clue where those \$%^&# Dene hunters went from here. Lets just head to the north west along this bog." Tom took the canoe and so I could lead a line with my compass. Within a hundred paces, I was right on the trail. Ain't life like that.

We got onto the big lake and were looking for anywhere to stop. But it was all bog shore line fronted by huge boulders that wouldn't let you within a hundred meters. We paddled about an hour and this micro beach appeared, just like a gift from heaven.