

THE ALLAGASH

I was seven years old when I soloed in my father's canoe. A few years after the river went up quite fast and high and many boats were lost. We managed to save at least a couple. One owner came and got his back but we had at least one in fairly good shape and we used it nearly every day. Dad was a first class canoeman and he gave us quite a few good hints how to handle a canoe with the pole. In those days the outboard motor was not invented. We would paddle down river and come back pushing our canoe along the shore. We could travel practically as fast that way as a man could walk.

When I came back to Maine, my health a bit shattered by a nervous breakdown, the outdoor was my best medicine. The healing woods as I have read in a book were for me and my past experience as a lumberjack and a scout made it natural for me to feel comfortable in the woods and on the water.

When I came to St. John, Me. near Fort Kent, I borrowed a canoe and paddle down from Allagash to St. John one fine September morning. Soon after Larry Pelletier, a friend from Ellsworth gave me a small canoe that I traded for a bigger one; a Jackson 20 footer fiberglass. I put a bracket on it and bought a six horse outboard motor. Early one spring just after the Allagash was ice free I motored up river from Two Brook to the Falls. I had never seen the Allagash Falls before. Was I impressed? The river was high and clean. The Falls were silver white. The St. John River has darker water than the Allagash and at Grand Falls the water has a creamy color. And the roar of the river as it rushed down nearly fifty feet was some thing special. I would have bet anything that the ground was shaking. But I noticed that the water in little holes on the ledges near the Falls was perfectly calm. So the ground was not shaking but the air sure was vibrating. That must have been around 1969.

In 1964, my old friend game warden Leonard Pelletier from St. Francis took me to his camp about three miles above Michaud Farm. The truck road did not reach that far but with a four wheel-drive we could go as far as a few yards from Finley Bogan at the foot of Michaud Farm. We put the canoe in the water and we motored by the old farm. There was nobody there but the old house was still standing and I took a picture of it which I treasure. We motored up to the game warden's camp and was I surprised to see half a dozen cows near by. A little below Michaud Farm on the opposite side of the river Henry Taylor owned the old Mose's Farm. In the summer he would keep his cattle across the river at Michaud Farm and saved the hay around his barn to feed them during the winter.

About half a mile above the game warden's camp on the left hand side of the river going up, was the site of the old Cunliffe Depot. The buildings were all gone but there I could see an old steam log hauler and the rusty remains of an old gasoline tractor. As I was standing near the camp and thinking of all the old timers who had spent a good part of their life working in the woods around there and on the log drive on the river. My grandfather had been in charge of lumbering operation on Ramzey Brook and so did my father after him. My uncle Ben had left the old steam log hauler where I still could see it standing. Then Leonard Pelletier told me I was standing on somebody. When I asked what he meant, he told me about old Joe McKeel, the caretaker of the depot who had died there before the turn of the century. He had no known relatives, so they did not take the trouble to take him down river to a graveyard but buried him on the bank of his beloved river. They had no board to make a box for him so they put him in two empty pork barrels face to face and put him in the ground where he still sleeps waiting for judgement come.

Coming back home we brought back a couple of bushels of the best fiddleheads that I have seen. In 1950 Jean Bosse the game warden at St. Pamphile had given me a ride to Churchill Dam. There were still quite a few buildings there and a young man was living there with his family. At Clayton Lake, Louis Paquet was dead but his widow still lived there and was the post mistress. Edouard Lacroix had sold all he had around there to Irwing who was not working in Maine except on Little Black River but the road from Lake Frontiere to Churchill Dam was still in good condition. Not long after the game warden took me to Umsaskus Lake about ten miles down river from Churchill Dam and on Long Lake to the old dam at the foot of it. The old dam was still holding but in very poor shape. There was no more log drives on the Allagash, then and nobody cared. Just a few years after that it was washed out and so did the old Churchill Dam. The latter was rebuilt later, to keep the water level practically decent for the canoeists. But the old Long Lake Dam was gone forever. It had cost \$35,000.00 dollars in 1902.

The Mose's Farm when I first saw it was a clearing about a quarter of a mile across along the river but years back it was much bigger. The Cunliffe Tote Road was coming up along the left hand side of the Allagash River to the Farm and then up to the Depot a short distance up river. At the lower end of the farm there was a barn and one year two men were coming back from home where they had spent the Christmas Holidays. It was bitterly cold, they were using hard drinks to keep warm but it did not work and they could not make it to the house. They tried to sleep in the barn without much comfort so one of the two decided to try and reach the house maybe a mile further. He made it but the other felt that he could

not, so he stayed and when his friend came back the next morning, he found him frozen to death. There used to be a sheer drop of fifteen feet in the Falls, now no more. The river comes down at an angle among big boulders. One year, the logs formed a jam in the Falls and they had to clear the river with dynamite. They succeeded but they broke most of the logs and made them useless. On the drive the men were working in bateaux but the supplies were floated down on a scow. At the Falls the scow was put on rollers and hauled down by the men. One spring one of the men got his leg caught under one roller. Everybody was pulling and yelling so that most of them did not realize what was going on and the man was killed.

The first time I saw Chamberlain Lake I had driven from Fort Kent to Ashland on an old woods road to the bridge between Telos and Chamberlain Lake. We slept at the landing near the bridge but were not allowed to build a fire. The next morning we motored to Lock Dam, the lake was as calm as a mirror. We had a little head wind on Eagle but not enough to bother. We came to Ziegler Camp site and Adrien Michaud was there with his wife. He had been fishing and as usual was lucky. The next morning we went fishing with him and we caught a three pound togue. Adrien caught a few nice big white fish and we had some for lunch. We left after lunch for Churchill Dam planning to come back to that camp site for the night but I did not feel good and decided to stay at the dam for the night. The next day Mr. Speed, the ranger, was going to Bangor so he took us back to our car and we came home.

The next year I made the complete river trip 98 miles from Telos Landing to Allagash Village. Fr. Gilman Chaloult was in one canoe and I had the other. We had Mr. and Mrs. Bob Garrity from North East Harbour, Me., with us. Another year we had two sisters of Mercy from Presque Isle with us. We were three priests in three canoes. Msgr. Chaloult in one with one of the sisters, I had the other sister in my canoe and Fr. Leopold Nicknair was in a smaller canoe with his nephew. It was quite a thrill when we came down the Chase Carry Rapids on high water. We all shipped water and one canoe was swamped but the Reverend Sisters managed to stay dry. On the trip we averaged about 25 miles a day which is quite fast. We were on the water before nine in the morning and we took a break for lunch. On the water again until around five o'clock when we stopped for the night. Then we'd go ashore at one of the authorized camp sites, set our tents, get some wood and cook supper. Some of us would try their luck for fishing but most of us sat around the fire and relaxed, planning the next day. Only once did the raccoons keep us awake most of the night. Once a moose went by my tent but did not disturb us at all. Another time a bear stole a little butter but did not bother us a bit.

I would call the Allagash River the major tributary of the St. John River. It is a good hundred miles long. Starting at Allagash Lake in north western Maine in Piscataquis County it flows into Chamberlain Lake. Years back it would flow from there into Eagle Lake, then into Churchill Lake. Now they have made a dam at the outlet of Chamberlain Lake and a canal from Telos into Webster Lake and from there it flows into the east branch of the Penobscot River. But the canoeists carry over the dam into the Eagle Lake and from there into Churchill Lake, through Chase Carry Rapids into Umsaskus and Long Lake into the river again at the old dam at the foot of Long Lake. After 11 miles they reached the Round Pond, the last lake of Allagash.

From there you go through a series of white water and slow flowing stretches of water. At the mouth of Musquacook, you cross a few miles of dead water; quite a few miles down you reach Michaud Farm. A mile or so further down, you see what is left of Mose's Farm, come to the Falls and carry around them. Back on the river you pass the mouth of McKean Brook, Big Brook, shoot through the last serious rapid and in a few more miles you come to the mouth of this beautiful watercourse where it flows into the St. John River. On your trip you have gone around two or three dams and around the Falls, you have gone under a few bridges used by trucks hauling logs out to civilization. Likely you saw quite a few moose, some deer, a few foxes, maybe coyotes and with luck a bear or two. You had to protect your food from the appetite of the raccoons and bears at the camp sites. The trip takes about a week, lets you share in the peace and enjoy the beauty of God's Country.

Years back the river saw great activity in the winter when men came to cut and haul logs, thousands of them and in spring then they floated their logs down the mills. You still can see the clearings where those logs were piled near the river and where the camps were built like at the Depot of the American Realty Co. at the right near the inlet of Umsaskus Lake and above Michaud Farm on the right, the site of the old Cunliffe Depot.

Now the river is used exclusively for sports: fishing and canoeing. The State took over, made a dam at the foot of Churchill Lake to regulate the flow of the water to make it easier for the canoe to come through. There are quite a few very good camp sites along the river and on the shore of the Lakes. Half a dozen rangers see to it that you don't get into trouble and help you out if you do.

I like the beauty of the country, the song of the breeze in the pines and spruce trees, the music of the loons calling in the night, even the hooting of the owls on the ridges has a mellow peaceful effect on your nerves which no pill can give. The trip may be physically demanding, you have to sit in a canoe for hours but what you see going by will help you forget your

fatigue. You will have to provide for one or two rainy days, but a good rainsuit and waterproof tenting can make it fun. Even the black flies are not that bad if you did not forget your fly dope and know how to make your bed as comfortable as possible and food cooked on an open fire has a taste that makes you ask for more. The exercise and the good fresh air will help you keep your weight down in spite of the good food. You may fly in with your equipment but it is expensive.

You can drive in to Telos landing or to the bridge at the thoroughfare between Telos and Chamberlain. Bring a driver with you who will take you car back out and when you come to the mouth of the river, go to the little filling station and call home to have somebody come get you. There is some dangers but I have made the trip for maybe twenty times and never had major difficulties.

Thank God I never swamped or upset my canoe. Some do but it is not hard to avoid those mishaps. On the lakes you may be wind bound, but then you go ashore and wait a little while. Toward the evening as a rule the wind dies down and you can proceed. An early start in the morning is real wise. As a rule the wind is not so strong in the morning as it is in the afternoon. Only canoes are allowed on the river but on some you can use a little outboard motor that will help you enjoy the trip if you are not so young. I have taken nuns and old ladies down the Allagash and they enjoyed themselves very much and made profits physically and even spiritually.

Let me tell you one of my many trips down the charming river. Sister Theresa and Sister Claire, Sisters of Mercy from Presqu' Isle had told me many times that they were interested in the Allagash trip. So early in June 1979 we met them in Ashland, Msgr. Gilman Chaloult was with us and also Fr. Leopold Nicknair pastor of Fort Kent, Me. Msgr. Chaloult had been pastor in Presqu' Isle and the good sisters knew him well. Also Msgr. has canoed the Allagash more times than I can tell. He is very prudent and was never heard to have swamped or upset a canoe. Fr. Nicknair had his nephew with him and that was a good help at the camp sites.

We had two small outboard motors but Fr. Nicknair did not have one; his canoe was only 15 feet long and would not have worked well with a six horse outboard. So I towed him part of the way and Msgr. Chaloult towed him too. It was early a Monday morning when we left Ashland and went to the bridge at the thoroughfare between Telos and Chamberlain Lakes. There is a ranger station at the bridge so we ate lunch, registered, loaded our canoes and were off. The wind was picking up when we came to the big bay at the mouth of Mud Brook. We had to get in the bay at least half way to avoid the roughest waves.

As I was towing Fr. Nicknair, he got a little wet from the spray. We stop at Ellis Brook and had in mind to camp there but the wind went down, so we decided to cross over to Lock Dam. We carried over the dam and went into Eagle Lake, kept going along the west shore to the place where two old locomotives have been left in the forest. There also we could see the ruins of the old tramway; an outfit that was used at the beginning of the century to carry logs from Eagle Lake into Chamberlain. From there they floated down the East Branch of the Penobscot to the sawmills in Bangor. At that spot, the distance between the two lakes is less than a mile. I don't know what kind of a motor they had for power but we still can see the big cable, the miniature track, the wheels and the cradles that carried the logs. It was not late in the afternoon so we kept going all the way across Eagle Lake to the last campsite on it near the thoroughfare. We were all very tired and we did not go fishing. A ranger invited us to a camp across the bay but we chose to sleep in our tents. He gave us a nice big white fish he had caught.

The next day we made it to Churchill Dam at the foot of the Lake. Below it there is a rapid, five or six miles long, very challenging because of the rocks and the speed of the current. The good sisters wished to go through. Usually I don't go through but put everything on the pickup available and have the ranger bring us at the foot of the rapid. The fee is only \$10.00 and those rapids are a real gamble. Usually the water is not deep and the rocks so wet from the waves that it is hard to see them. Many canoes have been broken there. So we put our baggages on the pickup, kept only our paddles and came through. When the water is not high a set pole is very handy but that time the water was real high: 3 gates open and spilling over. Boy, was it fast and wild. I went the first, shipped some water but not too much, thank God. The two other canoes came after, they made it to but took water, the smaller canoe had to stop along the way to bail out. We picked our baggage at the bridge at the foot of the rapid and kept going. We crossed Umsaskus, said hello to my friend the ranger (Cote) before we went under the bridge and into the thoroughfare down to Long Lake where we camped.

By that time the good sisters had tuned up and could take care of their tent and equipment without help. We had a beautiful campsite on the left shore on a low grassy elevation near the lake with a small brook near by for fresh water. The next day, we came to the old Long Lake dam. It is now rotten and much of it is washed out. Some shoot it down but there are nails under water and many canoes are hurt in the process. Some choose to carry every thing around but that is quite a chore. Msgr. Chaloult suggested that we rope the canoes down. Tie a rope to both ends of the canoe, then two men direct the thing down, load and all. We do it through the far

sluice. It takes less than 15 minutes and saves a lot of work. That day reached Round Pond and we camped there.

The pond was quite rough when we came to it but in a short time it was as calm like a mirror. The next day we came down the rifts at the foot of it, through the Musquacook dead waters over five miles long and all the way down to the Falls where we camped for the night. We were less than 15 miles from the end of our trip. We still had quite a few stretches of white water, the most challenging being the two Brooks Rapid which is quite steep and can be real dangerous at a certain pitch of water. A few canoes have been broken there. A trip like that is unforgettable. In so far as I know it was the first time that men have canoed the Allagash.

Canoeing can be dangerous and always a challenge but a few simple rules make it quite safe and much, much fun. If you have to walk in your canoe, do it in the middle of it. It is still better if doing so you can lean down and hold the gunnels on both sides. Take care in loading your canoe, a little heavier in the back but just a little. If the load is too heavy in front, the skiff will swing the moment you hit a rock. If it is rough on the water, don't stand, sit or better kneel on the floor. It keeps your center of gravity low and makes it harder to upset. Always keep your canoe in line with the

current, if you hit anything you have a good chance to go right over it. It happened to me once in Two Brooks Rapid. I took it on the right side and I knew the channel was on the left. By the time I realized where I

we were in the rapid. So I kept the canoe in line with the current. and Cyr from Caribou was with me. He yelled: "ROCK", I had seen it but could see no way around it. There were three rocks side by side. I sure was scared but keeping the canoe straight did it. The rock in the middle was round and smooth and we went right over it without accident. When reached the foot of the rapid, Roland turned around and said: "if you that again I wet my pants" I did not tell him but I think that I was too red to even do that.

in 1980, I was coming down with a party from Orono. We had slept at Ellis Brook, and when we reached Lock Dam the wind was picking up. I know that Chamberlain Lake can be so rough that very few can travel on it, and I had seen Eagle Lake in a very bad mood too. But I did not realize the situation and we made it to Lock Dam well. Coming on the Eagle towards the old tram-way we got into trouble when we came passed Salisbury Island. I was towing five canoes and I did not dare go too far from the shore in case of an upset. But the wind was swinging the canoes the rocks. We had no choice but to go ashore and it was in a swamp. We

a nice place, we built a small fire in a safe place. It was real cool we had a lady with us. We had lunch and waited until the wind calmed around five o'clock in the afternoon and came to a good camp

ground for the night, Fires are not allowed outside the regular campsites but in an emergency, you bank on the mercy of the authorities.

My advice: “don’t stretch your luck too much.” At times the traffic is very heavy on the river and there is bound to have a few careless people but the rangers manage to keep the Waterway in top condition and their customers happy.

