

THE ST. JOHN RIVER

It would be hard to exaggerate the place this blessed river had in my life and in my family. As soon as the ice was out, Dad was busy on the river with the log drive, for at least a couple of months. It was always in , teresting to watch the log drivers set their sheer booms.

There was one opposite our home and when we wished to go across we had to go around it. The river was bordered by willow and alder thickets. These were full of birds and in late June, what a music we had for a lullabye when we would go to sleep with our windows open. In May and June, the fishing was real good and I saw many beautiful trout pulled out of clean water. All summer we went swimming and in the evening we would sit on the platform in the back of the house and watch the swallows playing over the water and occasionally drinking a drop of water in their flight.

In the Fall, when lumbering was slow, Dad would set traps for muskrats in late October and early November. He would take me with him, I imagine to let me see how it was done. Sometimes he would find a log tied to the shore and he would make a few marks on it with his axe and set his trap in the notch he had made. Curiosity brought the muskrats to the trap which was not covered or hidden at all. Other times, he would build a little cubby with a piece of carrot in the back of it and set his trap in the opening. With this last method, sometimes the rats would chew their leg off and get away. For weasels and minks he would set a little cubby, bait it with chicken innards and set the trap in the opening. He did not have to cover his trap. It seems that those animals were not too careful.

In late May and early June, we would go to the low places along the river and pick fiddle heads. In late August, we would go on the gravel bars at the head of some islands to pick sand cherries, they were big and juicy not very sweet. Never the less, they were a treat as candy was scarce in those days. I have said that *hen I was seven, Dad took me to church for my first communion in his beautiful Old Town canoe. Later on that summer, he let me use it solo. He was telling me from the shore how to do it. When I was around ten or twelve, we spent much time on the river canoeing or just crossing it.

Across from our home, there was a hill side covered with wild raspberries. We would spend days there my brother Willie and my sisters, Alma and Regina picking those for our own use and also for sale. That was in July and August. We must have picked close to a hundred pounds a summer. In winter we would skate on the ice or just slide from its banks to the middle of it. It was about $\frac{3}{4}$ mile wide at our place.

At Easter, Dad would get up at dawn and go to the river with a pail and bring back some Easter water. It had to be collected before sun rise, We would drink it and wash with it. Mom would save some in a bottle and it would be kept all summer. I would like to know the origin of that tradition but I never read anything about it and never heard that this practice existed anywhere else. Could it be that in the early time of the settlement as there was no priest to bless the water like it is done on Saturday before Easter, Our forefathers would get some from the brooks and rivers with the hope that the Good Lord blessed it on the anniversary of His Ressurrection? It had to be running water and had to be collected before sunrise.

It was a custom at our place to get up before sunrise and watch the sun dance on the horizon when it appeared above it. I did watch it and really it seemed to dance in jubilation celebrating the victory of its Creator. Everybody noticed when the river would freeze in late November or in early December. We knew that winter was with us. But what an exciting event when the ice went out in spring. What a display of power! Big cakes of ice a couple of feet thick would push one another, pile up stop for a moment and then move on plowing the banks and uprooting trees or breaking them. This took place in April. Nearly every spring the ice would jam up river and we had a few days of clear water after our ice was gone and the other had not come down yet.

After that had happened the log drive would start. Later on the lakes up river would clear up too and the river would go up quite a bit. All that time, it was not very warm along the river with all that cold water going by. We had to wait until June as a rule to have real warm weather. There was danger of frost and we had to be patient and wait before planting the garden. June was the month for gardening and it was not a surprise when we had a frost around the end of June.

A Solo flip down St. John River

The St. John River is not always ready for canoeing. One year, a scout troop from Rangeley Maine, tried to come down from Daaquam by canoe, but they had to drag their canoes all the way. It was in late June. They would have had a better chance in early June.

Sometimes, late August brings good rain fall and the river goes up to a very nice level. A couple of years ago, such a thing happened and I hitchhiked a ride with Cr Martin from Eagle Lake, who at the time was working in Daaquam as a fire warden. We left Eagle Lake, where he lived at six in the morning and took to the woods at Portage Lake, crossed the Allagash at the thoroughfare below Uinsaskus, passed Clayton Lake and reached the Moody Bridge, on the St. John River. We put the canoe in there, loaded it and I was off on my own.

The river was in real good shape for canoeing. I had a twenty foot Grunman with a six horse Johnson Outboard motor on a bracket, not

:h load in it too. In a short time I was at Nine Miles Bridge. I went uph the shallow places at Seven Islands and was ashore near the

priestly Bridge early in the afternoon. It had started to rain lightly. I put my baggage under cover and realizing that I was running out of gas, I took my can and hitch-hiked to St. Pamphile less than 20 miles from the river. My Brother Willie lived there. He invited me to a warm bed for the night, so we went back to the river to make sure that everything was safe for the night and I went back to his place for a good night sleep.

The next morning, he brought me back to my canoe and saw me off. I got stuck on a rock in the middle of the Big Black Rapids but made it without hurting my canoe and sipped not a drop of water. I stopped at the camp-ground at the mouth of Big Black River and saved a piece of the old warden's camp that was down. At Moroe Shed I stopped near a brook on the right where my Brother Willie had been lumbering years back in the thirties, I found a broken piece of a beer bottle and saved it for a souvenir.

Above the Big Black Rapids, at the foot of Priestly Rapid I had stopped at the Old Simmons Farm where Fred Deschaines had spent over thirty years hiding after he had gone AWOL in the First World War. He came out in the sixties and died in St. Francis, Me., where I buried him. I said a prayer for him and picked up a piece of his old fence. In 1934, I had spent one spring at my father's depot at Savage Brook below Long's Rapid. I stopped there but could not find a thing worth keeping. Passed by Castonguay Settlement, school house rapid, the mouth of the Pokwok Brook, the Ouellette Brook and came to the Fox Brook Campground where I stayed for the night.

Years back my father had a nice big lumber camp where the campsite is now. He and my brothers had worked hard with no success there. I was lonesome until I gathered some wood and made a fire. It is an old belief that in the woods if you have a fire you are not alone. It proved true to me that time. After I had my fire going, I watched it for a while, said my prayers and went to bed for a good night sleep.

The weather was nice. The next morning I got stuck on a rock coming down the Big Rapids but managed to get free without damage. A few miles down river I went through the Niger Brook Rapids without mishap, then through the Cross Rock, the Golden and the Rankin which can be quite wild at certain pitch of water. I landed at the campground at St. Francis and Kit Pelletier, a friend and outfitter had somebody take me and my baggage home to Fort Kent.

I had traveled nearly 100 miles in two days. I don't mind traveling alone on the rivers but it is by far more interesting when one has company to share the fun. I had not seen a thing along the river and had seen only one canoe going up the Big Black Rapids.