



Sullivan poles his canoe below Lake Itasca. (Beth Sullivan)

Solo Canoeing from Lake Itasca to La Crosse on the Mississippi

By John F. Sullivan

I have been interested in following the paths of early explorers and voyageurs since my youth, especially the canoe pathways to and from the Mississippi. I have traveled the water route from Lake Superior to the Mississippi via the Bois Brule and St. Croix rivers. I have paddled from Lake Michigan to the Mississippi over the historic Fox and Wisconsin rivers route. In the past decade, I have also paddled the length of six of the seven state-named tributaries that feed the Mississippi. This has given me the opportunity to see the country as early explorers would have seen it — from the seat of a canoe.

Last spring, I announced to my wife, Beth, that I would like to paddle the Mississippi from its source back to La Crosse, Wis., in June, a trip of about 650 miles. Beth is a partner

in these adventures — normally the chauffeur and chief of land support.

“How far do I have to drive you?” and “How long will you be gone?” was her response.

“Oh, about six hours to get to Lake Itasca and about another three weeks to paddle back to La Crosse,” I responded.

I could see that she was calculating in her head which room or rooms she could paint or remodel during my absence.

“Okay, that will work, when do you want to leave?”

Lake Itasca

We arrived at Lake Itasca State Park, in northern Minnesota, early Saturday afternoon, June 9. We walked along the tree-lined boardwalk in the hot sun and found the outlet of Lake

Itasca, where men, women and children were drawn to the river’s edge. Many waded in the lake’s outflow, while others tried to walk across the artificial rock dam. A group of women in yellow-and-white bicycling jerseys had just completed an ascent along the river from New Orleans.

I launched my canoe the next morning at 7:30, after packing it with 170 pounds of supplies, food and drinking water. I don’t do much cooking while paddling long distances. I pack freeze-dried dinners I can cook quickly in a pot of water, and a lot of nuts, cereal and raisins. I also enjoy local cafes when I can. No one was around, but the sounds of water rushing through large boulders were exhilarating. With an encouraging word from Beth I was off poling downstream toward La Crosse.

The clear, cold stream flows out of the park to the northwest. Snags, riffles, wetlands and conifer forests bordered the tiny stream. Low water exposed mud flats along the edges, and my canoe rubbed the sandy bottom in many places. Hundreds of dragonflies scattered from the reeds and flew erratically in the cool morning air as I passed. The river briefly entered a forested reach where deciduous and conifer canopies extended over the stream.

Later in the morning, the narrow river channel had become more marsh-like among large spruce and tamarack marshes. Tall emergent vegetation blocked the view of the horizon in some reaches. Fortunately the wild rice was at the floating-leaf stage and only slightly impeded my descent. These rice plants send up tall shoots mid-summer that quickly develop into robust plants that make navigating wild rice beds very difficult.

At this point of the story I should mention that I stand up and pole my canoe in water shallow enough to allow it. One great advantage to standing in a canoe is that the higher perspective provides a better view of the obstacles ahead and below the water surface.

I started poling with a small flat-bottomed duck skiff on the Horicon Marsh when I was in grade school, about 45 years ago. About 10 years ago, I returned to this mode of propulsion to ascend the Bois Brule River in northwest Wisconsin along the historic waterway that early voyageurs followed from Lake Superior to the St. Croix and ultimately the Mississippi River. I had tried several canoes before selecting a 16.5-foot Wenonah "Solo Plus." The "plus" meant it could be paddled solo or tandem. I took out the rear and front seats to provide extra room for dry bags and gear and never re-installed them. I love poling this boat.

You've no doubt heard that you should never stand up in a canoe. Well, that's generally true, especially if the canoe is not moving. However, the rush of moving water along the hull provides quite a bit of stability. Also, my 11-foot spruce pole provides



After the heavy rains of June, launching the canoe was difficult in the turbulent tailwater below four dams between Little Falls, above, and St. Cloud., Minn. (John Sullivan)

extra balance. I start out slow, pushing on the bottom, and slowly build up speed. I thrust the pole smoothly into the river just behind where I stand and on a slight angle. I have found that steering a canoe with a pole is actually easier than paddling, except when the bottom is soft and mucky. Then you have to push lightly and

Avoiding four- to five-foot standing waves immediately below the dam's open Tainter gates, I stayed near the river's edge where waves were smaller but still very turbulent.

retract the pole swiftly, or risk losing the pole or getting yanked out of the canoe.

By the way, I have never capsized a canoe, but I have had to jump out a few times when I lost my balance.

At Bemidji, some 60 river miles northeast of Lake Itasca, the river enters Lake Irving, then Lake Bemidji. At this point the river changes both direction and character. It flows in a more easterly direction, forming the top of its question mark path in Min-

nesota. At Lake Bemidji the marsh-like character of the river becomes a passageway between large glacial lakes. Lake Bemidji was followed by Wolf, Andrusia and Cass lakes, whose beautiful clear waters held many loons, and eagles and osprey perched on towering pines and hardwoods or soared overhead.

Below Cass Lake, the river again loses itself in a large wetland, and I became uncertain as to the correct path. After several dead ends, I found the channel, which eventually leads to the southwest corner of the largest lake on the Mississippi, Lake Winnibegoshish. This lake covers more than 100 square miles, more than twice the surface area of Lake Pepin. Heading for the outlet on the northeastern side meant a 10-mile open-water crossing with southeasterly winds churning up whitecaps. Instead I followed the shore, a longer journey but much safer. Some sources say the lake's Ojibwa name means "dirty water." I think a more appropriate name would be "windy by gosh."

The fifth day I was on a stretch of river that followed a confusing path through broad wetlands as it flows southeast towards Grand Rapids. Mosquitoes became more numerous, requiring me to wear a head net or insect repellent on shore. I camped at

Schoolcraft State Park on June 14. The next day, at Grand Rapids, I encountered two dams about two miles apart — Pokegama Lake and Blandin Paper Co. dams. A large sign above the first dam offered a free shuttle by calling the Minnesota Power and Light Company. I took the shuttle.

The marshes gave way to forested shorelines from Grand Rapids to Aitkin. The increased current from recent rains helped propel me downstream. In places, portions of banks and trees had sloughed off the hillsides and slid into the river, forming queer-looking islands. In some segments, tent caterpillars had defoliated the trees, leaving leafless canopies and green underbrush, a peculiar scene. The mosquitoes were even more troublesome, and I had to wear my head net while paddling on a few mornings, until the wind drove them away.

Heavy rains dumped several inches of water in my canoe while I camped at Palisade on June 17, then again at Aitkin on June 19. The river rose a few feet and flooded out low-lying areas. At a campground in Aitkin, I awoke to the sounds of emergency pumps at the city's wastewater treatment plant kicking in. The sounds of torrential rain on my thin rainfly were deafening, and worrying about being flooded out of my campsite made sleeping difficult. I broke camp during a break in the storm before dawn and got underway in about an hour in heavy rainfall. Inflowing streams and rivulets carried great quantities of water and sediment and boosted the Mississippi's flow.

Heavy mist and thunderous sounds of rushing water filled the air at my approach to Potlatch Dam, at Brainerd, on June 20. A narrow asphalt portage path on the dam's west bank led me to the swollen tailwater filled with huge logs and debris. The river rose and fell more than a foot in about a 10-second cycle, so I timed my shove-off for the peak in the river's stage. Avoiding four- to five-foot standing waves immediately below the dam's open Tainter gates, I stayed near the river's edge where waves were smaller but still very turbulent. I was glad to have a canoe cover. All potential campsites below



Some campsites, like this one at Baxter State Park, were idyllic, but mosquitoes were often fierce enough to require head nets. (John Sullivan)

the dam were under several feet of water, so I pulled out at the Baxter Campsite about six miles below Brainerd, which offered high ground, a picnic table and a beautiful view of the river at sunset.

Between Little Falls and St. Cloud, I portaged around four large dams and launched into very turbulent tailwater. At Blanchard Dam, which forms Zebulon Pike Lake, the portage over two abandoned railroad grades

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was especially difficult. A bike trail over one of the old railroad bridge crossings offered a spectacular misty view of the dam's roaring outflow and the river's foamy surface extending downstream for several hundred yards.

Paddling downstream in flood conditions is challenging, because the water runs a lot faster and carries more debris, including logs and whole trees. You have less time to react to obstructions and hazards ahead, and you need to be constantly

looking downriver for a safe route. Below the Little Falls Dam there was a great torrent of foaming, turbulent water. I shoved off the left descending bank and began paddling hard to try to steer the canoe away from a large overhanging willow tree. Unable to avoid it, I ran straight into the branches and ducked to avoid being thrown out of the canoe. Fortunately my speed and mass were enough to cut through the canopy of twigs and leaves.

Good people sometimes come along exactly when you need them. While portaging the Sartell Dam, in Sartell, a young man on a motorcycle, Steve Fabel, stopped to ask about my trip. An avid paddler himself, he could see that I was looking to put in below the dam and stopped to recommend a safer place a mile downstream. When he learned that I planned to run the Sauk Rapids a few miles farther on, he set off on his motorcycle to check them out. I relaxed along the river's edge for 30 minutes until he came back to recommend a route through the rapids. Then he called the Sartell dispatch and arranged permission for me to camp under the Second Street Bridge, since it was getting late and a run through the Sauk Rapids in the early evening would not be prudent. It's people like this who make my river trips so enjoyable.

Next morning, I ran the rapids. The run was about a quarter mile, and I did accumulate a few gallons of water, despite my canoe cover. The St. Cloud portage included a take-out in a beautiful riverside park along the east bank above the dam. However, the trail to the put-in below the dam was long and the descent back to the river was steep. I paid two local teenagers 20 dollars to carry my canoe down. We all agreed it was a good deal.

Metro River

Many paddlers in kayaks, canoes and even inner tubes joined me on my run to Anoka, two weeks into my journey. I pulled out on a partially flooded island above Anoka in the late afternoon and pitched my tent on a thick cover of nettles and grass. The mosquitoes were wicked as the evening approached but not as bad as their cousins above Little Falls.

I reached the Coon Rapids Dam Regional Park early on a Sunday morning. The take-out was at a landing with a large barricade at the ramp advising boaters the landing was closed due to unsafe river conditions. It didn't say anything about boaters who wanted to leave the river. Considerable sums of money have been spent to provide a bikeway and walkway across the dam and a large visitor center on the east side, but the park provides little signage for portaging and selecting a safe put-in spot, which was difficult due to steep shorelines below the dam. I finally found a storm sewer culvert, which offered a flat concrete surface to launch my canoe about a quarter-mile below the dam.

On my approach to St. Anthony Falls, in Minneapolis, I called the Army Corps of Engineers on my marine radio. After my third hail, they responded, saying that locks at St. Anthony Falls and Lock and Dam 1 were closed due to the high water. I asked if they provided portaging assistance or information for making portages around their closed dams. No, they did not. I had expected this and had made arrangements with my son John to help. He met me at a park near Nicollet Island in the early afternoon, with a huge hamburger, French fries and a large Diet Pepsi. He then

took me and my gear to Hidden Falls Park, in the river gorge about a mile below Lock and Dam 1. I was underway again by 2 p.m., heading toward St. Paul in a river filled with recreational boats.

Loud music filled the air as I approached Harriet Island, across from downtown St. Paul. Thousands of people in the park were enjoying a music festival in the bright afternoon sun, and lots of others were heading there by boat. I was concerned because even without heavy boat traffic the river below Harriet Island presents a hazardous passage through closely spaced bridges, commercial docks and barge fleeting. After mak-

Most of the shoreline was underwater, but I finally found a gravel shoreline with sparse trees and shrubs to pitch my tent. I slept without a rainfly so I could stare at the stars.

ing my way around the downstream end of Harriet Island, I aligned my bow towards an opening between two railroad bridge piers, then realized that submerged logs and debris were blocking the opening. I tried feverishly to steer to the next opening, but strong current prevented me. I could see that my canoe was heading swiftly toward a huge concrete pier, so I paddled like hell to avoid the allision. I quickly realized my efforts were in vain, so I said a hasty prayer, put my paddle in the canoe and held onto the gunwales as my port side slammed into concrete just behind midship. My canoe tilted to the left and bounced off the pier like a rubber ball, then the current realigned it correctly in the swift current. Thanking the Lord for my good fortune, I felt my pounding heart slowly return to normal.

Back to the Big River

My last night camping in Minnesota was spent on a small island several miles below St. Paul, which I shared with fledgling bald eagles who gave

sorrowful cries in the early morning. I assumed they were asking to be fed.

As I entered the wide expanse of lower Pool 2, the weather was calm, clear and cool. However, east winds kicked up and then shifted to much stronger southerly headwinds in the afternoon in Pool 3 below Prescott, Wis. Despite the strong current, the winds halted my progress whenever I stopped paddling. The St. Croix added considerable flows of dark, clear water, sharply contrasting with the turbid tan-colored Mississippi for several miles below the St. Croix's mouth.

Winds lightened in the late afternoon as I entered Lake Pepin. I shared the long two-mile-wide lake with a few fishing boats and sailboats, and was treated to a beautiful sunset followed by a half moon, which provided enough light to guide me to the foot of the lake. Most of the shoreline was underwater, but I finally found a gravel shoreline with sparse trees and shrubs to pitch my tent. I slept without a rainfly so I could stare at the stars. However, sleep quickly took me, since I was worn-out from 14 hours and 62 miles of canoeing.

Over the next two sun-filled days, the Mississippi swiftly carried me on to La Crosse. I encountered few boaters. I pulled out at the mouth of the La Crosse River in the mid-afternoon on June 27. As the blistering sun quickly dried my gear, I prepared for the two-mile portage home. It felt good to be walking again after spending so much time sitting in the canoe. My sweat-drenched shirt and forehead, and my canoe on wheels brought questioning stares, but I just smiled, nodded and reflected on my successful paddle from the Mississippi's source to La Crosse.

I've learned a few lessons from my expeditions: Be patient, take one day at a time, keep a close eye on the weather, and find time to talk to fellow river users along the way. 🌊🛶

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