

Canoes and Friends

The trip began with a long, bumpy ride in a van. It was my second canoe trip at Camp Pathfinder that season, and I had no idea that the next 11 days would change my perspective on many things in life. My physical endurance would be expanded, my sense for the world around me would widen, and I would learn that canoe trips can create friendships that are lasting and profound.

I had never been out on the trail for more than a week, and I was nervous. Coming from the heart of Manhattan, I was in the beginning of my second year at the camp. Tim Lake, our jump-off point, was in the far west of Algonquin Provincial Park, in Canada. Often referred to as the Western Boundary, this particular section was infamous for its unkempt portages (hikes between lakes), confusing rivers plagued by beaver dams, and tributaries that were easy to get lost in. Portages are long and difficult in many places, and entail counselors carrying 80-100 pound cedar canoes and campers carrying 50-60 pound packs. This heavy load is made all the worse when the trail is in a bad condition, as was the case on the Western Boundary.

After finishing our first day, we had a tasty dinner of beef, peppers, onions and cheese in tortillas. The food we made always tasted great, due more to our exhaustion than anything else. We had to carry the raw materials in our packs, which were heavy as a result. When we ate dinner, we started from scratch—raw meat, peppers, onions, and a big block of cheese. All of the campers teamed together to chop up and prepare the ingredients for dinner. When eating, we only used the cheapest silverware and plates. After dinner, we washed everything by using pine needles to scrub off grease—we never brought any kind of sponge or soap. Preparing the food on trips forced us to consider the

minimalist side of life, that meals that filled the stomach and fed the mind could be prepared from the simplest of ingredients.

The next day was predicted to be our hardest—we would have to paddle up the infamous South River. We struggled tremendously—the portages were awful to go on—thorn bushes all around, mosquitoes buzzing constantly, and heavy packs. The pain and wear that we felt during the day brought us together even more, and gave us the bond of teamwork. It wasn't always pretty—we would blow up at each other at the drop of a hat. At times, all of us were on the verge of quitting: dropping our packs and taking a break. There were even times when we got lost and had to cry for help. It's hard to think of how we made it through. I think it was the common bonds of friendship. Maybe it was the need to finish the day—the incentive to get to the campsite, to relax, to regroup. Whatever the reason was, we always finished. There was never a camper lost, a serious injury, or any kind of emergency. It was always reassuring to know that the counselors and the rest of the campers would always be there.

By the time we had completed the South River, everyone was exhausted. We paddled up to the entrance of a long portage, a two-miler, the last one of the day. However, as we pulled our packs out of the boat, however, a peal of thunder sounded and the skies tore open, releasing a torrential rainstorm. Our counselors immediately decided to make camp at a flat stretch in the portage, and after 10 minutes of screaming at each other to put up tents, we had set up camp. As the rain thundered against our tent, we played a game of BS, and laughed with each other about things we had said during the day. That was the first night that I felt that I was surrounded by some of my best friends.

Each day brought a new adventure—new jokes, new lakes, new portages. Some days

we hated, and some days we had enough time that we could practically float across lakes and not have to worry about getting to the next campsite. Often, we would bring our boats together and share granola and gorp, a trail mix with M & M's thrown in. Sometimes, when a tailwind was blowing on the lake, we would have a sailing contest, where all the campers tied their shirts and coats together to make a billowing piece of fabric. The combination of fun and laughter and anger and struggle melded our nine-man group together within the first few days. There was a constant feeling of satisfaction throughout the trip.

On our seventh night we camped at Whiskeyjack Lake, a small, remote lake in the heart of the park. We were very tired when we reached the lake, and so we stripped off our shirts and jumped in the water. It felt amazing to feel the cool water surrounding us and relieving the stress that had built up over the past day. When tripping, you get really dirty. We don't bathe for 11 days, and we are constantly stepping in mud, so we get used to it. As we were swimming in the lake, we noticed it was a peculiar teal color. Our leader, who had been on the lake before, identified this as a sign that the water was very pure. We took a drink, and it tasted better than any bottled water that I've ever tasted. The sunset that night was one of the best I've ever seen.

As we continued on the trip, I realized that the nine of us had all become great friends. We had gone through everything together, every rapid, every time we got lost and went down the wrong way, every time when we got hurt and fell. I knew that they would be there for me should anything happen. These friendships, that grew out of intense shared experiences, aren't like the ones that I make in school, or anywhere else.

For someone from a city, the sense of wilderness that you get canoe tripping in

Algonquin Park, is hard to imagine ahead of time. The lakes, so big and clean, make you feel like you're in a different world. The skies are clear and blue. One only sees civilization if it's in a cordoned section of the park. One of the most incredible things is to see the stars on a clear night. For a kid from the city, seeing endless stars at night is impossible. Sometimes, when the night is just right, you can see the northern lights in the distance. At the same time, the soft call of the loon soothes the mind and relaxes the soul. Being in Algonquin Park gave me an appreciation for nature that I didn't have living in New York.

The last day of the trip was the most memorable part of my season. As the counselors came to the end of the last portage, boats on their back, our headman called us all together. He talked to us about the trip, and how we had all been great trippers. He talked about how much fun we had, and that he, too, was sad to see it all end. He talked about how we ate mac and cheese 8 nights in a row. He talked to us about how we played giant games of trivia and cards. Then, he promised a free visit to the candy shop to whichever boat got to camp first. We jumped in the canoes, laughing, and raced back to camp. For that brief period of time, I was happy to get back to camp. In retrospect, however, I think that when we got to Source Lake, we all felt two things-relief and sadness. Relief because we had finally finished, and we were back at camp, and sadness, because we had all become such good friends and didn't want the trip to end. I haven't felt like that ever since.