

EVERY TRAIL HAS A STORY: HERITAGE TRAVEL IN CANADA

By Bob Henderson

Every Trail Has a Story: for me, a loaded statement, a life's work ongoing, a labour of love. The notion that our travel experiences in the present are enhanced when the past is rendered as a felt experience is a compelling force that can take one out to the land and into the library in a charmed fashion. I have pursued this labour of love for over thirty years; first as a kid at Camp Ahmek, Algonquin Park, introduced to the idea via a native rock art focused canoe trip in Quetico Provincial Park and later, more formally as a graduate student at the University of Alberta leading "Explorations", an interdisciplinary study program of Western historic travel routes.

Over a twenty-five year career as an Outdoor Education professor at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, I have shared a passion for the stories from the trail with students and as a writer.

To travel into the past routes of native traders, explorers, surveyors, settlers and early recreationalists demands an intriguing set of questions that ultimately lead to developing an acumen for story telling about and on the land. Who are these people? Where did they go? How did they do it and why? Consider that only a good start to the questioning process. There will be primary and secondary sources. You will not have been the only person likely onto a good story. But, if you put paddle or ski pole to hand you might be among the few to get that special feeling under your skin of embracing those "then and now" primary experiences. And your story gathering will take you into an amateur realm of whatever discipline you need; be it history, geography, literature, anthropology and archeology. In short, your imagination will work overtime, before, during and after the trip and you will ever advance the epigram of American poet Wallace Stevens;



“Imagination: we have it because we do not have enough without it”.

The “every trail has a story” heritage orientation to trip selection has three main pathways of exploration. There can be a place, people or practices focus. Favourite places that have stirred the imagination most for me include rite of passages/baptism sites, medicine wheel or rock configurations on the prairie and long abandoned cabins. The Oiseaux Rock along the Ottawa River marks a ritualized baptism site for Montreal to Grand Portage/Fort William voyageurs. The rock is the first major cliff face out from Montreal. Here, all newcomers canoe men were dunked in the drink and indulged in a bit of drink (rum). Today, the Oiseaux Rock is no less impressive and the baptism beach nearby is now off limits,

part of the Chalk River Nuclear Power Plant. What was it like to a newbie on the trail to receive this attention from the veterans or for the voyager boss who is baptized by his “servants” inverting the power dynamic if only for a few hours? One can sit in his canoe and ponder deeply.



The McCarthy Bay, Ontario large rock art image (page 150 - Every Trail Has a Story).


The Majorville Medicine Wheel Rock configuration site overlooking the Bow River southeast of Calgary is estimated to be over 5000 years old. Did it serve as a lookout for Buffalo migrations, a travel beacon, a ceremonial camp for a ritual practice and/or a landmark for celestial to land feature

alignment? We don't know for sure, but it is only with a visit that theories come alive before your eyes. Moving from the abstract to the experiential is a major step forward in the learning curve.

Old abandoned cabins: ahhh to be able to fill them with their stories. The mansion of all log cabins, Jimmy McOuat's White Otter Lake castle in North Western Ontario is a standout. Jimmy said he built it because a school teacher had said, "Jimmy you're no good, you'll end up in a shack". Jimmy, alone and over ten years, built a four storey, forty foot, twenty-six windowed "shack" to prove the teacher wrong - you can't knock the teacher as a motivator.

People easily serve as the impetus for travels. David Thompson's kilometers by canoe, horse, and by foot means he is so often a presence in the re-exploration of the North West and in Ontario (see Ontario Professional Surveyor, Fall 2007, p. 16). He was, simply put, different than his colleagues in style and interests on the land. Coming to understand the man is important to appreciate his Canada-wide story. Marguerite de Roberval being kicked off the 1542 colonizing ship along Quebec's Lower North Shore for being too promiscuous; A.Y. Jackson's 1938 painting of Nellie Lake and how he altered the land to suit his vision; and Esther Keyser's and Mary Schaffer's lifelong love affair with Algonquin Park and the Rockies respectively, all speak to people who should get under our skin when we travel in "their" terrain and within their stories. These people are long gone and they have left little more than good stories, a cabin, a campsite, a painting and relatives but they leave behind for us so much more. In the words of Barry Lopez, "It is precisely what is invisible in the land [story] that makes what is merely empty space to one person, a place to another".

Finally self-propelled practices of outdoor travel in keeping with the region's historical precursors is the heritage way to go. Dog sledding in Northern Manitoba, horse packing travel in the Rockies, giving canoe river poling a try on New Brunswick rivers, or traveling a former logging river in a pointer boat: all of these travel practices bring the traveler closer by association to the technique of another time and therefore into the psyche of its travelers.

Canada still has an integrity to its landscapes. One can still feel the presence of the Maymaysgwayshi rock men that live in the cliff face crevices and cracks on Ontario lakes. The Rock Art paintings that represent these figures can become meaningful for the thoughtful traveler today. One can still travel kilometer upon kilometer with dog team caught in the trance of the land. One can still ponder who David Thompson, Jimmy McOuat or a New Brunswick river poler was in the landscapes they experienced. These experiences are still there to be had given the wealth of trails and stories and given an authenticity of Canadian travelways through time. Canada surely still has many a ghost. We travel and dwell well on the land when they are with us informing the present. Be it a far-flung trip to see totem poles in Haida Gwaii, or an exploration of your home town's portage trails or early surveyors' work. Truly in Canada, history is all around, where we set our distant sights and where we live day to day. Why explore it? Because as the German aesthetic Goethe once said, "mystery is truths dancing partner" and oh  how we need both.

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Calendar of Events

February 20 to 22, 2008

116th AOLS Annual Meeting

"Surveying: A National, Unifying Profession?"

Niagara Falls, Ontario

www.aols.org

February 20 to 22, 2008

5th Annual ORCGA Damage Prevention Symposium

Markham, Ontario

www.orcga.com

March 9 to 12, 2008

GITA Annual Conference 31

Seattle, Washington

www.gita.org

April 28 to May 2, 2008

ASPRS 2008 Annual Conference

"Bridging the Horizons - New Frontiers in

Geospatial Collaboration"

Portland, Oregon

www.asprs.org

May 5 to 8, 2008

**Canadian Hydrographic Conference
and National Surveyors Conference**

"Bringing Land and Sea Together"

Victoria, British Columbia

www.chc2008.ca

June 2 to 5, 2008

GeoTec Event

Ottawa, Ontario

www.geoplacement.com/gt

July 3 to 11, 2008

XXI Congress

**International Society for Photogrammetry
and Remote Sensing (ISPRS)**

Beijing, China

www.isprs2008-beijing.org