

Trial by Canoe

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These are the assembled and edited journal entries from a canoe trip done in Alberta by Eddie and Scott that was to stretch from Lake Louise all the way to Edmonton. The mission was to portage canoe and gear up the Pipestone River and beyond from Lake Louise about sixty kilometers. This includes two mountain passes and ends on the headwaters of the Clearwater River. From there, the Clearwater would be navigated via canoe 200 km to Rocky Mountain House and join up with the North Saskatchewan River. This river would then take us around 250 km back to Edmonton. See the map for an overview. We had previously hiked this route in the opposite direction on the Clearwater River Expedition. The original source of this article is <https://alcazarmountain.com/trial-by-canoe>.

Day One

Well, it's just about 5 PM on June 1, 2010. We've arrived in Lake Louise and finished dropping off the pickup truck we rented to haul the canoe out here. A short break seems in order before we set off down the trail up Pipestone River. The weather is a little dreary looking but it sure isn't damping my spirit. The last time Scott and I were on these trails was in 2006 yet it feels like yesterday.

We have set up camp near Mud Lake but this is certainly not where we intended to be. The trail was of course very well groomed in the beginning but we somehow managed to veer off of it and ended up right next to the Pipestone River. We tried to make it work

but the terrain proved impassible with the canoe and gear. Ultimately we left the canoe behind to scout ahead with our gear and ended up where we are right now. We'll go back for it tomorrow. Portaging the loaded canoe through rugged terrain is certainly not as easy as predicted. It seems we may have to resort to separate trips for the canoe and gear for some stretches. I sure hope tomorrow is more successful.



Day Two

We are resting west of Mud Lake right now. We left our gear behind in the morning to retrieve the canoe. Unfortunately we had to push the canoe back up a rather large and steep hill that we brought it down yesterday. Fortunately, however, we managed to find the groomed trail again and got back on it. We stopped at our current location and cut into the woods to retrieve our gear from where we left it in

the morning. That went quite smoothly and we are quite optimistic about things now.

Never before has a granola bar been so satisfying. The dry breakfast we made in haste this morning had certainly left us very hungry. We burned through a lot of ground on the groomed trails but unfortunately they starting to degrade. It's really quite amazing how only a few kilometers away from Lake Louise the trails are already falling apart. We're starting to notice quite a few grizzly and wolf tracks on our path.



The trails certainly keep getting worse. I guess we should appreciate this luxury while it lasts because I'm sure it will end. We've started hitting some fairly annoying mud. The wheels are not really all that effective in the mud. We ultimately had to start doing separate trips for the gear and the canoe. Scott and I clashed on whether we should proceed like that. I just couldn't get over having to walk three times the distance but ultimately he was right about it. Alas the rain hit us pretty hard today. It is making it quite difficult to get a fire going but I am pretty fixated on having a hot supper tonight. Ultimately we managed about twelve kilometers today before camp. I'd sure appreciate a sunny day soon.

Day Three

It rained non stop last night. Everything is good and wet. We cooked up some bacon and oatmeal for breakfast this morning. The bacon was the last of the fresh food we had so we made sure to savour it. We were on the road by nine and made it to the

Pipestone Flats in a hour or so. It was certainly nice to get a break from the trees and mud there. Ah yes the mud. It was again a *very* muddy day.

As much as it was nice to get a break from the trees and mud, the wind is starting to annoy me. We had lunch today using the canoe as a wind shelter. Having to walk each leg three times has allowed us an interesting observation. Consistently, when we pass our own tracks made as recently as fifteen minutes past, they are covered in fresh deer, wolf and bear tracks. It would seem as though the entire woods know we're here and are all running in the opposite



We made camp along the Pipestone just where Molar Creek joins up with it. To my great joy, the sun shone and we saw shadows for the first time since we left. Some rabbit and grouse crossed our path today but we opted not to consume them. Well, in all fairness, it may be more accurate to write that they opted to not be consumed. We chased them around for a bit but our attention was eventually diverted by one of our knives getting stuck up in a tree. The meal we settled for turned out to be quite a discovery. Pancake batter that is cooked, and then re-fried in lard. I'm sure in the comforts of a kitchen this wouldn't be such a delicatessen, but here it is really quite fabulous.

Day Four

We woke up today with lot's of frost but got some really good sun to dry everything out. I took the opportunity to bathe in the Pipestone River for the

first time this trip. One really cannot bathe in a Rocky Mountain river if there is no sun; it would be far too unpleasant. We passed by an unmanned ranger cabin in the first run. It was unmanned the last time we passed by it as well. Molar Mountain is showing herself. It's nice to see her again. The



Well, it appears there is a lot more snow here than we anticipated. We are at a point now where much of the travel is over deep snow. At first this scared us but we've noticed that sliding the canoe over the snow is really not so bad. Unfortunately the snow patches are fairly short so there is a fair bit of work involved in getting the canoe on and off the wheels. Even beyond the snow, things are getting really rugged. Some of the slopes we are going up are very rocky and wet; their traversal is quite a feat of strength.

Tonights camp is quite comfortable. We have some really good piles of dirt for sitting. What more can a man ask for? We covered about five kilometers today. In the process, a nagging pain on the back of my heel was turned into quite a nasty open wound. While training for this trip my jungle boots completely fell apart so I had to get a new pair right before leaving. It looks like they do not agree with my heel bones. Fortunately Scott had the good sense to bring a lot of extra gauze pads so starting tomorrow I will keep the wound covered.

Day Five

We woke up today covered in fresh snow. I slept under a tree for shelter but it didn't work out too

well. The snow on the tree melted into a stream of water that found it's way right into the opening of my bivouac sack. Some birds came to visit us this morning. It was a pleasant change from seeing nothing but tracks. Putting those boots on is sure getting painful for my heel.

The terrain grows ever more challenging as we venture forward. We are both growing very weary of this damn canoe. Why o' why did we opt to bring this thirty kilogram fiberglass behemoth? I guess it has some sentimental value. It has already made one attempt at this journey with us before. One really takes much abuse while carting this canoe. I've been smacked in the face and abdomen by it so many times I just want to smash it to pieces!

Today we encountered an obstacle that at the time seemed far too great to defeat. We were forced to pass through a kilometer or so of dense bush. They were tall, hard and dry and the only option we had was to literally plough through them with the canoe. Once through it we set up camp at what appeared to have once been designated site near a good river crossing. We mixed pancake batter with some peanut butter pemmican Scott made a week prior. It makes good pancakes. The wound on my heel has somewhat stabilized. These gauze pads appear to have made a significant difference.



Day Six

We were awoken today by lots of sun. We opted to take our time this morning and let it dry everything

out. It sure knocks quite a bit of mass off the load when everything is nice and dry. I certainly hope it lasts. Oh the sun. I took a very pleasant late morning nap in it. It was spectacular.

Snow is really starting to dominate the landscape now. We are falling into the fools trap of constantly crossing the river. The other side always looks easier to traverse until you actually cross over. We didn't even manage two legs today. In the end we set up camp just after lunch time separated from the canoe. The open wound on my heel has starting affecting me much more severely. We crossed paths with a porcupine today. It did not seem very threatened by us as it refused to get out of the way.



Our distance covered today does not even warrant mention. Instead of travelling further, we have opted to try and construct some snow shoes. The snow has become so deep in parts that it seems impossible to traverse without them. I am feeling incredibly road weary and I fear we may both be hitting some sort of psychological wall. Perhaps we've bitten off more than we can chew?

Day Seven

Damp and wet. That is what we woke up to this morning. Everything was damp and wet. Miserable. The snowshoes we fashioned yesterday were of pine saplings and duct tape and our first task was to test them out. Failure. They fell apart very quickly. We may revisit them at some point. I cannot get passed this feeling of dread that is overtaking me. Things are

difficult now, and looking up at that awful mountain pass does not inspire much hope.

All we really got done today was fetching the canoe and bringing it up to our camp. I was surprised we even did that. We encountered that stupid porcupine again. It almost seemed to be mocking us. We ate lunch and went straight to bed. Perhaps it is what we need.

Day Eight

The sun is shining and it is nine in the morning. I am feeling very rested. We must have slept twenty hours or so. I feel great. The air between Scott and me has become significantly more optimistic. Perhaps the porcupine was just trying to tell us we needed a couple days of rest. My heel has started to heal up nicely.

We couldn't beat the snow, so we decided to revisit our old loathed technique of dragging the canoe upstream in the water. Unfortunately things have become very rocky now and the gradient of our path has become very aggressive. Once we started to feel confident in our progress, we ran into a rather large waterfall blocking our path. We had to backtrack slightly and move the canoe and gear up a very challenging slope.



Once up the waterfall things took an interesting turn. Snow no longer just dominates the landscape. It is the landscape. We can no longer bypass it. Our strategy has now turned to loading the canoe with all the gear and pulling it by rope through the

snow. Without snowshoes this would be but impossible, were it not for a lone grizzly bear that is leading the way for us. The tracks she leaves cover a trail of packed snow in which we do not sink too deeply.

We've set up camp in a clump of trees that allows us access to solid ground; albeit surrounded by walls of snow. We found some yellowbells to supplement our pemmican and pancakes tonight. It is certainly a treat. We've taken the opportunity to attack the snowshoes again. This time with pine branches as the mesh instead of duct tape. The mountain pass approaches and we carry on with cautious optimism.

Day Nine



It was very cloudy this morning when we set off with the snowshoes. With only two or three kilometers to the top of the first pass, we seemed so close. The snowshoes performed better than last time, but they still didn't last too long. We managed to squeeze a kilometer or so out of them. In the end our only viable solution was to alternate between crawling along the snow on our hands and knees and then reeling the canoe up the slope behind us.

Our lack of winter footwear is really starting to affect us. Our feet are not handling the endless snow all that well. We find ourselves needing to take frequent breaks to warm our feet up. Scott seems to be the more affected and has taken to using plastic bags between his boots and socks. For once I am grateful for the excessively hot and sweaty feet I inherited. Our bodies and gear are starting to show significant

signs of wear. The gloves Scott brought did not last long with the reeling of the canoe. Neither are our hands.

Any hardships we felt we were experiencing in the past pale in comparison to what is going on now. A fierce blizzard has struck. About a kilometer away from the pass we panicked and threw down our bivouac sacks in the snow and jumped in. Here we lay, marooned on the slope of the mountain with zero visibility and only one option. We must wait this storm out in sacks. Our sleeping bags are the only thing that can keep us warm. It is only one in the afternoon and we must rely on our dry food and remaining sanity to get us through this. I guess more rest will do us good.

Day Ten

This stupid yellow sack has been pressed up against my face for the last twenty-four hours and I hate it. All I see is yellow; even when I close my eyes! Urination involves laying on ones side and slightly unzipping the sack enough to pee out of it. Just the act of rushing to get more food out of the canoe caused my bivouac sack to fill up with snow. I got so flustered that I ripped the zipper clear off Scott's day pack trying to get the food out. It is like a swimming pool in here with all the melted snow. I thank the gods we have synthetically insulated sleeping bags. I can't imagine the disaster it would be right now with down insulation.



The snow subsided around six in the evening and

we pounced on the opportunity to find a better spot to camp. We spotted some solid ground about three hundred meters away and dashed for it. The distance actually took us about two hours to complete but we did it. We sat for a bit on bare ground and some bluish sky seemed to be showing itself over the mountains. Scott lost his toque and has now taken to using his fleece pants to keep his head warm. Unfortunately the blizzard soon resumed its assault on us and back in the sacks we went. At least we're on solid ground and got a few hours break from it.

Day Eleven



The sun! It has graced us with it's presence and burned away the storm. It was a very cold night last night as my sleeping bag was still completely drenched. We are in a mad rush right now to get things dried off before we make for the pass. After those last two days, our joy right now is simply inexplicable. The sun is just so warm. I can't see over the pass but I hope it shows us mercy. The idea that we have a whole other pass to get over is something I'm trying really hard not to dwell on right now.

Here we sit at the top of Pipestone Pass. Eleven days to do what in the past we've done in two. Our road beyond this would typically involve going down into the valley and then back up Clearwater Pass. The thought of it makes me cringe. I find my eyes turning to the right toward Devon Mountain. Perhaps we can hug the contour of the mountain all the way to the next pass instead of going the traditional

route. Scott is not convinced of it. I hope I can change his mind.

It is beyond reckoning but we are sitting by the big Devon Lake in Clearwater Pass right now. The clock reads only eight in the evening and I certainly did not foresee us making it this far today. The sun we so badly wanted turned out a mixed blessing. It kept us warm, but the high altitude and reflection off of the snow has left our faces cracked and burned. Although a struggle, hugging the mountain proved quite effective. By the time we got to the next pass we were actually above it. Of course, as logic would dictate, our only course of action at that point was a forty-five minute sleigh ride in the canoe down Devon Mountain into the pass. It turns out that a canoe slides quite well in the snow so long you are going in the downward direction. We're eating a hot meal and it is not a moment too soon. We depleted a lot of our granola bars and pemmican over these last few days.

Day Twelve

We took the opportunity to sleep in nice and late today. The sun shone again in the morning and we decided to take all the time we needed to dry the gear out. This pass sure is beautiful. It was certainly a lot less white the last time we were here but even so, it is still a special place for me. We didn't actually get on the road until about two in the afternoon. We had hoped to ride the canoe across the Devon Lakes but as with everything else up here, they appear to still be frozen.

We travelled late today. As much as we got sick of dealing with the trees in the Pipestone River valley, here in Clearwater country it is a different story. The difficulty in getting a fire going in the alpine plains made the lowlands a target before the day is up. Squeezing the canoe through the trees and their roots truly isn't so bad when going downhill. I'm starting to not hate the canoe as much knowing very shortly it will carry us instead of the other way around.

Although we set up camp very late, we sure found a nice spot. Big trees, nice piles of dirt. Paradise. It is ten in the evening right now the fire is roaring.

A good soup and lot's of tea is in order. The wound on my heel is actually feeling pretty good today. I've used up all but one gauze pad but once we're in the canoe I shouldn't need them anymore. It's hard to believe that the dinky little stream of water we're hiking down will soon be powerful enough to carry us all the way home. Who knows, we may even get to put in tomorrow! I'm looking forward to sleeping in a nice dry bag.



Day Thirteen

We got an early start today and really motored forward. The air was certainly optimistic. With every step we took, the river grew broader and closer to our goal. We've reached the Indianhead ranger cabin and that means we are at the border and leaving Banff National Park.

All this fierce sunlight following that mass of precipitation has created an interesting phenomenon in the valley. Every few minutes we hear the deep rumble of an avalanche not far off. We hike with our backpacks for a couple of hours, then go back for the canoe and discover new streams had started up behind us. As we sit idly and peer at the river over the flood plains a reality presents itself. All this extra water flow has made the Clearwater surprisingly high. Typically one not would put in until Trident Lake but perhaps we could just put in right now?

We are merrily floating on Trident Lake right now. We ended up putting in in the flood plains. It has been nice and easy so far. We are approaching the

mouth of the lake and there are sure a lot of logs jammed up below us. They are increasing in concentration and getting closer to the surface as we approach the river. The path ahead actually looks a little frightening. Oh well; better than walking.



We've set up camp for the evening and our optimism has all but vanished. We came only a couple kilometers from Trident Lake but it felt like forever. Time seems to stand still when your dodging rocks and logs, and ploughing through standing waves that flood the canoe. It would appear that this extra run off has turned this otherwise peaceful river into a very violent beast. The clock is past midnight so, yay, it is now my birthday. We hauled that bottle of scotch all the way out here. We may as well try and celebrate now.

Day Fourteen

So here we sit now banked on the Clearwater River amidst a soaking pile of rubble that used to be our gear and canoe. Upon our waking in the morning we decided to try and scout out ahead to see what terrors the river had planned for us. Ultimately we decided to set sail down the river and within fifteen minutes, in a sea of chaos, the canoe was destroyed and our gear was floating aimlessly down the river. We managed to rope in most items but unfortunately a few key items escaped. Scott's hat, that which has been with him on almost all our journeys, is gone. The GPS device we had, along with almost all our paper maps, are gone. My camera, though physically

still here, is beyond repair. I only hope the CF card with the other photos from this journey is still viable.

How did the crash occur? It all happened so fast that it is quite difficult to reconstruct the experience from the shards of memory that remain. From what Scott and I recall, we were heading around a torrential bend in the river. Ahead lay a narrow channel upon which two large stones stood sentry at its edges. Inside this narrow gap a log jam blocked the way and the canoe was soon caught up in it. The massive flow of water behind us turned the canoe sideways and pushed us over directly onto a jagged rock. The rock fractured a rib in the boat and left a giant laceration beyond repair. As the canoe filled with water it began to capsize and we gained footing on the river bed and pulled ourselves ashore.

So as I wrote before, here we sit. Surprisingly, panic is not ensuing. Nor is fear, but actually relief. We are back to what we know; in our element. Dry land. We are now drying our gear out and will leave behind anything not critical for our survival. We are cooking up all remaining food items so we can maximize travel time. We have travelled these paths before (in the opposite direction) and I am confident that we should be able to navigate our way out of here. It is perhaps sixty kilometers to the nearest road.

We passed out of the mountains today and into the foothills. Our plans to follow the Clearwater River trail proved unrealizable as the valley is largely flooded from the run off. We have been forced to bushwhack through the high grounds that hug the valley. We covered a lot of ground today. Hiked for perhaps twelve hours. I am very exhausted.

Day Fifteen

Morning brought us snow. Lot's and lot's of snow. The day was rain and snow. Everything is flooded and wet. Our gear weighs double what it should. I can't recall the last time I've been so cold. Every time I felt like I would building up some body heat, we were forced to cross some sort of waist deep flooded area. The water is all so cold. Yesterday, we had cooked up all the remaining pancake batter into a

sort of quasi loaf of bread. It is already starting to mould. The battle between my boots and heel has started up again. The agony when putting the boot on is incredible.

Crossing from grown in cut lines to game trails, and back again, we eventually stumbled across fairly fresh horse droppings. We followed their tracks for quite a distance until we realized they were made from unshod hooves. Finally, to much joy, we found a empty beer can. Never have I been so happy to see trash out in the woods. We then noticed a similarity between a particular intersection of cut lines we were on, and a remnant of a topographic map we had. We used the piece of map to navigate our way to where we are now: a deserted camp ground.

We hoped to find someone here, but there is no one. We are, however, still optimistic. Tomorrow we will head toward the road and hope to hitch a ride.

Day Sixteen

The battle between my heel and the boots had ended. It appears that my heels won. The boots were completely destroyed and I was stuck wearing just sandals. Luckily only groomed roads remained on the path ahead. Once we got to the road outside the camp ground we were actually picked up quite quickly. It turns out a nearby natural gas well was undergoing shutdown at the time. One of the workers picked us up and we were provided a nice warm trailer and some food. Artificial heating is really quite an amazing invention. They were a very nice bunch of guys. We are in their debt. One of Scott's toes has started to swell up for some reason; this may have been just in time.

We got a ride with one of them on the next drive out to Rocky Mountain House. It was about a hundred kilometers. Once there we hit the laundromat and took some nice warm showers. Seeing our reflections in the mirror was quite a revelation. We had both lost a lot of skin fat but may have actually gained muscle mass. Quite a fitness program. I don't imagine the two large pizzas we ate afterwards helped though.

So now we sit on the Greyhound bus, destined for

our home town of Edmonton. I can't help but wonder how our stash of gear and a broken canoe will fair until we next return to retrieve it. This isn't the first time we've failed at this journey, and it likely won't be the last.