



Summer 2007

**The Journal of Canadian Wilderness Canoeing**

Outfit 129



photo: Paul Rowsell

## **The Petite Mecatina River - Petite it Ain't!**

*Paul Rowsell of Harrington Harbour, Quebec, on the north shore of the St. Lawrence got quite a view from the backseat of a Hydro-Quebec helicopter heading up the Petite Mecatina river which is slated for hydro dams. In fact, one of those dams will go right here, in the heart of the river's unrunnable canyon section. Paul helped out of the very few - and likely last - groups to run this formidable river. Tom McCloud's glimpses of a very tough river begin on Page 8.*



# Summer Packet

*It was nice to hear from one of the two authors of the very fine Canoe Atlas of the Little North - Jon Berger.*

Thank you for your kind words about the Canoe Atlas. Just for the record, I wrote the entire book and did all the drawings and many of the maps. Tom did most of the digitizing and read and commented on the manuscript. The book is at least 50 per cent better for his participation- he has a wealth of knowledge - historical and contemporary about the entire area- as well as a life time of traveling the region. The day to day - year to year over a 20 year period - labor of love - of doing it all fell to me. I call it my life's work. At the age of 14, I drew my first route map- from memory - of the Makobe River in the Temagami country. May the Winds Be At Your Back.

*From a CBC report in June.*

A group of paddlers says it paid an outfitter about \$28,000 for a guided canoe tour down the Thelon River, only to get stranded in Lutsel K'e for four days.

Eight people, including Yellowknife resident Jessa Sinclair and her father, booked a guided trip with Great Canadian Wilderness, operated out of Lutsel K'e, N.W.T., by "Tundra Tom" Faess.

The group arrived in the community of Lutsel K'e on Thursday, expecting to fly out to the river on a charter airplane the next day. But after waiting four days for the plane, Sinclair and five others from the group flew back to Yellowknife and chartered a plane with another company.

Sinclair said the outfitter gave many different excuses for why the plane did not arrive.

"It was very frustrating because we didn't know minute to minute what was going on," Sinclair told CBC News on Tuesday, before the chartered plane left Yellowknife.

"First there was ice on the lake, and next the flights were too booked up. And it was just sort of a different reason every day that we couldn't get moving."

Faess said the airplane did arrive in Lutsel K'e

on Tuesday. He blamed the air charter company, adding that he's experienced similar delays in the past. He said outfitters like him are often left at the whims of air charter companies that may not always show up on time.

"The Thelon trip that they were going on did in fact depart yesterday [Monday], a couple of days late," Faess said Tuesday.

"They were impatient with the wait. That often times happens with southerners coming north and trying to deal with remote aircraft logistics. However, other people in the group did go, and they're on the river now."

Faess said the group that Sinclair is with had signed a contract stating the operator would not be liable if there were aircraft delays.

But Sinclair said her group may consider seeking recourse through the N.W.T. government, which offers refunds to tourists who have been taken advantage of by guides and outfitters.

The Tourist Deposit Assurance Program comes into play "in the event that a visitor pays a tourism operator a deposit for a vacation package and receives neither the vacation nor a refund," said Gary Singer, director of investment and economic analysis with the Department of Industry, Tourism and Development.

Singer could not speak on the specific case involving Sinclair's group. He said several people have applied for refunds in the few years that program has been available, but only one payout has ever been made. Such refunds are paid out at the minister's discretion.

*We were remiss in not printing this March letter from veteran NWT outfitter Alex Hall, and his thoughts on the ongoing outfitter controversy.*

I have been amused by the "Barrenland Bob" stories. Nothing new to me, of course. I've been hearing them for decades.

I had a guy call me two Septembers ago who was absolutely livid and told me he was definitely taking "Bob" to court. It was the usual tale of paying "Bob" up front in cash for a charter, then "Bob" leaving them out there and never showing

up to bring them back to Yellowknife.

Luckily, they had a satellite telephone and got Air Tindi to come and rescue them. Anyway, the guy was collecting similar occurrences and I gave him some. He was going to have "Bob's" license revoked and sue his ass off etc. I've heard it all before many times and like all of the other times nothing ever happened to "Bob" that I know of and it all went away again - just another sucker that "Bob" fleeced. The GNWT must have a huge collection of these stories and for the life of me, I don't know why they have never revoked his outfitter's license (now, as of 2007, called a "Tourism Operator's License").

*David Pelly wrote in May, with some surprising news about Thelon area development.*

Good news! The Mackenzie Valley Environmental Impact Review Board has recommended outright rejection of UR-Energy's proposal to proceed with drilling in the upper Thelon valley. The reason cited is "adverse cultural impacts of a cumulative nature to areas of very high spiritual importance to Aboriginal peoples." The full report (see <http://www.mveirb.nt.ca>) also makes reference to the social, cultural, economic and environmental impacts of the proposed development. This is certainly a victory for the people of Lutsel K'e, who have made it very clear that they want NO exploration whatsoever, for any mineral, on their traditional lands in the Thelon valley. The Board has made this very clear recommendation to the Minister of INAC, Jim Prentice. He must accept or overturn their recommendation. To do the latter should be unthinkable, but given this government's record on both the environment and Aboriginal affairs, nothing is beyond possibility.

Prentice's office has been stonewalling every single environmental initiative in the North since taking office and have issued record numbers of exploration permits including in the calving grounds of the Beverly and Qaminirjuaq caribou.



## Editor's Notebook

**A**nother summer and another canoeing season is nearly at an end and it was a great one for me and the HACC. After five years of no major trips we finally got back at it with Northern Crossing - which you will read all about in Outfit 130.

We are happy to present in this issue a couple of interesting trips including a particularly harrowing slog down the imposing Petit Macatina River on Quebec's North Shore. I first became aware of this river through the old Wild River series of booklets produced by the federal government in the 70s. Thinking back, that project must have been inspired by then-prime minister Pierre Trudeau, the only true paddling PM this country's ever had.

The river was deemed to be virtually impassable which naturally drew the interest of a number of paddlers. It would seem the original assessment was pretty much correct and we thank Tom McCloud and his intrepid band of paddlers for letting us enjoy(?) their journey vicariously.

We also have watched with great interest the continued re-working of Canada's north. The latest news being the leak of an impending agreement to create a new Nunavik territory in northern Quebec - without ethnic boundaries. The continued creep of mines and machines is relentless despite some small victories in the Thelon Sanctuary [See Packet].

It is becoming obvious the industrial framework of society is being fitted to the outmost reaches of our continent but at such a slow and deliberate pace as to seemingly pass general public scrutiny. With the Nunavik Crater now a park and roads and ports planned for Arctic shores, and the race to claim the North Pole heating up, I am happy to say we have been to those places before the turnstiles were installed. Now, if we can only get back before the escalators are in.

Michael Peake.



*Che-Mun is produced by the Hide-Away Canoe Club and published quarterly. We acknowledge the help of the Publications Assistance Plan in defraying postal costs on issues mailed to Canadian subscribers.*

# Canoesworthy

**N**ine metres of mud excavated from the bottom of Pingualuit, Nunavik's crater lake (below), may offer researchers a more clear view on how the Earth's climate changed over the past 120,000 years.

A team of researchers, led by Reinhard Pienitz from Laval University, spent 10 days in May camped out at the lake, which is known as "the crystal eye of Nunavik" because of its exceptionally clear waters, to haul up sediment core samples from the lake bed.

Pingualuit, formerly known as Chubb Crater, is a perfectly circular lake, 3.4 kilometres in diameter. It was formed when a meteorite slammed into the earth 1.4 million years ago. Rain filled the crater, creating a lake with some of the clearest waters on Earth. "It's like a huge rain collector set out in the tundra," Pienitz said.

Most Canadian lakes are only as old as the last ice age, when glaciers that once reached as far south as Wisconsin began their slow retreat north, between 6,000 to 12,000 years ago.

But Pingualuit is different, researchers believe. The lip around the crater, and the depth of the lake - 267 metres - largely protected the lake from glaciers, which slid across the top of the crater, preserving the sediment on the lake bottom. The stuff looks like mud to most people. But when Pienitz studies sediment, he sees history.

Traces of charcoal show when trees began to migrate north once the glaciers retreated. Pollen hints at the plants that grew nearby. And the fossilized remains of algae and tiny shrimp and bugs show what kind of life the water once supported.

Acids in the sediment samples also let researchers piece together the colour and temperature of lakes in the past. To obtain such long-term climate records, until now, researchers have depended on core samples taken from Greenland, Antarctica, or the sea bed. Similar information about the climate of North America has not been available, until now, Pienitz said.

Researchers will spend the next several years analyzing the sediment retrieved from Pingualuit, but Pienitz said they are confident, after a quick examination of the core samples, that the sediment contains 120,000 years of natural history. The last researchers to try to retrieve sediment samples from Pingualuit had their camp blown away by a wind storm on August 8, 1988. Pienitz's team had better luck.

Researchers needed to follow strict conditions to avoid polluting the lake waters. No fuel-powered equipment was permitted. Snowmobiles stayed parked on the crater's rim. They carried their gear by foot.

They camped inside unfinished cabins near the crater, which are being built following the announcement in 2003 that the surrounding area will be Quebec's first northern park.



**T**he idea of a summer cruise through Nunavut and northern Quebec appears to be working for Makivik Corp., which is projecting its first operating profit. The Inuit-owned corporation, based in northern Quebec, invested almost \$1 million in 2005 to buy a 75 per cent share in Cruise North Expeditions. Up to around 135 passengers and 30 crew members can board the ice-class cruise ship for each trip. This year, the company has 14 Inuit staff on board, compared to just a couple when it launched in 2005.

"It's the best job I've ever had," said Jason Annahatak of Kangigssuk, who gives lectures on Inuit culture to passengers. "But it is demanding because you're working with people who have high expectations — and rightly so, because they pay a lot of money to be on board. So you have to constantly make the effort of being professional and efficient."

♦ CANOESWORTHY continues on Page 11





## **The Lure of Faraway Places** By Herb Pohl. Edited by James Raffan Natural Heritage Books, 2007 \$27.95 ISBN: 978-1-897045-24-4

*All books reviewed by Michael Peake*

There are wilderness paddlers and then there are *solo* wilderness paddlers. Two different breeds sharing the same space - though not the same head space. Herb Pohl was a solo paddler even when he was a part of a group. And like many soloists - he was a virtuoso - keenly in touch with the world around him, not interested in raucous camaraderie, which many of us seek.

It's fitting the cover shot of Herb's posthumous canoeing biography showing his classic covered C-1 and paddler on the cover is not Herb. Because for Herb Pohl the focus was never about him. It was all about the land - that incredible, irresistible northern landscape that constantly drew the transplanted Austrian back to it.

It was an unquenchable quest. How many years did I bump into Herb when he mentioned "this year" would surely be his last solitary northern journey. The lure of the raw and the wild, not just faraway places, were what drove Herb north year after year, decade after decade.

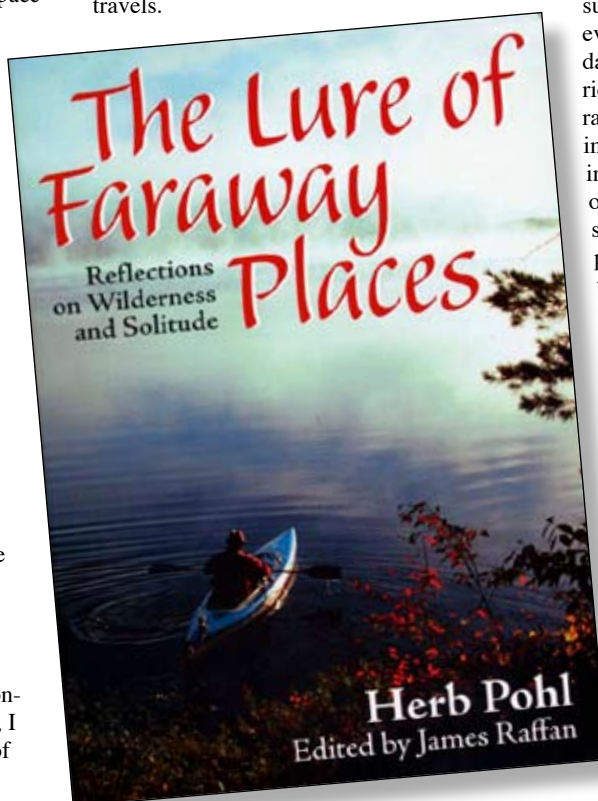
As someone who has had the great privilege to have seen many of Herb's wonderfully dry-witted wilderness slide talks, I was still surprised at the extreme nature of his travels covered in this book. This guy was tough and relentless. His greatest area of travel interest, Labrador and northern Quebec, boasts some of the toughest canoeing there is. Latitude matters little in Nunavik and Labrador. The terrain and the weather and the bugs combine to create a wilderness made for madmen or masters - I think Herb was a bit of both.

We are so thankful to have had the seasoned hand of Jim Raffan editing this volume, left almost complete by Herb, though obviously not ready to hand to a publisher after his sudden, tragic death in July 2006. For there are few better to shape and craft a canoeing tome than JR.

One thing about Herb always both impressed and shamed me were the magnificent panoramic photos Herb procured by dint of

walking to the ridge line no matter where he was. After the kind of days he put in, it was an incredible effort and probably just a part of his great addiction to the raw wild land. And we are fortunate this book, which includes a number of Herb's fine photos, has good reproduction on its non-glossy pages, a nice exception to many such efforts.

*The Lure of Faraway Places* covers 25 years, more or less, of Herb's northern travels.



primarily set in Quebec, Labrador and Northern Ontario with a couple of NWT exceptions. He really specialized in rivers of Labrador, particularly the several that run off the Labrador Plateau - the Notakwanon, Ugjoktok, Fraser, Moisie, Kogaluk, East Natashquan and Kanairiktok. Each rates a chapter in the book, and each offers a hardy challenge to the wilderness paddler.

One thing we learn in the book is what fuelled this intrepid traveller. It was bacon. In varying forms for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Good thing there were no wild boars around of Herb would have spent too much time hunting! The book even includes the brief recipe for his signature dinner dish of bacon, potatoes and

onions. Mmmmm!

Herb was born in Austria in 1930 and came to Canada in 1950. He immediately fell in love with the place and seven years later fell in love with Maura, his wife of nearly 50 years. While she never accompanied Herb north, she was clearly supportive - which is a key piece of any successful tripping career.

One typical morning on his favourite trip - a 1984 journey down the Notakwanon - probably sums up why Herb travelled alone. After an evening jaunt to a nearby hill he surveyed the day ahead as the river started to drop. Worried that the morning sun would make running rapids tough, he was on the water on at 4 am in the raging waters. He then spent some time investigating a major falls and then knocked off a one kilometre portage before finally settling down . . . to breakfast. Not a typical paddler's morning routine! A little later on that trip he calmly recounts being upside down in an eddyless, rapid-filled river only 10 metres wide.

This book is full of such tales, told in a colourful yet typically understated way - just like Herb talked. It is a remarkable testament to a remarkable paddling career. He just wanted to be out there, immersed in the wilderness - and he certainly was.

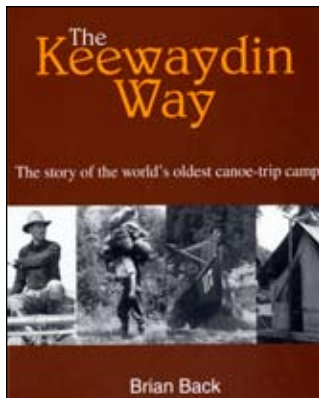
But I guess the best thing about this book is that it is Herb's voice you hear. His gentle humour when talking to a loon who didn't mind his foreign accent, or of a bear who enjoying the same view and kindly broke off an interfering branch. Typical Herb underplaying about flipping in a rapids or tackling a daunting portage, "Oh and yes, my canoe caught fire. I fixed it."

But interspersed in the stories are his key needs and values. He does not want the ringing laughter of companions sharing the trail. He did not enjoy being occasionally windbound or confined by the elements. Like an epic wanderer he must keep moving, must keep exploring. It was in his DNA.

The book finishes with his last trip journal. Herb heroically wrote his own epitaph in his final journal entry after failing to ascend the Dog River to Denison Falls following a 36 km day - at the age of 76.

"If there is one thing that this trip has done for me, it is that my tripping days are over. Everything is such an effort and even if you reach your objective it doesn't satisfy as it used to."

We should all have such swift closure.



## The Keewaydin Way

**The Story of the World's Oldest Canoe-trip Camp**

**By Brian Back**

**431 pp Roy Waters Scholarship Fund, 2004 \$28.95**

**ISBN: 0-9760313-5-3**

**B**rian Back is a man dedicated to the traditions of canoeing. The former environmental

activist and the current Webmeister of Otter-tooth.com- the web home of *Che-Mun*, was also part of the legend of Keewaydin Camp, the oldest boys tripping camp in the world. And it is a true canoeing camp with no in-camp program - just tripping.

This American camp started in Maine but in 1894 set up operations in Temagami. The camp has launched many generations of young American boys into the Canadian wilderness. This now three-year-old book, put together by Back over many years was missed by us when it was published and I asked Brian to send along a copy as I thought it would be of interest to the world beyond ex-campers. And it surely is.

*The Keewaydin Way* is an impressive piece of

work (Back breaking?). Drawing on the massive visual records the camp had amassed, Back reviewed 100,000 photos and spoke to 200 people for the project. This is truly an encyclopedic record of camp canoeing with an interest to anyone who has ever been to a northern camp.

Of special note is Keewaydin's history of canoeing in northern Quebec. For many years, they has a tradition of working with native guides and canoeing some big rivers - the East-main and Rupert notably, many of which have now been dammed.

Back also discovered in his research that in 1910 and 1911 one of the camp's guides was one A. Belaney aka Grey Owl thus filling the missing link in his years in the area. No one had known until then what he did those two summers.

Of course Keewaydin alumni will get the most out of this book but I found it endlessly fascinating as it contains such a breadth of material displayed in an easygoing format with dozens of chapters and section and loads of lists.

## Moving Waters

**Adventures on Northern Rivers**

**By Sam Cook**

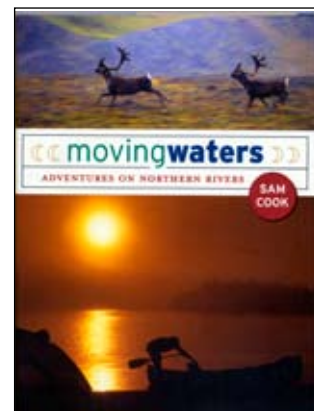
**117 pp Stone Ridge Press, 2007**

**\$28.95 ISBN: 0-9760313-5-3**

**T**his delightful little book is the product of a fellow newspaperman, in this case Sam Cook, who for more than a quarter century, has been writing for the Duluth News Tribune.

Cook was introduced to the wilderness with a 10-day trip in Quetico in 1964 that left a lasting impression and lit an eternal flame. Working in canoe country obviously stoked the fires of Sam who has paddled extensively in Ontario, Manitoba and Alaska. The multiple meaning title is very clever, though I think it works better without the 's' at the end.

As befits a journalist, this short book is



really like a selection of columns. In the style of fellow Minnesotan writer Sigurd Olson, each of the 27 chapters is between three and six pages of a particular memory or incident on

one of the many trips Cook has taken, usually with a regular group of friends. Some of the destinations featured include the Bloodvein, Winisk, God's, Seal and White rivers plus journeys in Pukaskwa Park and Alaska.

There are also some lovely photographs in a 32 page selection of colour photos on coated paper. My only complaint is they are a bit small but otherwise includes some fine images.

I think the great appeal of this book is its universal nature. Cook's trips are the ones of most trippers - not Arctic-busting mega-expeditions - but more gentle and familiar destinations. And his thoughts on the lure of wilderness travel are often our thoughts and it is amazing how many similarities and common observations we share with him. And for humans, such shared appreciation of a cherished thing has universal appeal.

## Capturing the French River

**By Wayne Kelly**

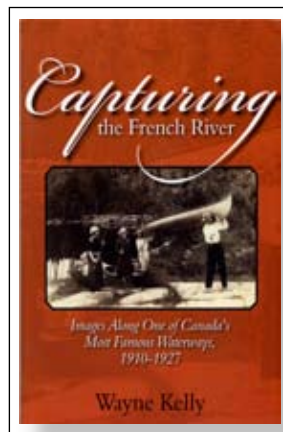
**128 pp Natural Heritage Press, 2007**

**\$27.99 ISBN: 978-1-897045-23-7**

Early adopters of technology often see the benefits many years down the road. Such was the case with this unique book featuring photos from the French River area between 1910 and 1927.

Brothers-in-law Ernest Rushbrook of Toronto and Frank Sherman of Detroit were avid devotees of the relatively new art of consumer photography. The pair made regular extended camping trips to the mouth of the French River over a 17 year period, capturing a delightful span of history which remained hidden in the Rushbrook family until Wayne Kelly and Natural Heritage Press uncovered these treasures.

French River Village, at the mouth of the main channel of the river was booming. Millions of board feet of timber flowed down the French to the sawmill located there. The main railway line was close by and the little town



thrived - all the while surrounded by the wilderness and history of this fur trade river.

Kelly does a great job of telling the pair's story as well as providing a concise history of the region and proving a most detailed bibliography including

web sites viewed.

The mill was in receivership in 1913 due to environmental concerns (even then) over fish habitat destruction. The area slowly dwindled and reverted to wilderness. But the photos live on, some hand-tinted ones in colour, and all superbly reproduced which we think would have made Ernie and Frank very happy.





# Prince of the Barrenlands



The little-known Prince River flows south into Baker Lake and is well off the beaten - or unbeaten - track. But not (right) far away from the endless Barrenland winds.

**By BRIAN JOHNSTON**  
Story and photos

If there is such a thing as a beaten path between Baker Lake and the Meadowbank River it is via the Thelon River. Numerous canoe parties use the Thelon route as a means of connecting the Hudson Bay and Arctic watersheds.

Several years ago when I was armchair exploring various canoe trip options, I considered an expedition starting in Baker Lake and terminating at Chantrey Inlet. The route was by way of the Thelon, Meadowbank, and Back Rivers. I fondly call the lower section of the Thelon, "The Thelon Pipe". This wide and free-flowing fast river rapidly descends into Baker Lake and creates a sand delta. Often canoe trippers employing the Thelon-Meadowbank route start their travels somewhere upstream, for example on the Dubawnt River or the upper Thelon, and travel with the current. This is advantageous. Canoeists paddling down the Thelon pass right by the creek system that connects the watersheds. Thus, they simply eddy out and portage up the creek into the Meadowbank River. Whereas our plan was to begin at Baker Lake and work our way up the Thelon River to the same creek. I was skeptical of the Thelon section—the upstream traveling—because an earlier attempt to paddle up a large northern river had been unsuccessful. Yes, upstream travel is possible through tracking and poling, but paddling against a powerful river current is futile.

A fellow canoe tripper suggested an alternate route. He mentioned that in April the Inuit of Baker Lake trek by snow machine to Gjoa Haven utilizing parts of the frozen Prince River. The Prince River?

Because I had never heard of anyone canoeing this river I set out to investigate if it would lend itself to canoe travel.

After investigating, I found the Prince River held possibilities as the means to link Baker Lake to the Arctic Ocean and the idea took hold and evolved into a plan. Instead of following the usual Thelon-Meadowbank route, we would instead opt for paddling up the narrow and small Prince River and its interconnecting lake system. True, the Prince River is a lively river with numerous rapids. Most noteworthy is its final drop into Baker Lake of near continuous whitewater. However, we could easily avoid this final downward gradient of cascading rapids. Our plan was to take the commercial scheduled flight to Baker Lake and then hire a taxi to shuttle us to the Prince River Bridge. The bridge is located just upstream of the river's final descent. Starting our canoe trip there would avoid portaging up the worst whitewater section.

Well, the trip never materialized, but as it happened, a couple of years later an interesting opportunity presented itself. Due to the time restraints of other members of the crew, I found myself on a 2-week canoe trip on the Meadowbank and Back Rivers. My canoe partner and I were less time-limited so I dusted off the route plan from the Prince, Meadowbank, and Back Rivers trip. We would simply arrange for our return charter flight to drop us off back where we started on the Meadowbank River. This would allow the two of us to canoe back to Baker Lake (while the remainder of the crew would fly onward). More importantly, we would rely on the former route plan of the Prince River. This plan had advantages. We already had the route plan and maps. The cost of our extra week would be the extra landing charge, a small fee. Additionally, because we would be following the original route in



reverse, we would be traveling with the current on the Prince River.

During past far north trips, we had seen the lower rapids of the Prince River in a photograph at the Baker Lake Airport but the headwaters as well as the portage connecting the river systems were unknowns. The topographical maps indicated several possible routes. Not surprisingly, at the upper reaches, single blue lines represent the Prince River— more uncertainties. Over the winter, I visited several paddling friends with topos in hand, where our discussions of options would come to no real conclusion. In the end, I just picked what looked best. Of course, the other routes are still unknown to us.

What did we find? Let's start with the upper Meadowbank River. We landed on an esker and portaged to the nearest water. From there, we traversed westward into the Meadowbank River and began working upstream. By following the shoreline, paddling hard, eddy hopping, tracking, wading, and portaging we progressed upstream, camping a couple of nights. Approaching the Meadowbank headwaters gave way to rapids that had too many rocks and not enough water volume to float a canoe. The slow pace of upstream travel afforded us wildlife viewing of loons, whooping cranes, and 27 muskoxen. Our final Meadowbank portage was 200 metres accompanied by a driving wind and rain.

We had now reached the height of land portage. Our route began with a high climb and we gained enough elevation that the next two lakes were visible, revealing almost the entire route. The open tundra made for easy route finding. We could walk direct without having to alter our path because of unsuitable terrain. The first portage was 1300 metres and at the top, we stopped for lunch. Due to the adverse weather conditions, we were cold and wet but the windy weather also meant no bugs. It was a fine day to be portaging rather than paddling. Oftentimes our canoe would get pinned bow or stern to the ground by the wind, so we dragged the canoe more than solo carried. In the powerful wind, we ruddered across the tiny lakes, wave surfing the entire way. We continued from puddle to puddle traveling mostly down hill to the final short carry into the Prince River headwaters. By 5:30 pm, we had completed the last portage. We were on the Prince River!

Tired from portaging 4 km, we made camp although due to the wind, there was no other option—we were wind bound. Setting up camp was a test of skill and knowledge, including much dexterity and determination. It took the two of us an hour to erect our tent as well as our MEC Mantis tarp (our cave shelter). We put extra gear inside the tent to weigh down

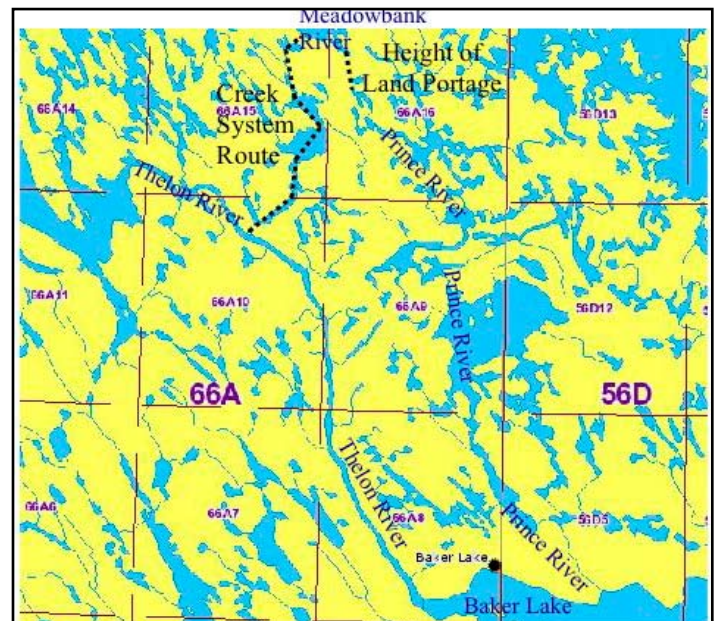
the windward side. Having finally reached the Prince River we were content to rest, eat, sleep, read, and catch up on a couple of repair jobs. We were traveling in style, with a mountaineering tent and the Mantis we had lavish safe havens to wait out the weather. Upon reaching Baker Lake, we learnt that the wind was 90 km/h at the Meadowbank mine site the day we portaged the height of land.

By 8 pm of the following day, the wind had lessened and although it was late in the day and still cold, we decided to continue following the Prince River headwaters. I was wearing four layers as well as my PFD on my upper body and three layers on the lower half. It was good to be moving forward. For two days, we worked diligently. We traversed five portages including one carry near the end of a lake across an island because there was no water on either side to allow for canoe passage. The river and rapids slowly gained volume but we were still required to wade several shallow and rocky rapids before the river gained enough volume to float us consistently through rapids.

As we made our way down the Prince River, its lakes and rapids provided us with variety. The river also offered many signs of travelers, such as inuksuit and cabins. We stopped at the Prince River Bridge to visit with some residents of Baker Lake who were there to get drinking water. From the bridge, we were literally swept and raced down the final descent. On route, we met two groups of men fishing for arctic char who were using the traditional kakivik. At the mouth, unlike at the extensive sand delta of the Thelon River, it is an easy passage to the community of Baker Lake provided the expansive lake is cooperative.

In the end, we were very glad that we traveled off the beaten path. Our route successfully linked the Meadowbank River to Baker Lake. Our portage overland to the headwaters of the little known Prince River as well as the river itself, a spirited river with abundant rapids, including its rapid drop into Baker Lake was a viable option to the common Thelon route. It served us well as the means of extending our stay and connecting watersheds.

*Brian Johnston, an avid canoeist and instructor, paddles in Manitoba and on wilderness rivers there and beyond.*







# Messin' with a Big 'Cat

*Quebec's Petite Mecatina River, on the North Shore of the St. Lawrence, is legendary as an unrunnable beast. So naturally it attracts a very few, very hardy souls to test that claim. It always wins. We present some excerpts from another Mecatina Masochists trip report and photos from Che-Mun subscriber Tom McCloud who clearly relishes a challenge.*

In July 2003, our group of 5 paddlers arrived at the town of Natashquan, Quebec, the place where the pavement ends 770 miles east of Montreal on the north shore of the St. Lawrence. The target of this canoe trip is the Petite Mecatina River, (pronounced mec KAT' nah), which heads up along the Labrador border in the northeast Quebec wilderness near several more famous siblings, the Moisie, Magpie and Natashquan. Unlike those rivers, which are traveled by wilderness trippers often, there was almost no information available about previous Mecatina canoe trips. That's one factor which made the Mecatina attractive to us!

We are Nate Houser from Afton, Virginia, Tom Cole from Richmond, Virginia, Ed Gertler from Silver Spring, Maryland, Tom McCloud from Frederick, Maryland, and Curt Gellerman, from Trenton, New Jersey. We've all spent a lot of days on whitewater rivers, and have done many wilderness trips. Our trips are organized as a backpacking trip would be: each person has his own boat and in that boat he carries his clothes, food for 20 days, tent, sleeping bag and everything else he needs.

Aside from a big pot, fire grid, first aid kit and tarp, there is very little 'group gear'. We were carrying an EPIRB for the first time, a GPS, a can of bear spray, but no firearms. Our canoes are all ABS plastic: three Blue Hole Sunburst 2s, Curt's Mad River ME, plus Ed's Kevlar/fiberglass custom C-1.

The rapid at mile 109 was big: at the top a routine boulder garden, but part way down the flow is funneled into the middle where it drops over a boulder barricade and then is focused onto a huge boulder forming a recurring wave above and pouring over into a monster hole that looks like light should not emerge from it. Clearly a class 5, our first true portage. As the day unfolded, we ran several more boulder gardens in the class 2-3 range, then came upon a broad, long, class 3, a problem because it was borderline runnable with a loaded canoe. The

middle, though very technical, was the best place to be, and the runout lasted another 300 yards., just fine if you're in the boat, but would be a most unpleasant swim. Ed, Curt & Nate ran down the center, while Tom & Tom lined a bit at the top and ran the rest. At the end of the day we had reached the 123 mile mark. You know it's going to be a tough day when, at 8:30am, you're already thinking forward to the swim at the end of the day. It was another very hot day. One benefit of having so many miles of shallow, slow-flowing headwaters was that the river water was reasonably warm, so an end-of-day swim with a bar of soap, and a washout of smelly shirts, was pleasant. The flow had now grown to ~2,000 cfs, but

aside from some class 2 rapids, paddling this pseudo-river was entirely slogging it out on flatwater.

Upon leaving Lac LeBreton, the Mecatina starts to look like a river again and a couple big-volume rapids came up. Around 10:30 we ran a long class 2 rapid that has a bedrock 'cliff' on the left at the bottom. We paused for a long and leisurely lunchstop on the flat rock out-cropping and were casting the eddies for trout when something much larger took the lure. After a comical battle during which Nate's reel self-destructed, and I hand-lined the fish, an 8 pound pike was landed. Then Curt caught a second the same size. This was a LOT of fish fillets so we had a real supertime fish-fry feast while



**Nate Houser takes a well-deserved lunch break at the top of the Mecatina canyon on the first day of a backbreaking portage around the many unrunnable rapids on this North Shore river.**

enjoying the view of a vivid red sunset through thin clouds.

Before long we had floated right up to the lip of the first rapid of the infamous canyon section of the Mecatina. Here all that flow is necked down to less than 100 feet, and drops 15 feet through a horseshoe-shaped notch in the water-polished gray granite. The name "Royal Flush" seemed perfect. There are several incredible kettle-holes in this rock, and balanced boulders the size of a garage. After walking the left side to scout, and being too late in the day to portage, we withdrew to camp at the top left, just above this rapid, where there was a sand beach only foot above water level, barely room enough for our 5 tents and a fire. At dusk we were surprised to see a bat flying around. Wonder how he survives the winter?

So after two lazy weeks which were mostly warm and sunny, with easy, occasionally interesting paddling, good fishing and a constant following breeze, we have reached ~mile 238. Less than 100 miles remains





to take-out, we've dropped ~1,000 feet, but have 700 still to lose. There have been no rude surprises, though all the flatwater has been disappointing. There is an old proverb which warns 'Be careful what you wish for, because you may just get it', and we had been wishing for rapids. This river now takes a sharp turn to the south, cuts a canyon, and heads in earnest for the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Prior to this trip the only information we had about the Mecatina was from a 1985 CANOE magazine article, which tells of a trip by group, one of whom was Serge Theoret, who paddled 18' Kevlar downriver canoes. This story tells of a 3 mile portage taking three days, of ascending a creek out of the canyon, following a chain of highland lakes, then descending to the Mecatina, in order to bypass an unrunnable set of cascades where the gradient is 100 feet per mile. A steep section of river is obvious on the topographical maps, but only one rapid is named - "Rapide de la Gros Truite". It is logical to assume that is the big one, but we didn't have any way of knowing how many runnable, or unrunnable, rapids had to be passed prior to getting there, but being experienced Appalachian technical creek paddlers in solo boats, we expected to be able to work the edges and run a lot of the rapids that tandem teams in 18 foot boats could not, and thus avoid much of that wicked-sounding portage. We were about to find out. Hold on to your hats!

The portage past Royal Flush went fast over a smooth, tilted, rock shelf littered by huge boulders, but the problem of getting back onto the river at the bottom was twofold: smooth, slippery rock and a surge of 3 feet in the eddy. We would load a boat, sit in it, wait for the surge to crest, and seal-launch one at a time into the swirling current. Almost immediately we were at another big rapid, and the several big rapids that followed, back-to-back-to-back, now run together in my head. We ran only one of the many rapids after extensive scouting, R3, down a big tongue on the right, then sharply left into an eddy. From there, staying along the left bank for a hundred yards, we cut out sharply to the right, aiming to hit a green-water tongue that formed below a smallish ledge/wave and we rode that to the right and out the bottom of the rapid.

At another rapid we sneaked around a rocky point in much the same way an experienced paddler approaches the lip of a dam, where he cannot see what is just below, then we dropped into a left side slot from where we could carry/drag for a short distance over water-polished granite past the really big stuff at the top. But we were up against a vertical rock cliff on our left, couldn't portage forward, couldn't get back upriver, so Ed studies "The Knob" from Camp 14 Nate at lunch on canyon rim, Camp 14 across river Granite Island Rapid from the canyon rim with no place else to go, had no choice but to run out the rest of the rapid, which was easily a high class 3. There were two boulders in vicious current to be avoided. Again we had to seal-launch into the crest of a 3 foot surge, one by one, and we all finished upright, though by different routes. Every rapid in this canyon was BIG! It looked like 10,000 cfs. It looked like Grand Canyon rapids, and 3 of us have paddled the Grand Canyon in solo canoes. But this river is tougher because of the boulders littering the canyon everywhere. It was all class 5 in the center and sneak routes were few.

The sixth rapid I'll call "The Whirlpool". Portaging around it on the left was easy, on a smooth shelf of solid granite, but paddling out of that counterclockwise rotating, powerful eddy at the bottom took several tries. The next rapid is formed by an island of solid granite, perhaps one acre in size, which splits the current, which crashes over at least two 10 foot ledges. I'll call this Granite Island Rapid.

After striking camp and forward ferrying across the river, we used the Sven saws to cut a path through the impenetrable alders so we could move packs back into the forest. Then the hike began. The objective of the day was to scout the portage route, to see the canyon and the cascades, determine if there might be sneak routes at water level, and also determine where we will re-enter the river at the end of the impassable canyon. So with heavy packs, we headed out. Very soon we realized that this forest was extremely thick, small trees growing densely, and we made poor progress. Footing was often bad, and the climb was so steep that you had to grab a scrub tree and pull yourself up. At noon we were on top of a bluff, having gained 600 feet elevation, and were overlooking the rapid that had stopped us yesterday. In the blazing sun it was blisteringly hot. We did not find caribou-moss-covered balds at top, where the walking would have been easy, nor were there game trails to be followed through the woods. At break we could see back up the canyon to Whirlpool Rapid, and last night's sandbar camp. In the forest you could not see the person only 50 feet in front. At 3 pm we were nowhere near the end of the canyon and had drunk all our water. It had to be at least in the mid-80's, and we'd been working very hard and sweating profusely all day. We badly needed water and a place to camp before dark, but turning around and carrying full packs back to where the boats were cached did not occur to us as an option.

Admittedly we did not move in a straight line, but after 8 hours of the most difficult bushwacking I've ever done, it was a discouraging thought to contemplate repeating this hike four more times. We had NOT accomplished the goal of the day of finding a route to the place we will re-enter the river at the end of the canyon. We had not seen the cascades. We weren't certain of our position in relation to the impassable section. In fact, we had created a serious complication for ourselves, since we were separated by miles of extremely difficult forest hiking from our second pack, our boats, AND the river. Up at dawn, each of us packed a light pack with some food and extra clothing, figuring that we could not possibly make it back here to Tent Lake with boats and the second pack in one day. Remaining at Tent Lake are the tents, packs, clothes and miscellaneous gear, but worst of all for this story, all of the cameras. The goal for the day was to move canoes and pack up that creek we'd crossed, and which we assumed had been used by the 1985 party. That meant we expected to spend a night in the open, at the top of the creek, and get to Tent Lake on the next day. It took 3 rough hours, with GPS navigation, to reach the boats and second packs which had been left upriver from 'The Knob', and the day was already hot. Then began the toughest portaging I've ever done, pulling and shoving the canoes up hills, and tilting them sideways through the dense little spruce trees. Portaging in the traditional sense, canoe overhead, is not possible. Cutting a path is not an option. In addition to the denseness of the forest, there are many thousands of down dead trees that add to the problems.. After a slim supper we put on all the clothing we had, a couple of us using deflated airbags as blankets, and curled up to sleep. It became colder. Sometime during the night the fire died, and had to be rekindled for warmth. Northern lights danced across the clear sky. This night took a toll. At first light we started to move up the creek. Well, kind of. With heavy packs on we started to force a way through the underbrush up along the creekside, but this foray did not last long. The viewpoint was expressed that this route was an impossibility, and that the 1985 group MUST have ascended some other creek, though we could identify no alternate on our maps.



Curt made a 3 hour scouting hike while four of us rested, drank water, snacked and fished. On return he had few words: first “water”, then - the impassable canyon was just around the bend. The river was white as far as he could see. Both canyon walls were smooth rock descending into the water, and passage through at water level was not possible. We saw no creek here that could have been the one ascended by the ‘85 group, so, resigned, we retreated upriver with difficulty, paddling against the current. Back at the mouth of the creek for the second time, and not wanting to spend another cold night here in the open, each of us picked up his second pack and, around 2 pm, started to hike toward Tent Lake. As you would guess it was again torture from trees, terrain, heat and blackflies. A GPS position check was made every half hour. At one point we were 0.3 miles away from the tents, and a half hour later 0.5 miles away! It was getting into dusk, and we were becoming concerned. Nobody wanted to spend the night laying on the Curt at Camp 19 forest floor in the open. We kind of semi-ignored the GPS and went by dead-reckoning, down a depression, reaching the lake but at the wrong end of it, so another 45 minutes of terrible hiking by flashlight was needed to find our tents. So at 9:30, in near darkness, we were getting the kettle boiling for a hot supper. It was a really beat up group. Both of Curt’s legs cramped: too much sweating and not enough water

After 3 days of backbreaking work we still did not have the canoes below the canyon and without them, could not get out of here. Hiking out 70 miles with a pack through this forest is not an option. In talking over our situation it was clear that we had to get the boats up that creek somehow and into the highland lakes in order to get them close to Tent Lake, and we could not do that in one day. It was also clear that we had neither the muscle strength nor the amount of food & days needed to move all five boats. This is a situation where being a solo paddler is a distinct disadvantage. Each person has to carry more weight than would each member of a tandem team. Two canoes would be abandoned, and we would portage only three boats to the top and paddle out tandem. So again we packed light packs in anticipation of spending another night in the woods away from tents and gear, but this time the sleeping bag was included. The GPS - directed hike back to the boats went predictably slowly on yet another hot, dry day. Arriving one last time at the creek mouth, I removed some strapping and hardware from my boat, thinking it would be of use in rigging Curt’s canoe for tandem paddling. A note was tied to a thwart giving the date we left and where we were headed, just in case a rescue party came looking for us a month from now. A lot of good that would have done! It was with a lump in my throat that I walked away. Losing a boat is a humiliation, a defeat. The Mecatina was kicking our asses.

As dusk was falling we were nowhere near the Mecatina, though we could now see it, occasionally through gaps the trees, still far below, and we were at the lip of another hundred foot fall. To our left was a brushy field with a few scrubby trees, and lots of caribou moss, which became home for the night. Camp 20. It was not such a bad spot. The temperature continued to drop and a ground fog moved in. After dark the kettle was finally boiled, in time delivering big servings of spaghetti with meat sauce and Parmesan for supper. We could have gone for sec-

onds, thirds! Everyone craved those calories! After a couple more hours of hard work the next morning we reached the Mecatina, viewing a big rapid below, but there was a boulder apron where we could pass by portaging if necessary. Good news. Though still in a canyon, the walls were no longer so tight. We paddled only a couple hundred yards, crossing to river left, and began to portage again. While carrying, I chanced across a brass marker, MRN 32, a surveyors benchmark. Later I found out from the ‘Ministry Resources Natural’ of Quebec that this benchmark is at an altitude of 139M. So from



The Mecatina crew checks out Whirlpool Rapid in the canyon prior to portaging way around it.

where our portage began above Granite Island Rapid to this benchmark the river has dropped ~70 meters, or 210 feet, in perhaps 3 miles. This is A LOT of drop for such a large river.

So if you are considering a canoe trip to the Petite Mecatina, I have one word of advice for you: DON’T! It was by far the toughest trip I’ve ever done. None of us, and we have a lot of wilderness tripping experience, have ever seen portaging conditions as difficult as those through the woods, and the rapids are suitable only for class 5 kayakers. And we still don’t know what exactly is inside those ‘cascades’. My wilderness tripping gear is wrecked, I have to buy a new boat, and it’ll take a long time to heal up from the damage done. This is a trip that will be talked about for a long time as the trip from hell. That’s not far from right.

POSTSCRIPT: Through the modern miracle of the internet search engine one of the participants on that 1985 trip, Serge Theoret, was located living near Montreal. Serge is one of the very few who have paddled the Mecatina twice, in 1977 and again in 1985. After exchanging several emails and some photos with him, there is no doubt that our portage route was completely different from what the earlier groups had done. They had gone down the canyon to about the furthest point we did, but then went directly up and over the top of the hill on river right, and immediately down the other side. This is a VERY VERTICAL portage, but much shorter than what we did. Was it easier? Debatable, as the route we did, though miles longer, gains less elevation. Our 2003 trip had a ‘medium’ water level, while the 1977 trip was at very low water, and the 1985 trip was about comparable with ours.





## CANOE SWORTHY *continued*

The one-week cruises stop in a number of communities in Nunavut and the Inuit region of northern Quebec known as Nunavik. Aatami said the ships bring tourist dollars and landing fees to communities. Ice conditions or bad weather can force ships to skip communities altogether, as they have done with Kimmirut twice this season.

But when the vessels do arrive, hamlets receive a per-passenger landing fee that pays local residents to put on cultural demonstrations to passengers. On top of that, community carvers alone can rack up as much as \$18,000 in sales per visit.

This year, Cruise North added tour packages to Newfoundland and Labrador. Makivik Corp., which represents the Inuit of Nunavik through the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement, also owns the First Air and Air Inuit airlines and a number of other wholly owned and joint business ventures.

**T**he DEW Line site cleanup, originally slated to be complete in 2008, has been extended to 2013. The schedule for cleanup was extended for budgetary reasons and to increase economic benefits for Inuit in Nunavut, according to Lisa Brooks, communications adviser with the Department of National Defence.

Canada is home to 21 of the Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line sites, built along the Arctic coastline in the late 1950s to provide early warning of an airborne attack. Of the 15 sites in Nunavut, six locations have been cleaned up since operations ended in 1993. Sites outside of the communities of Cambridge Bay, Gjoa Haven, Kugaaruk, and Qikiqtarjuaq have been dealt with, as well as one on Victoria Island and another between Qikiqtarjuaq and Clyde River.

Work is ongoing this summer at the sites in Taloyoak, Hall Beach and the eastern arm of Baffin Island. In Hall Beach, 52 local residents have been hired as truck drivers, heavy equipment operators, and as housekeepers and cooks for the work camp.

Cleanup of the sites involves dismantling old buildings and removing debris and contaminated soil. Soil or waste with high concentrations of metals or PCBs are sent south and disposed of at licensed facilities. When work ended last year on the DEW site in Qikiqtarjuaq, it meant a loss of jobs for the community.

### **DEW Line numbers:**

**1950s - DEW Line established in Canada, Alaska, and Greenland**

**15 - DEW Line sites in Nunavut**

**63 - radar sites originally built; 21 were decommissioned in the 1960s**

**1993 - DEW Line sites stopped operating**

**60 - percent of contracting work must be by Inuit companies**

**65 - percent of employees must be Inuit**

**\$440 million - the cost of cleanup on Nunavut's DEW Line radar sites**

**2013 - remediation to be complete**

**2037 - monitoring of landfill sites will be complete**

**H**opes for a Bathurst Inlet port and road are soaring higher than ever, with a recent push from northern mines bringing it ever closer to becoming a reality. Several mining companies operating in Nunavut and Northern NWT have stepped forward to promise funds and urge government to do the same.

The lack of reliable transportation is holding back development in the area, according to mine officials who believe that having the port would kick start all kinds of development and exploration in the area.

The port and the road leading from it would mean that the mines

could bring in supplies by sea, instead of being dependent upon the more vulnerable ice road.

The Winter Road Joint Venture partners are promoting the port as one of three possible alternatives to the ice road, which is being threatened by warmer winters and the rapidly increasing supply needs of the mines. They will ask Ottawa for funds to build the project. The price tag for the proposed port and road is about \$135 million right now, according to the Kitikmeot Corporation.

**I**t's still more than a year away, but avid skywatchers from as far away as Japan are already booking flights to Nunavut to see next summer's total eclipse of the sun.

The moon will cross the sun on Aug. 1, 2008, creating the eclipse. In North America, the best places to see the event are the Nunavut hamlets of Grise Fiord, Cambridge Bay and Resolute Bay, as they will see total or near-total darkness.

Arctic Bay and Pond Inlet will see partial darkness during the eclipse, while Iqaluit will see about 80 per cent of the sun eclipsed.

The eclipse is supposed to begin right after sunrise just east of Cambridge Bay, before crossing over the North Pole to Russia, Mongolia and China. While the moment will last about 90 seconds, Dyer said that moment will be spectacular — weather permitting, that is.

Interested Nunavut eclipse-watchers should reserve their accommodations in advance, though. Grise Fiord, for example, has only one hotel with 24 beds in nine rooms. And if you miss out next year, you may have to wait: Canada will not see another solar eclipse until 2024.

**T**he great-niece of Arctic explorer Roald Amundsen succeeded in finding long-lost relatives in Nunavut, meeting with two Inuks believed to be Amundsen's grandsons.

Gjoa Haven residents Paul Ikualluk and his half-brother Bob Konan met in June with Anne-Christine Amundsen Jacobsen, who spent nearly \$18,000 flying with her family from Norway to find her great-uncle's descendants in Nunavut.

Amundsen, a Norwegian explorer who in the early 1900s led the first successful sail expedition through the Northwest Passage, spent two winters in the High Arctic community of Gjoa Haven, located on King William Island. It was believed that he may have fathered children during his stay there.

"The undiscovered part of my life and my family's life is opening up, and we are knowing that we have relatives in other parts of the world," Ikualluk said during Amundsen Jacobsen's visit to Gjoa Haven.

Ikualluk was told by his father that he was Amundsen's grandson. His father had kept it a secret until two months before his death, so that he would not be considered an outsider.

Ikualluk said he suffered a bit of an identity crisis as a result of realizing he was not a full-blooded Inuk. But now, he said, he is proud to be a descendent of the explorer, adding that meeting Amundsen Jacobsen was an emotional experience for him.

The experience was just as emotional for Amundsen Jacobsen, 63, who, in addition to meeting her newfound Inuit cousins, also went to the lake her great-uncle fished from more than a century ago.

"I was just thinking about all the hardship it must have been. Thinking that we were sort of walking on the same ground," she said in an interview. "It's emotional and very, very difficult to explain. You feel kind of humbled."



*photo: Ed Gertler*

**ROYAL FLUSH** - Looks can be deceiving and this shot of this rapid aptly named Royal Flush by Tom McCloud & crew on the Petite Mecatina is certainly that. As Tom writes, "Here is the "Royal Flush, the first big rapid that starts off the Mecatina canyon. It is actually a two-part rapid with this drop at the top. It looks like it might have formed from a kettle hole that broke though, the water then finding a new, more direct course, and eroding out the sides even further. I say this because there is actually a small ledge completely across the river just above, a wide water-smoothed shelf on river left and a high water channel even further to the left. Even with a person in the photo, and this is Tom Cole contemplating the rapid, it's hard to get a feel for the size of this but the vertical drop is about 15 feet."

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