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River Stories

by Rob Kesselring

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RIVER STORIES



Real Adventures in the North American Wilderness

BY ROB KESSELING

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“Lots of folks crave the personal fulfillment of the wilderness experience. Rob's writing reveals a higher calling – inspiring others to pass on a love of the wild. That's the legacy of this book.”

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The Boundary Waters Journal

“Kesselring is a true storyteller - I laughed out loud one minute and wiped a heartwarming tear the next.”

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“I always envy Rob's great skill with words. I also like his focus on the little things and the accurate details; it makes his stories come alive.”

- Bob O'Hara, legendary arctic expedition leader

RIVER STORIES

Real Adventures in the North American Wilderness

Rob Kesselring

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Coming of age in the sub-arctic
And other stories of
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and

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Table of Contents

PREFACE.....	1
STORY 1 - BROKEN HAND.....	7
STORY 2 - SEVEN GEAR ITEMS FOR BOUNDARY WATERS CANOE CAMPERS.....	19
STORY 3 - A CANOE TRIP TO THE ARCTIC OCEAN AN INTRODUCTION TO FAR NORTH PADDLING	27
STORY 4 - BAKING BREAD IN THE BOUNDARY WATERS: BANNOCK.....	48
STORY 5 - CLIMB THE CLIFF.....	56
STORY 6 - A FEVER RAN THROUGH IT	80
STORY 7 - CANOE TRAVEL: FAR, FAST, LIGHT.....	87
STORY 8 - BOUNDARY WATERS WILDERNESS DAUGHTER FATHER DOGSLED TRIP.....	105
STORY 9 - BATTLESHIP.....	114
STORY 10 - BROKEN PADDLE	126
STORY 11 - TRADITIONAL WINTER CAMPING.....	133
STORY 12 - BWCA IN SUMMER CAREFREE AND HEARTFELT FUN	143
STORY 13 - “WHAT IF?”	150
STORY 14 - ON THE ROAD.....	164
STORY 15 - TEN CANOE COUNTRY SUMMERTIME CAMPING FLUBS AND HOW TO AVOID THEM.....	166

Story 5

CLIMB THE CLIFF

People make a big deal out of birthdays that end in zero. Years slip by, but decades somehow land with a thud. Party stores have promoted these passages into big money holidays touting black birthday garb, styrofoam tombstones and cards that evoke more sympathy than celebration. I have never been hung up on a birthday being a bigger deal just because it closes out a decade, with one important exception.

Three days after my father's 50th birthday he suffered a massive and mortal heart attack. I was 15. It remains today the most traumatic event of my life. Not the least of the effects of that event was to sear into my mind the fact that life ends at fifty. My adolescent brain was convinced in one instant that retirement planning was a fraud. Despite seeing busloads of senior citizens, I was positive that at least for me, as it had for my dad, life would end at fifty.

I remember well the halfway point, my 25th birthday. I was in Papeete on the island of Tahiti. The pungency of tropical blossoms clung to the humid air. Bright cotton fabrics, damp with perspiration, revealed intimate views of buxom Polynesian women dashing about town on motor scooters. I remember breathing deeply of life. My back propped against a gnarled fig tree, my legs extended and mimicking the tangled and exposed roots, I invited everyone who passed by to attend my birthday party. The sassiness of the French language blended perfectly with the earthiness of Polynesia. My life was half over and I was in the perfect place to celebrate.

As the years ticked away, I became sadly aware that fifty did not seem nearly so old as it had seemed when I was in my twenties. Nevertheless, as the end approached, I put my affairs in order and attempted to have long fatherly talks with each of my daughters. Their entreaties that I was not going to die and that all my talking to the contrary was “freaking them out” did not sway my conviction, and so, when my fiftieth birthday arrived, I waited quietly in my bed for the end.

The end did not come. There was no numbness in my left arm. The mirror reflected a countenance quite similar to what I had grown accustomed. All day long I endured a “I-told-you-so” chorus from my daughters, and relieved, but slightly exasperated looks from my wife. I was perplexed, but at bedtime, I remembered an important fact. I gathered the family in a circle around my bed and loudly reminded them: “My father died THREE days after his fiftieth birthday!”

When the next 72 hours passed without incident, I began to accept the reality that my life script had been based on a lie. The shock of this fact caused much misery. All those years of not wearing sunscreen, neglecting proper dental care and failing to put money into an IRA began to haunt me. But soon I realized the other half of the equation: I was alive!

In the weeks leading up to my birthday, my wife had wanted to plan a big party. To me, it didn’t make a lot of sense. The guests would all be back in a few days for the funeral anyway, and they would have even less to talk about. Maybe some would even skip the funeral in that they had just seen me. My fear that a birthday party could affect the turnout for the funeral and the potential irony that I had spent my life abhorring duplicate events only to create one in death, compelled me to nix her party idea.

But, when my death did not occur it seemed that a major celebration was indicated. Not because I was a half-century old

but more because I was still alive and who knew for how long? I had a whole second chance at life and it stretched out before me, beckoning. This fiftieth birthday was not so much an ending as it was a beginning. I was suddenly eager to celebrate, not with a party, but rather a journey. Combining the money my wife had budgeted for a party, with the money I had stashed away for the now unnecessary burial expenses I possessed a formidable grubstake.

Throughout the decade of my forties, I had led several canoe expeditions to the Canadian Arctic, and many Minnesota Boundary Waters Canoe Area (BWCA) trips for students and adults. As much as I loved leading trips, there was always the burden of responsibility. What if someone became ill or was injured? What if a decision I made caused harm to someone under my protection? Plus, there was the endless caretaking. It was never enough if I was having fun, or if the trip met my dreams. No, I was forever fretting over whether every aspect of the trip met every participant's expectations. The load of leadership can be heavy indeed, and I decided I deserved a free pass. I wanted a trip where I was just a participant, just one of the gang.

There is a magical river. It begins at the crest of the Mackenzie mountains, the spine of the mountain range that separates the Yukon Territory from the Northwest Territories of Canada. The headwaters of the Flying Cloud River is a glacial tarn, a tiny lake, high above treeline, and north of the Arctic Circle. For just six weeks a year the ice thaws, creating a landing spot for daring bush pilots and a portal for canoeists. Beginning at the lake, the Flying Cloud River twists through seven canyons and tumbles over three hundred miles of rapids before it surges into the Mackenzie River, seventy miles downstream from Fort Confidence. Though the rapids are nearly continuous, none are too steep to be navigated by skilled

canoeists. For its entire length, this wild river can be run without a single portage. Some years the tarn has held ice all summer, foiling any attempts to land a floatplane or mount an expedition. In warmer summers, a handful of canoeists have been able to convince pilots to take a chance on finding open water and bring them in. Those lucky paddlers are rewarded for a few glorious weeks, paddling a river few know exist and joining a select group of those who have successfully completed the journey. I wanted to be in that group.

The Internet has its uses. I typed in "Flying Cloud River Northwest Territories Canada" and one e-mail led to another. Soon there was a party of 12 men all eager and ready to paddle the Flying Cloud during the upcoming summer. We were to meet at the Fort Confidence float plane base July 15. It would be the first descent of the season and the earliest descent ever recorded of the Flying Cloud.

Undoubtedly, if women had been part of this expedition, we would have learned about each other in advance. We would have shared our ages, details about our families, our occupations, pastimes, hobbies, our fears and our aspirations. But we were all men, so we planned our logistics, assigned preparatory tasks, and leaked out hints of our accomplishments. For example, I learned that the two from France were accomplished mountaineers, having recently summited the world's second tallest peak, K2. The gentleman from England had built a sailing ship in his backyard out of cement, and sailed this home-built boat solo across the North Atlantic. Two of the Canadians had cross-country skied to the North Pole and one guy was arriving directly from Tasmania, having completed a six-week trek on that remote island. I was intimidated. There was only one other American, a doctor from the city of Fargo, North Dakota.

Going north by commercial airlines is a winnowing process, beginning amidst the throngs and ending nearly alone. I started off in a big jetliner to Edmonton, spent the night at the Nisku Inn and then flew on to Yellowknife in a smaller jetliner made even smaller by a bulkhead amidships which bisected the plane - cargo fore, passengers aft. On this smaller plane, I began to study the passengers, wondering if any of them were to be my river companions. Keeping quiet at this point was understandable. There were miners, sports fishermen, tourists, and residents returning from holidays, a whole panoply of people, and I didn't want to make any embarrassing assumptions. Even so, I was pretty certain I had identified half our crew. The winnowing continued as I boarded the small propeller plane that skipped down the Mackenzie River from one village to the next. It seemed awkward not to check-in with one another, but no one approached me, and anyway, the roar of the engines would have meant communication by shouting only. I decided to wait until Fort Confidence. By that time there were only twelve passengers on the plane -- our group entirely.

Although definitely older than most, I was gratified that there were at least two guys older than myself and three more that could generously be called peers. The two guys from France were friends and had traveled together, as had three of the Canadians. The rest of us were solos. At the airport, a couple of pick-up trucks from Redstone Airways met us for the shuttle to the float base on the river, but even with a few people crouched in the truck beds it would take a second run to get all of us and our gear transported.

The introductions had been cursory and I could not sort out the names. The biggest man in the trip was a late entry to the expedition. He was from Quebec and I couldn't catch his name. The accent was too thick. Conversation with others didn't improve much from that point. I remember sucking in my gut

when I greeted each companion, more conscious of trying to make a good impression than remembering names and faces. Most of my e-mail correspondence had been with Toby and Steve because of their familiarity with the river. I was struggling to figure out which was which. Their buddy, who I believed at the time was Frederick, also had nicknames for them, which just confused me more. I did learn a bit about Jon as we slung some of the heaviest food barrels into the back of the truck. He had spent the last three years working on arctic offshore drilling rigs but I couldn't ascertain what country he was from. He had a Euro-trash accent, wore strange glasses that were held on his head by a band like swimmer's goggles, and he was likely half my age.

I was on the second run and was relieved to be alone in the back of the truck. Conversation at the airport while we waited had been limited and strained. A day and-a-half of silent travel and then the cryptic greeting and meeting had put me off balance. I felt as if I was back in seventh grade and thrown together with a homeroom full of strangers. Up front, next to the Redstone Airways pilot, was our most senior paddler, Art, the cement sailboat guy. He looked the part, a man as tough as nails. Next to him was Denny the doctor from Fargo who had been as quiet as I was, when we had disembarked from the airplane. Even as we drove off from the airport with no one looking at me, I pretended to be unperturbed when the pick-up pounded over permafrost-induced potholes that could jar a filling from a tooth. The dust swirled around me, choking my breath and peppering my eyeballs.

The loading was in full swing when the truck arrived at the float base. There were two Twin Otter aircraft moored snugly to the pier and the hiss on the pontoons from the pushy, sediment-rich Mackenzie River was static in the background. In the foreground, the energy was electric. The first contingent from

the airport had already changed over into their river clothes and the pilots were busy directing them how to squeeze the six rented canoes into the cabins of the two Twin Otters. Although no longer in manufacture, DeHavilland Twin Otters remain the workhorses of the far north. They combine power, large volume pontoons, ruggedness, and a wing designed to maximize lift. All factors which enable the plane to get up and off in short order. Conversation was task oriented. Toby and Steve, because of their trip down the Flying Cloud five years earlier, had coordinated procurement of provisions and most of the gear. The provisions for three weeks consisted of over 500 pounds of food in ten watertight blue barrels. Each canoe was to be equipped with a spray cover that would strap to webbing that had been installed about four inches below the gunwale on each canoe. These covers consisted of three-pieces of waterproofed nylon pack cloth, the bow and the stern pieces had hand sewn sleeves for two fiberglass wands which when affixed to the gunwales of the canoe created elevated "cockpits" for each paddler. Once battened down these covers turned an open canoe into a much more seaworthy craft and made them capable of staying dry in bow waves that would have swamped a canoe not so equipped. But sorting out the 18 cover pieces and 24 wands and making sure the wands fit and that snaps, zippers and buckles were functional was a frustrating experience. Prior to even the most cursory introduction I found myself untangling equipment that clearly had been put away in a rush. All the while attempting to satisfy the brusque demands of an overbearing French-Canadian whom I was later to discover was named Andre. It had been a long day and my patience was starting to fray. Clearly alliances had already taken shape. The two experienced Canadians had befriended the younger paddlers and also seemed at least cordial with the Europeans.

Anti-American sentiment was running high. The United States president at the time, George W. Bush, had recently masterminded the invasion of Iraq. That geo-political initiative had seemed to particularly alienate all my new companions. Without even being given a chance to share my political views and voting background it seemed I was labeled as an “ugly American” as was the other American on this expedition, Denny. Although he lived only a few hundred miles west of me, I had never before met Denny. After enduring a few snide comments from my new companions and the silent treatment from another, I sought out Denny and greeted him warmly. It was as if he was a long-lost friend. We quickly agreed to share a tent and pair up in a canoe. There was an immediate and implicit understanding that we would watch each other’s back.

Both of us were anxious not to hold up the group and the pilots seemed eager to get airborne. We quickly changed into our river clothes and footwear, leaving our travel clothes in a duffle bag to be stored at the float base. Most of the group had stowed their sleeping bags, extra clothing and personal gear in barrels but Denny had a canvas Duluth Pack and I carried a similarly designed nylon pack. Approaching the planes with our packs slung over our shoulders and our helmets in our hands, we bumped into our two French companions, Jean-Luc and Philippe.

“You weel not need zee ellmets,” Philippe said.

Denny replied that helmets were on the e-mailed gear list, which had been circulated throughout the entire party.

“NoNoNo, all zee rapeedz are verrrrey deepuh wahter rapeedz, no ellmets. No vun is bringing ellemets, leevuh yorrr ellmets en zee offeece wiss yorrr street cloz.” Philippe insisted.

I looked at Denny and said, “I don’t want to be the only one bringing a helmet, let’s do as he says and leave them in our

duffle bags, it looks like we already have a huge load and it will be one less thing to keep track of.”

Two of the canoes were a little too long to fit lengthwise in the plane so they needed to go in kitty corner. This meant two of us would not have a seat. That would have been a problem in Yellowknife where in recent years flight regulations have begun to be enforced, but we were in Fort Confidence now. The pilot asked us a question not really expecting a reply, “You don’t mind sitting on a pack, eh?”

With the whine of the turbines, a skirt of spray rose from the pontoons and up went the nose and then as the plane accelerated on the river we assumed flying position and broke from the surface of the water as the earth fell away. In a blink, the hamlet of Fort Confidence was behind us, the brown Mackenzie below us and ahead Adventure. If you have never flown a floatplane into the wilds of the Far North you cannot know the feeling. It is as profound as the movie, “The Wizard of Oz,” when the world changes from black and white to the colorful and magical Land of Oz.

For almost 250 miles from the time we crossed the big river we would not fly over an airstrip, a road, a cabin or any sign of human impact on this incredible land. We were soon a few thousand feet above the Mackenzie Valley. Bogs of this lowland gave way to lumpy brown hills and then ever-increasing elevation as the earth rose up to meet us at our cruising altitude. The lee ridges of the taller peaks were still bunkered with snow and the highest peaks curled around sheets of permanent ice. Downslope from walls of granite was the forest unbroken, more black than green, carpeting everything below the granite and tundra of the mountaintops. As we flew on, the fingers of forest seemed to slide down-slope and the landscape gradually became a carpet of rolling tundra. Sometimes the tops of ridges were speckled with white dots,

which were Dall sheep. In steep creek valleys arcs of white ice were remnants of last winter's stream overflows. The pilot banked the plane and flew a hundred meters above and through a mountain pass. We watched a herd of caribou run pell mell downslope. At almost the same instant, the pontoons actually grazed the tops of a willow thicket as the pilot slammed the plane down on to "No Name Tarn" with the aplomb of a baseball player sliding into home. Those of us who had seatbelts were thrown against them, as barrels and canoes strained against their tie down straps. Quickly the plane settled into the water and the flying was over. The pilot taxied toward a gravel beach and spun the plane around by applying forward thrust to one prop and reverse thrust to the other. The turbines were powered down and we were left with our ears ringing, the sticky smell of turbo fuel and the whistle of propellers spinning unchecked. The pilot warned us to stay clear of those spinning blades, which still had the capacity to sever a limb or decapitate a careless passenger who wandered into their reach. The water was shallow. With the plane still 20 feet from the beach, we set up a brigade to pass the barrels, packs and paddles to shore. Pilots never linger. Despite the thin air at this high altitude, the empty planes lifted off that small lake like rockets, and almost as quickly disappeared into the sky taking all sound and smell with them. The air was still and cold, and a beautiful yet empty landscape beckoned in every direction. Our voices were the only sound and they had a sharp edge, our bodies the only movement. There was no smell, it was as if we were in outer space, or living on the surface of a glossy photograph. I wondered why there were no birds. I assumed it was too cold for bugs. The sky was unrealistically clear, as if it was not there. An hour before midnight, north of the Arctic Circle, the sun hung low in the northwest, and brought little warmth.

In the excitement of unloading I had been warm, even overheated, but a chill was in the air, and I became aware of hunger. Denny and I pitched the tent. Our group had rented six identical mountain tents from the canoe outfitter. They were serviceable if not elegant. Two of the guys, I couldn't remember their names, had no luck catching any grayling so our first night's repast would already be out of a bag, a chicken noodle hot dish, prepared on the gas stove. Discussion revolved around water levels. This was the earliest descent ever attempted, but Toby and Steve insisted that the lake level was lower than it had been five years ago in early August, and that the snowmelt and runoff seemed to a large extent finished already. Above the lake there were elephant sized drifts and the tundra was almost universally saturated. A patch of ground that appeared dry would become like a soaked sponge when you sat for a just a moment. But moving water was absent and the gullies in the hills were conspicuously dry.

The following morning, we paddled across the lake to its outlet. The outlet really consisted of a tussocky random marsh without any discernable current. We spent all morning dragging the boats over the soggy ground, occasionally finding enough water to paddle in. More often, even in the watery places, we were wading and pushing or pulling the canoes along. By mid-afternoon, a sinewy channel had emerged and we could at least float the boats with us inside, sometimes paddling, sometimes pushing and poling our way around each bend of the creek. We slept that night on a gravel bar, eschewing the tents. Deep on a valley floor at midnight it became dark enough for the sky to turn cobalt blue and cold enough that by morning moist air from our breathing had frosted the tops of our sleeping bags. Motionless, I marveled about a land so quietly extraordinary. Also, I worried about how poorly we were getting along as a group. I wondered if it ran deeper than petty feelings of

nationality. Maybe it was the lack of women. Women have a way of civilizing a wilderness trip. Camps are tidier, dishes are cleaner, talk is more polite. By their mere presence, women civilize men. But this was a competitive group. We had already learned that Andre could carry a ninety-pound pack while portaging and 80-pound canoe, uphill at a trot. Bragging, sarcasm and shirking camp duties were the rules of the day. We had witnessed Philippe fly-fishing on no-name tarn while standing on the bowplate of the canoe! After hearing much testimony, we were willing to concede that Toby had a dick that was the pride and joy of the Province of British Columbia, but his blow by blow accounts of his conquests were becoming tiresome. I doubted that even if women were present, this crew would act anymore civil. Hard to know, but I was convinced that despite the raw beauty of this land, it was difficult to enjoy anything if your crew was not getting along. I second-guessed my investment of time and money for such an unpleasant endeavor.

The next day in some ways was better. Side creeks had swollen the Flying Cloud to a bona fide creek, and a lively current kept us entertained and busy. Before lunch, our progress was stymied by overflow ice and we eventually had to push and squeeze our canoes through tunnels. I was irritated that we had not brought an ax, which would have simplified the process. Shortly after lunch, we encountered the first canyon of the Flying Cloud. Our little river was a turquoise ribbon, and it flushed into the mouth of the canyon with a playful spirit. Before scouting the rapid, Steve suggested that we get out our spray decks and affix them to the canoes, he also requested that we dig out our helmets as there were several sharp drops in this canyon and a spill was not out of the question. As all the other paddlers dug into their barrels for their helmets, I looked at Denny, and then over to our French companions. They were

bent over with mirth and looked toward us with smirks and derision. I thought for a moment that they might have stowed our helmets away and that they would triumphantly pull them from their gear and the chilly gestalt of this group would thaw. But no, it was just a stupid prank of which we were the butt. We would run this rapid and others beyond, without the safety of helmets. I flushed with anger, but I had to remind myself that in my first few decades of paddling I did not even own a helmet. I needed to trust myself that I would be fine without one on this trip. Nevertheless, it was a flaming metaphor for this journey. I wondered if I could last three weeks without throwing a punch at one of these jokers.

The first canyon passed without incident unless complaining about low water and low thrills counted as an incident. The next two days were more of the same.

Everything changed on Day 5.

The watershed for the Flying Cloud River is to the lee of the Mackenzie Mountains. Westerly winds bring moisture from the Pacific, but this moisture is wrung out as the air is pushed upslope and cooled. The eastern slope would be a desert, but because it is so far north, even sparse winter snows slowly accumulate over eight months and then melt in the brief summer creating a verdant valley. During the last ice age when almost all of Canada and the northern portion of the United States was buried under an ice sheet miles thick, the valley of the Flying Cloud River remained glacier free. The lack of glaciation explains why the canyons have an odd resemblance to the American southwest and look distinctly unarctic-like. Misty days and short thunderstorms are not uncommon during the summer months on the Flying Cloud River, but sustained accumulating rain is rare.

The air had been still the evening of our fourth day on the river, and it was the warmest of the trip. Mosquitoes had

reached nuisance levels, and everyone pitched their tents. A gentle rain began about midnight and carried on throughout the night. Using two canoes as supports and three telescoping poles, we strung a tarp to shield us from the rain and had a hot breakfast of oatmeal, raisins, cinnamon, and chunks of dark brown sugar, all washed down with black tea. It was getting colder and rain continued as we struck camp. We were anxious to get into our canoes with the weather protection the “cockpits” provided. We all assumed as the sun climbed higher, the rain would dissipate and the blue sky and warm sun would return.

The weather did not improve. The opposite occurred. Rain, sometimes heavy, fell all day. It was a bumpy section of the river, and we were in and out of the boats several times, scouting rapids. Despite our rain gear, we were a soggy crew by dinner.

As we had traveled downstream the protected slopes of the valley were now thickly forested and the riverbanks were littered with driftwood. We had planned to cook most of our meals in a steel firebox over burning driftwood. Using a fire pan or firebox avoids leaving behind scars of fire rings and blackened stones on the riverbank. A firebox also provides a stable and hot cooking platform.

We camped on a gravel bar about four feet above the level of the river. As we had done every evening, we unloaded, pulled up and flipped all the canoes. Our campsite that night did not seem like a wise choice to me as the river, which just yesterday was Caribbean turquoise, was now swirling butterscotch and had to be rising. I immediately walked to the edge of the gravel bar and by stacking stones built a little Inukshuk, a statue of a man, with his feet just touching the water.

It is madness to travel in the bush without at least a three-quarter sized axe and preferably a full-sized one. I had been

convinced via e-mail that with the abundant driftwood and the small dimensions of the firebox the only tools needed were a small handsaw, and the camping implement which I consider an abomination, a hatchet.

After 18 hours of rain, the only natural way to build, and even maintain a fire is to cut down dead standing timber and split out dry wood from the center of the logs. The Canadians were monkeying around with the stupid firebox, the hatchet and sodden driftwood. I was not optimistic, and I wanted a fire. Under my Gore-Tex rain gear, I was wearing a thin wetsuit but everything was soaked, and I was tired, hungry and cold. Toby, Steve, Gary and the two Frenchmen were in drysuits and warm and dry, the rest of us, wet and cold.

Denny's comment, "Screw the firebox, let's build a real fire!" fell on deaf ears.

I thought I might be able to use the head of the hatchet as a wedge and with a rock split some larger logs but when I asked for the hatchet, I got no response. When I walked over to Toby, he passed the hatchet back to Gary.

Resentments, pent-up frustrations, and hostility permeated the air. I felt as if we were in the pregnant pause just preceding the shootout at the OK Corral. As much as I agreed with Denny about building a fire, with just a hatchet our odds of building an open-fire were not much greater than the sputtering effort in the firebox. But, by God, I wanted to give it a try. I locked in, eye to eye with Toby.

Just then we were interrupted when Jean-Luc's roaring gas stove had tea water boiling. Turning inward, the deepest corner of our ingenious tarp shelter seemed warmed by the steam. We drank hot tea and our emotions if not cooled, simmered without boiling over. We had planned to eat up the remainder of our fresh beef as it had been thawed for a couple of days already. Jean-Luc insisted that boiling the beef would be "noo prableem"

on his single burner stove. The anticipation of food further quelled the conflict, and most of us left to set-up tents as Jean-Luc cut up the meat. We spent the next two hours boiling the meat, making rice, and eating in three shifts. It was midnight when we finished and when I glanced toward the river not only was the Inukshuk gone, but the river had risen almost to the level of the gravel bar. Then things started happening fast. There was no longer even time to argue.

The gravel bar was like a giant table and once the “legs” of the table were submerged the top was rapidly being inundated. Tents were taken down in record time. Canoes were untied and flipped over and almost at the same moment, floating. We managed to collect everything and ferry all the gear and boats to the mainland but not without mishap. The riverbank was way up in the willows, and it was a steep, greasy climb with the river’s current pulling at the haphazardly loaded boats. Art slid right down and into the river when willows he was pulling gave way. It was two in the morning when we finally had all the gear and boats piled 20 vertical feet above the river on a steep slope.

There was no place for a tent, but Denny and I put one up anyway. We pushed the willows down rather than trying to break or cut them for fear any sharp ends would harpoon us right through the tent nylon. Fortunately, the sleeping bags were dry, and eventually, my shivering stopped, and I slept the sleep of the dead.

The sun was out on Day 6 and water glistened everywhere. The willows were so wet that they drenched anything they brushed. I was late getting up but somehow the Canadians had the firebox going and cowboy coffee brewing. The scene around camp had the look of a third world market with tarps, tent flies, wet suits and Polartec draped everywhere. But just as soon, the clouds closed in again, and the air threatened rain, but no rain came. The clouds broke and blue sky returned. The

Flying Cloud River was running bank to bank across the entire valley. It was a boiling swirling torrent with the look of heavily creamed coffee. Debris was smattered across the churning river's surface. Without even talking I knew this would be a layover day and I was already looking for a flat clearing to repitch the tent. Last night was okay as a bivouac, but we could do better for tonight.

However, I was astonished to see Jean-Luc stowing his tent. Then I heard Toby announcing that his barometer was dropping again and more rain was imminent. "We've got to get through the second canyon today, or we could be stuck here for the summer!"

Was this guy crazy? I walked down to the riverbank with Art and we looked out over a river that was easily ten times as wide as it was the night before. In the distance, still shrouded in mist was the maw of the second canyon.

I didn't say a word, but Art turned to me and muttered, "It looks like bloody Mordor!"

An hour later, we had all launched on to the flood-swollen Flying Cloud River. We followed each other in a long line. Our thigh straps were tight, our canoe covers snug around our chests, and my mind was full of foreboding. I doubt anyone thought this was a good idea, but quarreling had become so tiresome we just quietly packed up and paddled downriver. Life is like that; fight, fight, fight, and then surrender; save, save, save and then splurge; talk, talk, talk and then shut-up. We were all in the shut-up, splurge, surrender phase. In the distance, two enormous flatirons marked the beginning of the second canyon. As we watched, the entire broad river funneled between those flatirons. It was as if we were watching dirty water going down a massive drain.

Even before we entered the canyon, we could feel the river's pulse, a swell and then a subsidence. At this point,

although not physically committed, we were mentally “in,” and no one was turning back. As we passed into the canyon’s maw the motion began to slow, ahead we could see an edge, not a sharp horizon that might be caused by a ledge, but more like a gentle rise in the river as if the water was defying gravity and pulling us upward. The motion of the river was spellbinding, and as we blithely entered into the canyon, the bow rose gently up and then the canoe slid down the backside of this swollen wave like a bus going over a hill. From canyon wall to canyon wall the river was smooth. All the rocks that typically created rapids were deeply submerged by the flooded river. The second swell was twice as large and more abrupt, and the third more like a roller coaster with a froth along its crest and the fourth even more so. All we could see ahead of us now was a wall of water, and our paddling effort was entirely focused on keeping the 18-foot canoe parallel with the current. One wave was so steep that even as we were hurling down the river we actually started sliding backward on the wave, so much so that the stern completely submerged and I was briefly underwater, while Denny in the bow was thrust into the air like a breaching whale. In a solo whitewater playboat the move would be called a stern squirt but on this big expedition canoe it was just terrifying. It was dumb luck that we kept the canoe from rolling. In the troughs of these waves, it was as if we were in an ocean storm with walls of water twenty feet high ahead, and behind us. We were sliding down one long wave just as a surfer might, when I looked ahead and saw calmer water and just caught a glance of the stern of a canoe disappearing around a bend in the canyon. First, I felt relief thinking we were already coming out of the canyon, but then I became aware of a new sound. The splash of the river, our constant yelling for draw strokes and braces would have masked any normal sound, but the roar coming down the canyon was so overwhelming, so powerful that we stopped

paddling and dropped our lower jaws. It was as if we were "Nellie" bound by rope to a railroad track and we could hear the thundering locomotive relentlessly approaching. Although we had stopped paddling, we had not stopped moving. The current swept us around the canyon bend with a swerving push. Plastered river-right, against the canyon wall were the five other canoes, and to our horror, across the canyon from one wall to the other was an uninterrupted recirculating white wave. Twisting and rolling in the curl of this wave were all sorts of debris scoured from the banks of the Flying Cloud: gnarled roots of spruce and willow, sheaths of bark, entire logs cleanly pruned of limbs by the spinning of the wave. Like socks in a dryer, objects kept coming around again and again, trapped by the recirculating hydraulic force of the wave. We dug deep with our paddles and careened into our companions grabbing the gunwales of Toby and Steve's canoe. They were pressed directly against the canyon wall that towered 200 feet upwards. There was nothing to grip on the rock face. I noticed that both of them were clinging to willow branches, which were extending up through the water from bushes submerged below. With our canoe no longer moving with the current I could again sense the pulse of the river. A surge of water pushing us upward would be followed by an ease of energy and a sinking, over and over again. Our flotilla of six boats rocked up and down with each throb. The lack of talk prevalent earlier was broken by everyone yelling at once. Our canoe was outermost. We had nothing to grab on to but the gunwales of the inner boats. With the action of the river, the rails of the canoe were chattering against each other, and sometimes riding up and catching and tangling the straps holding down the spray decks. The paddlers in the only two boats actually up against the wall were straining to hold the canoes fast but when the current got a grip on the hulls of the outer boats the entire flotilla would begin to peel off

the wall. Sometimes only by extended paddles and frantic grips did we keep the group intact and upstream of the crashing wave.

To escape by paddling upstream was impossible. Even if we could have gotten the boats turned around before being sucked into the wave, it would be impossible to make headway against this current. We would have slid backward into the wave, rolled and drowned. To climb out, up the nearly vertical cliff walls, was impossible, and to try to punch through that standing wave would have been suicide, although Toby kept yelling that we needed to try just that. He was usually a kayaker, and maybe in a lighter boat, he could possibly power through a hole like what we faced. These lumbering expedition boats would have turned and rolled, and all of the canoeists in the group knew it.

We did carry a satellite phone but we would need to risk our lives to ferret it out from under Art and Jack's spray deck, and for what? Even if we could get reception in this canyon, the best we could hope for was to raise the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) detachment in Fort Confidence 200 miles away. It would take several hours for a helicopter to be dispatched and to reach us and what could they do then? This canyon was much too tight for any basket rescue.

I was convinced we needed to wait. Eventually, the river would recede, and the wave would morph back into something we could safely navigate. Despite the dropping barometer, the sky above was blue and no rain had fallen for several hours. Why take a chance? We needed just to wait this out. In the chaos of conversation, it seemed as if at least the Canadians agreed with me. However, I began to hear a chorus of, "We must climb the cliff!"

This idea of climbing the cliff was madness. I did my four-letter best to shut it down. But when the idea persisted I tried to reason with my companions, "Hey, we can just cling to these

willows and wait it out, look at how steep that rock face is! Climbing the cliff is as impossible as paddling through that wave.”

But it wasn't, and three events proved me wrong.

First, a willow branch broke free and sent two canoes caroming toward the abyss. An outstretched paddle and the Herculean grip of Art was the only thing that saved four of us from certain death. Clinging to these willows only gave us the appearance of safety. I saw the other options as choices, but failed to realize that just holding on was also a choice and not necessarily a safe choice. It was a painful reminder to me of many times in my life when, rather than face the unknown; I cowered in the apparent safety of the familiar. By doing so, I was making a choice, and regarding my life aspirations, it was perhaps a dangerous choice.

Secondly, the idea that the river would recede anytime soon was wishful thinking. In fact, in the time that we were arguing, the diameter of the willows seemed to be shrinking. The river was still rising.

I also had discounted the option of climbing the cliff based on my own fears. Two individuals, dear to me had died in tragic mountaineering accidents. My best friend, Brady Shea, died on a granite face near Independence Pass in Colorado and my brother-in-law, Bob Deal, lost his life while climbing Symmetry Spire in the Grand Tetons. Rivers, not mountains, were my domain.

I was already uncomfortable, isolated and insecure in this group, and a man does not easily move from a position of insecurity to one of greater jeopardy. But I had overlooked much. Most importantly I had overlooked the fact that Jean-Luc and Philippe were world-class alpinists. I also did not see a shelf on the cliff just eight feet above the boats. The shelf was a mere 12 inches wide, but it extended with a gradual incline

sixty feet upstream until it diminished at a place where the wall was fractured. This rock shelf would provide a stable stage for mooring the canoes and for the climbing soon to follow. What was becoming most obvious now was, climbing the cliff was our only chance.

All of the canoes were equipped with throw bags containing 75 feet of 3/8 inch Spectra rope. Jean-Luc climbed up to the shelf with the ease of a squirrel and affixed one of the ropes securely to the crack in the cliff wall. Utilizing this one secure anchor and a few of the stouter willows we were able to pull the boats back to single and double-wide instead of triple-wide, tying up front to back, and thwart to thwart with our short bow and stern lines. By the time we had finished this process, I was amazed to look up the cliff and see that both Jean-Luc and Philippe had vanished and all that remained on the cliff face was a zigzagging rope secured whenever possible to knobs, cracks and tenacious roots. It was an amazing moment made more so by what happened next.

From the unseen cliff top, the two Frenchmen were lowering objects down the canyon wall. Attached to the end of the last of the ropes were two things, their helmets. When the helmets got to the boats, we saw a message written on them with a grease pen: "For Rob and Denny". Now it may seem strange in this time of crisis that Jean-Luc and Philippe would take the time to write our names on the helmets, but that small gesture made all the difference. Worried that climbing up the sometimes loose rock, of the cliff might dislodge a stone, which would become a dangerous projectile to those below, Jean-Luc and Philippe knew that helmets would provide some protection. This kind gift had a galvanizing effect on the group. For the first time, a spirit of selflessness permeated the air. With Jean-Luc and Philippe on belay from above, one by one we attached the loose rope to our life jackets and scaled the cliff.

When we were all safely on top, we were also connected in a way that had not yet happened on the water. Glad to be alive and finally glad to be together, we celebrated with laughter and playfulness that had been sorely absent earlier.

The group decided that Jean-Luc would go back down and retrieve food for dinner. Provisions would provide us with the luxury of time to wait for the river to drop. However, on his return and with a heavy pack on his back one of the rope anchors pulled out and Jean-Luc fell a short distance. The 3/8 inch line had cut into his palm as if it was a cheese slicer, and he was forced to leave the pack below. Denny would now need the medical kit to properly stitch up Jean-Luc's hand. The medical kit was in a barrel beneath the spray cover on our boat. Instead of trying to go down and retrieve a single pack we hatched a grander plan.

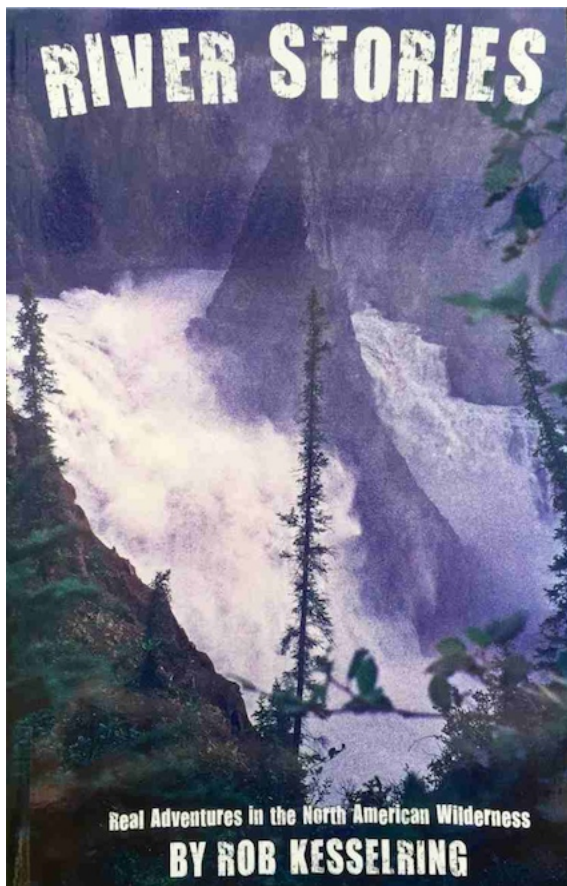
Denny, Steve, and Philippe rappelled down the cliff and unloaded the boats and passed the barrel-packs up to the rock shelf. It wasn't long before Art whose real job was as an engineer for Pratt-Whitney, devised a leveraged pulley system that worked so well that in a couple of hours we had hauled up not only all the packs but the six canoes as well. This was a wise move as the following morning the river was still high and had we not gotten out of that canyon, progress would have been impossible for several days.

We still had a difficult portage ahead of us through two miles of untracked wilderness, but our moods were buoyant, and the bushwhacking was fun.

Over the next two weeks, we joked, we helped each other without being asked. We told our stories without sarcasm or rancor. Frederick took a movie of three of our boats simultaneously bow-surfing a big friendly wave, and I taught everyone how to bake bannock in front of a fire. Mostly we talked, not about gear or whitewater maneuvers, but about

death, and love and life. When we reached the Mackenzie River and half of us caught a launch upstream to Fort Confidence. The other half continued toward Inuvik. It was with tears in our eyes that we said farewell. Although I was not blessed with brothers, I shall always have a brotherly space in my heart for those eleven paddlers and the summer of my fiftieth year.

When I am asked what was my favorite part of that trip, I must reply that it was the climbing of that cliff. The very initiative that I had so opposed, and what I was so afraid of, became a highlight of my life. It made me wonder about my 50 years and the many instances where I had chosen to "cling to the willows". Maybe some of that was necessary, but when I think back over those years, the choices I remember most proudly were those moments when "I climbed the cliff".



Rob Kesselring, respected outdoor writer and speaker, has paddled 120 rivers - including 29 north of sixty degrees latitude. In this, his second book, Rob weaves together seventeen stories of river running adventure and wilderness camping techniques. The collection includes the story, A River Runs Through It, one of the most rejected and funniest stories ever written.

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