

I have always liked canoes. I've never been interested in boats. I bought my first canoe when I was 18. Most of my canoes have been full sized at around 17 feet. That is good for two people but heavy for one. A canoe that big can be difficult for one guy to handle in rough water or high wind. I've done a lot of solo canoeing. I bought a 15 foot Bell canoe a week or two before my 60th birthday. You know, one of those presents for yourself kind of deals. This one is a dual purpose canoe. Generally shorter and narrower than a normal canoe but still big enough for two if not loaded to heavy. I purchased a 13 foot canoe once thinking it would be a good size for one man, but it wasn't. Thirteen feet is too short to handle in rough water on large lakes. A hard wind can spin it around between strokes. This canoe seemed just right.

The Bell brand has a reputation as a premium quality canoe and they are made close to my farm in Minnesota. I have opinions about canoes. The beautiful wooden ones are too pretty for the rough trips I take. I know I'd beat a wooden canoe up too much. I don't like aluminum, they are so noisy. Fiberglass will crack on rocks and the thick plastics are rugged but heavy to carry. Kevlar canoes always impressed me as fragile. I guess I find it hard to have confidence in canoe that I can see daylight through. But I think what bothers me most about Kevlar is the type of guys who use them. They seem to be real urban yuppies that have the "best" of everything. I don't want the same type of canoe that they use. This Bell canoe is plastic but relatively tough and light. Actually it turned out to be incredibly tough.

In the years when time allows I try to spend my birthday canoeing alone in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area (BWCA) of northern Minnesota. My birthday is on May 13th. The lakes are just opening up; in fact one year I pushed my canoe across miles of rotten ice. The BWCA is not crowded on my birthday and the fishing is good. I planned a three day trip.

I put in on the Temperance River about mid afternoon and headed upstream. The distance from my farm in central Minnesota is about 250 miles and I started the drive at daybreak. I wasn't in a rush. The winter ice had opened up a week before and the river was overfull and running strong. It was my intention to travel a few miles and a few portages then pick a camp site for the night. The weather was typical for spring in Northern Minnesota, cool and moist.

The first portage was about ½ mile upstream from my entrance point. I made the portage and reloaded my canoe. When traveling into the wilderness, with a loaded canoe, I always run a safety line from bow to stern. I run the line, a light rope, through a loop or handle on each piece of gear. That way if the canoe is capsized or fills with water while shooting rapids I can salvage my equipment. In case you are wondering, Yes, I have saved my equipment a number of times in just such a way. In early spring these frigid rivers can be full of surprises. More than a couple of times I have come upon significant rapids too late to pull out and portage. A good paddler can survive a lot of white water but you can't be worrying about your equipment while doing so. Your entire focus has got to be on keeping the canoe upright. If the rapids are exceptionally rough it is generally helpful if the canoe scoops and fills with water. An upright canoe, full of water, is quite stable. You will be wet and mighty cold when you reach the pool below and you'll need your gear to recover.

As I pushed off above this rapid, I had the safety line through everything except a couple pieces of fishing gear and my favorite green travel mug. According to Gail, my daughter Shannon gave the green insulated cup to me years before. I often keep a cup handy to scoop a cold drink from the lake from time to time. I often paddle hard.

The fishing equipment was about to become a big problem. As I pushed off, the sting of a rod caught on some alder brush on the upstream side. I intended to start fishing in the pond just ahead. In the short time that it took to un snag the line, the fast moving water took me into the mouth of the rapids. I wasn't particularly concerned though. I am a strong paddler. I figured I could ferry across the stream and catch a hold on a large and mostly submerged deadfall on the opposite side. The river was only about 20 yards wide at this point. As I crossed the river I noticed that another huge deadfall lay across the entire width of the stream. This enormous white pine had been blown down in the big blow of 1999. In that summer, a terrific straight line wind had flattened hundreds of thousands of acres of the BWCA. Normally this dead tree was a couple feet above the water. Today the river was so high that it hit the tree about midway and then generated a huge roll of violent water. Dead limbs stuck out from the pine at close spacing along its entire length. It looked like a wooden porcupine.

I reached the opposite side of the river and grabbed a limb on the mostly submerged deadfall. Don't be confused here. There are two deadfalls in this story. The 1999 deadfall that spans the river just above the rapids and the much older deadfall that I am depending on until I get set for my upstream escape. My location now was so close to the rapids that the current the center was moving faster than a man could paddle. My plan was to work the canoe upstream by following the edge of the stream where the water moved slower. It would be a challenge but I had done it before.

I was positioning the canoe with one hand, preparing for the upstream push and hanging onto the limb with my other arm.

Then, the damn rotten limb broke. Instantly, the canoe swung into the stream. I was in big trouble.

In seconds I was going to hit the gigantic water roll in front of the deadfall. When I was younger, stronger, quicker and more foolish I might have tried some evasive measure although I don't know what that would have been. The cross-river deadfall was sure to have limbs and rocks beneath it. Getting caught in this thing and then going under it had the potential to be a fatal situation.

I sacrificed the canoe and shot for what looked to be the best place to grab a hold on the deadfall and pull myself onto it. I made contact and fought through the limbs. When I reached the topside and relative safety I looked back to see what had become of my canoe. It was caught in the roll and being crushed against the breaking limbs of the tree. One end was well down in the water. The other end was a couple feet up in the air and the open topside of the canoe was facing upstream. The force of the oncoming water was pushing it down stream with tons of force. It had an ominous reverse bend along the beam that lead me to believe it would soon break in half. There were enough broke limbs digging into it from the tree side to make it stable. It was pinned, literally.

I worked for a half hour or so breaking off limbs on the top side of tree. I cleared enough so I could walk along the tree from dry land to the near end of the canoe. I reached as best I could along underwater portion of the canoe and could find no punctures. Even so, I expected that it was only a matter of time until the force of the water pushed one or more broken limbs through the floor of the canoe.

With another hour's work I was able to salvage most of my equipment including a hand saw. The safety line had saved my equipment but I could not free my canoe.

I recalled that I passed a camp when I put in so I decided to go back for help.

That is not as simple as you might think. There aren't really any beaches in the BWCA. The lakes were gouged out of granite by glaciers and not all that long ago. In most places, and this was one of them, there is no passable foot route along the shore. The camp I had in mind was only about a ½ mile south so I set off cross county on a direct line. Most of that route was through swamp and bog. That would have been difficult enough but the blow down had made it a jungle.

I reached the other side exactly at the location of the camp. The site was occupied by a family of four, a man, a woman and their two teenage sons. When I broke out of the brush the woman was alone in the camp. I scared the hell out of the poor lady. I was soaking wet from the river and covered with mud from the bog. I suppose I had a few sticks and branches hanging on me from fighting through a thousand deadfalls. The poor woman remarked that she thought that way was impassable. Well, I suppose under normal conditions you could say that was true.

The father and the boys were down at the water's edge. I asked if they would help me. They were a nice family and of course they said they would. They had two canoes. We returned to the upstream portage, the father and I in one canoe, the two boys in the other.

The boys stayed in their canoe and searched the downstream pool for my paddles. They found two of the three paddles I had brought in, plus a seat cushion. They waited to capture my canoe on the assumption that we would free it. We worked at it pretty hard. I went as far underwater as I dared cutting off submerged limbs. We were not making much progress. Then two men showed up on their way downstream. These guys were country boys, either farmers or construction workers. They were strong, tough and didn't care much about cold water. The man and boys from the camp were perfectly nice people and were willing to do anything they could to help me but they were town folks. If you don't know the difference or believe there is a difference I can't explain it to you.

The two country boys understood the situation immediately and got right into the river with me. The three of us got as deep as we could, and struggled hard breaking the limbs and moving the boulders that held the canoe. When we thought there might be enough room for the canoe to pass under the deadfall we pushed the top end of the canoe against the current and the underwater end deeper into the channel. The canoe twisted terribly and disappeared, finally sucked under the dead tree. I figured for certain the back of the canoe would be broken. Even if it were still intact here was no assurance it would emerge at the bottom of the rapid. It could stay hooked somewhere out of sight until summertime.

Within seconds it popped up at the end of the rapid. The boys brought it to shore. We dumped the water and did a little straightening. The canoe was perfectly fine except for a few gouges, none of which was particularly deep.

The country boys were gone. I don't believe we spoke except a few words of communication as we labored to free the canoe. They spoke central Minnesotan. That's all I know.

I thanked the father and sons, made the portage a second time and headed upstream.

O! I should mention that Bell makes a fine canoe and that the boys in the canoe found my green cup

It was just my lucky day.