

Trent-Severn Canal 2009 Canoe Trip
September 8-13, 2009



Route Map from Couchiching Lock to Port Severn and Return

Tuesday, Sept 8th. - Geri drove Norm over to the west side of Ottawa to the Carp Rd gas station by 8:30 am where Wayne was waiting with his car and trailer. Once loaded up with Norm's canoe and equipment, we were off to Couchiching Lock, located just north of Orillia, to start our venture. On route, we stopped in Lindsay to buy some groceries and by the time we arrived at the lock, it was only 2:15 pm.



Wayne & Norm

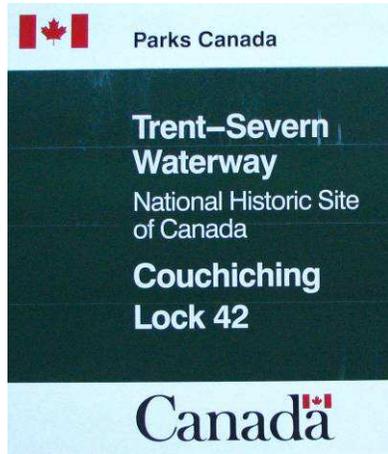


Trent-Severn Cribbage Tournament

After setting up our campsite on the lawn near the lock washrooms, we drove over to Washago for supper where the steak pie was awesome - what a delicious meal. That evening, we commenced our Trent-Severn Cribbage Tournament that would end at the end of our trip. We also met three ladies who had just completed the second day of a 14-day kayaking trek from Port Severn to Trenton. One of their kayaks encountered a leak in the rudder seal that resulted in a sleeping bag and most of their clothing getting drenched. To ease their burden, six garbage bags were provided from our gear as well as an introduction to a sip of Yukon Jack.

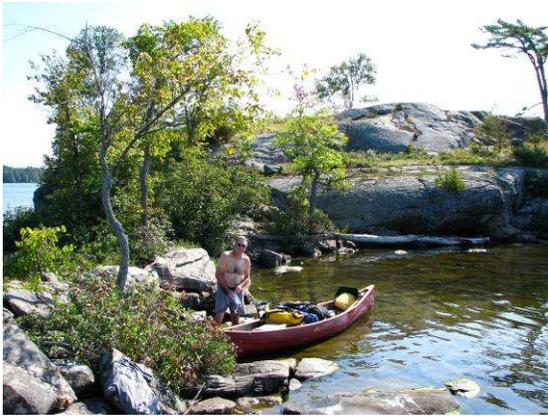
Wayne and I immediately thought of a fellow canoeing friend, John, when we heard the first freight train pass at 2 am, no further than a half km away, with whistle blazing and ground trembling. We thought of him even more so when the second train passed a half hour later. Both of us chuckled when we could hear John yell out, "I just don't believe it!"

Wed. Sept 9th. - With little sleep the first night, we still managed to get up early and have a hardy breakfast, decamp and portage our canoe and equipment down two sets of steep staircases to the lower locks.



Canoe packed at departure from Couchiching Lock

We completed the first 4-5 km paddle through a narrow cottage-laden channel without meeting any boats because the lock was still closed until 9 am. The three-mile wide crossing of Sparrow Lake was done under sunny, clear skies and we rewarded ourselves with a swim and snacks on a rocky, tree-swept island.



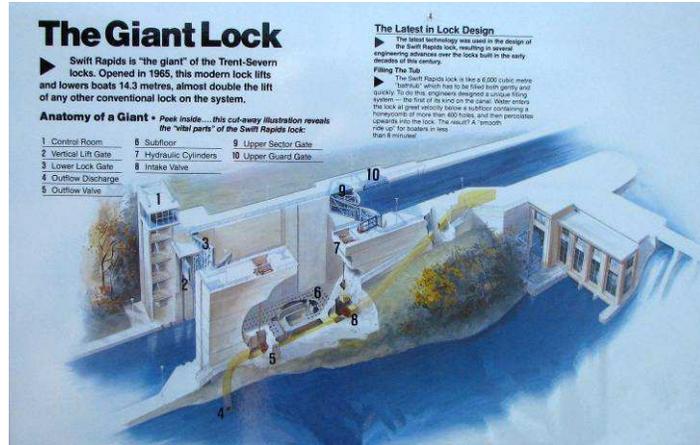
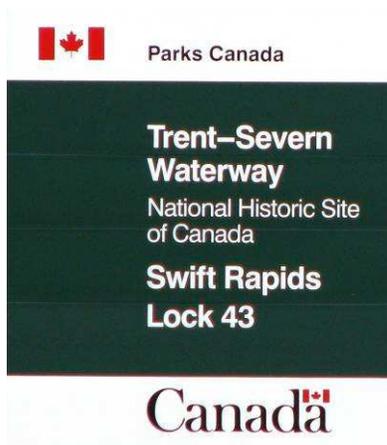
Swim & Snack Break



An Average Cottage with Boat

Wayne navigated our route with aerial maps and it was very easy to spot the channel buoys and markers along the way. Modest cottages had one or more boats moored at their docks or stored in boathouses. Labour Day had already passed and being mid-week, silence was everywhere and occasionally our attention was captivated with the sighting of osprey soaring in the high wind currents. Cottagers we did meet were very cordial and interested in our endeavour.

After paddling 24 km through a variety of waterways, either narrow, fast flowing, open lake, calm, or s-shaped as well as enjoying refreshing swims, we finally reached Swift Rapids Lock by 2:45 pm.



Swift Rapids Lock and Design

To portage around this lock, we would have had to carry the canoe and equipment over the narrow walkway atop the lock doors, down a staircase, a long, steep ramp and another staircase to a dock at the bottom of the lock. That wasn't the end. To get to the campsite, the canoe had to be repacked, paddled across the lock channel entrance to another wharf and unloaded. No way we were going to do that! Wayne and I decided to buy 2-way passes through this lock and the next one at Big Chute for \$21.80, not only to avoid the horrendous portaging, but also to partake the experiences of these two unique locks.



Approach from the lake to the Lock



Waiting for the Lock doors to Open



Double steel lock Doors



Long way Down

We were in awe at the height of the largest water-contained lock in the Trent-Severn Canal system, its depth being 47 feet. When emptied, 1.47 million gallons of water was dispersed out of the lock in a matter of 5-6 minutes. Once the humungous steel doors opened, we had an easy paddle to the campsite. We soon realized that the bathrooms were located at the top of the lock; therefore, a thigh-burning climb of a 72-step staircase would be required to reach them, followed by the return descent.

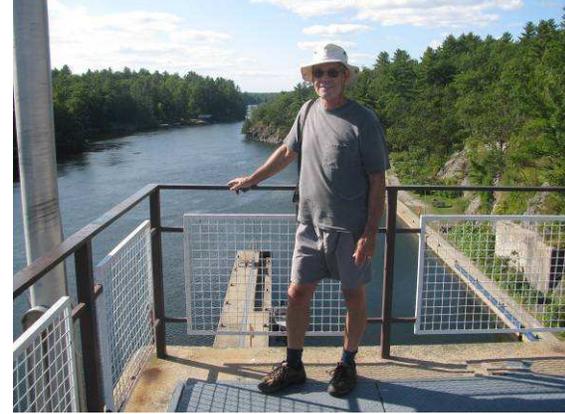
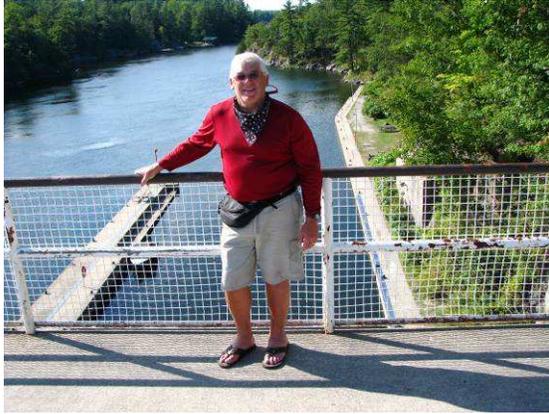


Norm & Wayne deep in the lock Chamber



View of the interior lock chamber and from the Exterior

Since there were no stores or hiking paths anywhere near this lock, we filled the time with swimming, cooking a good supper, playing cards, stargazing and meeting other boaters.



Norm & Wayne at the top of the Lock

Thurs. Sept 10th. –



Early Sunrise – above the Lock



Campsite below the Lock

We were on the water paddling by 7:30 am through narrow, twisting channels with fast flowing currents that ran downstream to our advantage. In retrospect, we were well aware of the ordeal we would encounter upon our return trip. We completed this 6 km paddle in 45 minutes, stopping in Severn Falls where we had coffee and met the new owner of the Riverhouse Restaurant. He promised to be ready for us upon our return trip with a meal of hand-cut fries and grade AAA beef hamburgers along with a Caesar salad.

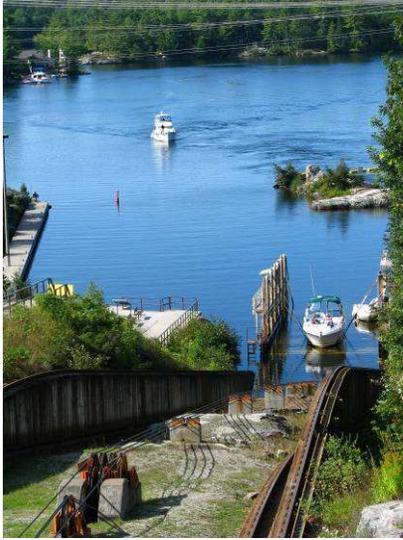


One of many breaks along the Way



Big Chute Rail System

The next 8 km had us at Big Chute Lock in no time. Not the typical water lock, this unique system consisted of a two-sided, open-ended flat-bed that rolled on two sets of rail tracks calculated at varying heights from one another. On the upper water level, the flat-bed entered the water and the vessel(s) slowly entered. Once the boats were secured, the flat-bed advanced on the tracks up and over the roadway to a level portion for a short distance, and then straight down at a sharp angle towards the lower waterway. To keep the flat-bed level and to prevent boats from sliding out, the front wheels rode on the higher track while the back wheels rode on the lower track. At the bottom, the flat-bed entered the water and the boats floated and continued on their way.



Boat entering the Flat-bed



Boat secured in a Sling on Flat-bed



Flat-bed stay level due to two-track system



Over the road to the water



Flat-bed submerged and boats leave



Our lone canoe at the wharf

When we entered the front portion of the flat-bed, we stayed in the canoe and had a fantastic panoramic view – what an experience!



Norm & Wayne in the Lift-bed



Up and Over



Submerging in the water and paddling away

Once we left the rail system, we soon entered an extremely narrow, rock-sided channel where the current ran the swiftest of all channels. Wouldn't you know it, we met two oncoming boats without any means for them to slow down, turn around or move out of the middle of the channel. When we maneuvered to the side to let them pass by, our canoe nearly capsized when it bounced off a couple of moss-covered, sleeper-rocks – the hull now has a couple of new war wounds to brag about.

The waterways soon widened and a change of cottage styles began to appear; no, more like huge, massive houses costing millions of dollars. The water was much cleaner; however, with more zebra mussels clinging to rocks. With the clearer water, this allowed more sunlight to enter the water depths and encouraged plant growth, but nothing like the over-grown Rideau Canal.



Cottages under construction along the Trent-Severn Canal



Port Severn Lock Station



Port Severn Harbour



Wayne next to the Lock

We reached Port Severn by 1:45 pm and the Lockmaster encouraged us to set up our tent in a very unique place next to the lock - photo speaks for itself.



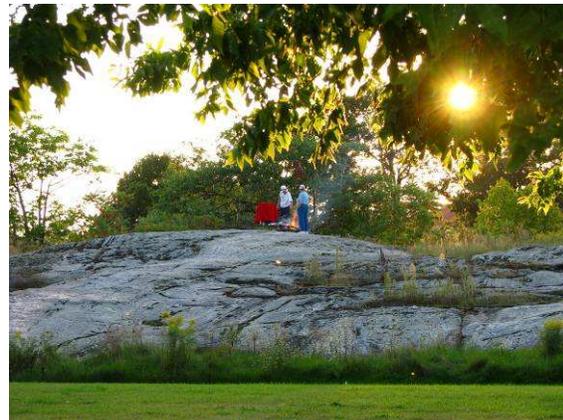
Port Severn accommodation – inside the Gazebo



Port Severn is not very big; however, it does have three restaurants - one for the very rich, another for people like Wayne and myself, and then a third where no one would really want to enter. However, it did have a beer store where we replenished the ice chest for the return trip. The fish and chips and spinach salad we had for supper at the Driftwood Cove Cafe were excellent and suited the occasion.



Blue Heron along the Shore



Campfire on the Ledge

The two boats we had met in the narrow channel returned later in the day. These boaters were very social and they invited us to their bonfire later that evening on a ridge next to the dock and our tent. We called it a day by 9:30 pm and the cool breeze from the direction of Georgian Bay kept us inside our sleeping bags throughout the night!



Georgian Bay Sunset

Fri. Sept 11th. - Wayne and I were decamped inside the tent prior to 6 am and when we emerged, we saw one of the most gorgeous sunrises over Port Severn.



A 6 am Sunrise upon Port Severn

After a quick breakfast, we were paddling by 7:30 am upon calm waters out of the harbour just as the sun broke over the ridge. We found that it was much easier to navigate on the return trip, having remembered landmarks and channels. We did come across a fisherman who was working like the devil with bent rod in hand trying desperately to bring in a large mouth bass - and a good one at that! The smile on his face said it all as he raised the fish high over his head towards us!

With strong, steady strokes, we were soon back in the narrow channel, paddling hard against the oncoming current until we reached the top and out onto the open water. Upon entering the bay to Big Chute Lock, the flat-bed was already carrying a boat to the top level; however, our wait was short-lived. It was just as exciting going up the flat-bed as it was going down. At the top, we docked our canoe and had lunch on the wharf, then wandered about to watch more boats go up and down this intriguing lock/rail system.



Waiting for the Lift-bed to Descend



Up the Rail System



Two rail-track system



On the other side, submerged and paddling



Lunch on the dock at Big Chute

The 45-minute rest at this lock was worthwhile because we were about to enter the 14-km swifter current channel until we reached the Swift Rapids Lock. At this time of the morning, we encountered more fishing boats and some larger watercraft that provided bigger wakes. We took our time and met the wakes head-on without incident. The last stretch before reaching Severn Falls seemed to be the hardest to paddle, especially under the train trestle.



Lunch at the Riverhouse Restaurant



Wayne looking for the Canoe

At last, we were back at the Riverhouse Restaurant with the owner greeting us at the door. When told we only had 45 minutes to place our order and eat, if we were to make it to Swift Rapids Lock before the 3 pm closing, he immediately went into preparing our meals. When Wayne and Norm returned from buying a few staples at the store across the road, our meals were on the table.....by far, the best tasting hamburgers and fries and salad we have ever eaten. Back on the water by 1:30 pm, we experienced some bigger wakes, even though the boat operators were trying their best to respect our much smaller canoe. Sometimes when these larger vessels go slow, they create much bigger wakes than when they travel faster.....go figure. We did enjoy the return trip, seeing the landscape and cottages in a different perspective.



Cottage with a fantastic view



Summer home along the canal

We arrived at Big Chute Lock in ample time to enter an empty lock and experience the water level rise up 47 feet in the chamber. What an eerie feeling being in such an enclosed, dark, damp cavity with no means to get out until the water in the lock became level with the lake surface. We camped at the point closest to the lake where we had a refreshing swim as well as the best canoe launch for the following morning. We decided to tie our food bag to a limb overhanging the lake as we were forewarned that a bear had been seen the previous night.



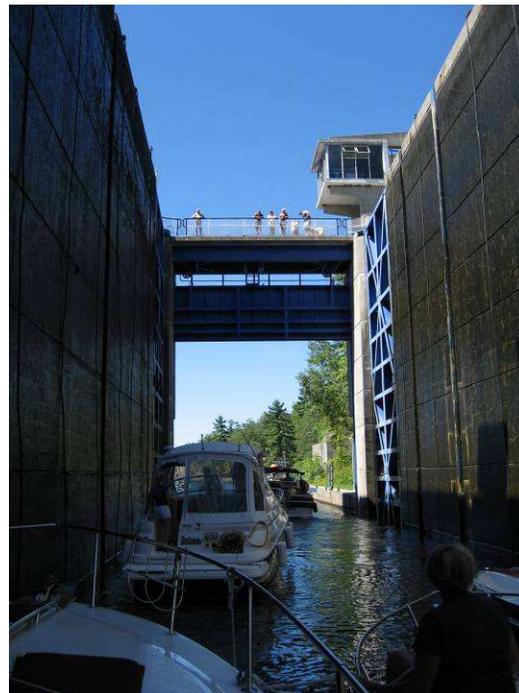
Waiting for the lock doors to open



Approach the lock chamber



Entering the dungeon-like chamber



Back view of the Chamber

A couple our age had their yacht docked at the lock entrance next to our campsite and their month old puppy kept us amused. Just as we were about to finish a game of cribbage, Wayne and I witnessed the beginning of the most fantastic, majestic sunset. It was continuously changing colours and shapes and the reflections upon the water in the lock and the spillway below it were spectacular. It was next to viewing the northern lights. Stargazing over the clear sky and listening to the insects over the lake made for an ending to a perfect evening.



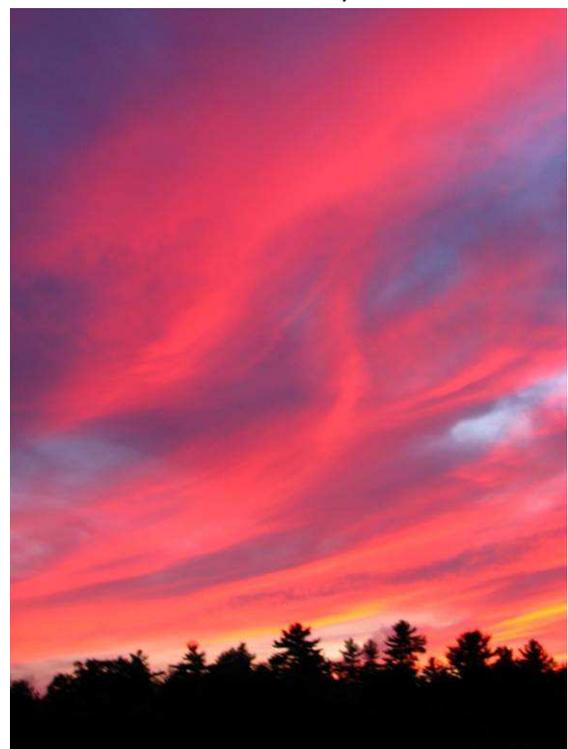
Flaming Sunset upon the sky and Lock



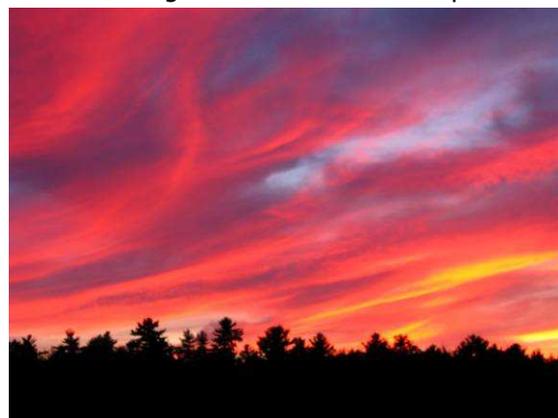
Fire in the Sky



Burning clouds over the Treetops



Dancing Fire



Wavering Sky



Streaking Reds & Oranges



Forest on fire in brilliant sunset



Nearing the end of the Sunset



End to a Majestic Sunset



Sat. Sept 12 th. – The 6 am sunrise provided vivid pink and blue hues and reflections upon the mist-covered lake - we were in for another grand day.



Sunrise on a misty lake above the Swift Rapids Lock

By 7:30 am, we were paddling into the rolling, rising mist and the glaring sun upon the still lake. The ever-changing misty scenery was so picturesque that we kept stopping to take photos. Now we can appreciate what Bill Mason and other well-known canoeists described in their books when paddling under such conditions. This was an experience that we will never forget!



Paddling in the mist upon the Lake



Dim sun reflection upon the Lake



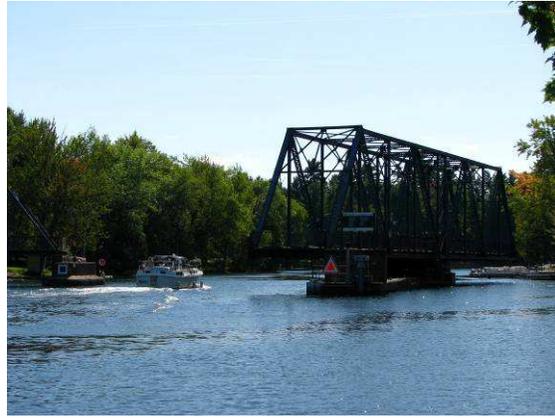
Sun and morning reflections upon the Canal

Being a Saturday, we were aware that our day would involve more cottagers and boats on the water, but not until after the locks opened at 9 am – and we weren't disappointed. At first, Wayne and I were paddling too strong and had covered about a third of the overall distance for the day in an hour. We cut back our stroke and stopped occasionally to enjoy the weather and scenery, relax and take photos. This was what the trip was all about!

On Sparrow Lake, we stopped on the same island to swim and snack before crossing the open water, which now contained several fast-moving boats - this meant bigger waves intermingling with the cross-waves caused by the wind. In no time, we were at the marina to rest before entering the channel that would bring us to the Couchiching Lock. At one point, we stopped to watch the operation of a swing bridge that allowed larger vessels to pass through. We definitely knew when the lock was being emptied because it affected the flow rate of the current in the narrow channel.



Wind-swept Island



Swing Bridge

At the lock, Norm sweet-talked the Lockmaster and she allowed us through the lock with other boats. This prevented us from having to portage our equipment and canoe up those two steep staircases - we must be getting softer in our older age OR wiser! I think and hope it was the latter. While inside the lock, a late arriving yacht entered; it was so big, I couldn't get a picture of it in one shot. We were told later it was worth over \$800k.

After setting up camp, we packed most of our unneeded equipment into Wayne's car. Washed and dressed in clean clothes, we headed to Orillia for supper at Montana's for a feast of ribs with a cold one. On the way back to the lock, Wayne and I were recounting our trip when we missed the exit.....we nearly ended up in Gravenhurst before realizing we weren't recognizing any of the landmarks.

By the way, Norm won the deciding game of cribbage! We were just about to call it an evening (10 pm) when we heard the first of four trains that passed by throughout the night. It wasn't the best of sleeps, but it would have to do.

Sun. Sept 13 th. - By 7:15 am, we had decamped and were off down the country road, crossing over those horrid railway tracks and onto the highway towards Orillia to the nearest Tim Hortons. Geri was waiting for us at the Carp Road gas station at 12:45 pm to exchange equipment and canoe to my car.



At the end of the Trip



Canoe on Norm's Car

Wayne and I haven't decided on where to trip next year, but we will be hard pressed to find another to match this last one. Overall, it was an excellent change from wilderness canoeing for the both of us and we thoroughly enjoyed the experience.

Norm Hooper

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