

Isaac in the Big Apple

By Max Finklestein

Sorry to be behind on the blog - we couldn't get an internet connection for several days.

Wow! Here we are in a Brooklyn cafe eating hueveos rancheros! Paddling into New York was surreal - past the Empire state Building, past the Chrysler building, the United Nations and the new World Trade towers with cranes in the background. We stayed the night on the grounds of the North Brooklyn Canoe Club - the funkiest, greatest canoe club setting you can imagine. It's a sliver of land donated by a private landowner - sandwiched between the overhead Pulaski bridge and a graffiti-decorated warehouse wall. About 30 ft wide there are storage containers for the boats, a composting toilet, an outdoor sink and a little community garden. We slept in our tents to the sounds of lapping water and roaring traffic watching the dying embers of our outdoor fire and the twinkling lights of the New York skyline. So there we were sleeping under a bridge in Brooklyn!! Fantastic!!! Sadly this is the last day of paddling for Isaac and me. The call of school, dogs, piano lessons, paddle training etc etc is drawing up home. We'll hop out of the boat at Staten Island, take the ferry to Manhattan and spend a day being a tourist before we take the train back to Ottawa.



Isaac: This is my first time in New York City. And I paddled into the city by canoe! I couldn't think of a better way to experience the place where Spiderman lives. Last night my mom and I went to Times Square by subway. We saw Grand Central Station, what a busy place! Times Square was awesome, so many tvs that you could not find one way to look where you wouldn't see one. We went to m&ms world where you can make customized m&ms! it was three floors tall full of m&m merchandise. It was about 9:00 at night but when we looked outside it seemed to be around 5:00. Times Square was incredible but there are many other moments this trip we have seen America in a different light. We went to a restaurant for dinner called the Ye Old Fort Diner in a small town called Fort Edward. The man who owned the restaurant was extremely interested in our trip. And told us all about the local history of the French Indian wars against the British. The dinner was delicious and for only 5 dollars. Near the end of our meal he said, "Free desserts for the Frenchmen from Canada." The next morning he gave us free breakfast!

Today we are going to paddle by the Statue of Liberty. I have had an amazing time discovering America from the water and am so pumped to go up Empire State building later today.

Greetings from the Raritan Yacht Club, Perth Amboy, New Jersey, (Elizabeth, Norm and Will)

Comings and goings and spectacular scenery

This morning we set from the North Brooklyn Boat Club with a few additions aboard: Gaynor Cote a NBBC member paddling for the day; Ted Gruber of the Long Island City Community Boathouse who provided guidance and direction through the NY harbor and Willis Elkins an NBBC trip leader who will be on board all the way to Washington. We also had the great fortune to have Bill Schultz, Raritan Riverkeeper, join us for the day as an escort through the bustling harbor on his 36' beast of

a boat. Bill and Ted led us down the East River, past the historic Brooklyn Bridge, chaotic downtown Manhattan skyline, of majestic lady of liberty herself. It was a busy ride navigating amongst ferries, tugs, barges, police boats, cargo ships, oil tankers and cruise ships all the while a steady stream of rain soaked the canoe crew – clothing and all.

As we waved goodbye to the Manhattan skyline, so too did we leave our cherished paddlers Connie and Isaac. Landing on the New Jersey shore, mother and son bid adieu to go explore the metropolis by train and foot.

The length of the trip was through the Kill van Kull and Arthur Kill, which separate the uber-industrial Staten Island and New Jersey shores. It is rare for normal citizens to travel these waters so seeing 10 story cranes loading containers, tugs pushing 6 barges at once, the bizarrely beautiful Staten Island ship graveyard, and mounds atop the infamous Fresh Kills landfill was a real visual treat.

As night fell we pulled into the Raritan Yacht club in Perth Amboy and were greeted by XXXX's wife Lori who had arranged for us to sleep inside the club if necessary. It was. Hot showers were appreciated by all, as was dinner. At the end of the meal the expedition's real hero, Bill Vine, arrived with our second resupply of food.

In the morning Bill will drive JP and Rob to NYC from where they will take a train to Kingston to pick up their car at the Maritime Museum. Bill, Connie and Isaac will head home to Ottawa.

We have reached the sea!



Oct. 3: Ross's Marine Services, Trenton, New Jersey, on the Delaware.

Max here: From Perth -Amboy we paddled up; the Raritan River....rich salt marsh interspersed with old garbage dumps, new garbage dumps, derelict factories, and once, a few homes. It is really like paddling through a post-apocalyptic world. i could imagine that we were a a band of people, seeking out another band of people who still could read and write, and had some technology, all the while avoiding mutant flesh-eating humanoids and other scary critters.

Photo credit: Raritan Riverkeeper

We even paddled past a derelict river boat, Mississippi style, that had once been a casino - now deserted. We thought it would make a great place to camp, even though it may be haunted. The contrast the salt marshes made with the derelict industrial lands was tough to absorb....great egrets, herons, kestrels, marsh hawks....the marsh was alive, but hurting.

One active garbage dump - and the garbage dumps, or more correctly, landfill sites, are the dominant topography - like terminal moraines....had about 10,000 gulls circling!

low battery, gotta go.....



In the day of my life, I have paddled on many waters,

And on and on and on we go,

I have seen great rivers silver-sliding on the tundra,

And on and on and on we go,

Vat lakes shimmering to the black spruce horizon,

And on and on and on we go,

Cold, wet, exhausted,

Hungry, lost and scared,

And it hurts from my shoulders to my toes,

But on and on and on we go,

My canoe has carried me to places I never dreamed of,

And a little beyond,

And on and on and on we go.

This story is about one such place.....

It was a crazy idea. And this is where it all started.

It was a dark and stormy night. In mid-November. We were driving home from a family vacation in Washington, D.C. My wife Connie was sleep in the back seat. Our son Isaac, then 12, was wide awake in the passenger seat,

I said; "Isaac, that was a really great trip. Washington is a fun place"

Yeah, I really liked the museums, and the monuments. There is so much history there", said Isaac.
"And it was so cool when Ovechkin fist-thumped me!"

"yeah", I said, the mileage slipping north. "We should go back"

"Yeah",said Isaac. "We could go back for another hockey game"

The Caps were isaac's favorite hockey team, and Alexander Ovechkin his favorite player.

"Hey!" I said, I know what would be fun. We could paddle there!"

"From Ottawa!?", said Isaac, how long would it take? And what route would we follow?"

And by the time we crossed the border into Canada and Connie woke up, the Capital to Capitol Canoe Trip had gone from an idea to a project with a name, and a purpose. But how to do it?

Round up a 36' Voyageur canoe and a bunch of enthusiastic (and sometimes a bit crazy) paddlers.our purpose was to spread the message that we must transcend political borders and work together at the federal, state and community level to protect and restore our rivers. Rivers know no boundaries. All along the route, we engaged with local people and clubs in discussions about problems and solutions on the waterways we travelled on. When we finally arrived in Washington, after 42 days of paddling, after braving 6' waves on Chesapeake Bay, howling headwinds on lake Champlain (sorry, we didn't see any sign of Champ, the sea monster reputed to live in the lake), thunderstorms, cold coffee, we finally arrived in Washington and we were invited to the 40th anniversary celebration of the Clean Water Act. As Captain, I got to cut the cake with a silvered-haired senator, and the team, dressed in our team T-shirts, and holding our paddles, set forth the challenge to twin the Ottawa and Potomac rivers, and to make these two rivers the cleanest rivers in the world that flow through national capital cities. It was a very Canadian moment. I'm happy to report that, five year later, the first part of that challenge has been achieved, and the second is well underway.

But a lot of water, and many stories, passed under the hull between our launch at Asinabke (Victoria Island) on the Ottawa River and our arrival in Washington. This is just one of them.

"Max, Can you steer us a little farther out", said Rob the muffin-man. Rob was known as the muffin man because he arrived with his buddy _AJ___, to paddle with us for two weeks, and they brought a lot of muffins. AJ works in a bakery back in Ottawa.

We had a 'revolving door' crew. With plenty of road access all along the route, paddlers could join us for whatever period of time they could afford, whether it be a day, a week or a month or anything in between. Along with Rob and AJ, our crew at this point in the trip consisted of our son Isaac, then 13 years old, and the love of my life, his mother,, Connie Downes. Connie and Isaac had been with us for two weeks. They would be leaving us in New York, Isaac to return to school, and Connie back to work at her position as Songbird Population biologist at the Canadian Wildlife Service. Someone has to take care of the birds. Four paddlers had signed up for the entire trip; Clive Doucet, retired city

councillor and avid rower; John Horvath, Clive's neighbour who had never paddled or tripped before; Liz Elton, mother of two Olympic paddlers, but this was her first canoe trip ever; and lastly Norm Radford, avid kayaker, but recovering from back surgery (his doctor advised him NOT to go on this trip). Our local guide for this day was Willis Elkins, from the North Brooklyn Boat Club. Willis had met us at Yonkers and would lead us through the bewildering waters of New York Harbour.

Rob is on his cell phone, talking to CBC in an office high up in a skyscraper in New York. We should make it on the evening news, and that is big news for us.

"The CBC guys can't see us yet", says Rob. "they say there is a big building blocking their view."

Farther out 'to sea', there is a big tide running, piling up some scary-looking standing waves. But anything for a few minutes of fame. So I steer farther out from shore, farther out from the towers of Manhattan on our right.

"Perfect", says Rob. They got the shot!"

Our day started at the Yonkers Paddling and Rowing Club. We spent the night sleeping in their boat bay, sharing the space with several raccoons (which made for an interesting night, given the nocturnal nature of raccoons!). Earlier in the day, as we made our way down the Hudson River, the towers of Manhattan came into view, like a misty range of mountains. The feeling of mounting excitement and anticipation was exactly what I felt when seeing the Rocky Mountains first appear on the skyline after weeks paddling up the North Saskatchewan River.

During our journey from Ottawa, one image kept drawing me onwards, through the fatigue and exhaustion, through the rain and incessant headwinds. That image was our beautiful canoe paddling in front of the statue of Liberty. The canoe, that most Canadian of icons, and the Statue of Liberty, the quintessential American symbol, coming together in one place.

Willis kept us on a tight schedule. From the Hudson Estuary, we had to make a sharp left turn and slide under the bridge into the Harlem River. The Harlem River is not a river, but a tidal estuary that separates the island of Manhattan from the Bronx. The twice-daily ebb and flow of the tides causes the currents in the 'river' to fluctuate dramatically. The tide had to be too high so we could fit under the bridge, but not too low to avoid the worst of the currents. The Harlem River takes us through Harlem, once the crime centre of the Italian Mafia, to the East River, where bodies are always being found on TV cop shows.