

A Cautionary “Tail” from the Okanogan Brigade

by Gwen Berdan

“Come on a brigade” she said. “It’ll be fun,” she said. It’s in the Okanogan, wine country, lake paddling only. So the summer of 2013 I did my first voyageur brigade.

So many firsts that trip. Experiencing the energy and camaraderie created by people in 10+ big boats. Learning that being on the water at 7:30 meant waking at 5:30! Feeling the water swish by and admiring the string of pearls display and charging the shore to the joy of those watching on the shore. Sleeping in a vineyard and reaching outside the tent to pull off a few sun-warmed grapes just before bed. Getting an honorable mention at the Cowboy Poetry competition (thank you Lois and Bruce). Hearing about First People’s experiences on the land before Europeans. The ritual of the passing of the car keys before you get into a boat and learning that some people put on an emergency brake and some do not. Appreciating the safety meetings to determine whether to paddle a certain leg given the weather and water decisions. Feeling the surge when we all pull together both on the water and off.

Paddling on about Day 3 though I noticed our sliding across get more ragged as the day progressed. The fellow in front of me was lifting instead of sliding during our shifts. Was reassured that all was well. That afternoon though I was asked if I could look at his bum as he was feeling raw. Yet another first! I am not a nurse, not first aid trained; I didn’t know him outside paddling and prepping for this trip. Trying to act like this was a normal thing to do and trying to not be caught. The plan was that after dinner he would prep some warm soapy water, towels, and have antibacterial spray at the ready. He would go into his tent and lay face facedown butt to the air. I would go in a few minutes later. I swear if there were lit candles and mood music I would be out of there so fast! No music no candles, thank goodness. Between the dabbing and the inevitable “butt clenching” with each dab I don’t know who was more uncomfortable. It was bad; the skin had been rubbed raw on a 2” x 1” swath. No wonder he was not sliding. If you can’t shave the area, tape does not stick to a man’s butt as I have learned. Convinced him to not paddle the next day and to get it checked out before it got infected as he was going on a solo trip following this and would not have a butt checker. On the final day I felt such glee gifting him the appropriately named hot sauce from the display during our stop at the roadside market. “Ass Burn Hot Sauce”

Thank you all for showing me the joys of brigading.

Gwen Berdan