

Indian paddlers relive history

During the summer, nine Micmac Indian canoeists in two canoes, left the Indian Island Reserve in New Brunswick for a 900-mile trip to Montreal via the St. Lawrence River. It took them 30 days.

Many years ago the Micmacs travelled by canoe to and from Boston, averaging 100 miles a day, but on this trip the team led by Vincent Knockwood wasn't out to break any records. Their aim was simply to go back into the past and experience the hardships of those early voyagers.

Chance to live with nature

According to Mr. Knockwood, "modern man with all his technological skills is attempting to control nature, but the obvious question is how can you attempt to control something you cannot comprehend?"

The purpose of this trip was to give the team a chance to live with nature.... The trip brought us back to nature and re-enforced certain cultural aspects. These men saw what this country consists of: its geography and its intense beauty."

With a \$2,500-grant from the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, Mr. Knockwood started making plans as far back as 1973. Although a group of Indian and white paddlers had made

the voyage to Expo '67, this was to be the first all-Indian attempt in over a century.

Problems in second week

Pushing off into the Northumberland Strait, the team started well, with some 45 to 50 miles of water a day passing beneath the bows. They were even being choosy about camping spots. After their second week, however, when the winds and currents changed, so did they. With progress down to 30 miles a day and, at times, with eight-foot waves breaking over their canoes, many meals were missed completely or eaten cold because there were simply no places to stop. In the Gulf of St. Lawrence the team watched as killer whales chased seals and, at night, seals would go right up to their tents. Travelling along the south bank of the St. Lawrence itself, Mr. Knockwood said they passed some of the most beautiful scenery. At times they also passed some of the most dangerous. With the wind pushing them toward rocks on the shoreline they had a three-way fight on their hands: a fight to stay upright, a fight to stay away from the rocks, and a fight to make any forward progress.

The canoes did not escape damage — the evidence was deep gouges and patched up holes. Each time a canoe was damaged time was lost. It had to be dried before it could be repaired.



Micmac paddlers demonstrate the skill used to cover the 900-mile journey from Indian Island Reserve in New Brunswick to Montreal.

In all, ten days were lost because of weather conditions and repairs.

A soggy night

At one point in the journey, the group were so mentally and physically tired they made an error that cost them a flooded tent and soaked clothing and sleeping bags. They had been asleep several hours when suddenly they found themselves in water. Everyone had forgotten the full-moon tide. They had to scramble up a 100-foot bank to find a dry sleeping spot. At other times they encountered hail, snow and fog. And the "Quebec mosquito didn't just take your blood, it took chunks of flesh to eat later on," said Mr. Knockwood.

On arrival at their destination, the paddlers had lost an average of 15 pounds each but were so fit they were the envy of everyone they met. The 20 paddles they had started with were reduced to a handful, each showing signs of hasty repairs.

Asked if he would make the voyage again, Mr. Knockwood said "certainly, but not right now.... I will be able to tell my grandchildren about this. Possibly one of them will also make the same trip". (Story and photos courtesy of Indian News.)



Micmac Indian paddlers are congratulated by Joe Martin, president of the Caughnawaga Marina (front row, fourth left) and chief Andrew Delisle (third

left) several days after their arrival at Montreal. Vince Knockwood, who began planning the trip in 1973, stands at extreme right.