

“Canoe Excursion”

(from *Nature Norm’s North Woods*)

by Norman Weeks

To get to know a river, you can canoe its entirety, from point-of-origin to ultimate immersion into another river, a lake, or a sea. A river is flow. If you yourself flow with that flow, you will become, in a sense, one with the river, the flow of your life merging into the flow of the river.

A lake called Itasca, here in Minnesota, spills out into a clear shallow creek. I once took off my shoes and socks and stepped into the cold outflow of Lake Itasca. There, right there, is the point-of-origin of the Mississippi River.

I stepped into that flow, but I could not put in my canoe and continue down the entire length of the Mississippi River unto its ultimate end. How could I portage all the locks and dams? How could I survive in a canoe among the barging barges and all the other fearsome traffic on the Mississippi? And so, what I know of the Mississippi is a here-and-there acquaintance acquired in my various travels.

Locally, I have found the point-of-origin of our Pelican River and flowed with its early course. Then, beyond the dam, I canoed several miles of its continuation. The riffles and rapids ensuing discouraged me from participating in the full flow of the Pelican River from start to finish.

What about that finish? The Pelican River flows into the Vermilion. Couldn’t I access the end of the Pelican River from its confluence with the Vermilion?

On the road to Crane Lake lies a hamlet called Buyck. The locals there, obviously tired of answering one particular question, have affixed a child’s bicycle to the sign that announces the town’s name.

There is a bridge over the Vermilion River in Buyck and, next to the bridge, a put-in for canoes. On the morning of a warm sunny Sunday, I launched my canoe there for the five-mile downstream paddle to the confluence of the Vermilion and the Pelican.

The Vermilion River is tannin-tinted, but the water quality is most wholesome. We have so abused the rivers of North America that it is heartening to find a healthy one.

I had scouted the river the day before, concerned that heavy recent rains may have swollen and accelerated the flow to the consequence of grueling labor on my upstream paddle-back. Yes, the Vermilion was in full flow, but not so much as to overmaster my strength.

When I returned on the Sunday morning, I found that most of the runoff had run through and the river was more relaxed.

The Vermilion there is a scenic river, broad and smooth, lined with tall grasses that extend back into marshes or, otherwise, forest trees to the margin.

On the way down, the current carried me along; I needed to make only slight corrections in the steering.

As I went on and on, past curves left and right, ever more water ahead, I wondered whether I might have taken on too strenuous a canoeing course. Late middle age doubts itself.

At last, after 2-1/2 hours of some paddling, some steering, but mostly just drifting with the flow (all the while apprehensive about the paddling labor I would have to expend on my return), I arrived at the confluence of the Vermilion with the Pelican.

I turned into the Pelican River and ascended.

The flow was coated with white scum and suds, the Pelican apparently a source of what I had seen at the Vermilion's arrival at Crane Lake.

It was only a short way to the rapids.

I pulled the canoe out at the base of the rapids, at the designated portage path. I climbed the bare rock hill to look upon the churning, boiling descent of the Pelican River.

Staring down into these rapids, I recalled a day long ago. I was in my canoe in the Boundary Waters, anchored in the flow of the Basswood River. A bright orange bulk came floating by. A life jacket, unworn. I hoped that it only had been dropped overboard upstream. I fished it out. Back at the outfitters, I heard that some adventurers thought they could run something called Wheelbarrow Falls. One man drowned. The life jacket was his property.

As in life, so in a flowing river it is not the rocks you see but those you don't see that might do you in. A canoeist had better learn to read water. Any anomaly in the surface indicates something solid just below. An upwelling and a curtain cascade toward you mean a submerged rock face that would stop a canoe with a crash, flip it about, and likely batter and drown any foolhardy reckless who thought they could "run the rapids".

A big snapping turtle was sunning herself on the bare rock. Seeing me, she withdrew her head at my intrusion. I left her alone and turned away, heading to a shady spot for my lunch.

I immediately came upon a turtle nest in a small patch of the rare diggable dirt. The shallow nest had been sniffed out, dug up, and the eggs eaten by some marauding creature of the night. The emptied shells, all shriveled up, lay scattered about in the dirt. No hatchlings emerged from that clutch to carry on the species into another generation.

I looked back upon the sunning turtle. If she was the one who laid those eggs, her procreative effort had failed.

Back in my canoe, I returned to the confluence with the Vermilion, the *end* of the Pelican River, although, of course, its waters, now mingling with those of the Vermilion, would continue on through the watershed.

You might enter a point-of-origin of a river, like my step into the outflow of Lake Itasca. However, you cannot find the terminus of a river, because the flow never ends. A freshet into a rivulet, a rivulet into a brook, a brook into a creek, a creek into a stream, a stream into a river, a river into a larger river, that larger river into a lake, then a further spillover into another river, on and on, eventually into the sea. Nor is the sea the terminus of a river, for evaporation lifts out of the sea what had been river water and carries it back inland, where it rains down, the runoff eventually into a river and so back into the cycle.

Not only don't I know the Pelican River start to finish, I don't know, can't know, any river that way. There may be a start, but there is no finish.

We may canoe a river, flow in the flow, over some few stretches, but immersion in the full flow of the cycle-of-waters must always be beyond us.

I know from experience the start of the Pelican River and its end as shown on a map. Beyond the confluence I must necessarily remain in experiential ignorance.

My upstream paddle-back of the Vermilion took almost the exact same amount of time as my descent. Apparently, I was not slowed down by the current, by my age, or by my riverine contemplations.

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