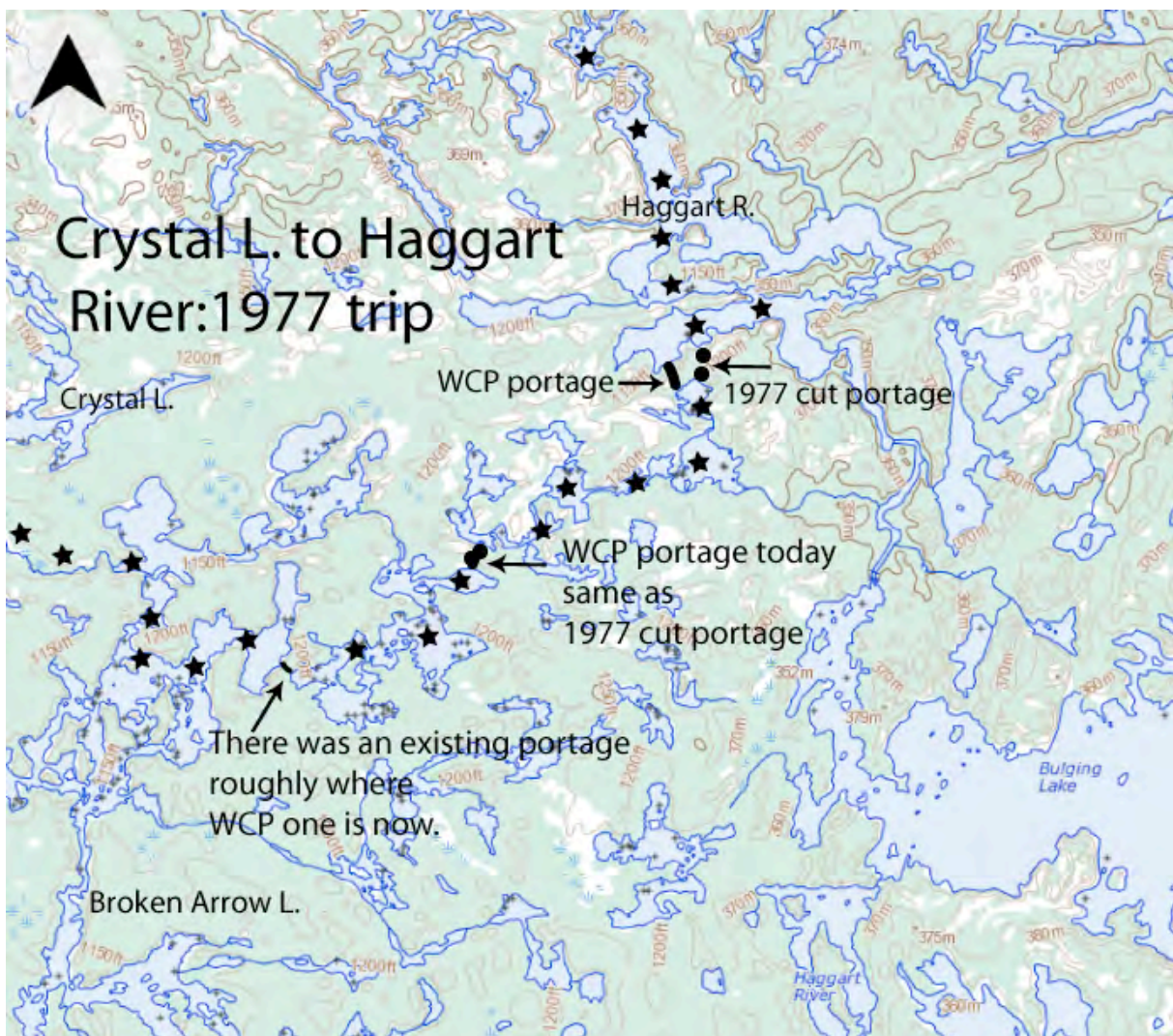


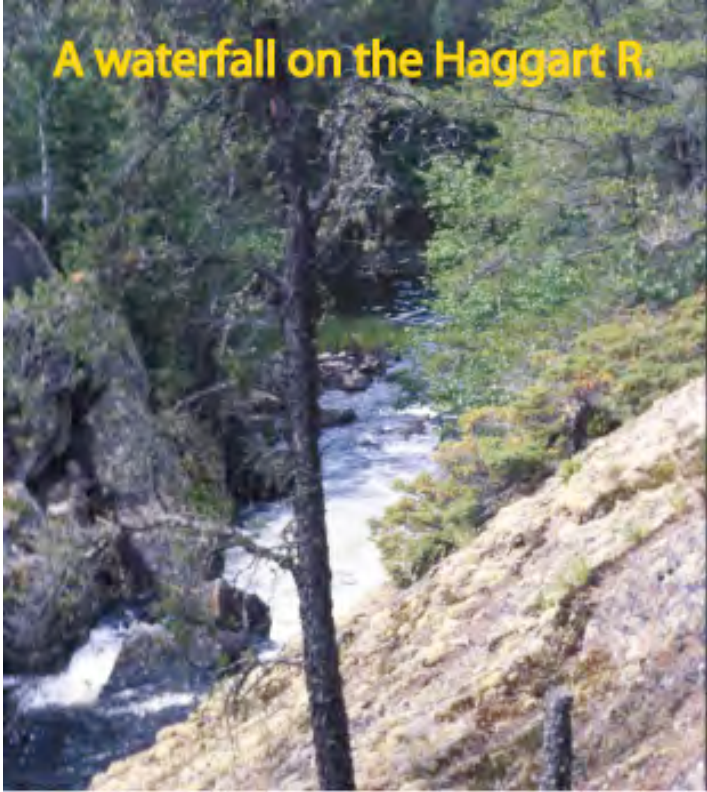
The Artery to Bird Fiasco

In 1977 four eager and vigorous (more or less) fellows took a canoe trip to - at that time - the mystical Bloodvein. The 8-day trip began and ended at Wallace Lake. The only topographical maps available had a scale of 1:125 000. They did not provide much detail for planning routes. Woodland Caribou Park and its canoeing map were not yet in existence. We also used Berard's maps for Manitoba sections of the trip but they were not always reliable. [*Berard made illustrated maps of what is now Manitoba's Atikaki Wilderness Park region. See: <http://www.canoe.ca/che-mun/maps.html>*] The only GPS in those days stood for Good Paddling Strokes. We mostly "flew by the swirl of our paddles" when planning a trip, hoping that our hypothetical path was possible and that we might even be lucky enough to find existing portage trails. More often than not we had to make a basic trail consisting of a freshly trodden path through the ground cover and blaze marks on prominent trees every so often.

We followed the Wanipigow River upstream, and travelled eastward to the Haggart River (not southward to Haggart Lake via Broken Arrow Lake). This involved making a couple of portages at the east end before the river (see map).

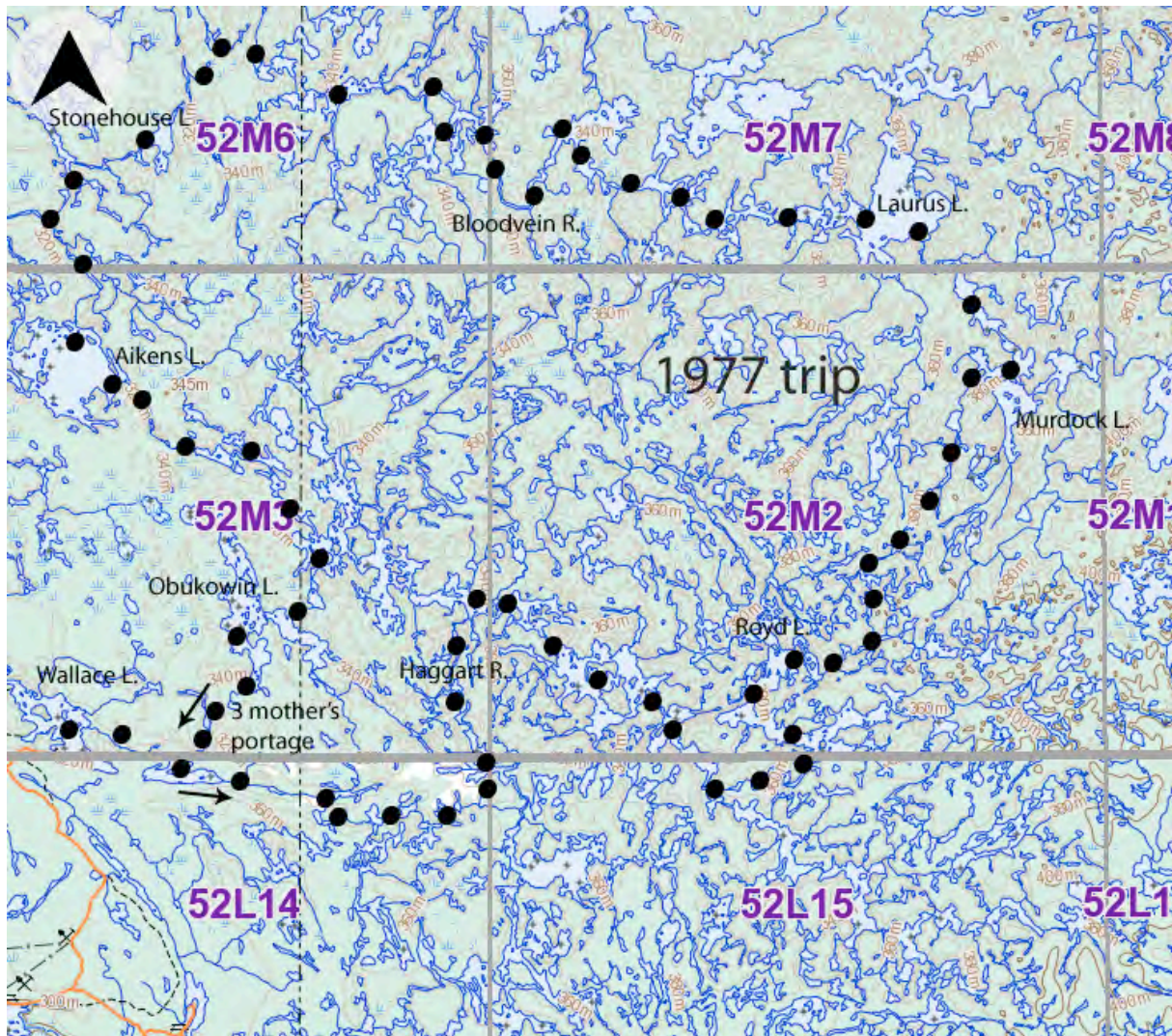


We went downstream on the Haggart River to Carroll Lake and then east up the Gammon system.



We went north up the Gammon River to Gammon Lake and portaged to Royd Lake. We went upstream on Royd Creek for a while. There were no trails along the creek, although it appeared as if someone had gone upstream sometime in the past. We cut two portages to reach the "sausage lakes". We paddled northward to the creek that drained the sausage lakes. We followed the creek to a place where bush blocked the channel. At that point we found and followed a well-established trapper's portage that led to Murdock Lake. From there, we went downstream on the Bloodvein system to Stonehouse Lake. The portage out of Stonehouse was the only seriously rough part of the trip.

According to Berard's map, there was supposed to be a 1500 m portage to the east branch of the Gammon River. [*The Gammon splits into two branches coming out of Aikens Lake.*] Instead of a portage, we found the aftermath of a recent forest fire. It was high hurdle time over charred helter-skelter strewn trees along a non-existent trail. The compass came in quite handy. Five hours later and 10 pounds lighter we reached the east branch of the Gammon, followed it upstream to Aikens Lake, and paddled upstream on the Gammon River to Carroll Lake. We used the infamous "3 mothers" Obukowin portage to reach Siderock Lake, and paddled down the Wanipigow back to Wallace Lake.



This brings us to 1997. Of the four fellows, only one remained to revisit the upper part of the Bloodvein. With my new partner, a 9-day trip was planned. We used 1:50 000 topographical maps and my memories of past paths to do the planning. It seems we did not know about the helpful canoeing map for Woodlands Caribou Park (WCP) that revealed somebody else's ideas on where to find portages.

Our plan was ambitious, but doable. It involved:

- flying in to Artery Lake from Bissett, Manitoba
- going upstream on the Bloodvein to Murdock Lake
- going to Royd Lake in the same way I did 20 years ago (but in reverse)
- portaging to Gammon Lake and going downstream on the Gammon River to Hammerhead Lake
- going upstream on the Rostoul River to Mexican Hat Lake.

Once at Mexican Hat, we would find a portage or mush up a creek to reach Amber Lake, portage to the Bird River from Aegean Lake, and then go down the Bird River system all the way to Bird Lake where our families were enjoying a vacation in rented cabins. The distance from start to end is about 220 km.

The trip started out well. We landed at Artery Lake about 4 PM on August 8th. We were in good spirits as the plane roared into the sky on its way back to Bissett.



We found a splendid campsite at a narrows in the lake. From there we could look northeastwards to where the Bloodvein flowed into Artery. The sun was shining warmly and dryly. The good times lasted about two hours.



By supertime, an energetic squall was pelting us with rain. I carried a combination sail and rain shelter in my faithful and indestructible 17' lightweight Grumman canoe. This sail/shelter consists of an 8' square fly tied to two long one inch (2.5 cm) diameter wooden poles. *[When not in use, the fly was rolled unto one of the poles. The two poles were lashed together, making for a convenient package to portage by tying it to the thwarts of the canoe.]* The shelter saved us from some of the fury of the squall. We managed to keep a smoky fire going long enough to cook a meal. The squall stopped and we hit the pillow in a brand new Eureka tent.

That night the tent received a severe testing. The big stomp came about 1 AM. Something pushed down on the tent and tried to squash it and us flat. At first we thought a polar bear was punching down on us in the way that polar bears do when breaking ice. Luckily, it wasn't a bear of any kind. It was a downdraft of a thunderstorm that was attempting to flatten us. We stretched out across the tent trying to hold down the bottom with our legs while at the same time trying to hold up the roof with our arms. It didn't help much. We could hear the horrible sounds of tent pegs popping and the fly flapping in the wind. Lightening lit the sky and forest around us. It didn't merely rain; it poured buckets of heavy water. The storm lasted for about half an hour. During that time, we both had wild thoughts of finding ourselves floating in the lake trapped in a tent with the door zipper jammed.

When the storm was over, we surveyed the damage. Both of our sleeping bags were wet from underneath but the tent hadn't leaked from above. We managed to find the popped pegs and restored the tent to a reasonable condition. The next morning we were greeted with what was to be typical weather for the rest of the trip - strong winds and rain squalls. We paddled with the swells to where the Bloodvein entered Artery Lake. There we met four Americans who were on a 30-day trip from the headwaters of the Bloodvein (near Red Lake) to its mouth at Lake Winnipeg. The storm had smashed into them as well during the night. They were still drying out.

About 15 minutes later upstream, we reached the Bloodvein's world-class pictographs and paused for a while to appreciate them and the artists who drew them. The pictographs may be legacies of vision quests, travel markers, or perhaps just doodles (a kind of “Kilroy” was here). It doesn't matter why they were made. It is enough to know that someone long ago passed by here just like us and did something to remind us of that journey.



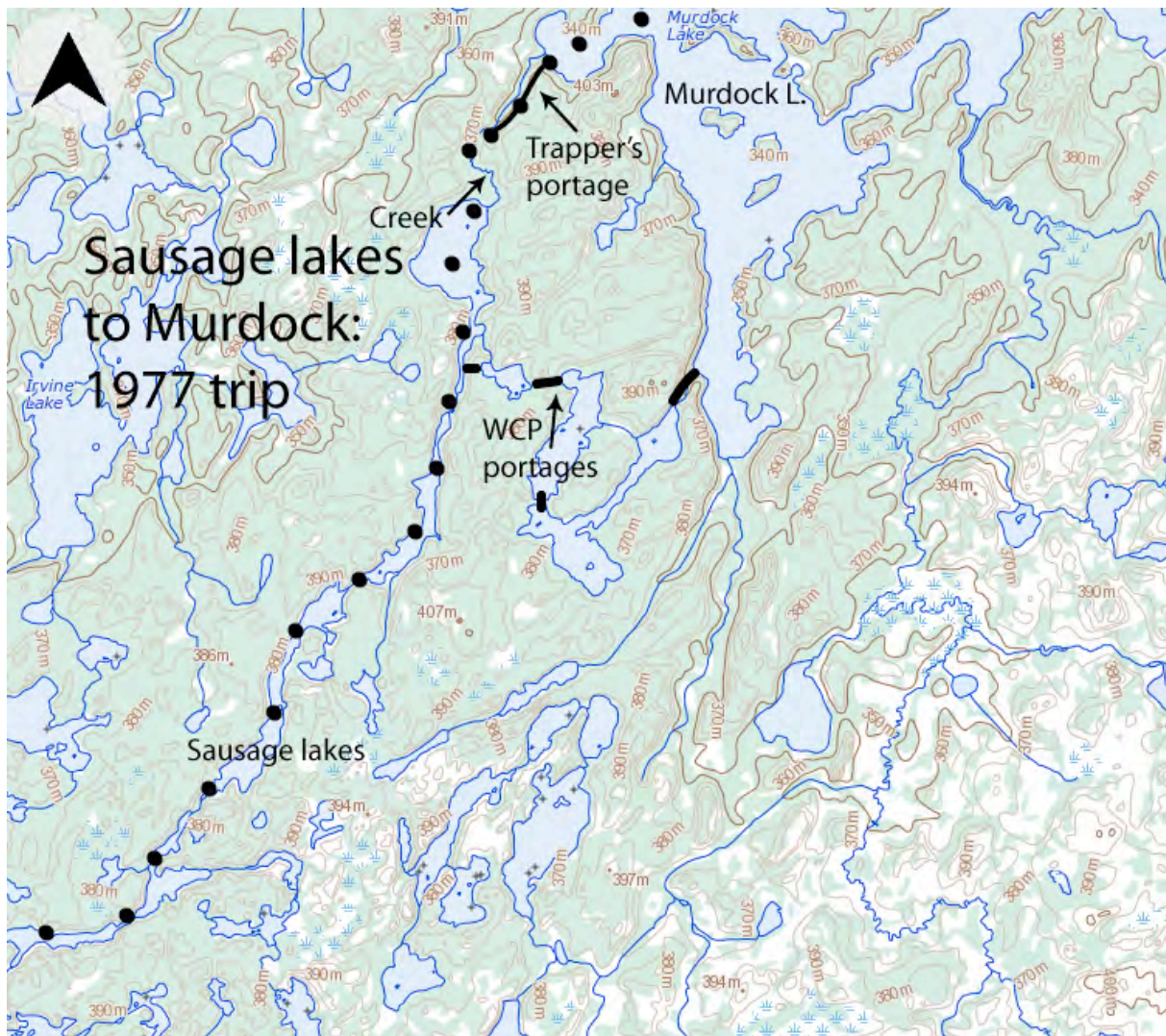
Squalls stayed with us all day. The good news was that the wind was from the west and we were mostly headed east. The sail was hoisted whenever possible. It ballooned ahead of the canoe like some garage-sale misshapen spinnaker but it worked. We surged along with the wind and pretended we were basking in the sun.

We reached a point just upstream of where the Sabourin River flows into the Bloodvein and camped on the lee side of an island. This area seemed to be a meeting place for bald eagles. We watched them drift with the wind as we prepared and ate supper. That night, we had a different kind of adventure. It was cold, cold, cold. [*We later found out that the temperature had dropped to 3 degrees in the area.*] Early August was feeling more like late September. We had only brought light summer sleeping bags. For the rest of the trip, we had to put on all of our dry clothes before crawling into our sleeping bags for the night.

Next morning we decided to take our time getting to Murdock. We fished and sailed and fished and sailed. By noon, we reached the falls where the Bloodvein poured into Larus Lake. My partner caught a nice walleye and we had fish for lunch. Our timing was perfect. Another squall hit just as we were cooking the fish. By mid afternoon, it was time to leave for the western bay in Murdock Lake where the portage to the sausage lakes was 20 years ago.

The 700-metre portage out of Larus was not in good shape. The frequent rains had made it slippery and there was much windfall across it. In retrospect, it was a sign of worse to come. We paused briefly at another pictograph site upstream from the portage but soon pushed on to find a campsite. We finally found one on an island close to the bay where we anticipated finding the portage to the sausage lakes.

August 11th. It was time to leave the Bloodvein and head south. The plan was to camp in Royd Lake that night. Well, there are plans and there is reality. Early that morning we were on our way looking for the 800-metre portage that I had used 20 years ago. It was gone, swallowed up by the forest. The entire lengthy hillside was abundantly covered with deadfall and thick undergrowth. Dragging our stuff uphill or cutting a trail through this was not a reasonable option. We were "up the shore" without a portage. Apparently the way I came 20 years ago was passé.



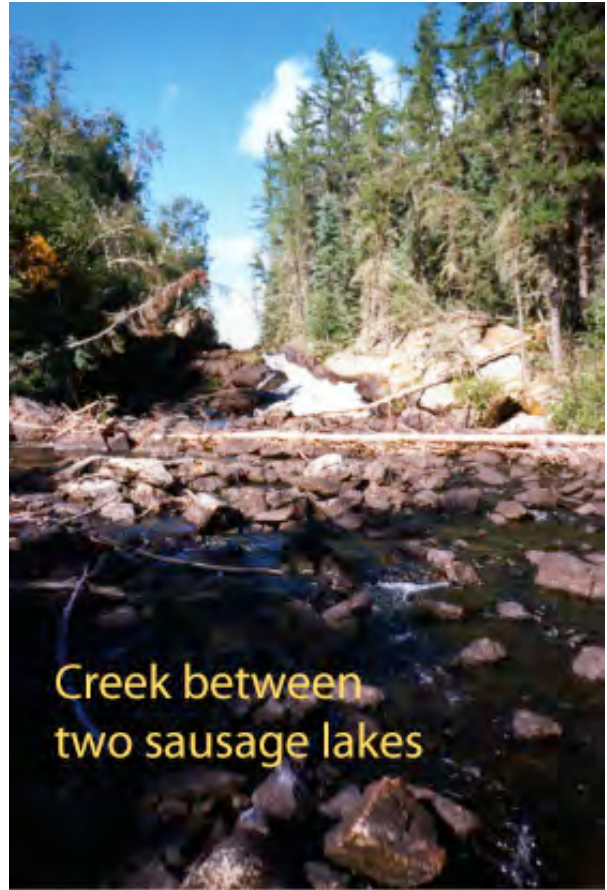
Out came the topographical map. It looked like the way to the sausage lakes might be by portaging west out of the south end of Murdock through three pond lakes. We paddled there and crossed our fingers. If we didn't find a portage we were going to retrace our steps to Artery Lake and then head south through Ford Lake (an unpleasant thought). It was mid morning when we found the portage out of Murdock. Our plan of reaching Royd Lake in one day was fading.

We finally emerged in the sausage lakes about 2 km south of where we would have emerged had the portage I used 20 years ago still been there. The new and improved way took three times as long and was much more work. I guess this is logical.

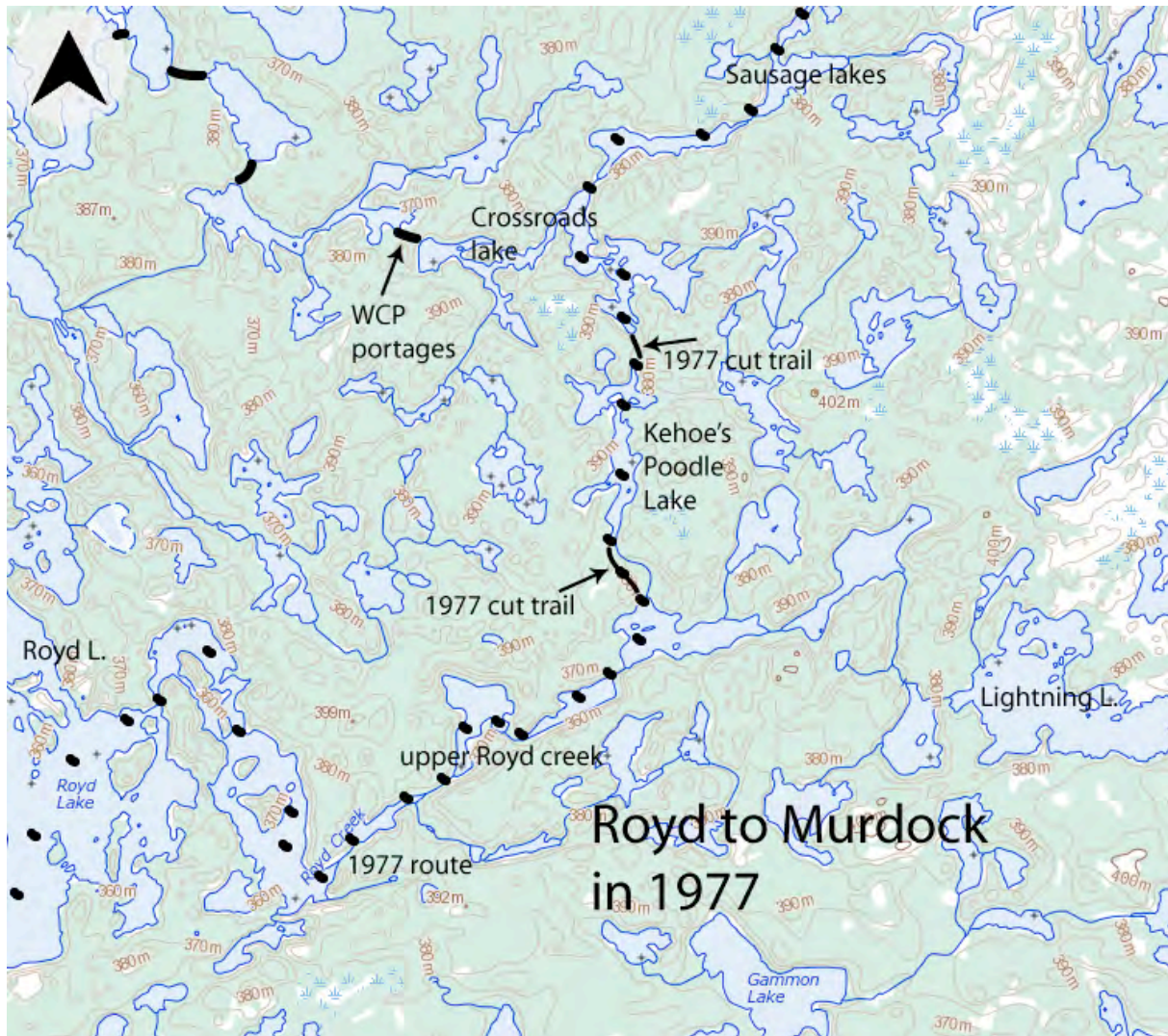
We headed southerly on the sausage lakes. They are narrow, and combined with their high shorelines, the lakes act as wind tunnels. A strong wind was blowing right into our faces. It seemed as if squalls hit us intentionally at every portage so that we would appreciate drying out in the wind when we paddled.

By late evening we arrived at what could be called crossroads lake. It was the lake that I reached 20 years ago by portaging from Royd Creek (upstream from Royd Lake). There were no campsites of the kind you see in wilderness promotions. We did manage to scratch out a tent spot in a hollow on a rocky island. After a hasty supper, we crawled into the tent, anxious about what we hoped to find in the morning - the two portages of 20 years ago.

[The picture on the right is the last one we took. From this point on wind, rain, and interesting situations preoccupied us.]



I imagine the reader has already guessed. The first portage towards Royd Creek looked like it had not been walked in 20 years. I found the gully that was at end of the trail but it was jammed with deadfall and undergrowth. We did not feel like remaking trails. It would have meant cutting a portage of 400 metres and then another one of 800 metres. Cutting trail is far less appealing when you are in your fifties than when you are in your thirties, especially in bad weather. [I have recently discovered that Martin Kehoe found my old path from the Royd Creek side. See '[Top to Bottom: A solo trip in Ontario's Woodland Caribou Park](#)'. He has re-worked the trails.]



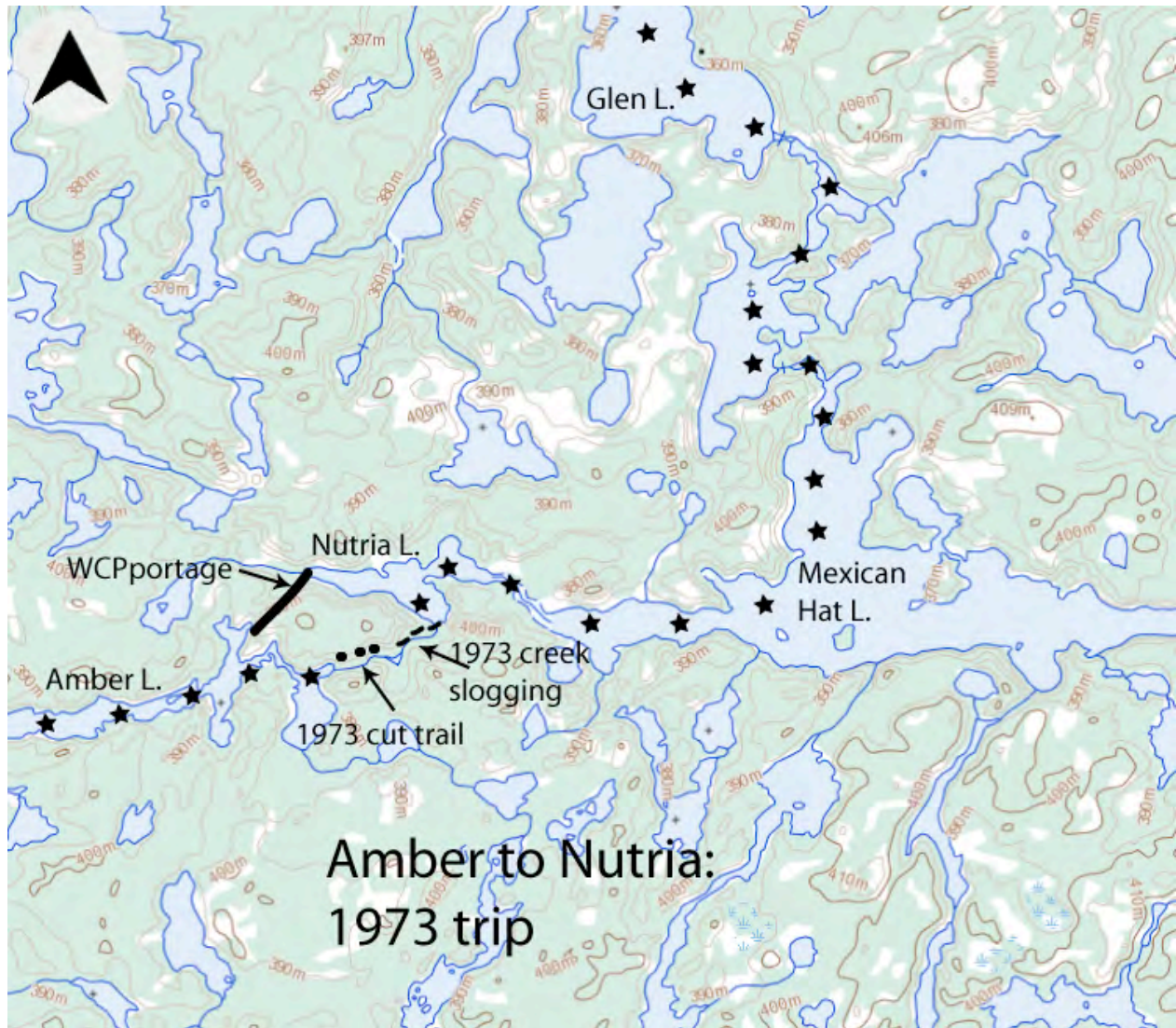
Out came the topographical map. If there was a WCP route into crossroads lake there must be a WCP route out. There seemed to be several ways to reach Royd Lake from crossroads lake. Which one was the new and improved way? When in doubt, think logically, so we elected to look for the way that was the most indirect.

As we paddled through the shallow channels of crossroads lake, we watched for canoe scrapings on underwater rocks. Yup! We were going the right way. Our path was frequently lit by bright aluminum metal and fiberglass red paint. Many portages later we reached Royd Lake and pushed on to Hammerhead Lake. The most memorable part of this was the last section on the Gammon River close to Hammerhead. The portage was an enticing adventure in climbing and rock hopping. *[When I did this section in 1977, we did not find a portage. Cutting trail was not appealing because of the tangled and cliff-like nature of the shoreline. Instead we water-walked and push and pulled to get through.]*

We made camp on a windy point in Hammerhead but first had to construct a windbreak out of deadfall and assorted debris to prevent the tent from being blown away. We took our first bath of the trip (it was time). The people in the fishing outpost cabin across the bay must have thought we were out of our minds as they watched us jump into the chilly lake and dry out in the cold wind.

August 13th. We left early and followed the Rostoul River upstream towards Mexican Hat Lake. We made good time with a crisp west wind pushing us eastwards. When we reached the portage into Mexican Hat, our spirits rose. We found a newly cleared and marked trail. It was a good omen. But with good news comes bad news. I was injured on the portage. As I was carrying the canoe, a wind gust caught the end of it, twisted it around, and in doing so, forced my left shoulder into an unnatural position. My shoulder hurt but I could still paddle.

We paddled through Mexican Hat (a marvelous lake with high ridges to the south, clear water and sandy beaches) and headed to the western narrows that separates Mexican Hat from Nutria Lake. The portage out of Nutria Lake was the last question mark ahead of us. I was there in 1973 and never found one. [*At that time, we started portaging by cutting across the land where we met a bull moose who convinced us it would be wise to walk in the marsh. We finished portaging by pushing and dragging our loaded canoes along the narrow, winding 1 km creek to Nutria. This experience is something like pulling a heavy sled in snow.*]



In the channel into Nutria, another good omen appeared. We found evidence of someone having pulled a canoe over the beaver dam that blocked the channel. Once in Nutria, the search for the portage began. Alas, it was nowhere to be found. [*We later learned that the WCP folks had started to clear the 600-metre trail from the Amber end and the job was only halfway completed at the time we were there.*] The way south out of Nutria is over heavily forested and steep terrain, not the kind of country to go wandering about. With no portage, our best approach was to repeat what I did in 1973 - slog up the creek.

We made camp in Nutria. I barely slept that night; my shoulder got worse and worse. By dawn it was apparent that I was in no condition to coax a canoe through 1 km of marsh and hazel bush.

There was another possible way south from Mexican Hat - through a creek system that could be used to reach Paull Lake, the headwater lake of the Bird River system. We decided against it because it was unknown territory to us. We were leery of getting bogged down and having to cut trail. Time was becoming an issue. We had to get to Bird Lake and to our wives and children in three days. If we didn't show up as planned, they would worry and worry some more.

The wind had shifted and was now blowing from the east. This usually means trouble in this country. We made the decision to backtrack to Hammerhead Lake, continue down the Gammon to Carroll Lake and then use the '3 mothers' Obukowin portage to reach Wallace Lake. [*From Wallace we could hitch a ride to Bissett where my car was.*] I knew this territory well. We would be able to get to Wallace in two days because we were able to one-time walk portages and because the east wind would make going west much easier and faster. My shoulder seemed good enough for paddling in the bow on the port side of the canoe and for carrying a packsack across a portage.

We broke camp in Nutria at 7:30 AM and headed back to the Rostoul River. The torrential rains hit us at 10 AM. We soon found that our 100% waterproof raingear was anything but waterproof. Within 15 minutes, we were both drenched to the skin. We had to stop every half hour to bail out the canoe but we still made good time riding the wave crests and the wind that pushed us steadily westward. [*We did not hoist the sail; the wind was too strong.*]

We reached Hammerhead Lake by noon and stopped to get warmed up at the fishing outpost cabin there. I think the American fishing guests must have seen a different version of 'Deliverance', one in which the canoeists are the bad guys. They were reluctant to welcome us into their warm abode, but they finally realized that we were too wet and cold to be a threat to them. We heard the weather report for the area on their radio and it was not good (but no surprise). Torrential rains, cool temperatures, and strong winds were to continue for the next few days.

It was then that we made up our minds to abandon our manly reputations and search for a radiophone so that we could call Bissett Air to fly us out. I knew that Donald Lake, the next lake downstream, was a haven for Americans with floatplanes and money. One of the wilderness retreats there should have a radiophone. Besides, from Donald Lake it is only three hours to the creek into Obukowin Lake. If we didn't find a radiophone in Donald our plan of getting to Wallace was still well-in-hand. We could hide in the lee of islands and shorelines to avoid the worst of the east wind as we paddled westward towards the creek. [*Also, there were fishing lodges in Carroll Lake that likely had a radiophone.*]

Leaving the fishing outpost behind, we once again braved the cold soaking skies. It did not take long before we reached Donald Lake and its cabins. We paddled and paddled, keeping to the east side of the lake to stay out of the strong wind, all the while searching for the tell-tale sign of a radiophone - a long antenna thrusting into the sky. No luck on the east shore.

There was a strange looking patch of green on the north shore. From a distance, it appeared to be a golf course in the middle of the wilderness. We headed for it across open water with the east wind powering us along. The swells occasionally dipped inside the canoe but we managed to keep from swamping. Then we saw the antenna in the midst of the greenery. The place was not simply a cute wilderness cabin. It was a collection of rustic buildings nestled at the base of a short peninsula that was covered with lawn. One of the buildings had the word 'Wamserville' spelled out on the roof in large white letters. We could see people watching us as we surfed towards them. I guess they were wondering about the crazies who were out in a canoe in that weather.

We swung into the sheltered side of the peninsula, still afloat. As we hit the beach, a throng of friendly guys greeted us and invited us to get out of the weather. My partner and I were soon drying out by a crackling fire and enjoying the finest Kentucky sipping whiskey. We impressed the guys with our Canadian toughness when we told them about our canoe trip. They impressed us with the information that Wamserville is owned by a Milwaukee millionaire who uses the place to entertain friends and employees.

The custodian of Wamserville [*It's a small world - he lived in my neighbourhood in Winnipeg.*] contacted Bissett Air and arranged for us to be picked up. The floatplane arrived by 6 PM. The weather was miserable - a low ceiling with thunderstorms threatening. It is a credit to the pilot that he was able to find us at all. A half-hour later, we were in the air. We flew low and soon Obukowin Lake was spread out below us. We could even see the portage trail from the air. Now this is the way to portage the mother of all portages. At that point, we were forced south to skirt a nasty looking thunderstorm that was coming our way. The plane seemed to be flying at the edge of a dark lightning-encrusted abyss for a long while before we finally reached Bissett.

By 8 PM, we had loaded the car and were on our way to eat in Bissett and then onwards to Bird Lake. The fun was not yet over. Rain pelted us as we drove. Sometimes it was difficult to stay on the road but thoughts of being out in a tent somewhere near Obukowin Creek, while trying to sleep in wet clothes, brought the horrendous driving conditions into clearer perspective. Near Black Lake, a rear tire was obliterated by a resounding blow-out. Changing a tire in the dark on a slippery inclined gravel surface is not fun at any time but we did the job without too many expletives escaping from our vocal cords. Around midnight, we rolled into Bird Lake and the cabins where our wives and children were staying. Our wives didn't recognize us at first and would allow us in only if we promised to take a long shower. And now, I think it is time to put this story of things gone awry to bed.

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