

passing it on

□ by Stephen Pisarik



A Vision To Behold

We lunge hard at first, laughing as we dip our paddles deep, driving with all our strength to see just how fast we can go. Each stroke is a burst of energy, rocking the empty canoe from side to side. After days of heavy paddling, we sprint lightly along the shoreline, leaving the world in our wake, coasting arrogantly to the finish line. We are young again, the years slipping from our shoulders like the heavy straps of Duluth packs.

Dave turns in the bow seat, grinning back at me. “Good water!” he exclaims, waving his arms about. “Good water!” Our laughter echoes back through time, recalling a similar day almost thirty years earlier. We were kids fresh out of high school, newcomers to the northwoods. We knew how to bobber fish for bluegills on farm ponds, but we knew nothing of walleye—until we met Frank.

It seems like yesterday when we first arrived at this very lake. It was late in the day, the light dimming to evening. Sore from paddling and stiff from portaging, we were following a very aggressive route, and it was more work than we had expected. Making matters worse, it was the third day of our trip, and we had yet to catch a fish of any size—just a few thin northers. We had begun to think we had made a mistake; maybe we should have stayed in Iowa.

We were just beginning to lay out the camp when a large canoe glided around a far point, making its way in our direction. As it approached we could see it was an old three-man wood and canvas tripper

paddled by young boys. In the center, seated in a folding director’s chair, was an old man wrapped in a wool shirt that was way too heavy for a summer’s evening. We could hear him coughing far across the lake, long before the boys nudged the canoe neatly alongside the rock landing by our camp.

“Welcome to God’s Country, boys!” the old man exclaimed, flinging his arms wide to encompass the entire lake. His voice echoed across the water, as if he were Ambassador of the North, a master of ceremonies introducing the star act.

That was how we first met Frank. The consummate host, he was so sincere in his welcome you would think he owned not only the lake, but the entire wilderness surrounding it. He was giving his two grandsons a tour of walleye water, and this lake was one of the best. We told him our story, and when he learned this was our first visit to the area, he knew we needed his help.

Without warning, before anyone could steady the canoe, he swung a leg over the side, stepping into calf-deep water in rubber boots that came almost to his knees. He slipped toward shore, eyes wide with excitement, arms waving for balance. Dave and I reached out to him, glancing at each other over his shoulder, raising eyebrows in silent frustration. All we wanted to do was set camp and eat as many hot dogs as possible. We were not ready for Frank.

We were a couple of bell-bottomed long hairs in those days. Most old men didn’t approve, but Frank didn’t seem to judge or even notice. All he knew was that we were fellow fishermen, that we had caught few fish so far, and that he could remedy that for us. His excitement grew the more he talked, pointing out one fishing spot after another before he even opened his map. He was so enthused, so eager to help, that he drew us in. We resigned ourselves to a late dinner and encouraged his excitement as best we could.

With his map spread out on our upturned canoe, Frank directed us to a narrows that connected the three arms of the lake like the knot in the center of a bow.

“All the water in the entire system flows through that channel,” said Frank. “The fish will be there in the morning. That’s where I’d start.”

He showed us the exact spots to fish and the ones to avoid; he gave advice on lures and water depth; he told us how to read the wind and currents. He jumped from one subject to another, pausing only to catch his breath or when a coughing spell forced him to slow down. He had too much to tell us. He couldn’t say it fast enough, and his voice grew hoarse as the evening wore on. He stayed late, way too late.

We pitched camp in the dark that night, snickering over the old man’s antics. But early the next morning we headed straight to the narrows.

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Every northwoods sunrise begins with a special promise. Each morning offers the opportunity of a new start, the feeling that all things are possible, the assurance that it will be a good day. We were filled with such confidence that morning. Perhaps it was Frank's advice, possibly it was the sound of fish rising on the early water or maybe it was just the arrogance of youth, but we were sure that our streak of bad luck was over.

Arriving at the narrows, we found Frank and his crew already there, waving to us like long-lost friends.

"Good water!" he called out, making wide hugging motions with his arms, embracing the entire scene, pulling it close to himself and holding it tight. "You'll catch fish here. This is all good water!"

We dropped our lines immediately and began to work the area, trying to keep Frank in sight without being too close. We didn't want to appear overeager, didn't want to be rude. So we shared the narrows, floating together, drifting slowly apart, always within earshot of the old man's coughing. We hung on the edges of the current, paddling slowly past fallen trees, working our way around points, but to no avail.

Slowly the mists lifted, taking with them the dampness. The light took on a harder, sharper edge, warming the surface of the lake, forecasting a hot day ahead. In no time at all, sunrise became mid-morning. The golden hours of dawn passed us by, leaving us fishless. Our confidence began to wane.

From time to time, we could hear splashing and excited voices; we would turn to see the heavy net lifted high into Frank's canoe. Dave and I would glance at each other, anticipation slowly giving way to boredom, then frustration. Something was wrong. It just wasn't our day, wasn't our trip.

After what seemed like hours, after giving up hope, we let the current push us where it would, laying our rods across the gunwales, dragging our lines behind us. Drifting in our own self pity, we didn't hear the canoe approach, and Frank's coughing startled us.

Then came the question, "How'd you boys do?" We mumbled in some embarrassment, admitting to being fishless.

"I was watching you. You spent too much time near that dead bay, no moving water there. Stay closer to the channel." Coming closer, grabbing our canoe, Frank reached for one of our rods. Like the night before, he crackled with rapid-fire instructions. "Get rid of that steel leader. You need lighter line. Got to feel the bottom all the time."

Peeling off line from his own rod, he kept talking, trying to impress on us all the details we needed, punctuating his lessons with

encouragement.

"They're still biting. This will do it for you. Now you'll get 'em!"

Cutting the jig and a long length of line directly from his rod, he snipped the leader from my line and began splicing them together. We stayed there, holding his canoe, watching his shaking hands struggle with the blood knot, listening to his instructions.

"Watch the wind. Fish the shore facing the wind. See that rock wall over there? The way it dives into the water? It'll keep going down like that below the surface. Feel for the drop-off. Jig slowly and always keep a tight line."

He sharpened our hooks, pumped us full of hope, pointed us in the right direction and sent us on our way. We felt rejuvenated, ready to try again; a losing team coming out strong after a half-time pep talk. Heading for the windward shoreline, we began anew.

Following Frank's advice, I focused on my line, reaching down through the water, leading the white and yellow jig in the steps of a slow dance, surprised I could actually feel the lake bottom.

To this day I remember the first strike, a sharp little tap on the line. I snapped the rod up quickly, feeling the hook dig hard into the mouth of the heavy walleye. I held on in surprise as the fish thumped back and forth, pounding the line, pulling the end of the canoe in a wide arc. I swung the rod around the stern, passing it from one hand to the next, rocking awkwardly. Almost tipping overboard in excitement, I slowly worked the fish to the surface, grabbing him behind the head.

Lifting him into the canoe, I held him in stunned disbelief as Dave snapped a quick picture. That photo captured the moment with a clarity that has remained crisp and clear through the years. All of the joy of youth expressed in my face; all the promise of the wilderness shines around me, splashing in the waves, caught in the tree-lined shore, reflecting off the water.

Little did I know at the time that I had set the hook deep into my own soul, linking my life to a passion that would pull me back to the northwoods time and time again. I was just a kid, eager to catch a fish. How could I possibly predict the impact of that moment? How was I to know I had been caught, trapped by the love of a sport that would tug at my spirit forevermore?

We lingered along the drop-off for a long time that day, catching walleye after walleye. Each fish came as a surprise, serving as a testament to Frank and his advice, for we knew we would not have caught them without his help.

By early afternoon the bite began to slow, and we began to think of lunch. After all morning in the canoe, we were ready for a change of pace, to stretch our cramped muscles. Reeling in the

The logo for Goldseekers Canoe Outfitting & Wilderness Expeditions features a stylized silhouette of a person in a canoe. The person is wearing a hat and is positioned as if rowing. The word "CANOE" is written in large, bold, black letters across the front of the canoe. Above the canoe, the word "OLDSEEKERS" is written in a similar bold, black font. Below the canoe, the words "OUTFITTING & WILDERNESS EXPEDITIONS" are stacked in a bold, black font. The entire logo is enclosed in a thin black border.

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lines, we began to pull along the shore, watching for a good landing. As we rounded a point, making our way down a long arm of the lake, we could hear muffled shouts in the distance. On a rock ledge at the far side of the lake, a wet paddle caught a flash of sunlight as one of Frank's boys waved it back and forth overhead. We returned the salute and began paddling quickly their way, concern rising as we approached, fearing something had gone wrong for the old man.

As we reached hailing distance, Frank appeared on the ledge, waving us in with welcoming arms, announcing that shorelunch was underway. Relieved that all was well, we lifted our stringer high for him to see. Laughing and cheering, he hopped about in excitement until a strong spasm of coughing forced him to sit down and catch his breath.

Hovering over us as we cleaned our catch, Frank peppered us with questions. Where had we caught them? How deep were we fishing? Enthused with our luck, he couldn't have been happier if he had caught them himself, encouraging each answer with, "That's great. Just wonderful. Beautiful fish!"

A shorelunch is an experience to savor, and our feast that day was one of the best. Fresh, cleaned walleye dipped in breading and fried golden brown, sizzling on the plate next to potatoes fried with bacon and onions. Frank had taught his grandsons well. They managed the temporary camp with an efficiency that surpassed their age, turning out an exceptional lunch in no time at all. They were obviously as happy to be there as we were, and they were justifiably proud of their skills.

Cleaning up after the meal,

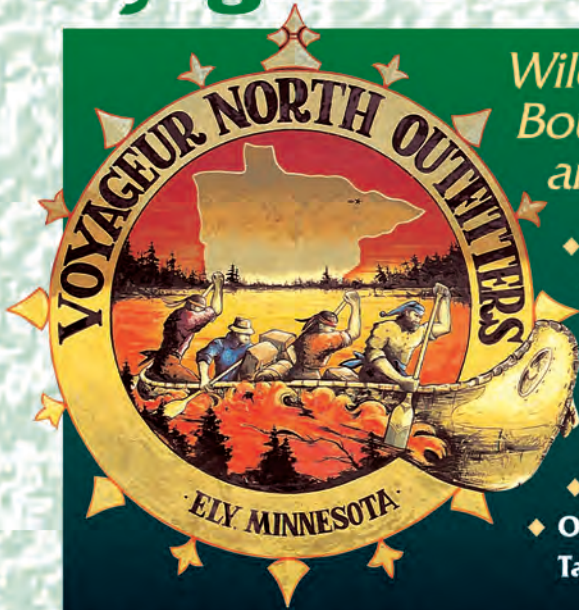
scrubbing the skillet with sand, I took a closer look at their canoe: a deep, wide wood-and-canvas model that had seen its better days. Deep scratches marked the faded canvas, which was patched and re-patched, frayed at the edges where countless paddles had dragged across the decking. Frank noticed my interest.

"You should have seen it when it was young," he said. "It was really something. I hated to see it just sit there under a tarp. That's no way to go. I had to take it out on one last trip. This is probably the last time for both of us."

And he was off on the old days, rambling through the years when he and the canoe were both young. Old man talk.

"Those were the days—the early twenties, after the war—when everyone was home and glad to be alive—or at least most guys. Took two men to carry that big boat. We would

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triple portage. The food and liquor we packed in! And the heavy canvas tents and the wool blankets. Back then, we had an outboard motor, almost heavier than it was worth, and the gas.

"We fried fish until we ran out of lard, and then we broiled them over an open fire." His eyes drifted to the far horizon. "Maybe that wasn't such a good thing, but there seemed no end to it. We usually carried out our trash, but some weren't so careful.

"It's better here now; quieter. People seem to respect the woods more. You have to keep it this way. Don't ever miss an opportunity. Get out here as often as you can. Your time will be up before you know it, like me and this old canoe."

When you're in your teens, it's almost impossible to picture yourself at eighty. With lunch over, we grew restless,

eager to get back on the lake, to catch more fish. But we owed him, so we let him go on. He had been right about the fish. For all we knew, he may have been right about other things as well, so we gave him our attention. Sitting around him with his grandsons, listening like students in an open-air academy.

He too had been hooked his entire life, and he was concerned about the future of the wilderness. Looking at him, a man too old to paddle his own canoe or portage his own packs, it seemed like we were hearing his final request: a sincere hope that we would care for the wild lakes he had loved so much for so long. Nodding our heads, we made a silent commitment.

Finally, we had to move on. As we left to go our own way, Frank continued to talk.

"We're going to try to find

some bigger fish this afternoon. If you see us out in mid-lake, and we don't move, come on over. There are some sunken islands out there, and when the bite is on, it is a vision to behold!" An actor on a stage, he flung his arms wide with drama.

Like everything about Frank, his generosity was both flamboyant and sincere. Never before had I been invited to join a fisherman at a favored spot, and I have only known that courtesy since from hired guides. For nearly thirty years, I have carried with me the lessons I learned from Frank. Thanks to him, I still pay particular attention to wind direction, and I'm always sure to feel the bottom when I fish for walleye. But most importantly, I remember Frank for his enthusiasm, for his infectious love of the wilderness and for his eagerness to impart

that passion to others. I owe him a lifetime of northwoods memories. I am in his debt.

I have shared the lakes and portages with many travelers through the years since, and I have come to understand the wilderness means different things to different people. Some paddle in search of peace; others for excitement. Some are looking to escape, while others seek something they may have lost. But regardless of perspective, we all hold a special love for the wilderness.

We have an obligation to protect and keep it alive, to pass on our love of the wild to each new generation. Like Frank, we must take the time to teach and encourage, to live with passion and share our enthusiasm with others.

The characters you meet along the way make the trip interesting, and Frank was quite a character. Taking him at his word, we joined him that afternoon at mid-lake. He showed us how to fish the humps, rigging nightcrawlers to drift slowly around sunken islands. We caught fish! Lots of fish! Then we threw them back and caught them again and again and again. It was a day like few since.

We shared the lake with Frank and his boys for several more days. He continued to coach and encourage, and we took his advice to heart, trying out new techniques under his guidance, learning as much as we could. But as the week progressed, his energy began to fade. He rose later every morning and left the lake earlier each afternoon, forsaking the canoe for a warm patch of sunshine near camp. His coughing spells grew stronger and lasted longer. The excitement was taking its toll, and he finally had to admit it was time for him to leave.

On the last morning, we waved a silent farewell as the boys paddled past our camp. Frank was resting low in his chair, facing the stern, watching as God's Country slipped away. Catching our eye, we waved softly in return, his hand rising and falling in a slow blessing, passing his dreams on to us as the old canoe melted quietly into the mist. □



ADAM JANSSEN



Perseverance is huge in canoe country fishing. Keep portaging, keep paddling, keep casting away. The angling thrill of a lifetime could be lurking in that next little hidden bay.