

Day 52, Sept 1

22 mi, Canoe + Co Campsite

Andy helped me shuttle my car to Enosburg, then dropped me off in Newport with my canoe for this 57-mile section. Under sunny skies I paddled North up Lake Memphramog, after making my offerings and prayers. At the border I used a glorified

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phone booth to check in with customs, and then headed on my way up the lake. The breeze was at my back and it was fun to ride the swells in the wakes of passing power boats. The people speak French here! The man at the boat launch washing station told me I was "one brave chick" for being out here alone. I shrugged and told him I do this a lot 😊

Once my canoe was washed free of invasive aquatic species, I loaded up for the famous 5.9-mile Grand Portage from Memphramagog to the Missisquoi River. This was my first time using the portage wheels alone, so I took care balancing the weight of the gear in the canoe. The steep haul up out of the Memphramagog watershed was brutal, but my muscles did not fail me. I got a lot of incredulous looks from people in passing cars. The gentle descent into the Missisquoi valley was much nicer. I got to the river at 4:30 pm, and

sat down for a little while to eat some rice + jerky and look at the map. I had not expected to get so far in one day!

I canoed down to Mansonville, where I had a nice chat with a local man at the boat launch. I spent much of the portage mentally reviewing my High School French vocabulary, and managed to deploy "Merci" and "Bon Soir" to show respect for the locals, but people are happy to speak to me in English once it becomes clear how poor my French comprehension is. I portaged 0.7 mi through the town to avoid some unrunnable rapids. The water is very low here on the North Branch of the Missisquoi, but my canoe mostly clears the bottom as I weave around fallen trees on this small waterway. I reached the campsite a little before dusk - it gets dark at 7:30pm these days!

Day 53, Sept 2

35 mi, Lawyer's Landing

Here's the thing I'm really bad at when I'm alone: stopping paddling for the day. Hence, I paddled 35 miles today and finished this "four day trip" in two days. And I loved it!

The rain arrived around midnight last night, as expected: heavy, steady, gonna-be-here-a-while rain. I had breakfast in my tiny one-man tent, then packed up my things and put on my rain gear. I pushed off into the river around 7:30 am - a nice leisurely morning, since I figured there was no way I'd be able to do the remaining miles on the Missisquoi in one day. (Ha!)

The North Branch of the Missisquoi reminded me a lot of the East Branch of the Savannah River back in Minnesota: a small, windy, tree-lined river narrow enough that one fallen tree can block the whole thing. Luckily this waterway is paddled regularly, and other people have hacked out ways through the

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tangle that I could utilize. After a few miles of tree-dodging, I reached the confluence with the main branch of the Mississippi.

In my head I not-so-fondly call this waterway the Peep River. Almost its whole length is in farm country, with ~~run-off~~ run-off from dairy farms and manure-sprayed fields flowing into it daily. It smells vaguely of poop, has trash floating in it, and the water is unsafe to drink even after purification or boiling. I'm sure it was a lovely river before Western Agriculture arose around it, but in its current state it's the least appealing waterway on the NFCT. After a night of heavy rain I could see clouds of poop-colored run-off gushing into the river from every drainage ditch.

I paddled 12 miles through the rain to the US border, where the young customs officer was gruff, formal, unsmiling, and suspicious. It must

be part of their job training. Still, a little rudeness is nothing compared to the atrocities being committed on the Mexican border these days. With that unhappy thought, I sat down under the International Bridge to put on another warm layer and eat some wild rice for lunch.

Back on the river, I had reason to bless the rain, because water levels had risen back up to normal levels, and I would not have to portage around the bony gravel bars of late summer after all - instead I rocketed through class II rapids, making great time, and began to wonder if I could make it all the way to Ensbury Falls today after all. The prospect of driving home in a warm car instead of camping in a saggy tent was quite appealing...

As I neared Richford, something on the riverbank caught my eye: four tall bushes arching over the water, displaying

glowing red bunches of Highbush Cranberries far all to see! My breath caught in my throat as a flood of memories came ~~back~~ back from last fall's wild food trip in Minnesota - picking berries on the riverside, portaging heavy buckets of berries, squeezing the juice out ~~with~~ with my bare hands, and tasting the maple-sweetened cranberry sauce on pot-roasted beaver meat. I was filled with a sublime gratitude for the generosity of this plant. I pabbled over and whispered words of thanks as I picked a few berries, tasting their cool sour juice squirt into my mouth, and savoring even the slight bitterness of the seeds before I spit them into the river.

I had a strong impulse to stop and harvest all the cranberries, but I had no extra buckets or bags, and a portage was coming up so I could not just carry them in the bottom of the boat. Also, they were just

slightly under-ripe, and would be better in a few days. So instead, I ate a few more fresh, and cried out to the bushes, "Yes! Yes - yes - yes - yes! Thank you! YES!" It was not my most articulate prayer, but it was very heartfelt.

Those ripe red berries had sparked a deep joy and faith and connectedness inside me... they lent a wholeness to my story over this past year, and assured me that all the pain and numb toes and social agony had left me with more than just the bitterness of half-met goals... that some deeper goal within me had been fulfilled, and the proof of what I'd learned was in the spark of joy and deep relatedness that I felt when I looked into the faces of those rosy berries. It's hard to put it into ~~the~~ words, since the mystery of this relatedness is so newly sunk into my bones. It is a mystery that must be earned through hunger, through labor, through tears,



and through the revolution of the seasons,

I paddled on, catching a few more "yes'es over my shoulder to those wise old berners. The

portage through Richard was easy, and I calculated I should

have enough time to reach Frosburg - and my car - before dark. Only

16 miles left!

The high water from the still -

persistent rain allowed me to

paddle right over Magoon ledges

rapid, and to shoot through the

Samsouville Dam Ruins rapid too -

which I probably should have

scouted first, since it turned out

to be the steepest rapid I've

paddled yet this summer, but my

quick reflexes served me well

and I cleared the big drops

without trouble. So fun! The

rain intensified, but my sprints

were quite high as I churned

through the final miles, and

~~Turned through the final miles~~

I took advantage of the rainy solitude and sang some bawdy gay elvish love ballads to the river.

Who says you can't build queer community when it's just you and the river? Nature is full of queerness, and our human queerness only exists because we are a part of it. Despite my soaking wet feet and butt, despite the hunger in my stomach, despite my aching shoulders, despite the poop-smell of the water all around me, I was filled with a good-humored conviction that Nature just wants us to be our true selves. That's why I keep heading out into the woods again and again, to backpack and hunt and paddle and forage... because Nature inevitably reminds me that I am just exactly who I need to be, and any human culture that asks me to be otherwise is wasting my gifts. Any such culture,

built on falsehoods and denial, is bound to crumble eventually.

The work of celebrating our true ~~we~~ natures is the work that will heal the world.

Hmm, what was in those cranberries? Feeling strangely optimistic and energetic, I pulled up to Lawyer's Landing in Enosburg... the place where Zev cooked us delicious Hopniss Chili months ago, back before everything fell apart and then re-assembled into something better. It felt good to close the loop.

I loaded my canoe on my car and blasted the heater on the drive home in an attempt to dry out some of my soggy clothing. My thoughts turned towards home... the warmth of a fire in the woodstove, the tomatoes that probably need harvesting in the garden, the saplings in the archery range that need to be cleared before this weekend's class, my cozy bed... Half the sweetness of a journey is in the return.