

Ste. Marguerite River, Labrador and Quebec, August 1981

Party consisted of: Dick Irwin and Bob Davis, Kerck Kelsey and Stew Coffin.

Aug. 7 - Took 8 a.m. train from Sept-Iles to Labrador City. Arrived late afternoon and stayed with Bob's friends overnight. Bob once worked in the mines there.

Aug. 8 - Transported by truck to Mt. Wright, then farther over private good gravel road (permits easily obtained at gate), closely paralleling Gagnon rail line, to bridge over Pekans River. Started down Pekans, ran some easy rapids, made one short portage, and lined a few spots. Next portage was 100 yds left around heavy drop, at which we camped. (mile 14, from start at bridge)

Aug. 9 - Ran several long easy rapids, then left Pekans and started up Grasse River. First portage was 100 yds left thru woods on good trail. Second portage, 250 yds left around pair of rapids, also good trail. Finally hauled up short rapid into Lac Gras, a pretty lake nestled in hills, with cliffs to the west. Found good campsite halfway down right shore. (mile 35)

Aug. 10 - Paddled up lake. Portaged 100 yds to upper lake, and continued southward up Lac a la Plaine. Dragged up several shallow rapids and over beaver dam, made one short carry, continued up winding stream thru burnt country, and finally portaged 300 yds to Lac Isabel. Portaged out of Isabel 100 yds over height of land to small lake. Camped wedged tightly among boulders in very rough burnt country. (mile 55)

Aug. 11 - Portaged out of small lake following blazed trail starting to the right of outlet, skirting left of bog, and leading 1/2 mile to head of navigation of outlet brook. Paddled a bit, lifting over two shallow places. At third shallows, departed this brook and followed a compass bearing westward over burnt hillside 1/2 mile to Ste. Marguerite River, here very small. Ran many shallow rapids, and lined down one, to reach Cedar Lake. Ran stronger rapids, waded and lined some, into Little Cedar Lake. Camped at sandy beach on right part way down lake. (mile 69)

Aug. 12 - Spent most of day negotiating 6 miles of steep rapids below little Cedar Lake, portaging, wading, lining, or running pitches too numerous to mention. Upper part required four portages averaging 100 yds. The lower section involved two portages left of 1/3 mile each. Climbed prominent bald hill for view. Camped on gravel bar just below junction with tributary. (mile 76)

Aug. 13 - Winding river with good current to junction with large tributary, then fast current and easy rapids thru burnt country. Finally left burn behind. Camped on right in birch grove. (mile 104)

Aug. 14 - Entered scenic section with many cliffs and waterfalls. The few easy rapids gradually diminish. Camped at sandy beach on left in quiet stretch. Signs of moose everywhere along the way. Finally saw two at this camp. (mile 120)

Aug. 15 - No rapids in morning, but many sandbars. In afternoon, many moderate rapids. At one impassable drop, carried left 50 yds. Camped at poor spot atop high sandy bank on left. (mile 150)

Aug. 16 - Easy paddle; not many rapids. Mid-afternoon, arrived at head of big gorge, reported to be impassable. Found good portage trail on left, starting 1/2 mile above gorge, leading eastward up steep hill. Carried canoes up it (800 vertical feet), and camped in poor spot at start of trail. (mile 171)

Aug. 17 - Resumed portage. At top of hill, trail goes thru saddle and turns southeast following down small brook. Paddled across small pond, then continued portaging along brook to head of small lake. Total portaging to here about 2 miles. Paddled 1-1/4 miles to outlet, then descended brook by series of short portages (just one 3/4-mile portage might have been easier) to head of larger lake. Camped halfway down this lake at old campsite in very scenic high country. (mile 176)

Aug. 18 - At outlet of lake, portaged left 200 yds over good trail to deadwater, crossed small pond, and found good trail running southwest 1/4 mile directly to Lac au Poelon. From south bay of Poelon, followed blazed trail up steep hillside, through saddle past small pond, then down steep open hillside to larger pond which drains southward. Continued down blazed trail, which follows ravine for one mile, then continues southwest 1/2 mile more to rejoin the river at foot of big gorge. Upper part of this trail was slow going over rough terrain, requiring some cutting, and evidently not the main route, which probably lies farther to the west and appeared to rejoin our route near the lower end. Paddled short ways down easy rapids, and camped on one of several large gravel bars. (mile 181)

Aug. 19 - Continued down easy rapids and fast current, thru scenic mountainous country, with sheer cliffs nearly always in view. In 10 miles, reached slack water caused by dam. Saw some fishing parties in power boats. Campsites very hard to find because of steep densely wooded hillsides and eroded clay banks. Finally forced to camp in such a place. Scrambled up 350-foot pink granite cliffs near camp for exercise. (mile 213)

Aug. 20 - Paddled remaining 8 miles to Rt. 138 bridge and power dam, stopping along the way at beautiful waterfall on right. Portaged left across highway, down road to power station, and by path to pool below tailrace and sharp drop. Passed some "keep out" signs, but power personnel did not appear to object. Paddled 1-1/4 miles to second power dam, and portaged left on good path past ruins of abandoned hydro station and over ledges to pool below rapids. Paddled 1/3 mile to Chute d'Aval (6 foot drop), which we portaged over smooth ledges in middle of river. Paddled 4 miles to mouth of river, and portaged 150 yds across sandy neck to avoid long paddle around. Paddled 8 miles along the coast, around Pte a la Chasse, and camped at splendid spot along rocky shores in a cove just short of Pte a la Marmite, where fresh water was found. For once, no bugs! (mile 236)

Aug. 21 – Blessed with sunny skies and gentle breezes, paddled the remaining 4-1/2 miles to Sept-Iles, practically to where our vehicle was parked at the train station, and headed home.

Notes: Compared with the illustrious Moisie River, which runs parallel just to the east, this less traveled route down the Ste. Marguerite is about the same length, and with comparable total length of portages. The rugged mountain scenery is also comparable to that of the Moisie, generally regarded as one of the more attractive canoe runs in eastern Canada. But as for whitewater, the miles of heavy rapids for which the Moisie is noted were entirely absent on our trip, as the Ste. Marguerite flows over a broad bed of sand and gravel nearly its entire length, except at the few places noted, whereas the Moisie cuts thru deep rocky gorges. The total drop of the two is about the same, but much of the drop on the Ste. Marguerite is taken up by the impassable gorge and two dams, and by the steep shallow rapids below Little Cedar Lake. However, our water level was said to be way below normal for this season, and high water might change the picture. The long paddle near the end, in the muddy backwater of the power dam, was anticlimactic. However, if one has the opportunity of finishing the trip as we did by paddling and camping along this beautiful archipelago coast under the ideal conditions we had, the muddy part is soon forgotten.

This is a slightly revised version of my original 1981 report, made by scanning it with OCR and then making numerous corrections. I may have missed some. Some of the information may be incorrect or obsolete, such as train schedules, permits, and power dams.

Stewart Coffin, April 2008

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- Dumoine River, 1962
- Riv. du Chef, 1963
- Chibougamau, 1964
- Kazan River, 1966
- George River, 1967
- Kipawa-Dumoine, 1979
- Romaine River, 1980
- Ugjoktok River, 1982