

Cariboo to Klondike - Yukon River Quest  
A Recollection.....2002

Prologue:

This is one participant's account of the experiences of a group of six paddlers who participated in the 2002 Yukon River Quest marathon canoe race from Whitehorse to Dawson City, a distance of 742 kilometres or just over 420 miles. Over the course of this experience, six friends developed a very strong bond based on good will, and mutual respect and trust. It was a very special experience for all involved and we hope that the reader will be able to garner a sense of the excitement, will enjoy the adventure, will see the humour and will take away with them, a little bit of how meaningful this experience was for us all.

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Standing on Main Street Whitehorse Yukon, it is almost 12:15 p.m., we are lined up waiting for the starter to fire off his bear banger and then we will all make our way down to the shore of the Yukon River where our loaded canoes are waiting. Thirty six different teams, a total of 76 individuals from all over the world, all have planned for months toward this moment. Our team, we call ourselves Cariboo to Klondike in recognition of Canada's two greatest gold rushes is lined up behind the Paddlers Abreast team of eight very inspirational women. We are laughing and joking, it is an understatement to say that we are pumped and yet I feel amazingly relaxed. I take this moment to reflect on what it has taken to get to this point, to this very special moment.

Eight months earlier, the tiny kernel of an idea that it might be a great adventure to paddle a voyageur canoe in the Yukon River Quest was planted amidst the snow and freezing temperatures of a Quesnel winter. A few friends tried the idea on for size, others were contacted to gauge their degree of interest, for several months the idea slowly germinated. Some who were contacted were very interested but various commitments made it impossible for them to participate. We had the idea that it would be great if our team could be comprised of individuals over age 50. We wanted to use the voyageur canoe, the Blackwater Dancer, that is the property of the Quesnel Blackwater Paddlers paddling club, those who were committed quietly started to ensure that they would be in reasonable physical shape and slowly the plans as well took shape. The club was supportive and the executive gave the plan their blessing and authorized the use of the Dancer. Finally six individuals committed to the plan, Jerry McFetridge, John Havens, Petrie Neave, Don Cunningham, Cathy McNeil and Jeffrey Dinsdale were committed and we had a team.

The planning started in earnest. As soon as the ice was off the local lakes paddling practice began. Tragically, just a week after paddling began, Cathy McNeil was involved in an bicycle/automobile accident and shattered her kneecap. The team was in shock, but a replacement was found, Susie Paley of Vanderhoof was excited about the challenge and she very quickly became an integral member of the team. Logistics were worked out, some would fly to Whitehorse, others would drive, a support crew of four spouses/partners was recruited, menus planned, equipment finalized, details with the race organizers were clarified, support from sponsors was obtained.

It was agreed that we would do more than just show up to race a canoe but we would do all we could to ensure that this was the event of a lifetime for all of us. We decided to "twin" the Cariboo and the Klondike goldrushes and the assistance of Barkerville Historic Town and National Historic Sites in Dawson City was solicited. Similarly we wanted to twin the new casino in Wells, the Jack o' Clubs Casino Music Hall along with the Quesnel Billy Barker Casino Hotel with the venerable Diamond Tooth Gertie's Casino and Music Hall in Dawson City. We also agreed from the outset that we would be ambassadors for voyageur canoeing, we would wear voyageur outfits as much as possible. We all shared common goals, to make this event a personal challenge, to paddle well, to ensure our safety, to work well as a team, to respect other competitors, to savour the Yukon and that special river, to feel the history, to represent our club and our community and to have fun. From the outset we agreed that we would aim to complete the event in 80 hours.

June 20th saw us in voyageur costume at the official opening of the Jack o' Clubs Casino and Music Hall in Wells, for five minutes we were the guests of honour. We proudly received the gifts and information

packages that we would carry with us all the way to the Klondike and then we had our photos taken with the two camels that are the casino mascots. It was to be just the start of a surreal experience and by the time the race was over, the camels were not the least bit out of place.

June 21st, Saturday morning, a bright crisp day, the canoe was loaded, the vehicle was ready, people had been found to watch the houses, water the plants and feed the dogs. We pointed the vehicle north on Highway 97, put in the book-on-tape and off we went. It took exactly five minutes to leave the cares of home behind us, we were full of excited anticipation. We had made lots of plans, had double-checked our plans. We were confident that all would work out but still there was a bit of apprehension. It wasn't our first trip north, we had made this exact same journey four years earlier. At that time it had taken us 14 days to paddle the same route in a voyageur canoe so we had some idea of what was in store for us. Soon it became quite clear that we had planned well, the canoe trailered perfectly, all the gear was packed safely, we were comfortable, we even used the air conditioning.

A few good omens. As we were padding through Prince George there was a chance meeting on the bypass with Lyle Dickieson, one of our mentors. His big "thumbs up" was worth a million dollars. Lyle had paddled with our group about a month earlier, offering some valuable suggestions, especially about self rescue in the event of a capsizing. We knew that he and many others were travelling with us on this trip. In the weeks leading up to the departure, several friends and members of the Blackwater Paddlers had wished us well and had helped in many little ways. Some of the club members sanded the gunnels and decks of the *Dancer* and lovingly oiled them with several coats of preserving oil, others had baked special breads, some had taken the time to come out and help with paddling, others to take photos. Other club members did some last minute work on the trailer to ensure that it was truly the perfect means of transporting the canoe. Our club website contained a special Yukon River updates section that was kept current by the club secretary, the media was very supportive, local businesses supported us.....and everywhere we went people wished us well.

The first night we pulled into Buckinghorse campground on the Alaska Highway and there were Petrie and Liz waiting for us. We were tired and it was threatening to rain, we had trouble with tarps but eventually got the tents up and the hot stew we had for supper was great. A few hands of cards and lots of anticipated talk about the trip and we hit the sack. We could already sense the increased hours of daylight. Next morning breakfast was in the Buckinghorse Highway Lodge. We had a waitress from Newfoundland who had a boyfriend from Quesnel. Was this another good sign?

That night our destination was Liard River Hot Springs campground. En route we stopped off at Duke Energy in Fort Nelson to meet Pat Latham, Susie's boyfriend and an invaluable member of our support team. We pulled into the huge natural gas plant and blissfully walked into the empty admin building. We dialled a number as the sign suggested and were told that we were under close video surveillance. So much for our careers as subversives. We had lunch along the highway north of Fort Nelson and coffee in Muncho Lake, right in the heart of the Northern Rockies. We saw lots of wildlife on our trip, several moose, black bear, caribou, stone sheep, foxes, coyotes, caribou, deer and this day was probably the most prolific one for wildlife viewing. A few hours later we smugly pulled into our reserved camping spots at Liard Hotsprings noting that the campground was full. Several hours of soaking and sightseeing around the hotsprings were a much-anticipated reward. This spot is home of the \$750,000 solar powered outhouse and that warranted both a visit and a photo. In terms of expense, some would say that this outhouse ranks right up there with the fast ferries but there is a difference...the outhouse works. Then supper in the lodge across the highway, a few games of cards in the bug tent that was going to prove to be an invaluable and much-used part of our equipment and again off to bed.

Monday we made our way northward, reminiscing about earlier trips we had all made over that road, we had our photos taken at the Yukon border, lunch at the Signpost Forest in Watson Lake, coffee in Teslin and finally we arrived in Whitehorse just about supper time. We marvelled at the city's growth, drove open-mouthed past "Camp Wal-Mart"...the forest of R.V.'s camped on the Wal-Mart parking lot, had supper at Boston Pizza and around 8:00 p.m. connected with our friend Danusia Kanachowski, a Whitehorse resident who had invited our whole group to stay at her place. We invaded Danusia's home, the neighbours were furtively looking through curtains as we parked the *Dancer*, set up a tent trailer, and unloaded tons of

gear. We visited and talked about the race. Danusia is a former competitor and she has been training the Paddlers Abreast team. It was apparent that the mind games had begun, she wasn't going to let out any secrets and was trying her best to psych us out.

Tuesday the 25th was preparation day. The canoe had to be washed and some last-minute adjustments made to our gear. We had to purchase a few items and we visited the race headquarters where we had questions answered and met some of the other competitors. It was reassuring to learn that our concerns were shared by the others. What if it is windy on Lake Laberge? What side of the lake will we stay on? Will we really regret not having a spray skirt, we had debated that issue over and over and had decided that we would be better off without a spray skirt? Actually, we were confident with our planning and with our equipment. It was more exciting than anxiety-producing. It was also great to be in Whitehorse in the summer, the tourist welcome mat was out. We went down to the river, looked at the put in, visited a few interesting sights and planned supper at Sam 'n Andy's, a local Mexican place. Danusia was able to join us. Also on Tuesday Susie arrived via Air North from Vancouver and Pat had driven overnight from Fort Nelson to meet her.....our team was almost complete.

Wednesday, the 26th. Don and Jerry flew in at 2:30 via Air Canada from Vancouver, our team was now together. We met them at the airport and chauffeured them to action central at Danusia's place. They brought all of the frozen previously-prepared meals with them on the plane and the support crew faced the task of getting the food properly packed into individual meals and then placed into the buckets that we had brought along to transport them in the canoe. We had to get our canoe ready for the pre-race inspection and that meant getting the floatation bags in place along with all of our personal gear. Our plan was to use our dry bags along with some air bags for floatation in the event that we capsized in Lake Laberge. This meant that everything had to be fastened tightly into the boat so that it wouldn't float away if we tipped over.

Dressed in voyageur outfits, we drove to the Mount McIntyre recreation complex and it was at that point that it was impossible to ignore the fact that we were in a race. The parking lot was filled with canoes and kayaks. Our boat was an immediate sensation and large numbers of race participants came over to examine the Dancer and to run their hands over her majestic bow and stern. We received endless positive comments from onlookers. We were actually interviewed by the BBC, on camera no less. They were following one of the competitors, a woman who had rowed across the Atlantic ocean.....it was for some kind of reality television program. We were to see that camera crew throughout the race and the woman and her partner were easy to spot, they actually had two cameras mounted on their canoe. We also wandered throughout the canoes with our mouths open, marvelling at the ingenious hydration methods used by the various teams, and very impressed by the beautiful canoes and kayaks, some of them handmade.

The pre-race competitors' meeting was informative. Probably the most significant thing about the meeting was the fact that we all received our T Shirts (been there done that). But we also felt reassured as we learned about the river and the safety boats. The Yukon River Quest is actually run by the same group that organizes the Yukon Quest sled dog race and some of the officials from that group made presentations. Some very knowledgeable folks were in charge of the safety features, they obviously knew the river very well. Another group that was involved in the organization of the race was the Canadian Rangers, it is hard to say too much about these men and women. The Canadian Rangers are a quasi-military organization with groups in various communities throughout the Yukon, NWT as well as one or two in B.C. They are not unlike a search and rescue group although have a much higher profile in the north and their primary role is one of national defence. They are Canada's "eyes and ears" throughout the north and they are authorized to report any unusual developments or movements throughout the Canadian Arctic. They wear a distinctive red shirt and ball cap, rumour has it that their only remuneration is free ammunition for their hunting rifles. This group actually had a team in the tandem canoe section of the race and they had tents set up at the various checkpoints providing the competitors a place to crash. They also set up observation and safety posts along the river.

Following the meeting, it was back to Danusia's for the pre-race pasta load. The men cooked and everyone ate. Spaghetti with meat sauce, fresh salad and pie and ice cream. We all felt satiated and retired early in anticipation of the big day.

The 27th dawned early...by this time of year it is daylight in Whitehorse by about 2:00 a.m. A few of the team members were up by 4:30 a.m. Up means up and about, fussing over last-minute planning. Eventually Jerry and I went into town searching for coffee and an internet hook-up to send a last-minute update to the website. Sleep was impossible but about a day later, oh how we wished we had stayed in bed anyway. We all loaded the canoe for the final time, everything was ready and it was time to head downtown to the put-in. We went to the Airport Chalet for a group breakfast, we were all wearing our black, Blackwater Paddlers T Shirts with "Cariboo to Klondike" emblazoned across the front. We had our sponsor's logos sewed onto the sleeves and we all wore pink ribbons pinned to our T Shirts in silent support of the women of the Paddlers Abreast team. As we left the restaurant to head into town a bald eagle flew overhead, another good omen.

At the put in we decided to leave the Dancer on shore, fully loaded but on the special set of wheels that would enable us to simply push the canoe into the water when it was time to go. We were lined up beside the Paddlers Abreast canoe, a beautifully painted fibreglass replica of Bill Reid's cedar canoe Lootos. The canoe is 32 feet long and is deceptive in its appearance. It moves very well in the water and is fairly easy to turn despite its width and a decorative long bow and stern. Clipper Canoe has done a good job with the design of this canoe. This particular boat is owned by the RCMP and it has been used as part of their Vision Quest program. While not actually a voyageur canoe, it was considered as such by race officials, although the term that we heard more than once was that it was a "crew boat". The women of Paddlers Abreast were very efficient, these ladies knew a thing or two about paddling. We noticed that they took the centre seats and filled that area with their dry bags. This created a nice soft area about 4 ft. by 8 ft. Voila a bed!...and those women didn't miss a thing, they added a nice down duvet.

Here we are again, back on Main Street, the office workers are milling about as they enjoy their lunch break. John, the master of the salute suggests that we do a salute right there on the main street. "Preparez a saluee" he yells and we go through our well rehearsed routine. Except we have rehearsed it while paddling in the canoe on the water with paddles but we still do a commendable job. It is an exciting moment as the starter holds his bear banger in the air. It fizzles, he has a disappointed look on his face, the competitive racers take off and the rest of us half jog, half hobble down to the riverfront. There is pipe band to urge us on and Petrie, our best runner, smiles and almost does the Highland Fling when he sees them.....another good omen.

Down at the put-in there are canoes and kayaks everywhere. As we approach the Dancer as a group, there are already tandem canoes well on their way downstream. We push the boat into the water, we put on our PFD's and at that point I get into the river at the bow to conduct a special voyageur ceremony, giving a gift to the spirit of the river in the hope that she will look kindly on our group and keep us safe on our journey. I wade in up to my thighs, pull my leather sack of tobacco from my pocket, say something bland and inane about wind at our backs or something like that and spread the tobacco, just as voyageurs have done for centuries. I noticed that the Paddlers Abreast team also paused to take part (and later on they commented that they think it worked because there were no adverse winds). Unfortunately I also succeeded in soaking my shorts and undershorts and for the first five or so hours of the race I was hopelessly uncomfortable and all I could think of was my rear end turning into hamburger, just like John Briscoe had told us was going to happen during the race.

Jerry was in the bow and we had told ourselves that we didn't want to go out too hard and tire ourselves right at the start. "Positions....Preparez...En Avant" and we were quickly into the current, Jerry setting a pace of about 45 strokes a minute. The first five minutes or so are a blur, the banks were lined with hundreds of people, we did a few salutes, everyone cheered us on....I heard "Blackwater Paddlers" and looked over to see Danusia hanging out of a van and cheering us on, we passed the old shipyards and soon we were past Whitehorse, just us and the river and the other canoes. Right from the start, William Kleedehn and Catherine Pinard decided to draft off of us, which they did for the first half hour. We can't really blame them for when the Dancer is under full steam it leaves a very inviting wake. We passed some boats and were passed by others, the BBC seemed to be everywhere, we passed a few dazed tourists on paddling holidays who had no idea what was happening around them. We had decided to change paddling sides every 15 minutes and to stop for five minutes every half hour. It was up to the gouvernail in the stern to call the changes and the breaks. We religiously kept to our schedule and it didn't please William

Kleedehn very much when he had to move out and make his own way. William is a well-known dog musher and I wanted to make some comment as he went by about him needing to find a better lead dog but I held my words.

The first landmark was the Takhini river flowing in from river left. High on a bluff our support crew had set up camp overlooking the river, we could see the Yukon flag flying and we were able to talk with them using a small walky talky radio. It was reassuring to speak with them...both for them and for us. We knew our support crew would be valuable, we had no idea just how valuable they would be. Also at this spot we saw a woman dressed in a blue jumper and sandals running at full clip along the shore and cheering us on with a loud voice....it was Danusia once again, we reasoned that she must know a few short cuts. Our support crew also made it to the end of Burma Road to cheer us on and once again we were able to wave and to speak with them. They also made it to the campground on Lake Laberge and while we spoke with them, we could not see them.

We made it to Lake Laberge in about three hours, actually a little faster than we had planned. When we got to the lake there was a fairly strong wind coming diagonally from our left, with swells of almost a foot. We cut a path at about a 45 degree angle to the swells, just to the right of the centre of the lake, it seemed to work out well. From time to time we could feel the wind at our backs, at no time did we feel anxious, the Dancer handled this water handily.

We paddled for about five hours on the lake, steering to the right of Richtofen Island for a point called the narrows, which is supposed to be the half-way point on the lake, we made good time and were still riding the high of the start and the fact that we were underway. At any one time we could see about 10 boats, they were small specks on the horizon, the safety boat circled us a few times, the sky was clear and we were very happy. We kept to our schedule of changes and rest and at about 8:00 p.m. decided to go to shore for a pee break (although we very quickly learned how to discretely use the bailers for this purpose). On shore we broke open the food buckets and had meal #1, Pizza and apples (all meals were carefully labelled). For this first part of the trip we carried five meals and we were already behind schedule as here it was eight hours into the race and we were supposed to be eating meal #2 by this point. This caused us some mild anxiety for we were well-aware of all the work that had gone into preparing the menu. We all carried our own personal snacks and we drank profusely and were not hungry.

At this stop, which lasted about an hour, we changed into warm fleece clothing for the night, took some photos, stretched, ate and were treated to a reading of *The Cremation of Sam McGee* by Don. What a surprise and what a treat! We were enthralled and all joined in on the line "Since I left Plumtree down in Tennessee, it's the first time I've been warm". As Don recited Robert Service, the Brits and the BBC went by and then we were treated to one of the strangest paddling sights we had ever seen. A determined tourist paddling solo in a 16 ft. Royalex canoe was sitting in the centre of his canoe and paddling one stroke on the right then one stroke on the left then one stroke on the right and then one stroke on the left.....he was doing this the whole length of Lake Laberge.

We hit the water feeling revitalized. Jerry was now in the stern, John was in the bow. There was still total daylight and it was now after 9:00 p.m. We laughed and sang and joked along this part of the lake. It was clear that we had stopped beyond the halfway point and soon the end of the lake was in clear focus. The safety crew was setting up a tent on a prominent point at the end of the lake so that they could spot the canoes as they went by and note their numbers. We made a beeline for the entrance of the Thirty Mile River, just as the sun was thinking about going below the horizon. It was about 11:00 p.m. at this point. Once on the river the current picked up and we settled in to enjoy one of the most beautiful parts of the trip.

The Thirty Mile, which is really just one section of the total Yukon River was declared one of Canada's first heritage rivers. It is fairly narrow, the current is swift, at times you can see it falling away ahead of you, it is twisty, quite shallow, lots of wildlife and totally pristine. It was a thrill to be travelling this river in the dusk. We travelled the full length that night, we watched the sun disappear but the sky remained bright, there was really no darkness. About 3:00 a.m. the moon came up, it scribed a very short arc in the northern sky and then disappeared. It is hard to come up with the words to describe the colours, peachy yellow with blue, gold with black, it was breathtaking. That night the temperature fell and fell. Soon we were wearing

almost everything we had to wear, gloves, toques, polarfleece pants and tops, jackets, warm socks and dry shoes, there was mist rising from the water.....it was cool!

At about 4:00 a.m. we came to Hootalinqua where the huge Teslin river flows in on river right. Just past Hootalinqua is Shipyard Island and we decided to stop to allow some of the team to see the abandoned sternwheeler Evelyn. There were people camping on the island and we probably woke them up. We were feeling somewhat cold and welcomed another pee break. We looked at the decaying sternwheeler and whispered to one another, then decided to hit the river once again. Somewhere on the Thirty Mile we had consumed meal #2 as we drifted (beans and pepperoni) and we weren't hungry at all but something very interesting was happening to us. Our first clue was when we were about a half mile past Shipyard Island and Jerry, (who was now sitting ahead of the stern as John had taken over as gouvernail with me in the bow) uttered a very mild oath and stated that he had left his PFD behind on the island. Without hesitation we did a 180 degree turn and found the calm water close to the shore and paddled back upstream to get the PFD. This was good for a beer once we got to Dawson City. Jerry's forgetfulness was no-doubt evidence of what we all were feeling....we were exhausted!

In our planning for this trip we had paid attention to our paddling and water safety and equipment etc. etc., but we didn't have a plan about how we were going to cope with the sleep deprivation. We knew that there would be a few short mandatory breaks at Carmacks and at Minto but it was now evident that this wasn't going to cut it for us, we needed more sleep. We still didn't have a plan and just kept paddling on. From Hootalinqua, the next landmark on the river was a distance of 45 miles at Big Salmon where the Big Salmon river flows in on river right. We kept on and eventually passed Big Salmon feeling not too bad, our second wind had kicked in. From Big Salmon to Little Salmon it is another 45 miles and we started breaking it into one hour segments, hoping that we could travel at least 8 miles per hour. We realized that from Shipyard Island to Little Salmon was a distance greater than the trip around the Bowron Lakes and we were doing it in 16 hours or less.

Our support team had travelled to Little Salmon the night before and had set up camp after midnight. They were up early and saw all the action on the river, including the kayaker who fell asleep and woke up upside down in the river. They had front row seats for all of the front running action, they entertained the crews of the safety boats and the rescue boats, they had a beautiful camp set up. We finally arrived at Little Salmon at about noon, nothing can describe how good it was to see our support team standing on the shore waving the Yukon flag. Actually, I had seen members of the support team on shore several times before this, I now know that I was beginning to hallucinate because of sleep deprivation. Our plans had called for us arriving there at 8:30 a.m. so it was apparent that fatigue and sleep deprivation was taking its toll. The first kayak had passed by Little Salmon at 5:20 a.m., almost 7 hours ahead of us. We were in great spirits even if we were a little dazed and had trouble walking on dry land. We were quickly offered the most delicious pancakes I have ever eaten, along with hot coffee and then we grabbed about 45 minutes of sleep. We were back on the water after an hour feeling totally revitalized, ready for the seemingly endless 50 mile trip from Little Salmon to Carmacks.

Just a few words about the support team. In this race, the support team members are referred to as Bank Runners. We were fortunate to have a group of the best. By sheer accident or coincidence, Jeff, John and Petrie all married women (Margaret, Dorrie and Liz) who have a love for strange things. They love sleepless nights, they love bugs, they love waiting for hours with no knowledge of when the canoe will appear, they love tearing down camp and setting it up again, they love cooking over camp stoves (with the bugs), they love planning and preparing meals for weeks ahead of the race only to have them go uneaten, they love dirty, smelly and incoherent partners who grunt when spoken to, pee in the bushes and sleep at all hours of the day and night, they love getting lost on unmarked roads, they love asking for directions from strangers in the middle of the night, they love taking water out of the river, they love doing laundry and most of all they love eating at the Carmacks Hotel. And guess what you are being groomed for Pat?

We made pretty good time and were still hanging in there in the sleep department. This was a long slog though, the river has lots of twists and bends. In places you can see the Robert Campbell highway and we were able to speak with our support crew on the walky talky. Just before we got to Carmacks we had rain and a gusty headwind but we paddled through it and Jerry did an incredible draw as we eddied out behind

the dock at Carmacks at 7:47 p.m., I believe that onlookers actually applauded. We took the Dancer out of the water using our wheels and our support crew took over. They drove us up to the bathroom (by this time modesty was the furthest thing from my mind) and then back to a field that they had commandeered to set up "action central". All of the tents were up along with the bug tent. We all hit the hay for about 1 ½ hours, organized our gear, had hot chocolate and date squares to kill for, and were back on the water at 10:27 p.m. Our two hour mandatory stop had been extended to two hours and 40 minutes.

We were reorganized, we had a fresh supply of meals, were scrubbed, bright eyed and bushy tailed. We were now facing one of the most exciting parts of the trip. Our goal was Minto Landing, supposedly a six hour paddle ahead of us, with the prospect of a six hour mandatory layover at that point. But between us and Minto Landing were the fabled Five Finger Rapids. We were full of anticipation and talked about our strategy for one of the most famous parts of the total trip. We were not anxious, by this time we had become one with the Dancer, we had complete faith in that boat and felt confident that we could ask it to do whatever was needed to deal with any rough water that lay ahead of us.

We had about three hours to get ready for Five Fingers, when those four rock pillars finally appeared before us at about 1:30 a.m., in the dusky half-light of a Yukon night we were ready. We were excited, we had been singing and joking, we kept to the right side of the right-hand channel, our support crew was cheering from the observation deck (we had been talking with them over the walky talky), the water was big but the Dancer knifed through the standing waves, we didn't take on a drop, we cheered and yelled, it was a moment of pure adrenalin. On an island just below the rapids, the Canadian Rangers had a safety crew waiting just in case. These fellows had a fire burning and a camp set up, they were in good spirits and joked as we passed. It was good to know they were there.

What followed was one of the most incredible experiences of my life. The light was once again indescribable. There was a ¾ moon that reflected off the river with that same peachy golden colour. We skirted around Rink Rapids and the river became wider and wider, with lots of islands. Don, our navigator and GPS guru told us what side of the islands to travel on. This was high water, in places the river looked like a lake and we were in full-blown sleep deprived hallucination mode. We stopped at Yukon Crossing for a pee break and to look at the old roadhouse and were back on the water by 3:30 a.m. The next three hours were surreal. It was cool again and we were bundled up, we just kept paddling and paddling, I was in the stern and quite frankly was questioning most of what I saw ahead of me. That's the thing about sleep deprivation, it causes you to begin to doubt your own judgement, you turn inward and become tentative, not a good state for the gouvernail of a voyageur canoe to be in. We all saw faces in the rock walls, we saw canoes that weren't there, people that weren't there. As the day got lighter and lighter we kept looking for Minto Landing. By this time we were using the current to full advantage and it was clipping along at about 10 mph. At one point we were sure we were lost and even considered camping and waiting for someone to come and find us. Needless to say, our judgement wasn't at its best but we kept going. Eventually, in the relatively clear light of a 6:40 a.m. morning we came into Minto Landing and the welcome sight of our support crew. We had established walky talky contact and knew we were going to make it. All we could think of was sleep. We took the Dancer out of the water and staggered to our tents.

Minto Landing is a beautiful spot. It is on a bluff overlooking the Yukon river, it is actually First Nations land but there is a campsite with cook shelter and outhouses. Apparently our support crew had as much trouble finding the place as we did. We will be making some suggestions to the race organizers about signage and maps. The day heated up quickly and we slept for about three hours before the heat made it unbearable. We got up and washed and organized our clothing and equipment. We then all sat down for a chicken cattiatore meal with coffee and dessert, it was wonderful. We then did some serious team building as Jerry called everyone together and took out a vial of "soothing balm" which we were free to rub on to any part of our body that was aching. We were actually all feeling some discomfort or muscle pain, but nothing that was even close to debilitating. Nevertheless the "soothing balm" was used liberally and whether it was in our heads or not, it seemed to help. We got ready to leave on the next leg of the trip, a 180 mile section to Dawson City. There would be no more contact with the support team so we had more meals packed in the canoe and we pushed off at 1:19 p.m. We had spent 6 hours and 40 minutes at Minto. We had been observing other canoes as they put in and it was clear that they were relying almost totally on the ever-increasing current to push them along. Most canoeists were hardly paddling. We had a strategy

session and agreed that we would try to use the current more efficiently and that we would try to institute a plan where two of us at a time would try to sleep in the canoe throughout the upcoming night. We were ready for the last big leg of this odyssey.

The current was 10 mph at this point. We consciously slowed our paddle cadence to about 40 strokes per minute in order to conserve energy. With such a current, we didn't need a high cadence. We found that as this journey had progressed, we had no difficulty maintaining 55 or even 60 strokes per minute and unless we were careful, we tended to increase the cadence without thinking. It was also interesting that as the race progressed we experimented with various paddles and to a man (woman) we settled on the Lolk otter tail paddles that had been part of the Dancer's equipment right from the start. We had hardly used these paddles in training, relying instead on a whole melange of paddles that we brought from home. We had actually come to agreement that for this race we would probably rely on bent shaft paddles, and each of us had a beautiful lightweight bent shaft paddle to use. But as time wore on, the logical paddles to use were the beautiful cherry wood Lolks. Jerry and John did use their newly-purchased and excellent 12 oz. carbon fibre graphite space-age paddles some of the time however we had actually left most of our extra paddles behind at Carmacks. I thought that it really was a fluke that we had the Lolks along with us and I was glad that we did. This was a pleasant part of the trip in bright sunshine, we also were fascinated by a herd of Dall Sheep that could be plainly viewed on the cliffs that ran the length of river left.

Twenty four miles down river from Minto Landing was the historic "ghost town" of Fort Selkirk. I became the self-appointed historian and as we approached the Pelly River which came in from river right, I recounted the history of Robert Campbell and the establishment of Fort Selkirk as a HBC trading post in the 1840's, the pillaging by the Chilkat Indians who resented the fact that the HBC was trying to undermine their role as a middleman between the Russians on the coast of Alaska and the interior native people. We talked about the establishment of the Yukon Field Force by the Canadian government to ensure sovereignty in the Yukon in the 1890's, of their trip from eastern Canada, north through the Stikine country to Teslin, then down this very river by raft (with their cannons safely aboard). Soon the roofs of the Yukon Field Force barracks came into view and the two large depressions in the rock wall across the river from the barracks (where they reputedly took target practice with their cannons) were clearly evident. We saw the Yukon flag and the Canadian flag flapping in the breeze and the whole townsite located high on a bank on river right was visible. We eddied out at the dock and made our way up the steep steps for a pee break (complete with outhouses) and a chance to fill our water bottles with fresh water.

There were several people in Fort Selkirk, many of them tourists (just like us) and some of them with the race. Most of our group took a quick tour of the town. For some of us it only hardened the personal resolution that we would just have to come back again. It is a beautiful, quiet, fresh place, with a slow pace and a fresh breeze. The heady days of the sternwheeler era which was the lifeblood of this community are now gone, but it didn't take much to imagine what it must have been like when one of those smoke-belching behemoths came up or down the river and then pulled in at the dock with a load of supplies or to take on a group of people who were anxious to travel to Dawson City or to Whitehorse. I spoke with some of the race volunteers and scrutinized the race statistics. We were in the bottom third of the pack but were not last, beside each boat the race official made a cryptic note "looks tired", "waved a greeting", "going strong", "bow paddler sleeping" and beside the Cariboo to Klondike entry was the note "stopped". Apparently we were the only sightseeing group in the race.

The officials had set up a viewing platform and were carefully recording the number of each boat that passed. A tandem kayak was having gear problems and were beached on an island just above Fort Selkirk, the safety official was aware of this. All race volunteers and safety boats were in contact via satellite telephone in the event of an emergency. To date, other than the kayaker who woke up upside down, the problems experienced by paddlers were limited to "blown shoulders" and other types of physical problems. A young female reporter from the Yukon News, the same person who had interviewed us in the parking lot at the pre-race meeting was also at Fort Selkirk. She was covering the race and was "hitch hiking" along the river with various support boats. We had a not-too-heavy discussion about the race-to-date, I was amazed at just how good and relaxed I felt at that moment....how could it be anything but?



After about 40 minutes we were back in the Dancer, I was in the stern and a great draw by Jerry got us into the swift-moving current. As the big rivers entered the Yukon the current got faster and faster and the river got wider and wider. Our next landmark was approximately 100 miles downstream, the entry of the White River on river left. This river gets its name from the fact that it carries huge amounts of white volcanic ash and below the confluence, the Yukon river actually becomes a milky white colour and the water becomes extremely gritty. When we were finally in this water, I thought about the club members back home and hoped that they would be pleased that we were giving the hull of the Dancer the ultimate in wet sandings. But we had to get there first and at this point our journey begins the take on a hazy and vague appearance. Sleep deprivation was once again becoming a factor and the sheer size of the river had a disorienting effect. We never lost the current, we never found ourselves in a dead end, we never grounded out on a sandbar we always had at least a rough idea of where we were, but somehow we seemed so insignificant in the immensity of that space.

We left Fort Selkirk at about 4:00 p.m. on Saturday, we had now been on the water over two days. As the afternoon became evening, the now-familiar pattern of yet another Yukon night began to take shape. We put on warmer clothing, we ate one of our meals but to be honest we had started to “graze” the food buckets. If meal #6 wasn’t to our liking, what about meal #7 or meal #8? We were all quite enamoured with the “meal in a cookie” option, but also enjoyed the couscous salad and the jambalaya, not to mention the salad with feta cheese and pita pockets. We ate as we floated, our stops on shore became less frequent. We began taking turns “sleeping” two at a time in the centre part of the Dancer. We spread dry bags out on the floor of the canoe and with a lot of shuffling, Petrie and I took our turn lying down side by side in the bottom of the boat with our heads on one seat and our legs over the centre thwart and our feet on the seat in front of us. Not exactly an advertisement for posturpedic mattresses but it was better than nothing and we were zonked. We actually slept for about 20 minutes or so. I remember waking up to the rhythmic paddle strokes and looking up on a side hill and seeing a bald eagle looking down at me. Was it the same one that had flown over us as we left the restaurant just before the race began? I was in a daze, it was difficult to know where reality started and fantasy stopped. Eventually Petrie, who was squeezed into the boudoire beside me also came to a state of semi-consciousness. I remember Jerry looking back from the bow and asking “how was that for you Jeff?” We all convulsed with laughter at the incongruity of the whole situation. I turned to Petrie and suggested that we should both have a leisurely cigarette before we got up for the day but we passed on the smoke. With lots of wiggling and squirming we took our places on the seats and resumed paddling. Eventually everyone took their turn in the centre section of the canoe, now known as the pit. Some slept soundly. When Don was slumbering away, it sounded like the Dancer was now equipped with an outboard motor and when John tuned in, it sounded like we had two outboard motors. Everyone had suggestions for improvements to this sleeping arrangement once they had completed their sentence to the pit.

At one magical moment at about 3:00 in the morning we came around the point of an island only to find the Paddlers’ Abreast team coming around the other side of the same island. When they saw us they began singing energetically...”Whitehorse....to Dawson.....”. Magically we met in the middle of the night in the middle of the river. This was the first time we had been together since the race started. We glided up beside each other and began to chat with muffled voices as we drifted with the current. Don and John were asleep in our canoe and one member of their team was seen snuggled under the green duvet. We compared notes and offered support. The “captains” of the Paddlers’ Abreast team knew this river well and offered some helpful suggestions. Then they pulled ahead, we followed behind for about two hours but they slowly disappeared into the semi-darkness and mist. I will savour that chance meeting for the rest of my life.

In the very early hours of Sunday morning we came to a sharp bend in the river and noticed a fire on the far shore. It was the Paddlers’ Abreast team. It was their pattern to stop on shore and to light a fire for warmth and to have a hot meal. We didn’t even acknowledge each other as we paddled past. We knew that we had to do something to help us with our near-dormant state. Someone suggested a cup of tea! We pulled over on a rough and damp little spot, made for the bushes to empty bladders-- “girls to the left and boys to the right”. By this time John had a running battle going with the Yukon version of Montezuma’s revenge (probably caused by too many “meals in a cookie”), we got a roaring fire going, we broke out our single burner Coleman, boiled some water and made a steaming pot of tea. We had only two cups between us, but we all enjoyed a hot drink. Then we all zonked out right there on the damp shore of this little island. For

half an hour we slept, we had no choice, we were exhausted. I heard voices and looked up to see the Paddlers' Abreast boat glide by, it was the last time that we saw them until we reached Dawson City. I silently wished them well.

As we came to the White river, I remember the Yukon river becoming steep like a ski hill. I was in the stern and asked the crew if they would like to go slalom down this hill, we all laughed but just kept going in a straight line. In my fog-like state I wondered why we weren't "falling off" the steep hill we were descending. Don kept calling out the GPS readings in miles per hour, "8.9, 9.1, 9.2, 9.3, 9.8, 10.1", we all let out a cheer every time we broke the 10 mph barrier. At other times Don would report "6.4, 5.3, 4.5...we're out of the current, maybe it is over there". We were getting better and better at reading the river, some of us better than others. John showed a skill for reading the water and he usually would point us in the right direction. Here we were using the latest in military technology, in touch with at least three satellites circling overhead and we were accomplishing exactly what must have been second nature for the voyageurs who went ahead of us. They knew how to read the water, how to avoid the slack holes and the back eddies, they know where the fast water was and similarly when they were paddling against the current, they knew exactly where to find the forgiving slow moving channels.

The White river flows in a broad valley from river left. It is a maze, a series of channels which in turn effects the Yukon, turning it into a broad network of channels separated by a myriad of islands. We had been advised to stick to the right and that is what we did. It was reassuring to know that we were moving in the right direction and that eventually we would end up in Dawson City, but it was disorienting to be caught in such a maze of channels. Again we thought of the voyageurs ahead of us. We had detailed charts and maps, a GPS system, the advice of fellow paddlers and barrels filled with carefully planned meals, they had nothing but their strength and determination and courage, a sextant that would allow them occasional readings and a cast iron pot of roobaboo to dip into when they felt hunger.

Ten miles past the White River we suddenly saw a stark white building standing out on an island towards river right. This was Stewart Island, the Stewart river flowed in from the right and the building was Burrian's Store, one of the last surviving buildings on Stewart Island. This had once been a major transshipment point as the lead-zinc ore from the mines of Keno City and Elsa were shipped on smaller barges down the Stewart river from Mayo and then loaded onto larger barges in the slough behind Stewart island for the trip to Whitehorse. At one time there were two hotels, a post office, several residences, a store and a population of over 100 people on this island. Over time the river has seriously eroded this island and one by one the buildings either crumbled or were washed into the water. The store has been winched back from the eroding bank several times. There is still one family living on the island but we stayed well clear and stuck to the middle of the river. It is a fast-moving and dangerous section of water and we didn't want to take any chances. But this was another landmark and ahead we could look forward to Ogilvie Island and the entrance of the Sixty Mile river from river left. We could smell Dawson City in the air with less than 100 miles to go.

That last day (Sunday) is in some ways a blur. We had discussions about sleep deprivation and hallucinations. Were we really hallucinating? We had some medical theories put forward that made a lot of sense. These explained the chemical changes that take place in the brain when deprived of sleep and how these in turn trigger visual hallucinations. It all seemed quite plausible. Our "visions" seemed to follow a pattern. In the clouds we saw angels and cherubs all smiling and floating. We also saw virtually every Walt Disney character ever created. If you saw Mickie Mouse, sure enough Minnie was right behind him and then there was Goofy and Cinderella...it was actually quite entertaining. In the rock walls that ran for miles along the river we saw gargoyles and serpents and grotesque figures going into the water or rising out of the water. I saw dogs, lots of dogs. When I saw a schnauzer I also saw a german shepherd and then a collie and a husky and then a spaniel, all of them looking out at us as we passed. And there were coded messages, words that looked familiar but there were letters either added or missing and this caused you to wonder just what the messages meant. Another paddler who had similar experiences reported that all of his hallucinations were pornographic in nature. I don't think that was our experience and this is probably a reflection of the clean living that we all follow. It is my theory that we don't hallucinate anything that we don't know or haven't experienced. Perhaps this is what separates this type of "vision" from a psychotic state. There was nothing frightening about these hallucinations except that they caused

you to doubt your abilities. And all the time there was the desire for sleep. At one point I watched Petrie who was sitting ahead of me. He was clearly on automatic pilot but he never missed a stroke. I could see his head bobbing and finally he simply keeled over to his right. This startled him and he awoke in panic, fearing that he was going overboard. The same experience was mine on more than one occasion.

Past Ogilvie Island it was clear sailing. We had forty miles to go, maybe five hours if we caught the current just right. A few support boats checked in on us and it was reassuring to know that we had read the map correctly. At one point we pulled over at an island for yet another pee break and the support boat came and stopped to chat. "Are you all ready to go" was the question. "No" came the echoing reply for somewhere in the middle of the bushes as John was attending to his needs. We all laughed uproariously, a joke at John's expense, but he was laughing too. At age 65 John was the oldest member of our group and yet he didn't miss a stroke. I will never forget the night paddling from Carmacks to Minto Landing. John was in the bow and it was a difficult night for all of us as our judgement was impacted by our fatigue. It was John's job to find the channel and none of us had any real idea of where we were. He didn't miss a paddle stroke, the stress showed on his face when we finally arrived at Minto Landing and his voice was just a little hollow but he hadn't stopped paddling once, he was a real source of inspiration to all of us.

After leaving the island we found new life. We set up a strong pace, paddling almost 60 strokes a minute and travelling in a powerful current. We kept that up for over an hour and felt invigorated. Eventually we saw the famous Moosehide Scar through the trees, we knew we were within an hour of Dawson City. There was another one of those "ski hill" sections in the river that was almost incomprehensible, then we settled into the home stretch, signs of life were evident along the river, we saw small cabins, then the Klondike river on our right and then the city of Dawson loomed ahead. We swung around the point, Jerry was in the stern and he was offering encouragement. It was Jerry's calm, determined nature and his paddling skill that consistently got us through difficult situations. As we came into Dawson, in true voyageur fashion we wanted to look good. We had stopped on an island about two hours back and changed into our black "Cariboo to Klondike" T Shirts. The dike along the Yukon river was lined with people, it was 8:30 in the evening. We powered down the river and made our way to the take out and the finish line. We echoed a salute to the cheering onlookers. We were going at full speed and then just seconds from the shore the command to "hold water" rang out and we finished with flurry and a splash. There was lots of applause. We staggered from the boat, some of us falling down in the process. We hugged and embraced our support team and each other, I noticed tears in the eyes of some of our team, this was a moment of true personal gratification and accomplishment. Members of the Paddlers' Abreast team had waited for us and shook our hands. They had arrived an hour ahead of us. We had made it in 80 hours and 29 minutes!

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Epilogue:

The race was over but the adventure continued. For the next 48 hours our group enjoyed all that Dawson City had to offer. After a seven hour "sleep of the dead" we were dressed in voyageur costume and hitting the sites on Canada Day. We joked that we were photographed more than the mounties. Official presentations in front of hundreds of people, awards ceremonies, a date with Diamond Tooth Gertie, a voyageur re-enactment with Robert Campbell and a 36 foot birchbark Montreal canoe (complete with Robert Campbell wearing a Hawaiian shirt, a trumpet player, a violinist and 17 paddlers bailing as if their life depended on it), sunset viewed from the top of the "Dome" behind Dawson. Maybe I will write about those experiences at another time.

Jeffrey Dinsdale  
July 8/02