

**Newport Forest (Thames River)**

October 31 2000

1:00 - 4:35 pm

**Weather:** clear, cool (16C), no breeze

**Purpose:** to paddle Thames River from Newport Forest to Moraviantown

**Participants:** Kee, Darren Jacobs

I drove down to Moraviantown at noon to pick up Darren Jacobs, who has begun Project Ta'Keekwak (Growing-Trees) at Moraviantown. I met him at the Learning Centre, noticing immediately that he looked different, somehow. "It's that Poison Oak," said Darren. He had been tramping through Virgil's Woods last Friday and accidentally handled the plant, subsequently getting an itchy rash on his hands and face. He thinks the plant looks "something like Virginia Creeper." Anyway, since he was now almost over it, he was ready for the trip.

We parked his truck, a Dodge Sierra, next to the riverbank, by the old Moravian Church. Then we set out in my van for Newport Forest, taking the "back way." At Hurdle's we picked up the canoe, but got the hapless, tail-less black Lab, "Pooch," into the bargain. Pooch followed us down the the lower meadow, watched as we unloaded the canoe, paddles, and other gear, then bounded joyfully along beside us, ready for some great adventure, no doubt. We loaded up and set off, Pooch following along the bank for about 100 metres before giving up.

The current was strong enough in most places that without even paddling, one moved along, almost at a walking pace. We heard a Redtail Hawk calling, but couldn't place it until it flew into view south of the river. After about a kilometre, we saw some ducks fluttering out of the shallows to head down-river. I thought they might be mallards, but Darren said they were Wood Ducks. "Mallards will circle around behind you and land again." We planned to stop at the old Suckertown dam. On the way, we spotted more ducks and two Great Blue Herons. Both here and at many points of the voyage, Darren took out his video camera and shot sweeps of river scenery, including the departing ducks and other game.

Of particular interest to me on this trip were the old river terraces formed by the proto-Thames early in its history as a glacial river. At that time, it received meltwater from two, nearly adjacent ice lobes and drained at a rate that must have been one or two orders of magnitude greater than at present. The attached maps indicate this channel (shown in dotted lines that follow the 200 m contours on the "Bothwell" top-map). It has several straight reaches and clearly shows that the Hogsback is part of a lineal shoreline. Fleming's Creek, which drained a smallish portion of the Erie Lobe, seems to be responsible for the greater part of the

erosion of the Hogsback at both ends.

At Suckertown we came to a small rapids produced by a line of boulders that formed the base of the old Suckertown (Cashmere) dam. We shot the rapids, then swung into a back eddy and pulled the canoe up on the gravelly shore of a back-water. Almost as soon as we had unloaded the field pack and steeped ashore, Darren, then I, noticed the strong smell of sweetgrass. "We'll have to have a look for that," said Darren. Just as we sat down to a quick lunch, I spotted a very large hawk to the northeast. No, not a hawk. Too big. The bird wheeled majestically, flashing a white head, then a white tail. A Bald Eagle. "Ho'lee...!"

Unfortunately, the sight of the Bald Eagle so distracted us that we forgot to look Darren decided to climb the 50-foot "hogsback" behind us in order to scan the countryside for deer and to show me some of the land thereabouts. I puffed up the steep (70-80 degree) slope behind him, surprised to discover that I was not nearly as winded as I would expect to be, especially at my age. The view was panoramic. To the north and east, we could see the last sweep of the river curving behind the scenery to our left. To our southeast, on the other side of the hill there was a narrow, shallow valley, the opposite slope lined with cowtracks zig-zagging up and down the the hill, rather like the goat-tracks I remembered from the rolling country of the Bekaaa Valley in Lebanon. The hill we stood on was extremely narrow, affording only a few feet of standing room at the top. It was clearly in the last stages of erosion. In a few hundred years there would be no standing room at the top and it would gradually decline as its base continued to erode.

Back at the bottom, I discovered a stratum in the base of the hill that consisted entirely of unsorted rock of many origins -- glacial till. I took a picture of the till in context, making it clear how the rocks worked out of the bank, forming a gradual talus into the river. We set out again, Darren in the stern this time. As we rounded a bend further down, Darren told me to get my camera ready, as there would be "Coots" under some willow bushes to our right. Just when all was ready, sure enough, about a dozen ducks exploded from the willows, flying low over the river, downstream.

We passed under the Bothwell Bridge, now about 2/3 of the way to Moravian-town, according to my map. On the other side, some distance downstream, we heard a horn and turned the canoe to look back. A green van was parked on the bridge and a figure waved to ask, asking, "Is everything alright?" I wondered what kind (but somewhat nosy) soul would take an interest in the travel of two strangers. Then I realized it was Nina Hurdle. I waved back.

“We’re coming to Stink Creek,” announced Darren a little later. This proved to be a creek which discharged a small stream of milky water that proved to be highly sulphurous. “Are there oil wells anywhere around here?” I wondered. “There’s gas wells right over there,” said Darren, pointing to the headlands of the creek. We came to “Stink Creek Number Two” a few hundred meters beyond the first one, but this creek discharged from the opposite bank. Perhaps the Sulphur Dioxide was bubbling up from underground naturally, as it does in the Oil Springs area.

Another flight of ducks flapped off ahead of us. These were larger. Darren announced them as Mallards. Some had blue heads, but others were all black. Black Ducks? On this stretch of river, we passed two or three “dark Herons,” probably immature Great Blues, with body feathers that had yet to take on the lighter hue of the mature bird. One of them suffered us to glide right under its perching-tree, without taking flight.

On the east bank, we passed a remarkable stand of trees. White Birch! Mixed among them were large Eastern White Cedars. Both trees were somewhat unusual, especially in combination and I had to wonder whether they’d been planted. If so, the arrangement was either very artful or very old, for the stand had the statistics of a natural one, both species gradually petering out as we passed along some 200 metres of bank. We also saw a few Yellow Birch mixed in among the White Birch. I noted that the stand occupied that part of my map labelled “with the names of adjacent townships: Zone Twp. and Oxford Twp. (for future reference)

The east bank being fairly steep along this stretch of river, some of the trees perched precariously, with roots exposed, like the bars of a cage. “Good place for coons to hang out,” observed Darren. Just then I spotted a huge, round burrow under one of the passing trees. It was close to two feet in diameter. “Ho’lee!” We talked about badgers. Darren said that a friend of his, Greg Tomchek of Rodney, had trapped a large one a few years ago. He apparently gave the animal (presumably the pelt?) to “some Society.”

We were now on what I called the last “S,” a section of river that curved first east and then west, as it approached the Moraviantown Reserve. We now began to pass small fishing camps, each with the same equipment on display: a table for cleaning fish, a lean-to or tent or brush hut, and a long

[drawing here]

pole with a box net attached to it by wire or rope. The box net dimensions, accor-

ding to Darren, are about 5' by 5' by 5', with an open top and side. The open side is placed downstream and there the fish enter, milling about long enough to be caught, should the net be attended. Left long enough, most find their way out of these nets with little difficulty. The nets are made of heavy duty steel mesh and the framework is of steel rods. We passed, all in all, about ten of these little camps, each frequented by a specific fisher or family.

We passed one or two more Great Blues, including another 'immature.' On the last bend of the "S", we startled a large, brownish owl, which flew out of a tree on our left and flapped silently across the river on powerful wings. Was it a Great Horned or, maybe, a Barred Owl? (Darren said it had dark eyes.) We now came to a series of three rapids, the last with the largest fall. It was pure pleasure to hear the laughing of the water as it rushed over the stones and boulders below the bottom of the canoe. There at last was the bank below the old Moravian church. And the sun was just a few minutes from setting! We brought the canoe out, struggled up the bank, and loaded it on Darren's pickup. Before I knew it, we were back at Hurdle's, stacking the canoe in his garage. Then down to the lower meadow where, it turned out, the van started perfectly!