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J.A. Larsen
Iowa State University

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Down the Allegash
by J. A. Larsen

Editors' Note: Reprinted from the 1932 Ames Forester

Ambajemackomus, Chesuncook, Umbazooksis—are some of the tongue twisters we struggled with before we really got on the downgrade of the alluring Allegash. These are Maine lakes, bewitching and otherwise; enticing to canoers. Twelve of us came up in a truck from Medomac Lake near Rockland with our beds and a ton of the choicest grub. As we whisked through old Bangor the bells were calling to morning worship; at Foxcroft we stopped for pork chops, coffee and pie; at Greenville we refreshed with ice cream and sent souvenir post cards. On that glorious Sunday afternoon we skirted the inimitable Moosehead Lake, almost in the shadow of great Katahdin, darted through spruce and birch for the Ripogenus Dam which bars the south end of Chesuncook Lake. At our approach, deer, fox and grouse, sauntering along the lonely forest highway, were startled from their daydreaming and scurried into the thicket with as much surprise as our own. This trip comes as a fitting climax to boys, many of whom have spent several seasons at Medomac Camp for Boys at Washington, Maine.

Six canoes waited at the dam where we cooked a hasty supper and crawled in under the dense spruces which lined the somewhat rocky
shore. Monday before sun-up we had already disposed of hot cakes, eggs, bacon and coffee and eagerly began apportioning bedding and provisions among the canoes.

Hitherto I had enjoyed every minute of the trip, but no sooner were we swinging backward and forward in rhythmic strokes of the paddles over the placid lake than my mind began its disturbing questions: "What cared the white waters of the upper Allegash River for our safety? How would these boys just out of high school forestall a spell with loss of food, damage to canoe and risk of personal safety? What dexterity could I show who had hardly handled one of these wizards of the streams for twenty years? Or what would it help me that I had paddled them over the quiet moonlit lakes with fair companions? Would we be able to match our wits and strength with the rough and tumbling rapids of Chase's Carry?"

Well—at any rate we were off—and such a morning! Our genial and licensed guide, Jack, leading north over the long lake in even powerful strokes, two and two in each canoe, bow and stern, myself bringing up the rear; the phonograph in the boat ahead squeaking out "I met her at the River, Sweet Marie."

There was swimming, a lunch and rest at a small creek coming in from the west, and about supper time we neared Chesuncook village. Making fast the canoes to the docks, we rushed up to the little French store. What should we buy? We had all we needed, but no sooner were we counted them due, than the Frenchman rattled off a demand for six kisses for every divide between Penobscot and St. John Rivers. However, as the country was rather level the hills having long since been worn down and transported to the sea, you would not know it was a divide.

Mud Lake is very appropriately named. It is perhaps two square miles in area and barely deep enough for a loaded canoe. It took on a dark brown color under the low hanging clouds. There is about as much mud as water. Here Tennyson's vividly descriptive lines came to mind "Oily bubbled up the meer." We reached this wonder of creation by team and wagon over spruce land toward Umbazooksis Lake and Mud Lake at the very divide between Penobscot and St. John Rivers. However, as the country was rather level the hills having long since been worn down and transported to the sea, you would not know it was a divide.

It was on this fishing trip that Jack took his marvelous dip, racing to keep his balance on a rebellious floating spruce stem. A foot missed connection and he disappeared from view for a moment but came up on the other side of the tree still holding the fishing rod in the right hand, a small mess of fish in the left, and his pipe between his teeth. After two days we set out into Churchill Lake but a Northwester whipped the water into such fury that we landed on a small island overgrown with splendid white birch. It was here that the boys fashioned many articles out of birch bark and wrote some very original and startling verses on them.
The boys got a tremendous kick out of everything and nothing escaped them. Everything and everybody was most profusely photographed—deer, gulls, ducks, squirrels and mice. Three cooks took complete charge of the menus and meal preparation and dishwashing. Their appetites were prodigious and their culinary skill fraught with many new creations and not a few mysteries, but no fatalities.

I am tempted to say something about these upper lakes. The water is brown, heavily charged with vegetation. The surrounding timbered country seldom rises perceptibly above the general low level while the shores are fringed with unsightly masses of dead trees which have been killed by the water held in reserve for driving and spruce milling operations. It is only after coming into the Allegash River itself that the country takes on character and beauty, with steeper slopes, a more broken sky line and an intriguing river full of rocks, rapids and surprises. From this point onward there are better camp grounds provided with tables under open shelter, some sort of fireplaces as well as drinking water; not to forget the ubiquitous fire warnings in English and French.

A little way down the stream we came to a ranger cabin from which led a trail 300 feet up a steep slope to Allegash lookout. It was the only trail we saw on our entire trip. The foresters travel by water and use a small motor attached to the canoe, poling over the shallows. If the fire calls them into the forest, there will be no trail whatsoever, but plenty of underbrush and second growth spruce and balsam. Practically all of this land has been logged over once and the canoes one by one as they swung into midstream, the helmsman standing erect in the stern maneuvering with the pole, casting eager and anxious eyes forward to the next vicious rock. To avoid striking a boulder he would throw all his strength on the pole to check speed or to prevent being hung crosswise on the upstream side of it. That is the worst predicament possible, as the upstream gunwhale of the skiff will duck and ship water with unbelievable rapidity unless someone jumps out to hold it up. Should the helmsman get his pole wedged between a hidden boulder and the canoes on the down stream side, he has to choose between letting go or being whipped into the rapids. The five helmsmen ahead of me might be doing either one of these things, but on the whole they managed quite well. After all, the canoe itself seems possessed of a wonderful intuition especially when it comes into the rapids. It comes into its true and native element, life and action, and it dissents as much as any one being tossed on a rock. The more elevated boulders have more side current, which in many cases acts as a buffer or actually pushes the canoe away from the rock. It is mainly these insidious, treacherous, submerged scoundrels, just high enough to rip the bottom, that cause the most trouble. And for the man in the bow, he must use his paddle now and then to avoid scraping. There is one thing he must not do and that is to steer. This is left to the man in the stern. If he decides to follow down another riffle than the one headed for, he throws his pole and weight against the canoe and swings the stern laterally into the proper current, before allowing it to proceed.

To say that this was exciting is putting it mildly. That afternoon we poled 10 miles of rough and white Chase's Carry. It gave us plenty of gymnastics; left us limp and a trifle wet, but we saved the grub and bedding with only a little wetting. That is more than many previous parties can boast.

The second day after going down the carry we camped where the Allegash tumbles through a magnificent gorge and beats itself into foam over a 75-foot precipice. Here the Genii of the falls have churned deep kettle holes in the solid propphy, cauldrons so huge that it might cook a steer. One wonders what they sang or what they mumbled through their gray beards while doing all this. Alas, these busy gnomes have been driven into exile by Paul Bunyon and his infernal logs. They could not stand getting bumped on the head by those impertinent blocks of wood, and could not fathom from whence they came. We carried canoes and baggage past the cataract, reloaded below and departed on our way just as the rays of the early sun threw the halo of its rainbow over the beautiful misty white avalanche; gliding down the stream with the rumbling of the waters more and more faintly humming in our ears.

From this point onward the river becomes truly picturesque; alternating with rapids, huge rocks, gentle riffles, deep silent pools; the scene varying and framed in hills, woodlands and arching trees. As we approach St. John River, the Allegash cuts deeper and deeper into mother earth. Here it loses itself in a vast outspreading mass of geological specimens at the bottom of a wide and deep valley such as the St. John alone could produce.

At last the smiling French village of St. Francis, diffused with sunshine, beckoned from afar. The gilded cross on the lovely white church steeple reflected lucidly in the glassy surface. It was here that we rested three days to finish our provisions and to enjoy visits to the quaint old village until our motor truck came and took us all safely to Camp Medomac at Washington.

"We are all travelers in the wilderness of this world and the best that we find in our travels is an honest friend."

Robert Louis Stevenson