

A Charlie Guide Can Make the Difference

by John LeBlanc



Six canoes approached Prairie Portage in the soft, light rain. Just two hours earlier those same canoes carrying thirteen scouts, four adult leaders and one Charlie Guide had left the Sommers Canoe Base on Moose Lake for a ten day canoe trip into Quetico Provincial Park. For seventeen of those paddlers, it was the trip of a lifetime. For the other, a Charlie Guide, it was his job. Donnan Christiansen worked at Sommers to help pay college expenses. It was a tough job leading canoes of scouts all summer long, but someone had to do it and he did it well. He was a Charlie Guide.



The canoe trip had been the focus of attention for over a year as Troop 82 from Port Arthur, Texas prepared themselves for their northern journey. Physical training was on schedule when we left home. We had worked hard and we were prepared. Or so we thought. What we were not prepared for was the weather. For a group of people who lived in an area that gets more rain than anywhere in the United States except Seattle, we were not doing very well. The rain was getting to our boys. Complacency was setting in. This was only the first day of a ten-day voyage. At this rate, we were in for a long, miserable trip. Boys rode the middle "duffer" position almost in a daze. Packs that were opened to get to rain gear stayed that way. Bilges began to fill with rainwater and soaked through the Duluth packs. Rain trickled down into the dry corners of sleeping bags.



At the first lunch stop right after the portage into Carp Lake, three boys wanted to turn around and go back. From my position in the bow of Don's canoe, I could see that things had to change. My journal entry expresses my concern and hope for turning it around. Don and I talked various strategies to get the crew functioning properly.

Listening from his position in the middle of the canoe was Bobby Jefferson, the smallest boy on the trip. Bobby had constantly worked to bail out the rainwater from the bottom of the wood and canvas canoe that we were traveling in and had done a good job. He was using his drinking cup and bandana and was keeping it almost bone dry. He spoke up. "Just tell them what they got to do and make them do it" was his solution to the problem. "I mean I am not having the most fun in my life, but at least our packs and clothes are all dry and so are the sleeping bags. All you got to do is work at it."



Several portages tested our mettle to see if we really wanted to be on Knife Lake for the first night of the trip. After some moaning and groaning, our crew made it onto Knife and found a vacant campsite just across the Canadian border and down a ways from Dorothy Molter's Isle of Pines. As the tents were going up, it continued to rain. Not hard, but steady. The cooking detail fixed Boundary Waters Stew and all enjoyed a warm meal. After a dessert of warm pudding, the cleanup detail did their thing in the kitchen. The smallest boy, the only one who had successfully kept his canoe bilge and packs dry was blamed for anything and everything that went wrong.

I did not like what was happening to Bobby and told Don so. Don said, "we'll fix that". Don called everyone together under the dining fly to escape another rain shower and said the things that needed saying. He told the scouts what each job was and how it needed to be done. These things would have worked themselves out in time, but time was running out for us. We already had wet sleeping bags that needed drying out and we were just in the first day of the trip. It was "show and tell" as Don went over the finer points of packing the gear in a Duluth pack so it would stay dry. The duties of the "bilge keeper" were defined and understood by all.

The eight sleeping bags that were soaked would have been a total disaster for most people, not for Don. With some help, he cut up a big deadfall into two-foot logs, split them and built one hell of a fire that would warm and dry the wet gear. By today's standards, it was unacceptable, but very welcomed in the "big bonfire" days back then. As the sleeping bags were being dried, Bobby huddled around the fire in his shorts and T-shirt soaking up the warmth. When Don asked if he thought he might need to put on a jacket, Bobby told him he could not because he had left his back at the base. "I'll be OK" he said with a smile. Don being a man of few words simply winced.

In a few minutes Don said, "John you and Bobby, come with me". While the crew dried sleeping bags, Don took us down the lake to see Dorothy Molter. It was after dark when we got there and still raining. Don told her we wanted to buy some rootbeer. "Not until you come in and warm up first" was her reply. There in her cabin we warmed Bobby with coffee and her wood stove, fed him a candy bar or two and a bottle of her famous rootbeer. Don explained Bobby's problem. Dorothy found a jacket tucked away in the corner to give to Bobby. When he told her that we would not be coming back this way, she simply told him he could have it. "Maybe someday you can give it to someone who needs it like you do today" Dorothy told him.

What ensued was and still is the most memorable evening visit with anyone I have ever had. We talked about so many things, but mostly about Canoe Country. After about two hours, we told her that we had to excuse ourselves and get back to our campsite. We returned to our campsite just in time to hear the shouts and cheers, as the last sleeping bag was declared dry. The fire was enjoyed a while longer, then doused and we all went to sleep.

The next morning proved to be a different kind of day. It was still raining as it would for the rest of the canoe trip, but it was a different group of boys as they busily did what they had to do. About half way through the morning Bobby commented to Don, "see, I told you how to get them to do it". Bobby was so proud that his method had worked. He was having fun seeing his fellow crew members enjoy themselves. That evening Don told everyone that the problem puzzled him, but that Bobby came up with the solution and that the crew's success was due to Bobby solving the problem. We never told anyone what Bobby's suggestion was. They focussed on him, hoping he would divulge it. He never did.

On our layover day, while others fished and caught more Walleye than we could eat, Bobby put one of his other talents to work. He baked cinnamon rolls, spice cake, yeast rolls and pies in a reflector oven. He was at home in the camp kitchen on an island in Kawnipi Lake. An overturned canoe was his kitchen table and he was white with flour from head to toe. There were no leftovers when Bobby baked. Bannock with raisins became known as "Jefferson Bread" and was enjoyed for lunch each day afterward. No more squashed bread for this crew.





We finished the trip just like we started, in the rain. What could have been a disaster was avoided due to the qualities and abilities of a unique person, a Charlie Guide. Don was held in reverence afterward for his guidance, knowledge, ability and his swagger. Yes, he had swagger. After all he was the only one out of the whole crew that dared the waters of Louisa Falls on that cold, windswept day we were there.

Don would never agree that he had swagger, but on Singing Brook portage he enlisted the crew to help load him up and then carried three seventeen foot Grumman canoes across the portage by himself. Many cameras duly recorded the event. When you are fourteen years old and your Charlie Guide just did something that no other Charlie Guide had ever done, my friend he has swagger. For the Troop 82 crew he was their role model, the authority and their hero. His name was mentioned for years afterward whenever stories from Canoe Country were told.



When Bobby got home, he told his parents what so many had done for him on the canoe trip. Bobby's mother wrote to Dorothy Molter thanking her for helping her son that cold, wet, rainy evening. She sent the letter along with a whole box full of various jackets for Dorothy. I also sent a letter thanking her. Bobby and I received Dorothy's Christmas letter for years afterward. She was a complex lady living a simple life in an environment she loved and she enjoyed helping people. Charlie Guides picked up on that and passed it along to those they escorted on the canoe trails. I could not help but be struck with awe at the simplicity of her address when Cliff Hanson at Sommers Canoe Base gave it to me. Dorothy Molter, Knife Lake, Ely, Minnesota. Bobby would come by to visit with me from time to time to talk about our "Canadian Canoe Trip" as he called it. He always wore that jacket Dorothy gave him. It was a badge of honor for Bobby. He was proud of his accomplishments. He was proud of the fact that he had "saved the crew" from a wet and miserable trip by his suggestion. He was

proud that it had been accepted by the Charlie Guide as the cure. When adults listen to kids, that really reinforces faith and trust in them.



A lot of the "stick to it" that these boys would use in their journey into manhood was gained through the guidance of their Charlie Guide. His character and demeanor were just a cut above the rest. His influence was immeasurable. These boys went on to become men of character. They became leaders in their chosen fields. They are doctors, lawyers, college professors and businessmen. All have wonderful families and are sharing with others the values that they gained from a Charlie Guide at Sommers Canoe Base. All but one, that is.



Four years later, I would be called out on a local river to search for and find Bobby Jefferson's body. He was run over by a motorboat after he fell from his family's boat one Sunday afternoon. It was really a tragedy. His parents listed all the scouts and leaders from the Canadian Canoe Trip as honorary pallbearers. Also listed were Dorothy Molter and Donnan Christiansen, although they lived over 1600 miles away. Bobby's mother told me that those were the people Bobby constantly talked about. They had meant so much to Bobby and his family.

After Bobby's death, I wrote a letter to Dorothy Molter telling her how much she meant to Bobby and his parents that summer. She sent the family a letter telling them how nice her son was that summer he visited her and thanking them for letting him come to Canoe Country and sharing stories with her about his home and family. Bobby was one of only a handful of boys that I have known to never say anything but yes sir, no sir, yes mam and no mam.

Don and I kept in contact with letters until I went into the Army and Don into medical school. Somehow we lost addresses and his old one near Duluth was no longer valid. Years went by. I would get out my slides of our canoe trip and show them to friends and family. Once as a child, my daughter, now twenty years old, asked "daddy, did you really go canoeing with Santa Claus?" With a full head of hair and a bushy white beard to match, there is quite a resemblance especially through the eyes of a young child who desperately wants to believe.

From time to time I wondered if Don had made it to Alaska to paddle the remote wilderness rivers we talked about on the canoe trail that summer. Somehow I figured that he did. He was a Charlie Guide. Throughout the years I talked to many people who went through the Sommers program and all expressed how much that canoe trip changed their lives. Sommers has held that special aura for many scouts and their leaders over the years. The Charlie Guides were standouts in every case.



One day while surfing the Internet, I wondered if Holry, the rye cracker we carried that summer was still made. When I entered that into a search engine, you guessed it, the Sommers Alumni Association website came up. John Christiansen was listed on the board of directors. Could this be Don's brother that he spoke of during the summer of 1966? There was a phone number. A quick call determined that it was not Don's brother, but he knew Don and graciously gave me his address.

I mailed Don a letter. Weeks went by which was not unusual. Don has never been punctual in answering his mail. To know him is to love him, he is a Charlie Guide. Charlie Guides are just simply too busy helping kids become adults to do much writing. Finally in 1998, some thirty-two years later I got to tell Don of the impact he had on Bobby Jefferson's short, but meaningful life. I had not had the opportunity to tell him of Bobby's death and what his family said about the Charlie Guide.

After a thirty-three year absence, I am finally going to get to go back to Knife Lake this summer. I'll stop at Dorothy's with my family and break out some homemade rootbeer and have one like I did long ago. It won't be nearly as good as Dorothy made and the visit won't be quite the same without her hospitality. The memories of that trip a long time ago will be fresh on my mind and as I travel the Canoe Country with my wife and daughters, new memories will take their place beside the old ones.

Maybe I can talk Don and his family in to going along. I could still use the company of a good Charlie Guide.

If when passing by Isle of Pines where Dorothy held court you see a jacket hanging on a limb, let it remind you of the kindness one lady served from that spot for so many years. If you need the jacket, please feel free to take it and use it. Just be sure to return it someday even if it takes you thirty three years to do it.

A Charlie Guide can make the difference.



Note: Don Christiansen lives with his family in northern Wisconsin near the shore of Lake Superior. John LeBlanc lives with his family in southeast Texas near the shore of Lake Sabine. Both are avid canoeist and outdoorsmen. Bobby Jefferson's spirit lives on in their hearts and minds.

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