

## Rendezvous 2000 – Part II: Sandy's Mission

by Dave Greenlee, photography by Tom Beaton



After Rendezvous 2000, Tom Beaton, Mike Sawinski, John Thurston, Craig Pendergraft, and I took off for a canoe trip into the Quetico. We had a few precious days together and we visited some new and special places.

Even before we got our paddles wet, we were tested. With last minute adjustments to the crew and some inadequate planning on my part, our crew was short a couple Remote Area Border Crossing (RABC) permits. After making some phone calls to just the right people, Northern Tier's Doug Hirdler showed us how he can make things happen. He managed to get a permits processed and faxed back to us over a holiday weekend when all but the drive-through Canadian Customs offices were closed.



Having jumped through our first hoop, we packed our gear and picked up a few odds and ends from the Base and in town. Rounding up our gear and packing was a joyous experience. I think many of us have memories of last minute crew preparation and packing as a time of anxiety and tension. By comparison, taking a trip with a bunch of Charlie Guides is quite a relaxing experience. Everyone seems to know what to do, what gear to bring, and how to get it all together.



We got a late morning start, and talked and paddled our way up Moose, Newfound, and Sucker Lakes, recalling all the trips that had begun that way, usually with a crew that took the "scenic route", at least until they began to master the process of keeping a canoe on a line. This was quite a different experience with five seasoned Charlie Guides in two beautiful Seligas. When we were younger you might have seen us and thought we showed some "swagger". At this point in our lives, I think it is safe to say we don't go out of our way to try to impress anybody. If you had seen us on this trip, you might have noticed that we were pretty much like other people you might meet on the trail, except that we were more mellow and

comfortable than most.

It wasn't until we got to the other side of the portage that I realized that the grey nylon pack that we had wasn't the pack I had brought from home. My buddies had decided to repack into one of the Base's grey packs. That wouldn't have been a problem if I hadn't put our permits and paperwork in the top zipper pocket of my pack. It was now 2:30 pm and our entry permit was for that day. We had until five o'clock to check in, only 2 1/2 hours before the all important entry permit would turn into a pumpkin.





We huddled to figure out our options. We couldn't paddle back to the Base and get back here in time. We hadn't brought a radio. Could we get the ranger to call the Base? Not likely, and besides, the Base's kicker was broken. Then Craig said "Wait a minute - somebody was getting loaded in a towboat over at LaTourell's - maybe we could hitch a ride." Mike said, "Better hurry up or they'll be gone". As Craig and I turned to run back up the trail, Tom slipped me a \$50 bill and said "Here, take this. It may help."



When we got back to the top of the Falls, we could see a boat just leaving the landing on the other side. We waved our arms. Yelling seemed pointless over the noise of the Falls. Somebody waved back, and soon they were headed our way. So far, so good. When they got closer, we could see an older man in the stern, along with a younger man running the motor. Two tourists were in the center seat, facing the back, and their canoe was loaded on the top rack.

As they killed their engine and drifted near the shore, the older man said, "What's up?"

"We forgot our paperwork," Craig said. Can you give one of us a ride back to Sommers?"

"How in the world did you forget your paperwork?"

"They switched packs on me", I said lamely.

The man looked disgusted. "Well, Cmon," he said and motioned impatiently.

You didn't have to tell me twice. I waded out to the boat. He mumbled something about Boy Scouts with their wet feet being nuts. I think he asked me if I realized that its getting to be Fall now and wet feet make you cold. I wasn't sure it was a question that needed a response, so I didn't answer. I was already feeling pretty stupid for leaving the paperwork at the Base. Then the younger man started the outboard, and we were off with a roar. Twenty minutes later we were at the waterfront by the Base.

By now I had figured out who the older man was. "You must be Jeep", I said.

"I'm Jeep", he said.

"I'm Dave Greenlee. Glad to meet you. I used to work up here in the sixties."

I had heard that Jeep LaTourell was a crusty old curmudgeon, and he certainly is. To his credit, he also gave me a lift without the least bit of hesitation, and that ride saved my cookies. More to his credit, he offered me the ride without knowing if I was going to be a paying customer.

As I jumped out on the landing at the Base and pushed the boat back to deeper water, Jeep asked me if I needed a ride back to Prairie, and when I told him I did, he told me to come over to his landing. I hustled to the car, grabbed the paperwork, took the short cut through the public landing, and made it to LaTourell's Landing a few minutes later. I went inside, where somebody I didn't recognize was by the cash register. He asked me if I was the guy who needed a ride. When I said yes, he told me it would be \$36. I paid him with the \$50 Tom had

slipped me. Then the younger guy who had run the boat came in the store behind me. "You ready?" he said. "You bet!" I said. Things were looking up.

The six mile ride back to Prairie Portage was highlighted by an interesting conversation with the boat driver, Ikuru Stewart, a Dakota Indian from somewhere in North Dakota. He asked where I was from, and I told him South Dakota. He said he knew people from Rosebud, SD, and I told him that I was working with some people from the Rosebud Sioux Tribe to interpret satellite images. He told me he had been to Rosebud to attend Sun Dances. I had heard a little bit about Sun Dances, mostly that they are a sacred ceremony that is not talked about openly. He must have thought I was OK, because he told me more about them than I have read. When I asked why a Dakota Indian would participate in a Lakota Sun Dance, he told me that many tribes now participate in the Sun Dances of the Lakota, and that sometimes even the Ojibwa from this area go to Rosebud. He told me that he was a singer, but had not had the dream vision that allows one to dance. I won't share all the details of my conversation with "Eechy" (his nickname is not "Itchy", he says), but I will say that when we got back to Prairie, I hurried to get a notebook and a pencil to write things down so that I wouldn't forget.

Eechy also told me that he worked at the Sommers Base a few years ago during the winter. When I asked him who he worked with, he told me Tom Lutyens, a retired Air Force survival instructor. I remembered that Tom had come back to work with Sandy on the Okpik program. I told him that Tom and I had started guiding together back in 1967, before Tom had joined the Air Force. We agreed that its a small world.

When I got back to my crew, they had already eaten lunch. Rather than lay it on me about my screw up, John praised me for the Bay Bread and jerky that I had prepared back home. Leave it to John to "catch me doing something right", one of his well honed leadership skills. Since I had the paperwork in hand, we checked in at the Ranger's cabin and got through our last paperwork hurdle. We were very lucky that things worked out so well. I don't think anybody razzed me about it for the rest of the trip.







I realized then that many of my experiences as a Charlie Guide have gone this way. When things get screwed up, either through my own fault or by chance, there is no reason to panic. In fact, it is often the beginning of a new and wonderful adventure, if I am receptive to the spirit. I'm not trying to make a case for doing things that are stupid, but it certainly has been my experience that things seem to work out better if I can shift into that gear that keeps me cool, calm, and clear headed. I know I learned this as a Charlie Guide. I have used that gear in medical emergencies, in blizzards and on icy roads, and in situations where other people have made poor judgments. I think of it as my Charlie Guide gear. It is

a great comfort to know that I have it.

For the next few days we lived in the woods. We paddled several lakes, made a few portages, caught a few fish, baked cakes with my prized stainless steel reflector oven, and just generally enjoyed each others company. I didn't think about the hassles at work or anything that wasn't relevant to the experiences we were having in the woods. We talked about our beautiful Seliga canoes, compared notes on the types of gear we had used and what we think works the best. Each of us had brought some gear that was identical to that we used to use as guides, and some that we had found since our guiding days. We discovered that each of us prides ourselves on being minimalist, but that we each had learned and adapted to some modern advancements. We had packed light, but we were ready for the cold weather that September can bring in the Quetico.







We remembered that Sandy Bridges, esteemed Charlie Guide and longtime Base Director, always seemed to have been working with new gear, trying it out, making modifications that might make it work better or be more reliable. We decided that each of us should pick out a favorite project, research a particular piece of gear, or look for just the right way to share our experiences and our expertise with the new trail staff. We talked of pre-season training, of our memories of the way it used to be, and of how it has been the last few years when some of us have volunteered to work with the new and returning staffers.



By the time we reached Emerald Lake, we had already talked a lot about the program, the quality of a wilderness experience, what has changed, what has stayed the same. We talked of the special experiences that we will always savor.







Before we had left on our trip, we had agreed that we would visit Emerald Lake. Emerald was one of Sandy's favorite lakes. For myself, I wanted to commune with Sandy's spirit, and to remember him in some special way. The day we spent on Emerald was rainy. Rather than use a rainy day for travel as we might have done in the old days, we spent the entire day ducking in and out of a dining fly, standing outside it in between the showers and sitting under it while it rained. We spent the day talking. And talk we did! ...about everything under the sun.

Toward the end of our day on Emerald, we decided to go out on the lake in our Seliga's in a sort of ceremonial remembrance of our friend Sandy's life. I think of this as how the voyageurs or the Indians might have performed such a ceremony, but I really don't know if it is. It really doesn't matter. What does matter is that I will always look back on this as a time of closure for me, and also a time of rededication to the things that I think are important and that I can contribute to the program. John sent me an email after we returned to say he will always think of Emerald as Sandy's Lake from now on. I agree.





In the last year of his life, Sandy communicated with me regularly by email, something he didn't have much time for until after he retired. I remember his encouragement for our emerging web site, his childlike enthusiasm when I added a page or tried something new. I learned a lot in that last year about how much Sandy embraced change and was ready to try new things.

On the last day out, we bucked a king-sized headwind, and were even wind-bound on the Carp Lake portage for awhile. It was as invigorating as it was tiring. We even got to watch the sun set while we were paddling down the Moose chain. We slept well that night. Looking back on the trip, I don't think I would have changed a thing.



The following weekend, Tom, Craig, and I went up to the Atikokan Base on Perch Lake, in order to attend the Northern Tier National High Adventure Committee meeting. We had a chance to see all the progress that has been made to the Base and to that rapidly expanding program. Don MacDonald has assembled quite a trail staff crew up there, and they seem to be enthusiastic as well as highly professional. Not a bad combination. We talked Don Meany into opening up his shop on a Sunday morning so we could order some of his famous XY paddles and take a look around. Don is quite an interesting character as well as being an excellent craftsman and a great friend of the Northern Tier program.





When Craig and I drove back from Atikokan, we stopped in Duluth to have lunch with Mike and Cherie. Mike's children were also there, and they are simply delightful people. I toast Mike and Cherie's happiness, and celebrate that they have found such great companionship with each other. I will close this trip report with an excerpt from Cherie's talk at our last alumni reunion. The message is timeless.

"... there is nothing - absolutely nothing - half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats."

- - The Water Rat, in Wind in the Willows

