

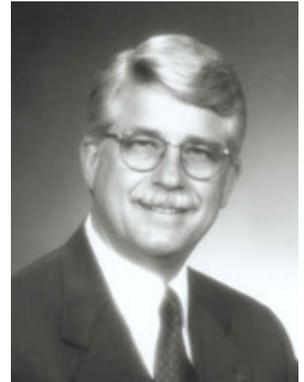
## About Sandy's Mission: A letter from John Thurston

by John Thurston

Dave,

Perhaps it's because we had the same mentors in our youth... You are every bit as squirrely as I am about finding deep meaning in what seem like every day occurrences. There seems to be a lesson in nearly everything that happens for us. Here are a few additional thoughts on our trip...

As we departed from the landing, I thought "what a shame that we couldn't fill the sixth slot for our trip. There is room in our Seligas for one more." However, I think that we would all agree that we did indeed have a sixth traveler with us... Sandy. He was with us constantly and I recall that nearly everything we did or said resulted in Sandy being mentioned and included in our thoughts and feelings.



As we took the portage into Emerald, I remember thinking... "Although this certainly isn't arduous compared to Yum-Yum or an all day portage I once made with Voldi Welch on a guide-training trip, it is the most arduous portage of this trip." It was complete with moose muck, downfalls, mud and slippery logs. And the view of that beautiful lake at the end spoke volumes as I recalled the metaphor Sandy used during his last year. He compared undergoing the treatment of his cancer to a very arduous portage, knowing that a good paddle on a clear lake lay beyond.

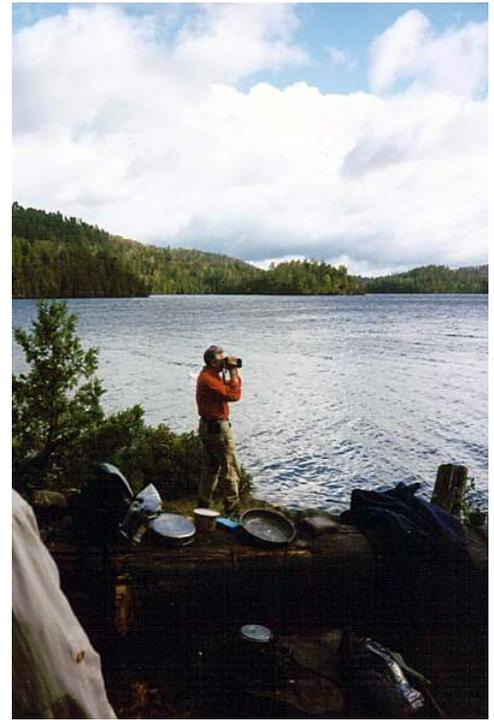


I was thinking of Sandy and the old times when we were very young, when I felt moved to relocate myself back to the poop deck for one last time. As we joyfully paddled to our campsite on that beautiful and clear Emerald Lake, I remember looking at the canoe with you and Mike and thinking... "We have an open place for one more Charlie Guide... but maybe that really was our subliminal plan all along." Perhaps it was like the rider-less horse in a high-level military funeral entourage or the missing aircraft in the formation flown in honor of a fallen pilot.

You mentioned a "funny feeling" on Emerald. Along with Sandy, there were others with us.

The nice thing about being with fellow Charlie Guides is that not everything has to be said. We tend to allow each other the needed physical space when it is obvious that that's where one of us is headed. And it's a privilege and a rare gift to be with a group of wilderness travelers who not only allow that space, but understand the need for it as well.

I will never forget my first visit to Listening Point two years ago. A couple of my slightly older mentors and heroes, Ron Miles and Barry Bain, were with us. We reverently walked about the cabin. Several of us fondly and proudly remembered the presentation of the ash paddle that hangs above Sig's mantel. Cliff Hanson presented it to Sig, during his visit to the base in 1962. A loon and "Sig" are painted on the blade. "Sommers Canoe Base 1962" is painted on the shaft.



I served on the base staff in 1962 and "swamped" with Jerry Cox as well. I will always cherish the memory of that visit by Sig. I think we all learned a great lesson about listening and respecting the sounds of nature. I can't remember what Sig said in any great detail. But, what I do remember... is what he did.

Shortly after Sig began his message, a loon began calling out on the lake. The windows on the west side of the lodge were open. Fresh aspen leaves were shimmering outside as we all followed Sig's example and looked towards that loveliest of North Country sounds. Sig had stopped mid-sentence, paused... and just listened.

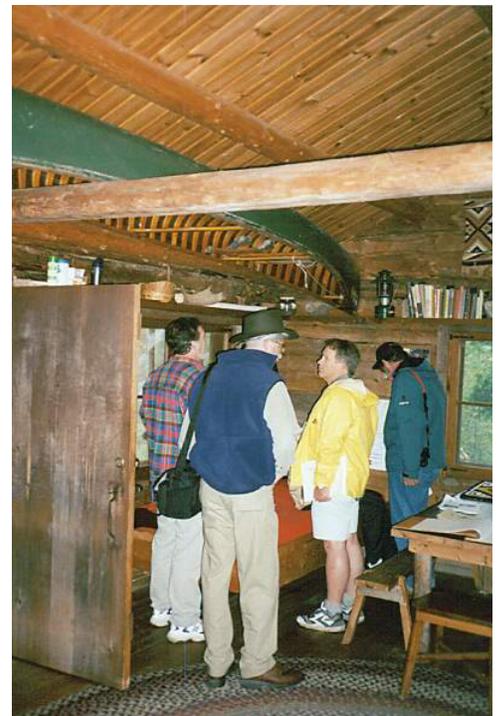
When the loon finished his call, Sig said, "What he has to say is far more important than anything I can tell you."

During that first visit to Listening Point in 1998, we also paused to examine and reflect on the well-used canoe in the rafters. We were lost in thought as we paid silent tribute to the very craft that had transported Sigurd Olson to all places that inspired his writings, which in turn, that had transported and inspired us all. As we quietly walked along the narrow and rocky trail to the point, I noticed that each of us, without words, moved to a spot where we could be alone with our inner thoughts. The separation was maintained for fifteen minutes or more. Not a word was spoken.

As we quietly regrouped and moved back to the cabin, someone, I believe it was Larry Whitmore, said, "For a bunch of old Charlie Guides, this is like visiting the Sistine Chapel."

You mentioned a "funny feeling" on Emerald.

I think there were lots of folks with us in that sixth seat. Sig Olson, Cliff Hanson, Fred Moyer, Voldi Welsh, Chris Breen and others. I was traveling with the memories of both the living and the memories of those cherished friends and comrades who are paddling on that clear



lake. Your family and mine were often in my thoughts. Your dad, my Scoutmaster, surely added his expressions and good humor to our trip through your occasional outbursts of wit. We are both fortunate in that regard.



Seeing Joe Seliga before we left was certainly a highlight of the reunion. And you are correct when you observed that Joe seems more interested in his canoes being well used than anything else. I don't think he ever intended that a Seliga become a museum piece. I think he revels in the wild places they go, the beautiful things they have seen and the fellowship they facilitate. I think if invited, his determined spirit and good humor goes along with his canoes.

As we prayed before each meal and individually, at other times, it was obvious that we had another companion as well. He received much thanks and praise as we enjoyed the quietude and beauty amid the glories of his handiwork. So, I think the "funny feeling" was the spirit of all who accompanied us in our thoughts and feelings. I too, had a "funny feeling." It was warm and comforting.

During that year on the base staff and the four years I was a Charlie Guide, I was busy building good memories. As a 55-year-old Charlie Guide, I found it an honor to be in the good company of friends with a common bond. And it is also a precious gift to have both the companionship of those good memories and the presence of a most generous and loving God.

John O. Thurston  
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