

It was the best of rivers, it was the worst of rivers.....

A Tale of Two Rivers - QUEBEC'S PETITE MECATINA

On the 20th of July 2003, our group of 5 paddlers arrived at the town of Natashquan, Quebec, the place where the pavement ends 770 miles east of Montreal on the north shore of the St. Lawrence. The target of this canoe trip is the Petite Mecatina River, (pronounced mec **KAT'** nah), which heads up along the Labrador border in the northeast Quebec wilderness near several more famous siblings, the Moise, Magpie and Natashquan. Unlike *those* rivers, which are traveled by wilderness trippers often, there was almost no information available about previous Mecatina canoe trips. That's one factor which made the Mecatina attractive to us! So on July 22nd we made the floatplane flight with Leonard DeReps some 200+ miles north to an un-named headwaters lake at ~1,770 feet elevation, the beginning of a 320 mile descent to sea level. We are Nate Houser from Afton, Virginia, Tom Cole from Richmond, Virginia, Ed Gertler from Silver Spring, Maryland, Tom McCloud from Frederick, Maryland, and Curt Gellerman, from Trenton, New Jersey. We've

all spent a lot of days on whitewater rivers, and have done many wilderness trips. Our trips are organized as a backpacking trip would be: each person has his own boat and in that boat he carries his clothes, food for 20 days, tent, sleeping bag and everything else he needs. Aside from a big pot, fire grid, first aid kit and tarp, there is very little 'group gear'. We were carrying an EPIR for the first time, a GPS, a can of bear spray, but no firearms. Our canoes are all ABS plastic: three Blue Hole Sunburst 2's, Curt's Mad River ME, plus Ed's kevlar/fiberglass custom C-1.

Lifting off from Natashquan the sky was still overcast following a day of hard rain, but the further north we flew the sunnier it became. Looking down on the headwaters, the central Quebec/ Labrador plateau looked typical of other northern lake and forest we've visited, with low, rolling, wooded hills, some balds, bouldery banks, and small sand beaches, but it also looked to me to be more lush, dense and green than



Nate inspects while Leonard secures canoes to the Otter

some other places I've been in the north. The headwater lake where we landed could have been a most pleasant spot for a days' relaxation, catching up on sleep, fishing, and exploring, but since we were already one day behind schedule due to rain, fog, and no flying yesterday, we loaded up and started to cross. There was barely a ripple on the lake on this hot day. We saw ducks, terns, geese and loons. From the air we had seen an extensive boggy area at the south end of this lake, and before long we'd paddled into a dead-end. After map-checking, backtracking and exploring further to the west, a clear channel through the bog was located. Five miles later, in a swampy area with dozens of pitcher plants in bloom, and on a narrow sand beach, we pitched camp 1 at ~52deg42'N, 63deg15'W. Camping with us were thousands of black flies, a dozen large, green dragon flies, several sandpipers, and in the early morning hours, a moose.



Nate and TomC afloat on the upper Petite Mecatina, Day 2

On this first morning the 'tone' for the trip was set: TomC is always up first. It's light enough to see at 4am. He builds a fire and gets the kettle boiling, then the rest of us emerge from tents a bit past 6. But TomC does have one bad habit: he shaves every morning. After a leisurely breakfast, and packing, we're afloat before



Ed, Nate & TomC trying to stay warm on a wet day at camp 7

The weather stayed warm with a light westerly breeze but heavily overcast, and several rain squalls moved through. When the showers came we scrambled to put on raingear, but just as soon as it stopped, because of the heat and high humidity, the extra clothing quickly came off. The next day the river was again mostly flat but with a few rapids up to class 3. Often the river was 100 meters wide and 100 millimeters deep with a sandy bottom. That afternoon, paddling through a section of broad river with many islands in a thick, gray fog, it was eerie, but beautiful in its own way. A number of small beaver lodges dotted the banks but we didn't see a single beaver. Later that afternoon we were entertained for an hour by very Wagnerian-Opera-like thunder in the distance to the north, but the threatened storm never hit.

July 28: We had camped alongside rapids at the 84 mile mark when the rains came. Crawling out of the tent at 11am, I found a thick, cold mist being blown up a white-capped river. Not a day for travel. It was tough coaxing a fire to life. In a cold, steady rain we cooked a little and ate warm. It was entertaining watching a pair



109 Mile Rapid, Day 9

of nighthawks catch insects from over the water. A mid-day lull did not last, with the wind shifting northeasterly toward evening. Supper was cooked and consumed in a cold rain. That night the sleeping bag was zipped up all the way for the first time, as the temperature dropped to 50F. As things turned out, this was the only layover day of the trip. The next morning a thick, low overcast slowly gave way to sun. Afloat again, the water level seemed to be up by a few inches and we found more small class 1-2 bouldery rapids, but a lot more lake paddling. We watched several osprey, spotted several of their nests, and late in the day saw a confused bull moose – or perhaps more than one moose, that crossed the river twice. The riverside habitat would seem to be ideal moose browse, with shallow water and lots of underwater grasses, so we have to wonder why we haven't seen them several times every day. In camp on a river left sandbar at the 108 mile mark we enjoyed a very pretty vivid red sunset as the temperature dropped quickly. The rumble of a rapid downriver seemed to get louder, lower, and more ominous, the darker it became.

8. The Petite Mecatina is little more than a creek here, but with adequate water to float a boat, though thin in little class 1-2 rock-gardens. Most of the time it's a long, skinny lake, with indiscernible current. At the bottom of rapids brook trout bit on small, yellow spinners on nearly every cast. Around the 15 mile mark the rapids picked up to class 2/3. While running a set of these rapids, a black bear was sitting on the bank, intently and curiously watching us, but turned and ran into the brush when we looked back. We passed through a five mile stretch of continuous, bouldery, class 1-2 rapids, plus three class 3 ledges, which we ran after scouting. Then the river reverted to long pools with little current.

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July 30: At early morning, as the mist lifted it slowly become sunny and was showing signs of developing into a scorcher. Fifteen minutes of paddling brought us to the noise. The rapid at mile 109 was big: at the top a routine boulder garden, but part way down the flow is funneled into the middle where it drops over a boulder barricade and then is focused onto a huge boulder forming a recurving wave above and pouring over into a monster hole that looks like light should not emerge from it. Clearly a class 5, our first true portage.

As the day unfolded, we ran several more boulder gardens in the class 2-3 range, then came upon a



Curt.....follows Curt (with TomM watching).....following Curt through a long rapid at ~ mile 120

broad, long, class 3, a problem because it was borderline runnable with a loaded canoe. The middle, though very technical, was the best place to be, and the runout lasted another 300 yds., just fine if you're in the boat, but would be a most unpleasant swim. Ed, Curt & Nate ran down the center, while Tom & Tom lined a bit at the top and ran the rest. At the end of the day we had reached the 123 mile mark.

You know it's going to be a tough day when, at 8:30am, you're already thinking forward to the swim at the end of the day. It was another very hot day. One benefit of having so many miles of shallow, slow-flowing headwaters was that the river water was reasonably warm, so an end-of-day swim with a bar of soap, and a washout of smelly shirts, was pleasant. The flow had now grown to ~ 2,000 cfs, but aside from some class 2



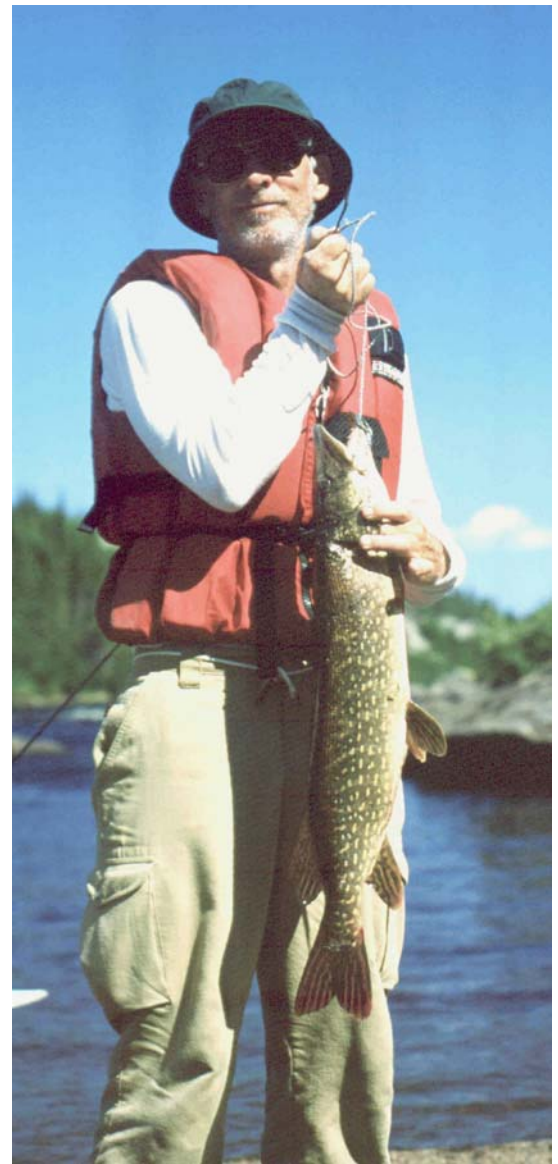
Map check, leg stretch and snack along the upper river

rapids, paddling this pseudo-river was entirely slogging it out on flatwater. At lunch on the 1st of August we figured to be at mile 168, putting us past the half-way point after 9 days, and on schedule to complete a 20 day trip. We even thought about arriving early. A pair of black fighter jets on low-level training out of Goose Bay buzzed low over the water with a roar so loud you felt it. The problem with these guys is that you don't hear them coming. They just **explode** out of a clear and quiet sky. We have to wonder if they even see us. Camp that night was along the south shore of Fourmount Lake, a scenic place where it would have been fun to relax and fish, but the nicest sand beaches are on the north shore, and we were at a smaller, rockier spot. The next day we paddled on through lakes Donquin and LeBreton, both several miles long, with a steady following breeze pushing us along. Much of the time these lakes were shallow, with the blades of water grasses visible just beneath the canoes. The breeze pushed us into a shallow, sandy cove on the east end of LeBreton near its exit, where we camped. Just as we were about to leave in the morning, a black bear was walking the beach, headed in our direction, but when he heard us he ran for cover.

Upon leaving Lac LeBreton, the Mecatina starts to look like a river again and a couple big-volume rapids came up. Around 10:30 we ran a long class 2 rapid that has a bedrock 'cliff' on the left at the bottom. We paused for a long and leisurely lunchstop on the flat rock out-cropping and were casting the eddies for trout when something much larger took the lure. After a comical battle during which Nate's reel self-destructed, and I hand-lined the fish, an 8 pound pike was landed. Then Curt caught a second the same size. This was a LOT of fish fillets so we had a real suppertime fish-fry feast while enjoying the view of a vivid red sunset through thin clouds.

4 August 03. In the moist sand near the boats Curt noticed fresh, large, wolf pawprints. After an hour of paddling we came to a major rapid, which was passed by a combination of lining, lifting and running. Later we spotted a sow & yearling black bear on the left bank, digging in the dirt. I was curious to know what they're digging for, so quietly sculled over, and even when I was 50 feet away the little one didn't care that I was there. He looked right at me with a 'retarded' sort of look on his face. Mama was up in the bushes.

Late in the afternoon the scenery changed markedly as a line of hills became visible across the horizon. As we approached them we were funneled into a narrowing and only now realized that the volume of the river had doubled or trebled over the past few days, because with so much lake paddling that increase had been difficult to detect. Before long we had floated right up to the lip of the first rapid of the infamous canyon section of the Mecatina. Here all that flow is necked down to less than 100 feet, and drops 15 feet through a horseshoe-shaped notch in the water-polished gray granite. The name "Royal Flush" seemed perfect. There are several incredible kettle-holes in this rock, and balanced boulders the size of a garage. After walking the left side to scout, and being too late in the day to portage, we withdrew to camp at the top left, just above this rapid, where there was a sand beach only foot above water level, barely room enough for our 5 tents and a fire. At dusk we were surprised to see a bat flying around. Wonder how he survives the winter?



Nate & Supper



TomC studying the Royal Flush



Nate lazes while TomC packs at Royal Flush Camp

So after two lazy weeks which were mostly warm and sunny, with easy, occasionally interesting paddling, good fishing and a constant following breeze, we have reached ~mile 238, close to 51deg24'N, 59deg58'W. Less than 100 miles remains to take-out, we've dropped ~1,000 feet, but have 700 still to loose. There have been no rude surprises, though all the flatwater has been disappointing. There is an old proverb which warns 'Be careful what you wish for, because you may just get it', and we had been wishing for rapids. This river now takes a sharp turn to the south, cuts a canyon, and heads in earnest for the Gulf of St. Lawrence.



Curt & Nate scout at the top of R2

Prior to this trip the only information we had about the Mecatina was from a 1985 CANOE magazine article, which tells of a trip by group, one of whom was Serge Theoret, who paddled 18' kevlar downriver canoes. This story tells of a 3 mile portage taking three days, of ascending a creek out of the canyon, following a chain of highland lakes, then descending to the Mecatina, in order to bypass an unrunnable set of cascades where the gradient is 100 feet per mile. A steep section of river is obvious on the topographical maps, but only one rapid is named - "Rapide de la Gros Truite". It is logical to assume that is *the big one*, but we didn't have any way of knowing how many runnable, or unrunnable, rapids had to be passed prior to getting there, but being experienced Appalachian technical creek paddlers in solo boats, we *expected* to be able to work the edges and run a lot of the rapids that tandem teams in 18 foot boats could not, and thus avoid much of that wicked-sounding portage. We were about to find out. ***Hold on to your hats!***



TomM watches as Ed & Curt eddy out, R3

The portage past Royal Flush went fast over a smooth, tilted, rock shelf littered by huge boulders, but the problem of getting back onto the river at the bottom was two fold: smooth, slippery rock and a surge of 3 feet in the eddy. We would load a boat, sit in it, wait for the surge to crest, and seal-launch one at a time into the swirling current. Almost immediately we were at another big rapid, and the several big rapids that followed, back-to-back-to-back, now run together in my head. We ran only one of the many rapids after extensive scouting, R3, down a big tongue on the right, then sharply left into an eddy. From there, staying along the left bank for a hundred yards, we cut out sharply to the right, aiming to hit a green-water tongue that formed below a smallish ledge/wave and we rode that to the right and out the bottom of the rapid.



TomC, Nate, Ed & Curt scout at Whirlpool

At another rapid we sneaked around a rocky point in much the same way an experienced paddler approaches the lip of a dam, where he cannot see what is just below, then we dropped into a left side slot from where we could carry/drag for a short distance over water-polished granite past the really big stuff at the top. But we were up against a vertical rock cliff on our left, couldn't portage forward, couldn't get back upriver, so

with no place else to go, had no choice but to run out the rest of the rapid, which was easily a high class 3. There were two boulders in vicious current to be avoided. Again we had to seal-launch into the crest of a 3 foot surge, one by one, and we all finished upright, though by different routes.

Every rapid in this canyon was BIG! It looked like 10,000 cfs. It looked like Grand Canyon rapids, and 3 of us have paddled the Grand Canyon in solo canoes. But this river is tougher because of the boulders littering the canyon everywhere. It was all class 5 in the center and sneak routes were few. The sixth rapid I'll call "The Whirlpool". Portaging around it on the left was easy, on a smooth shelf of solid granite, but paddling out of that counterclockwise rotating, powerful eddy at the bottom took several tries.

The next rapid is formed by an island of solid granite, perhaps one acre in size, which splits the current, which crashes over at least two 10 foot ledges. I'll call this Granite Island Rapid. We scouted both right and left sides and found no way past. We had come perhaps 5 miles already, anticipated getting to an unrunnable section so assumed we had now reached its head, we had done a lot of portaging so were tired, so we worked back upstream a few hundred yards to where there was a sandbar to camp on. Though the river in front of camp is flat, the current is swift. On river right, was a prominent rock hill that I'll call "The Knob", which we will go behind tomorrow, staying in a low notch, descending to cross a small stream, then climbing to the canyon rim for a look into "The Cascades".



Ed studies "The Knob" from Camp 14

August 3. After striking camp and forward ferrying across the river, we used the Sven saws to cut a path through the impenetrable alders so we could move packs back into the forest. Then the hike began. The objective of the day was to scout the portage route, to see the canyon and the cascades, determine if there might be sneak routes at water level, and also determine where we will re-enter the river at the end of the impassable canyon. So with heavy packs, we headed out.

Very soon we realized that this forest was extremely thick, small trees growing densely, and we made poor progress. Footing was often bad, and the climb was so steep that you had to grab a scrub tree and pull yourself up. At noon we were on top of a bluff, having gained 600 feet elevation, and were overlooking the rapid that had stopped us yesterday. In the blazing sun it was blisteringly hot. We did not find caribou-moss-covered balds at top, where the walking would have been easy, nor were there game trails to be followed through the woods. At break we could see back up the canyon to Whirlpool Rapid, and last night's sandbar camp. In the forest you could not see the person only 50 feet in front.

At 3 pm we were nowhere near the end of the canyon and had drunk all our water. It had to be at least in the mid-80's, and we'd been working very hard and sweating profusely all day. We badly needed water and a place to camp before dark, but turning around and carrying full packs back to where the boats were cached did not occur to us as an option. On the topo maps a lake was shown not far away so its coordinates were dialed into



Nate at lunch on canyon rim, Camp 14 across river



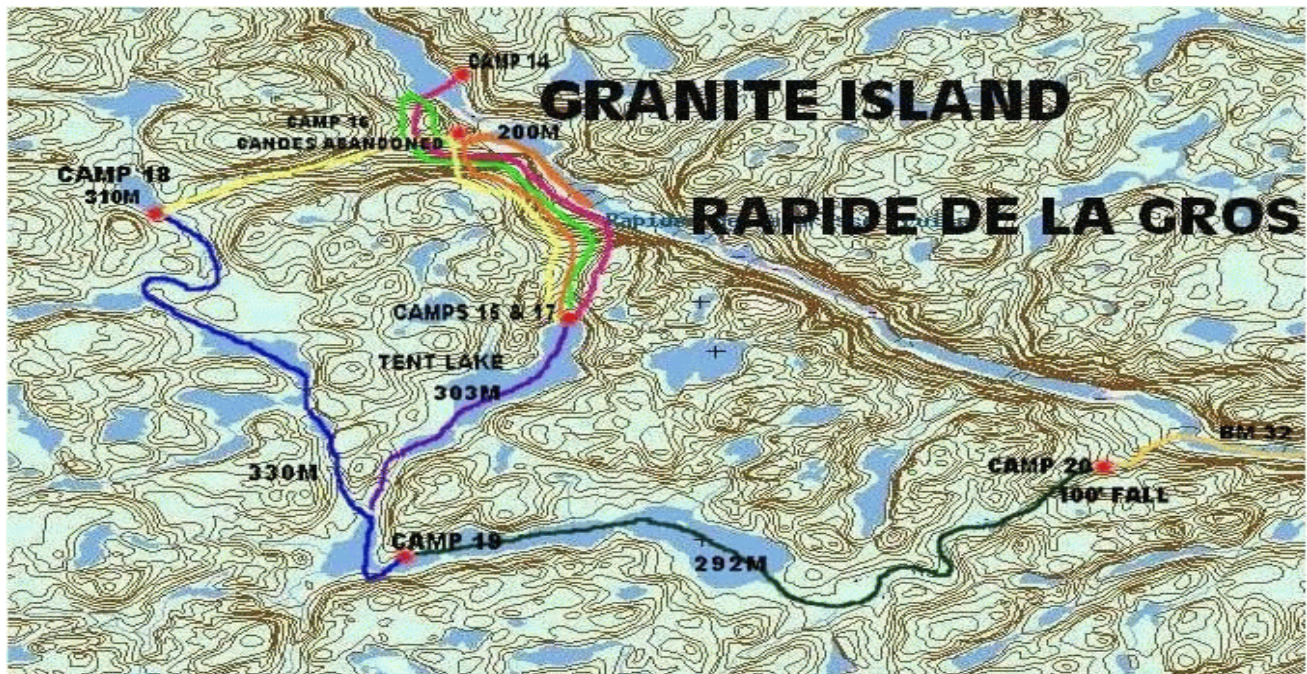
Granite Island Rapid from the canyon rim

TomC's GPS, and we headed in that direction. Even with the GPS guiding the way, the route was not obvious, and at one point, for lack of a better reason, we simply picked a ravine to descend because the water flowing down it would *have* to flow into the lake, and we barged blindly through the dense little spruce and hemlock. Arriving at the water late in the day, with no flat space to set up tents, we cleared brush and fallen trees to create some lumpy, small pads, and then built fire on the mud, almost in the lake, which was shallow at this end. I've come to call this camp, #15, 'Tent Lake', which, according to the GPS, was 1.8 miles as the crow flies from camp the previous night. Admittedly we did not move in a straight line, but after 8 hours of the most difficult bushwacking I've ever done, it was a discouraging thought to contemplate repeating this hike four more times. We had NOT accomplished the goal of the day of finding a route to the place we will re-enter the river at the end of the canyon. We had not seen the cascades. We weren't certain of our position in relation to the impassable section. In fact, we had created a serious complication for ourselves, since we were separated by miles of extremely difficult forest hiking from our second pack, our boats, AND the river.



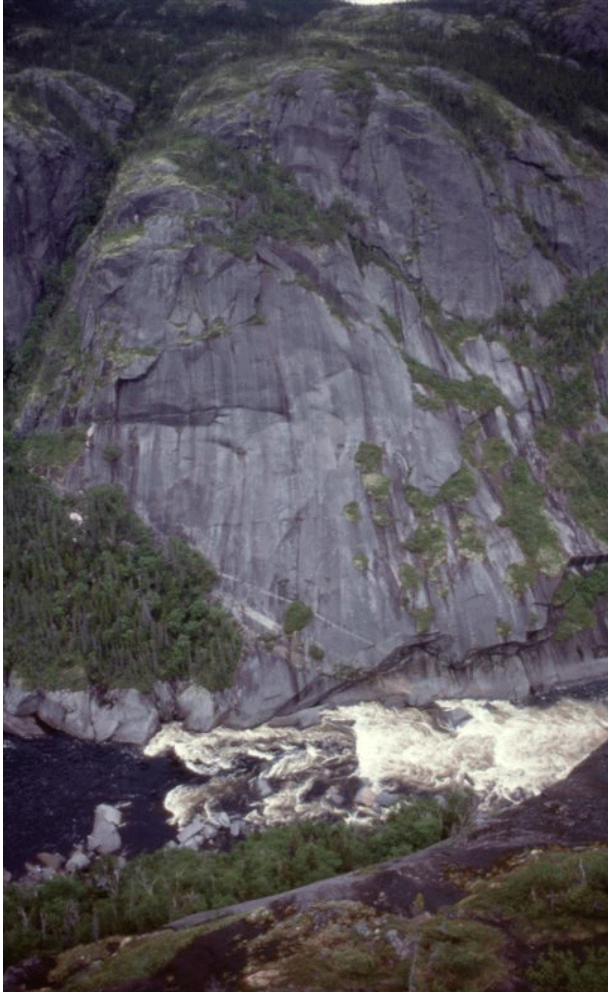
Ed portaging through the tangle

Up at dawn, each of us packed a light pack with some food and extra clothing, figuring that we could not possibly make it back here to Tent Lake with boats and the second pack in one day. Remaining at Tent Lake are the tents, packs, clothes and miscellaneous gear, but worst of all for this story, all of the cameras. The goal for the day was to move canoes and pack up that creek we'd crossed, and which we assumed had been used by the 1985 party. That meant we expected to spend a night in the open, at the top of the creek, and get to Tent Lake on the next day. It took 3 rough hours, with GPS navigation, to reach the boats and second packs which had been left upriver from 'The Knob', and the day was already hot. Then began the toughest portaging I've ever done, pulling and shoving the canoes up hills, and tilting them sideways through the dense little spruce trees. Portaging in the traditional sense, canoe overhead, is not possible. Cutting a path is not an option. In addition to the denseness of the forest, there are many thousands of down dead trees that add to the problems. There had been a heavy infestation of the hemlock looper several years ago and in places 50% of the trees are dead. These are now falling, helter-skelter to the forest floor. And succeeding the dead trees are millions of seedling spruce and birch. We did the portaging in stages, helping each other since one man alone really could not move a canoe



6 Aug red, 7 Aug green, 8 Aug orange, 9 Aug yellow, 10 Aug blue & purple, 11 Aug dark green

through this tangle. It took hours and hours just to get boats and packs onto the boulders near the mouth of the stream below 'The Knob', downriver of Granite Island Rapid, which wasn't even a third of the total portage distance, and we were real tired. We soaked our feet in the cold water of the creek, and drank our fill of the ice cold water tumbling from above. We'd come to assume that this *has* to be the creek the '85 group ascended, though we have no proof. With no markers, trails, any signs whatsoever of previous people passing through here, it is just a guess. There are rock cliffs and house-sized boulders to the upstream end of this "bowl" (which is really a huge eddy at the bottom-right of Granite Island Rapid) where the creek drops into the Mocatina. These boulders would provide some shelter if the weather turned bad on us during the night, so we built fire there, and gathered a pile of wood. After a slim supper we put on all the clothing we had, a couple of us using deflated airbags as blankets, and curled up to sleep. It became colder. Sometime during the night the fire died, and had to be rekindled for warmth. Northern lights danced across the clear sky. This night took a toll.



Theoret's photo of the Cascades, 1977

far as he could see. Both canyon walls were smooth rock descending into the water, and passage through at water level was not possible. We saw no creek here that could have been the one ascended by the '85 group, so, resigned, we retreated upriver with difficulty, paddling against the current. Back at the mouth of the creek for the second time, and not wanting to spend another cold night here in the open, each of us picked up his second pack and, around 2 pm, started to hike toward Tent Lake. As you would guess it was again torture from trees, terrain, heat and blackflies. A GPS position check was made every half hour. At one point we were 0.3 miles away from the tents, and a half hour later 0.5 miles away! It was getting into dusk, and we were becoming concerned. Nobody wanted to spend the night laying on the

At first light we started to move up the creek. Well, kind of. With heavy packs on we started to force a way through the underbrush up along the creekside, but this foray did not last long. The viewpoint was expressed that this route was an *impossibility*, and that the 1985 group *MUST* have ascended some other creek, though we could identify no alternate on our maps. The argument ran something like this: "Suppose we had no information whatsoever about this river? What would we be doing? We'd be probing on downriver until we came to something that we absolutely could not get around before we started to portage. We haven't gone that far yet." Well, I can't argue with that, because it's premise is correct. It might even be true. We dragged the boats down to the Mocatina, loaded the single bag, and paddled out from the creek mouth, around the next bend. There are vertical rock cliffs on both sides. In only a few hundred yards we were at a ledge, the beginning of another major rapid, a long and bouldery class 5. In the distance the river narrows and bends around to the right and out of sight, where I think I see a plume of mist, and the left bank is a smooth slope of gray granite, hundreds of feet high dropping at a 60 degree angle into the water. If we continued to portage this rapid, the canoes would have to go over boulders the size of vans and panel trucks, but who knows if we can get past that corner 500 yards away. Still uncertain whether we had indeed reached the 'impassable cascades', Curt made a 3 hour scouting hike while four of us rested, drank water, snacked and fished. On return he had few words: first "water", then - the impassable canyon was just around the bend.

The river was white as



TomM barging through the thick forest

forest floor in the open. We kind of semi-ignored the GPS and went by dead-reckoning, down a depression, reaching the lake but at the wrong end of it, so another 45 minutes of terrible hiking by flashlight was needed to find our tents. So at 9:30, in near darkness, we were getting the kettle boiling for a hot supper. It was a really beat up group. Both of Curt's legs cramped: too much sweating and not enough water. The two nights at Tent Lake are camps 15 & 17.

We did not awaken as early as usual, and when we did gather by the fire we were not moving quickly. It was clear we were up against a tough spot. I can't say what the others did, but I started to put myself on short rations. After 3 days of backbreaking work we still did not have the canoes below the canyon and without them, could not get out of here. Hiking out 70 miles with a pack through this forest is not an option. In talking over our situation it was clear that we had to get the boats up that creek somehow and into the highland lakes in order to get them close to Tent Lake, and we could not do that in one day. It was also clear that we had neither the muscle strength nor the amount of food & days needed to move all five boats. This is a situation where being a solo paddler is a distinct disadvantage. Each person has to carry more weight than would each member of a tandem team. Two canoes would be abandoned, and we would portage only three boats to the top and paddle out tandem. So again we packed light packs in anticipation of spending another night in the woods away from tents and gear, but this time the sleeping bag was included. The GPS - directed hike back to the boats went predictably slowly on yet another hot, dry day. Arriving one last time at the creek mouth, I removed some strapping and hardware from my boat, thinking it would be of use in rigging Curt's canoe for tandem paddling. We carried the two Sunbursts high on the boulders, some 40 feet above than present river level, but not higher than some gray-weathered driftwood, and turned them over, side-by-side, saddles, air bags and a Norse paddle still inside. A note was tied to a thwart giving the date we left and where we were headed, just in case a rescue party came looking for us a month from now. A lot of good that would have done! It was with a lump in my throat that I walked away. Losing a boat is a humiliation, a defeat. The Mecatina was kicking our asses.

The ascent of the creek began. It's not a big creek, only 5 cfs. Curt & I lead out with the ME, while Tom, Nate and Ed, with the C-boat inside the canoe, hauled second. There were innumerable lifts of 3-5-7 feet, up small falls and over fallen trees. The going was slow: a grunt - a heave - 3 feet forward - and a thud, but at least we were going, and being wet from the waist down meant that the heat was less of a problem. And we had all the water we wanted to drink. This little creek rivals in green-ness and lushness any trout stream in the Smokys. The rocks were slippery, with all of us suffering many stumbles, cracks to the knees, shins and ankles. At one point we thought we'd made it to the top, as the creek pooled and there were a couple small beaver dams, but soon the gradient increased again. We went over, under, and through the trees fallen completely across this narrow stream. It was 5+ hours of exceedingly tough work to progress one mile and ascend 300 feet in elevation. On top at last in a small lake, we grabbed the first little clear spot we saw to make camp 18. It was a strange spot, a small bare slope covered with lichens, but with room enough to build a campfire. The soil was peaty. As dusk grew deeper the guys rigged a tarp and spread out ground cloths for a place to sleep while I tended fire and improvised a one-pot group meal from potatoes-au-gratin, milk powder, dried green peppers and corn, etc., plus a summer sausage. The cook always likes favorable comments but I have to believe those on this night were heavily influenced by fatigue and caloric deprivation. Wet socks, pants and boots were hung from low branches. The evening was exceedingly quiet. No animal sounds. No wind. No threatening weather. Eerie. Just a few mosquitos. Before it was completely dark we had crawled into our bags, tightly packed together, underneath the tarp.



Curt at Camp 19

Up at first light, 4am. It had been a quiet, dry night and was again a warm morning. Now we started the different, but equally difficult task, of finding our way through these highlands. It was here that we realized the problems of using maps obtained off the internet and printed on home printers: the green ink is water soluble. Both copies have suffered water damage, though stored in plastic bags. They have become borderline readable, with the green running everywhere, but the brown contour lines stayed in place. Better than nothing. As we worked through a series of small, interlocking lakes, mostly dragging between them, there were frequent map checks. At a small lake where a spongy sphagnum swamp only inches above lake level divided us from the next creeks' watershed, we portaged across and found a ravine with a trickle running down it, to a lake draining into a different creek. The descent was predictably slow and very difficult because of the thick underbrush and many down trees. Curt headed out to find the end of this portage, and was separated from us for quite a long time. After 3 hours of mostly down-hill dragging we found a small pond, dammed up by beavers, then after 100 feet of moist boulders, a real lake. After some indecision we concluded that a trickle feeding into this beaver pond on its other end *MUST* be draining from Tent Lake, so that's where we'll have to go to retrieve our gear. If anything, this was the most difficult push through the bush we'd done yet. Both the creek itself and the nearby forest were a tangle of fallen trees and underbrush. Yet strangely, I saw a couple small trees obviously cut off with an ax!? Who had been here, and why??? TomC's canoe went up, was paddled across the lake, got grossly overloaded at Tent Lake Camp, paddled back, and re-portaged down. Another backbreaking job on top of so many others, after we were already exhausted. But the gear *DID* get retrieved. Reunited with our equipment for



Lacerated Frogg Toggs

pants. Nate's skillet and spatula were left behind. So after this longer than usual 'breakfast' period, we loaded the remaining gear and headed out across this good-sized lake. There was some wildlife here including ducks, mergansers and some little guys with a white belly, gray top, black head with white patch just behind the eye. If only we'd had time this would have been a nice place to rest, and for sure the fish have never seen a lure.

When we found the exit flow we were rather pleased that it was a swamp creek plenty big enough to float a canoe. After following that creek for a couple miles, a critical decision point was

the first time in 5 days, we distributed the loads across the 3 remaining boats, paddled out into the bigger lake, and immediately looked to camp. Just around the bend to the left, where the lake was very narrow, was a small, sloped, bald spot, not really big enough and swampy behind, but it had to do. Camp 19. When I crawled into the tent, on this night like many others, I was asleep instantly, and slept the sleep of the dead.

With the fire going and breakfast over, we made an effort to lighten the loads, consolidate, and get better prepared to tandem paddle. Burned were a small bottle of hand lotion, five empty film canisters, two pens and a tablet, a pair of sneakers, a full roll of canoe tickets, a shattered fishing rod, badly torn nylon pants, lacerated Frogg Togg



TomM, Curt & Ed lining downhill



The Hundred Foot Fall

reached. If we stayed on this creek we might be descending into the Mecatina canyon too soon, where we would face more unrunnable cascades. The alternative was to work up-flow, through additional lakes on the canyon rim, to get to a second creek shown on the map which descends to the Mecatina further downstream. This option involves more miles of dragging and portaging, and keeps us up on top for at least two additional days with very poor maps. We don't know which of these two creeks the 1985 group took, if either. Those additional days of hard work and the additional food that would be consumed on the longer route tipped the balance. We decided to go with the flow.

After a mile this little creek started dropping precipitously over solid rock ledges, the first of them 30 feet! It's an interesting place, scenic in its own rugged way. Hard to judge our rate of progress, dragging, pushing, grunting, but we keep moving. The boats are often floating in the water, but we are not often in them. Two men lining, often crossing from side to side, seems to go fastest. Before long we saw nothing but sky in front of us: the lip of a 100 foot fall. This one forced a portage around the left and into the woods. As you would expect it was again an extraordinarily physically difficult task, but at least it was mostly downhill. During one of these 'poses' a thunder-storm struck. We huddled underneath overturned canoes for a half hour, gradually becoming wetter and colder, then continued when the rain slowed to a drizzle. As dusk was falling we were nowhere near the Mecatina, though we could now see it, occasionally through gaps the trees, still far below, and we were at the lip of *another* hundred foot fall. To our left was a brushy field with a few scrubby trees, and lots of caribou moss, which became home for the night.

Camp 20. It was not such a bad spot. The temperature continued to drop and a ground fog moved in. After dark the kettle was finally boiled, in time delivering big servings of spaghetti with meat sauce and Parmesan for supper. We could have gone for seconds, thirds! Everyone craved those calories!

After a couple more hours of hard work the next morning we reached the Mecatina, viewing a big rapid



Ed's Tent at Early Morning, Camp 20



The Mecatina: still far below Camp 20

below, but there was a boulder apron where we could pass by portaging if necessary. Good news. Though still in a canyon, the walls were no longer so tight. We paddled only a couple hundred yards, crossing to river left, and began to portage again. While carrying, I chanced across a brass marker, MRN 32, a surveyors benchmark. Later I found out from the 'Ministry Resources Natural' of Quebec that this benchmark is at an altitude of 139M. So from where our portage began above Granite Island Rapid to this benchmark the river has dropped ~70 meters, or 210 feet, in perhaps 3 miles. This is A LOT of drop for such a large river.

Finding a really nice sandy beach across the river at the end of this portage, we agreed to set aside one hour to rest, snack, drink, swim with a bar of soap and wash out clothes, the first hygiene that had been practiced in 6 days. I put my white polypro shirt into a bailer along with soap, squeezed a few times and the water turned an opaque brown-black. Several water changes were needed before the water cleared. Our bodies looked bad, scabbed, bruised, bug-bitten, and thin, with lower legs, ankles and feet swollen. The rock cliff above had a dark rust color, perhaps a form of iron ore. Presumably the name Mecatina comes from a Montagnais Indian word meaning 'red topped mountain'. Had there been the time, this would have made a superb camp site, but since it took us 5 days to move from above Granite Island to below this canyon we are now 3 days behind schedule and getting low on food, so the push began to reach Harrington Harbor in time to catch the once-a-week ferry. We have three days.

After several more portages over big boulders, the river widened appreciably and we paddled past Cape Mystery plus some additional miles on a slowly flowing, broad, flat river. Another black bear was seen. But every so often another rapid was encountered, and every one of these was big water racing through big boulders, with big waves and holes, and nearly everything was a portage. We'd work along the edges as far as possible to



Dusk at Camp 22

minimize the distance that gear had to be carried. When a route was borderline runnable, it became common practice for the bowman to step out with a pack, lightening the canoe by 200 lbs., and let the solo paddler take the boat through. A number of really significant rapids in the class 3-4 range were passed in this way. But again, in late afternoon, we found ourselves scouting a very long narrow sluice through the granite which deserved the waterfall mark on the map, but didn't have it. The portage was long and difficult along the right side rock, occasionally up into the forest. By the time this was completed it was dusk, so we went into camp on a poor, wet, bouldery sandbank just downriver. Camp 22.

As the miles passed next day, the canyon floor continued to widen, and the hilltops moved further into the distance. We again found ourselves, paradoxically, on a river often

resembling a lake, with long, shallow stretches of gentle or imperceptible current. Those of us paddling the overloaded, improperly rigged tandem canoes were having a rough time of it, straddling a gear pack. Knee pain dictated a break at least every hour to stretch the legs, and that was not enough. The pain was constant. In three weeks we had not seen a porcupine, yet within a mile there were two, on opposite sides of the river. I thought how tasty they would be barbecued. We worked hard all day, stroking steadily since sunrise, portaging some, and aided by a constant following breeze, and knocked off more than 30 miles.



Ed and Curt wait in the eddy for TomC and Nate (notice dead forest)



At the top of "The Split"

It was already late into the afternoon, 4pm, when we reached yet another huge rapid, a waterfall, really, where a 50 foot wide notch has been worn into an exceedingly dense red-orange granite. Curt and I grabbed packs and began to walk into an overflow channel, scouting for a portage route. It was soon obvious there isn't an easy one. The right side high-water channel is smoothly waterpolished at a 60 degree angle, so footing is nonexistent. After only a short way, perhaps 200 feet, I could see the pool below the fall, but it was a puzzling sight. Belatedly, we realized where we were. After its initial drop of 20 feet into the foaming cauldron, this river does something that no other I know of does: crashes into a granite face and

IT SPLITS! With 150 feet in elevation still to loose, these two channels go their separate ways, some 15 or so miles, to the coast. The eastern channel keeps the name Mecatina, but the west channel takes the name Netagamou. So we had another critical decision to make: if we take the east channel and the weather gets windy, the big waves on the Gulf of St. Lawrence will prevent us from paddling out to the island where the ferry stops. If we take the west channel we'll arrive at a Chevery, a small town where we will have to find someone with a boat big enough to haul canoes out to the island. We slept on it. For the second day in a row our progress had been stopped by a huge rapid.



Ed (pack), Curt (canoe) and Nate hiking to the Netagamou

In the morning began a one mile portage around the falls and at least 4 more class 5 rapids, to get to the west channel. The die is cast, we go to Chevery and hope to find a boat to haul us to Harrington. We headed up into the woods on river right about 300 yards upriver from The Split, and after some bushwacking, broke out onto relatively level balds where the hiking was easy. With a light breeze, the hard work in the hot sun was bearable, and the panoramic scenery was terrific. There were ripe blueberries for the first time on this trip, if only we'd had leisure time to pick them. As you see in the photo, Curt actually got to portage canoe overhead, and he carried both canoes. But the 5 walks across took us 8 hours! Not yet paddling

until after noon, we pressed on, finding miles of flat, flowing water, a head wind, and occasional rapids. When this river decided to drop, *every time* it threw a temper tantrum. Nearly every cross-hatch on the map was an unrunnable rapid, big water flowing fast across polished granite, forming huge stacks of waves. Continuing to push, we paddled hard through the afternoon, either portaging or solo paddling several more rapids. We did not stop to take any photos. This morning, with only 15 miles to go, we had let ourselves believe we really could make it into Chevery by evening. We had talked about how great the hot shower was going to feel after 24 days, and what we were going to eat for supper, but this damn river simply would not let up. Even in this Netagamou channel, with only half the flow, everywhere where there was a little drop there was a big rapid. There were rapids on the river NOT indicated on the map. There is a map symbols for a 'swift' or small rapid, and nearly ALL of these had waves too large to go through in a canoe, though some we got by with a solo paddler, or some lining. We'd worked hard for 14 hours, but the lengthy scouting and portaging had consumed a lot of time, so as darkness fell we had 4 miles still to go, another portage just ahead, and who knows what after that. By now we all just wanted this ordeal to be over. We were all hungry and exhausted. We'd been denied Chevery, stopped for the third day in a row by another portage. Dispirited, we camped on the wet sand, built fire, cooked and ate after dark again. Camp 24. But we were not giving up on catching that ferry. We agreed to make another hard push in the morning.

Up at 4am, Saturday, 19 August. We have reservations for the ferry out of Harrington Harbor *this afternoon*. If we are not on it, a week will pass before the next boat stops. By first light, and without any breakfast, we are portaging a rapid, then paddling, then portaging again, then paddling, then portaging again and again....this river will NOT let us go. After a couple hours we reached a big, smooth ledge, and on the right a wooden observation platform has been built. This is an easy carry over smooth rock. In the far distance is a radio tower, which certainly stands out as odd in this place. At 7 am we have reached the final falls, a 50 foot drop to tidewater, and for the first time in 25 days found a well-cut portage trail, and more observation platforms, I would guess for birdwatching, around the right side. Even with the trail, it was a chore to carry around, particularly getting back into the water over nasty boulders. At 8 am we paddled up to the dock at Chevery. Very quiet, with empty buildings to the left and empty fishing boats to the right. Finding no one to talk with, we were ready to hike toward town when a guy rode up on an ATV. We asked him if he knew of a fisherman who might haul us out to the island. He rode away and before long returned saying someone would come soon.



The final 50 foot fall to saltwater



Loading the Cecil Anderson



Annie loves her poppies!

After loading everything onto the back of this crabber, the Cecil Anderson, we hung on as he headed out into the north Atlantic chop. This day was hazy and cooler than we'd experienced in the last two weeks. We passed around what little jerky and gorp we had left: a final breakfast. Along the route there are dozens of bare rocks and little islands, with sizeable waves breaking on them. The north Atlantic is gray and restless. We would not have been able to paddle against this in canoes.

In an hour we've landed at Harrington Harbor. Free at last, Free at last! Free of the Mecatina, at last! We have made it in time to catch the afternoon ferry out of here!

We confirmed our ferry reservations, then cached gear at the freight terminal and walked into town



The church was recruiting for a new pastor

looking for two things: a hot shower, which we got at Annie's Bed and Breakfast, and FOOD, any kind of food, but ice cream, and potato chips, and beer and cookies which we found in Rowsell's Store. Harrington Harbor is an interesting place, a community of about 300 souls and no cars. The thoroughfares are built of wood and everyone rides around on ATV's. Everyone is friendly and interested in hearing about our trip. We told the story several times. Despite interest, there seemed to be universal agreement that they would not want to do it. "Oh, yes, I remember the last group that came down that river, about 10 years ago", we heard more than once. Aside from cutting firewood on the mainland, and traveling perhaps 15 miles inland by snowmobile in winter to hunt moose, these locals do not go up the Mecatina.

The Harrington Harbor pay phone worked, so we let family know we were alive. It rained for awhile, got colder, but the sun came out again. We walked around, saw the town, visited both grocery stores more than once, took some photos. But despite enjoying the place, we got on the ferry that afternoon, and the next day were back to our own vans at Natashquan, feeling very lucky to be there.

So if you are considering a canoe trip to the Petite Mecatina, I have one word of advice for you: **DON'T!** It was by far the toughest trip I've ever done. None of us, and we have a lot of wilderness tripping experience, have ever seen portaging conditions as difficult as those through the woods, and the rapids are suitable only for class 5 kayakers. And we still don't know what exactly is inside those 'cascades'. My wilderness tripping gear is wrecked, I have to buy a new boat, and it'll take a long time to heal up from the damage done.

This is a trip that will be talked about for a long time as the trip from hell. That's not far from right.



Nate



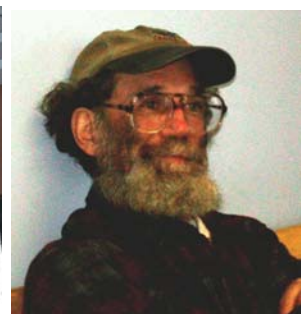
Ed



TomC



Curt



TomM

POSTSCRIPT: Through the modern miracle of the internet search engine one of the participants on that 1985 trip, Serge Theoret, was located living near Montreal. Serge is one of the very few who have paddled the Mecatina twice, in 1977 and again in 1985. After exchanging several emails and some photos with him, there is no doubt that our portage route was completely different from what the earlier groups had done. They had gone down the canyon to about the furthest point we did, but then went directly up and over the top of the hill on river right, and immediately down the other side. This is a VERY VERTICAL portage, but much shorter than what we did. Was it easier? Debatable, as the route we did, though miles longer, gains less elevation. Our 2003 trip had a 'medium' water level, while the 1977 trip was at very low water, and the 1985 trip was about comparable with ours.

This is just a short trip report. I'm still working on a comprehensive trip report, that includes more details, the GPS waypoints of every campsite, more maps and more photographs. It is going to run around 40 pages. Obviously I can't afford to print that out and freely distribute it to everyone, but if you are really, REALLY serious about the Mecatina, contact me at mccloud-tom@worldnet.att.net. Maybe you've got a trip report you can trade me.

Trip report by Tom McCloud, 5318 Shookstown Road, Frederick, MD



At Camp 1, TomM & TomC



Portaging The Split, Curt, Nate, Ed



Lunch break, Nate, Curt, TomC



Curt running out the tail of a class 5 gorge rapid