

Gone Native

BOUNDARY WATERS BREAKDOWN

By **MARK ANDERS** | Photography by **ILJA HERB**

IN THE TEACHINGS OF THE CHIPPEWA PEOPLE, four is a sacred number. Four seasons. Four winds. Four directions of the compass. Four races of people. The fact we're four men in four boats is pure coincidence, but as our somewhat reluctant Chippewa team member, Ray Boshey, gently sprinkles a handful of tobacco into the water, blessing our journey, it's easy to believe we're embarking on something bigger than a canoe trip.

We're in Minnesota's renowned Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, preparing to retrace a serpentine path of lakes, rivers, and streams linking Crane Lake, Minnesota, to the tiny tribal village of Lac La Croix, Ontario. Native Americans blazed this ancient route hundreds of years ago, and French-Canadian fur traders followed from the 17th century into the 20th. As recently as the 1950s, the Bois Forte Chippewa paddled the 45-mile stretch en masse, 100 canoes at a time, to the village of Nett Lake in celebration of Miigwitch Menom-an, a ceremony thanking the Creator for the wild rice that grows in abundance there.

Ray last paddled that route as a young man, some 60 years ago. He's a living link to the old ways, which is precisely why we drafted the quiet tribal elder to join us in our prototypical white-man fantasy: to travel this country as the Indians had, living off the land. The rules are no maps, no mechanical portages, no packaged foods, and no navigational aids other than the memory of a 78-year-old man. In case of emergency—and only an emergency—we have placed in the bow of my boat a bright red dry bag packed with a map, compass, GPS, first aid kit, emergency beacon, and, most notably, food. We named the bag Wilson, after the volleyball that kept Tom Hanks company in the film *Cast Away*, and vowed not to use it. For four days and 45 miles, we would eat only what the Chippewa would have had on such a trip a century ago.

We were totally committed to those rules until, on the way to the put-in, Ray suggested we stop for beer at the local package store. A mild debate ensued regarding how alcohol fit into our plan to live off the land, but the thought of sitting around the campfire sober while watching Ray drink Coors Light put an end to the discussion. We bought a case of Silver Bullets, and a bottle of Jack Daniels for good measure.



Stand and Deliver: The author fishing for dinner.



Courtesy McKenzie maps, bwcamaps.com.

The route from Crane Lake to Lac La Croix, on a map Ray's grandfather could have used, if he'd ever felt the need.



This Better Work: Jimbo Meador gears up.

Rounding out our expedition team is Ilja Herb, an affable and lanky 32-year-old photographer from Vancouver, B.C., and Jimbo Meador, 65, a celebrated angler from Point Clear, Alabama. When Jimmy Buffett wants a fishing buddy, he calls Jimbo, not so much for his uncanny angling acumen as for the gut-busting tall tales he delivers in a deadpan accent somewhere between Foghorn Leghorn and Forrest Gump. Jimbo is a lifelong outdoorsman with a deep respect for Native American culture.

Jimbo and I spent more than a year working with the Bois Forte tribe to identify a Chippewa guide for this expedition until they finally suggested Ray. We'd only spoken with him on the phone a couple times, including one conversation, less than a week before our trip, in which Jimbo had to convince Ray not to back out. Though we had no idea what to expect, Ray managed to surprise us. We knew he was an elder, but to be honest we were expecting someone younger and, I don't know, maybe a little more mystical. Ray looks like anybody's grandfather, with gentleness in his dark eyes and a slight belly that suggests life has slowed down for him lately. When he arrived at the put-in wearing jeans, leather street shoes, and a cotton jacket, we wondered if he knew exactly what he was getting into. For that matter, we wondered if he knew enough to get us to Lac La Croix in one piece.

Still, the tobacco ceremony had been a good start, at least until the rude high-pitched whine of a 200-horsepower bass boat shattered the moment. The wake rocked our kayaks, and Jimbo looked my way with a little laugh. I figured that was my cue to crack open the flask of whiskey and pass it around for a toast.

WHEN WE CATCH UP, RAY SHARES A STORY ABOUT CAMPING AT THIS VERY SPOT WITH HIS FAMILY IN 1937, WHEN HE WAS EIGHT YEARS OLD.

The Jack Daniel's burns the back of my throat, and I mute it with one last swallow of energy bar.

"Better enjoy that," Ray says with a grin. "You're not going to eat like that again for a long time."

WE'RE NOW THREE MILES INTO OUR PADDLE. Though it's a Tuesday afternoon in late September, Crane Lake is still hectic with fishing boats zipping about. "Doesn't anybody work around here," Jimbo grumbles as he casts a line into the choppy water.

I paddle alongside Ray, trying to coax forth a few stories about life on the Boundary Waters. Like many Native Americans, Ray learned as a child never to talk simply to talk. Eventually, though, he tells me that he grew up in nearby Tower, Minnesota, raised six sons and one daughter, and now has 30 grandchildren. For 25 years, he worked at the Fortune Bay Resort and Casino, run by the Bois Forte tribe, and now he works at Fortune Bay's marina. Following in the footsteps of his grandfather, Joe Boshey,

Ray is also a trusted elder who keeps the traditions of his people alive by passing down stories and teachings to the young people of his community.

"My grandfather used to talk about when the voyageurs came," Ray says quietly. "His Indian name was Joe Bozjie, he was a Chippewa. But when the Frenchmen came around they changed his name. They called him Boshey. He also told me stories about the Sioux and about how our people fought to drive them out."

As we paddle north from Crane Lake around the bend into Sand Point Lake and back south again to Little Vermillion Lake—in all more than eight miles—the traffic on the water disappears. Soon all is quiet and the lake is oily smooth. The leaves are changing, setting the gentle hills afire with bright reds, maroons and mustard yellows. I'm daydreaming when suddenly I hear a hoot from Jimbo.

"What did you catch?" I ask.

"Din-Din," he says, proudly displaying his fish. "That's what we call a northern pike. They've got a lot of bones but we're gonna eat that mofo, bones and all." I paddle over for a better look at the sleek brown and green fish with its white camouflage spots. Jimbo hands me a piece of driftwood.

"Give it a wood shampoo," he says.

With a quick thud, our dinner lay motionless in the bottom of the kayak. As usual, Ray has been paddling steadily along while the rest of us were fishing, so I stroke hard to catch up. As we move south the lake grows narrower, and I finally join him as we glide through a thick stand of wild rice growing along the lake-

shore. Using his paddle, Ray demonstrates how the Bois Forte tribe—the country's largest producers of wild rice—use cedar sticks to harvest the grain. One stick bends the stalks over while the other knocks the ripe rice into the canoe. I give it a try and soon there's a thin layer of rice in the bottom of my boat.

We paddle past dark before finding our first night's campsite, but we have food for dinner so life is good. The wood we gather is wet and we have no kerosene, but eventually we get a fire blazing. Soon we're eating fish with pan-fried bread called bannock and wild rice that Ray harvested before the trip. It's more than enough to fill our bellies and soon the whiskey is making its rounds again.

"Ray, any good looking women in that village where we're headed?" inquires Jimbo. Ray pauses before answering, his eyes glinting in the firelight.

"Do you guys have any Viagra packed in your special red bag?"

OUR SECOND NIGHT BRINGS TORRENTIAL RAIN and fierce wind, punctuated by thunder and nearby lightning. Unbeknownst to us, the National Weather Service issues a tornado warning. In the morning our firewood is drenched, so Ilja, Jimbo and I choke down a few mouthfuls of the wild rice that sat in the pot overnight. It's cold and soggy, but we need the calories. Ray skips breakfast, so I offer him a couple energy bars from the emergency bag. He takes them without embarrassment or apology—living off the land is our deal, not his.

Though Ray has never paddled a kayak before—just ca-



Dinner—and breakfast—for four.

**Map Quest:** With a thunderstorm bearing down, the team sneaks a peek.

Jimbo Meador and Mark Anders, trying to keep their guide in sight.

noes—he has surprising endurance, especially for a guy in his late seventies. He keeps a steady pace while the rest of us stop often to fish. But then we're constantly sprinting to catch Ray, who is, after all, the only one who knows where we're going.

"Good ol' Ray sure does like being up front," says Jimbo, as Ray paddles off toward the horizon. "Slow and steady wins the race, I guess."

I think it might go deeper than that. Maybe he yearns to be the first to peer around each bend and curve along our path, to be the first of us to see places and things he hasn't seen for decades. Or maybe he simply wants to take it all in without the view being spoiled by three white guys on a wacky quest to go native.

After about four miles, Ray stops on a small, nondescript island. When we catch up, he shares a story about how he and his family camped at this spot back in 1937 on their way to Lac La Croix. Ray was 8 years old. "My dad, he'd kill a deer on our way, then we'd find a spot where we'd camp. The women would rig up a little teepee on the bank, and then they'd build a fire inside. That's where they'd hang all the fresh deer meat. They would smoke it so it wouldn't spoil. We used to have that to eat for the whole way over to La Croix."

All I can think about is how much I'd like to gnaw on some deer meat right about now.

HEADING SLIGHTLY SOUTHEAST, our watery path narrows and becomes the Loon River. The water is auburn now, stained with tannins from the heavily wooded banks, and more marshy than before. The ribbon of water is often no more than 20 feet wide.

On the left is Canada; on the right the United States.

Soon the stream dead-ends at Loon River Portage, the only passage to Loon Lake. By the time we arrive, Ray has already made friends with Wendy Scofield, who operates the mechanical portage. Basically a flatbed rail car powered by an old Ford truck engine, the portage hauls motorboats and canoes up and over the ruddy hill to Loon Lake. The long, slightly muddy footpath that parallels its track would be a pleasant hike for the well-fed and unencumbered, but we're heavily loaded—we planned to live off the land, not sleep in the dirt—and we're a little weak thanks to our diet of soggy rice, fish bones, and bourbon. In our present condition, the prospect of humping our kayaks and gear over the hill seems a bit like Minnesota's answer to the Bataan Death March.

As we contemplate the coming test of strength, Wendy offers us coffee. Jimbo can't resist. "The Indians had coffee, right Ray?" he says, already following Wendy into her modest cabin. Ilja and Ray both accept steaming hot cups, but I decline. Though I don't drink coffee, I pretend I'm abstaining to stay true to our mission.

Wendy is clearly craving human conversation; she's a city girl and living alone amid all this beauty is starting to wear on her. She's telling us that she has only six days to go this season when Jimbo cries out.

"Groceries!" he says in his deepest southern-fried twang. "Look at that grouse!"

"What grass?" Wendy asks, peering out the same window.

"Not the grass. That grouse. The bird out there."

To my hunger-addled eyes, the bird looks like a pair of juicy

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drumsticks pecking around the yard. "We need to get that sling-shot," Ray whispers to me.

"Oh, that's just Lucy," says Wendy. "Isn't she cute? She comes around here all the time. We feed her."

Once we quit laughing, we talk our hostess out of a little gasoline for a fire starter, then debate whether to carry our boats on foot or use the mechanical portage. Finally, Jimbo asks Ray how his family would do it.

"We'd use the portage," Ray answers.

That's all we need to hear.

FROM THAT POINT ON, the trip was never quite the same. The next day, our third, Ilja comes to me with a confession. "I have a Ritter chocolate bar in my drybag. My mom packed it for me."

We contemplate eating it on the spot, but eventually agree the bar would be safest packed deep inside Wilson. We're too close to the finish to surrender completely. We've traveled approximately 28 miles, carried our boats and gear over Beatty Portage and are now heading north through Loon Lake. The water is gin-clear and the topography is changing. The hills are growing taller and an 80-foot stone cliff soars above the right bank, decorated with ancient Chippewa pictographs.

"Winter must be coming early this year," Ray says as we pass yet another beaver lodge. Since leaving Crane Lake, we've

seen more beaver than humans. "They're getting their food together—birch, maple, poplar—whatever they can get a hold of. They put it right there in the front of their lodge to stock up for winter."

They must have been right, because by late afternoon the weather turns cold. I'm wearing every piece of clothing I brought as 30-mph gusts churn the wide lake with foot-high waves. Jimbo and I take quick strokes and surf the wind swells for yards at a time. We're having fun. Ray isn't.

For the first time, he's falling behind. All along he's had a tendency to list slightly to his right. Jimbo thinks it's because he spent his whole life paddling a canoe. Before it was funny; now it's downright dangerous. The wind is pushing waves over the right side of Ray's kayak, and an ominous purple and black storm front is gathering along the hills to our west. Thin barbs of lightning touch down nearby. We need to keep moving to cover the five miles to Snow Bay by nightfall.

Jimbo and I paddle along either side of Ray, rafting up, three kayaks together as one. As the wind pushes us along, Jimbo bails Ray's boat and I steer. Soon we turn to the east skirting along a headland hidden from the wind while the thunderstorm tacks away to the northwest.

Out of the storm's path, we take advantage of the time to fish. We're nearly out of food—just a few bites of bannock left,



Man in the Middle: Ray Boshey, center, with friends at Lac La Croix village.

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plus whatever we manage to catch in the hour before darkness settles in. Ilja and I resort to sneaking a few swigs of whiskey while we wait for something more substantial to strike our lures. One hundred calories a mouthful makes the wait more enjoyable.

As we fish a promising rocky point, Ray is off again. Soon he's so far away all we can see are tiny white splashes from his paddle. I reel in my line and give chase. Jimbo and Ilja join us 40 minutes later on a beautiful island in the middle of Snow Bay. They brought with them a tiny small mouth bass, and arrive just in time to hunker down as another huge storm engulfs us. Like two kids, Jimbo and I crawl under the low bows of a cedar tree and lay on a soft bed of pine needles. It's warm, relatively dry, and fragrant as a Christmas tree. "Man, I'd just as soon sleep right here," says Jimbo.

When the rain passes, Ray kneads the last bit of bannock in the dark, as we share the impossibly small filet of bass and ration out the four remaining beers.

"There's a mouse coming over here," I whisper.

"He must smell the bannock," says Ilja.

"Let's get him," Jimbo growls. "Put that mofo on a stick."

He isn't joking.

MORNING, DAY FOUR. Just nine miles to go. Another band of thunderstorms rolls through, sending ominous concussions along the lake. Lightning cracks the opposite bank. Despite the obvious hazards of paddling a wide-open lake with a metal paddle in the midst of a lightning storm, we decide to push on. We must reach Lac La Croix by the afternoon in order to catch our

motorboat shuttle back to the put-in.

"Wait for us this time, okay Ray?" I say. But as soon as I push his kayak into the water, he's gone, disappearing around a nearby island. Jimbo and I can't help but laugh. It's spitting rain but thankfully there's a stiff breeze at our backs. We eventually catch up to Ray and, four hours later, land together on the cobblestone banks of the Indian village at Lac La Croix (pop. 402), Canada.

"Glad you did this, Ray?" I ask, as Ilja and Jimbo drag their boats up the banks.

"Yeah," he says, followed by a pregnant pause. "Just seeing that area again brought back memories. You paddle, you see everything."

I grab a wool hat from my drybag and turn back to answer, but Ray is already scrambling up a low hill toward town, perhaps in search of coffee and some home-cooked food at a relative's home. He doesn't invite us to come along, but that's okay. He'd done what he'd set out to do: led us along the meandering, 45-mile route without cracking a map, even though it had been 60 years since he last paddled it.

The three of us have a good laugh about it all then realize there's a chocolate bar waiting for us inside the red bag. Jimbo and Ilja huddle close as I unwrap the golden foil. Instinctively I count the squares to make sure everybody gets their share. Four rows with four squares of chocolate each. As I sink my teeth into the rich chocolate, the number four seems pretty darn sacred once again.