

Paddling into the Past

A tale in the riparian mode of a journey down the Thames River in 2004.

Keewatin Dewdney

We'll begin our journey with Steve Logan, a nearly full-blooded Delaware who began his life some 45 years ago on the reserve at Moraviantown. Steve and I are about to embark on the muddy waters of the Thames River by canoe. We will paddle from Newport Forest, which is just across the river from Skunk's Misery, and follow the current, with all its roils and eddies, down to Moraviantown, back to a primordial state, not just Steve's, but mine as well.

Steve studies the river. His face and person are lean from the discipline of a traditional life. He has struggled to live out what little remains of his heritage, eating the best roots and berries in season, camping out on the river during the spring pickerel run, tapping the sugar bush behind his house, hunting deer and wild turkey, making traditional clothing - chaps, moccasins, pouches, from deer and moosehide.

“What do you think? Shall we get started?”

Steve is not a talkative man.

“Yup.”

We push off into the murky brown current and I feel a vague distaste. I remember Harvey Newport who stood on the Bothwell bridge not two weeks ago. He was enjoying the view when an all-too familiar odor crept up his nose. Wasn't it manure from nearby fields?

“I'm telling you. All I could smell was shee-it.”

Harvey has farmed in the area all his life. He swears a lot.

“And I know where all that shit is coming from. London, that's where.”

Harvey is one of the riverfarm people. Mostly of Scottish descent and concentrated in areas like Crinan, they cope with spring floods and summer droughts and sometimes lose their crops. But in good years the fertility of the soil rivals that of

the Nile floodplain and the farmers are repaid by bumper crops.

Times have changed on the river. Even in the memories of the riverfarm people, it once ran clearer than it does now. As children back in the forties and early fifties, the Newports and the Campbells, the Haggiths and the McPhails swam in it regularly. You could actually see the fish.

The river has changed its name over the centuries. First it was the Askunisippi. The Delawares knew it first by its French name, La Tranche, then as the Thames, a name bestowed by Lord Simcoe. Of the later names, the French one was at least realistic. The Thames is a trench indeed, frequently with steep banks of clay that is slightly harder above than below, resulting in a terraced landscape. Swift-moving spring currents cut away the lower material more readily, leaving overhangs that crumble into high slopes. The English name, heavy with a misplaced romanticism, conceals an environmental prophecy. One day the new Thames would become just as polluted as the old one.

The Delawares have two reserves on the river, one at Moraviantown, the other at Munsee, some 53 miles upstream. The history of how they came to live there is long and painful. It begins along other rivers, the Hudson and the Delaware in the eighteenth century. Driven westward by expanding European settlements, the Delawares were the ones who sold Manhattan to the Dutch for a handful of beads and trinkets. The Mahican Delawares, celebrated in James Fenimore Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans*, suffered twin depredations of disease and warfare and had nearly disappeared by the time of the French Indian wars. Delawares fought on the British side against the French and Iroquois. Shortly after, the Moravian missionaries, a German-speaking Czech people, moved in among them, bringing True Faith to the frontier.

The westward trek was sporadic, the Moravian brothers urging them into settlements of log cabins, cultivated fields, and a Christian life marked by much prayer and abstinence. A settlement would barely be established, however, when warfare would break out between the neighbouring tribes and the white settlers who were advancing wave upon wave. The good brothers would decide to move the settlement once more to the west. Gnadenhutten in Ohio, for example. At such times, a few of the Delawares would leave the missions to seek out neighbouring tribes, the remainder staying with the Brothers. Some tried mightily to be model Christians, cultivating their fields and attending regular services in the mission church. Others, still puzzled by a manito who allowed himself to bleed and die on the cross, gathered in the bush to hold traditional ceremonies in secret.

We're out in the mainstream now, paddling only sporadically to keep the canoe aligned with the banks. We watch giant sycamores, cottonwoods and silver maples glide by, a dense gallery of foliage and birds. Except for the brown, sediment-laden water that bleeds from farmers' fields up and down the river, I can pretend that all is as it once was. The gallery forest along the riverbanks is but the visible edge of a vast forest that extends infinitely far in all directions. The Longwood.

The Attawandaron (Iroquoian) lived in the Longwood, followed by the southern Ojibway. They established winter camps deep in the forest, where they could hunt and trap, finding some relief from the biting winter winds. In summer, they would migrate to camps along the river to fish and pick berries. The Attawandarons were driven out by the Mohawks in the eighteenth century and the vast forest was never to regain its human balance. Scattered bands of southern Ojibway moved into the area. Then came the Delawares and later, the Oneidas..

Steve raises his paddle to point at an osprey that calls from an overhanging snag, then takes wing at the intrusion.

"He's gonna see if we scare up any fish."

We travel the river together, an Indian with a white man's name and a white man with an Indian name. The Delawares use the politically correct terms "native" and "aboriginal" only in the presence of whites from whom they get funding. Among themselves they keep the older term, *Indian*, preserving Columbus' mistake and leery of new labels. The whites always seem to know what's best for the Indians.

In 1790, driven by almost constant warfare and strife in the Ohio valley, the Moravians brought their "children" to the Detroit frontier to inquire of the best land. "Up the Thames," they were told. They located a broad reach of fertile ground across the river from the present location of Moraviantown. Here they once again cut trees, ploughed fields, built log houses, raised crops and attended services. Here too, some held secret ceremonies in the woods.

Sometimes a few of the Delawares would get in a canoe with some camping gear and paddle up to Munseetown - to visit sick relatives, they said. They went to party and carouse, thought the brothers. The missionaries would see their charges off anxiously, admonishing them to keep to the straight and narrow. "Remember the wounds of Jesus," cried Brother Zeissberger as the canoe edged away upstream. Yeah. Right.

About the same time that the Moravians moved their charges upriver to the first Moraviantown settlement, European immigrants had begun to trickle into the area, not to mention many Americans in search of better land. The first settlers in the area were the Flemings, who cleared a small farm by the river just a few miles downstream from Newport Forest.

We come to Suckertown, a rapids marked by a large pile of stones, all that remains of a dam that once powered a mill. Here, in a village (actually called Cashmere) now vanished, lived barely a hundred souls who ground grain, sold mercantile goods, blacksmithed, farmed and harvested clams from the river. From the clams they made buttons by the thousands, selling them to the clothiers in Detroit and Fort York. Sometimes, they would find pearls.

In spite of its badly polluted state, the Thames still has more clam and mussel species than any other Canadian river. The names recall a pioneer past: heel-splitters and papershells, muckets and pocketbooks, squawsfeet and niggertoos, the last two recently abandoned in favour of more acceptable names like deerfoot and ladyfinger.

It's time to stop for lunch. We haul the canoe up below the rapids and break out the sandwiches. A Turkey Vulture circles overhead.

"He's after our sandwiches," opines Steve. A smile breaks his face.

"What's the Delaware word for vulture?" I ask.

"Neeskweh'lah," says Steve. He explains that "weh'lah" is the word for hawk or any large bird. The "neesk" part means "dirty."

"It's like you said "shithawk," says Steve, smiling faintly.

Neesk'wehlah drifts slowly to the west, looking for dead animals. Perhaps he'll find one lying beside the Longwoods Road that runs parallel to the river just a few miles to the west. Once I conducted a one-year survey of roadkill along the Longwoods Road: 213 raccoons, 35 squirrels, 32 skunks, 26 possums, 23 cottontails, 11 groundhogs, two foxes, and two European hares, as well as some 66 other corpses that could not be identified from a fast-moving van.

Once we came upon two raccoons, long flattened in the middle of the road,

accompanied by several two-dimensional crows that had come to dine upon them, a lesson in bas-relief to all who would forage on the highway.

The remnants of the dam are huge boulders on the west side of the rapids. We sit on the east side, where glacial rocks have tumbled out of an unusually high hill behind us. There is granite from the Canadian Shield, dredged up by the immense ice sheets that began to melt only fifteen thousand years ago. By 12,000 BP, the Thames drained two vast lobes of ice, the Huron and the Erie.

At one time you could see them both from the river, distant white cliffs over a kilometer high, shimmering in the sun. The river, higher and mightier than today's Mississippi, ran between two glacial shorelines over a mile apart and marked now by high hills like the one behind us. Its mate lies to the northwest and well inland, occasional ridges of clay and gravel.

At that time the land was clothed in spruce and pine. Woolly mammoths and mastodons that roamed the forests and parklands of the Pleistocene landscape were merely the largest of the gigantic forms then common. Beaver the size of walruses, deer the size of moose, and a fast-running bear the size of a grizzly, made life more than exciting for the Indians who hunted in those days. Further south they had to contend with three species of saber-toothed cat, including Smilodon, as large as a Bengal tiger, dire wolves the size of ponies, and American lions that resembled African lions on steroids. Human remains from that era are rare, not surprisingly.

Of the predators, only the smaller animals remain: timber wolves and coyotes, foxes, black bears, badgers, bobcats, and lynx. And cougars, of course, the largest remaining cat.

“What’s the Delaware word for cougar?”

“Kwanishuk-wanayot,” says Steve. He pauses, then adds, “It means, ‘the one with the long tail’.”

“Have you ever seen one?”

“Nope.”

“Do you know anyone who has seen one?”

“Darren seen one, once. It was black.”

“Where did he see it?”

Steve takes a bite of his sandwich and furrows his brow.

“I think it was down off Highway Three, just north of the lake.”

He’s talking about Lake Erie which, strangely enough, got its name from a Wyandot word meaning panther or cougar.

“Some people call them “panthers,” I said.

“Yup. I heard that word. Used to be a clan.”

“Like the wolf clan?”

“Yup.”

We sit and eat in silence. I search in my pack for my camera. I want to take a picture of the rapids. Steve breaks the silence.

“I heard that Tecumseh was a Panther.”

“You mean he belonged to the panther clan?”

“Yup.”

Tecumseh looms large in Delaware legend. In 1813 American forces recaptured Detroit from the British and began a drive upriver to rid themselves of the one man who could turn the tide of white settlement back upon itself.

Tecumseh, through gargantuan efforts, had tried to organize virtually all the tribes of the frontier. He traveled the length of the Mississippi, to the plains Sioux, the southern Osage people, the Florida Seminoles, the Appalachian Cherokee, the Wyandots, the Mingos, and his own people, the Shawnee of the Ohio valley. He traveled north to Michilimackinac to preach to the Ottawas, Ojibway, and Potawatomies. To all tribes and nations he pointed out how the whites had broken treaty after treaty, that the whites had no intention of passing up any land unless it was defended by force.

He succeeded enough to scare the authorities in Washington.

The American forces, outnumbering a retreating band of British regulars, Indians, and Canadian militia by more than ten to one, caught up with the remnants at Moraviantown. The night before the battle Tecumseh sat with some comrades in the woods just north of the village, while the British general, Henry Proctor, dithered about how to defend the spot. Many times during the retreat they had come upon ideal ground to oppose the Americans, but each time proctor had demurred. Tecumseh was furious.

“Is our white father a woman, who must flee every time he hears a distant bugle?”

Proctor was reluctant to stand and fight, perhaps because his wife and daughter accompanied the force.

Sitting quietly in the woods on the night before the battle, the Indians with Tecumseh all heard it, the sudden “whizz” of a musketball through the air. Then Tecumseh doubled over in pain. When he recovered he looked up, his eyes hollow, his hand clasping one side of his belly. Everyone knew what the sign meant. He would be killed by a musket in the coming battle.

Early next morning proctor deployed his two hundred troops in two lines across the Longwoods Road, a small six-pounder wheeled into position at the centre of the line. The militia interspersed with the regulars and a large body of Indians waited in the woods to skirmish and harass the attacking Americans.

By the time the bugles of the advancing Kentucky riflemen, mounted on horseback, sounded just down the road, proctor had boarded a carriage with wife and child, taking a small escort force with him and leaving the rest of his troops to fight on without a leader. The battle raged for less than an hour during which the riflemen, attempting to outflank the line by circling to the north, met the Indians with much slaughter on both sides. One of the riflemen spotted the Indian leader and promptly took aim, striking Tecumseh with a musketball in the very spot of his sudden pain the night before. The Americans, including General (later President) Harrison, claimed to have Tecumseh’s body. The Indians claimed that they dragged it from the battle-field.

The Americans burned the village and laid waste the crops, guaranteeing a hard winter for the Delawares. Later, the Moravians would start a new settlement on

high bluffs across the river and nearly a mile upstream, the present location of the reserve.

“By the way, do you know what happened to Tecumseh’s body?”

“The Walpole people claim to have the body but I know for a fact they don’t,” said Steve. “I heard that some of the warriors took the body upriver and off to the west, toward the land of the dead. They buried him in a spot not far from the railroad that runs through there now.”

Steve gets up to stretch, then rolls a cigarette from his rawhide pouch.

We smoke for a while.

“Speaking of cougars, d’you know what his name means?”

“Whose name?”

“Tecumseh. It means ‘shooting star’.”

“Yes, I knew that.”

“But d’you know what the shooting star is?”

I didn’t.

“It’s the panther who leaps the river in the night sky. That’s a shooting star that crosses the Milky Way. Tecumseh was born into the panther clan and when he was born the biggest shooting star anyone ever seen went across the sky. The very moment he came out of his mother. They took that as a sign about the new child.”

He gets up, drops his cigarette and begins shifting the bow of the canoe off the rocks, stepping in as the front floats. I get my backpack and step into the stern, easing us out into the tail of the rapids.

The river has broadened somewhat along the lower part. Willow-choked sandbars obtrude into the current, even as the edge of the river passes under overhanging trees. The trenchlike banks have given away to flatter, more open country. Ahead, a mother duck and her twelve young flap in panic along the shore, making a long string of miniature splashes before disappearing into an overhang.

A large fish jumps ahead of us, long silvery body suspended briefly in midair. I wonder what it is and Steve reads my mind.

“Looks like a Largemouth,” he says. “I shoulda brought my fishing rod.”

There are supposed to be some 85 species of fish in the Thames, but some of the species haven't been seen for a decade or more. My friend Darren Jacobs of Moraviantown once joined Steve and me for a fishing derby at Newport Forest. I wanted to see what fish were still in the river. Darren was amazing. He caught and threw back a Bullhead, a large Channel Cat, a Mullet and two Sheepheads, as well as Pumpkinseeds, Carp and a few small Hornyhead Chub. I caught some Emerald Shiners in my minnow trap.

Darren explained that they used to haul up dozens of Pickerel every time they pulled their nets from the river. Now they were lucky to get just one.

“And it was too bad if that was the only one you caught,” he explained. “Cause you always had to throw the first one you caught back in the river. That way, the Creator could always make more.”

Then Darren suddenly stood up and said “C'mere.”

I watched in fascination as a parade of the most peculiar fish passed below at our feet, next to the bank and very close to the surface of the water, where you could actually see them. They were long and greenish with an impossibly long nose. They were Gar Pike, an ancient fish, on their spring migration upstream.

As if to underline the fishing theme, Steve and I round a bend in the river to find a truck parked near the bank and a man fishing nearby. We wave and he waves back, slowly sliding behind us. A little further on we frighten a Great Blue Heron that gathers itself into the air on majestic wings, beating downriver.

All along I have been wanting to ask about the secret ceremonies in the woods, but I have been afraid to raise the subject. We will be there soon.

“I heard somewhere that even while the missionaries were having services for the Indians, some of them were still practicing the old religion. They would go off into the woods to do this. Do you know anything about that?”

“Nope.”

“Well, can you guess what they might have done?”

“Oh, they probably beat on a drum and chanted some of them old songs.”

“Are there any medicine men left?”

“We still have medicine, but I guess it ain’t the same as what we did have. There’s people coming down from Walpole now pretty regular and giving lessons in the Mide religion.”

The Midewewin were a medicine society famous for their shaking tent ceremony. My father, who studied the Ojibway religion, once told me about a strange beast called Mishepeshoo, the “water lion” who acted as an intermediary between the Ojibway and the spirit world. Whenever they crossed a river or a lake, the Ojibway would always scatter a little tobacco in the water to appease the beast.

“Did you ever hear about ‘Mishipeshoo’?”

“No,” says Steve. “Who’s that?”

Feeling like a fish out of water, I stated the little I knew, explaining how the name meant water-lion or something like that.

We pass an extensive series of gravel bars, round another bend, then see the Moraviantown bridge looming ahead. Steve raises his paddle to salute the bridge. We’re getting close. We drift into the shadow of the bridge and out again. Almost immediately we begin to pass what appear to be little camps. The skeleton of a lean-to, a battered old table for cleaning fish, a forked stick stuck in the ground nearby. There were roll-nets and box-nets tucked away in the underbrush with their poles.

“That name, what was it again?”

“What name?”

“The name of the Water Lion.”

“Oh,” I say. “That was Mishipeshoo.”

We're coming to the takeout spot. I steer the canoe toward the shore as Steve leans forward to grab a bush and hold us against the bank. Getting out is tricky because the clay is slippery and steep, but Steve hops out first and helps me up. We pull the canoe out of the brown, roiling water and Karen, Steve's wife, descends the bank, dangling the keys to their truck.

"That name sounds a bit like 'matchiposhish'."

"What's that?"

It's the Delaware name for a spirit. It means 'bad cat,' the spirit cougar."

"Well, I sure wish my Dad had known about that" I exclaim. "I'll bet it's the same as Mishipeshoo."

"Could be," said Steve.

Notes:

1. Ojibway and Delaware are sister languages, both belonging to the Algonquian Group of languages. They have many cognate and near-cognate words.

2. About their origins, the Indians say, "We've always been here." Indeed, the evidence is accumulating that the "ice-free corridor" through which Asian hunter/nomads were thought to migrate, is not standing up to scrutiny. I tend to follow the theory that Asian peoples were in North America far earlier than that. The sea-going canoes of the west coast people speak to a tradition of travel by sea, probably along coastal areas, hopping from island to island and camping in coastal "nunutaks" ice-free areas on the west coast all the way up to the Aleutians. As the migrations continued southward, bands would split off to explore and live in the continental interior. All the way down to South America.

2. Nina Hurdle has a story about the Flemings who cleared the first farm in the area. The children would accompany the cattle into the woods on hot days to help keep them cool. Once the children were with the cattle when a large Black Bear showed up. He was not after the cattle, as the story goes, but the children. The cattle, however, formed a protective circle about the children and would not let the bear get at them. Finally the bear gave up.