

# THE OLD MAN AND THE RIVER

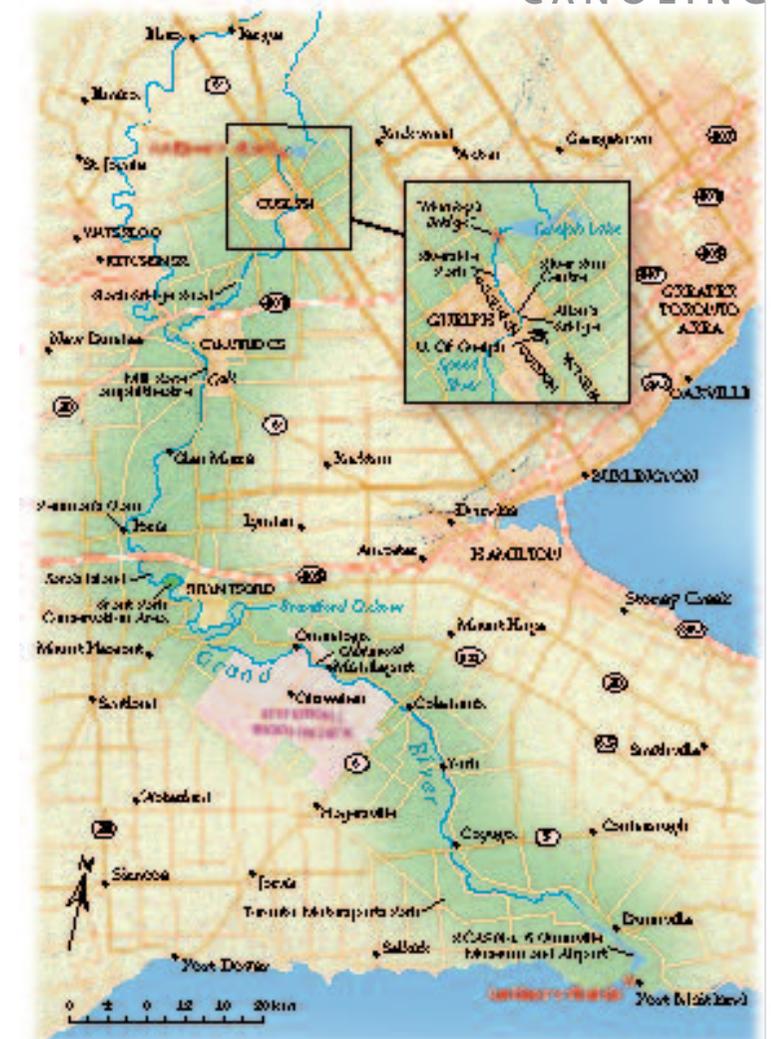
A CANOE TRIP CLOSE TO HOME  
CONJURES MEMORIES OF MY FATHER  
AT EVERY CURVE

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES RAFFAN





Retracing a route he had last paddled as a pre-teen boy scout, canoe guru James Raffan (OPPOSITE BOTTOM) travelled down the less-than-rugged Speed and Grand rivers from Guelph, Ont., to Lake Erie last summer. The trip took him past a picturesque dam in Paris (LEFT) and great blue herons (BELOW). A chance encounter with a pilot near the end of the journey led to a flight over the Grand at sunset (PREVIOUS PAGES) that afforded Raffan an aerial tableau “animated by the wakes of boats cavorting in the last light of day.”



A THICKET OF BURDOCK and man-eating wild hemp grabs at my clothing and skin as I push and portage down from the road. I smell the piquant essence of crushed stems and feel a few trickles of blood from scratches on exposed limbs. It's nearly enough to turn me back, but then I see the river, familiar and serene, chuckling over pink and grey gravel with a slight echo beneath Monkey's Bridge.

I push off from the herbaceous confusion on the shore and align my canoe in the gentle flow. After weeks of rushing around to get ready for departure day, my little red Bob's Special, loaded with enough provisions to last a week, feels like home. Savouring the water's whiffs of creek chub and algae and settling in to the rhythmic squeak of the seat, my eyes wander downstream and spot the journey's first obstacle: a shopping cart half submerged in a mid-river shoal.

Last summer, I was supposed to be paddling a birchbark canoe in mid-northern Saskatchewan with a guy whose father had done the trip back in 1939. Only after we mapped out a route along the Churchill and Sturgeon-weir rivers did I discover that the legend of the father's journey was just that — a legend. Turns out it was a fishing



boat, not a bark canoe, with a motor and a Cree guide. These niggling details notwithstanding, our “reenactment” was going to be a grand trip.

But it was not to be. My 89-year-old dad fell ill in Guelph, Ont., last June. Despite his protestations to the family to carry on with our plans, I had no desire to be a satellite phone slave in Saskatchewan, ready at a moment's notice to haul my sad and soggy self back to Ontario. Instead, I decided on a canoe trip from Guelph, where I grew up, down the Speed and Grand rivers to Lake Erie. Five days, tops. As exciting as this journey was when I first did it as a pre-teen boy scout, compared to the wilderness of Saskatchewan, it was at best a consolation prize. Still, it was better than no trip, and I'd be close to Dad.

Anticipation and preparation are usually two of my favourite parts of canoe tripping. They typically involve fondling maps, drying food, mending gear and reveling in packcloth smells. Having done all of that with Saskatchewan in mind, I simply had to grab a tent, sleeping bag, rain coat and swim suit — what the heck kind of tourist trip needs a bathing suit, I wondered? — and to throw some jerky, Triscuits and a flask of single malt into a knapsack.



MAP: STEVEN FICK/CANADIAN GEOGRAPHIC



Since Raffan's boyhood days on the Speed and Grand rivers, graffiti artists have become much more prolific (RIGHT), tagging countless walls and weirs with writable surfaces in loud and lurid shades. Not all is lost, though: some taggers appear to have read Nietzsche.



*Most of the graffiti makes no sense, until, on a crumbling stone wall, there's a pronouncement: 'You must bear chaos in yourself in order to bring a dancing star into the world.'*

Was I cranky because of the change of plans? Or was it the prospect of losing my dad? Making sure my cellphone and Visa card were charged, I returned to the river that set the pace and direction of my life to find out.

**AS MY NEPHEW DAVID** drives me to a bridge on Victoria Road just below Guelph Lake, oldies radio station CJOY bookends severe thunderstorm alerts and tornado warnings with "Summertime Blues" by Eddie Cochran and "Bad Moon Rising" by Creedence Clearwater Revival. If that isn't ominous enough, I scramble under the bridge to launch my canoe — beloved Monkey's Bridge, centre of many boyhood adventures, rafts, restiveness, riding ice pans in the spring — only to see that spray painters (maybe the same goofs who ditched the shopping cart just downstream) have tagged everything with gibberish in loud and lurid shades. Who, or *what*, is "VOLD," anyway?

Magically, though, it doesn't take more than a few strokes and the nudge of an August current before all that angst dissolves into thoughts I haven't had for years, as if somehow being in that place had aligned the tumblers in my memory lock. Walking in Riverside Park with Dad and the dog — I might have been five or six. We'd just moved to a house by the river. Crossing the swinging bridge and entering a rolling field of black-eyed susans. The security of a familiar voice, a hand to hold and a dog that came when he called.

Paddling gives way to wading in low water. There's rhythm to that too. Wet feet. Working hands. Hopping from stone to stone above the water, under the water, taking care not to slip. Mind engaged with the preoccupying puzzle of moving forward without getting caught up in overhanging branches or in the nasty snarls of logs and sticks brought about by the long-passed spring freshet.

**Grand Experiences, a canoe and kayak outfitter in Paris, offers a range of ways for people to take to the river. You can rent your own boat or sign up for one of the company's many packages, including several guided aboriginal culture excursions — some with overnight camping and some in multi-person canoes (ABOVE). Raffan spent an afternoon on the water with a Grand Experiences fishing guide, but his trip, including this stretch through Galt (RIGHT), was mostly solo.**



Colourful rental canoes await customers at the Brant Park Conservation Area north of Brantford.



*Eyeing a clutch of mallards, I see Dad, with a borrowed shotgun, dressing me in every coat and sweater I own for a pre-dawn hunt. Final score: hunters zero, ducks unlimited. We still laugh about it.*

Different than what I remember, every retaining wall, every weir with a writable surface, is tagged. Most of the graffiti makes no sense until, on a crumbling stone wall not far from the place where the Speed passes behind Guelph's River Run Centre, there's a pronouncement: "You must bear chaos in yourself in order to bring a dancing star into the world."

VOLD apparently reads Nietzsche.

Rain spatter on the black calm of the river envelopes the canoe and I slip under the cantilevered balcony of the River Run Centre for shelter. For now, the thunder is far away. When it lets up a little, I move downstream toward Allan's Bridge and start pulling my things up the slippery clay bank to the sidewalk for the portage around the site of Guelph's founding by John Galt and the dam that powered the Royal City's first mill. But the rain starts again in earnest and I duck under the red steel roof of a small Trans Canada Trail pavilion for a bite of lunch.

Savouring the irony of getting a psychic boost from a graffiti artist, feeling gritty, dirty, wet and happier than I'd been in some time — writing rivers of words, not travelling along them, for a living — I watch as a chap in a suit, holding a briefcase over his head for protection from the deluge, scuttles across the nearby crosswalk and pops into the shelter beside me. He gives me the once over.

I hold out a damp box of Triscuits: "Would you like one?"

Without a word, he strides back out into the storm.

That afternoon, I relax to a steady rhythm of paddle and portage downstream from Guelph. Between downpours, ducks in loose formation rise against shadowed backdrops of Indian cucumber vines on flood-scarred weeping willow branches and zoom past so low that the squeak of air through their wings thrums on the soft part of my cheek. By 4 p.m., the time between lightning's crack and thunder's roll is too close for comfort, so I bail into a copse

## CANOEING

of cedars in a field full of cows. While I could camp on this patch of private land, claiming necessity and embracing the chaos, I dig out my cellphone and inquire of my niece in Cambridge about a possible search-and-rescue operation. I relay my coordinates to Emily and, an hour later, hear tires on gravel and haul my sodden kit up the greasy wet clay to Black Bridge Road. The intrepid adventurer finds salvation from the storm in a red minivan with his grand nephew, Benjamin James, chortling in the back seat.

**NEXT MORNING, CLOTHES DRY,** belly full, Emily drops me back at the river on her way to the daycare. The storm has left the water high, turbid and filled with flotsam, including a red, white and blue volleyball called Wilson, who (inspired by Tom

Hanks in *Cast Away*) I scoop out of an eddy and invite along. People walking, fishing and drinking coffee on their decks in the sunshine wave as we ride the Speed onto the rollicking waters of the Grand. I've never seen August water levels like this.

Slowly, I am captured by the journey. Eager to see what's around the bend, happy to drift close to herons that lift like a sigh and move on. It isn't wilderness, but the Grand through Cambridge is lined by tangled thickets on the shore and it's easy to dream to the dip, dip, dip of the paddle. Eyeing a clutch of mallard chicks worrying their way to safer water, I see Dad, with a borrowed shotgun, dressing me in every coat and sweater I own for a pre-dawn bonding duck hunt on the river. The final score: hunters zero, ducks unlimited. We still laugh about it.



Built in the 1850s to process flour, the Caledonia Old Mill is now in the hands of a local restoration group.

### EXCEPTIONAL WATERS — AND MORE

**Getting there** The Grand River flows through southwestern Ontario and is close to cities such as Kitchener-Waterloo and Hamilton and is just over an hour's drive from Toronto along Highways 401 or 403. Once in the region, there's no need to rush; take one of the scenic drives recommended at [www.grandrivercountry.com](http://www.grandrivercountry.com), a website that also has a good paddling section.

**Staying there** For lists of places to stay organized by community or accommodation type, go to [www.grandrivercountry.worldweb.com/wheretostay](http://www.grandrivercountry.worldweb.com/wheretostay) for options ranging from simple to sublime. Langdon Hall near Cambridge ([www.langdonhall.ca](http://www.langdonhall.ca)) is part English country estate, part fairytale garden, while the Bear's Inn ([www.thebearsinn.com](http://www.thebearsinn.com)) offers a unique cultural experience — as well as private cabins — on the

Six Nations Reserve. For a hot shower and a good meal while paddling, try Heron House on the Grand B&B in Caledonia ([linetap.com/heronhouse](http://linetap.com/heronhouse)) or Dunnville's Lalor Estate Inn ([www.bbcanda.com/6024.html](http://www.bbcanda.com/6024.html)). **Playing there** As a designated Canadian Heritage River ([www.chrs.ca](http://www.chrs.ca)), the Grand traverses a landscape that's both beautiful and historic. Take the family to the restored

pioneer village of Doon Heritage Crossroads at the Waterloo Region Museum or check out the Hillside folk festival ([www.hillsidefestival.ca](http://www.hillsidefestival.ca)) in Guelph from July 23 to 25. For the adventurous, Grand Experiences in Paris ([www.grand-experiences.com](http://www.grand-experiences.com)) offers canoeing, kayaking and rafting lessons — which you'll need to tackle the white waters of the Elora Gorge — as well as guided hikes and fishing.

## CANOEING

In Galt, Wilson and I sidle up along the recycled concrete retaining stones on the east side of the river for an early-morning portage past the lights at Park Hill and Water streets and down through the Mill Race amphitheatre, anticipating a favourite paddle between the five-metre floodwall palisades that protect the town's central business district. But before that, we bumble into some kind of photo shoot: shorts, tanned skin and blonde hair against the patina of rough stone in the morning sun. "Quick, somebody's coming," a voice rasps from behind one of the ramparts. The river draws all kinds.

After a delightful morning with rafters and kayakers in forgiving riffles from Glen Morris to Penman's Dam, I meet up with Grand Experiences fishing guide Neil Demaria in Paris. Through the long light of late afternoon, we float through the "Exceptional Waters" section of the Grand, from Paris to the north end of Brantford, so named for the cold waters entering the river from springs and creeks that make exceptional fish habitat and for the virtually untouched

Carolinian forest — black walnut, oak, hickory, sassafras and sycamore trees — that girds the river through this stretch. Eighty-two species of fish in the river, or so Demaria says, and we pull not one from the turbid waters. That Demaria and a host of others make their livings from outfitting and guiding on the Grand is testament to its rehabilitation and the care it has received from every community along its banks. But today, that doesn't seem to matter.

As Demaria talks, I cast idly, but instead of reeling in a prize rainbow trout, I catch only stories about his mother, Sara, daughter of an Ojibwe family at Old Fort Hope on the Albany River, who met and married a CN railwayman from Brantford and, eventually, made the Grand River her home. We stop for a snack on an island named for Demaria's mom and he talks about family picnics there — about fishing trips, frozen pants and Huck Finn adventures with his pals, no different than mine a couple of towns upstream.

"There are six million people within an hour's drive of this watershed and nobody

seems to know this is here," he says. "There's a thriving rainbow trout population and brown trout upstream. And it's super safe for canoeing — if you tip, all you have to do is stand up in most places. The Grand has to be one of the best kept secrets around." As he talks, six turtles plop from a deadfall into the river.

Demaria goes home to his family and I camp at the Brant Park Conservation Area. Early the next day, I drift around a corner and startle a woman in silk pajamas filling a bird feeder on a bluff. I wave. She laughs.

**BEYOND BRANTFORD**, paddling through cornfields and reflected clouds, with birds and increasing boat traffic drawing the eye this way and that, a sense of peace fills my soul. Taking advantage of a sweeping curve in the river that tucks the wind nicely astern, I put my dirty bare feet up on the gunwales and pull out my cellphone to give Dad a call.

"You're where?" I hear over the rhythmic click of his at-home oxygen generator.

"On the Grand, Dad. Thinking about you and swans and canoeing on the Avon when we'd go to see Gilbert and Sullivan musicals at Stratford on my birthday. I'm in the middle of the Six Nations of the Grand River Reserve, getting ready to stop at the house where Pauline Johnson grew up."

"Pauline Johnson? She's the Mohawk poet."

"That's right. You've got a great memory. How are you?"

"I'm still here."

I tie up the canoe and walk up to Chiefswood, the historic Johnson homestead. Nobody's home, but looking back at the river from here, the river where young Pauline would have paddled in her bark canoe, her lines flicker back to mind: "August is laughing across the sky, laughing while paddle, canoe and I, drift, drift...." Now *that's* something to tag on a bridge.

The two days from there to Lake Erie collapse into interconnected vignettes of travels without and travels within. Although the Grand River Conservation Authority's excellent guidebook, *Paddling the Grand River*, lists many campsites, I opt, instead, to avail myself of Haldimand

County's excellent hospitality at the Heron House on the Grand B&B in Caledonia and the Lalor Estate Inn in Dunnville. The Grand is wider here and speed boats roar past me, but they seem to belong.

At the Neat Little Bookshop in Cayuga, I meet Larry, a local history buff, who sees me map in hand.

"You lost?" he asks.

"No, I'm found."

Just south of Cayuga, roaring engines lure me off the river, across open fields, to the Toronto Motorsports Park, where dragsters and performance motorcycles are ripping up the tarmac of an old airport. Beyond Dunnville, I stop at the local airport and the RCAF No. 6 Dunnville Museum, where farm implement dealer Bernard Nieberg invites me to overfly the river at sunset.

Looking down, the land falls into shadow and the river flows gold, animated by the wakes of boats cavorting in the last light of day. Memories of Dad fade in and out — of strong and steady hands pushing my swing in Riverside Park, of learning to sail his beloved Styrofoam Sea Snark, of sun-alive Saturdays and lazy evenings on the Speed.

We bump down on a grass runway at the end of the flight and I'm as full as can be with the richness of the place, the rediscovery of so much so close to home on a journey through one of the most populated landscapes in the country. Canoeing back through time and into the place-locked memories of home has been a readying and a steadying of sorts for Dad's last breaths, which would come in autumn.

By the time the plane is put to bed, I'm back in the canoe taking a few final strokes on the edge of Lake Erie beneath an indigo sky. The sun is gone but Venus and the night's early stars dance in the quiet ripples of a grand river.

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