

The 45th AuSable Canoe Marathon – By Lee Diviney

(or how eight Texans met the real canoe racers)

Eight Texans met the REAL Canoe Racers

A description of the 1992 Marathon by Lee Diviney

Over the July 24-25 weekend eight Texans consisting of four paddlers (Lee Diviney & Kevin Van Oort and Roger Myers & Jerry Cochran), two drafted bank captains (Robert Youens and Mick Edgar) a C-1 paddler (Bob Spain) and friend Judy Lutz found themselves in Grayling, Michigan for the start of the Au Sable Canoe Marathon. The Au Sable Canoe Marathon is unlike any race in Texas and to participate proved to be a unique and rewarding experience. To experience the race one must first learn the yankee canoe racing vocabulary lest one make a wrong turn up the North Branch of the Au Sable River or have one's boat disqualified. Some key words and phrases used and abused in Michigan:

- The Marathon: The Au Sable River Canoe Marathon
- Kayak Paddle: Double Bladed Paddle
- Feeder: Bank Runner or Bank Captain
- Canoe Racer: An athlete possessing huge muscles and a washboard stomach who can paddle a boat through 6" water at speeds generally reserved for the Bonneville salt flats.
- Pond: A reservoir that is miles long, 1-3 feet deep, full of weeds and stumps, has numerous dead arms and is impounded by a hydroelectric dam that can't be found until one is within 50 yards of the portage.
- Deadhead: A stump.
- Pasties: Consumed by racers.
- Y.B.'s: Faster than Roger and Jerry, and better looking too. Pro boat, Hassel, & V-1: A canoe that is similar to a cruiser and raced by Yankees and Canadians.
- Canadian: Of French and/or Indian extraction generally having a funny name like Serge, Guy, or Luc.
- Amateur Boat: USCA Cruiser.
- Expert: Pro class racer.
- Good Water: At least 6" deep.
- Suck Water: 2-3' deep.
- Serge: The Canadian who wins the Marathon. The rules require that he start and finish the race with a partner.
- Cut: The way through a weed bed.
- Yooper: Michiganders who trap the Lynx.
- Lynn Witte: The Michigan version of Athantasee.

Given the length and non-stop format of the Marathon, there is a natural temptation to infer comparisons to the Texas Water Safari. However, the Marathon proved to be different animal and to train, think and rig Safari style proved not to be a good approach to this race. The forty-six year old Marathon is primarily a "pro" race and is not geared towards the recreational paddler or novice paddler who is merely looking for a finish. There are two classes: expert (the pro class) which pays cash prizes and the amateur class (USCA C-2). While special recognition is given to the first women's and mixed teams to finish, all teams compete as one class. The Amateur class is rarely contested and in 1993 only one of two boats completed the race. The competitiveness of the race is due to the \$46,000 in prize money, the long canoe racing tradition in that part of the country and the 19 hour deadline in which to complete the course.

Along with the General Clinton 70 Miler and the La Classique Internationale Des Canots De La Maurice (120 mile stage race), the Marathon represents one-third of the North American triple crown of marathon canoe racing. The Marathon proved to be the best organized, best attended and most generous race that our Texas entourage had ever attended. For the town of Grayling and to a lesser degree Oscoda, where the race ends, the Marathon is the major event of the year. It is hard to find a business that does not contribute to the race and one could dam the river with the signs and banners that advertise the race.

In order to attract more out-of state paddlers to Au Sable, sponsorship packages were available from the race committee which helped defray our travel costs. We were fortunate in that one individual, Col. Wayne Koppa, took a special interest in Texans and secured both travel and advertising sponsorships for us. It is not certain as to whether or not these incentives will be available in the future.

To prepare for the race, our first decision was to choose a boat for the effort. Given the unavailability of modern pro boats in Texas, I purchased a 1990 Wenonah Pro-Am while Jerry and Roger took a chance on locating a boat once in Michigan. During the week prior to the race they obtained and tested a Hassel (Crozier built) and a Wenonah V-1 and ultimately chose the V-1.

Both teams arrived in Grayling the Sunday prior to the Marathon in order to scout the river and make preparations for the race. Col. Koppa and his wife Marcia were kind enough to provide accommodations for us at Camp Grayling a 124,000 acre National Guard Reserve on the edge of town. This proved to be just the beginning of our exposure to Yankee hospitality and in the following week we were the guests of honor at a private reception and at the local Rotary Club, we were interviewed repeatedly by both print and radio reporters and were made to feel at home on all occasions.

Scouting the river began at Ray's Canoe Livery, a day rental outfit whose boardwalk serves as the starting line for the race. At Ray's we discovered the water to be cold, swift, clear and ... about 6" deep and 20' wide. To our surprise, the locals informed us that this was a high water year and that records could be broken. It seems that the Au Sable River has a constant flow that varies so little that people build their homes on the river bank with no danger of flooding. The first 20 miles of the river is a shallow twisty river with a gravel bottom that flows through pine forests dotted with river homes and canoe liveries. We found some minor cuts in this section which saved some seconds. After the North and South Branch join the Au Sable, there is more volume, less gradient and an abundance of 2-3' "suck" water. Beginning with Mio Pond, the river passes through a series of six hydroelectric ponds which deserve a thorough scouting. These shallow ponds are

characterized by suck water, deadheads, weedbeds and dead arms which can add hours to the race if one gets disoriented particularly if there is fog. The majority of the cuts are found at the top of the ponds, particularly Mio. To demonstrate how little the Au Sable River changes from year to year, our 1990 river guide made references such as "enter cut through weed bed at stump on right below small log jam". Sure enough we found the cut as described. We were also fortunate in that Rick Joy and Jim Harwood, two top local racers, invited us on their scouting of the ponds and cuts. Finally, below the Foote Pond Dam there is a 1 1/2 hour sprint to the finish at Oscoda, MI on the shore of Lake Huron.

On Friday before the race. all teams are required to do a downstream/upstream sprint for position at Penrod's Canoe Livery in Grayling. Kevin and my practice times were lousy so we borrowed the V-1 from Jerry and Roger which saved us one minute. Still our starting position was 42nd while Jerry and Roger were 18th. We learned the hard way that short choppy strokes don't work going upstream in shallow water. Also on Friday. the locals hold a corporate challenge relay race. Out of 35 entries, our host Col. Koppa and his Rotary Club team won. Friday evening we enjoyed the paddlers dinner with over 400 racers and fans at the local Holiday Inn. Later we were joined by Robert and Mick who soon found their way to Spike's Keg 'O Nails. a local purveyor of adult beverages.

Race day (Sat. July 21) began with the official measuring of boats. Yankees can find more ways to measure a boat than Uncle Russ can bemoan his age. I admit to loosing my temper when the race officials insisted that I owned an "amateur boat". Later on, Ray's was host to short downstream/upstream races for several classes. Bob entered the C-1 class and finished respectably in the middle of the pack. It does not bother Bob that the winner, old Butch Stockton. took the time to collect trash from the river during the race or that the woman who whipped him by five minutes was a Barton by marriage not birth.

The next order of business is the mandatory introduction of the paddlers at Ray's. In reverse order of sprint position. each team is introduced to the crowd. This event included the singing of several national anthems, a dixieland band performance and the raising of flags. They flew the Texas flag for us and naturally it was the largest flag.

By 8:45 PM we were pretty tired from the long day when we were called to the line. Boats are placed in rows in a street approximately two blocks from Ray's. At 9 PM a cannon was fired and we lifted the canoe to our shoulders and took off through a sea of paddlers, boats, dropped paddles and the maddening roar of over 10,000 fans towards the river. Having passed a few boats on the run, we entered the river in the backwash of some 40 boats and passed a few who spilled or dropped equipment. The first 45 minutes until dark was a wild sprint past thousands of fans on the riverbank, through cuts and stumps until darkness slowed the pace. Through the night we traded positions with the slower boats and took two swims, broke the bow light, lost a paddle and were briefly lost once. We passed three canoes which went up the South Branch. Meanwhile, Jerry and Roger ran a fine race through the night and were as high as 11th place for some time. Later we encountered a Canadian team who, being french. were rude and would not speak to us. I sang a chorus of the Eye's of Texas as we passed them. One thing that worked perfectly was our bank crew consisting of Robert, Tom and Laura Schans and John McLachlan the son of one of our sponsors. Pro racing allows the "feeders" to provide food. water, paddles and equipment during the race and our crew was there for us at every point. Robert lit a fire when he correctly told us that the Y.B.'s were whipping our ass at Camp 10 Bridge when we faltered during the night. We also lucked out with mild weather as some years' nighttime temperatures can fall into the thirties.

Daylight brought on Safari style sleepiness which I cured with Caffedrine while Kevin chose to dwell in his own dimension for a couple of hours. We muddled through the ponds and portages as a light rain descended through the morning. As we were hours behind the leaders a headwind, waves and powerboats were our lot on Foote Pond the largest and last of the lakes. Entering the river below the dam, we placed our aching muscles in gear for the final push to Oscoda. Given that I had initially assumed that we would finish the race in 17 hours, I was painfully aware of each minute lost on this final leg. After 18 hours and 29 minutes, we crossed the line in Oscoda in 37th place and were provided with beer which Kevin drank without ill effect. Though I had thought for hours that we were the last boat on the river. I was gratified when the mute Canadians that we had passed in the night finished some 14 minutes later. Jerry and Roger had faded some during the morning but still did Texas proud with a 15th place finish in 15:40. To no one's surprise, Serge Corbin and Solomon Carriere won the race in 14:23 after overtaking local favorites Bill Torongo and Jeff Kolka late in the race.

Later that evening, the Oscoda Yacht Club hosted a finisher's dinner for about 250 guests and I was a big winner in a raffle and won a Tunturi stairclimber for winter training. At the dinner. I invited 68 year old Al Widing Sr., the 19th place finisher with Fritz Lamm, to come to Texas and break the Safari record for oldest finisher. Widing, who with his brother won the Safari in both 1964 and 1965, responded with

My impression of the race and the competition can be put simply: It is a great race and to finish is no less an accomplishment than our Safari. The Yankee and Canadian racers are faster than us because they train harder. race more often in more competitive races and have money on the line every weekend. For example. one week prior to the Marathon a prize money race was held below Mio Pond with a \$2,500 C-2 1st prize (35 entries) and a \$1,500 C-1 1st prize (48 entries). We raced the Marathon like the Safari which is to say we ground out the miles while the locals sprinted for 14 1/2 or more hours. I'll go back some day ... a few pounds lighter and a whole lot faster.