

WORDS BY CONOR MIHELL
PHOTOGRAPHS BY AARON PETERSON

T H E

N A M E S A K E

CHASING FAMILY GHOSTS IN THE TEMAGAMI WILDS

On the third day of a weeklong, early spring canoe trip in northern Ontario, my trip mates start calling me Shackleton. We've been icebound on sprawling Smoothwater Lake since the end of Day One, when we dragged, pushed and occasionally paddled across 10 miles of ice, slush and short-lived leads of open water. From this sweeping sand beach on Smoothwater's east side, it's disappointingly obvious that zeal outweighed logic in planning this early season trip across 75 miles of prime canoe country in search of the lake that carries my family name. Breakup is days away, and our expedition is fast becoming a failure.

We're stranded in the northwest corner of Temagami, a 6,000-square-mile canoe area about 250 miles north of Toronto. The region encompasses one of the greatest networks of wilderness canoe routes in the world. Native Ojibwa called the interconnected lakes, rivers and portage trails of Temagami "nastawgan," and they traveled these routes for more than 5,000 years, by canoe in summer and snowshoe and toboggan in winter. The original canoe-trippers in this region are still known as *Teme-augama Anishnabe*—the "Deep-water People." Today, 2,200 miles of aboriginal travel-ways remain largely intact, their wilderness qualities protected by an array of provincial parks and conservation reserves.

We hashed out our trip plan in the dead of winter, studying maps and weighing the pros and cons of the half-dozen or more ways to get to Mihell Lake. For Michigan-based photographer Aaron Peterson, the 75-mile route we decided on was to be a last hurrah before the arrival of his second child. His buddy James Leaf, an unemployed Great Lakes fishing boat captain, was recently married and still clinging to a free-spirited lifestyle of "smokin', drinkin' and cussin'," and saw the trip as an opportunity to paddle a wilderness he'd always dreamed about. My wife, Kim, is always up for a canoe adventure, while for me, the greatest lure was toughing out 20-odd portages to spend my 30th birthday on my namesake lake.

But after only an hour of paddling on the Montreal River, we encounter ice floes at the mouth of Lady Dufferin Lake. For a brief while, we can paddle patches of open water along the shore. Peterson uses a camp axe to break open narrow leads while I steer for white ice I reckon is capable of supporting our weight. Kim is already showing signs of exasperation, but she reluctantly joins me in propelling the canoe across the ice skateboard-style, using the boat as a bridge across open-water gaps like a couple of misdirected polar explorers. A traditional canoe trip it's not, but after six hours of playing icebreaker I'm still feeling optimistic.

Old Man Winter plays his trump card on Day Two. After an hour of bashing through shattered ice, we round a sandy point on Smoothwater Lake and get our first look at the end of the line. The entire southern half of the five-mile lake is socked in. Peterson snaps photos of Leaf and I lobbing melon-sized boulders at the ice. Kim chuckles sarcastically when none of the rocks break through. "Should be called Hardwater Lake," she mutters tersely.

I sense mutiny.

Traditionally, travelers in Temagami country laid low at this time of year. Though our Royalex canoes shrugged off conditions that would've destroyed old-school birchbark or wood-and-canvas canoes, the edges of our wooden paddles have rubbed raw and splintered. My trip mates roll their eyes and laugh when I tell them that as

long as things stay above freezing we're doing fine. While there's no doubt the ice is slowly disappearing with every sunny day, we huddle around a fire at night, shiver to sleep and awaken each morning to newly formed, inch-thick ice covering what had been open water the previous afternoon.

There's no climactic paddle into the sunset on Mihell Lake. After sitting idle for three days on Smoothwater Lake, Aaron and James have smoked their tobacco supply thin, Kim has become increasingly despondent over how she's wasted an unpaid vacation, and my naïve enthusiasm has run its course. I spend my birthday trundling home on the Trans-Canada Highway, mired in the silence of failure, and desperate for a second chance.



Through Tall Trees: A rare easy portage amidst old-growth red pine to Marina Lake.

MY GRANDFATHER WAS JUST 15 WHEN HE LIED about his age and followed his three older brothers to war in 1944. He joined the Canadian Navy and served as a gunner on HMCS Chicoutimi, a corvette that escorted convoys across the North Atlantic. Like hundreds of thousands of other young men, he and his brothers, who served in the Royal Canadian Air Force, played small but imperative roles in the Allied victory in Europe. After the war, a small lake was named after the Mihell brothers as a token of thanks for their service—or at least that's the story my grandfather told. Each winter, as we planned our annual spring fishing trip, he'd pull out a creased, small-scale map of northern Ontario, lower his bifocal glasses, and, pointing to the pinprick of a lake he had never been to, launch into the tale as only a grandfather can.

The story makes sense—Canada has enough lakes to pay honor to thousands of war veterans—but more recently I learned that Grandpa was wrong. A cousin did some digging and discovered that the name Mihell Lake dates back to 1906—a year after Jack Mihell, my great-grandfather, immigrated to Canada from Portsmouth, England. As it happens, 20-year-old Jack, the son of a sailor and ace cricket player, was torn between sporting stardom in Australia or adventure in the Canadian North. In the end, Robert Service and Jack London won over bats and wickets, and young Jack shipped for Canada. He settled temporarily in Toronto where, in the summer of 1906, he worked for a surveying company.

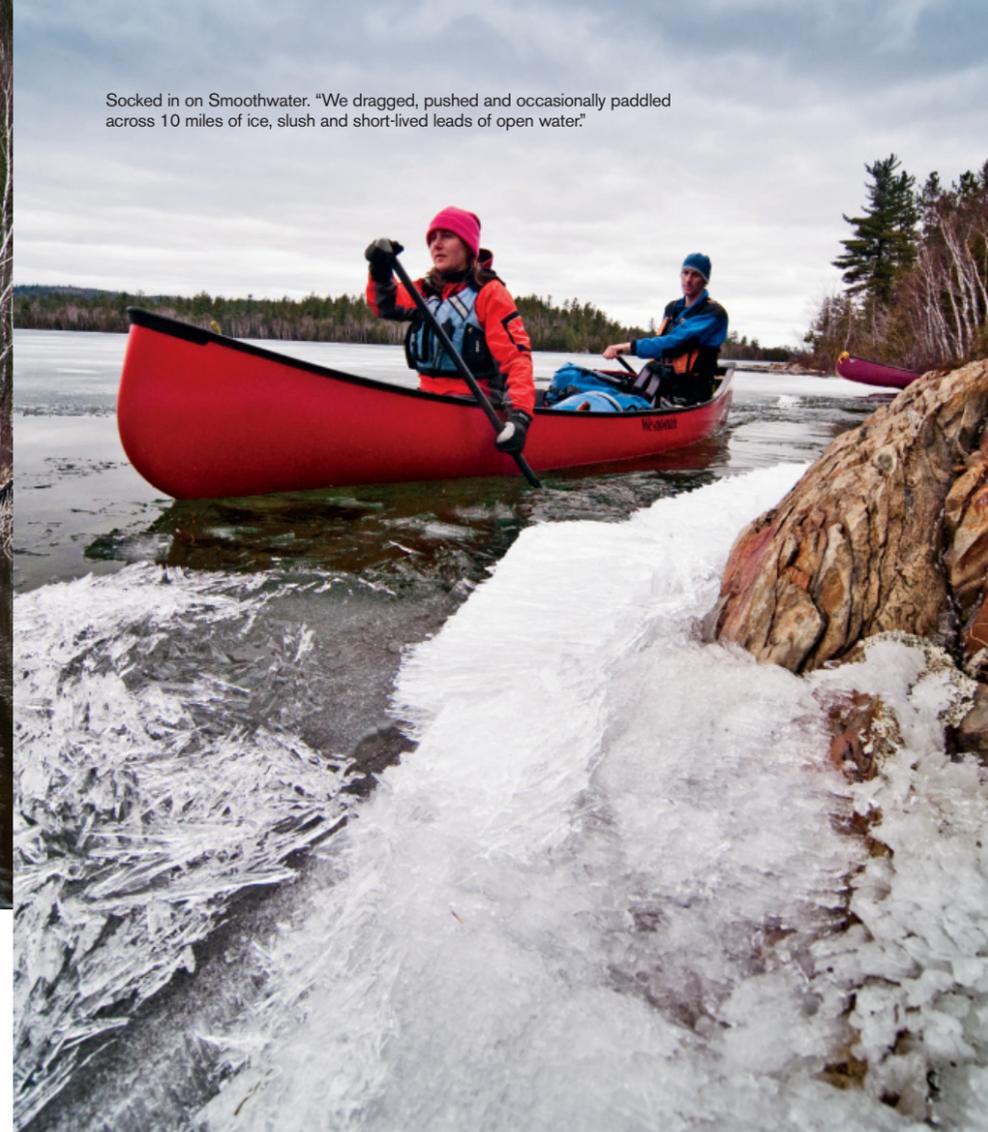
Whether Jack was simply a desk jockey in a downtown office or if he actually got out in the

wilds as a mapmaker in northern Ontario remains a family mystery. At the time, the region was almost as remote as the Klondike, accessible only by train through the upstart mining village of Temagami and then by canoe via more than 60 miles of traditional *nastawgan*. To the best of my knowledge, my ancestor had no experience with transits and sextants, much less paddles and canoes. I suspect the lake was named after the fact, in the process of filling in blank spaces on the map.

If, as I suspected, my great-grandfather had never been to Mihell Lake, there was still a chance for me to be the first Mihell to see it. The prospect of claiming first dibs had fueled my decade-long obsession with reaching the lake. Besides, I had a promise to keep. Shortly before his death, when I was a young man infatuated with canoe tripping,



Scouting for a lead through the ice on Lady Dufferin Lake.



Soaked in on Smoothwater. "We dragged, pushed and occasionally paddled across 10 miles of ice, slush and short-lived leads of open water."

I told my grandfather that I would go to Mihell Lake. Kim supported the notion wholeheartedly, though less in the sense of celebrating war heroes than as a good excuse to go exploring.

The more I researched the area the more I gravitated toward Kim's view, anticipating the journey rather than the destination. Topographical maps revealed countless ways to get there. Mihell Lake—mile-square, vaguely X-shaped with four central islands and deep, beckoning coves—is located in the heart of quintessential canoe country, nestled in a virgin red- and white pine

Mihell Lake in late May. The ice has been out for almost two weeks and we have five days to connect a handful of waterways in Lady Evelyn-Smoothwater Provincial Park with remote Solace Lake in the heart of the region's deepest wilderness. Our chosen route includes a brief section of the Sturgeon River and a side trip to the summit of Ishpatina Ridge. The teardrop-shaped route passes through Mihell Lake and includes a backbreaking eight miles of portaging. To capture the essence of the *nastawgan*, we've committed to a killer workout.

was with a 108-year-old who revealed the traditional name for Smoothwater Lake, among other locations. "It was a very fragile thing—trying to get to these people before they died," he says. "A lot of this stuff wasn't going to get passed down."

The fruits of Macdonald's labor, *The Historical Map of Temagami*, is held in the collections of the National Archives of Canada, the Smithsonian and the U.S. Board of Geographic Names—a testament to its unprecedented level of detail.

The so-called Map Man of Temagami seemed like the perfect ally in my quest to discover the original name of Mihell Lake. But he's stumped when I ask him about it. He managed to track down names for neighboring Lady Dufferin Lake (*Nehgig Tigwahning*), Ishpatina Ridge (*Ishpudinong*) and the Montreal River (*Shonjawawamaw Zeebeeng*), but by the time he started his research, "the fellow who really knew that area had passed away two years earlier," he says. The best Macdonald can do is to describe it to me: "It's pine clad with clear water and close to a tremendous ridge," he says. "It's a beautiful lake."

I ache to get there. WITH MACDONALD'S HELP, we charted a course through some of the least-traveled areas of

IT'S CLEAR FROM THE OUTSET WE'RE ON THE ROUTE LESS TRAVELED. JUST GETTING TO THE PUT-IN INVOLVES CARRYING THROUGH HUNDREDES OF YARDS OF MUSKEG.

forest and shadowed by 2,300-foot-tall Ishpatina Ridge, the highest point of land in Ontario. We would pay homage not just to my family heritage but also to the generations of aboriginal canoeists who paddled Temagami long before it became a recreational hub.

SPRING ERUPTS IN THE NEON BUDS OF BIRCHES and aspens, chorusing frogs and songbirds and clouds of pesky blackflies when Kim and I return to Temagami for a second try at reaching

Few people living know the area we've planned to paddle better than Craig Macdonald. In an obsessive 27-year process, Macdonald, who's trained as a fisheries biologist and works as a civil servant, logged thousands of miles crisscrossing Temagami by canoe. He learned the Ojibwa language and interviewed more than 200 people, most of them aboriginal elders, to uncover and document the Ojibwa place names for 660 waterways and landforms.

Macdonald's most memorable conversation

Temagami. According to the map, the traditional portage from Hamlow Lake to the Sturgeon River measures 78 chains—about one mile. It's the first of several unknowns in our trip and we start with light loads, eyes peeled on the trail. This is the *nastawgan* link from the north- and east-flowing Montreal River watershed to the Sturgeon, which spills south to Lake Nipissing and the Great Lakes. But after a logging road penetrated the area in the 1950s the old portage fell out of use. Only recently have summer camp trippers reopened it, and on this hot, sunny day we're likely the first canoeists of the season to walk it.

The map is spot-on. The portage is long, but relatively easy. Old blazes mark its course over several ridges, around a mossy bog and downhill to Stull Creek, which feeds into the Sturgeon. Thousands of footsteps have worn a furrow beneath layers of leaves and dirt on the forest floor. The feeling is euphoric when we're back in the canoe and drifting downstream beneath towering cliffs on the peaty, wine-colored Sturgeon River.

This is classic canoe tripping, a North American pastime that experienced its first boom about the time Jack Mihell landed in Canada. Stories of the Temagami region's abundant fish and game began appearing in American outdoors magazines and the first summer camps—including Camp Keewaydin, which remains a fixture in the area today—were just getting started. Fishing lodges sprang up, summer camps flourished and, into the 1940s, droves of government-employed canoeists ranged the ancient routes on the lookout for forest fires.

Among the fire rangers was an enigmatic Brit named Archie Belaney, a trapper and skilled canoeist who learned Ojibwa customs and was adopted by the local Bear Island band. He promptly reinvented himself as Grey Owl, an erudite Indian whose best-selling books played to the European notion of the noble savage, yet accurately captured the essence of life in the Canadian frontier. Ironically, Belaney grew up only 80 miles from my great-grandfather's hometown in southern

England, immigrated to Canada with similar ideals a year after Jack did, and has a Temagami-area lake bearing his pen name. Belaney was a womanizer and a drunk, but he had a way with words—his stories of conservation were responsible for bringing the beaver back from near extinction. The true story of Grey Owl's charade was not revealed until after his death in 1938.

By the 1940s and '50s, government policies forced the remaining semi-nomadic *Temagami Anishnabe* to settle down on reserves, their children shipped away to culture-breaking residential schools. Modern forest fire-fighting technology made canoe rangers obsolete, and other than occasional use by Temagami's summer camps, the *nastawgan* became overgrown. Then, Hap Wilson, another adventure-seeking youth, moved north from Toronto and started exploring the old canoe routes. In Temagami, Wilson found "sanctuary in a paradise among the pines." He scored a government job maintaining backcountry routes and amassing information for a guidebook, *Temagami Canoe Routes*, first published in 1978 and still a trip-planning staple today.

Wilson's guidebook is vague about the second crux of our trip—cutting cross-country from the Sturgeon River through a series of ponds and seven portages to Solace Lake, six miles away. It's clear from the outset we're on the route less traveled. With each portage, our first challenge is locating the landing. We quickly learn that the difference between a dead-end beaver slide and a portage is a pitch-stained axe blaze on a tree trunk, or specks of canoe paint on the rocks. Once we've found the trailhead, blowdowns, mudholes and the rounded boulders of dried up riverbeds obscure the route. Finally, just getting to the put-in often involves extending the carry through hundreds of yards of nearly impassable muskeg.

It's well past dinnertime when we scan the



Old School: On their return visit, the Mihells paddled a wood canvas canoe the author restored.



shoreline of an unnamed lake for the final portage of the day—a half-miler that Wilson’s guidebook describes as “strenuous right to the end.” We land the canoe on the edge of a wetland and strike off with map and compass in search of the trail. But what we believe is a faint path through the swamp ends in an impenetrable screen of black spruce.

Solace is rimmed with steep hills and pocked with granite islands, each of its tendril bays a gateway. The map reveals an array of possibilities: downstream on the narrow and swift-flowing Solace and Pilgrim creeks, tributaries of the Sturgeon River; by headwater streams to enchanting Florence Lake, aka *Shkimskajeeshing*,

portages and finally slide our canoe into Mihell Lake. It is everything Macdonald described, punctuated by islands and surrounded by a primeval forest of white and red pine old enough to have witnessed the death and rebirth of wilderness canoeing in Temagami. Aside from the stately trees, the shoreline is low and non-descript with only one marginal campsite, but to the west Ishpatina Ridge soars through the mist.

THE LAKE IS EVERYTHING MACDONALD DESCRIBED, PUNCTUATED BY ISLANDS AND SURROUNDED BY A PRIMEVAL FOREST OF ANCIENT WHITE AND RED PINE.

By now I’m sweaty, my sandaled feet bloody and blistered, arms sunburned, neck and ears swollen with bug bites. I suggest we give up, make camp and turn back tomorrow, but Kim insists we get back on the water and paddle around one last point. Somehow, we find the portage and end the grueling 12-hour day on aptly named Solace Lake. We set up camp on a rocky island and linger by the campfire while the loons call in the night.

“lake that bends in the middle”; or pond-hopping to Obabika and Wakimika lakes, home to a grove of 400-year-old pines. We choose a natural route north, through a series of swamps and lakes whose traditional names have vanished. After another exhausting day we stop short on Scarecrow Lake, a beautiful, egg-shaped body of water barely a mile south of Mihell Lake.

On a drizzly morning we carry over two

The moment is satisfying, particularly after the failed Shackleton-like attempt and having thrived on the hardships of one of the most physically demanding canoe trips Kim and I have ever made. But it’s without magic or fanfare. At once the quest for my namesake lake feels too trivial. It’s morphed into a revelation that’s much larger, that there’s so much more *nastawgan* to explore. If I’m truly the first Mihell to reach this lake, I think I’ve earned the right to name it something more appropriate.

On this day, *Gigawaabamin menawaa*—“See you again Lake”—sounds about right.