

Padding Through History

Monday, June 25, 2004 – Port Kent, NY north to Plattsburgh City Beach

Distance: 17.5 miles

Weather: Sunny to start, moderate S-SE wind, then threatening clouds, temperature in high 60s

(CF and MH) Our logistics were brilliant this morning. With the aid of one husband, our good friend Mike who lives on Cumberland Head, and our dog Sophie, we managed to get ourselves to the Port Kent ferry dock and in the water ready to paddle by 8:40 am. Sophie, our 9 pound Maltese who loves to go kayaking and hates to be left behind tried to jump in my kayak before we left but had to settle for giving me a big sloppy doggie lick instead. I felt guilty only until we were out of sight!. Joe drove the van back to the city beach in Plattsburgh where the attendant was quite upset that he had a dog with him, dogs not being allowed at the City Beach. Joe quickly assured her that neither he nor the dog were staying, only the car which would be picked up later. He then called Mike, who drove them to the Cumberland Head ferry where they returned to Vermont as foot passengers. Joe's car was waiting at the Vermont ferry landing where it had been dropped earlier. The important part of this story is that we are doing these trips with a lot of help and support from family and friends whom we have asked to do lots of silly things and we very much appreciate their efforts on our behalf.

Today the weather dominated our thoughts, but to explain this I need to relate some recent events. A week ago we had a weather forecast for "60% chance of torrential rain and thunderstorms starting midday. Margy and I talked in the morning at 6:30 am. I told her the grim forecast. "But what does the radar show right now?" asked Margy. "Nothing, nothing at all. There is never anything on the radar at 6:30 in the morning! But the weatherman says it is going to get nasty just when we are furthest from home and shore. I think we should bag it!" Margy: "But the sky is clear and beautiful. There isn't even any wind, at your house or my house. It is the perfect kayak day!" So after hemming and hawing, and much to Margy's dismay we canceled the trip. Of course the rains never came, the wind never picked up, and the skies stayed sunny all day. I felt terrible, and thought of calling Margy to apologize for my wimpy behavior and blind trust in the weatherman, but I never did. In defense of Vermont weather people, they have a hard job. The weather gods are not kind to them. They are very good at what they do but the weather gods are devious, cynical and powerful!

With that as a background, on Sunday when we planned this trip for Monday, the forecast was for partly sunny skies, 10-15 MPH W/SW winds and a chance of showers and thunderstorms but not until late in the day. By Monday morning that forecast had changed to a 40% chance of showers and thunderstorms arriving in the afternoon. I certainly did not suggest a cancellation. But we did get an early start and kept a sharp eye on the western sky.

Our attentiveness to the weather was partially caused by the sad fact that, two days before, a day we had not kayaked, a fierce squall line had come across the lake about 5:00 pm with wind gusts well over 40 MPH. The temperature dropped precipitously in just a few minutes and a woman was killed when a wedding tent was blown over on Isle La Motte. There were reports of numerous boats capsizing. Independently Margy and I both thought about what it would have been like if we had been out on the water that day. We were very thankful we were not. And it reminded us of our vulnerability. Sudden storms are a threat to all boaters but particularly to people whose only way of moving forward is from sheer paddle power.

So our minds were on the weather this bright Monday morning.

With a good tail wind and waves large enough to keep us honest and alert we made good time, arriving at our half way point, just across from Valcour Island, about 11:00 am. We stopped at a boat access to stretch our legs and eat lunch.

Just as I took the first bit of my peanut butter and jelly sandwich, dark threatening clouds started to appear to the west. Spooked by Saturday's storm, we wasted little time at lunch although we did allow ourselves to be delayed by a family of ducks who swam right over to us looking for food. Clearly they had been fed frequently by the many boaters moored at the nearby marina. They certainly had little fear of people. Tearing ourselves away from the ducklings, we resumed our paddling, vowing to stay close to shore. The wind picked up as did the waves and the skies played games with us all afternoon. But fortunately, no storms materialized and only after we landed did it start to rain, and then only lightly. We covered the distance more quickly than we would have liked because of those clouds but we did not shortchange ourselves and our observation time by too much.

The first thing we noticed was the train track running along the New York shore. At one time, trains played a prominent role in transportation in the Champlain Valley, on both sides of the lake. From the days of the earliest settlers, Lake Champlain was a very important north-south transportation route. Commercial sailing vessels sailed north to Montreal as well as south to lower New York State. These early sailing ships were replaced by steam driven boats and eventually the steamboats were replaced by trains. Today a few passenger and freight trains, mostly on the New York side of the lake, are all that remain of rail traffic. People and goods move up and down the valley now in cars, trucks and planes, leaving the Lake for recreational endeavors. There is no commercial fishing on the lake although there are plenty of "for-hire" charters available for people who want to fish.

As we have been on other days, we were struck by the expanse of undeveloped shore.

The railroad track that runs just above the shore, is probably the reason that land is still undeveloped. We did pass two campers who took advantage of a rocky beach to pitch their tent, interrupted in their solitude only by our passing kayaks and an occasionally train.

Paddling north from the railroad bed, we soon came to the mouth of the Ausable River and its related delta. What a wonderful large area of sand beaches, sandbars and bird habitat. We saw lots of ducks both in the air and in the water. Without handy binoculars (would someone please invent waterproof, light weight, zoom lens, glasses, preferably before we finish this journey!) and without being able to slow the ducks down a little, it was pretty hard to identify the particular species of duck

The sandy delta of the Ausable reminded me of other Lake Champlain river deltas that are, for the most part, shallow and sandy and show signs of the river mouth having once been located at other locations over the course of time. In fact, upon studying the map I noticed that almost every river mouth has a "Dead Creek" close by, a branch of the river that once flowed to the lake but now goes nowhere. I think we passed 3 Dead Creeks today.

At any rate, as we passed, we decided that we wanted to go back and see how far we can paddle up the river. (I hope this does not mean we are going to add the shoreline of the major rivers and creeks feeding into the Lake, to our list of shoreline to explore. Hmm, but that is an interesting idea.) Just beyond the delta area we saw a huge flock of cormorants, obviously drawn to the area by a school of fish. Margy paddled up to the cormorants hoping to see what they were eating. As soon as she got too close for their comfort, one, then two and then eventually all of the cormorants flew off for safer waters. It looked like an old Alfred Hickcock movie, "Margy and the Cormorants". As they left, a huge granddaddy size great blue heron flew in to fish. There is a large rookery of Great Blue Heron on Valcour Island which we were approaching on our right, but surprisingly we did not see other heron that day.

As we approached Valcour Island and looked up the channel between it and the New York shore, I could picture the string of ragtag American gun boats, under the command of Benedict Arnold, strung out across the channel back in October of 1777, waiting for the British fleet which was sailing from Canada on a strong north wind.

Valcour Island is a state park and undeveloped except for a campground accessible only by boat and a lighthouse. So looking at its pristine shore, it was also easy to imagine how easily the Indians, whom the British had put ashore on Valcour before the battle, were able to swim from the island to the line of American boats and cause havoc on the American line.

Mainly what we thought about though, was how the American fleet had escaped that night after the battle, in which they were resoundingly outgunned, by paddling their flat bottomed, gun boats in the fog, along the New York shore, past the mouth of the Ausable River which we knew from our immediate experience to be very shallow. I grounded my kayak on one sandbar with no fog, or dark of night for excuses, just a foolish desire to cut corners. I was thankful that Arnold had not done the same. I never pass Valcour Island without a good deal of respect and awe for the naval battle that took place there in October of 1777, and the role it played in eventually allowing us to win the American Revolution. I wonder how many people pass that island in boats of all sizes and shapes, year after year, who are oblivious to that battle. I get enough goose bumps I suppose to make up for them.

About a mile and a half north of Valcour Island is Crab Island. It was used in the War of 1812 as a hospital location and somewhere on the island there are over 500 American soldiers buried. There is a huge flagpole on Crab Island which can be seen from a least a mile away, as well as a monument to the soldiers who died there. There are several volunteers from Plattsburgh who are in the process of restoring the island to its 1812 condition. Aside from its historical significance Crab Island is notorious for its prolific poison ivy.

Meanwhile on the shore side, we were passing more open land, startling after the more developed Valcour town shore and for it's proximity to Plattsburgh. High above the water, Clinton Community College was clearly visible in the afternoon light. It is a huge presence from the water. Again, it is easy to think back in time to when it was a hotel and imagine guests in long dresses and suits promenading on the verandahs. Under the building, and closer to the shore is a more contemporary but tasteful development. The open shore is a result of a golf course, the college and the former Plattsburgh Air Force Base, where an occasional brick wall from some of the stately old buildings can be briefly glimpsed from the water.

Once we passed Crab Island we were within eyesight of Plattsburgh. Just south of Plattsburgh we pulled inside a small break water associated with a boat access area so that we could attach our spray skirts and drink some water. The south wind had picked up and the waves from the south were building by now and occasionally giving us a good surprise soaking.

Plattsburgh's longer breakwater gave us some respite from the waves and we slowed down as we paddled by, feeling less like we were going to get caught in foul weather before we reached our destination at the City Beach, now only about 2 miles away. The Saranac River flows right through downtown Plattsburgh and empties into Lake Champlain at this point. Again we encountered another "Dead Creek" . Margy, a one

time resident of Plattsburgh, says you cannot paddle very far up this river before encountering rapids. It is interesting that the city has made little of its waterfront. It is almost hard to tell that one is passing a city except for a brief stretch of houses along the shore and the size of the sewer plant which is visible from the lake. Further along, the city has taken advantage of the beautiful sand beach for a municipal recreation area.

It was a short paddle from downtown Plattsburgh to the City Beach but the last mile, no matter how far one has traveled, is always the longest. It is totally a mental phenomena, and yet I have not figured out a way to avoid it. We slogged onto the City Beach about 2:00 pm, getting caught by a few breaking waves before we landed and eased our creaking bodies out of the boats without managing to fall into the surf. We left our boats and set off to find the car, dripping water from our wet pants, jackets and spray skirts all the way. There is just no way to go kayaking without getting wet. Someday we will probably remember to put dry clothes in the car! Some day. We could not get the car as close to the kayaks as we might have liked but in no time we had the kayaks on top of the car, along with a good deal of sand, and we were headed to the ferry, sitting on an old shower curtain so as not to get the car as wet as we felt. It was a good day, and we booked it, 17.5 miles in 4 and a half hours! We felt awesome and somewhat silly! The fatigue would hit as soon as we got home!

Birds sighted: Kingbirds, tree swallows, bank swallows, lots of ducks we could not identify, great blue heron, mergansers with ducklings