

In Nessmuk's Wake

Great-great-great-grandson Will Madison Recreates
the Naturalist's Solo Adirondack Canoe Trip

By Brendan O'Meara

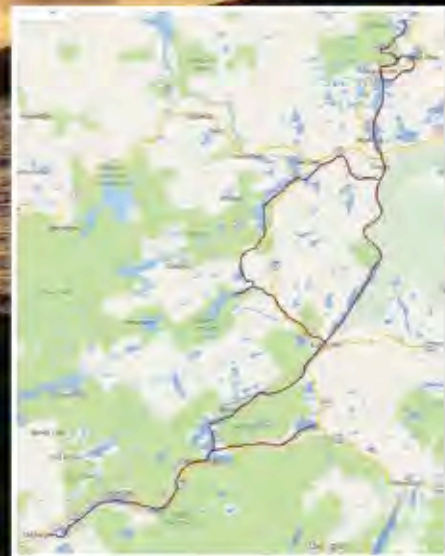
The Adirondacks are old, geriatric even in the geologic sense. Will Madison, a recent graduate from Saint Lawrence University, knows this. He minored in geology, knows the nature of the granite and the anorthosite, a rock prevalent on the moon.

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Born into it: Like Nessmuk, Madison shares the love of wilderness exploration. A sixth grade school project turned into an exploration in which he had "no control."



Personal passage: Madison ends his journey with deeper insight into his own determination, limitations, and a humbled sense of self. (Inset) This map shows the various canoe and portage points along his retraced expedition.



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When he set his canoe down in any of the rivers in Adirondack State Park, it's a river long decided by the retreat of glaciers once layered by season upon season for millennia upon millennia with snowfall. The weight became so great that the snow compressed into ice thousands of feet thick.

Under that mass, the lowest layers of the glacier moved like thick maple syrup. The southern expansion of the glacier climbed over the mountains pulling boulders with it, erratics. The glacier carved the shape of these old, granite mounds.

These mountains, this landscape, had Madison cite Henry David Thoreau's *Walking*, "When a traveller asked Wordsworth's servant to show him her master's study, she answered 'Here is his library, but his study is out of doors.'"

Madison majored in philosophy at Saint Lawrence University.

When the earth warmed and the glacier pulled back, it left behind kettle ponds and lakes, but also the tire tracks that would form river beds as the water fell from the sky or when the snow melted from on high.

These rivers, some 30,000 miles of streams and brooks in the Adirondacks, made homes for fish and game, and provided highways for ships for trade and travel, scenic by-ways far from the horse paths and modern-day Interstates, serene with kingfishers chirping or black bear rising on hind legs.

It was in these waterways that, in 1883, outdoor writer, woodsman, conservationist, and poet George Washington Sears, also known by his nomme de plume Nessmuk, paddled his *Sairy Gamp* some 266 miles.

Fitting that Madison, the great-great-great-grandson of Nessmuk, would embark on a similar trip in the wilderness, in the great outdoors.

For Madison also majored in outdoor studies at Saint Lawrence University.

But first, he needed a boat. Rob Frenette, founder of Raquette River Outfitters in Tupper Lake, New York, is a fourth-generation Adirondacker. He loved wooden boats and, while at college, he noticed his peers ran toward some abstract future to create a modern world. Frenette

didn't want an "inside job," as he put it, though part of what he does (boat building and restoration) is inherently indoors, as it must. He saw the direction of that rat race, this zombie horde lurching toward drop ceilings and high rises, water coolers and flickering fluorescent lights. If that's the modern world, then let the futurists have it. "I reversed and went to the 1800s," says Frenette, for Frenette is a boat builder.

He familiarized himself with Nessmuk, and, by extension, the work of J. Henry Rushton, an iconic figure in the world of boat building. It was Nessmuk who pushed Rushton to design smaller, lighter boats.

Rushton, a man of regal appearance, tight eyes, a well-groomed goatee, and a high forehead with silver hair, told Nessmuk about the *Sairy Gamp*, "Now you must stop with this one, don't try any smaller one. If you get sick of this as a Canoe use it for a soup dish."

Nessmuk later said, "Her maker had warned me that he would not warrant her for an hour. She may go to pieces like an eggshell. He builded better than he knew."

In this spirit, Frenette traveled to Maine where he attended boat building school and learned the finer art of crafting canoes. Boats lack straight lines, so building them takes patience, skill, and experience.

In 1980, Frenette went to work on his first wooden canoe, inspired by the Rushton design, though slightly sturdier than the *Sairy Gamp*. Frenette cites a joke that Nessmuk said about Rushton's small boats, "You've got to part your hair down the middle and chew gum split in each cheek so you don't tip over."

Frenette used cedar planking for his boat, with the keel and gunwales (or gunnels) in oak. He made the ribs from white oak—though Rushton preferred elm—and used copper clenched nails to fasten the ribs to the planks, as Rushton would. He installed a cedar seat with a single thwart as a backrest.

When he finished, he unofficially named her *Nelly*, after one of his mother's favorite dogs.

Frenette, having read of Nessmuk's voyage in the Adirondacks, harbored visions of taking *Nelly* through the same rivers and streams, retracing the path in his Rushton-inspired vessel. How perfect that would be. He even read Christine Jerome's *An Adirondack Passage* (a book recounting Christine, in a Kevlar canoe, retracing the Nessmuk journey) and figured that was something he could do.

"When I built it," says Frenette, "I wanted to take that trip with the boat. I was always working. I never got to do it and write about it."

Along came Madison, born some fourteen years after Frenette built *Nelly*, who crashed with Frenette's brother. Madison had visions of following in his great-great-great-grandfather's watery path. The Frenettes convened, learned Madison was related to Nessmuk, and that Frenette had a boat inspired by the same maker of Nessmuk's famous canoe.

In Madison, Frenette saw a vicarious opportunity. "I never had the time," says Frenette. "At least my boat could go."

Madison spent much of his youth in the Boy Scouts, which, "Got me into the wilderness," he says, "no video games. I spent other ways keeping busy: drumming, juggling, lots of random things. It's a fun way to get out on camping trips with a fun group of guys."

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When he was six years old, right around the time a boy of that age would enroll in Boy Scouts, he had a writing project for school. He chose his great-great-grandfather as the subject: George Washington Sears, better known by his *Forest and Stream* pen name Nessmuk (Native American for Wood Drake).

Madison starts his project by writing of Nessmuk, "He was a little bit famous, so I decided to write about him."

Madison noted how slight Sears was, barely over five feet tall, 110 pounds, which means he'd have his hands full with a well-fed fifth grader. Then again, in Nessmuk's words, "It wouldn't take a strong rope to hang me, but a bear trap on one leg and a grindstone on the other wouldn't drown me in ten fathoms."

In the report, Madison revealed Nessmuk's secret recipe for "bug stuff": three ounces of pine tar, two ounces of castor oil, one ounce of pennyroyal oil, then simmer over a slow fire. "He put it on his face and skin. Each day he added a new layer. He said, 'Don't fool with soap and towels where insects are plenty.' He must have gotten pretty smelly."

In closing, Madison writes, "Some day, when you drive by Mount Nessmuk in Pennsylvania, you can think of this story about my great-great-grandfather."

That story, in a few year's time, would also be Madison's. "To be honest, I don't want to gloat about it," Madison says. "I was just born into it, no control. It was a good excuse to go on a long canoe trip."

Madison could, if he wanted to, wave the Nessmuk flag, but he keeps it close the chest. Instead, he paddles the paddle, and when he learned of Nessmuk's 266-mile canoe trip through the Adirondacks, he sought his own course in the wild, looking up into those mountains from the depth of the riverbeds.

It conjures, yet again, Thoreau, how one draws nourishment from the outdoors, "For I believe that climate does thus react on man—as there is something in the mountain air that feeds the spirit and inspires. Will not man grow to greater perfection intellectually as well as physically under these influences?"

Madison believes this, and it is why he sets out on his own. "He had the drive and the ability," says Anne Fleck of Raquette River Outfitters. "He did lots of paddling trips. He's an outdoor enthusiast. He knew how to pack his gear. He did that on his own. It helped to work at an outfitter all summer."

Madison had most of the gear he needed. Thanks to Frenette, Madison had the boat.

Thanks to his age, having just graduated from college with little tying him down, Madison had the time. "If I get too involved in," life, work, family, you name it, he may not do it and then it'll be, "I'll do it next year, I'll do it next year," he says. "There may be too many things tying me down."

All Madison needed was fuel, five days of food at a time: pastas with onions and sausages, pizzas, good potato soups, oranges, eggplant and cabbage.

Weighing 185 pounds himself and towing a sixty-pound pack, Madison entered the water, wearing a smile as wide as the *Sairy Gamp* herself. Madison's long, amber beard recalls images of Nessmuk from his 1883 voyage 133 years ago.


Madison started in Old Forge and the Fulton Chain Lakes as the boat wobbled a bit as he centered himself. The gunwales

The same, but different: Nely, the sturdier 1980 version of Rushton's *Sairy Gamp*, was created by boat builder Rob Frenette. Having little time to make the voyage himself, Frenette saw an opportunity to fulfill a personal dream in Madison's interest.




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were a few inches above the surface of the water as he thought, "What the heck have I gotten myself into?"

It was also exciting, that first day, September 11, 2015, "I felt blessed to do something like that in twenty days and have so much fun."

The trip wasn't a given, of course. Weather and the wild, portages and rougher currents, but he made it through that first day and at 9:22 p.m. he wrote in his journal:

"Pretty overwhelming day 1 as a whole... mostly because I'm thinking about what day 2 holds. I've got about a 20-mile day ahead to get to Tom Thatcher's. Work took longer this morning than planned and took a bit to get the boat/gear dialed. First time paddling the boat with gear, little nervous about facing big winds in it. Gunwales are riding a little low. I brought a stupid amount of food, just way too much. And I would like to cut down on gear but am not really sure where to start, will keep pondering it. I'm half thinking what have I gotten myself into + half thinking wow this is really cool. Camping at Decamp Island (Treasure Island) since I got such a late start.

But will get up at 5 am tomorrow morning + want to hit the water by 6 am. Am Guessing I average 2 miles an hour with the portages, but hope to cruise + and do better. Lots of rain in the forecast the next few days. But I will say we do need it + it could save me some portages."

On he paddled through the latter parts of the beginning stages, through Raquette Lake, Forked (pronounced Fork-ED) Lake, Raquette River, into the big widening of Long Lake, and continuing down the Raquette River.

Through Brown's Tract Inlet, Madison looked up at the clouds clinging to the mountaintops with the trees painting autumnal colors against the coniferous evergreens. His boat low in the water, he paddled with smooth, guided, precise strokes as the water rippled out in a V behind him.

This was Nessmuk's path, and Madison was well on his way.

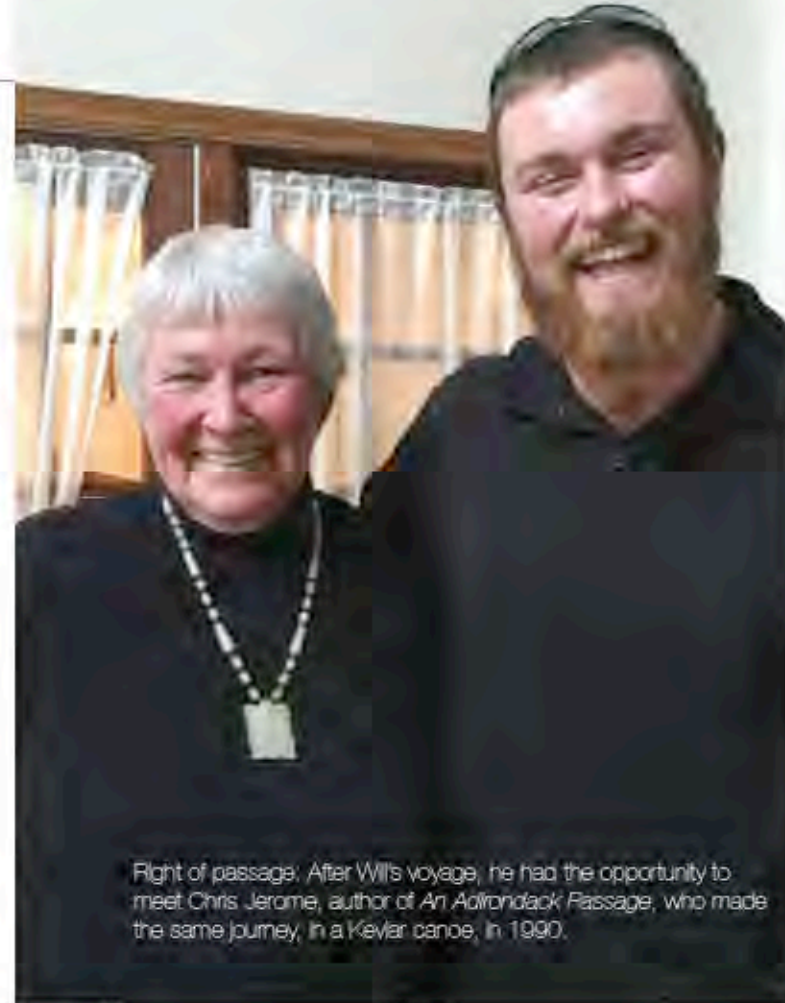
By and large, Madison spent the bulk of the trip alone. He met some people along the way: friends, kindred spirits, reporters, photographers, but when they left, he kept

paddling.

It echoed a similar sentiment Nessmuk felt in his travels when he wrote, "I like the sort of woods life... that has a spice of convenient civilization mixed up with it, where, for instance, I can visit with intelligent men from different sections of the country, and get in [my canoe] and paddle in an hour to a secluded spot where I may camp for a month without seeing a human face."

During one challenging portage, Madison met two sightseers by chance. While portaging, his pack, which he conceded was too heavy for this trip, came unbuckled at the waist and shoulders. The only one intact was his chest strap, and it yanked him back and nearly strangled him.

One could almost imagine the ghost of Nessmuk standing there beside Madison saying, as Nessmuk once wrote, "Each and every camper has gone to his chosen ground with too much impediment, too much duff; and nearly all have used boats at least twice as heavy as they need to have been. The temptation to put this or that bit of indispensable camp-kit has been too strong,



Right of passage: After Will's voyage, he had the opportunity to meet Chris Jerome, author of *An Adirondack Passage*, who made the same journey, in a Kevlar canoe, in 1990.

At times he paused to fish, other times he let the water carry him along as he looked up at the setting sun. He even saw a black bear along the river's edge, and it stood up on its hind legs and looked at him "like a squirrel would out of curiosity."

He soon traveled to and through Upper Saranac Lake, Lake Clear, the Seven Carries, Upper and Lower Saint Regis, turned around at Paul Smiths, back to the Raquette River, Tupper Lake, Round Pond, Little Tupper, shuttled to Forked and back to Old Forge, 200 miles and twenty days in total.

Before he finished, on a cold and wet day, he detoured to Blue Mountain Lake and, instead of hiking the mountain, "after paddling so far, I opted for the warmer museum," Madison says. He entered the Adirondack Museum where the *Sairy Gamp* is on display, all nine feet and 10.5 pounds of her.

He stood beside a cutout of George Washington Sears, and Madison put his arm around his great-great-great grandfather, the two sporting similarly long beards, sharing similar looks of outdoorsmen, men of the same era, separated by time. "It was crazy, powerful to see how far he went in that tiny boat," says Madison.

On the final night before Madison finished his trip, he wrote, "Hard to believe it's all over tomorrow, but I do feel as if I accomplished a feat [sic]. It's the longest trip I've ever been on. It's the longest time I've ever spent by myself, and I also planned everything on my own. Not to say I didn't have help as I do owe gratitude to many, but nobody was holding my hand, If I didn't pursue it it wouldn't have happened.

This trip + my recent trip to the Adk Museum has me wondering once more if I was born into the wrong time. I've been told by many who were not aware of the others telling me I am an 'old soul.' And I suppose they're right. I'm bad with technology, but good in the woods. That's not really as marketable as it once was. I do believe Nessmuk to be a great woodsman, but I'd like to think I could keep up with him at least."

For those who have spent time in the woods, time humbled by the remoteness of the outdoors, of imposing peaks, hooting owls, and the chirping of crickets, few things sound better than the crack of a campfire or the gentle plunk of the oar entering the stream.

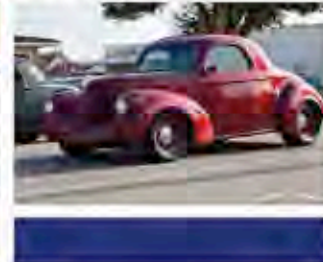
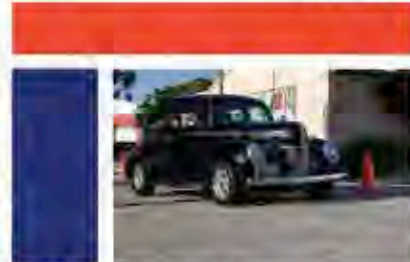
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and we have gone to the blessed woods, handicapped with a load fit for a pack-mule. This is not how to do it. Go light; the lighter the better."

It was as if Nessmuk gave Madison the equivalent of an atomic wedgie from beyond the grave.

"Nessmuk would've been laughing at me," Madison says. "He was all about go light, go light."

Madison would shed ten pounds of gear for the remainder of the trip, still with far more than the one shirt, one extra pair of socks Nessmuk brought with him in his fifteen-pound pack aboard the *Sairy Gamp*.

Through the middle of the trip, Madison found his groove. All systems were in order and his biggest worry from dawn till dusk was where to camp and where to eat dinner.

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