

In Search of Mulligan Island

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[[This essay is intended for publication in the “Leopold Atlas” feature of *Leopold Outlook* magazine, published by the Aldo Leopold Foundation. As such, it assumes a reader familiar with Aldo Leopold and his significance. If that doesn’t describe you, then let me tell you that Leopold was in many ways the founder of wildlife ecology and of wilderness preservation. A thoughtful, lucid, and lyrical prose stylist, his *Sand County Almanac* is one of my four favorite books.]]

At noon on Wednesday, 11 June 1924, Aldo Leopold set off from Winton, Minnesota, for a fifteen-day canoe trip deep into the wilderness of Canada’s Quetico Provincial Park. He was at the time 37 years old, and was accompanied by his brothers Carl (34 years) and Fritz (28 years), and his son Starker (10 years). It would prove to be “a memorable trip – maybe the best we ever made”: the four travelers caught trout and saw moose and beaver, they sat out a storm on “a little dream of an island consisting of a single tree on a single rock”, they dove off “a steep, smooth rock into the deep water. It didn’t seem nearly so cold after we got in.”

But of all these sites and events (recorded in Leopold’s journal, then posthumously edited and published as a chapter in the book *Round River*) I have been most intrigued by their third campsite, “on a little rock island with only half a dozen trees and no mosquitoes. Tried a fish mulligan consisting of the planked wall-eye cut into big boneless cubes, ham, potatoes, mixed dehydrated vegetables, rice, and noodles. ... It was so good we christened it ‘Island Mulligan’, and the camp, ‘Mulligan Island’.”

Leopold, of course, gives us no GPS coordinates for Mulligan Island. But my study of Leopold’s journals and a 1928 “Map of Canoe Routes in Minnesota–Ontario Lake Region” made me home in on two candidates for Mulligan Island. And a September 2019 canoe trip by my brother and me found that one of those islands bears suspicious resemblance to a photo that Leopold pasted into his journal. This essay tells the story of my search for Mulligan Island.

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Most wilderness trips start with physical preparation, but to find Mulligan Island I had to start by reading and reasoning. Leopold’s journal says he spent the night of 12 June at the portage around Lower Basswood Falls – the southeastern end of Crooked Lake. He spent the night of 13 June at Mulligan Island. On 14 June he ate lunch at Curtain Falls – the northwestern end of Crooked Lake. So Mulligan Island must lie within Crooked Lake, but where? My first thought was that it took two-thirds of the Crooked Lake paddle time to reach Mulligan Island, so it should lie two-thirds of the way up Crooked Lake. Leopold’s journal entries for 13 June rule out that possibility: In the morning he passed the “painted cliffs”, then “a narrows with a current”, then “nooned on a fine point of solid rock”, and finally made camp on Mulligan Island. After supper Fritz and Starker went “back to a narrows with a strong current” while Carl and Aldo canoed into a muskeg and then “lifted the canoe over” and into “the channel where the boys were fishing.”

So to find Mulligan Island we must look just downstream (northwest) of the second narrows of Crooked Lake. This is not hard: there are only two narrows in Crooked Lake. The 1928 “Map of Canoe Routes in Minnesota–Ontario Lake Region” (published by Architects & Engineers Supply Company of 318 W. 1st St., Duluth, Minnesota) has been reproduced by North Bay Trading Company and is available for purchase as an “antique map”. That map calls the second narrows “Current Narrows”. (During our canoe trip, my brother and I found that it is even today called “Big Current”.) Furthermore, just northwest of this narrows is a bay and muskeg that fits the description of Leopold’s after-dinner activities on 13 June.

There are two small islands between the Big Current narrows and the muskeg, at the north end of Thursday Bay on Crooked Lake: the easterly one has a latitude, longitude of 48.19749°, -91.74369°, the westerly one has 48.20000°, -91.75636°.



A snip from Google Maps satellite view shows a portion of Crooked Lake.

One more piece of reading and reasoning remained. The University of Wisconsin archives have digitized Leopold’s journals and made them available on the Internet – for this 1924 canoe trip see “Diaries and Journals: Hunting Journals, 1917-1945 [Journal for 1924]” pages 34 to 74. These digitized pages include information not presented in the *Round River* account, including many photographs – all of them uncaptioned, but one (on page 36) apparently of Mulligan

Island. I set out to identify the locations for these photographs. And I would use the Mulligan Island photo to distinguish between my two candidates, or to reject both of them.



Aldo Leopold's photo, apparently of camp on Mulligan Island.

With all this in mind, I set out on a canoe in search of Mulligan Island.

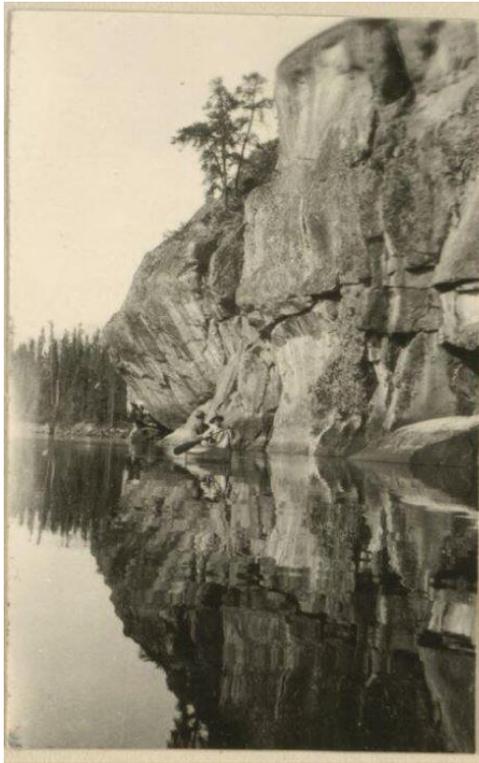
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At 9:00 AM on Wednesday, 18 September 2019, my brother Bill and I set off for a ten-day canoe trip deep into Minnesota's Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. Forest Service regulations today prohibit entry from Winton, so we started at the nearby Fall Lake Campground. Bill was 66 years old, I was 64. Our launch was auspicious: a bald eagle followed us for a few minutes. I took launch photographs on my mobile phone's camera, but later that phone accidentally slipped into the water: not only were all the photographs lost, but I also had to purchase a new phone. Fortunately, I also took some photographs on my waterproof GPS device.

We portaged into Newton Lake, where we saw our first loon, and then Basswood Lake, where we spent our first night. After a long paddle on Basswood Lake, we portaged Basswood Falls into Basswood River, and we spent our second night watching kingfishers flit back and forth across the international boundary without the benefit of passport or identity card. On our third day, after three more portages, we arrived at the foot of Lower Basswood Falls and the southeast end of Crooked Lake. Soon we passed the Native American pictographs at Picture Rock.

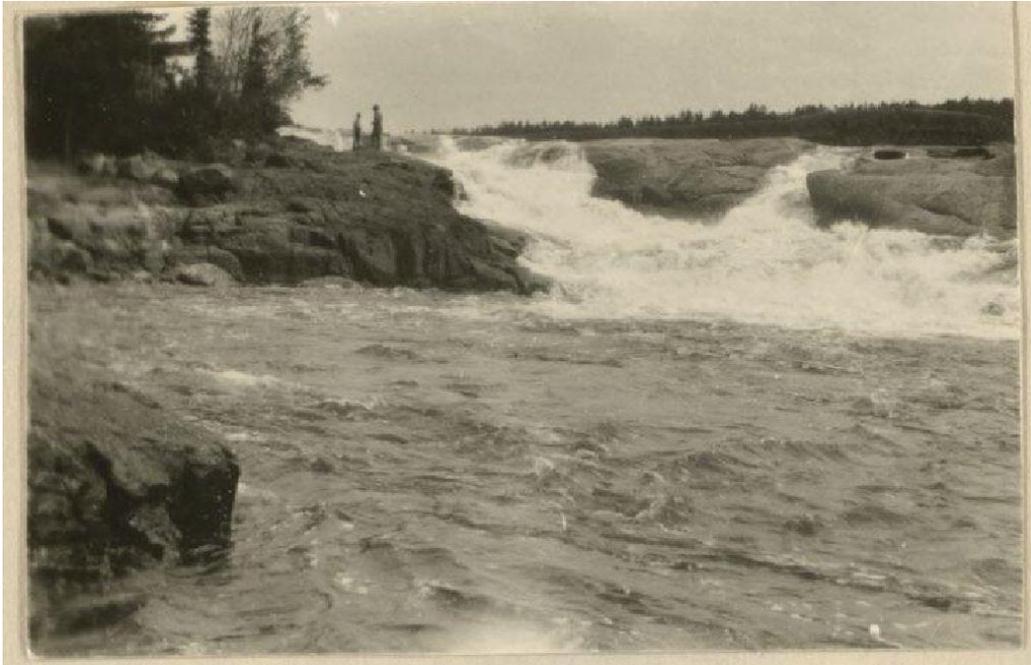


Canoeing past Picture Rock on Crooked Lake: Leopold on left, Styer on right.

We had a particularly nice campsite that third day: We swam and washed clothes, then dried our bodies and our clothes spread on a rock in the warm sunshine. There was a touch of fall color. I made a particularly good meal by combining my pouch of “Quinoa with Lentils & Garlic” with Bill’s pouch of “Punjab Eggplant”.

On our fourth day, we drew up to my two candidates for Mulligan Island: The western candidate was too small and not rocky enough to match Leopold’s photo, but the eastern candidate, when viewed from the east, was right on. We canoed all around both islands, taking dozens of photos, all of which I lost when my phone slipped into the water. Nevertheless, I am willing to say that I’ve positively identified my eastern candidate as the true Mulligan Island.

Later on that fourth day we landed at Curtain Falls. We agreed with Leopold that “the falls are really quite a show”, but we were also entranced by a spotted sandpiper teetering near the rushing water, by rusty woodsia fern, and by pale corydalis wildflower.



Curtain Falls: Leopold above, Styer below.

At Curtain Falls we turned back toward our Fall Lake launch point. One night during our return we saw the Milky Way, the Pleiades, and two meteors. One evening we saw a rainbow and beaver. But our grandest adventure came when we took a day trip from our lakeside camp

canoeing up Horse River in search of river otter. We found rapids, and swans, and a lake, and mergansers, and the bright red berries of mountain-ash, but no otter. The next morning three otter gamboled through the lake right past our camp. We had to agree with Leopold that “the number of adventures awaiting us in this blessed country seems without end.”

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After finding Mulligan Island, what remains to trace out concerning Leopold’s two canoe journeys into Canada, one in 1924 and one in 1925?

Plenty. The first is to take the trip I took, but keeping your camera dry.

A more significant question requires indoor searching. Can you find the 1924 map of Superior National Forest and Quetico Provincial Park that Leopold carried? Leopold discusses his map explicitly on 13 and 14 August 1925 – it used the name Kashahpiwigamak Lake for what is today called Kahshahpiwi Lake. And on 17 June 1924 Leopold looked for “Indian paintings ... on the cliffs in the lower part of Darkey Lake” (today called Darkwater Lake). Presumably his map indicated the existence of these pictographs. These hints could identify the map that Leopold used.

Other searches are outdoors: Where within Trout Lake (today called Argo Lake) is Leopold’s 16 June 1924 campsite, “a little dream of an island consisting of a single tree on a single rock”?

On 13 August 1925, Leopold visited the outlet of Yum Yum Lake and “found an entrancing rocky glen with a deep pool covered with multicolored water-lily leaves. ... Overhead hung a great cliff with colored lichens and gnarled pines and cedars. It was quite the loveliest spot I have ever seen.” At this point in his life, Leopold was 38 years old. He had lived in Iowa, New Jersey, Connecticut, Arizona, New Mexico, and Wisconsin, and had traveled extensively – for example to the Grand Canyon and to the “Green Lagoons” of Mexico’s Colorado River Delta – always with a sharp eye out for lovely spots. If this is the loveliest spot he had seen in all that rich looking, then it is surely worth visiting. I commend it to you for your next wilderness trip!