

A BOLD HUDSON RIVER PADDLING JOURNEY

"From the heart of the winter wilderness to the soul of American Civilization".

by **Grace Zaboski**

If you were standing on the edge of the Hudson River during the cold and rainy months of April and May this spring, you may have witnessed two handsome wooden canoes pass by, loaded with a cheerful cohort of twelve (12) high school students, paddling downriver with hand-made wooden paddles. And, if you were able to follow them into the evening, you would find them setting up tents in some hidden corner of the riverbank, collecting firewood, and gathering around a warm pot of soup, for an evening of songs and academic studies.

This unique tribe happens to be the latest cohort of the Kroka Expeditions Winter Semester Program – a five-month 750km outdoor expedition study program that has been taking place for the past 15 years. In previous years students have traveled through Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine, and Canada – however in 2019 the decision was made to attempt the first-ever Kroka expedition down the Hudson River.

Their entire 5-month journey took place on the water – however the first few months were skiing on a snowy landscape of frozen water! In January the students made their preparations at the Kroka base camp in Marlow NH and then ventured by skis and snowshoes through Vermont towards the far northern wilderness of the Uapishka Mountains in northern Quebec. After the ski expedition, the students traveled south towards the Richelieu River at the northern end of Lake Champlain – and from there began their month-long paddling odyssey.

While on expedition students engaged in a challenging academic program encompassing humanities, social studies, natural science, and applied mathematics. While all students are required to give 100% effort to disciplined study, training, and work, Kroka also respects individual learning differences and is committed to supporting all striving, hardworking students, regardless of their learning needs.

Here is their story, in their own words:

On February 20th we ventured out from our basecamp in Marlow with high spirits, excited that we were finally getting on the trail. We learned about site selection for our tent, stove setup, and evergreen bough harvesting for our tent floor. This would become our routine for the duration of our winter legs.

The amount of food needed for 15 people for such a long expedition required two sleds that we took turns pulling behind us. These first few days physically taxed us more than any other time. When we finally made it to Lac Magique, many of us were beat beyond belief. We had

made an elevation gain of 1,700ft in just two days. On our rest day we had time to learn about this land reigned by spruce, whose spiky boughs would become our carpet and whose wood became fuel for our stove. Above the spruce we found windswept peaks bordering perfect powder skiing bowl.

After Lac Magique, we pointed our skis east and headed toward Mont Lucie, with blue skies above. In the dazzling winter sunshine, we took a break from our packs and followed our teacher as he glided ahead of us to the top of a slope. Then he turned to us and said "like this" before gracefully telemark skiing back down. Soon a hoard of semester students careened down the slope. It was incredibly fun to soak up the warmth of the sun on our cheeks and be free, for a moment, from our packs.

When we broke camp the next morning we knew we would have a hard day ahead of us, traveling 11k across a treeless plateau. When we arrived to the top of the plateau we



met whiteout conditions. It was hard to tell where we were, or what the contours of the land were actually like, because everything was grey-white: above, below, and all around. What seemed like a flat stretch could have a steep slope in the middle. We were happy to have our competent navigator, River, who led us down safely from the plateau to our Mont Lucie camp

The next day we summited the 3,500ft mountain and were caught in whiteout conditions again, experiencing ripping winds and a lunar landscape. It was quite the experience straining our eyes to try peering through the swirling white, and in the end we could only see the outlines of nearby rocks

and each other through the thick and beating snow.

Back down at camp, our canvas tent became a cozy classroom for studying *The Endurance* by Ernest Shackleton, listening to wilderness medical lectures, reviewing weather patterns, and learning about poetry.

It was really fun seeing how we could rely on each other and work as a team to get camp set up, and even with that we still had our serious set backs. For the girls it was a tent that was so frozen from melted snow that we had to stuff it into a backpack and strap the excess to the outside of the bag. For the boys it was managing cooking and melting water on a much smaller stove. Something we learned was how much we need each other in order to efficiently and enjoyably live in this landscape. We met back with our instructors the next day to complete our academic work and prepare to return from the mountains.

myself thrilled. They beat into the fact that I am really out here, accomplishing amazing things and living life to the fullest way more than I would back in Wisconsin, still in high school. On the coldest days and longest stretches a grin will often spread across my face and I find myself even laughing out loud at the absurdity of us out here choosing, even paying, to go through this. However I am also grinning at the environment that surrounds me and the people who are right along side me going through the same things, we are experiencing what so few people get to... pure wilderness. While sometimes I am worn down and hurting, I never question why I chose to do this, for I know this is what satisfies me and ignites my soul." –Rosa Koehnlein

Spring came in quickly for us in early April, as we stepped out of the depths of winter and into the waters of Lake

Champlain. After a quick stop in Quebec City, we exchanged our faithful skis for two lofty 20-foot long wood canvas voyager canoes, crafted by previous Kroka students and re-varnished and re-painted by our semester. These new vessels would be our main mode of transportation on our venture to New York City.

When we were starting out we were apprehensive of what we might encounter. We learned a new style of camping, which consisted of a summer stove, a tarp for group gatherings, and three tents for sleeping. The first night

When we all joined together our breath was caught on the wind as we saw the vast frozen swaths of the Manicougan Reservoir ahead of us. We were so in awe of it that we could do nothing but sing, and when our voices were carried away by the wind we howled at the top of our lungs. We had made it, we were not only alive but fully living.

"I am here for adventure, the risk factor, the unknown. I grow the most in the hardest parts of my life & I enjoy the challenge. Without a risk, the unknown, a challenge, I feel like there's no point to life. During the hardest part of this expedition I have found

was bitterly cold, and many faces on that night were solemn with fear, that this chill might become a consistent trend. We heard that the lake was frozen over, which posed a potential problem for our travel plans. Yet as we went we were slowly greeted by clear water and stunning days. On our third day we had our first (and last) encounter with the ice. After a long day of travel and only a mile from our intended destination, we came upon a stretch of water that sat placid in our gaze. At first we perceived it to be clear, calm waters as a result of a bay blocking the wind. As we drew nearer we were astonished by the sound of ice, like a massive wind chime cascading against itself. One of our two mighty boats sped towards it in an attempt to break through, but to no avail. Instead we watched as their bow slid atop the ice and momentarily trapped them. At this point our only choice was to find a place to set up camp and devise a plan for crossing. We spied a thin channel in the pack that seemed like it passed through but we were uncertain. In the end we decided it was our only option. Our plan for the following day was to find our way through. In the end, as we slept, a warm southern rain came and

finish line the patch of still water by the shore. We called to River who was steering in an attempt to distract her. At first she stayed strong and focused on the prize, but curiosity crept over her like the waters crept over the gunwales and in a moment of weakness she looked back at us. In that same moment she re-positioned her paddle maneuvering her boat to the side. This gave us a few precious moments to gain the lead and as we passed we cackled like a flocks of crows. The only prize for the race awarded was a beautiful sunset and the perfect campsite.

On the next day we were greeted by a cheery NE wind. We hoisted our mast, tethered on our square sails and by their fair and forceful breath were sent 34 miles in a single day. All of us were thrilled by the gift of going such a great distance, and found our spirits lifted.

We touched down at the inlet of East Creek, where we would have a rest day, this time spanning two days. It was an utterly beautiful place, barely touched, because it is often as flooded as it was when we visited it. There we noted such signs of spring as toads, snakes, muskrats, and the distinct song of the loon.



by morning we were astonished by a perfectly clear expanse of water.

Though the ice had left us we weren't out of the woods yet. We started by travelling into the headwinds, and as they picked up throughout the day so did the waves. Soon we were paddling hard, leaning into every oncoming wave. It was hard to believe we weren't in some vast ocean. Several times the bow dipped under the waves or a back splash sloshed over the stern. We endured these conditions for five straight hours, and as we moved slowly onward, Valcour Island came into sight. First its outline became distinct against the land behind it. Then the trees were visible, and finally we could see the rocks lining the shore. We declared it a race by hounding our boat to push and so we kicked it into high gear. A cacophony of absurd insults and yips of encouragement boomed about the crashing waves. We were neck to neck, our

For our culminating day of the Champlain Leg we traveled 25 miles to Whitehall, NY. We paddled non-stop across silky still waters. While we pushed, the sun parted the overcast blanket that had shielded its golden rays from us in the morning. It was t-shirt weather! Misha, feeling it's warmth, announced from the stern of our canoe that we would go swimming. Two at a time jumped from the boats into the chilly water. Moments later heads would re-emerge from the water and quivering bodies would flop into the boat shortly behind. It felt so lovely afterward, to be dried by the sun.

At the end of that sunny day we came to Lock 12, the first (for us) of the twelve locks that make up the Champlain Canal. Though the locks were off-season, the NY State Canal System pushed maintenance earlier so that we could continue our journey without portaging our boats. It was an event all of us had been envisioning since the first week of semester. Our two lovely vessels floated

before the yellow gates and waited for the green light. Before the green light could even illuminate, the sound of the lock with its mighty metal arms resonated across the water. Once inside we held onto the ropes so our boats wouldn't be tossed about by the water. It was barely noticeable at first, but soon strong white patches of foam bubbled up around us and the water level rose. When it again came to a rest, we were done with our Champlain leg, having traveled 120 miles in 16 days.

As far as we were concerned, it was an adventure. We'd only been in the lock system for 2 days, completing 4 of the 11 locks, before we learned we could go no further. The northern end of the Hudson was flooding and the NY State Canal Corporation thought it would be better if we took out and put in again in Waterford right before Lock #1. We would need to travel 40 miles over land. Thankfully, instead of spending the rest of our expedition portaging our boats, the abundant hospitality of the canal system allowed us to travel that distance in a day. Though we would have loved to complete the canal on our own, this created a chance for spontaneity and divergence from the plan, an important part of every adventure.

We now had time to live into our Hudson River life and learn the ways of the river, transitioning away from lake life. Unfortunately, the first real difference we saw was an increase in pollution and trash. Little plastic bottles and cans floated mindlessly downstream, and a grove of glass bottles littered one of our first campsites. Though this was worrisome, we were assured by our instructors that through the efforts of organizations like the Hudson River Sloop Clearwater, the river has become much cleaner. In its past the river was said to have run in a variety of colors from red to purple, due to several dye factories that used the river as a dump. When we arrived in Poughkeepsie we learned that the Hudson is an estuary- this means that the river becomes brackish and responds to ocean tides the closer we get to the ocean. Because the Hudson flows from north to south we also had a handful of beautiful days for sailing, a group favorite, as it allows us to kick up our feet and send our gaze out to the world beyond our boat, the gunwales, and our paddles.

While we journeyed down the river we learned a lot more about hospitality and human kindness. Over the course of our expedition we have become accustomed to staying in the wild, but that isn't always possible on an industrial waterway. We stayed in public parks, canoe clubs, and on small islands. We stayed at several farms, such as Camphill Village Copake, where we spent a day doing service. It was a special thing to give back through working the land with our hands and feet. A highlight from Copake



was the torrential downpour that pummeled at the crowns of our heads while we placed the mulching tarp. It felt liberating to work barefoot, fully drenched from head to toe in these conditions, as we connected fully with the elements. At Seed Song Farm we truly loved the experience of lifting our voices in song while mulching the raspberries and weeding the peas. We were also honored to be included in a celebration of life for Pete Seeger. In every interaction with others, we gained new understanding of our own culture. Though each place was unique, all of them had in common the love and hospitality they gifted us.

The sound of trains is prolific on the Hudson. There are train tracks of both sides of the river- the passenger train on the east side, and the cargo trains on the west. Many of us are fond of their distant whistle as a reminder of home, and others get incredibly excited by an inbound train and will run to get closer if the opportunity is provided. On one occasion we happened to find our campsite situated not 30 feet from the track. This prospect was amusing at first. It was even fun to carry our dry bags and wannigans past the tracks and up the little slope to camp. And the first couple ding-ding-dings of the train crossing light was cute, as it gave us a warning to close our ears and look with excitement toward the tracks. But by dinner, after having more than three 90-car trains whoosh past, it began to get old. Our ears were already starting to ache. After two more trains passed and it was time for bed we all found ourselves anxious over the quality of sleep we would be having through the night. On the bright side, by morning we had learned a really cool lesson that interestingly enough, cargo trains do not stop at night. It was such an effective lesson that it left us cringing for the next couple days whenever we heard the distant call of the whistle.

From Croton Point southward campsites were scarce, and luckily we enjoyed the hospitality of the First Presbyterian Church of Dobbs Ferry, as well as the Yonkers Paddling and Rowing Club and the Inwood Canoe Club. Before we knew it we were paddling towards the George Washington Bridge and right beneath it was our destination, the place we'd ultimately been headed towards since the first day of expedition was in our sights: Manhattan.

We finished our river journey at the Gowanus Canal, one of the most polluted waterways of our country. We were shocked to see the shimmering veil of oil dance away from the disturbance of our paddles as we skimmed across the murky surface. The smell that hung in the air was no longer the crisp salt spray lifting from the bay, but rather the pungent odor of a mixture of chemical and rot. We would learn that the eutrophication in the canal is so dense that fish regularly die from de-oxygenation. We carefully navigated around the shopping carts and circuit boards that had been discarded in the dark waters. At the dock we had a moment of silence, to reflect on the distance we had travelled. We had journeyed from the cold snowy reaches of northern Quebec, and then by canoe from the Richelieu River in Quebec to Manhattan (though we were technically staying in Brooklyn) in 37 days. This moment marked the end of our time on trail. We left our boats and entered a new realm; the city.

We were fortunate enough to have the opportunity to see some classic sights of the city like Central Park, Times Square, and Broadway. Each of these places had something to teach us. In Central Park we saw nature in the city- though vast and tumbling in places, also well-manicured. We were delighted to see so many people dancing, laughing, and enjoying their green space. In Times Square we encountered the opposite of our winter experience; in the Canadian wilderness, silence is the dominate sound, our voices a rare and mellow accent of its quiet grandness. In the city, silence

never visits, not even for a moment. The bustling of cars and the scraping of shoes on pavement echoed off the concrete earth. Roused voices spring from every passerby. The sensory overload was far from the life we'd been living for the past 4 1/2 months. On Broadway we learned about the United States Constitution through Heidi Schreck's play "What the Constitution Means to Me". The culmination of the play saw her and her young co-star having a debate-style conversation on how our generation will play in the shaping of our future government, a dialogue that left us with much to consider and discuss among ourselves.

One of the projects we enjoyed most was our neighborhood navigation solos. For class that day each group of two was sent to one of six neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Manhattan: Brighton Beach, Greenwich, Sunset Park, Chinatown, East Harlem, and Harlem. We observed the culture and infrastructure, as well as class and racial distribution. It was a positive experience for us to look at the city through this lens in order to recognize the privileges, bias, and injustices that we have encountered and carry with us. Besides this academic outlook we also took time to connect with strangers, take fun photos, and one group even went for a swim.

A favorite service project of ours was the Billion-Oyster Project at Governors Island. It was there that we learned the amazing restorative power that oysters have in their ecosystem. A single oyster can filter 50 gallons of water a day. If there were 1 billion oysters in the New York harbor then it would only take 3 days to be completely filtered. That is mind-boggling! The project currently has 28 million oysters in the harbor. To assist their efforts we made oyster habitats to be placed in the Hudson near where the Tappan Zee Bridge once stood.

Our trip back to Kroka Base Camp consisted of one very long train ride to Bellows Falls, a time we used to finish up our academics. At the station we met a trailerful of bikes that would aid our travel to Kroka, 14 miles away (uphill, of course). This was the final part of the final stretch. We were riding into the end of expedition. We were coming home. As the sun set and we came down the final hill to Kroka Base Camp our voices turned to joyous shrieking. We had made it back after 3 1/2 months of being away.

Now home at base camp we will spend the remainder of our time doing service, finishing academics, and relishing the moments we've had together and the ones we still have before going home.

Students:

- Robert Alexander Boulder, CO
- Ethan Andrus Camden, ME
- Sophia Cable Amherst, MA
- Fynn Greene South Londonderry, VT
- Grace Jessiman Newton, MA
- Rosa Koehnlein Eagle, WI
- Simone LePage Brooklyn, NY
- River Pasquale Holyoke, MA
- Callie Pittman Leverett, MA
- Emma Smith Plaistow, NH
- Ethan Wahanik Rohnert Park, CA
- Grace Zaboski Chatsworth, CA

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