

A PICTURE AND A THOUSAND WORDS

Water, sky, trees, canoe, plain white tent: those iconic elements compose the ideal image to ponder on our country's birthday



FRANCIS BOYES PHOTO

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Francis Boyes took the picture that's launched a thousand questions 15 summers ago.

It was a couple of years before Boyes and his wife, Caryn Colman, bought Smoothwater, a struggling lodge north of Temagami, which they've since turned into a thriving, four-season, eco-tourism destination offering everything from canoeing and snowshoeing to yoga and organic cooking.

For years Boyes, a professional photojournalist working in PR and corporate photography, and Caryn, a professional artist earning a living as a copywriter, had dreamed of escaping the rat race in Toronto.

Their canoe trip to the Mistassibi Nord-Est River, 350 kilometres north of Lac St. Jean in northeastern Quebec, was just the kind of journey a young couple would take, a journey where dreams of what their future could hold would have been discussed at length.

After setting up camp that July evening, Boyes stepped away to relieve himself in the woods when he happened to turn around and see their campsite framed perfectly against the northern sky.

The stark contrast of their simple, cotton tent, the upturned canoe, the rushing waters of the Mistassibi beside a calm pool of water, and the sight of his wife helping pre-

pare dinner, prompted Boyes to rush back for his 35mm Nikon to get the shot.

"The photo is a great touchstone for me," Boyes wrote recently in an email from Temagami. "It was the first day of our canoe trip in the taiga of northern Quebec. There was great anticipation of the river that lay ahead but a quiet appreciation for this day and our pristine surroundings.

"The dramatic evening sky was unexpected but very much in keeping with being in the wilderness."

Today, the original 16-by-20-inch print of the photograph hangs framed on a wall in their lodge. It never fails to stop guests in their tracks, Boyes says.

They admire the lighting or stare at a scene that evokes a way of living with the wilderness that is all too uncommon these days. Others who look at the photo, he says, revel in an image that perfectly captures the feel of the northern wilderness.

"And they always ask where it was taken," adds Boyes.

The tent that anchors the photo, Boyes points out, is made of Egyptian cotton, famed for its quality. It is grown in the Nile River Delta but woven in Scotland and, owing to the fine, tight weave, is waterproof.

The tent was made by a Toronto

resident named G.H. Westhead, who produced canvas theatrical backdrops between the 1940s and 1960s. He also made tents for Boy Scout troops.

Boyes fondly remembers a touching gesture by Westhead, who gave him one of his tents after Boyes paid him a visit at his home. Today he owns three Westhead tents, including the one in this picture.

I first saw the photo during a visit

Today, the 16-by-20-inch original hangs framed on a wall in an eco-lodge. It never fails to stop guests in their tracks

to Smoothwater Lodge in the late 1990s, not long after Boyes, Caryn and their young daughter had made the decision to leave Toronto and head to the near-north to pursue their dreams.

My wife and I made the drive to Temagami — a part of Ontario that has the stark beauty typical of the Canadian north — in a blinding, late December snowstorm, after we'd read a newspaper article about Smoothwater lodge.

We were drawn like so many others by stories of ancient towering pines, as well as a desire to experi-

ence what Canadian winter was like far, far away from Toronto.

It is the farthest north I have ever been in Ontario, and the memories of that trip remain vivid.

The lodge served delicious meals; there were lengthy conversations at a communal dinner table; we made a particularly long snowshoe hike over endless kilometres of wilderness.

On the visit I purchased a copy of the picture for, as I recall, \$10.

After returning home, we taped the image to our fridge door, then moved it to the kitchen bulletin board, and finally hung it by my desk, amid countless maps of journeys realized and imagined.

When I look at the image I am always struck by the rawness of the scene.

This is not cottage country.

And it is certainly not ice-cooler camping.

It is minimalist camping, shorn of the trappings of Coleman Inc. and the dazzle of Mountain Equipment Co-op.

The photograph is also a reminder that there are journeys I have yet to take to the real north, the vast region of Canada that is paradoxically nothing more than an image or a notion for the millions who live in southern Ontario or along the 49th parallel.

Robert Fulford wrote that pianist Glenn Gould was greatly affected

by the north when he worked on his music. Fulford quotes Gould saying, "I found myself writing musical critiques . . . in which the north — the idea of the north — began to serve as a foil for other ideas and values that seemed to me depressingly urban-oriented and spiritually limited . . ."

Fulford tells how the north for Gould became a point of reference and remembrance, "a kind of alternate truth to which his life as a Canadian gave him access."

I love the city as much as the "country," and yet I increasingly find myself wanting to venture far beyond cottage country, past Killarney, past Algonquin Park, farther into that expanse of land that stretches up there.

Just the other day I happened to hear a dispatch on CBC radio by the canoeist Kevin Callan, who had completed yet another dream trip in the north.

Callan spoke about enduring oppressive heat, blackflies and the dreaded horseflies, as he described the challenges and rewards of navigating a remote northern river by canoe.

Then he said something to the effect that once you've been to the north, all else pales.

A thought worth pondering, with the help of this image, is I dream of heading north again some day.