

## **ADVENTURE IN THE ARCTIC**

### **BOREALIS PADDLING EXPEDITION A TESTAMENT TO FEMALE EXPLORERS, TRIBUTE TO YMCA CAMP**

**By STORY BY LISA GOODMAN, SPECIAL TO THE CAPITAL TIMES**

Out of such unimaginable solitude, just a few days prior to journey's end, arrived a welcome sight - a festive surprise visit by a band of adventuring seaplane pilots. Perhaps this was a gentle harbinger of the days ahead; the inevitable re-entry into "the real world" and lots of people offering congratulations and inviting the adventurers to tell their story.

After 87 days and 1,200 miles on the trail, members of the Borealis Paddling Expedition recently reached Chantrey Inlet on the Arctic Ocean where, Karen Stanley reports, they took a "final swim of celebration" in the icy waters.

What would it be like to spend three months canoeing across northern Canada? And, what will it be like to return from such an experience? Five women, all recent graduates who range in age from 21 to 23, are about to find out.

The expedition members are:

- Meg Casey of Washburn, who graduated from St. Olaf (Minn.) with a degree in political science and environmental studies;
- Nina Emery of Hartford, Conn., who majored in philosophy and physics and Cornell (N.Y.) University;
- Beth Halley of Milwaukee, who has a neurobiology degree from the University of Wisconsin;
- Karen Stanley of Waukesha, a UW-La Crosse grad in recreation management;
- Stirr, who has a biology degree from the University of Puget Sound in Washington.

Between them, they share 60 years of wilderness tripping experience and a wealth of skills gleaned at Camp Manito-wish YMCA in Boulder Junction, located 35 miles northwest of Eagle River. Putting their training to good use, they have journeyed through 1,200 miles of remote country, challenging whitewater and the unpredictable winds and ice of Saskatchewan, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut.

"Somehow we have managed the delicate feat of separating our anticipation for reaching our goal from the dreaded finality of reaching the end. I am struck again by how eerie the stillness is. I am used to the way the wind roars across the great emptiness of the tundra, to the tired euphoria of my body after a day of hard work, fresh air and laughter. ...Which brings me to the most universal of all truths about trail. It is never long enough."

- Nina Emery

### **Giving Something Back**

What would possess these recent college graduates to do such a thing? Many women in their shoes would be landing "real jobs" or heading off to graduate school, but these are no ordinary young people.

Over the two years since they first conceived of the expedition, they have been preparing. Putting larger plans on hold, they found short-term work. Casey, Halley and Stirr based themselves in Madison, Stanley in Waukesha, and Emery prepared while completing her studies at Cornell. They made endless lists and phone calls and garnered \$20,000 in sponsorships from more than a dozen outdoor gear manufacturers, including Bell Canoe, Kokatat, Northwest River Supply and Sierra Designs.

The cost of the entire trip was estimated at \$60,000 - which included about \$18,000 in equipment they already owned. Between the sponsorships, personal contributions and a "friends and family" fundraising drive, they made up the difference, contributing the funds to a common bank account.

The five women also cultivated other necessary skills, such as learning to shoot a shotgun, and put forth an enormous amount of planning, especially when it came to food usage.

But they really began preparing for this effort more than a decade ago, learning trail skills as campers at Manito-wish.

Through the expedition, the women are giving back to the camp that gave so much to them. Their goal is to raise \$50,000 for the Borealis Campership Endowment, to sponsor at least one camper at Camp Manito-wish each year. As the journey ends, executive director Anne Derber reports the women are already more than halfway to their fundraising goal.

Expedition member Casey is a campership success story. At the recommendation of friends, she attended Manito-wish as a youngster. She went on to become a counselor and trip leader. Without the campership fund, Casey said "it never

would have been possible" for her to attend camp. "I think I really am choosing my life's path because of Manito-wish."

In the words of Jenny Emery, Nina's mom and a Manito-wish alumna herself, "The expedition is making a statement about women and strength and independence."

Said Gail Stirr, Emily's mom and a Manito-wish alumna: "I think they're looking to inspire others, both older and younger women."

Strong female leaders are a tradition at Manito-wish, where the executive director and the board chair are both women. "When I go do a canoe trip with other women, I forget that's an unusual sight. That seems normal to me," Derber said.

On Trail The women chose an impressive route, following the Fond du Lac, Dubawnt, Thelon, and Back Rivers. They really wanted to challenge themselves, to "go longer and make it harder" than trips they'd done previously, Stirr said. The Dubawnt is not a very frequently paddled river, and to the best of their knowledge, they are only the second all-woman group to run it (the first was last summer). They also believe theirs may be the longest all-woman expedition to the region in distance, and possibly in duration, according to Halley.

Use of technology has been limited. Map and compass served for day-to-day navigation. A GPS unit and satellite phone helped coordinate food re-supplies. The phone also enabled them to leave weekly update messages. They carried a personal locator beacon, in case of a serious emergency.

Back home in Milwaukee, Phil Halley - Beth's dad - helped keep the expedition Web site current. He posted the expedition photos sent out by bush plane from re-supply points, and saw that the women's weekly satellite phone updates were transcribed and posted to the Web. Halley enjoyed hearing their voices on the recordings, and knowing that all continued to go well. "They're so euphoric," he said with a chuckle last week, recalling their recent messages.

Over the course of their journey, the women have pulled, paddled and lined their canoes across vast expanses of ice, portaged long distances and run challenging whitewater. They have explored the tundra, marveling at the landscape, the sky, the native plants, the musk oxen, caribou and arctic wolves. They have waited out stormy, wind-bound days in their tents, reading Farley Mowat. They even had a chance to practice their tent repair skills after weathering a visit from a black bear.

### **In the land of the Ithmiut**

In a journal entry, Casey reflects on a somber aspect of the journey:

"On top of a narrow esker-like peninsula that divides the lakes stand two towering inukshuks, reminding me of an entirely different history this land knows. Inukshuks are rock-piled, human-like pillars, made by the Inuit people who inhabited this land for centuries. Only 60 years ago, the Ihalmiut lived on the plains we are traveling. Their history is long, rich, yet disturbingly silent, even to those who seek to understand this place to its fullest. They were a people who lived with balance, as innate elements of their environment. They subsisted on caribou and lived nomadic lives; they were hunters, and wise women. We are surprised to be learning of their history for the first time, seeing that we are five college graduates who have already traveled in the boreal forest and tundra. Are these people remembered? Who are their spokespersons? Where are their memories? The more we learn about the Ihalmiut and other Inuit groups (Crees, Chippewyan, Idthen, Eldeli), the more they become part of the world we are seeing."

### **Trail's end**

A satellite phone update from Sunday finds the Borealis Paddling Expedition members camped on Montreal Island, almost halfway through their motor boat passage up Chantrey Inlet to Gjoa Haven, Nunavut.

Wind and fog have slowed this final leg of the expedition, but they look forward to reaching Gjoa Haven soon. (An example of the testy weather on the Arctic Ocean: At 6 a.m. today, it was 37 degrees, with 95 percent humidity, and winds at 26 mph, gusting to 32 mph.)

Weather permitting, they will fly back from Gjoa Haven to Edmonton, Alberta, on Thursday, and then drive three days back to Wisconsin.

What's next for these accomplished women? From the end of the trail, Emery writes:

"Our greater mission provides a strong, steady undercurrent to the goals of every day, and one of the things we look forward to the most at the end of the trip is seeing how the endowment is faring and continuing to share our story and inspire further generations."