

BOOK REVIEW

Title: *Waters Beneath My Feet*

Subtitle: *New Orleans to Nome:*

My 3 Year Canoe Odyssey

Author: Jerry Pushcar

Published: 2018

Publisher: Last Cache Publishing, Alaska

Contents: 367 pp, black and white photos, one map

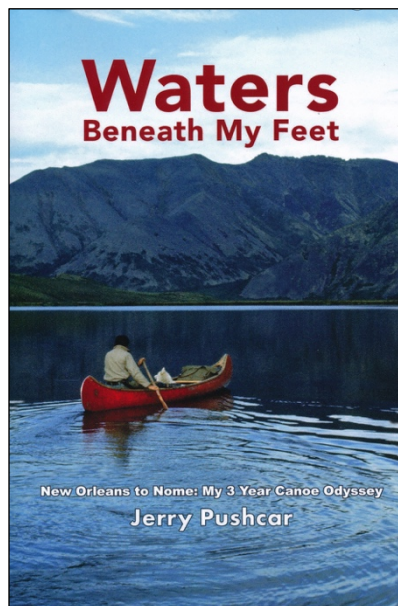
Cover: softcover

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Review: Paul Caffyn

A trap with buying books on line is the limited amount of information available. This book's subtitle caught my eye as the author had finished his trip at Nome in Alaska where I had been during my round Alaska paddle.



With not much of a preamble, other than a note on the rear cover that states, 'after a 1,200 mile solo canoe trip from Grand Portage, Minnesota to Hudson Bay, Jerry Pushcar wanted to see more of North America's untamed wilderness', the author launched his 17 foot canoe into the Mississippi River at New Orleans. He aimed to paddle up the river, cross central Canada by portaging and paddling, down the Mackenzie River, up the Rat River, then portage across into the Yukon River and from its mouth, paddle north along the Alaskan coast to Nome.

Jerry was 25 years old, when he launched into the river near New Orleans on 10 January 1975, his sole companion a six-week-old Samoyed pup. There are 10+ books of kayak or canoe trips down the Mississippi - one of the best being the 1960 paddle by two women and a kitten from source to sea. All these books describe difficult times with floods, finding campsites, portaging around dams or passing through locks and dealing with a high density of shipping traffic, particularly long strings of barges in the lower reaches.

Jerry has to deal with all those challenges, but in reverse, bucking the current, fighting his way upstream around moored barges, dealing with sudden thunderstorms, and trying to find dryish campsites for an evening. All this on an absolute shoestring budget. His dogged determination to push up the Mississippi River is staggering. He slept with a Smith and Weston under his pillow, using it once to deter a pack of five dogs savaging a deer. Once through the first of the many massive locks, the issues of floods and muddy river banks are left behind and he was able to enjoy the scenery and interaction with locals he met.

By the onset of northern winter, Jerry had left the Mississippi River and begun the paddle/portage routes to the Canadian border where he rented an abandoned farmhouse for the winter doldrums. After ice breakup on the lakes and rivers in the summer of 1976, Jerry followed those routes that the French-Canadian voyageurs used in the really old days with big freight canoes. Not far north of Lake Athabasca he had to spend a second winter and remarkably, from scratch with the aid of an axe and a two-foot folding saw, he builds his own log cabin, plastic sheet for a window and boot leather hinges for a door. How this young fella survived on his own for a second winter with just himself, a second dog and his guitar is mind boggling.

During the third summer, Jerry reached the Mackenzie River, then had a battle with bugs, running short on food and having to drag his canoe up the freezing waters of the Rat River to Summit Lake. Locals out hunting and archaeological teams helped with his meagre diet, as Jerry paddled down the Bell River, into the Porcupine and then it was all downhill on the Yukon River to the sea. At Russian Mission, a small native village, not only does he lose his second

dog in an overnight scrap but it was mid-September and winter was on its way. Held up by headwinds, he finally exits the north mouth of the Yukon River but then almost loses his canoe when it drifts offshore; his survival afterwards on shore following a swim to retrieve the canoe, depended on his ability to light a fire. His 'Tin Man' description of his trying to free his frozen joints and underwear is so apt.

At Unalakleet, a coastal Inupiaq village, winter conditions were well advanced. Then at Cape Denbigh, only 132 miles by sea from Nome, there was no more open water, the sea had iced over. He could have waited out another winter, but Jerry's dogged determination led him on a long freezing detour on land, through terrible blizzard conditions until he staggered into Nome on 12 November 1977.

In the acknowledgements, Jerry Pushcar notes the book was 40 years in the making. Obviously, he had a few rejections early on. The text is very readable - it never gets bogged down in a straight regurgitation of diaries. Mind you, he had plenty of time for re-writing during those two long winters. Description of his time interacting with the locals, especially during the two long winters are nicely done, with insights into the hardships suffered and friendships made in those really remote villages or winter camps.

Photo coverage is on the lean side; some chapters with none and some with two or three in the text. The single half-page map shows North America with a black line marking his route and not a single place name. Which makes following Jerry's route rather difficult. A map per chapter would have helped.

The last paragraph notes that 'Jerry was born and raised in the northern Minnesota' and he 'has lived in Nome since completing his record-breaking solo canoe voyage. He has now retired and spends his summers mining for gold in the mountains surrounding Nome.'

Perhaps described as a down to earth narrative of a really big paddling trip by such a young bloke. No deep philosophizing about the meaning of life, but how he set his sights on reaching Nome and how his dogged determination got him there in the end.

Review: Paul Caffyn 28 July 2020