

# Portage Routes of MVCA: Their History and Use

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## An Ancient Travel Route

Anishinaabe people say that Bon Echo Rock on Mazinaw Lake was a great rendezvous point long before European settlements reached the Mississippi River watershed. The cliff top at Mazinaw Lake was a sacred place, and Algonquin peoples retain and value this ancestral link to their past.

More than 260 painted images attest to the significance of this place and the storytelling technique of the people who created them. The red ochre images depict human and animal figures, as well abstract and geometric symbols.

Pictographs are place-markers linked to travel rituals and are signs of human occupation on the landscape. The Mazinaw pictographs, attest to a tradition that is at least 2,000 years old.<sup>1</sup> Some estimates place them as far back as 5,000 BCE.<sup>2</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Aubert et al. 2004; Rajnovich 1994:41

<sup>2</sup> The Mazinaw Pictographs were designated a national historic site of Canada in 1982, the largest

These pictographs and artifacts found along the Mississippi River confirm it to be an ancient travel route perhaps as old as the pyramids of Egypt.

## Lumbermen's Feud of 1882

French fur trades travelled the Ottawa and Mississippi rivers and connected with the Algonquin of this area around 1670.<sup>3</sup> The Mississippi River watershed remained relatively untouched by settlers until the 1850s when they began to clear the land and harvest the great forests of towering pines to send them downriver using timber slides.

In fact, Canada's *Navigable Waters Protection Act* is said to have its origins due to the "Lumbermen's Feud" of 1882 between Mississippi River lumber mill barons Peter McLaren and Boyd Caldwell.<sup>4</sup> The story goes that McLaren owned a lumber mill on the upper Mississippi River and, to push his logs downstream, he constructed a series of timber slides on the Mississippi and some of its tributaries. His rival, Boyd Caldwell, sought to take advantage of McLaren's work and attempted to drive his logs through the same slides. A feud entailed, which ended in court.

rock art site on the southern Canadian Shield and the only major pictograph site in southern Ontario.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ottawariver.org/pdf/07-ch2-5.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/McLaren\\_v\\_Caldwell](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/McLaren_v_Caldwell)

Caldwell made the claim that no single person can own the navigable rights of a river, and that he was fully justified in his actions. Caldwell's successful claim established the principle in Canadian law that waterways are open to all, and that private interests cannot refuse passage to anyone if the waterway is navigable.



Several of MVCA's dams are located at former timber slides or mills along the Mississippi and Clyde rivers.

### Mississippi River Canoe Route

The Mississippi River Canoe Route extends from Bon Echo Provincial Park on Mazinaw Lake to the Ottawa River—just over 200 kilometres. Along the way, it traverses countless rapids and falls, through forested banks, lowland swamp, rolling farmland and

country hamlets. Portages are necessary at several locations due to dangerous or impassible sections of the river. It is likely that most portage routes in the early years were informal and evolved over time as trees fell, erosion occurred, and land was developed.

In 1910, the Mississippi River was the first canoe route to be promoted in *Canada's Book of Recreational Canoe Routes*.<sup>5</sup>

### Provincial Assessment and Funding

When MNR crews surveyed the Mississippi River watershed in 1969 they found that “the high potential for canoe routes has not been developed except in the western end of the Authority.”<sup>6</sup>

Over the years that followed, the MVCA received provincial funding to sign-up and work with landowners to establish portages: “Portage trails on the Mississippi River from Dalhousie Lake to Playfairville have been completed across private land through the co-operation and courtesy of the landowners who include Mr. W. Hall, Mr. W. Duncan, Mr. J. Playfair, Mr. N. Wall and General H. Meuser. Signs and waste disposal barrels have been erected at the portages to protect the natural environment of the river.”<sup>7</sup>

In 1975, signs and fireplaces were installed at several locations, and several additional sites were examined for their potential as portages or for overnight camping. The

<sup>5</sup> [The Happy Camper: Canoeing Canada's Mississippi River, Part 1 – Explore Magazine \(explore-mag.com\)](https://www.explore-mag.com/2014/05/the-happy-camper-canoeing-canada-s-mississippi-river-part-1/)

<sup>6</sup> <https://mvc.on.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/mvc-repot-1970-v1-WEB.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> MVCA 1973 Annual Report.

“brochures which were printed in 1975 have received wide distribution and the Authority has received many comments on the quality of the routes.”

By 1976, MVCA’s role was focused on publications and promotion of the canoe route while “the two Districts of the Ministry of Natural Resources will be responsible for a large part of the maintenance of the route.”<sup>8</sup>

### Sign, Sign, Everywhere a Sign

MVCA continued to promote the canoe route, and performed occasional maintenance of portage markers and fallen tree removal for over 30 years. These activities discontinued around 2008 when the Township of North Frontenac assumed land management of Crown properties, and as more canoeists took on portage maintenance throughout the system.

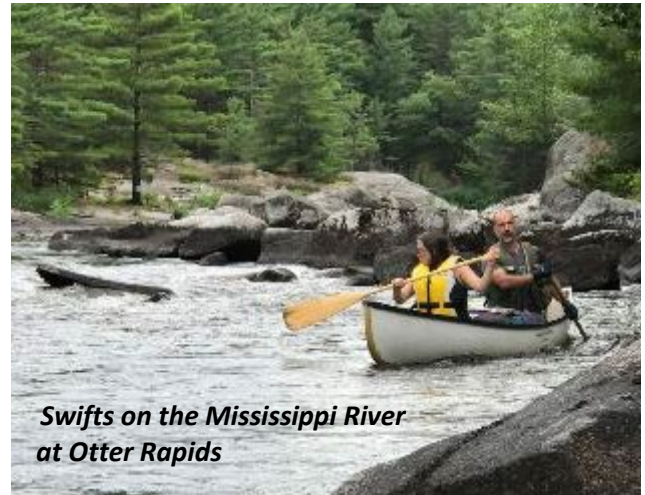
Today, MVCA still has a large visual presence along the Mississippi River Canoe Route not only at our dams and gauge sites, but also due to our many historic portage signs throughout the river system.



<sup>8</sup> MVCA 1976 Annual Report.

### Big Gull Loop & Whitewater Opportunities

The upper Mississippi River and its reservoir lakes are enjoyed by way of the Big Gull Loop, which connects canoeists back to their starting point by exiting Crotch Lake and navigating small creeks to Gull Big, Shoe Pack and Kashwakamak Lakes.



Adventurous white-water enthusiasts can experience the true wilderness of the river between Crotch Lake and Miller Lake. While rugged in parts, the white water eventually turns into swifts as the river passes from Crown land to Patent land and camping opportunities are reduced to private operations.

The middle reach of the Clyde River is also popular with white-water canoeists when levels are high. The Clyde River is navigable for 44 km from Widow Lake to its outlet at the Mississippi River. Where portages don’t exist, it is travelled using a “*stay with the river*” method and techniques of “*lining and wading*” are used.



## Not So Calm on the Carp River

Paddling the Carp River provides excellent opportunities for day trips. Certain sections can only be paddled during high water levels, and can be challenging due to downed trees and low bridge clearances. The final reach below Carp Road to the Ottawa River provides white water conditions during the spring freshet.

## Manoomin

Manoomin, “good berry”, or wild rice, is culturally significant to First Nations. It is found in abundance on Mud Lake downstream of the community of Ardoch that has harvested it for generations.

## Portages

Portage or portaging is the practice of carrying water craft or cargo over land. On the Mississippi River it is generally around



*Wild rice on Mud Lake*

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an obstacle in the river such as a dam or rapid.

Portages are dynamic and adjust to the changing environment, downed trees, beaver floods and may have high and low water accesses. Most of the portages of the upper reaches of the river are located within the Crown land shoreline allowance. Below Crotch Lake, portages start to be found on private land as shoreline allowance have not been preserved. Portages on private land have been a source of contention in some places.

MVCA provides for and maintains portages at our water control structures where active and historic use is known.

## Mapping & Promotion

The Mississippi River Canoe Route is promoted in various publications, the most popular being *A Paddler's Guide to Ontario's Lost Canoe Routes* by Kevin Callen, 2002.

The Mississippi River Canoe Route is also actively promoted on several websites and community forums including [Mississippi Valley Field Naturalist](#) and [MyCCR.com](#).