

*Hiking
Manitoulin
Island*

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"from the future the past"

Hiking Manitoulin Island

I - The Beginning

It would have all started some thirty years ago in the early seventies. My father had decided that he and my brother and I would spend a few weeks on Manitoulin Island. I would have been eight or nine at the time. So, on an early morning there we stood with our packs on Avenue Road in Toronto. My brother's thumb seemed to be lucky as the first car that drove by picked us up. We were hitchhiking. I don't imagine my brother and I were much fazed by that. Already by then we were probably veteran hitchhikers having travelled to the family cottage umpteen times in that manner. Neither sinking knee deep in swamps, nor hacking through the bush. Neither hiking long cottage roads to get to the highway to hitchhike to the nearest little town of Baysville for supplies and ice cream. Neither watching a capsized canoe, paddles and supplies float by as my father had tried to run a set of rapids, while my brother and I alone traversed the portage through the bush with the 8mm camera, waiting to be picked up at the other end. So, one is formed by those years and in the end to have an adventure is the only way to go.

A few years earlier, which by the span of our ages then would have been almost half a lifetime earlier, we were broken down in an old Volkswagen bug on the side of the highway, while Neil Armstrong was landing on the moon. I guess that would have been the end of regular transportation. From then on it would have been hitchhiking or borrowed cars.

So unfazed we started off. I don't remember all the details of all the rides, but by evening we had crossed by ferry to Manitoulin Island and by nightfall our little tent, with three people in it like sardines, was set up by the corner of highway 6 and 542 leading into Mindemoya. In the morning we would wake to my father talking to a local farmer about something or other. Could such a trip have a deliberate end point and not one determined by just wherever you might end up?

By the next day we had made it to Poplar, and then sure enough began the long hike down the concession road with farmer's fields on either side, and then the dirt road through the woods to Portage Beach. Why Portage Beach of all places? Well, my father it seemed had seen a perfectly round little lake in an aerial photograph or topographical map. That little round lake happened to be just north of Portage Beach a kilometer or so. That little round lake was so round that it could possibly be a little round meteor crater, thought my father.

So, we were off to check it out, the simple reason why we ended up at Portage Beach on the south shore of Manitoulin Island on Lake Huron. As reasons go, this reason was as sufficient as any to go anywhere. An idea and a destination. Here is a little, little round lake on a map, in some deserted area, in a place not well travelled. Let's go find it and see it for ourselves.

And from such seeds of ideas grow many stories. And while not all seeds germinate some grow into large trees with longevity and many branches. Not much has changed and I still find myself seeking out some place for no more purpose except to see that it exists.

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And so, on a large beautiful sandy beach we spent a period of time. A run-down building at the east end of the beach was all that was there. Who remembers how many days we were there? The days were spent with the amusements at hand. The little flow of water, which can't even be called a creek was dammed into a small pond. Bottle caps were raced on it and crewed by ants. Pocket knives whittled larger hulls for the great water. Masts of twigs, sails of thin birch bark and rudders completed the craft. All told these ships still only measured a few inches. Ladybugs crewed the sails.

And so, the wind took away these boats and one would watch them gently sail away if they didn't capsize. Imagination continued as they disappeared from view, to where on the seas, beyond the points embracing the beach, they might voyage.

So, the beach was walked up and down and explored. Little conical depressions in the sand like upside down ant hills were discovered to hold tiny anteaters. When an ant unfortunately fell in, the tiny anteater would throw sand up on the sides of the conical depression, until the ant finally ended up at the bottom and became dinner. In the sand one day was found a cone shaped fossil, latter to be ascertained to be a coral cup and not the sharks tooth it looked like.

And so passed the days in the sun or in a wet tent when it rained. The trench dug around the tent doing nothing for the torrent of drops that would fall if we touched its sides. Every few days though we had to get supplies. Poplar was about five kilometers from Portage Beach making it a ten kilometer round trip. So off we trudged in the hot sun to Poplar. I still have a photograph that sits framed on my desk of my brother and I with our small army surplus packs with sleeping bags tied on top, walking ahead on the dirt road to Portage Beach. It was probably taken either on our first day in or on our last day out.

Now Poplar still had a general store in those days but there was not a lot to choose from. The thriving general store that it had been for so many years before, serving the community with feed and ice and all else, must have been in its final few years or maybe even its last year winding down to closing. There was probably still bread, eggs and butter and definitely apple juice.

The apple juice tin we would take over to the school yard, after looking at the machine gun in front of the war memorial. There under the shade of the tall trees next to the school we would pump cold water from the well to dilute the apple juice. The cool shade of the trees and cold apple juice was a respite from the heat of the gravel roads.

In later years I always wondered where exactly we sat. Sometime in the passing years the trees were replaced by a gravel parking lot for ballgames behind the school. So now, the flickering of the sun through the leaves and the cool shade and pump in the middle of the grass can only ever remain as a memory.

And so followed the long walk back to the shoreline. I always remember how long it took us and what a long hike it was. The butter my father bought didn't fare well and after only a single

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taste with a finger, melted a day or two later in the heat of the summer and was buried somewhere on the beach.

Poplar wasn't even a town, barely a crossroads, but it holds for me one of my fondest memories of Manitoulin Island. Every time I drive by or stop in Poplar I remember it from long ago. I see in my mind the store where once we bought apple juice and search in vain for the shade trees we drank the diluted apple juice under and the well. I see the war memorial and its machine gun and the house now that used to be the store. I look down the concession road with the farms on either side, that we would endlessly walk down towards Portage Beach. In my early twenties I would repeat the trip in the same way, hitchhiking to Manitoulin Island and then to Poplar, to walk that road down to the beach anew.

I don't remember our journey home at all and barely remember hacking through the cedars back to the little round lake. Sure enough I am told we did. Faint unsure images of memory linger and are confused. I do remember lying in the tent fantasizing about pumping out that little round lake to find the meteor buried in its muddy bottom. A prize to behold by perseverance. To find something that nobody had found before or even knew existed.

What deep influence then was formed by this first visit? What was subtly buried in oneself so quietly that at the time one did not even know it was there? I remember two feelings very strongly.

The first was that I always wondered what lay beyond the points on either end of the curve of our long beach. The long beach on both sides ended in fields of round rocks. Certainly less passable and friendly than the sand. Yet the shoreline must have continued beyond these points. I so distinctly remember wondering what lay beyond these points. A mystery shrouded in fog. Imagination didn't know how to answer that wonder. It was a blank page and for now the points defined our world. There was the seed, and from that seed would later germinate the active idea to find out what lay beyond those points.

The second strong feeling was that of the interminable hikes into Poplar and back and how much we walked. One day in the future those two strong feelings would combine into one.

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II - The Intermediate Years

I am hard pressed to remember many of the details or even the number of trips to Manitoulin Island between my first visit thirty years ago in the early seventies and my first shoreline hike in 1992. There would be at least three and maybe as many as six trips.