



PROVINCE OF MANITOBA CONSERVATION COMMENT

CANOEING ON THE SOURIS

Carefully, the paddle dips into the slow-moving brownish water under the overhanging poplars. The current moves sluggishly, pressing the canoe towards the bank. And she's there. Alert, wide-eyed, at this strange apparition easing down the stream. Her ear quirks with the question: "What is it? Is it dangerous? Shall I run?" She freezes. We whisp closer. Then an explosive movement and she decides flight is expedient. Her white flag shoots up and the doubting doe bounds through the sparse undergrowth, away from the river and us. Again we are alone, and turn our shoulders once more into the paddles.

That's part of the Souris River. And part of the experience of canoeing down it. It's placid and exciting, restful and raucous. But it's seldom boring. It's a trip that can be easily undertaken by the novice, yet one which will be a delight to the expert. It's a trip filled with wildlife and wild scenery, and packed with the elements of history that make the southwestern part of Manitoba so fascinating.

The Souris starts deep in the southeastern corner of Saskatchewan, dips down into North Dakota, then rises to enter Manitoba near PTH 83. Antler Creek is a good starting point for a canoe trip down the Souris. It's an easy launching, and one surrounded by history in an area first settled in the early 1870's, with many of the original buildings still standing.

The 165-mile canoe trip down the Souris is not a difficult project. It is easily traversed in a week or less. We took our time, and spent the whole week going from Antler Creek to the Treesbank Ferry, just above the junction of the Souris and the Assiniboine. But we stopped often during the day, to shoot film or to sit and watch a brave beaver struggling towards the canoe, branch firmly gripped in

chunky teeth, until the unfamiliar foe is spotted and the tail slaps its warning to its fellows.

There are many campsites, both formal and informal, along the river, each spaced nicely for a day's leisurely travel. At Melita, there's the town's Centennial Park; there are a multitude of good spots around Hartney. Souris, too, has comfortable facilities, and it's an easy trip from there to where Highway 10 crosses the river, and another campsite there. A fair pull through sometimes turbulent water brings you to Wanwana for the night, and from there it's an easy run to Treesbank Ferry (unless, like us, you get a strong wind blowing against you while you try and force your way upstream on the Assiniboine).

The trip down the river is really two canoe trips: one for wildlife, and one for excitement and splendour. From Antler Creek, the river is quiet and calm. Most of the surrounding countryside is gently rolling hills, with huge trees easing down to the water's edge. With judicious paddling and a minimum of talking, all sorts of wildlife will seemingly lose its traditional fear of man, and let you get practically within spitting distance. There are deer, and muskrat, and beaver, and mink, and coyote, and raccoons. And of course, cows - if you really want to look at cows. And, if you go in spring, ducks galore. Mallards, in full courting splendor, Wood Ducks, Coots, Black Ducks, Bufflehead, Pintails, Green-winged Teal, and even the more elusive Cinnamon Teal. Canada Geese, Swans and Great Blue Herons by the score.

Or perhaps more exotic - Barred Owls, Horned Owls and Great Gray Owls. And Swainson's Hawks, and Red-tailed Hawks, and Rough-legged Hawks, screaming and complaining when the canoe passes too close to a nest bundled in the topmost branches of a century-old tree.

Then below the town of Souris, the river starts to take on a different complexion. Gone are the rolling hills and the wide meanders - the ones that make you curse because they take five miles to cover half a mile in straight line distance. The banks become sharper and steep, rising up to dominate the river, forcing it into a narrow gorge. The water runs faster, it roars at times, and turns white with challenge to the wayward canoeist. Beware, and keep your sense sharp! The river is not dangerous, but it is only too willing to show who can be boss, and with a flip of a frolicsome comber, the canoe can be over and you out, spluttering and splashing. But if all is packed well and waterproof, you're only wetter and wiser after a dumping.

The country below Souris is magnificent, reminiscent of Grand Canyon tourist photos at times. Here too is history. About half way between the crossing of Highway 10 and Wawanese lies the ruins of the Gregory mill, which ground farmer's flour until the turn of the century, when it became obsolete. Many's the story to be found in the minds of the older locals about the mill. And if you search diligently around the banks of the old sluice, you'll find worked flints and petrified wood, for this was a favorite spot of the early Indians.

Just downstream from the mill, a huge and precipitous cliff juts from the curving river before. Not too long ago, if you beached the canoe there, bleaching bones of hordes of bison could be found at its base, for this is where Indians stampeded buffalo over the cliff, to prepare pemmican for the long hard winter. The river giveth and the river taketh away.

The Souris is a comfortable river. It is not too difficult to paddle, yet it is - like many rivers in Manitoba - interesting and filled with history, if only you take the time to explore its background. Spring is the best time to make the trip, when the water is high and the mosquitoes aren't yet out. During hot summers, the water level drops and many of the turbulent rapids become rock-filled and dangerous.

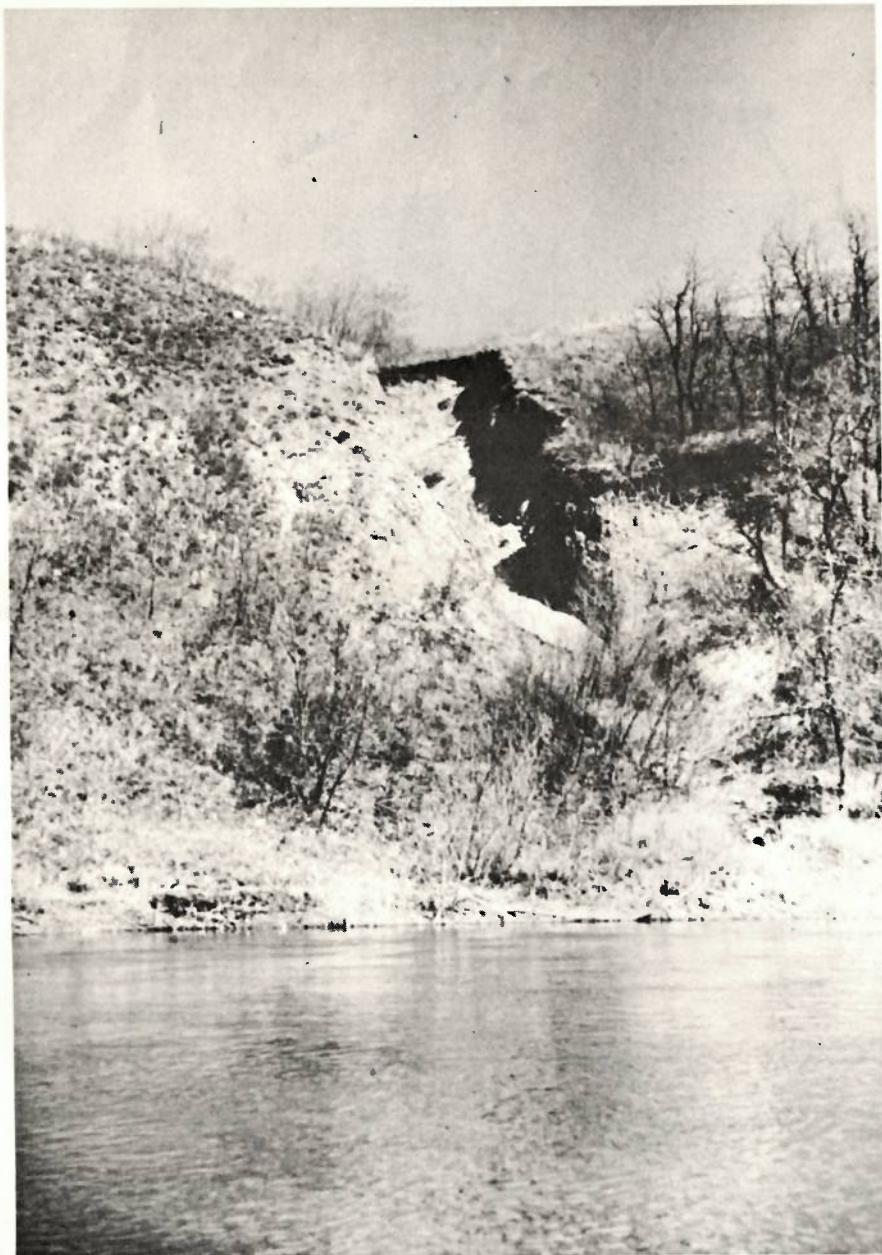
But whatever the time of year, it's always pleasant to feel that creak in the muscles when the paddle digs deep on the road to adventure.

- Kip Park

More detailed, four inch to the mile, maps of the Souris River can be obtained from the Surveys Branch of the Department of Mines, Resources and Environmental Management, Room 800, Norquay Building, Winnipeg.

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Some of the high bluffs in the reaches below Souris