

Paddle to calm, unhurried place



COURTESY PHOTOS

Debi Nelson

*Debi Nelson's canoeing – including outings with her spouse, **Dean**, and their grandkids – often occurs on Loon Lake, near Bottineau.*

Life had been turbulent! I lost my home in the Minot flood and what was left of my belongings was spread among garages of five generous friends. My mom had passed away a year earlier and my career of 30 years was coming to

an end. Life was anything but calm.

Canoeing had been a part of my life at youth camp, and when I was first married.

The feeling of being alone on a lake, far away from land, was an adventure. Sometimes, we dragged a fishing line along in the hope of catching supper. The canoe was old, having been in my husband's family for quite awhile. It had seen better days, but it floated and was stable.

The flood situation created the opportunity for us to realize a dream: to have a lake cabin in the woods. We chose a smaller lake in northern North Dakota without many cabins. It took some looking, but we found a used 18.5-foot aluminum canoe. The "landing" part of the shoreline in front of our cabin was a challenge, with lots of branches and logs sticking out of the water. While it was rustic and picturesque, it was not easy to navigate a canoe in and out. But, a canoe can maneuver both forward and backward, so we were able to get through the brush.

It had been years since either of us had canoed, but as

we slid the craft into the water and took a few strokes, it all came back. A calming peace came over me I hadn't felt for years. A few minutes of paddling took us out of the bay and into the open water to discover the lake.

The water was glass smooth under a bright blue sky, with pillow clouds lazily floating along. It was late spring, so the cool bottom of the canoe felt good as the sun warmed my face like a welcoming hug. The only sounds I heard were the paddles gently breaking the water stroking back, and the "drip, drip" as they were pulled forward to stroke back again.

Ducks, geese, loons, white pelicans and black cormorants all frequent this lake and are quite relaxing to watch. They let us get fairly close and then, when an imaginary signal is given, the black cormorants take off first, and then the white pelicans. It is the same when they land on the lake: the black cormorants land first, followed by the flock of white pelicans. Loons are usually seen by themselves or as a pair until summer when they will venture out with their family.

Watching these birds move about so elegantly, fully using the graceful bodies they were given, took my mind off of my troubles. I visibly felt my shoulders dropping, jaw relaxing and the corners of my mouth turn up in a smile at the simplicity and beauty of the surroundings. My heart rate slowed as I breathed in the fresh clean air. A peace and calmness swept over me.

One or two eagles sometime grace the sky and always remind me of being free and able to soar with new possibilities. Many times, I quit paddling to take



pictures or just soak it all in. It is awesome for both of us to stop paddling, sit and listen to the sounds, and feel the gentle rocking of the water. I found myself reflecting on life and all that had happened since the last time we canoed, more than 25 years ago. It was good. I was also able to ponder my current life, and the blessings I did have. Things were easy to put in perspective.

Birds weren't the only creatures active on the lake. Late spring also brought out turtles that would crawl onto logs to sun themselves – warming after the winter. Once in awhile, I thought I was seeing a floating piece of wood and it would be a muskrat swimming by. As I concentrated on my surroundings, I felt myself blending in with the lake – not there to interrupt, but to co-exist. Thankfully, there are no cell phones or beepers that get service on the lake!

On one trip, around a bend, there was a huge beaver house. There were green leaves still on branches heaped onto the house, so I knew it was in an active mode. As we moved forward to look at it more closely, I saw a large beaver swimming interference between us and his house. As soon as he determined we were too close, he slapped his tail on the water with such force that the canoe actually felt the ripples. Even these little adventures produced a calmness, from just experiencing the reality of nature.

In warmer weather, I was frequently on the dock before sunrise. There – in my pajamas, with a cup of coffee – I could contemplate life. Seeing the sun peek over the trees, then the red fire ball spilling rays on the

water, is a great calming way to start the day.

One morning, my husband came down to the water's edge shortly after sunrise and suggested we take the canoe out. Right then and there, in pajamas, I climbed into the canoe and we slowly made our way out of the sleepy bay and into the open lake. The morning mist was still rising off the lake. But, we eventually realized we hadn't stopped to put on life vests, so we headed back to shore.

Fall is also a peaceful time on the water. It brings gorgeous color to the shoreline, which is reflected on the water. The canoe glides through the yellows and oranges of the trees' images, as overhead, geese are honking to their neighbors and practicing formations. Beavers seem more frantic to secure their houses for winter, so are more active and fun to watch. The weather is now cooler, so a hooded sweatshirt is worn under the life vest for those early morning rides. The lake is having its one last beautiful hurrah before it prepares to become a solid chunk of ice and shut down for the winter.

The calm of the canoe is just what is needed for turbulent times. To focus entirely on one's natural surroundings, with sunshine and fresh air, takes the focus off of self, and one can't help but relax. Problems fade, at least for awhile, and a more content heart and mind help put things in perspective, renewing strength and energy. ■

Debi Nelson resides in Minot. She and her spouse are members of North Central Electric Cooperative.