



The Little Boat That Could

by Allan Casey

Saskatchewan's great inland seas are unpredictable enough, but to ply them in a tiny homemade wooden craft is to truly mess with the lake gods

After three hours waiting for a breeze to carry us out of the glassy bay and onto the lake, we suddenly had a gale to fill our sails. The Neoma heeled over, the supper dishes went clattering into the bilges and we were flying. Rounding a point, we got our first look at the watery horizon of Reindeer Lake, a maze of islands and convoluted shores stretching 250 kilometres up the Saskatchewan-Manitoba border. A squall line was bearing down, its gusts knocking us on our beam ends. I had to wrestle the tiller with two hands to hold course. Neoma is a sharpie – nimble and seaworthy, like an elongated dory – but she will repay clumsiness with a capsize. Cautiously, I ran in under the lee of the first island, where Marki dropped the anchor and we struck the mizzen-sail. A little rattled by our first encounter with the big lake, we weren't done yet. "Let's look shippy, Mr. Nicholson," said I. "The whole town is coming out."

A sail is visible a long way over water, and ours had attracted attention in the hillside village of Southend, 600 km north of Saskatoon. A flotilla of aluminum skiffs bore the curious our way. The Neoma is likely not the first sailboat to be seen here – Hudson Bay Company York boats used sails, and aboriginal fishermen have been known to get home on wind power – but certainly the first in awhile. Teenage boys aboard the first skiff circled us, half-amazed, half-amused as Marki and I wrestled sailcloth. Next, a dignified couple idled alongside, a man in the stern, a woman sitting forward with a coffee mug in hand and a worried look. "Saskatoon," she nodded, reading our home port on Neoma's stern. "Going up the lake? Be careful." A warm greeting mixed with genuine concern – northerners can say so much with few words. Were the lake gods trying to tell us something?

So began the maiden voyage of the Neoma.

I have always loved little boats and big maps, and long daydreamed about exploring the many vast, wild lakes of Canada. The very names stir the imagination – Great Slave, Athabasca, Lake of the Woods – but such inland seas remain relatively unexplored. Mostly for lack of the right boat, I figure. Canoes are not for big, open water – even the largest voyageur freighters drowned a lot of men in an era when life was cheap. Kayaks are seaworthy but cramped and wet. Engines are costly, noisy, stinky, repellant to wildlife and unreliable. No, my boat would sail. It must not be yachty and fragile, as factory boats are, but rather sturdy and workmanlike, repairable in the field with simple tools.

Like puffed wheat cake, you cannot buy such a boat – you have to make it yourself. I

had bought some suitable plans, but, with work and a young family in tow, spare time was another matter. It was a decade before I began to cut wood for the radical boat in the pictures, a design from American wooden-boat iconoclast Phil Bolger. It floats in just inches of water yet is seaworthy enough that it might just survive an ocean crossing. No, I am not that crazy. However, I did dare to replace the designer's sail plan with one of my own, a cat-ketch lifeboat-type rig with fire-killed spruce trees for masts. Hell, it was my boat. And I called her Neoma, after a certain plucky youngster.

During building breaks, I sometimes sat in the unfinished hull and wondered who my future shipmates might be. Mark Nicholson, a fellow sailor, had for two years listened politely to my construction reports over pints of Guinness in the Yard and Flagon, as close to a quayside pub as you can get in Saskatoon. One night around last call, he surprised me by offering to sail along. Marki got his nickname living for several happy years in Germany, where he acquired that country's language – and its tastes in uncomfortable travel. How else to explain his willingness to labour before the mast in an untested plywood boat bound for the far side of beyond? Before he could change his mind, I took us out the next day and bought two expensive coldwater survival suits. There we were in the Fishin' Hole on Circle Drive, two middle-aged fools in big red suits. Committed.

Marki had one very sensible proviso: that we thoroughly wring out our ship in warm, southerly waters before trusting her at high latitudes. A good thing, as Neoma's sea trials on Emma Lake were a maritime disaster. She almost sank at the boat launch because I forgot some epoxy around the centreboard case. And my old-school rig, which seemed so clever on paper, was a

sweaty job to manage in three dimensions. Wielding its six unwieldy spars, untangling its tangle of sheets, snotters and lacings, we looked like two orangutans building a yurt. Under her crackling new sailcloth, Neoma handled like a wading hippopotamus, refusing to come about, sailing on one tack but not the other. She began to tear her own steering linkage apart, and the tiller bent like a sapling under the strain when the wind got up. In all, she was the worst-balanced, sloppiest-handling boat I had ever sailed. I could have cried. Instead, we did the manly thing. We went to the MacIntosh Point bar and watched football.

Marki, bless his soul, never lost faith in my boat even when he was standing in icy bilge water. Call it the right stuff. His father had built a sailboat years ago. And his maternal great-grandfather was the celebrated Captain Walter Blythe Spicer, who commanded the last evacuation vessel from Sulva Bay in the Battle of Gallipoli, December 20, 1915. Beyond these sterling credentials, Marki reminds me of Harrison Ford from certain angles; perhaps he would spring to life as an action hero, if need arose. And so it might. We were far from sure of Neoma's abilities before it was time to head north.

On Reindeer Lake, after that first welcoming party, we mostly had its 6,500 square km to ourselves. We worked northward, slowly learning Neoma's ways. The solstice arrived, and the daylight seemed endless. Distant fishing skiffs passed, but they travelled sheltered routes that we called "shipping lanes." We traversed the mouth of perfectly round, 10-km-wide Deep Bay, created by a meteor impact 120 million years ago. Our sail handling improved, and we took to speaking in a navy way as we hoisted and furled. "Peak sprit ready, Mr. Casey." "Haul away, Mr. Nicholson." Each night we dined ashore and watched the

Twilight Channel in Warbler Surround Sound. We had a tent but discovered the flattest, snuggest, least-buggy place to sleep was aboard. With the dodger buttoned over us, swinging at anchor between the stars and their reflection, Marki decided it was like being aboard the cramped old Russian space station Mir. We generally spoke with Russian accents after dark.

Sadly, however, Neoma was still tearing herself apart. A cringle was parting from a sail corner, and the much-welded steering was wanting more. Then I noticed the crack. I had forgotten more epoxy atop the chine log, a vital piece of hull structure, and the wood was swelling. Neoma would not fall to bits, but prudence demanded we turn for home, abandoning our plans to sail at least to Kinoosao, the isolated village about 100 km further north. The return was bittersweet. Neoma never sailed so well as she did on that run south. We were not ready to leave this elemental landscape of clear water and lichen-covered rock.

When we again found time to return north, spring had become fall, and the tamarack and birch were tangerine paint thrown across the evergreen taiga. Perhaps *Neoma* too had changed her stripes. One evening prior, I had spread her mizzen-sail on the back lawn and sliced a foot from the trailing edge with the kitchen scissors in hopes she would balance better. I also addressed a more delicate problem. Neoma had never been baptized properly, though I had been given champagne for the job months before. The morning of our departure, as my daughter charged through the backyard on her way to university, I thrust a glass of the bubbly in her hand and nodded toward the boat. Hardly breaking stride, she rifled the wine at *Neoma*'s topsides, shouted "Don't sink!" and ran for her bus. Perhaps this would

remedy all.

We followed the same highway north but stopped 200 km short at Lac La Ronge. Not so big as Reindeer, it is still a formidable 50 km across, with an unsheltered basin across the south generally feared by motorboaters. The lakeshore town of La Ronge still shows its roots as a rough northern outpost, but it has grown in new directions. Northlands College lets young people reach post-secondary levels without moving south. Meanwhile, the Lac La Ronge Indian Band is one of the most politically influential in the country, and its Kitsaki business arm manages a large stable of profitable, job-creating aboriginal businesses.

Unlike Reindeer, we had a proper marine chart for Lac La Ronge – but failed to look at it carefully until we'd gotten afloat at the worst possible spot for a boat with no engine. So again we began a trip becalmed in a sheltered reach, the finger-thin, six-km-long McGibbon Bay. The small breeze was against us if anything, so I started to row. *Neoma*'s oars are mainly for manoeuvring around docks and anchorages, not for travel. After an hour, in a full sweat, the end of the bay still not in sight, there was only one thing for it: I reached for the leftover champagne.

This was the first time we had alcohol aboard – and a good solvent it is for certain small problems such as lack of engine. Besides the bubbly plonk from the morning ritual, which had been "airing" all day in a rubber boot, Marki had brought some decent vintage. The fall evening came quickly, but it was warm and the full moon came up. Standing in *Neoma*'s centre slot, her cabin-top makes a fine saloon bar. We had dinner and yarned the hours away, eventually toasting ourselves in Russian accents for having no engine. Our revelry awoke a

beaver family of three. They snuffled indignantly right under our bow until we retreated into spaceship Mir. With neither bugs nor rain to worry about, I kept my end of the dodger open to the stars, occasionally waking to see that Cassiopeia had pirouetted a little farther across the sky.

There was wind aplenty to belly our sails in the morning, and we wasted no time reaching out to open water. It was blowing hard, in fact, testing us with our biggest waves to date. They looked even bigger from Marki's navigator seat low in the bows. Prone to seasickness, he took to muttering disapprovingly at each approaching roller. Meanwhile, I was enjoying new-found confidence in the boat. Trimming the mizzen had not hurt our speed – Marki read eight knots – but the tiller was more manageable. We flew across the water till we got hungry. Finding a perfectly sheltered cove, we made use of an empty cabin porch there for lunch and a nap out of the rain.

Three halcyon days of cruising followed. Among the highlights was a campsite so perfect we swore never to reveal its location on pain of death. *Neoma* behaved impeccably. Or we'd just learned to sail her at last. Marki piloted us around the map like Magellan himself.

September turned to October. It was time to call it a summer. I wanted to finish the voyage by crossing the open southern bay and following the compass into downtown La Ronge. We nosed out into wind that had blown all night across 15 open kilometres. After two small last-chance islands, we were committed to running steep-fronted two-metre waves – nothing on an ocean but plenty in shallow fresh water. One by one they overhauled us, making great swishes along the hull. *Neoma* showed no vices,

however, and I felt free to revel in success: a boat worthy of heavy winds, and a fine crew to make her go. Marki had acclimatized to the big seas and was liking the ride. Too soon we were across, running down past Patterson Park, the float base and into the marina. It was the end of the cruise, perhaps, but the beginning of a new era. I thought of spring, and *Neoma's* further adventures.

Allan Casey's book about his travels to lakes across Canada, Lakeland: Journeys in a Freshwater Country, is due out this fall from Greystone Books. The title is borrowed from the rural municipality of Lakeland, home to the Casey family cottage.