A 'once upon a time' Bloodvein tale

A 1969 trip with a dead end & an unexpected event.

On the Broadleaf River upstream from Leaf Lake.

The Bloodvein is one of those rivers that captures one's imagination. Perhaps it is the name. Perhaps it is the challenge of reaching its upper waters. Perhaps it is the connection to the fur trade.

The river is varied and rugged, and especially tumultuous downstream from Artery Lake. About 300 kilometres long, its headwaters are in Ontario's Woodland Caribou Park (WCP) and its mouth is at Lake Winnipeg. The Bloodvein, a link between WCP and Manitoba's Atikaki Wilderness Park (Atikaki is Ojibwe for 'land of the caribou'), is a designated Canadian Heritage River. It flows across ancient rock that is the foundation of much of North America. Its channels vary from narrow, fast-water gorges to open water marshes and lakes. The river is steeped in Aboriginal history.

During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the Bloodvein was used by Ojibwe peoples as a trapping area to supply the fur trade. It also served as a secondary fur transportation route. The river's notable historic features include:

- Undisturbed archaeological sites which indicate habitation by prehistoric, hunter-gatherer peoples 6,000 years ago.
- Pictographs (rock paintings of red ochre) dating from 900 to 1 200 A.D. [CE, if you prefer.] The Artery Lake site is nationally significant because of its size, quality and number of diverse images, and connection with other sites in central Canada.

The name may have originated from stories of a fierce battle between the Ojibwe and their allies, the Cree, and another tribe. Many were killed. The Ojibwe words 'Miskwi Isipi' or 'Blood River' became the Aboriginal name of the river. The English name 'Bloodvein' first appeared in an 1819 Hudson's Bay Company journal from the Berens River Post, but the name may have referred to the red granite veins of the river bed.

This is a story of my first attempt to canoe the waters of this storied river. The year was 1969. My three buddies and I planned to begin our adventure at Wallace Lake and reach the Bloodvein by using the Carroll-Craven-Ford route that parallels the border between Manitoba and Ontario. Once on the Bloodvein, we intended to go downstream to Stonehouse Lake, portage across to the east channel of the Gammon River, paddle upstream to Aikens Lake, portage to the Broadleaf River, travel downstream on it to the Wanipigow River, and return to Wallace by paddling upstream on the Wanipigow.

We used a 125 000 scale topo map and a Real Berard map for planning. Neither provided sufficient information about portages from Craven to Ford and Ford to Artery. This part of the plan was a large unknown for us. Other parts had either been canoed before or we had sufficient information about them. For example, we had already canoed from Aikens to Wallace via the Broadleaf system, reaching Carroll Lake by going down the Haggart River and also had reliable information about the portages from Stonehouse to the east branch of the Gammon.

An aside.

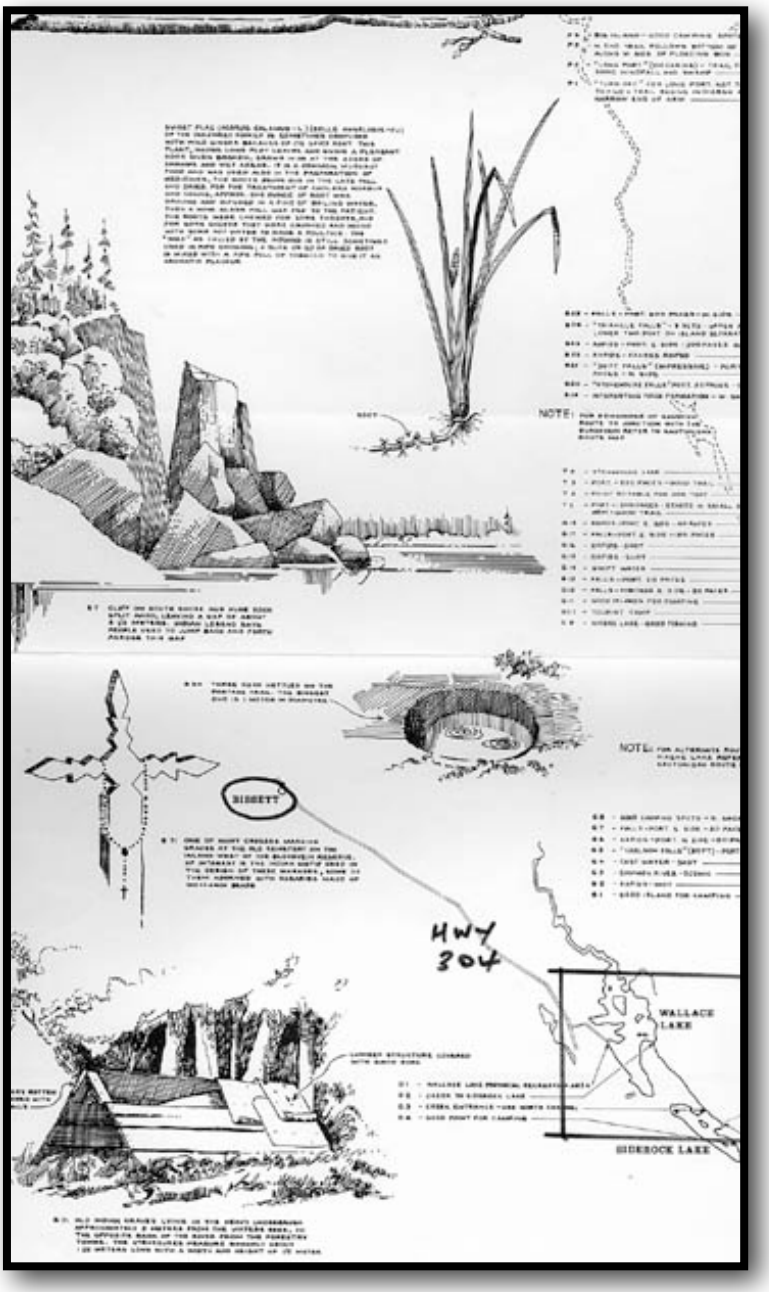
During the 1960s and 70s, Manitoba artist and naturalist Real Berard re-explored several of the province's culturally significant canoe routes and produced a set of 13 maps. Not intended as navigational charts, they are guides consisting of hand-drawn maps, art work, and descriptions of flora, fauna, and travel characteristics. The maps are available from

CanadaMapSales.com online

or over the counter at:

Canada Maps Sales
Manitoba Conservation
1007 Century Street
Winnipeg, MB Canada

A sample map, art work, and description is shown here. It is detail from the Sasaginnigak map.



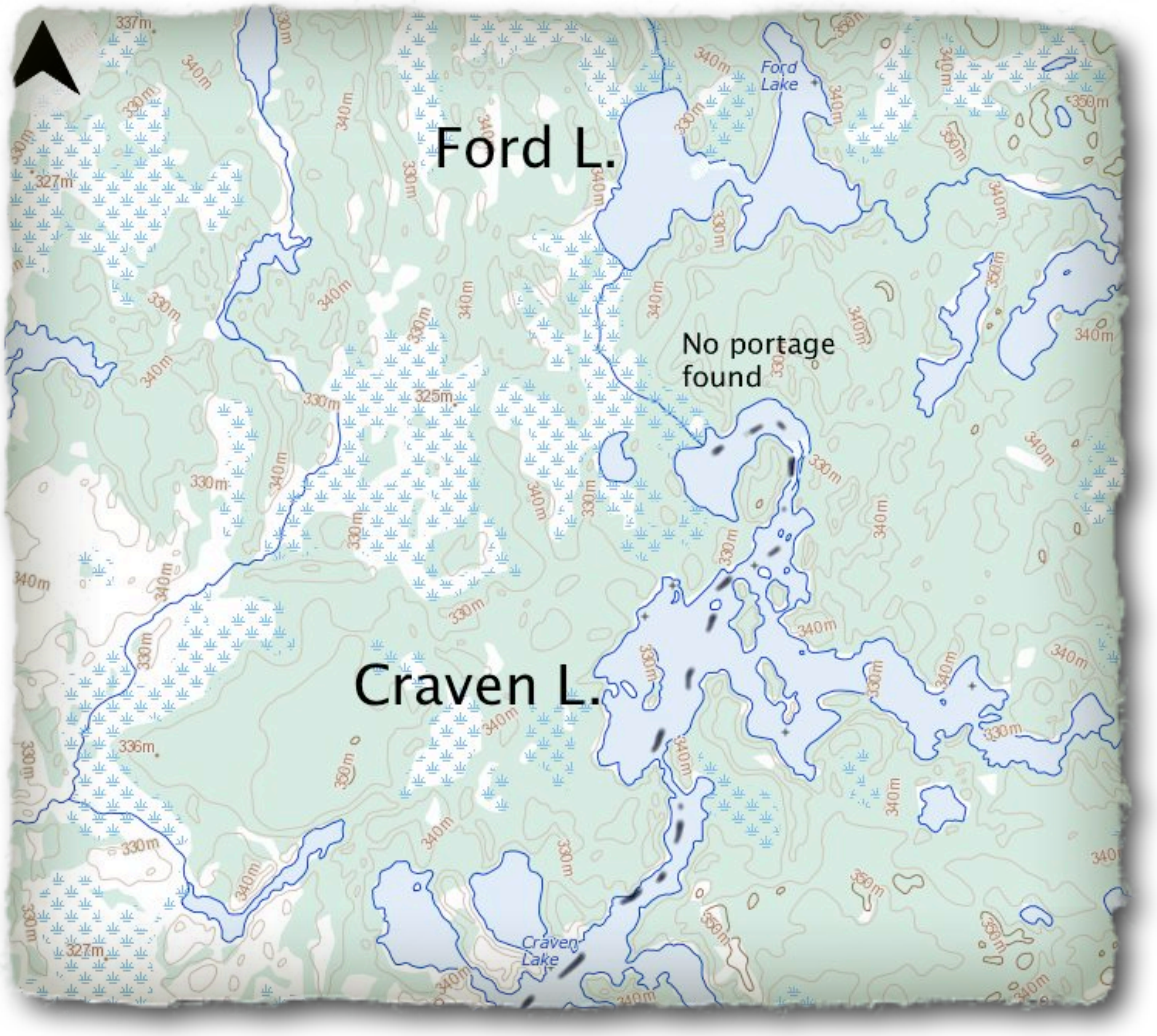
The shortest way to the Bloodvein from Wallace involves the Obukowin portage, affectionately known as the 3 mothers by Manitoba canoeists. The total distance is about 5 km with two pond lakes breaking the portage up into three sections. In 1969, the start of the Obukowin portage was not at its present location in Siderock Lake. Rather, it was just to the west of the creek that drains what some refer to as First Lake. The Wallace forest fire of 1987 not only changed the character of the landscape but also resulted in an eventual shift of the start of the portage much further east into the Siderock bay. The present day start is east of that creek with the distance from the start to First Lake now perhaps 25% shorter than the pre-1987 distance.

We had camped in Siderock on day 1. There we were on the morning of a fine day 2 in 1969 looking down the partly boggy trail that was our path from Siderock to First Lake. It was our first anticipation of the walk but we were well armed with stories about how tough it was. We did not let the stories discourage our ambitious spirits. We burdened our young bodies with our entire load and marched off down the trail. Single walking the lumpy path with an entire load on our backs lasted about 300 metres. Then sanity prevailed. Double walking was more appealing.

The end of the trail at First Lake was the same in 1969 as it is now. Water levels determine how easy or difficult it is to reach open water in First Lake. The levels in 1969 were low. We had to bog clump hop and pole to reach it. The remainder of the portage was similar to the current one with a few distinctions. There were no inukshuks near the start of the portage to Kidney Lake (second lake) and there were a couple of minor differences in the location of some sections of the trail.

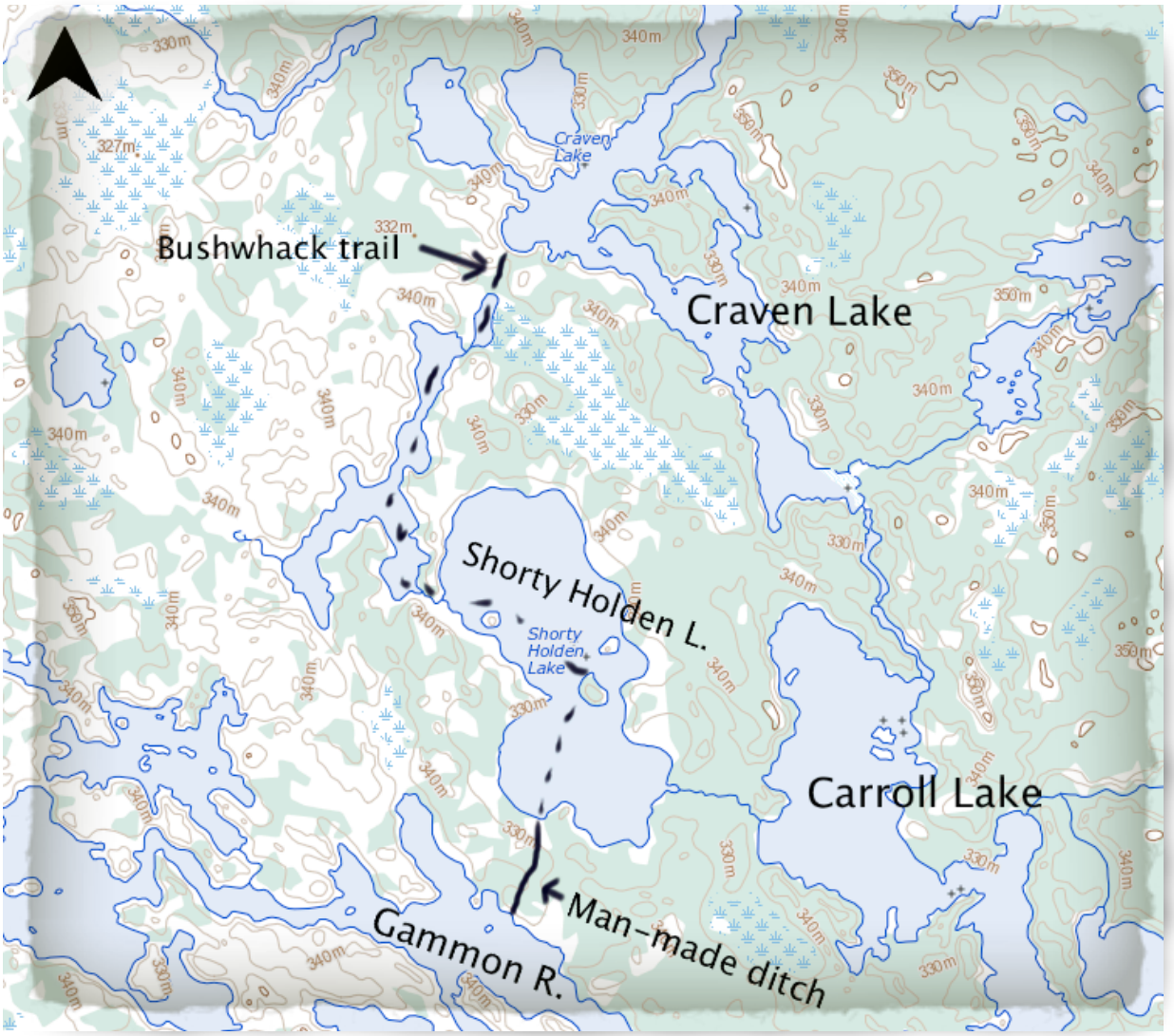
We reached Carroll Lake in the early evening of day 2. It reminded me then, and still does, of a miniature version of Lake of the Woods. The lake abounds with islands and scenic shorelines. Bountiful numbers of fish swim in its waters.

Day 3 found us paddling in Craven Lake. When we reached the north end of the lake we began our search for the portage to Ford. In our early years of canoeing, when confronted with lakes connected by creeks, we tended to look for possible paths along the creeks. We faced a creek only wide and deep enough to float a toy boat. The shoreline near the creek was swampy with no portage apparent anywhere. Nor did we find a portage further to the east of the creek.



We decided that bushwhacking to Ford and then likely bushwhacking again from Ford to Artery was not especially desirable. The land distances were too great and the land seemed too swampy. We decided to continue with the rest of our plan: the Aikens - Broadleaf way to Wallace. But we did not want to paddle to the Gammon through Craven and Carroll again. Traveling the unknown road was one of our canoeing principles. Examining the 125 000 topo map carefully, we noticed a possible path that involved cutting southwest from Craven to the Gammon. At worst there would be four bushwhack portages to make, with the longest about 500 metres.

Decision made, we paddled back down Craven a bit. The first bushwhack trail was about 300 metres long and ended at a pond. We pushed our way through a barely navigable creek to the next lake and paddled to the southeast corner where there was another tiny creek. It also was barely navigable. We entered a larger lake (Shorty Holden) and found ourselves in a dense wild rice field. Then matters got interesting.



Emerging from the field, we were confronted by a person in a small motorboat pointing a gun at us. Tension filled the air. Then the mood changed dramatically. The person lowered his rifle and began to chuckle, welcoming us towards him. He apologized for the weapon display and invited us to his cabin (on the large island) to have a meal and stay the night if we wished. He explained, from a distance it looked like a moose was in the rice field, and he liked moose meat for supper.

We stayed the night, enjoying our chats with the person. We asked about the lake. He said it was a human-seeded commercial wild rice lake. He came to check on the the rice and water levels every so often.

Wild rice is an annual plant that grows from seed each year. It begins to grow in lakes and streams after the ice is out in spring. The plant grows best in shallow water in areas with soft, organic bottoms.

Wild rice plants reach the water surface usually by mid-June. The plants lay flat on the water surface and can form vast leafy mats. During this floating-leaf stage, wild rice is highly susceptible to fluctuations in water levels. Plants can be uprooted and washed away due to increased water levels.

The lake level and water flow in it was regulated by a man-dug ditch from the lake to the Gammon River. Our bed-and-breakfast host suggested we use the ditch to portage to the Gammon.

The ditch is still evident today from a satellite. [See satellite image shown here.]

Next morning we were off to find the ditch. There was barely enough water in it to float a canoe containing only packsacks and loose gear. We tied ropes to the canoes and towed them down the ditch, one person pulling on each side of the ditch. It was sort of like lining a rapid from both sides. Except for the lumpy walking on the banks, the ditch “portage” went smoothly.

Reaching the Gammon River, we began our journey downstream to Aikens Lake.

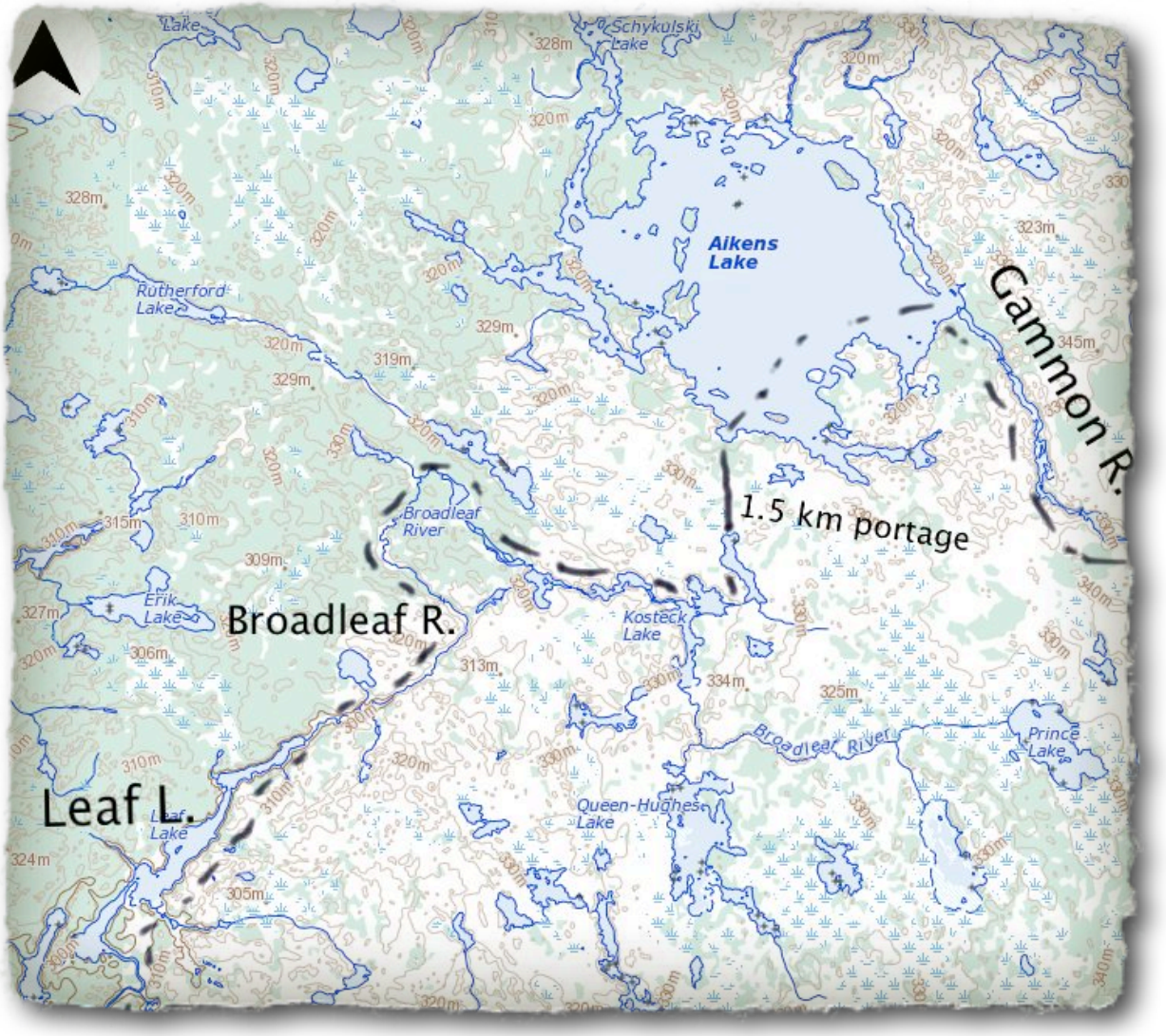
The Gammon, between Carroll and Aikens, is in Atikaki Wilderness park. It has several rapids and falls with no long portages. It is a pleasant paddle. Below is a picture of one of the falls.

We camped on Aikens Lake at the head of the 1.5 km portage to the Broadleaf system. At that time, there was an old growth forest there. A somewhat recent forest fire has changed the land and the portage is no longer a pleasant walk through fairly flat terrain.

Aikens Lake has a number of sandy beaches. The fishing is great. That explains why there is a fishing lodge tucked into the narrow long bay at the east end of the lake (near where the Gammon enters the lake). The lodge owner was and still is (as far as I know) friendly towards canoeists.

The next day we portaged to a small lake near the start of the Broadleaf River and began our journey downstream on it. The Broadleaf is mostly narrow but it does not wiggle very much on its way to Leaf Lake. There are a number of falls and rapids on the river at which you have to be careful about scratching up the bottom of the canoe on the rock beds. However, portages are not particularly long.

[*If the reader examines the map closely, he/she should notice a possible shortcut on the river that involves a pond lake running northeast to southwest. A future tale of a trip from days gone by will reveal in detail what awaits anyone wanting to use the shortcut. For the moment, suffice it to say that the shortcut is best left to nature and the animals of the forest.*]



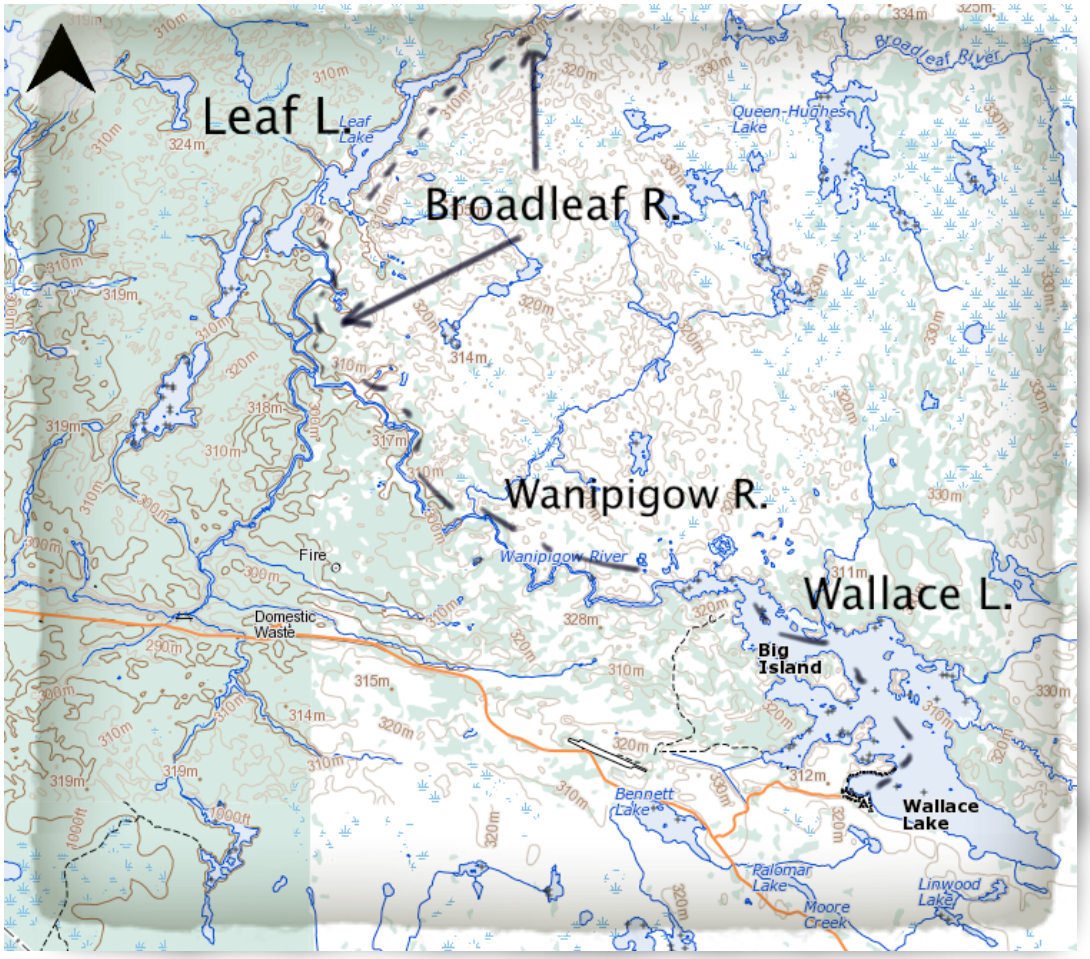
When we arrived at Leaf Lake, vast wild rice fields lay in front of us. The lake is best described as a giant rice field with some open water here and there. The image below shows a shoreline and a canoe path through wild rice.

The lake lies just outside Atikaki park. It was a commercial wild rice lake in 1969 and in 1987 (the last time I was in the area). Its current status as a commercial lake is unknown to me.

We camped at the south end of the lake for the night. The next morning we were on our way to Wallace.

The Broadleaf, downstream from Leaf Lake, is wider but shallower. In low water years you have to walk stretches of it pulling the canoe along with you. Fortunately the river bottom is firm in most places. Beavers occasionally dam the river and change the conditions in an unreliable way.

We did not have to water walk. When we reached the junction of the Broadleaf and Wanipigow we headed eastward to Wallace. The Wanipigow is much wider and deeper downstream from Wallace. Only a small number of falls/rapids interrupted our paddling and the portages were not long. After an uneventful journey upriver we reached Wallace and our cars.



It had been an interesting trip. We didn't regret not paddling on the Bloodvein. Our stopover in Shorty Holden Lake more than made up for missing that dream. Besides, dreams can always come back another day. [And they did many times with fulfillment each time.]