

Ottertooth River

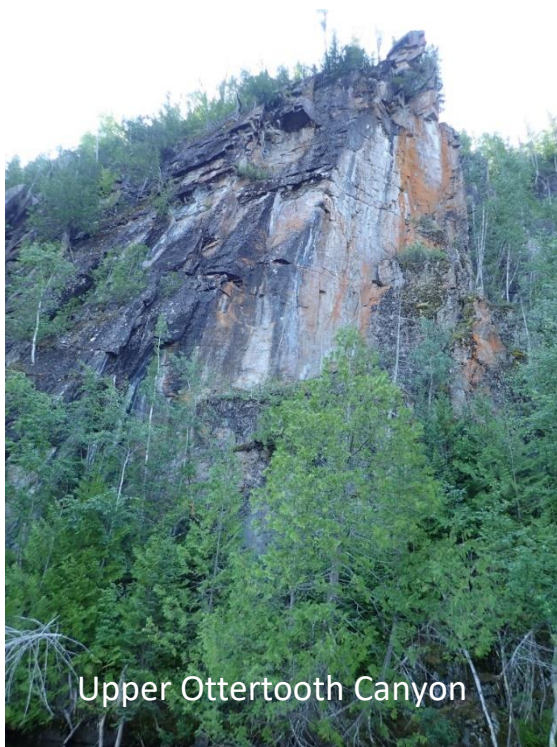
Trip Report

Trip Dates: July 1 - 11, 2018
Nearest City: Armstrong, Ontario
Put in: Sparkling Lake
Take out: Obonga Lake
Distance: 56.78 miles
Water level: Low
Boat: Northwind by Bell Canoe Works (16'6" RoyaleX)
Outfitter: Mattice Lake Outfitters (www.walleye.ca)
Paddlers: Dave Fish, Winsor Heights, Iowa
Vern Fish, Waterloo, Iowa
Difficulty: Challenging – Because of the severe topography, low water, lack of campsites and non-existent portages, this trip was a physical challenge.
Submitted by: Vern Fish, vernfish@aol.com



Obonga/Ottertooth Provincial Park

“The park offers challenging, and remote canoeing opportunities. The route, which passes through Ottertooth Creek canyon, presents the canoeist with severe travel obstacles and minimal campsites. However, one is rewarded with unusual and spectacular scenery of rapids, waterfalls, talus boulders and steep canyons. Few people travel this area.” Park management plan (<https://www.ontario.ca/page/obonga-ottertooth-provincial-park-management-statement>)



I was “encouraged” to paddle the Ottertooth by Phil Cotton, the founder of the Friends of Wabakimi. The Ottertooth canoe route forms the southern boundary of the Wabakimi Area. The Wabakimi Area includes over 6 million acres of Crown land that embraces Wabakimi and several other provincial parks and conservation areas. The Friends of Wabakimi was created to rehabilitate and document historic canoe routes in the Wabakimi Area. The Ottertooth is one of the last waterways in the Wabakimi Area to be surveyed and documented by the Friends of Wabakimi.

In 1784 Ed Umfreville was hired by the North West Company to find a canoe route that would by-pass the Grand Portage route across Northern Minnesota. Under the 1783 Treaty of Paris, the Grand Portage route became the property of the Americans. Umfreville avoided the Grand Portage route by paddling from Lake Nipigon to Winnipeg by going up the Ottertooth drainage to the height-of-land and then down the Kashishibog River.

Phil Cotton wanted someone to explore and document this historic waterway. The management plan points out that there are two undocumented pictograph sties in the Ottertooth Creek system. Thus, the purpose of this trip

was threefold. Document the status of Ottertooth canoe route, try to find evidence of the 1784 route pioneered by Umfreville and find the pictograph sites.

A quick internet search found almost no information on the Obongo/Ottertooth Provincial Park. I found references to a government document called Graham Area Canoe Route # 9. However, this document was no longer in print and no longer available. Phil Cotton had a copy Route # 9 that he shared with me. He also provided a link to an abridged extract of Umfreville's 1784 journal complete with modern maps edited by Bill Martin of Thunder Bay, Ontario. The following is a link to that that that journal extract:

<http://freepages.rootsweb.com/~wjmartin/genealogy/nipigon.htm>

Maps & References

The Friends of Wabakimi provides a planning map for the entire Wabakimi Area. Backroad Mapbooks (www.backroadmapbooks.com) provides a 1:100,000 scale map of the Obonga/Ottertooth Provincial Park. I used both of these maps to start my planning process. I ordered the following 1:50,000 digital maps from YellowMaps (www.canmaps.com):

52 H/13	Uneven Lake
52 G/16	Harmon Lake
52 H/14	Gull Bay

I "digitally" joined these maps and reduced them down so they would fit into 13" X 17" a SealLine map case. I then transferred the details and notes from the Graham Area Canoe Route # 9 brochure, the Backroad planning map, Umfreville's 1784 journal and the park management plan on to these maps. I laminated the final version of these maps for the trip.

We also used the Redsand Lake to Brightsand River map from Volume Five of the Wabakimi Canoe Route Maps. This map provides detail for the paddle across Kashishibog Lake. Volume Five has been produced by the Friends of Wabakimi. Wabakimimaps.com offers a map called Kopka River 5 that shows where Graham Road intersects the Kashishibog River and provides vehicle access to Sparkling Lake. If we had wanted to drive to this put in point, this map would have been useful.

Permits & Fees

We purchased non-resident daily camping permits for Crown Land from Mattice Lake Outfitters. Non-residents can buy camping permits online (www.ontario.ca) or through participating Service Ontario Centres. The cost was \$9.35 + tax (per person, per night)

Logistics

Dave Fish, my first cousin, drove from Des Moines to my house in Waterloo, Iowa. We stopped north of the Twin Cities and completed the drive to Armstrong, Ontario the next day. We spent the night in a cabin provided by Mattice Lake Outfitters (www.walleye.ca.) On Canada Day, July 1, our canoe was lashed on to red DeHavilland Beaver and we were flown to Sparkling Lake. We unloaded, got our bearings and started paddling up the Kashishibog River.



The original plan was to paddle up the Kashishibog River and cross the height of land into Ottertooth Creek. We were going to follow the Ottertooth down to Obonga Lake and then work our way back to Lake Mattice where we started. I had included a side trip up Survey Creek to follow the Umfreville's 1784 route. I estimated that we could do this in 10 days. Crossing the height of land and working our way down the Ottertooth Canyon proved to be very difficult and time consuming. It actually took us 10 days just to get to Obonga Lake. The following is an overview of where we camped and how far we traveled each day

Overview

Day	Date	Campsite or Significant Feature	Distance traveled	GPS
1	July 1	Island in Bear Narrows, Kashishibog River	6.21	49.766521 -90.114305
2	July 2	Island in Savage Lake	11.17	49.843694 -89.938803
3	July 3	Birchall Lake	6.97	49.876074 -89.817245
4	July 4	Potential Campsite		49.865517 -89.807181
4	July 4	Height of Land – Kashishibog/Ottertooth River	2.6	49.850539 -89.780273
	July 4	Potential Campsite		49.848776 -89.774265
5	July 5	Pictograph Camp	6.6	49.829489 -89.6944
		Moose/Caribou Pictograph		49.829777 -89.690055
6	July 6	Survey Lake	7.17	49.887693 -89.631486
7	July 7	Umfreville Lake	2.95	49.891427 -89.572499
		Umfreville Cairn		49.895542 -89.572761
8	July 8	Upper Ottertooth Canyon	2.94	49.891663 -89.535656
9	July 9	Potential Campsite		49.898148 -89.521958
9	July 9	Lower Ottertooth Canyon	1.85	49.917744 -89.452293
		Ottertooth Lake – Pictograph site(s)		49.914131 -89.489005
		Ottertooth Lake - Waterfall		49.914131 -89.489005
10	July 10	Pick point on Obonga Lake	8.32	49.960696 -89.378174
			56.78 miles	



Highlights & Observations

The park management plan said that this route presents severe travel obstacles but offers a spectacular scenery. I would agree. The four portages across the height of land between the Kashishibog and Ottertooth River only covered about 2.6 miles but it took a full day. Three of the portage trails had disappeared in a burn area that had been repopulated with young jack pines. According to Umfreville, the second portage (*portage de Savanne*) was “450 yards and road was mostly swampy”. The last portage (*des Grosses Roches*) was 430 yards of “bad road over sharp rocks”. Neither of these portages had changed since 1784.

The portage into Ottertooth Canyon took almost 6 hours to find, clear and cross. This portage drops 200 feet and is 650 yards long. In places the trail was too steep to carry the canoe so we

lined it up and down the rock face. We did find blazes on trees and that someone had recently marked the trail with survey tape. However, we had to clear a path through the bush.

When we finally got back on the water the sun was disappearing behind the canyon walls. Our maps did not show any campsites so we were frantically searching the vertical walls for a place to camp. Tucked into a low spot just before the next set of rapids was a seldom used site with barely enough space for two tents. We watched the sunset dance across the canyon walls as we set up our camp in complete exhaustion.

The second day in the canyon took almost 12 hours of continuous paddling, wading, portaging, lifting, lowering and lining to go 1.85 miles. We spent over two hours cutting logs, wading and lining down a half mile of rapids. The portage around a roaring waterfall was enchanting but watching the river disappear under the rocks was surreal. At one point we had to tight rope the canoe and gear across a log jam bridge. Again, we faced fading daylight as we struggled to find a semi-flat slab of rocks for our tents.



Portaging out of the canyon and into Ottertooth Lake on the third day was bitter-sweet. The canyon was picturesque and technically challenging. Each barrier was a unique physical challenge to overcome. However, we were both tired and beat up. I was concerned that one of us was going to get hurt before we got out. The lake was equally stunning and it was an easy paddle.

As our beat up little canoe glided across Ottertooth Lake we could hear but not see the first waterfall coming into the lake from the west. Umfreville had portaged up and around this waterfall in 1784. We could see but not hear the second waterfall which marked the location of the two pictograph sites on the north shore. Water flowing over the vertical wall of black rock was a highlight of the trip. Spending three days and two nights in the Ottertooth Canyon and on Ottertooth Lake was well worth the trip.

Along the route we paddled by one active outpost cabin and visited four abandoned or underutilized cabins. We saw six otters, a few eagles but no moose or wolves. We caught enough walleye for three meals. We also ran, waded, lined or portaged dozens of small rapids and a couple of waterfalls. The last twisting CII rapid ended in a massive log jam which we had to climb over to get into Obonga Lake.

The park management made reference to two pictographs within the Ottertooth Canyon. The Graham Area Canoe Route # 9 brochure canyon encouraged paddlers to look for an excellent likeness of a moose pictograph



Pictograph
Moose/Caribou

3.5 miles east of Tommyhow Lake. We found a pictograph east of Tommyhow Lake but to me it looked more like a bull caribou than a moose. On the last day we found two pictograph sites on the north shore of Ottertooth Lake. We did not see any pictographs within Ottertooth Canyon. Finding several legible pictographs at three different sites was one of the goals for the trip.

Another goal was to retrace a part of Edward Umfreville route. We portaged or ran many of same rapids he crossed. His 1784 descriptions of these trails and waterways were still accurate. However, today many of these portages have been burned over and are not being used or maintained. We visited two of his campsites but neither being used by contemporary paddlers. We did leave a cairn on one of his campsites on an unnamed lake. I have

taken the liberty of naming this lake Umfreville Lake. Because of time restraints and fatigue we did not paddle up Survey Creek or explore the 2.5 mile portage Umfreville took to avoid the Ottertooth Canyon.

The main purpose of the trip was to document the route for the Friends of Wabakimi. A day by day trip log and more photographs from the trip are provided in a separate document. The trip log provides a detailed summary of the route with descriptions and locations of campsites, rapids, and portages. We also measured or estimated the lengths of the portages we crossed.

Trip Summary

Our experience reflects what was stated in the park management plan. This route is rarely traveled and presents the paddler with severe travel obstacles and minimal places to camp. The portages have disappeared into the forest and are physically challenging. However, Ottertooth Canyon is spectacular and Ottertooth Lake is magical. The Canyon reminded me of hiking through the side canyons of Lake Powell. Hopefully this trip report will prepare the adventuresome paddler to tackle this remote wilderness.

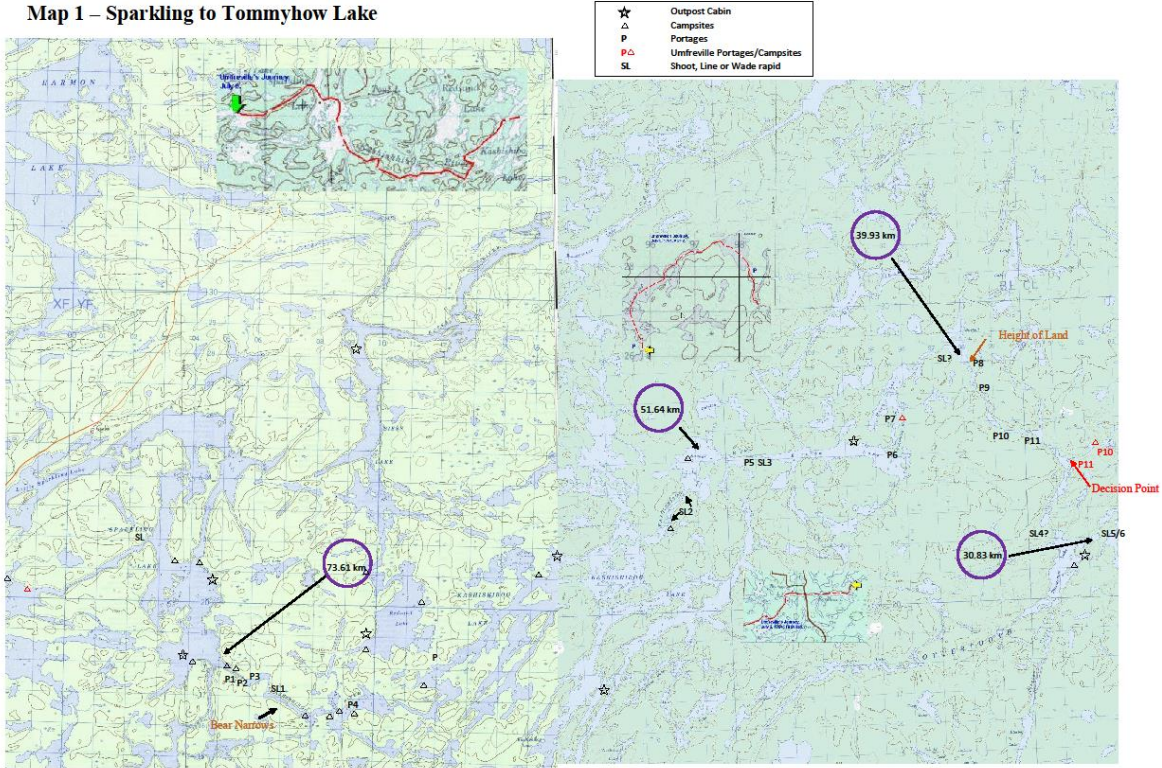
Historical Note

It should be noted that Umfreville's journey from the mouth of Nipigon River to the confluence of the English and Winnipeg Rivers by way of Lake Nipigon was 286 leagues with 72 portages. The Grand Portage route is a distance of 214 leagues with only 26 carries. The Lake Nipigon route was only suitable for the small canoe, *canoe du leger*, and not the larger *canot du nord*. The North West Company continued to retain its headquarters at Grand Portage for 17 years after Umfreville's journey.

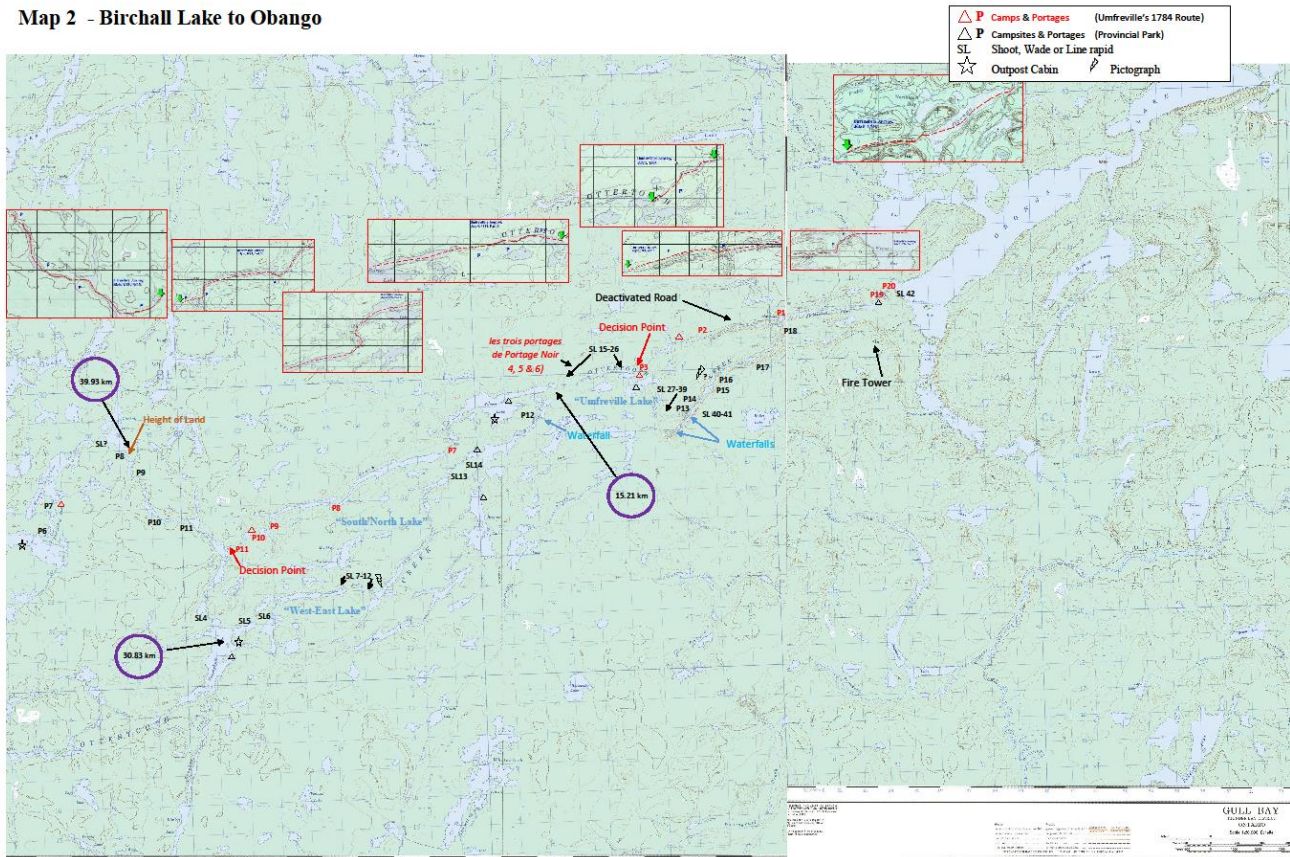


Waterfall
Ottertooth Lake

Map 1 – Sparkling to Tommyhow Lake



Map 2 - Birchall Lake to Obango



Portage & Rapid Summary
Sparking Lake to Obango Lake
(73.61 kms/44.16 miles)

Number*	Description	Location	Length	Measured Length (meters)
1	First portage out of Sparking Lake; EU ran this rapid It should be possible to line this rapid.	Sparking to Kashishibog	80 m – WabakimiMaps.com	120 River Right
2	d'Orignal Portage – <i>“carried goods over good road and passed (lined) the canoe down the rapid”</i> It should be possible to line this rapid.	Sparking to Kashishibog	250 m – WabakimiMaps 230 yds - Umfreville	283 River Right
3	EU called the rapid <i>“discharge d’Orignal”</i> he unloaded canoe and ran the rapid he estimated to be 100 yds. It should be possible to line this rapid.	Sparking to Kashishibog	80 m – WabakimiMaps.com 110 – Wabakimi Project	114 River Right
Shoot Wade Line - 1	EU lined down this rapid, <i>“choked with stones”</i> It should be possible to line this rapid.	Sparking to Kashishibog	?????	60
4	Portage Islet on “right” – “good road over smooth rock”. WabakimiMap.com shows portage on south side. Wabakimi Project shows portage on island	Sparking to Kashishibog	25 m – WabakimiMaps 29 m - Wabakimi Project	Lift over Island 25 m
SWL - 2	<i>“The men debarked and passed (lined) the canoe in strait among the stones.”</i> It are several miles of open water on Kashishibog Lake from the portages out of Sparking Lake to this entrance into Savage Lake.	Stream between Kashishibog Lake and Savage Lake. There is an outpost cabin on Kashishibog Lake.	70 yds - Umfreville	Lined up
5	<i>“Here the water descends through a narrow passage into another lac through which we passed (lined) the empty canoe; portage 55 yds over good road”</i>	Stream between Savage Lake and Kershaw Lake.	55 yds -EU	48 River Right
SWL -3	<i>“Men debarked and passed (lined) the canoe among the stones to portage de la Praline”</i>	Stream between Savage Lake and Kershaw Lake. There is an outpost cabin on the north shore of Kershaw Lake.	??	Paddled up
6	<i>“the neck between (two lakes) has so many large stones in it that we were obliged to discharge and carry over it”</i>	Stream between Kershaw and Hawn	??	Paddled through
7	<i>“Portage Campion, 160 yds over a good road”</i> Name suggest that Etienne Campion, old French trader, had traveled this way. . EU camped at this portage on July 5, 1784.	Portage between Kershaw and Hawn	160 yds - EU	123 River left
	EU paddled through this channel. At low water the channel was filled bush rush and became a wet portage requiring pulling and dragging.	Channel between Hawn and Birchall		200-400 meters

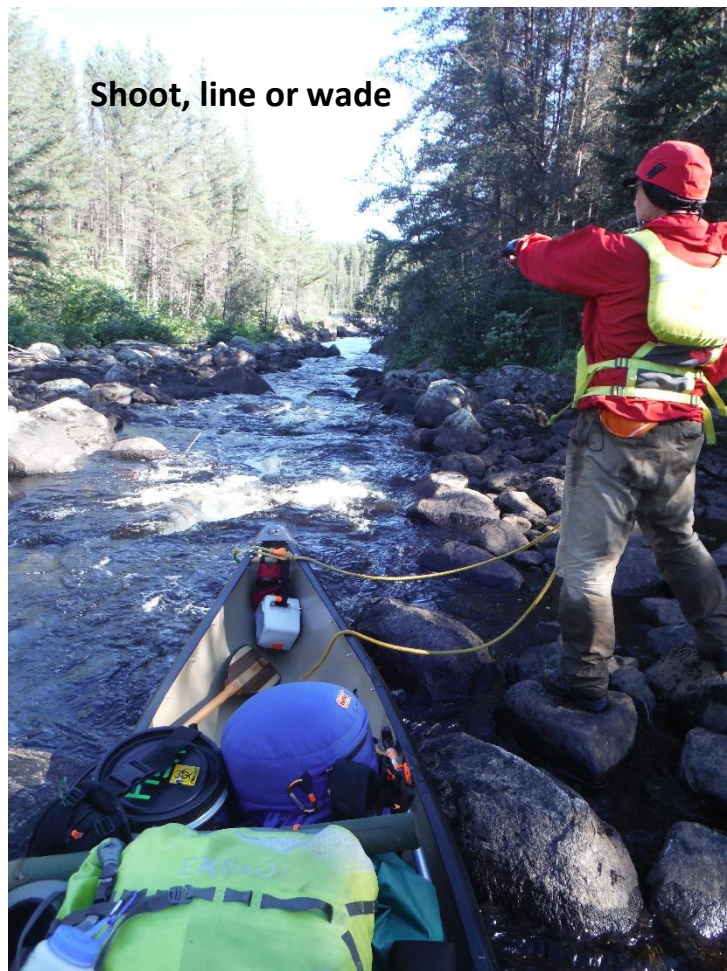
8	<i>"portage de Ram (Bird Song), 90 yards long and good road"</i>	Portage out of Birchall Lake to the south.	90 yds - EU	63 River left
9	<i>"portage de Savanne, 450 yards long and road mostly swampy"</i>	Second portage south of Birchall Lake	450 yds - EU	Did not measure but distance is close
10	<i>"portage de Calument, 160 yards over and good road"</i> This the Height-of-Land and the trail was cleared on the south side.	Third portage south of Birchall Lake	160 yds - EU	80 south side
11	<i>"des Grosses Roches (Big Fat Rock), 430 yards long and bad road over sharp rocks"</i>	Fourth portage south of Birchall Lake	430 yds - EU	Did not measure but distance is close
11	<i>"portage Brule (Burnt), 670 yards long, after clearing away a little a tolerable road"</i> This portage leads to a swamp and a small creek that is so shallow that, <i>"we were obliged to half unload canoe"</i> Creek leads to a small lake. Decision Point – We will try to find and cross this portage before following the Ottertooth Creek drainage down to Tommyhow Lake.	Portage into the Survey Creek Drainage.	670 yds - EU	Did not cross here
10	<i>"portage le Gros Galais (Big Pebble), 450 yards long and good road over rock"</i> After completing this portages, EU camped on a small lake on July 4, 1784.	Next to last portage out of Survey Creek	450 yds - EU	Did not explore
9	<i>"portage Bushe 135 yards long by swamp"</i>	Third portage into Survey Creek, <i>"here the lac draws up in the form of a bold creek"</i> for a distance of about a mile.	135 yds - EU	Did not explore
8	<i>"porta Catteaux, 80 yards over and good road"</i>	At end of a long narrow lake/creek.	80 yards - EU	Did not explore
7	<i>"portage les Peches (Catching Fish) , 500 yards long and good road"</i> Can not find outpost cabin on BRMB map.	Goes west out of Survey Lake. Survey Lake includes an outpost cabin.	500 yards - EU	Did not explore
SLW 4	This turned out to be a portage on river left into Tommyhow Lake.	North end of Tommyhow Lake.	200 yds	90 River left
SLW 5	Lined this rapid			
SLW 6	Lined this rapid			
SLW 7-12	Lined or ran these low rapids			
SLW 13	Ran with difficulty			
SLW 14	Ran with difficulty			
12	Good trail passing around the left side of a waterfall.	Connects <i>"South/North Lake"</i> to Survey Lake	35 yards - Graham Area Canoe Route # 9	5 River left

SL 15-26 (6)	<i>"The portage 500 yards long, partly choked up"</i> This portage empties into a 200 yard long swamp.(EU) Going down Ottertooth Creek from Survey Lake for 1.5 miles to "Umfreville Lake" there are 12 short easy rapids (Graham Canoe Route #9) EU was forced to portage 3 times going upstream.	The next three portages are called, " <i>les trois portages de Portage Noir....</i> Entering a river, stony, shoaly....3 miles"	500 yards - EU	Ran or lined
SL 15 -26 (5)	This portage is 300 yards, into a small creek which leads to a small lake.	This little creek is flowing out of Survey Lake.	300 yards - EU	Ran or lined
SL 15-26 (4)	This portage is " <i>340 yards over a middling road</i> "	Portage ends a small unnamed lake just before the big portage into Ottertooth Lake.	340 yards - EU	Ran or lined
3	"portage Noir (Gate of Black Portage), 1430 yards" EU camped on the NE corner of a small lake (Umfreville Lake) on July 3, 1784. Decision Point – We look for a EU portage/campsite but we will go down Ottertooth Canyon and work our way through the waterfalls and rock gardens.	Portage begins after a mile long lac and ends at a small unnamed lake I am calling " <i>Umfreville Lake</i> "	1430 yards - EU	Could not find
2	<i>"portage la Grande Cote de Roche (Big Rocky Coast) is 4550 yards long, the last ½ mile is down a sloping mountainous rock"</i> EU camped at the end of this portage on July 2, 1784.	This "huge" portage runs north and parallel to Ottertooth Lake.	2.5 miles - EU	Did not explore
1	<i>"portage d'artoise, 130 yards long and good road. In river S.W. 150 yards, W by S 2 miles W.S.W 1 mile. This is generally 80 yards wide and steep, perpendicular rocky shores."</i> [Ottertooth Lake]	This portage leaves the west end of Ottertooth Lake across the bay from where the creek comes in.	130 yards - EU	Did not explore
SLW 27-39	Numerous short rapids	Between " <i>Umfreville Lake</i> " and Ottertooth Canyon	EU did not go this way	Ran or lined
13	Starts on left side of falls at large upright slab of rock. Trail crosses open rock before heading into trees and includes steep inclines and slippery rock surfaces! Graham Area Canoe Route # 9 said that the trail goes down the right side????	Starts a 200 foot drop into the Ottertooth Canyon!	650 yards	If not longer River left
SLW 40-41	Two long rapids must be lined before reaching another steep drop that must be lined/portaged.	Ottertooth Canyon	No portaging	Ran or lined
15	Falling rocks have created a porous dam filled with huge rocks. With great difficulty portage over rocks to next small lake.	The end of the first of three tiny lakes.	25 yards	25 m
16	Portage goes around left side of falls.	Second tiny lake ends in a waterfall.	?	10 m
17	Portage goes up and over huge barrier of rocks into another small lake.	Stream drops into chasm that is blocked by another wall of rocks	?	100 m

18	At the end of the lake is a veritable wall of rock under which the stream disappears. Climb a wall of rocks and cross a dry river bed filled with jumbled rock between two high cliffs.	Portage leads into Ottertooth Lake.	150 yards	135 m
19	<i>“portage Brule (Burnted), 160 yards and good road. Then 120 yards to portage la Prairie.” Good trail right begins beside campsite on east side of creek...ends at small pond</i>	First of two portages to get out of Ottertooth and into Obango Lake.	160 yards – EU 200 yards – Graham Canoe Route #9	180 m River right
20	<i>“portage la Prairie, 470 yards” Good trail starts on left (north) side of creek. By passes a waterfall and rock-strewn rapid to a pond.</i>	Portage into small pond.	470 yards – EU 300 yards - Graham Canoe Route #9	270 m River left
SL 42	Long runnable rapid flows from pond into Obango Lake to avoid overgrown portage on right side	Flows int Obango Lake		Half mile?
*Numbers in RED represent portages that Edward Umfreville crossed from east to west. The first six are within the provincial park boundary. Numbers 7-11 along Survey Creek are not within the provincial park boundary.			Total portage distance in 2018 1931 meters or 1.2 miles	



**Portage #15 in
Lower Ottertooth Canyon**



Shoot, line or wade

Graham Area Canoe Route No. 9 Description of Ottertooth Canyon & Ottertooth Lake.

next small unnamed lake, there are a dozen short rapids most of which can be easily run, and none which are too difficult. There is a good campsite on the east end of the large island in the middle of the unnamed lake. From this lake, the creek begins its tumultuous descent into the canyons west of Obonga Lake. There are 12 short rapids all of which can be easily run. Following this series of rapids is a quarter-mile section of calm water before the long series of falls dropping about 200 feet into the canyon.

PORTAGE NO. 7: This 650 yard trail begins on the right of the first small falls beside a large upright slab of rock. The trail crosses open rock near the river then heads into the trees alongside the creek. In some places the canoe must be raised up steep inclines on the trail, until it levels out above an old watercourse which leads down to the lake. This section of the portage can be treacherous in wet weather. At the bottom of the trail you must slide the canoe over several huge fallen cedars, to a small landing on a narrow lake.

From the beginning of this lake to Ottertooth Lake high cliffs rise above the creek, blocking the view of the sky. Several small rapids can be run, and a few small waterfalls are by-passed by dragging the canoe over flat rock. Two long rapids must be pulled the entire distance (about $\frac{1}{2}$ mile) as they are very rocky and shallow. The second of these rapids ends in a steep drop, down which the canoe must be pulled or lined into a small lake. The next mile of the trip into Ottertooth Lake takes you through three tiny lakes and some highly un-

usual scenery. The first lake is bounded by high cliffs on which are marked a very high waterline (about 6 feet above summer levels). At the end of the lake the reason for this becomes apparent. Rock falling from the cliffs above have effectively dammed up the end of the lake. Water can pass under the rock only at a certain rate approximately equal to summer flow. However, at spring runoff the water backs up until it can flow over the dam.

PORTAGE NO. 8: With considerable difficulty, the canoe and gear must be hauled over the huge rocks, a distance of 25 yards, and lowered to the next small pond. The next lake has an even more exaggerated high waterline indicating another plug at the end. A sizeable waterfall leaves the lake and enters a narrow chasm.

PORTAGE NO. 9: Drag or portage the gear around the left side of the falls, and into the chasm. (Note: In springtime, high water would eliminate these falls.)

PORTAGE NO. 10: A huge barrier of rock blocks the end of the chasm. Again with great difficulty you portage up and over this barrier. On the far side of this barrier you are faced with an unusual site. The waterline is about 25 feet above current levels, and below this lake large boulders exhibit the effect of years of water erosion. They are smoothed and hollowed out by the force of the spring flow. At the end of this strange lake, a veritable wall of rock faces you, under which the creek disappears.

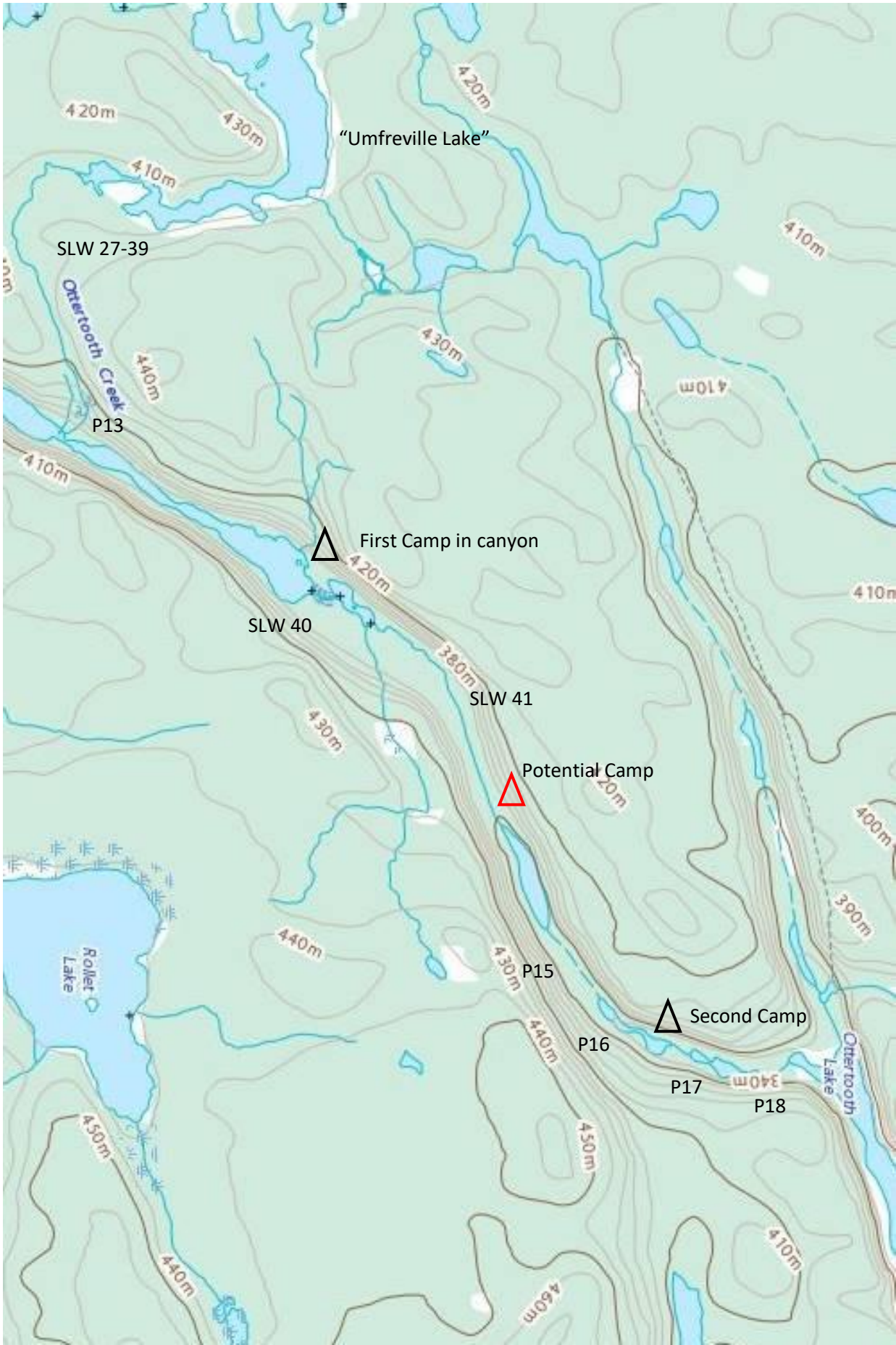
PORTAGE NO. 11: Climb the wall of rock and portage another 150 yards across a dry river bed of jumbled rock, between high cliffs. During the spring the creek flows over this bed, yet in mid-summer, the reduced flow runs 20 feet under the rock, percolating slowly into Ottertooth Lake.

Ottertooth Lake is reached with much relief. Again high cliffs rise on either side, but at the end of the lake at the outlet of the creek, a small campsite and level ground provide a welcome spot for the night.

PORTAGE NO. 12: This good 200 yard trail begins right beside the campsite on the east side of the creek, ending at a small pond.

PORTAGE NO. 13: On the left (north) of the creek, this 300 yard trail, in fair condition, passes around a waterfall and a rock-strewn rapid, to a pond. From the end of this next pond, a long rapid flows into Obonga Lake, and although it is rocky at the bottom, it can be run quite easily, avoiding the need to use an overgrown portage on the right side.

Obonga Lake is a long narrow body of water with high rolling hills surrounding it. Numerous wide sand beaches can be found along the lake providing excellent campsites. It is 10 miles from Ottertooth Creek to the access point at the end of the trip.



Ottertooth Canyon