

YUM YUM

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My first impressions of the Yum Yum Portage were all negative. All the indications told me that it was going to be an ordeal that I would not soon forget. It sounded so terrible that I just avoided thinking about it. I was going to be an assistant cook and general handyman for the Keck Geology Consortium's Quetico Research Project. In preparation for the geologic mapping field season in Ontario's Quetico Provincial Park, I prepared fifteen copies of the Knife Lake Quadrangle for field use. On each copy of the map was a short dotted line from Yum Yum Lake to Kahshahpiwi Lake and in small print the words "Yum Yum Portage." I had to measure, cut, and then paste each section of map and every time that dotted line caught my eye. Forty-five times I looked at that line, and forty-five times I heard the leader of the trip, Chief, say, "... and then to get to Kahshahpiwi you have to climb down a cliff. They say you have to lower the canoes down with ropes." From reading that map I figured that I had to carry the eighty-seven pound canoe on my back three-quarters of a mile while going two hundred fifty feet up in elevation, and then turn around and do a half hour worth of back breaking labor to lower it down. I was really looking forward to the rest of the trip, but not the Yum Yum.

The first time I actually experienced the Yum Yum Portage was a cold and rainy day. Chief and I were paddling around exploring Yum Yum Lake and doing some reconnaissance geology. After lunch, Chief decided that he wanted to walk over the Portage without the canoe to see how difficult it was going to be. I chose to stay behind by the lake and take a nap. I was not about to attack that beast when I did not have to, even without a canoe. When he came back he said that it was not as horrible as we had heard and that we would not need ropes on the other side after all. I felt a little relieved, but I still did not want to portage over it.

The next time I saw it was two days later. Frank, the head cook, and Chief dropped me off there at nine o'clock in the morning. My task was to clear the trail of windthrown trees and meet them at lunch time. As they paddled off, I realized that I was really going to have to face the portage. I set out to assess my work and the portage itself. The trail surface was rocky, but I could keep my footing. The trail grade was generally steep, and extremely so in some areas. The worst area was a bare rock outcrop that went up for thirty feet at a twenty-five degree angle (a comfortable trail grade is about five degrees). At the top, the trail jumped a three and a half foot high ledge that I could not go around. It was definitely a stretch to get up, and would be a devil's task to do with a canoe on my back. The "cliff" on the Kahshahpiwi end of the portage was very steep, but would probably be negotiable if it was not for the fact that I would be exhausted by the time I got there. I gradually worked my way back clearing the trees, thinking about how difficult it was going to be to cross. Around lunch time and three big trees away from completion, Frank and Chief arrived. Frank and I worked for about a half hour to cut out the largest tree, and then headed down to the lake for lunch. Just as we finished eating, four park rangers with chainsaws paddled up to work on clearing the trail. All my work had been unnecessary! I hoped my luck would be better on my first carry with a canoe.

The next week, my first trial came. We needed to get a Vermilion Batholith specimen for radioactive age dating. The nearest place was Sarah Lake, and a round trip to Sarah would take a whole day. Getting to Sarah meant that we had to go over the Yum Yum to Kahshahpiwi. I was looking forward to the day, but not the Yum Yum. Frank carried our canoe first on the way there. He carried up over some steep spots and the horrible outcrop with the ledge. Each step he took was one I was not carrying the canoe, but one closer to when we would switch loads. After a while he got tired, and I carried the canoe. It was eighty-seven pounds plus two three pound paddles. That is forty-six pounds resting on each shoulder, going up hill. It felt like I had the bare metal yoke on my back, instead of the portage pads. I had to climb up and up and up even more. I had decided that I was in purgatory when the trail leveled off at last. I balanced my desire to appease my screaming shoulders and my need to be fair to Frank and traded it back about two-thirds of the way across. He carried it through the swamp and I was thankful that I did not have to. We got to the edge of the cliff and I could see the lake below. I was relieved and thought that Frank would make it. Frank called me just as I began to head down. I felt a sinking feeling and I knew what he wanted. He was tired and could not balance it well enough to make it down safely. I had to take it down to the lake. Downhill is very tricky- -worse than uphill- -because the canoe has to be tilted downward so that the stern does not bang against rocks. If you let it bang, it vibrates horribly and all the energy goes through your shoulders. When it is tilted downward, you have to hold it tight to counteract its tendency to slide forward. If you do not, the yoke will dig into your neck or club you in the head. The footing was loose and hard to see, and the yoke was often on my neck. Every third step the canoe slid forward and I had to stop to put it back into place. After I got it back on my

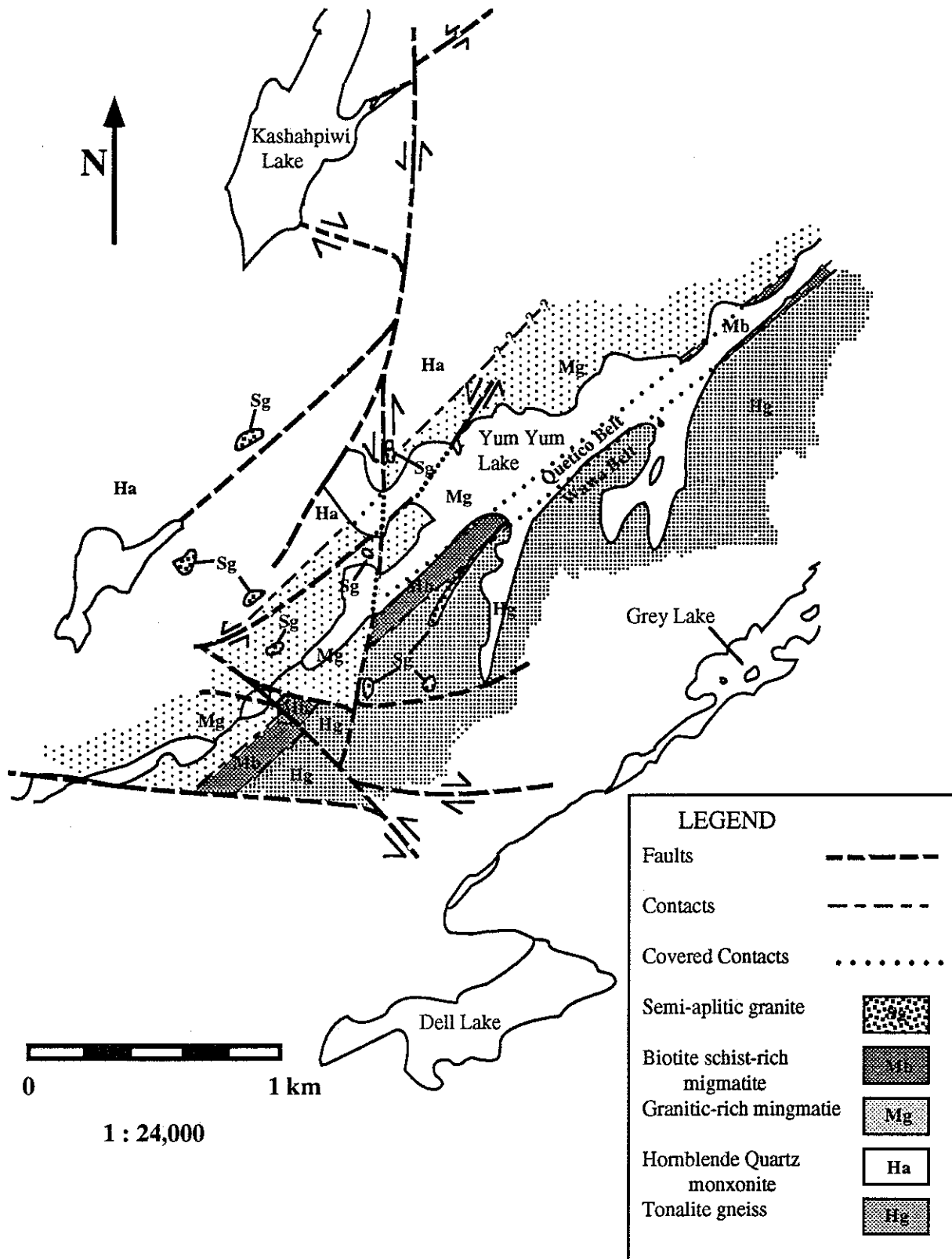


Figure 2: Geologic Map showing unit contacts and faults in southwestern Yum Yum Lake area.

shoulders, I would take a step and bang it on a rock. My neck felt like someone had taken a sledge to it but somehow kept me conscious. Thinking about the return trip put a damper on the rest of my day.

On the way back, Frank carried the canoe over the Portage into Kahshahpiwi, so it was my turn to carry it when we got to the Yum Yum again. I was tired to start with, but I knew the harder I worked, the sooner I would be able to take the canoe off my back. I got up the cliff quickly, and my one third of the way passed rapidly. I gave it to Frank, and he carried it the next third. When he gave it back to me I actually did not mind. I was so excited about making it as far as I did on the first leg without a rest that I took the canoe the remainder of the way to the lake without stopping. I even made it down the horrible outcrop with the ledge without too much trouble. I was exhausted and ready to go home, but I was also triumphant. I even felt that trying it again sometime might not be as terrible an idea as I had thought.

That time to try again came sooner than I had anticipated, four days later, on another trip to Sarah Lake. We had not collected a proper sample last time, and we had to go back. I looked forward to seeing Sarah Lake again, and even going over the Yum Yum. I carried the canoe first and made it one-third of the way without too much difficulty. Amy, one of the student researchers, was my canoe partner this time. She carried it from there. She has a light build, and I did not think that she could make it very far. She rested once on the way to the two-thirds point, and refused to trade off early when I offered. She had a positive attitude about carrying the canoe and doing her fair share that inspired me. She could have taken advantage of my incorrect prejudices about her size and strength and left the work for me, but she did not. I carried it the final leg including the cliff. This time I managed to do it without letting the yoke slip, and I was ecstatic!

On the return trip, I went temporarily insane and carried it more than half way across without a rest. By the time I set it down, I was trembling all over and my shoulders had quit screaming and had instead begun to sob. Amy carried it for a short distance, but I could tell from the way it banged around that she was really tired. She gave it back to me and I carried it for the last leg. When I finished this time, I really wanted to go back sometime and do it all by myself.

My last carry and my first solo over the Yum Yum came on a reconnaissance trip to the North end of Kahshahpiwi. We went via the north end of Yum Yum and McNiece Lake which was more paddling but less portaging. On the way back, I chose to take the Yum Yum knowing full well that I would have to carry it the whole way on my own. I carried it one-third, rested, carried it one-third and then took a long rest. I sat and looked out at the valley for a while, and then finished the last stage. On this trip, I savored the entire experience. Each step was no longer an annoyance, but a challenge and an achievement. I knew each step well. I knew the best way to step up onto ledges and exactly where to put my feet in the tricky spots. I turned the canoe at just the right time on turns to avoid banging the bow or stern on trees. I moved more quietly, without cursing and groaning, and observed a lot more. I saw a grouse and some moose tracks, and a few wild flowers that I had not noticed before. Although my view was obstructed by the canoe, I saw a few nice views that I could not remember seeing before. When I arrived at the lake for the last time, I felt entirely different than the first time I had been there. What had been an unfriendly and dreaded place was now a proud notch in my paddle. When we pushed off, I knew that I would miss the Yum Yum.

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