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From Syracuse to Keuka, Mostly by Canoe, in 1907: Selections from Fred R. Lear's "Our Canoe Trip"

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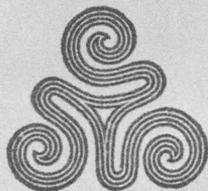


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THE COURIER

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Sunday, September 1, 1907.

Ready to start.



Upon awakening, we saw that it promised to be a hot and very sunny day, so we made haste to get a early start and thus to enjoy the best part of the day. After a solid breakfast, we put our canoe into the water and loaded it. This operation brought all unoccupied people from the hotel. They expressed their amazement at seeing so much "duffle" stowed in such a small craft. We then pushed off into the canal basin.

A page of Fred R. Lear's manuscript account of the canoe trip taken by him and his wife Lillian in 1907. The photograph shows the Lears on Keuka Lake; the passage into which it is set describes their departure from Montezuma, however.

From Syracuse to Keuka, Mostly by Canoe, in 1907
Selections from Fred R. Lear's "Our Canoe Trip"

Professor Fred R. Lear (1882-1950) served with distinction as a member of the faculty of the Syracuse University School of Architecture from 1905 until his retirement in 1947. In 1973 a collection of his papers was generously presented to the Syracuse University Libraries by his daughters Ruth (Mrs. J. Leonard Mowry), Roma (Mrs. Bernard Loren), and Cordelia (Mrs. Eldon W. Buell), members of the classes of '31, '38, and '41, respectively. Among the rich variety of letters, journals, and drawings relating to architecture it was a pleasant surprise to find an unpublished memoir of a remarkable journey taken in the summer of 1907 by Lear and his wife, the former Lillian Huntley Congdon (C.A.R., S.U. '06). This adventure was a four-day, hundred-mile canoe trip which began in Baldwinsville, northwest of Syracuse, and proceeded through a watery network made up of the Seneca River, Cross Lake, the Montezuma Marshes, and the Erie and Seneca-Cayuga canals to Dresden on Seneca Lake, where the young couple hired a wagon and driver to take them overland to Penn Yan on Keuka Lake, their final destination.

This canoe journey had been taken by the Lears once before, not long after their marriage in the summer of 1906. Following the repeat of the trip in 1907, Fred Lear wrote a memoir of it, hand-lettering his text onto forty-two pages and illustrating it with tipped-in snapshots. His narrative was made for the fun of it and for the entertainment of family and friends, though it now also assumes significance as a unique document of social and regional history. The text which appears here has been selected from the original manuscript and edited by Professor David Tatham. Omissions are not noted. Words supplied by the editor are bracketed.

Professor David Tatham is Chairman of the Department of Fine Arts at Syracuse University and a member of Library Associates' Board of Trustees.



Off to Penn Yan. Fred Lear.

OUR CANOE TRIP

Friday, August 30, 1907. Having arrived in Baldwinsville upon a car earlier than usual, Lillian and I at once began to complete our preparations for our second canoe trip to Keuka Lake. While Lillian was at the town store purchasing our provisions, I carried the canoe, tent, blankets and other duffel from the boat house to the landing. Then, upon Mrs. Lear's arrival from the store, we packed the outfit in the canoe [and] after a careful inspection to see that nothing was forgotten, we seated ourselves and struck out from the dock amid the farewells and good wishes of the gentlemen on the bank and soon were lost to view.

The [Seneca] river was very low and the marshes were drying up. At intervals there were flats of mud, with surface cracks forming crazy quilt patterns. The first few miles we passed several of these and upon one I saw a number of birds, about the size of a kingfisher, but being grey and white in color, with two black rings around their necks. Not being acquainted with the species, I shot one to examine it more closely. It fell upon the flat, about ten feet from the water's edge. Lillian volunteered [to retrieve it] so I paddled the canoe ashore. But on stepping from the canoe, upon apparently solid ground, imagine her surprise to sink above her ankles in soft, black muck. Only by promptly throwing herself on the bow of the canoe did she keep from getting more than a foot in the grave. That bird was not secured.

We passed up the river and although the sky was becoming overcast with dark clouds, we were not in the least afraid of getting wet since there were cottages on either bank. Near noon, when we had covered about eight miles, the rain began to fall. Finally compelled to go ashore at a small [unoccupied] camp named "Lena," we cooked and ate our first dinner. Shortly after dinner we were able to resume our journey and encountered a number of swift places. On arriving at the entrance of the state ditch, we found but little water trickling down the stony bottom. This made it necessary for us to follow the river around a large loop.

[Beyond the section of the river called Jack's Riffs] the Seneca is straight for a number of miles and we were able to see as far as the first island in the outlet of Cross Lake. The river now moved more slowly and the canoe seemed to glide over the water with little effort. We noted a rowboat a quarter of a mile ahead [and I] sought to forget my weariness by trying to overtake [it]. We found that it was not hard to decrease the distance, so Lillian rested while the two men in the boat, as yet, were not aware of our scheme. The intervening space slowly grew less and less. As we grew nearer, the fellows realized the game and entered with spirit into the contest. Mrs. Lear now added her paddle to our motive power and although the young men rowed in relays, we slowly passed.

When we had gone about five miles beyond the lake, it began to grow dark and as either side of the river was marshy, we had some difficulty finding a suitable place for a dry camp. After a half hour of anxious searching, we found a suitable locality. Although it was quite low and near a brook, we decided to risk it, as the sky was cloudless and the sunset was beautiful. The position of our camp site was across from Ward's island and it served us very well. While I erected the tent and prepared the blankets and killed mosquitoes, Lillian's time was taken up in getting supper. By the time the bacon and eggs were ready, we were two hungry individuals ready to eat all that was set before us. There was not a smell or a crumb left for the squirrels. The supper dishes were left outside the tent for the dew to wash.

Saturday, August 31, 1907. While we were preparing and eating breakfast, the old sun was also busy dispelling the fog from the river so that by the time we were all packed up and ready to move, the atmosphere was clear. The crisp air put us in the best condition, so we "swung along with a rhythmic song," and soon had covered a number of miles. On reaching Hickory Island, we passed a number of old fishermen and as we reached Frost Island, we saw two houseboats, and in one a man cooking dinner. We drew alongside and asked him to sell us a fish. He, thinking we might be looking for a violation of the game law, said he had none. As we started to leave, he changed his mind and sold us a small pike. During the conversation we learned that the two boats were the same ones we had seen the previous year moored near "Camp Louise" above Baldwinville. They towed the houseboats from point [to point] by means of their small fishing skiffs.

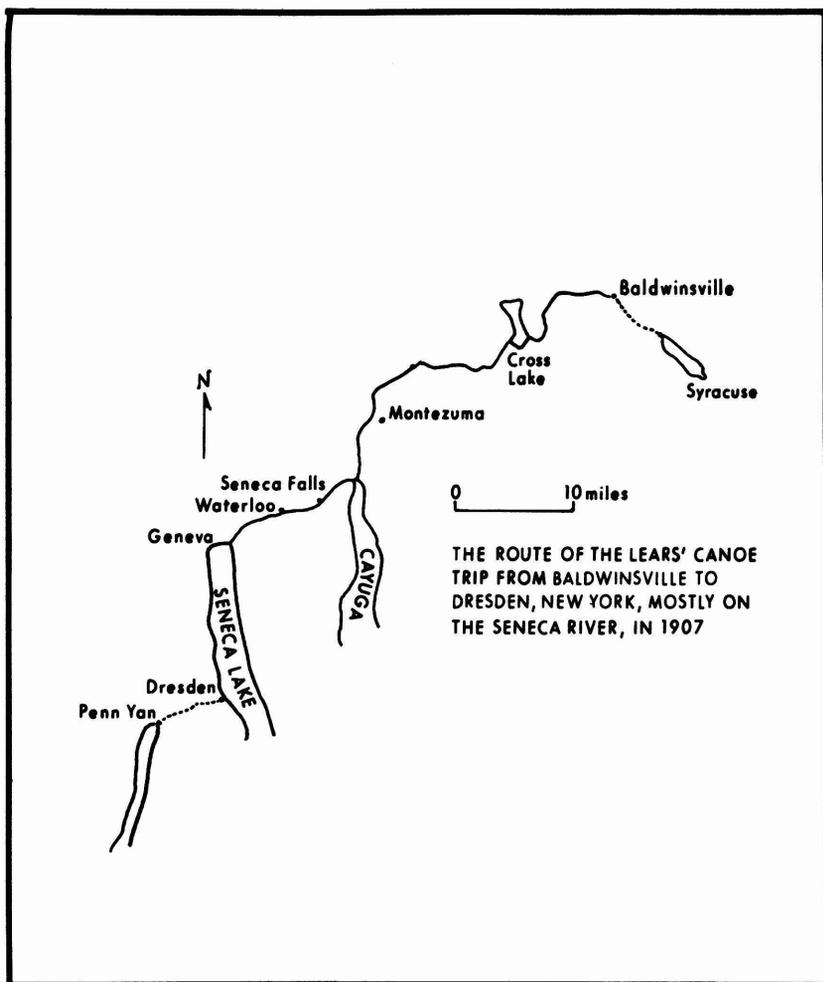
[The Lears headed toward shore to cook their fish.] Just before landing, we discovered a large snake nearly covered by the water at the edge of the river. It was a difficult shot because of the distance and the fact that the head of the reptile was all that was above water. I tried a shot and succeeded in cutting its head off. Tying the body to the stern of the canoe, we went ashore at a point across from the lower end of Howland Island. Then Lillian fixed us a dinner of soup, fish, corn on the ear, potatoes, etc. Crude as the food was, it was all well cooked. Edibles made by the best of chefs were never eaten with more relish than were these. After clearing the dishes, Mrs. Lear lay down to rest. I prepared to skin the snake. Turning back the skin around the neck for about an inch and winding dry paper about the reversed ring, one slow motion of the paper toward the tail removed the skin. The fleshy part of the body had not grown on the ventral line. When the skin was removed, the underside looked as though it had been cut by a knife. This cut-like opening exposed a long sack of transparent membrane which contained a row of spherical bodies. Upon closer examination these proved to be small water snakes, rolled up in knots. On cutting this membrane, they fell to the ground and slowly uncoiling, began to glide away. After killing them, we counted nineteen of the small edition. It is probable that the old snake had swallowed them to protect them, since they were not in the stomach [which] was nearer the head and contained a partially digested frog.*

About two o'clock we packed our canoe, placing the snake skin on top of the waterproof to dry in the sun. Pushing off, we took the east channel around Howland Island and immediately entered the Great Montezuma Marshes. After we had traveled about two miles across the rushes, we saw the smoke stacks of what later proved to be a dredge deepening the main channel of the river for the Barge Canal. As it dredged the bottom of the stream it oscillated from one bank to the other. The machinery and waste pipe boats took up nearly all the river so that we were compelled to watch our chance and make a dash under the cables while they were in the air. It was a relief to be by.

The afternoon was hot and sunny. We had used most of our water supply at dinner, so we both began to feel thirsty. The marsh is a mighty poor place to find drinking water. Among the small islands we saw many wild ducks and a few pairs of grey cranes. From time to time we frightened up bitterns and blue heron. I shot a number of turtles and one mud hen.

As we passed [the Buck Island] Bridge, we saw a passenger train on the New York Central Rail Road, about half a mile directly in front of us, but the river made a sharp bend to the right and a glance at our map showed that we still had four miles before the main stream reached the tracks. We entered a straight stretch of water called the saw mill cut and the current here was the

*The snake in fact was of an ovoviviparous species; the young had not yet been extruded from their parent - D.T.



swiftest we encountered during the trip. The water was deep and there were but few ripples on its surface, but the force of the flow was terrible, and of course the wind must needs begin to blow at just such a time. Ere long Lillian became too tired to paddle and seated herself in the bottom of the canoe to rest. Then, against the current and wind, my best effort could not move the canoe more than an inch to a stroke. After a time that seemed to me an age, and many a rest hanging to cat-tails along the bank, the point was reached at which the river turns a ninety degree angle to the south. The current became weaker and the wind now blew at our back. Raising the sail, we traveled the few miles with such ease and speed that we made up for much of the time [we had spent] struggling against the current. We soon arrived at the N.Y.C. bridge.

As it grew late in the afternoon, the wind gradually died down and finally a perfect calm settled on the marshes. The black bird's clatter was stilled. Not even the splash of an awkward turtle broke the hush which had fallen. In spite of lagging muscles we seemed compelled to paddle with care lest a faulty stroke disturb the sublime stillness of the solitude. The slanting rays of the setting sun lit up the hills to the east and turned the stream to silver. On this shining way we approached the aqueduct by means of which the Erie Canal crosses the marsh. As it was now growing dark and we were reaching the end of our endurance, it was decided to go to Montezuma village for the night. It took some time to get the canoe and our camping outfit up the steep bank of the canal [but] soon we were paddling the last mile of the day's trip.

Coming to the village bridge I left Lillian in charge of the canoe and began a search for accommodation. Finding the hotel, we went ashore fifty yards from [its] door. We stored our equipment in the stable and wasted no time getting to the dining room. We looked like tramps and I am sure our appetites confirmed our appearance. Lucky for us the regular supper had passed and we had the room to ourselves. While we were eating a thunderstorm passed and the falling rain made us thankful we were under a wooden roof. Expecting it to be a good night to sleep, we retired early.

Sunday, September 1, 1907. We learned that the Seneca-Cayuga Canal ran parallel to the main channel of the Seneca River. When we came to the lock, we dropped from the Erie Canal down into the Cayuga [Canal]. As we swung along, we passed many small farmhouses, each with its enclosure opening upon the water. In places the canal seemed to contain more domestic ducks than water. A little later I shot several water snakes that were sunning themselves on the rocky shores. We noticed many trees covered with vines loaded with grapes. For a considerable distance the waterway ran along near a country road and we saw loads of people on their way to church. Today we were in the Cathedral of the Universe and our teacher was God himself, through nature.

[The Lears follow the canal through the town of Seneca Falls to Waterloo.] We came to the Main Street bridge and I climbed up a buttment and began a still hunt for an ice cream parlor. You can imagine the sensation my tramplike appearance created in the Sunday afternoon promenade. After obtaining the [ice] cream I returned to the canoe and we enjoyed our party under the gaze of curious strollers on the footbridge above.

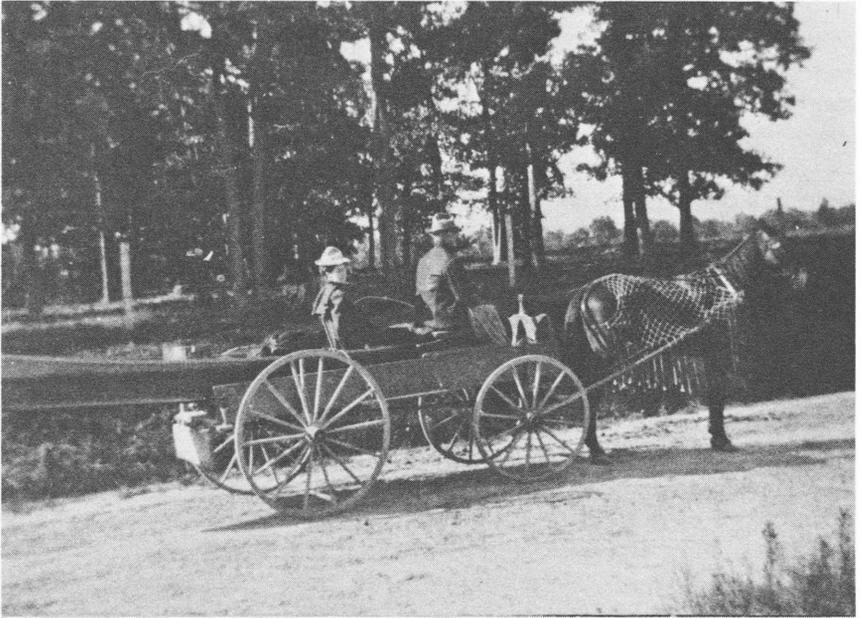
Passing on, the trip became more nerve wracking. We were now continually meeting and being passed by motor boats of all kinds and speeds. As a final task we came [to] a string of four canal boats hurrying to reach Geneva for the night. At this point the canal was very swift and scarcely twice the width of the barges. As the boats were drawn upstream, the water rushed down beside them as in a mill race. Not wishing to trail behind, we decided to pass the boats. By a long, strong pull together we managed to get by. Almost

at once, we passed through "Open Lock" and saw the end of Seneca Lake, through the North-east outlet. It was now two miles to the North-west outlet and harbor, upon which Geneva is located. The canal runs parallel to the shore. We remained in [it] and began a search for a suitable place in which to camp. For some distance the canal runs through very marshy land. Just beyond this we saw several tumble-down buildings from which issued drunken songs. This was not a promising locality so we passed on.

By now we were very tired and began to be less particular. We drew up on the tow path side and chose a spot for the tent between two scrubby apple trees. As we ate our meal, we took inventory of our surroundings. A quarter mile to the north were the N.Y.C.R.R. yards with its multitude of noises and a tube works with its night shift sending periodical reports into the air. Across the canal to the south, behind a screen of bushes, was the willow-lined boulevard, with its evening strollers and carriages. Just beyond this was the lake pounding the breakwater with waves impelled by an embryo gale. We expected a sleepless night. It was very hot [and so] I cut down a young forest of clover to let the breeze strike the side of the tent and thus ventilate it. We retired and fastened up the tent but immediately found that the tall grass had kept a secret from us. It was full of green apples. We were used to hard beds but we could not endure these. After an investigation which found and exposed many secrets, we lay us down to listen to night's serenade. Unappreciative mortals, we fell at once to sleep.

Monday, September 2, 1907. Unknown to us, it rained most of the night. [At morning,] the sky was still gray, but it had begun to clear. Although the canal was calm, we could hear the rollers on the lake and knew that the evening wind had grown stronger. We entered Geneva and turned into the harbor. We found the lake so rough that it was not safe for small craft. The old gentleman [at the boat livery] said, "This is the third day of a blow from the south and I have noticed that the wind does not let up on the first day of such a blow, the second day it goes down about two o'clock, and on the third day it never lasts until noon." We had a fourteen mile trip to Dresden [on the west shore of Seneca Lake] and wished to leave as early as possible. We asked if he thought we could leave by ten or ten thirty that morning. He replied, "Exactly." The manner in which he said this word, and his frequent use of it, had led to our nicknaming him "Exactly."

While waiting for the lake's permission, we set out to lay in a supply of provisions. While at the store we saw a parade pass and then began to realize that it was Labor Day. On return we found that Exactly's prophecy was correct. We were able to leave at once and lost no time in doing so. We kept close to the west shore and criticized all of the cottages and summer homes built upon the bluff. During the morning a shower drove us under a boat house for shelter. Lucky for us it was built far enough above the water so we were able to paddle under without trouble. At noon we were half way to Dresden.



Lillian and the Canoe in the Haywagon.

[The rest of the passage was alternately stormy and peaceful and the Lears arrived at Dresden in good time, registered at the hotel, and engaged a farmer to take them to Penn Yan on Keuka Lake the next day.] Ready for the start the following morning, [we] returned to the hotel just in time for supper. Immediately after we went to our room and I read the first paper since we had left Syracuse. But in the midst of it my eyes grew so heavy I slipped out of my clothes and into bed.

The Lear papers are currently being processed by the Syracuse University Archives and will be open for research in the near future.