

The Crossing

By Suzanne Konopka ("Doc" – 1983)

The name of this river in Maine slides off the tongue as smoothly, supposedly, as the river flows in its bed. The Abenaki Indians, who lived in Maine and New Brunswick, called it the Kennebec, which means "level water river" or "long quiet river." They were a nature-centered tribe. Surely, they knew what they were talking about. But they hadn't walked a mile in my Nike boots and I hadn't walked a mile in their moccasins. And when they named the river, the dam hadn't been constructed upstream of the Appalachian Trail crossing. The AT was not even there before the 1930s.

The Abenakis were right about a few things. It was a river. It did have water and it was long. But it was level as earthquake rubble and just about as quiet. Because I hadn't 'studied' the Kennebec fording before starting my hike in Georgia, there were only two sources to inform me as we approached it.

The first was the official description in the Maine trail guide book, entitled "Crossing the Kennebec River":

At Section Six's northern end, the hiker continuing northbound must cross the Kennebec River. This is the most formidable water ford along the entire 2000 mile AT. The river is approximately 100 yards wide with a swift powerful current. Its depth varies greatly as the River is used for hydro-electric power generation. The River can be forded across gravel bars when the water is low, especially in the early morning (prior to 8 am) before the upstream dam gates

are opened. These releases of water do vary and will change the fording conditions from waist deep at low water to over 6 feet at high water (which makes fording impossible). Provisions should be made to keep backpacking equipment dry. Rafting is possible but requires time and some ingenuity. Extreme caution should be exercised as this can be very dangerous in high water.

Arrangements can be made to be ferried for a fee from a retired local resident. Call J. Harold Smith 207-672-3775 or write to him at Box 30, Star Route, Bingham, ME, 04920.

Northbounders can contact him by radio-telephone (for a fee) by stopping at the Carrying Place Camps near Pierce Pond, about three miles south of the River. The camp owners can also provide information regarding the current river conditions.

Hikers must understand that a ferryman may not always be available, so advanced arrangements should be made to avoid long delays to be ferried.

The first wave of panic arrived. There was only one choice for me. I simply had to contact J. Harold Smith and be ferried for a fee!

The second source of information erupted from rumors. Lots of them. The southbounders who'd already crossed the River left their sadistic comments in many of the trail registers, embellished with their own personal and dreadful realities. It was similar to "Oh, you're pregnant? Well, let me tell you about my pregnancy!"

Then there were the whimpering entries of the northbounders, who'd listened to too many southbounders. They felt compelled, in order to save themselves from drowning in the adrenalin of fear --- before they had the opportunity to actually drown in the Kennebec--- to

splay their concerns on paper. I shared them all, but whereas most hikers' emotions about the River merely ebbed and flowed, mine were shooting the rapids days before we ever reached its bank.

The 1983 AT Data Book gleefully stated that it was only 152.9 more miles from the Kennebec River Crossing to Mt. Katahdin, the northern terminus of the AT. That meant we'd already hiked 1,985.6 miles. I'd already suffered the frightening extremes of hypothermia and hyperthermia, and the embarrassment of public dysentery. I had endured the pain of pus-dripping blisters on every toe, until I learned to tape them all. I had once hiked backwards for four days during two months of excruciating knee pain. I had hiked the last 1,000 miles with red-hot, swollen feet, sometimes needing to stop every 10 minutes and lie down. I had been perpetually half-starved, for most of 148 days. I'd met black bears in the mist, rattlesnakes at my boot tips, and a bona fide, beady-eyed stranger who was hiking in a wool suit and socks, with no boots. In August. I was scared a lot.

These were just a few of our experiences in broad daylight. After all that, I should have been a fearless super-woman. But as comments about the Kennebec arrived more frequently, as the rumors boiled up more ominously, as the miles receded under our feet -- I was reduced to my lowest common denominator – naked terror.

This was going to be a new kind of baptism, but not in the placid waters of a Jordan. I had only one question left for God. After all this, what pleasure would it give You to kill me now?

Day 149

Our last stop in civilization before reaching the Kennebec was Stratton, Maine. Bruce, Kate, Steve and I stayed at the Widow's Walk (now there's a happy name!), a rooming house for hikers, skiers, hunters and other smelly adventurers.

I decided to get a jump on other timorous hikers and call Harold right now, on a real Ma Bell, not the Carrying Place. I imagined the latter to be in the middle of nowhere with a non-functioning radio. My hand was shaking. I dialed the number and an ancient, crackling female voice answered in classic Mainer dialect. I assumed it was Mrs. Smith.

"Ayah?" I am so astonished to get them on the phone that I excitedly blurt, "HelloisHaroldthere?"

Mrs. Smith responds with a long "yehhh-sah."

Doc: "Well, may I please speak to him?"

"Hah-rolld cahn't-ah cum-ah to the phuwn-ah aht nawha."

Doc: "Well, I'm an AT hiker and calling from Stratton to see if he could

ferry me across the Kennebec in 3 days” (ha! this assumes that we make it there in 3 days).

There is a frighteningly long pause, even for “Mainahs,” and I have stopped breathing.

Mrs. Smith, “ Whaht-ah?” I repeat myself, verrrrrrrry slowly, tasting a rise of stomach acid. She starts talking to someone in the distant background. Hah-roid. His speech is stranger than hers. No wonder he doesn’t come to the phone.

“Wahl-ah, Hah-roid sehs-ah hees-ah nottah showa. Yule-ah hoff-ah tuh cahlla him innah therha days-ay.” That’s three days, in English. My whole body begins to shake.

Mrs. Smith isn’t finished yet, “Ayah, Hah-roid sehs-ah tuh nottah lay-ay downn-ah.”

“ Excuse me, what do you mean?”

Again, “ Hah-roid sehs-ah tuh nottah lay-ay downn-ah.”

“ Uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh, I’m really sorry, this must be a bad connection, I can’t understand you.”

After several more attempts, she finally makes herself clear.

“ Thah hykahs awlways-ah lay-ay downn-ah innah thah weeds-ah, states Mrs. Smith, “ahn Hah-roid cahn’t-ah fahnd thaym fruhm-ah hiss-ah boeht, suh DOHN’T-AH LAY-AY DOWHN-AH!!”

Oh, all is not lost, I think. “Not to worry, Mrs. Smith. I’ll be standing like a redwood, waving like a flag, jumping like a pogo stick ... thank you, ma’am. I’ll be calling in 3 days!”

But I’m really worried. This is not a sure thing at all.

The next three days blended together in the amalgam of advancing dread. My hiking partners watched my attempts to act normally, but I mostly stopped talking. It did help to hike 18.8 miles the next day, to Jerome Brooks Shelter. We arrived to find that three hikers had cold-bloodedly murdered two unresisting spruce grouse for their barbecue dinner. Just another normal day in the woods.

Day 151

40° this morning. I wake up completely drained. But as on any day, every day, well, actually 150 days like that – you ignore yourself and move on. This time I am moved by the accelerating fear as well, and 13.4 miles later I arrive alone, way ahead of my group, at the deserted Pierce Pond lean-to. Only another 3.4 miles to the River, where we planned to camp this night. To be ready ... before dawn ... to cross ... the Kennebec. I would wait here for my friends to catch up, but first, I have something to do.

Hurry. Dump the pack. Scan the notes in the register, posted on the logs. Read what you don't want to know. It was all there. Page after page of southbound survivors and northbound cry-babies, like me. And a few disgusting accounts of delightful fordings. Almost everyone gave advice, some of it conflicting, some of it confirming official facts. Several hikers had slipped in the River and were carried away in a neonatal Moro reflex, flailing about, trying to unstrap their packs before they were submarined. If they were lucky enough to jettison their packs, find their footing and fight their way to shore, they still had to hack through brush for hours, for miles downstream, looking for and maybe not finding their water-loaded gear. But at least they lived to tell the story.

The water was very fast and very strong, they said, even before unknown hands opened the upstream dam gates, at unpredictable times. The bottom rocks were smooth and coated with super-slippery slime, they said, and you must try hard to jam your feet between them, or go down. Use two walking sticks, not one, they said. And move one foot, keeping the other foot and both sticks securely wedged between rocks, tri-podding yourself every second. Pick the visible gravel bar area about $\frac{1}{4}$ mile downstream from where the "official" AT crossing is, they said. Double-bag everything in your pack in plastic, they said, and put everything as high in or on top of the pack as possible.

Because you never know how high the water will go or how low the hole you step in. And if you slip, they said, none of this matters at all.

They said too much. Even though it was already late afternoon and Harold probably couldn't be contacted, I went tearing down the unmarked side trail to the Carrying Place Camps, 0.2 miles away. Packless and propelled by visions of death, I ran the trail until it ended in a cluster of decrepit cabins in the middle of nowhere woods, exactly as I'd imagined. There were clothes hanging on a crooked line, in windless air and eerie silence. Although it has been in continuous use since the 1900s, this day the Carrying Place seemed orphaned, like me. One of the buildings had a dining hall, and I stomped my boots at the entrance to raise the living or the dead. If they didn't hear my boots, they would have to hear a pounding heart.

After a long time, a lone worker finally strolled out, bored and unconcerned. He informed me that Harold couldn't be called until 8 am. I'd have to come back tomorrow. As I turned to leave my last hope of salvation, he generously threw after me, "and there ain't no guarantee that Harold would be able to ferry you tomorrow anyway."

I half-dragged, half-pushed myself back to Pierce Pond. My hiking group had not arrived yet and so I slumped to the ground against the

shelter floor, utterly bereft. My only consolation was the sun, gently reaching around me, hiding behind clouds, between trees, winking through butterflies' wings and teasing me with the last flicks of living warmth. The dam burst. I let the very first wave of tears roll.

There seemed to be no question now. It wouldn't be right to delay my friends with any of these ifs, ands, buts, maybes and no-guarantees-about-Harold. None of us, even me the sissy, had the time or inclination to hike a 40-mile round-trip detour to the nearest bridge and back. We would ford the River together. My soliloquy ended abruptly and my decision was sealed when Bruce, Kate and Steve finally marched in, strong, calm and chatty. We took only a short break, hoisted our packs, and ... impossibly, I rose to a higher level of fear, 3.4 more miles to a River, I swore, I could hear from there.

After Pierce Pond, the trail flowed gently downhill, almost comforting me as it open-armed into a wide logging road. But long before we saw the River, we began to hear it roar, louder and LOUDER and LOUDER. The "gentle" 750 foot drop in trail elevation was merely a deceptive descent to the mouth of hell, where I knew I would be swallowed whole. When the AT abruptly turned to parallel the river, and I saw the Kennebec for the first suffocating instant, the sight merged completely with the sounds of it. All of my nightmare images

became real, clicking one fast frame at a time. This River was huge. I could barely see the trees on the other side. It was deep, clearly “high tide” and over my head. And it was wild. Its surface masqueraded as smooth glass, but it was flowing so fast underneath that I wasn’t fooled. It was really ... a horizontal waterfall. In the name of God, how could anyone ford this? I think of Moses and the Red Sea.

As suddenly as we turned to face it, there were suddenly no more trail blazes. “Lord, save me,” was immediately replaced by “Where in blazes is the trail?!” We wandered around in overgrown, skin-ripping briars, confused and distracted. If we didn’t find where the AT actually “crossed,” we couldn’t find the safe crossing area, the gravel bar, 1/4 mile downstream. An hour later, squinting into the setting sun and its blinding reflections on the River’s face, we finally saw a white painted “AT” across the River, barely visible on a cliff. Whooping and hollering, we now think we know where not to go.

The next blessed distraction was to shuffle back and choose sites for our two tents. We ruled out the jungle of briars and neck-high weeds. My friends decided (with no objection from me, because I could no longer think) to camp right on the River’s bank (but what were they thinking?!). We pitched our tents on top of boulder-strewn gravel only a few daring feet from that monster.

I don't remember what they fixed for their dinners; I fixed the Last Supper. I don't remember what they talked about; all I could hear was the River's incessant, guttural laughter aimed at me. I vaguely remember a pensive Bruce whispering, "We'll help you, Doc. Don't worry."

Many people find it soothing to fall asleep by the beach, listening to the crashing waves. Some people would find this River just as soothing. For me, the night's only lullaby was going to be ear-splitting, mind-altering cult music from an evil River. It rocked me in a cradle of rocks, allowing neither sleep nor sweet dreams.

After our meals, Bruce and Kate peacefully climbed into their tent. Steve shared mine that night, and dozed off like a contented baby. How can they sleep through this? Only the River and I were awake and we argued through the night on the River's terms. It screamed past, it gurgled, it splashed and spit, and didn't let me get a word in edgewise. I could barely hear myself breathe, but I could hear the crinkling of tiny ice crystals, forming on the outside of the tent. It was 30 degrees. By midnight, they were forming in my flesh as well, giving true meaning to the phrase "cold as hell." I decided that the rocks under my Thermarest had to be cousins of the River bottom rocks ---

with familial loyalty, they too poked and sneered. Then realization struck me, horrors : *I was already lying on the bottom of the Kennebec.* I closed my eyes and saw black. I opened my eyes and saw black. But what I really saw was that River at dusk – 210 feet across, over 6 feet deep at “high tide,” and perfect for a grave, yet demonically smooth on its unbroken surface – taunting that it had no bottom at all.

And so I drifted in and out of the nightmare of my own Salvadore Dali landscape. You cannot sleep when the River chants all night, licking at your head.

Day 152

At 5:30 am, in a pitch black pre-dawn, we crawled stiffly out of our tents and faced yet another surprise – dense fog blocking all sight but the fingers on our hands. How could we see the other side of the River, how could we possibly find our way to low areas over uneven gravel bars, if we could not see? I asked these questions only to myself. We were simply going to go, and we had to get across before the dam gates opened their jaws of death. He who hesitates, dies.

There would be no breakfast, only hot chocolate to remind us briefly of the warmth in living things. We quickly packed up tents, ice

included. Double-bagged the most important possessions, placing everything as high in the packs as possible. We had already found our extra walking sticks. The final act was the strip-tease of our warm outer gear, exposing ourselves as half-naked warriors in t-shirts, running shorts, and tennis shoes without socks. If the River claimed us, at least we'd have dry clothes in plastic bags. Or body bags. And we all loosened our hip belts... just in case.

The air temp is now 37°. What temperature is the water? I will soon become a poikilotherm. I stand at the lip of the enemy, top-heavy, shaking from cold, cold fear, and free-falling exhaustion. But my bearded, golden-haired, teddy-bear, buddy-brother Bruce tells me he'll hold onto the top frame of my backpack and I can hold onto the bottom of his. I am 5'1" and he is 6.' We'll cross together as a unit! Gee, why didn't he mention this before? We could have practiced. His wife Kate and our friend Steve have already scampered into the River on their own recognizance. Fools. We must go, NOW, and follow.

It is still completely black, and we find the water's edge more by groping toward sounds than by sight. I dip one foot into the River's edge and instantaneously merge oh-so-intimately with liquid nitrogen. Inexpressible pain quickly turns into total numbness. Then inch by inch, the cycle repeats as water slowly and calmly creeps up my skin

with every advancing step. How can my feet feel their way over butter-covered rocks when they've lost all sensation?

Pre-dawn has turned from flat black to semi-gloss, still with a full fog curtain. We strain our eyes to see through this wax paper, looking for exposed boulders or gravel. It's "low tide" until the gates open, so they should be there. But we cannot see a thing. And we have absolutely no idea where the opposite shore is either, where to direct ourselves. But we'd been told that the noisy water is shallower; that's where water is blasting over the rocks. So head for the noise.

We've gone the distance of only three feet into the River, water just above my ankles, and Bruce chirps, "See, Doc, we're almost there." I choke once through the first and last of self-allotted tears. There's no crying in the Kennebec. Locked together, we have no need for second sticks. He is my second stick and I am his, tri-podding. I plant a foot, plant a stick. He plants a foot, plants a stick. Each foot has to be jammed between those slimy rocks. Is your foot secure? Ok, then it's safe to lift the stick up and plant that. He jams a foot, a stick. I jam a foot, a stick. Again and again. Progress is measured in inches. And there are 200 feet of them to go. *"Six inches of fast-moving water is capable of knocking down an adult."*

The water is now up to mid-calf on me and barely over Bruce's ankles. Its velocity has increased exponentially, and the astonishing pressure of it forces us to tighten every muscle fiber to resist. The water pulses are coming in explosive, unpredictable pulses though, so we don't know when to stiffen and brace. We are forced to stay stiff and braced, even as our balance is falls away.

Now the water has ascended to my knees and I slip for the first time, I can't breathe, but I'm caught by a mighty yank from my anchor, Bruce. I breathe. The reality that I could really truly DIE. TODAY. WITHIN SECONDS ... has slammed into me with the first slip. *"18 inches of fast-moving water can float most cars. Once floating, a car can be carried to deeper water or even overturned."* We don't know where Kate or Steve are, but no one is screaming and that seems to be consolation enough.

The closer we get to the center of the River (wherever that is), the faster and faster it flows. No, this is not a flow anymore. This is a cataclysm. Have they already opened the gates?! *"You cannot cross faster than the water level rises."* The full fury is on us, and I wonder if it will rise to my throat.

It's crashing into my mid-thighs. Are we even half-way there? My spirit is also numbing, and fear is replaced by apathy, or is that hypothermia's grand entrance? I entertain thoughts of just standing still, paralyzed in fear, but realize that that will end in a watery grave. Or maybe I should race hysterically, get it over with, but that would have the same result. The only option was this methodical slow dance with Bruce, freezing alive.

Another surge leaps up to my waist, and at this level and force and cold, I believe yes, I will surely die soon. Every muscle is violently trembling into profound weakness. *"Fast-moving water can hinder swimming to safety."* Bruce is still calm and telling ridiculous stories to humor me, punch lines fading before he gets to them. If I'm alive later, I must remember to thank him.

I slip again! But Bruce yanks and holds me upright. We go on, on, on. Feeling like hours of this suspended torture have passed, thinking that I just can't fight anymore, I SEE the water slowly sliding lower on my dead legs. Can this be true?? I can actually see some rocks on the bottom too. Squinting, I can see the other side of the River in the foggy dawn, as light finally fades in. Giggling Steve is coming toward us with his camera, recording my zombie-ism for posterity. Kate is waiting safely on higher, holy ground with a gigantic smile on her face.

And now so are we, Bruce and I, slogged onto the other rocky shore. I am simply and totally stunned to be alive. Simply and totally. All four of us are grinning as wide as the River. And here comes the sun!

But wait. Just as Steve comes with the camera, he tells us that a lone hiker is further downstream in the middle of the River, and in big trouble. We race along the bank and see him with his invisible backpack, neck deep in the grip of the Kennebec. We are helpless and can only watch in silence, sure we are witnessing someone's death. We should be praying. He cannot possibly stay upright now. But, impossibly, he does, and makes it to our side. Ahhh, prayer!

And of course, we were not done yet. The day had just begun. Heavy and board-stiff with the cold, the half-frozen wet clothes and an unparalleled fatigue, we now had to bush-wack through the woods and find the next white blaze where the AT continues on dry land. Once again, we were directionless but luck plopped us onto isolated Caratunk Road, and into more good fortune. There was a 19th century Congregational Church right there, and it was open and empty. We gleefully ran in, peeled off our clothes and pulled on the dry winter ones. There is little modesty on the trail. Ayah!!!

Then we blessedly cooked hot, oh yes, hot, oatmeal by the church steps. And reminded of the warmth of living things, we ate it while sitting in the only patch of sun we could find – the dry gravel next to the road. It wasn't quite like the resurrected Christ cooking fish and bread for us on the beach, but it was definitely a redemptive meal. We ate silently, meditating on what we had just survived. This was history. We all felt victorious. But I felt resurrected.

Still grinning, we re-packed our gear, hoisted our packs and ambled onto the trail again for the next 15 miles. Just another normal day in the woods. And 152.9 miles to go.

We hiked the AT in '83. And I wondered then if the Maine AT Club waited perhaps, for someone to drown before they remedied “the most formidable water ford.” Harold, I later learned, was in his 80's, had a heart condition, and soon passed away, hopefully not while ferrying a hiker. I could picture two people in a little rowboat, one dead and the other frantically rowing to avoid unexpected passage to the Atlantic and beyond. Was there anyone to take Harold's place?

In early 1985, an AT park manager who was section-hiking with his son, wrote to the Maine ATC president after fording the Kennebec. With great restraint, he stated, “We were frightened by the experience and wonder how the MATC and ATC can persist in a casual attitude toward the evident danger involved, particularly for less athletic and capable hikers.”

Someone did die. On August 26, 1985, 60 year old, petite Alice Ference attempted to ford the Kennebec with her husband. She slipped, she did not have her hip belt unfastened, and she went down to the bottom and downstream with her pack. The MATC and ATC quickly, finally, moved to establish a ferry service from May to October. In 1987, the Rivers and Trails Northeast Company ferried 265 people.

The current ferry service is contracted to the Fletcher Mountain Outfitters --- <http://www.matc.org/Ferry.htm> --- as posted on 5-8-12, the ferry report for 2011 included the following:

“I am happy to report that the 2011 Ferry season has come to a close without major injury or incident ... Fletcher Mountain Outfitters safely ferried 1,297 hikers ... 22 dogs, 1 cat and 1 goat. As in seasons past, a small number (14) of hikers chose to ford the River. Thankfully, there were no [reported] fatalities. However, at least one hiker very

nearly died ... he told me that he wasn't sure why he was still alive, and after hearing his story from his own mouth, I'm still wondering myself why he didn't drown."

A far cry from the 1983 Trail Guide advice, the current MATC website screams its warnings in bold and red letters: **"The Kennebec River is the most formidable un-bridged crossing along the entire 2,174-mile Appalachian Trail... with a swift, powerful current under the best of circumstances. However, as a result of releases of water from hydro facilities upstream, the depth and current of the river surge quickly and unpredictably. You cannot cross faster than the water level river rises.**

! DO NOT ATTEMPT TO !

FORD THE RIVER

The name of the River now slides smoothly off my tongue. I'm humbled to be part of that elite group whose members have thru-hiked the AT. Even more precious is the solidarity with those who crossed the Kennebec on foot, and lived.

But I would never cross the Kennebec again. I still can't swim.



Sue and Bruce arrive safely on the North shore of the Kennebec in the early morning light.