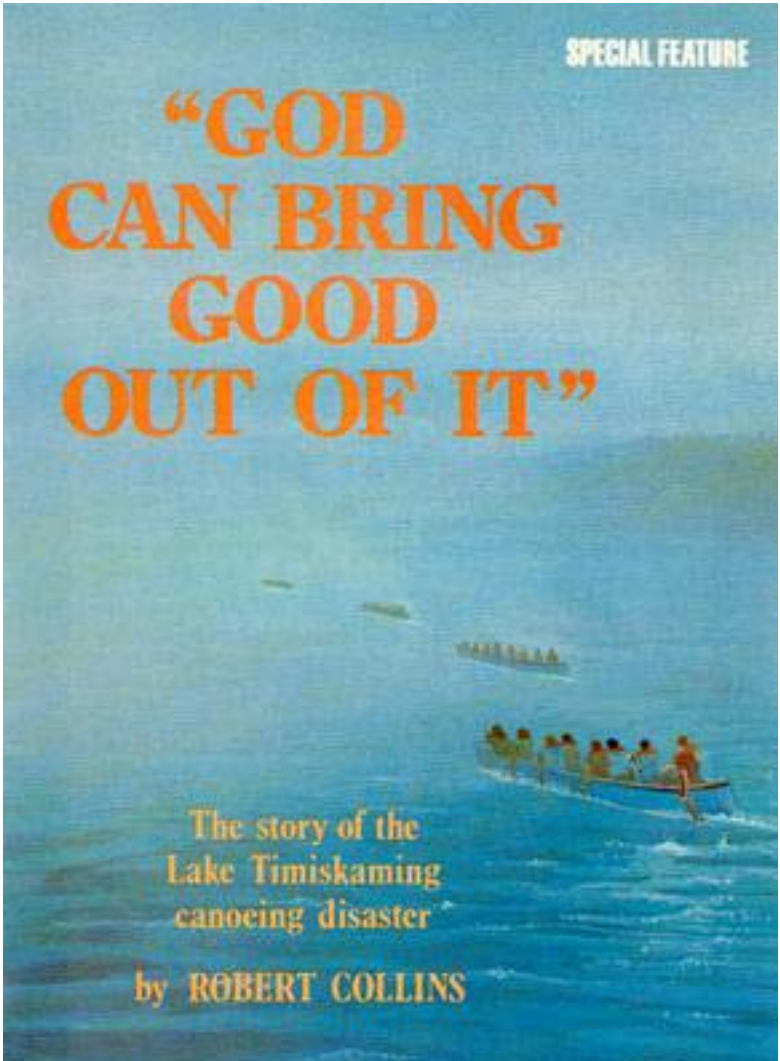
SPECIAL FEATURE

"GOD CAN BRING GOOD OUT OF IT"



The story of the Lake Timiskaming canoeing disaster

by ROBERT COLLINS

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Paddles flashing in the sun, the 27 young St. John's schoolboys and their masters sped their canoes toward Lake Timiskaming. Their spirits were high. The trip ahead was to be the highlight of the school year, a three-week, 845-km journey that would take them along the route of Chevalier de Troyes and his voyageurs. A tough assignment for boys? Yes — but facing challenges was what St. John's School was all about.

Suddenly, disaster struck, and 13 bright young lives were over. As news of the drownings reached the world, there were cries of anger and condemnation. Yet almost none came from the bereaved parents. In their grief, they rallied around the school they had helped to build. And the courage and faith they displayed would touch the hearts of all who met them.

IT SEEMED such a glorious day for canoeing. Sun climbing in a clear sky. Soft breeze riffling the Ottawa River beside the paper-milling town of Temiscaming, Que. Temperature heading for the mid-20s.

Long before Sunday worshippers were afoot that morning last June 11, the four leaders and 27 boys tumbled yawning from the vans that had hauled them overnight from St. John's School of Ontario, 360 km south. Short on sleep but high on excitement, they bolted a breakfast of orange juice and as many as four cheese or jam-and-peanut-butter sandwiches apiece. They lined the bank in their orange life jackets while a master divided them into four crews. Then they carefully loaded packs and sleeping bags into their brand-new seven-metre (22-foot) Selkirk wood-and-

ILLUSTRATION GEOANE O'YOUNG

canvas canoes and checked the balance with brief forays on the water.

In an hour they were ready. Blue craft hovering at water's edge, they bowed their heads in prayer. Then with good-by waves they paddled north at 8:15, the breeze at their backs, following the river into Lake Timiskaming, which forms a 130-km boundary between Ontario and Quebec.

It was the windup of their school year: a three-week, 845-km journey to Moosonee on James Bay over a voyageurs' route that would test their skills and endurance, just as the whole demanding year at their controversial private school had stretched their bodies and minds.

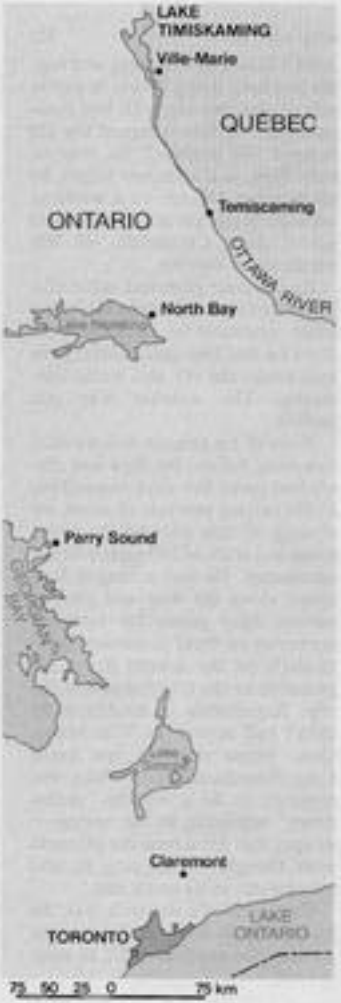
Although none had canoed since the previous August, they skimmed through the clean morning air at a respectable 7 km/h. The helpful tail wind merrily flicked up small waves. Each canoe, carrying only two-thirds of its 2000-pound capacity, rose a comfortable 30 cm from the water.

The brigade seemed to be in excellent hands. Its leader, and the steersman of No. 1 canoe, Richard Bird, had been on five major trips and many lesser ones. The 29-year-old Bird is the kind of man who glitters when he walks: tall, articulate, sculpted profile, sleek cap of brown hair, with an air of dignity beyond his years. A Ph.D. and associate professor of mathematics and economics at Queen's University, he attended the original St. John's School in Winnipeg as a boy. He had been doing poorly in public school and running with bad companions. "St. John's turned my life around 180 degrees," he remembers. Now, as a volunteer helper, he often drives 480 km on a weekend between Kingston and the Ontario school near Claremont, 48 km northeast of Toronto.

As a private pilot and sailor of a 12-metre (40-foot) ketch, Bird pays strict attention to the elements. Even on this blue-gold morning his eyes swept the sky and water constantly. The weather was just perfect.

None of his brigade had traveled this route before, but Bird and others had spent five days researching it. He carried two sets of maps, including 30 that covered the entire route at a scale of 500 metres to the centimetre. He had arranged food drops along the way and phoned various local points for firsthand comment on local conditions, particularly on the Abitibi River, expected to be the trickiest part of the trip. Regrettably, in hindsight, he didn't call anyone at Ville Marie, Que., whose residents best know Lake Timiskaming. The lake was expected to be a routine "shakedown" beginning to the outing – so easy that for a time the planners even thought of skipping it, and starting out at its north end.

Part of Bird's research was the journal of Chevalier de Troyes who paddled the route in 1686, in what



was to be a surprise attack on the British on Hudson Bay. Now 27 chattering boys, ages 11 to 14, were retracing history.

Even 13-year-old David Cunningham in Bird's canoe was in high spirits. His father had died only three weeks before, but St. John's takes care of its own at such times. When Cunningham returned to school a master said, "All right, come here and bend over!" Cunningham bent resignedly (instant obedience is a school rule), expecting the ultimate punishment: "swats" on the rear end with a one-by-two-inch paddle. Probably for some long-forgotten sin, thought Cunningham, but pretty unfair, since he was just back from his father's funeral.... Suddenly the master grinned and other boys poured from hiding with gifts of a soccer ball, baseball bat and glove. It was their way of saying, "We're with you; we care."

Canoe No. 2 was racing abreast with staff teacher Peter Cain, 27, in the stern, and student Ian Harling in the bow. Cain, a husky fair-haired British Army veteran, had been on five previous St. John's canoe trips. Harling, 13, was jubilant over his first turn as bowsman.

In public school, teachers had told Harling he wouldn't amount to much. After a year at St. John's he had learned how to study — "not just shuffle papers," his mother said proudly — and his marks soared

from the 50s to the 80s. Now he was a leader, holding the second most important job in his canoe. As with so many other boys, St. John's had pushed Harling to his limit, and found untapped resources.

His five seatmates were in equally fine fettle. Even while winging along at 20 strokes per minute, they found the breath to razz Cain about his recent engagement.

"Hey sir!" piped a voice. "Remember you told us, 'Don't think I'll ever get married. Don't need a woman to run *my* life'?"

"Why don't you pick on Mr. Bird?" countered Cain.

"What! Mr. Bird's engaged *too*?"

"Just the other day," shouted Cain. "I got one, he thought he should get one too!" From both canoes a torrent of hoots descended on Bird.

A hundred yards behind, another weekend volunteer, slim, dark Mark Denny, was steering No. 3 canoe and contemplating his future. When Denny's father died seven years before, St. John's Manitoba became a father to him. Now the 20-year-old student was thinking of dropping his economic studies at Queen's, becoming a teacher and joining St. John's permanent staff. His mother had reminded him that St. John's teachers earn only $1 a day.

"But I'm so happy at the school," Denny had replied.

From time to time Denny threw a watchful glance over his shoulder

Richard Bird, expedition leader, meets the press: "... it's not going to be easy"

Peter Cain, teacher in No. 2 canoe

PHOTO ABOVE: MONTREAL STAR/CANADA WIDE BELOW: ST. JOHN'S SCHOOL OF ALBERTA

at No. 4 canoe, which was staying on course with difficulty. Staff teacher Neil Thomson, 24, shy, sensitive, with a tumbled shock of dark hair, had never steered before. Out from England little more than a year, he had minimal canoeing experience and had been swimming only two years. Before the trip he'd worried aloud about his steering ability. You'll learn, the other masters assured him. For 21 years that had been the St. John's way at the two earlier schools in Manitoba and Alberta: come to a general agreement on procedures, pass the highlights to new leaders by word of mouth, let them learn on the job, grow with the challenge.

But Thomson was doggedly doing his best, with a crew that superbly illustrated all the good things about St. John's. Bowsman Todd Michell had thrived on the school's daily calisthenics; he could do 50 normal push-ups plus 25 *one*-handed. A boy whose favorite phrase had been "I can't," Todd in one year had doubled his math marks and risen two grades in reading level. A poster on his wall at home reflected his brightening outlook: "The Future Belongs To Those Who Have Faith In It."

Behind him, Jody O'Gorman, another 50 push-ups achiever, had "doubled his physical strength at St. John's," his parents said. More important, he "was a happier kid, proud of his marks, proud of himself." So was Dean Bindon whose year at St. John's put him "head and shoulders over where he'd been." Their seatmate Owen Black, who rarely completed assignments in public school, yesterday had carried off the "Most Improved Student" award at St. John's year-end Open House exercises.

At the same Open House, irrepressible Tim Hopkins, blue eyes burning bright from his tanned face, had won a *double* scholastic award. As the school's leading practical joker — his specialty was spooking the headmaster's wife with fake black spiders — Hopkins received his prize, a $30 compass, in appropriate fashion: hidden inside a huge box filled with multiple small boxes.

Simon Croft was another success story: from a "depressed, irritable, prickly boy around home" who had failed Grade 7 in public school, to one whose marks rocketed. "Now I know what you mean when you say research is finding a little clue that leads to a bigger clue that leads to a great big river," he had told his father, a film maker. "That's the way it is at St. John's."

The smallest boy in No. 4, Tom Kenny, 12, had the biggest grin. Life had opened wide for Kenny: he'd found teachers who *cared*. In public school he used to hide his report card when he got home. At St. John's he scored 70s and 80s, and kept a diary. Again and again his entries exulted, "Today was a great day!"

BY NOON they had paddled 27 km. Cottager David Radway, dipping up a pail of dishwater on the Quebec shore, saw them, paddles flashing, "making good time with a full following wind."

The breeze was rolling up 30-cm waves. There was no sign of storm, but Radway and other lake dwellers knew that capricious Timiskaming can turn lethal if a strong wind whoops down its length. In minutes it can form waves that swamp large boats. Timiskaming claims relatively few lives only because, according to one man, "people are afraid of that lake!"

But at 12:20 when the brigade pulled to the Quebec side for lunch and a breather, the only minor tempest was in their midst: a boy in Denny's crew wanted to go home. It had been a hard morning. Occasionally, trippers do want to drop out; occasionally it is permitted if they can be safely and conveniently sent home. In this case, a bit of sympathy and persuasion encouraged the boy to carry on.

Work Hard, Play Hard

ST. JOHN'S boys never have it easy. Founded by a handful of Anglican laymen, later banded into the Company of the Cross, the first school at Selkirk, Man., was a reaction against a permissive and increasingly godless society. While many pub-

Answers to "Stamp Stumpers" (page 142)

1. The curved upper walls of Montreal's Olympic Stadium are not transparent.
2. Columbus is shown looking for land in 1492 with a telescope, which wasn't invented until the 17th century.
3. Smoke blows left-to-right; flag, right-to-left.
4. First issue shows Robert Schumann's portrait with music by Franz Schubert.
5. The title of the book was corrected.
6. Outrigger canoe is shown in full sail, but there is no one to guide it.
7. A conventional airplane is flying without propellers.
8. Franklin D. Roosevelt has too many fingers on his left hand.

lic schools and parents let pampered kids "do their own thing" with few goals and little discipline, St. John's brought back a tough scholastic regimen — coupled with chores, fun and physical punishment — that turned stragglers or dilettantes into "A" students.

From the beginning, St. John's sought not the problem boys but those with potential, frustrated by overworked public-school teachers. "Some say we send our sons to St. John's because we don't know what to do with them," scoffs Jean Croft. "It's because we *do* know what to do with them!"

St. John's schools are definitely not for everyone. Some boys and parents find them too rigorous. Some educators abhor the physical punishment. But so many families liked the first school that a second was launched in Alberta. And in 1977, St. John's Ontario raised its plain wooden cross outside a former nursing home at Claremont and squeezed in 50 boys — six more than they had intended.

In screening all prospective students, the school looks more for attitude than I.Q. David Cunningham, for example, impressed his future teachers with plans to spend his paper-route earnings on gifts for his family, rather than on himself. A Christian influence runs strongly through St. John's, but the degree of involvement depends on the student. From morning prayers and "quiet time" — when boys can read the Bible or anything else, silently — to Compline, a brief day's-end service, religion is there for those who want it. Admission is not restricted on religious grounds.

More important, every boy before admittance must *want* to be there, regardless of his parents' wishes. He does so with full knowledge of the discipline, ranging from extra chores to swats (as few as three for skipping homework or talking after lights-out; as many as ten for smoking). If a boy feels wronged he can appeal to the headmaster; if swats were unfairly given, the teacher apologizes to both boy and parents. Surprisingly, boys rarely go to this higher court.

"I'd rather be rapped on the bottom and get it over with than be tongue-whipped by a public-school teacher all day," Ian Harling told his mother. Todd Michell, when asked how he had raised his marks, said wryly, "Mother, it was a one-by-two-inch stick!"

From 7 a.m. until lights out at 10 p.m., they work and play hard. Along with a mandatory two hours of homework on week-nights, the boys wash dishes, make beds, scrub floors, clean toilets, help with the cooking and sell honey in season. The chores, while teaching responsibility, help keep annual fees to a reasonable $2750 for bed, board, tuition, a sleeping bag and a parka.

The masters' role is a delicate balance of father-teacher-brother-

boss. Foremost requirement is a genuine love for boys. Their teaching "magic" is eminently simple: they know each boy inside out and kindly but firmly push him to his capacity.

Their own $1-plus-board day begins at 6:15 and runs until midnight. To ease theirs and the boys' strenuous schedule they often take a spur-of-the-moment outing or declare a "rowdy time" to let off steam. During a "rowdy," boys might pelt a master with snowballs, or wrestle him to the floor under a tide of small bodies until he cries "Uncle." But after it's over his word is law again. He must be addressed as "Mr." or "Sir."

Every winter, masters and boys struggle together through a 40-km snowshoe race (for which they tune up on previous short weekend trips). Each must cross the finish line; some are hauled across. Some cry. Sometimes faces get frostbitten and toenails turn black-and-blue. But afterward, at the parents and sons banquet, every boy is somehow lauded by name for his effort.

Twice a year, long-distance canoe trips endeavor to give boys a glimpse of nature, history and themselves. Leadership, endurance, courage, selfishness — all a boy's good and bad qualities unfold on these outings. "Everything we teach during the year culminates in the canoe trip," says Ontario headmaster Frank Felletti, a boyish-looking 28, himself a St. John's "old boy" with 14 years' canoeing experience. "It's an exercise in living and working with others."

Even as Richard Bird and his brigade paused for lunch, five other St. John's parties across Canada were tackling other challenging canoe routes steeped in voyageur history. One brigade from St. John's Alberta was bound for Great Slave Lake and Yellowknife. Already they had manhandled their 250-pound red canoes across a 21-km portage in northwestern Saskatchewan and shot vicious rapids leading into the Athabasca River. Another brigade camped stormbound on the banks of northern Lake Winnipeg, en route to York Factory on Hudson Bay. Meanwhile the seniors from St. John's Ontario were venturing into a chain of rivers and portages that would carry them to Moosonee. There they would meet the 27 juniors from Claremont — all part of the grand adventure.

The Deadly Chill

IT WAS only a 45-minute lunch break. The boys flopped on the bank and wolfed down leftover sandwiches and juice. Bird and Cain compared notes on the new canoes. The wind tended to swing the bows, they agreed, but it seemed no serious problem.

"How's Neil doing?" Cain asked Denny.

"Seems to be doing well."

Cain, who had also been watch-

ing their inexperienced steersman, agreed. Thomson was certainly no slacker: although the last to arrive for lunch, he was the first back out on the water. But when the brigade pushed off at 1:05, each canoe resumed the morning's position. There was only one minor change: Bird assigned 14-year-old Andy Hermann to spell off the morning bowsman on No. 1 canoe. As well as a good canoeist, the lively, handsome Hermann happened to be the school's best boy soprano.

With the wind rising a trifle, Bird decided to ease their labors by traveling in the shelter of the Ontario shore, about a mile opposite. The waves were perhaps 30 cm high but Selkirk canoes ride well in 60-cm waves. The weather was still sunny. Cunningham stripped off his shirt to get a tan.

Bird led off toward a point five kilometres distant, at an angle to the current for a minimum of buffeting during the crossing. The others followed at intervals of 70 to 100 metres. By 2 p.m. Bird was nearly across – but Thomson was in trouble. His canoe persistently wandered off course. Try as he would, he couldn't correct it.

"Port side, back paddle!" he ordered. Port side struggled hard but the current was too strong. Steadily it forced their bow around until they lay parallel to the waves, as though locked at anchor. They sat helpless, bewildered. The canoe began to rock.

"If we don't turn her we'll end up in the water!" Thomson shouted. Seconds later they *did*.

They were not unduly scared, although they had had no formal training in what to do next. Treading water, they clung to their waterlogged craft, which had righted itself.

"Don't worry, the others will get us," Thomson assured them. "Your jackets will hold you up."

Denny was already turning to the rescue. But in the midst of the turn, a boy heavily shifted position to dodge a splash of water. The canoe wobbled, took water and . . .

"*Mr. Denny's gone over!*" a boy shrilled in Thomson's ear. The deadly chain reaction had begun – a fatal string of events, any one of which by itself would scarcely have rated a second thought.

Now Thomson was worried. He was unsure of what to do; had lost his glasses and saw no sign of rescuers. How long would it take them to come? *Would* they find his crew?

Already the cold water was taking its toll. The least-understood peril of a boating accident is hypothermia – the swift numbing effect caused by the lowering of the body's inner temperature. With a drop of only a few degrees the victim loses coördination and awareness of his surroundings. His speech and thoughts go awry. A child succumbs sooner than an adult. It was happening now.

They tried to push the canoe to

shore, perhaps 250 metres away. It was useless; the lake was too strong. Thomson decided to swim for it. He sent off his two strongest boys first; then another who said he wanted to go; then two more together. Then Thomson pushed off in a breaststroke with his two smallest boys, Kenny and O'Gorman.

"Try, try — you have to help yourself!" Thomson pleaded. Todd Michell turned to help the smaller Kenny. But all were losing strength. They had been in the water perhaps 40 minutes. Thomson's vision blurred. He felt sleepy. That was the last he remembered of being on the lake.

"May God Be With Us"

YET still there was a chance. There had been scores of dumpings on other St. John's trips. This one was still manageable. At the first cry of "*Neil has dumped!*" Bird and Cain sped to shore, dropped their smallest boys and some baggage and returned to the rescue.

Cain hastened to the Denny boat and plucked up Scott Bindon, Andrew Skinner and David Parker. Moments later Bird rescued Frazer Bourchier and James Gibson. All were soon safe on the Ontario shore with five others from the Bird and Cain canoes.

Back raced Bird with five boys at the paddles. But as they began to tow or take on Denny and his last two boys, somebody floundered. Cain, hurrying back to the scene, heard his crew shout, "*Mr. Bird has dumped!*"

Cain was aghast. Bird was the best canoeist of them all. What was happening? A routine rescue was turning into catastrophe! Yet Bird was keeping his head.

"Can you see Neil's boat?" he shouted to Cain.

"Yes."

"Okay, I can handle this, we can swim in, you go get them." To the eight others milling around him, Bird ordered, "Calm down. Don't try to climb on top."

Cain and his remaining trio — Harling, Chris Bourchier, Barrie Nelson — bent their backs to the paddles. But out on the lake they could not see any trace of Neil Thomson or his boys. Had they made it ashore? There was still no storm, but the wind had risen perceptibly and 45-cm waves were slapping Cain's lightened craft. They had been paddling all-out for nearly half an hour. Wearily they turned back to the nine shivering swimmers who had failed to push Bird's canoe in.

"Throw me a line," called Bird. In a moment the two canoes were hitched. Surely Cain could tow them all to safety? But Denny, who earlier had been seized by a cramp or convulsion, now struggled to the Cain canoe.

"Don't take anybody in!" warned Bird. "Just tow him ashore!"

Too late. Denny was already halfway in. Cain heaved him the

rest of the way. Denny, his reflexes deadened from cold, half rose.

"*Sit down!*" yelled Cain. Denny did, but involuntarily began to stand again. The last canoe rolled over.

Now it was total disaster. With 13 men and boys flailing in the waves, there was only one chance: try to swim ashore, roughly 70 metres away. An easy goal for fresh swimmers in calm warm weather. But they were tired, chilled to the bone and the wind and current were thwarting their attempts to reach shore.

A few boys cried, a few floundered in panic, but most were remarkably brave. Some sang hymns and prayed, as did the others waiting on shore. Religion runs like counterpoint through the normal St. John's day. Singing hymns and grace are among the pleasures of school life. Now faith was solace. Little Timothy Pryce, 13, an Anglican clergyman's son, whose self-esteem like so many others' had soared in his year at St. John's, locked his hands to a friend's across a canoe bottom. "May God be with us all," he said.

It was near three o'clock. Some had been in the water close to an hour. The morning's paddling had drained them. Hypothermia was seeping over them. Even the well-conditioned Bird — who hadn't slept a wink the previous night — felt his strength ebbing.

"*I'm not useful here,*" he thought, "*and there's nobody in charge on shore.*"

He grasped his smallest boy, Cunningham — now barely conscious — and towed him ashore. It seemed to take a very long time. Bird fell exhausted on slippery rocks, a steep cliff rising behind them. The shirtless Cunningham had also lost his shoes and trousers. Bird shielded the boy's quaking body with his own for five minutes, caught his breath, then covered Cunningham with both their life jackets.

"Stay here," he ordered, but the semiconscious boy scarcely heard him. Bird scrambled off in search of others he'd put ashore. Once, trembling with cold and weariness, he slipped and thought, "*If I hurt myself there'll be no one in control.*"

Black Hours

OUT on the churning lake, Cain made one last try to swim a canoe in. His boys hadn't the strength. They rolled it upright and partially bailed it. Freckle-faced Barrie Nelson, a champion swimmer and longtime canoeist with his parents, crawled in and began paddling to shore. If the others had clung to the side they might have made it. Instead, several tried to climb in. It rolled over again.

Harling, another strong swimmer, now struck out on his own but his legs went numb. Cain plunged after him and pulled him onto the rocks. Shivering violently, the mas-

ter paused for breath, then forced Harling to move before the boy blacked out. Harling fell in the water. Cain pulled him out again. By now he had lost sight of his canoe.

Along the shore Bird met a lone survivor who yelled, "There's three in the bay calling for help!"

Three times Bird dove into the frigid lake and hauled out the now-unconscious boys. Each time he started artificial respiration, then instructed others to take over while he plunged back into the water. Thirteen-year-old Skinner worked hard over one of his friends and, for a moment, had a flicker of life. But none of the three survived.

James Doak, Christopher Suttaby and Michael Mansfield made it in on their own, the sturdy Mansfield towing an unconscious David Greaney. Cain tried to breathe life back into the boy but failed. Neil Thomson regained consciousness alone on the rocks, with no memory of how he got there.

Bird and Cain had no time to dwell on the horror around them. Now the storm had begun. They started a fire and doggedly trudged the shore until 7 p.m., gathering stragglers. Then — exhausted, cold, stunned with shock and grief — 18 wretched survivors made a crude camp from a few salvaged packs: lean-to shelters of plastic sheeting, one sleeping bag per two boys, a saw and an ax, and 30 pounds of granola plus a box of candy — their only food.

Hordes of mosquitoes, pelting rain and harrowing memories tortured them through the night. Had any of the other 13 survived? Bird feared they hadn't, and called his boys together to face this possibility. They talked, prayed, tried to find some meaning from the meaningless tragedy, tried to resolve their guilt at merely being alive.

Bird, after his superhuman effort on the lake, stayed up a second night, this time to tend fires. Boys slept and rose fitfully. Some had privately agreed among themselves to share fire watch so no one would spend the black hours alone.

At dawn, Timiskaming was seething with 1.5-metre waves. Their canoes had vanished. Bird rigged an "H" for Help from life jackets. They chopped a clearing on a hill near water's edge, then huddled in raincoats and hoped for rescue, prepared to eke out a week in this wilderness if necessary.

AT 9:30 that Monday morning, bearded young Gary Smith, flying through rain and fog across the lake toward Ottawa for Hearst Helicopters, noticed two overturned canoes off the Quebec shore. Hovering at three metres, he couldn't at first believe his eyes. But yes — the two floating objects were bodies, life jackets still holding the heads up, waves splashing over the lifeless faces. He sped to the nearest farmhouse and called the police. Then he returned to the shoreline and

discovered more bodies and canoes.

Smith flew out a third time in midafternoon with Cst. Camille Gagnon of the Quebec provincial police at his side. On the Ontario shore, they sighted a wisp of smoke, then Bird's distress signal and a cluster of yellow raincoats. As they circled closer, the boys waved their life jackets.

Smith turned and hurried back to Topping Lodge, a fishing resort on the Quebec shore which had become the base for the search. Already boats were bringing in bodies of drowned victims.

"We've spotted survivors," Gagnon told lodge proprietor Scott Sorensen.

About 4 p.m., Sorensen piloted his powerboat to the rocky shore, and in two trips across the tumultuous lake, the forlorn survivors were carried to the lodge. There the owners and a handful of guests were waiting with spare clothing, slabs of cheese, pots of chili, hot chocolate and coffee. Gratefully, and not forgetting to say grace, the survivors ate their first hot meal in two days. Then the boys eagerly helped wash dishes, glad for a semblance of normalcy.

One by one they unburdened their stories to the sympathetic listeners in the lodge. Some — both boys and leaders — went into a separate private room and broke down in one another's arms. A doctor flew in from Ville Marie to treat their masses of insect bites and check them for fatigue. Young James Gibson, bowsman on the Denny canoe, fainted from exhaustion in the arms of Indiana tourist Marvin Martin, then settled into a long, deep sleep. The others, after bedtime prayers, slept on the dining-room floor rather than break off into separate cabins. They had weathered the first terrible night together; they would stick together now.

"We will be forever touched by the beauty of those children and the strength and kindness of their leaders," says Martin's wife, Arletta. "It was a privilege for us to be there. We saw the strength that the school is trying to instill in them."

Like a Roulette Game

THROUGHOUT that Monday morning and early afternoon, the parents knew nothing of the tragedy. They are a disparate group: airline pilot to teacher to fuel deliveryman. Some are well-to-do, some not; some deeply religious, some less so. Their common bond is an earnest desire to give their sons a better grounding in life. And on this morning virtually all were delighted with the boys' spiritual, scholastic and physical progress in Claremont's first year.

In their handsome Mississauga home, Norman Bindon, an Air Canada pilot, and his wife Ruth recalled their two boys' successes, particularly remarkable in the case of Scott, a fair-haired imp with

braces on his teeth, who had hated public school so much that at one time he hid out two days in the family garage.

On a 20-acre farm north of Toronto, Barbara Hopkins remembered Saturday's Open House and Tim's starring part in a student-written play about life and death. As yet she did not realize the irony of his role in which he chose to go to God through a long tunnel. For Marian Kenny of Markham and her accountant husband, Ron, the same Open House was a memory of Tom bursting out with his usual exuberance, "Mommy, I've learned *so* much this year!"

At the Michell farm near Uxbridge, everyone looked forward to Todd's summer vacation. Mrs. Michell smiled as she readied his blue jeans for the Monday wash. In the hip pocket she had found a poem composed by her son who, before St. John's, had trouble reading road signs:

St. John's School is a jolly place
Everyone has a smile on their face.
Kids jump and kids shout
Even though they got a clout.
When the canoe trips start in the fall
The kids seem to climb up the wall.
A swat or two never hurt anyone
Really it is rather fun.

Many parents heard the first fragments of the awful news on radio or TV late that afternoon: 12 boys and a master were believed drowned. Marian Kenny learned it from her mother who phoned from England. At Claremont every master was away on a canoe trip, but luckily former master Mike Maunder, then stationed at the Alberta school, happened to be back on a research project. An old boy and a former newspaperman, the tall, level-eyed Maunder generates instant trust and respect. His strength and honesty would hold the school together in the bitter night ahead.

The first garbled bulletins did not name St. John's. Maunder phoned Ville Marie, the Quebec town where the news was originating. The lines were jammed. Then the operator said, "NBC News in New York is trying to break in with a call for your school!" Maunder's heart sank: "It *is* us!"

Suddenly the school's single phone was jumping off its hook. Fending off calls from the press, Maunder made three of his own in quick succession. He asked one parent to summon the others to the school. In Edmonton, publisher Ted Byfield, co-founder of the first school, promised to catch the next plane east. Torontonians Heidi Hedlin and John Smithson, longtime friends of the schools, agreed to come immediately and answer the phone around the clock.

The Hopkins arrived first, at 5 p.m. The Michells, close behind, found Pat Felletti, the headmaster's

young wife, in tears in the chapel.

"It will be the end of the school!" she sobbed.

"It won't," said Evelyn Michell, a devout member of the Pentecostal Church. "God can bring good out of it."

Jack Suttaby, assistant superintendent of a criminal detention center, and his wife Sheena, driving slowly toward Claremont, spirits as black as the lowering rain clouds, decided on the spot to enroll younger son David next year, no matter what had happened to Christopher. Motoring through the same storm, Thelma Cunningham bleakly remembered another such rain-soaked drive just three weeks before — the night her husband died. Now . . . *surely* not David too?

By early evening most parents were there, plus about 50 journalists, nine clergymen including the Rt. Rev. Lewis Garnsworthy, Anglican Bishop of Toronto, and two local policemen, friends of the Michells.

St. John's Ontario is really one huge family. At headmaster Felletti's invitation, the parents have shared in its growth from the start. They've written thousands of fund-raising letters, donated furniture, built bunks, served juice during snowshoe races; cooked Thanksgiving dinners. It became not *a* school but *their* school.

Now as they waited, wept and drank countless styrofoam cups of coffee, they reached out to comfort one another. A man arranged tacks on the bulletin board to spell PRAY. Many stepped into the chapel to do just that.

Maunder repeatedly called Ville Marie, where police were trying by fading radio to get accurate names of living and dead from their officers at Topping Lodge. The lodge, some 40 km south on the raging lake, had no telephone and is accessible only by water or air. At 9 p.m., Ville Marie told Maunder the list would be ready in about an hour.

"My God, it's like a game of roulette!" someone said.

Lesson for All Canadians

AT LAST the call came into the small upstairs bedroom doubling as an office.

"Give me the names of those who drowned," said Maunder grimly.

"Andrew Hermann. . . " the distant voice began, and Maunder broke down. Then, steeling himself, he took all the other names. One of the regional police asked, "What do you want to do now?"

Maunder turned to the stairs and the parents waiting below, and faltered.

"Do you want me to take the list and read it?" the policeman said.

"No," said Maunder, drawing himself up. "I have to do this."

John Smithson touched his shoulder and murmured, "The Lord is my shepherd. . ."

Coming downstairs, Maunder asked, "Will the parents of those

boys who were on the canoe trip come upstairs? Everyone else please remain below."

Hushed, swallowing their fear, they crowded into an upstairs dormitory. Bishop Garnsworthy followed.

"Which way shall I read it?" Maunder asked, loath to begin. "The ones who were saved or the ones who were lost?"

"Please, Mike," a voice pleaded, "get on with it!"

"All right. These are the survivors." He called out 15 boys' names. The 12th was Chris Suttaby; the 14th, David Cunningham. Thelma Cunningham's cousin, who had come upstairs with her, screamed and burst into tears. Mrs. Cunningham turned to the stairs, numb with relief, to tell the rest of her family. But already Jack Suttaby was below, calling jubilantly, "David Cunningham's alive, and Chris too!"

"... James Doak," Maunder concluded, paused, then said heavily, "These are the names of the boys presumed dead. . ."

Scott Bindon was fortunate enough to make it through; his older brother Dean did not. Kevin Black and Frazer Bourchier lived; their brothers, Owen and Chris, respectively, were dead.

Hermann and Pryce, lost. Nelson, an only child, gone. Hopkins and Kenny, whom Bird and the others had tried in vain to revive. Michell, who used to slip out on the school roof at night to read his Bible by flashlight. O'Gorman, Greaney, Croft — *all* those bright and shining boys from the fourth canoe, gone.

The room erupted with grief. A woman ran screaming. A policeman turned into a corner, pulled his raincoat over his head and cried. Bishop Garnsworthy raised his voice: "This is a terrible moment, but let us offer a prayer."

"Who are *you*?" someone cried bitterly.

"I'm the Bishop of Toronto," he answered firmly, "and we'll say a prayer!"

The phone rang. It was Mark Denny's mother, who had chosen to await the news at home. She knew only that a master was dead. Maunder had deliberately avoided reading that name aloud until he could reach her.

"Mike," she begged, "It's *not* Mark, is it . . .?"

"Oh Jean!" said the anguished Maunder. "I'm so sorry, I'm so *sorry*!"

THROUGH the next blur of hours, Maunder held a press conference, tracked down canoeing headmaster Frank Felletti in northern Ontario and Frank Wiens, co-founder of the Schools, at Fort Frances, and arranged a chartered bus to take parents to Ville Marie.

"Tomorrow could be very different," he warned Smithson and Mrs. Hedlin, leaving the school in their care. "We may even get a wave of

hostility." And he was partly right.

They left in the rain at 2 a.m. Some parents cried, some tried to sleep, some talked in hushed voices. At 7:30 a.m. they stepped down with aching eyes into the pine-scented town of 3000 beside the killer lake.

What happened then was an object lesson for all of Canada. Few of the parents speak French, few of the townspeople speak English, but Ville Marie opened wide its arms. Since dawn they had been mobilizing: Quebec provincial police, Knights of Columbus, Red Cross, Golden Age Club, Christian Women of Ville Marie, the mayor and the 62-year-old parish priest, Father Nadeau.

"At first we took an interest because it happened near to us," Father Nadeau said afterward. "But then the heart speaks . . ."

As weary parents filed into the cultural center, waiting townspeople silently clasped each hand.

"*Café? Thé?*" they asked. There were mountains of sandwiches, pots of homemade soup, cognac, and at noon a hot chicken dinner. Again and again they offered their homes: "Here is my key. Go, rest!"; "Use my telephone"; "I have room for six."

Through the day those who spoke English listened quietly to any bereaved parents who cared to unburden themselves. A local doctor moved among them ("Madam, you have a headache?"). The mayor offered his sympathy, as did district coroner Léonard Julien on behalf of the province.

In midmorning, Felletti and teacher Steve Duddy arrived after an all-night, 965-km drive from Wawa, Ont., in a borrowed truck. The news had now flashed to all St. John's brigades across the land. Outside a general store at Norway House, Manitoba headmaster Fred Parr was eating popcorn with his boys when the call came. He took them into a church and wept as he broke the news, "the hardest thing I've ever had to do." Alberta headmaster Dave Neelands, leading a party near Fort Chipewyan when his message came, spent the night alone beside the campfire, pondering the meaning of 12 years' work and reading the Bible to assuage his puzzlement and pain. Graying Frank Wiens, chairman of the Company of the Cross, who has ten children of his own, took his crews into a Fort Frances park to pray. Then they said, "Mr. Wiens, we have to finish this trip, please don't take us off." And finish it they did.

Felletti, on hearing the news, cried out, "I don't believe it! I don't believe it!" Later he angrily demanded of his God, "Why have you allowed this to happen? What have we done to offend you?" Through the night he searched his heart and remained certain that what St. John's stands for is right.

But now, eyes welling with tears, he walked into the roomful of par-

ents at Ville Marie, dreading the wrath that might engulf him. The Nelsons met him first and seized his hands.

"Don't stop what you're doing!" they said. "What you did for Barrie was so good, nothing can take that away!"

Others embraced him. Amazed and relieved, Felletti found the parents comforting *him*.

The surviving boys were now arriving in relays by small aircraft. As they left Topping Lodge, besieged by news photographers, some had scribbled their names and messages in the guest book. David Cunningham wrote the words spoken to him when his father died: *For God so loved the world that he gaveth his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.*

At Ville Marie, subdued but for the most part composed, they hugged their parents, submitted to calamine lotion, then gathered by themselves, strong in each other's company. Several early arrivals hurried to tell other parents that their sons were all right.

"Even in that time of tragedy they thought of the other fellow," marvels Joanne Harling, whose son was in the second-last planeload.

One boy put an arm around Maunder and whispered, "I tried! I tried!" Days later Maunder understood: the boy, who was put safely on shore early in the tragedy, prayed in vain for his friends to be saved. Now he felt he had failed them.

To Maunder fell the ugly task of identifying the dead. To Richard Bird fell the heavy responsibility of meeting the press. Eyes reddened from grief and fatigue, face dark with a stubble of beard, he began, "I'm going to tell the story . . . it's not going to be easy . . ." Then, his voice thick with emotion, pausing often to control himself, breaking down completely for awhile, he finished the account.

After a few questions, there was silence. Several reporters clasped Bird's shoulder as they filed out.

When parents and surviving boys reached Claremont very late that night, driving through police lines that held reporters back, bereaved father Bill Hermann was waiting. He had avoided Ville Marie but had made this lonely middle-of-the-night drive from Toronto to meet his friends. Inside the school they knelt for prayer. But when Mike Mansfield began to sing the *Nunc Dimittis*, "Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace . . ." the verses that Andy Hermann had always sung before, Bill Hermann could not hold back the tears.

"Keep That Head Up!"

THE ordeal went on and on. There were 13 funerals and a memorial service to be coördinated; lawyers to consult about the impending inquest. Before the funerals, Felletti and the three surviving masters called jointly or individually at ev-

ery bereaved home. It took courage, most of all for Thomson. He entered the Michell farmhouse, head down, hands over his face.

"I lost my whole crew, my whole crew!" he wept.

The Michells coaxed him to stay, worship with them and "ask the Lord to come into his life." To that point Thomson had scarcely eaten or discussed the accident for four days. Now he devoured two platesful of chicken. Then Jim Michell said, "Neil, we have a right to know what happened."

Thomson described the accident as he remembered it from beginning to end. He went home with his head up. Each time Michell saw him after that, he said, "Keep that head up!"

Without that kind of parental support — and it was almost unanimous — St. John's probably would not have survived. A *Toronto Star* columnist accused St. John's of an archaic attitude toward education: "12 little boys are dead playing the game of 'being men.'" Letters to the editor raged at the school. But not the parents.

"Believe me, I felt like hating somebody, but with the St. John's people I couldn't," says Barbara Hopkins. "I've never before met people like them. They give so much of themselves. If I were asked to describe true Christians, they would be it."

Even before their son Simon's funeral, Peter and Jean Croft reconfirmed the fall registration of their younger boy Darren. Both the Crofts and Kennys were asked by lawyer acquaintances if they wanted to sue.

"For what?" demanded Jean Croft. "For the happiest year of our son's life?"

"At least we saw what Tom was capable of in his last year, what special traits he had," says Ron Kenny. "Every one of those kids seemed to have something special in him and the school was able to bring it out."

Now, too, letters, cards and telegrams of support flooded in to the school and to individuals from friends and strangers from all over the continent and beyond. The Pryces alone received 600 letters. With many messages came words of encouragement: "Nothing worthwhile comes cheaply. Our culture needs schools like St. John's"; "I know your ideals and how you work to achieve them, and I applaud."

Twenty thousand dollars, mostly in small sums, poured into a Memorial Bursary Fund to help needy students attend the school. Other bursaries were started in the names of individual boys. The Hopkins family donated a portable classroom in memory of Tim. And 75 parents enquired about enrolling their boys in St. John's.

Headmaster Felletti calls it all a miracle. Co-founder Frank Wiens adds, "It has been a humbling ex-

perience. There is a yearning for our kind of school."

Perhaps the staunchest endorsement came from the 50 "old boys" who rallied, unasked, from all over Canada. They drove bereaved parents to funerals, formed a human corridor one night to shield a busload of boys from the clamoring press and turned out *en masse* for the Friday morning memorial service in Toronto. At that service, red-sweatered students from St. John's Alberta and black-sweatered Manitoba boys mingled with the blue-and-white-jacketed Ontario students to form an honor guard. And there, his voice husky with emotion, Felletti reviewed the calamitous days past and concluded, "These young men died and now they live."

There were *so* many funerals. Owen Black was buried on the Thursday night as they sang his favorite hymn, "Onward Christian Soldiers." Tom Kenny and Barrie Nelson were buried side by side.

Beside Mark Denny's grave, Maunder said, "St. John's Manitoba was a father to him and he has become a father to St. John's Ontario. In a very real sense, this school would not stand without Mark Denny." He was asked to speak again at the Bindon funeral. "I've cried too many tears for this boy, I can't cry any more," he said, and so with gentle humor told how Dean Bindon had once damaged Maunder's nose during a rowdy time. He paused and glanced up. "Watch your nose, God!" said Maunder. Afterward, Bindon's father smiled, "It's the only time I saw people laugh at a graveside."

What If?

IT SEEMED wrong to end the school year with funerals. After a day of private meditation the masters reopened St. John's to the boys for a few days of light duty — really just an excuse to bring them together.

"We're here to put death in its place," Wiens and Maunder explained. "We need one another. Without that unity we can't go on."

But the unity was somehow missing. The staff was uncomfortable, the survivors tense. *Why me? Why did I live while others didn't?* The masters put aside chores one afternoon, took the boys on a tour of the Toronto waterfront, had hymns and prayers and went to a fun fair. The boys seemed to relax.

A day later Maunder told them, "We all feel guilt. But we can't go on thinking of the 'ifs.' If you can cope with that, we'll go canoeing together again for a weekend."

Most of them came — parents with boys; parents who'd lost boys; brothers and sisters — for two-hour canoe jaunts, barbecues, songs and a windup Sunday dinner. With that, the school year ended.

But the memories went on. For a few weeks Paul Nyberg would not go near water or talk about the school. Ian Harling used to love

swimming in cold water; not any more. At a summer barbecue in the Crofts' backyard, Neil Thomson turned away, overcome at the singing of familiar hymns. Peter Croft put an arm around him: "It's all right, son." And for some parents and teachers, as the reality of everyday life set in, there was the agony of empty rooms or nagging thoughts of "what if ?"

What if Simon Croft or David Greaney had not been admitted until autumn 1978, instead of being squeezed belatedly into the 1977 year as they and their parents so earnestly desired? What if Mark Denny had found the summer vacation job he had been looking for, and so had missed the canoe trip? What if the brigade had rested a day before starting out? What if the trip had begun at the lake's *north* end, as once considered?

Or, was the accident "God's will," as a few devout parents believe? Many churchmen, most parents and the St. John's staff reject that interpretation.

"If we are all in God's keeping, as I believe, not a hair of our heads falls without His knowledge," says Frank Wiens. "But if we make mistakes, God will not necessarily intervene."

A Deeper Purpose

MISTAKES there were, as the coroner's inquest in Ville Marie established in late June. Again parents and teachers traveled by bus, prayed together, sang together and slept on a school gymnasium floor. Again the press puzzled over their unity.

"Why are the rest of you here?" a reporter asked Manitoban Fred Parr. "Were you subpoenaed?"

"We *want* to be here," explained Parr. "With the others."

Quebec coroner Stanislas Déry — although scrupulously fair, and sensitive to the feelings of parents and boys — pulled no punches. He found no criminal negligence but called the trip "an exaggerated and pointless challenge."

Déry deplored the lack of provincial or federal regulations to govern this or any other canoeing trip, and urged such legislation. He cited 15 errors or omissions in St. John's Ontario's planning, including: no equipment on board for communicating with the outside world, insufficient knowledge of the route, no pretrip medical examination, no pretrip canoe workouts, not enough rest the night before, not enough experience on Thomson's part, no special qualifications for bowsmen, no rescue equipment aboard and no effort to determine if the boys could swim. "Many could not," the coroner said. In fact, every boy on the trip *could*, but the school had not checked.

The school soberly set about mending its ways. The old, informal manner of doing things — learning on the job, each trip colored by each leader's personality and experience

– was no longer good enough. As the Company of the Cross's own publication, *Saint John's Edmonton Report*, said, it was time for "tough and rigorously enforced standards of instruction."

In a summer of intensive research and writing, drawing advice from experts across Canada, Maunder compiled a 120-page handbook covering every aspect of planning and performance for normal canoeing and emergencies. It deals with all the deficiencies noted by coroner Déry. Every future expedition must be preceded by a training camp which will include lectures and tests on cold water and hypothermia, a check of the boys' swimming ability (100 metres in bathing suits; 50 metres in clothes and life jackets), training in mouth-to-mouth artificial respiration, at least ten hours' of paddling and at least two practices in dumping.

Never again will a St. John's canoe go out without an inflatable life raft aboard. Never again will steersmen fail to cry "Kneel!" at the first hint of emergency, thus lowering the center of balance and making the canoe almost impossible to tip.

Steersmen must pass a tough written test, hold a St. John's Ambulance first aid certificate, be competent in Royal Life Saving Society techniques and have at least 50 days' paddling experience, some of it as bowsman. Bowsmen too must pass written and practical tests, have at least 25 days' paddling experience and be at least 16. The autumn new boys' trip from Claremont carried one adult for every two boys aboard.

But parents and teachers reject Déry's charge that the fatal trip was a pointless challenge.

"It was an adventure," say the Crofts. "There is no challenge for a public school child today. There isn't even a challenge to *think!*"

"Our boy was going to St. John's for the very thing that cost him his life," says Barrie Nelson, Sr. "Preparing himself physically and spiritually for the world later on. The canoe trips are part of that."

"I know my son would not have come out of such an experience unscathed mentally if he had *not* been at St. John's," concludes Joanne Harling.

As the 1978-79 school year began, St. John's Ontario was more heavily booked than ever. All the survivors (except two who, prior to the accident, had planned to drop out) are back at class. Gordon and Janice Black sent not only Kevin, Owen's surviving brother, but *another* brother as well.

As usual, classrooms were plain to the point of shabbiness but classes exploded with freewheeling discussion. As usual, fathers and sons pitched in to build extra bunks. Bert Hopkins, farmer and fuel deliveryman, came regularly to cut the school lawns as he did when Tim was alive. The Bindons wallpapered a student lounge and filled it

with Dean's furniture. Ron Kenny built lockers. Peter Croft again showed free Saturday night films. Hildegard Hermann painted walls; her husband built shelves. The Bourchiers catalogued books for the school library.

But it was *not* the same as before, nor should it ever be. The memory of Timiskaming will haunt them all, but they are building on it. "We are trying to make it not a tombstone but a foundation stone," says Croft.

"There is a much deeper purpose than ever before," reflects Mike Maunder. "Those boys died building this school and this school will become a real monument to them. It must not fail, or they will have died in vain."

Cold Power

By Paul Steiner, NANA

THERE'S something in the air this time of year; sneezes, sniffles and coughs. If you've got a seasonal cold, take comfort in the misery – and wisdom – of others:

THE AUTOCRAT of Russia possesses more power than any other man in the earth; but he cannot stop a sneeze. –Mark Twain

A BAD cold wouldn't be so annoying if it weren't for the advice of our friends. –Kin Hubbard

THERE is only one way to treat a cold, and that is with contempt. –William Osler

SOME people are never happy unless they can discover where they caught a cold. –J. Ashy-Sterry

IT TAKES about a week of treatment to cure a cold, but without treatment it takes about seven days. –Ed Greif

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WE HAD been having trouble with our paperboys, who were supposed to deliver the paper before 7 a.m. I could read the paper at any time, but my grandson had to leave for work at a quarter to eight and enjoyed reading the paper at breakfast.

One morning in February, I opened the front door at 6:25, just in time to be handed the paper by a lad. Even his face was muffled against the bitter cold.

"Thank you," I said, "you're doing a fine job."

The following Saturday when I looked for the paper, I saw in the fresh snow the words, "You are nice." –Contributed by Mrs. J.F. Morris