

Messing About

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“Believe me, my young friend, there is *nothing* - absolutely nothing - half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats.”

These timeless lines were, of course, spoken by Rat to Mole in Kenneth Grahame’s timeless classic The Wind In The Willows. And for many of us, truer words were never spoken. While all kinds of boats have their unique attractions, none can compare, in my judgment, with the canoe. I came to believe early in life that canoes were beautiful, graceful things that stood for adventure - outdoor adventure of the most worthy, manly variety. And my life so far has pretty much proven this to be the case.

I can’t quite recall how I came to be fixated, in my early years, on the North Woods as the locus of all worthwhile adventure, but so it happened. From lurid boys’ adventure books (who among us read as a boy Silver Chief, Dog of the North? Surely everyone read Call of the Wild)... to tales of derring-do in Canada, Alaska, Labrador, Newfoundland... tales of the voyageurs of the fur trade... to Pere Marquette and the first explorers... journals of the Jesuit missionaries’ incredible adventures as Black Robes among the Indians... Kenneth Roberts’ histories of the French and Indian wars... boys’ books about lumberjacking and log drives on the rivers of the North Woods... and - most enduring of all - the wonderful world of angling literature... central to it all is the canoe. This simplest of vessels was the key to unlocking, penetrating, surviving, profiting in and enjoying these lands and waters. I was in love with canoes long before I even saw one.

I actually came face to face with canoes at a boys’ summer camp which, like many such institutions, was oriented around canoe trips of increasing length and difficulty as boys developed their skills. Here was affirmation of the canoe as the key to unlocking manly wilderness adventure: the older you were, the more skilled and experienced in outdoor survival, the greater the canoeing challenge was your reward.

In those days, the canoe was a somewhat fragile vessel made of cedar strips and covered with canvas. Canoes had to be treated with respect, especially when running rapids, and they had to be cared for. We are told by psychologists that our lifetime values are set sometime in our early adolescent years: in my adolescence it was universally understood that the right, proper, best

canoes were made only of wood and canvas, and today I cling to this traditional view even when confronted by the unarguable practicalities of later manmade materials that were yet to come when I was a boy.

As is widely known, the first canoes were made of bark - usually, birch bark - in a simple but beautifully efficient design invented by early Native Americans. These canoes can still be found in museums and they are wondrous things. Each tribe developed its own unique design variations which can easily be recognized, but the hull shape is essentially the same. They were not built to last: the Indians understood that their canoes had a short life expectancy and when yours came apart, you trashed it and went looking for another birch.

There are still, today, a handful of makers building birch bark canoes in the time honored way with no modern materials whatsoever. The best known of these artisans is Henri Vaillancourt, the subject of John McPhee's wonderful book The Survival of the Bark Canoe, in which McPhee, in his crystalline prose, tells us first precisely how Vaillancourt does it. He then takes us with Vaillancourt on a long trip of discovery in birch bark canoes through the Maine woods following a pioneering route of Thoreau's. This is a book worth reading!

Early Americans developed in the 1800's a variety of wooden versions of the bark canoes but they were heavy, awkward things. The breakthrough came in the 1880's when the idea of a lightweight wooden hull covered with skintight canvas was pioneered. The best known of these pioneers were B N Morris and E M White, both Downeaster Maine guides and woodsmen who built canoes into the 1920's, and whose original canoes are still today things of great beauty commanding steep prices. I prize my Morris canoe, built in 1906 and still completely sound and usable.

About the same time the Old Town Canoe Company started business in Old Town Maine, and is today the only survivor from the early Maine builders. Old Town has been, over the decades, by far the principal maker of quality canoes. It is a small-town Maine enterprise which has long clung to folksy old time ways of doing things. They have sold thousands upon thousands of classic wood and canvas canoes in a wide variety of models for use on rivers, on lakes, by fishing and hunting guides, twenty man war canoes for boys' camps, sailing canoes, and canoes for general family use.

The popularity of wood and canvas canoes soared in the early 1900's with an explosion of canoeing clubs in cities up and down the East coast and along the Great Lakes It was a craze

similar to the early bicycling clubs of the same general era. The Charles River in Cambridge was literally blanketed with canoes on sunny Sunday afternoons, most of them bearing lovely ladies with wide brimmed hats, trailing their fingers in the water while being paddled by dapper young gents wearing blazers and boaters and often strumming a mandolin. These were good times for Old Town, Morris, White, and others in the business.

Sometime in the late 1940's Old Town's adherence to old-time ways led them to one of the great marketing blunders, which is still studied in business schools. The Grumman Company had prospered during World War II making aluminum boat and airplane hulls and pontoons, and they saw a future for aluminum canoes. They approached the Old Town Company with a proposition for collaboration, and were turned down cold... so Grumman started their own canoe enterprise. In no time at all, the canoeing world shifted to Grumman canoes, which were cheap, almost indestructible, required no maintenance, and were perfect for river canoeing, canoe liveries and general family use. Almost overnight, Old Town's business completely collapsed and the company barely survived as Grumman and its aluminum imitators took over 95% of the market.

In the 1970's interest dawned in various plastics as a new alternative for canoe construction. Old Town was not going to make the same mistake twice, and they pioneered plastic boats starting with polypropylene and working up to better and better high tech materials like Kevlar. Today, Old Town canoes and kayaks of high tech plastics dominate the industry and have many practical advantages over other materials. Aluminum is history. But Old Town has not lost sight of its roots: they will still accept special orders for beautifully handmade wood and canvas canoes, at about \$4,000. They don't sell many, and probably lose a little on the ones they do make, but they are breathtakingly lovely links with tradition by a very traditional company.

My family has been quite seriously committed to canoeing over the years. When we were some years younger and more energetic, we regularly canoed the Little Miami and other local streams with friends and children. And in the springtime, when rivers are high and canoeing is prime, we took two and three-day overnight trips down rivers across the Tristate, camping along the riverbanks. Those were happy times, filled with adventures and misadventures as well.

Favored rivers were the Green and the South Fork of the Cumberland in Kentucky, the Buffalo in western Tennessee, the Pere Marquette, Au Sable, Little Manistee, and Rifle in Michigan, and - best of all - gorgeous West Virginia rivers like Shaver's Fork of the Cheat and various headwaters of the Potomac.

On one particularly memorable trip we canoed the Big Two Hearted River in Michigan's Upper Peninsula: this was a sentimental journey in homage to Hemingway's classic short story of the same name. It was a fine trip, but literally within days of our return we made the disappointing discovery that this is not the river about which Hemingway wrote: he just liked the name. Hemingway's river is, in fact, the Fox - also on the Upper Peninsula. The next weekend, we loaded up again and went back to do the Fox, which was very special.

There were, of course, mishaps along the way but few were serious and they gave us memories to talk about. Capsizing is always a possibility in a canoe, especially when loaded with several days' camping supplies and sometimes children and a dog. In one misadventure on the South Fork of the Cumberland we came just a little too close to losing future Literarian Harry Santen. We learned the hard way that there is a trap in river canoeing: this is to try harder and ever harder rivers... ratcheting up the danger factor with ever more demanding rapids until you discover - too late - that you have over-reached your skills... you have gone too high on that scale and someone might be seriously hurt.

This moment of truth arrived for me on the Dry Fork of the Cheat River in West Virginia. This is a first class river when the water is right: but the day we arrived it was too high. We had driven a long way to get there and it didn't seem right to drive back home without even trying a piece of it. Bad mistake. Within the first hundred yards my daughter Margaret and I found ourselves in a rapids which swamped our aluminum canoe. As we went into the river, Margaret grabbed a low hanging tree branch and pulled herself out of the water. I was being carried straight to a waterfall: not a big one, but big enough, when my feet found bottom and I half swam, half floundered out of the current to grab a boulder close to the shore. It was April, and the water was icy. Hypothermia set in as I clung to the rock and wondered how I was going to get out of there. A friend in a kayak figured out a way to rescue me. I recuperated in a motel bed, under piles of blankets and with quantities of hot soup. I said to myself, "You better learn something from this!" I have not canoed a challenging river since.

Today my canoeing is done on pristine Adirondack lakes, where the biggest hazard is wind. This evening I am in a traditional wood and canvas canoe, with my wife in the bow. And I am wonderfully thankful to be here. I contemplate endlessly the graceful lines of our canoe... the symmetry of its perfectly parallel handmade ribs... the flowing curves of the gunwales... there are no straight lines in a canoe... the workmanship and materials of which it is made... the silent ease with which it glides through the water... its responsiveness to the lightest touch of our paddles... the history and tradition it all represents. Surely, man has found no other form of

conveyance which can compare to the soul-satisfying grace and beauty of these moments. And maybe - just maybe - there will be a trout for us in the bay by the Lodge at the head of the lake. This, for me, is the highest order of “messaging about in a boat.” I love it all so much. This is absolute happiness.