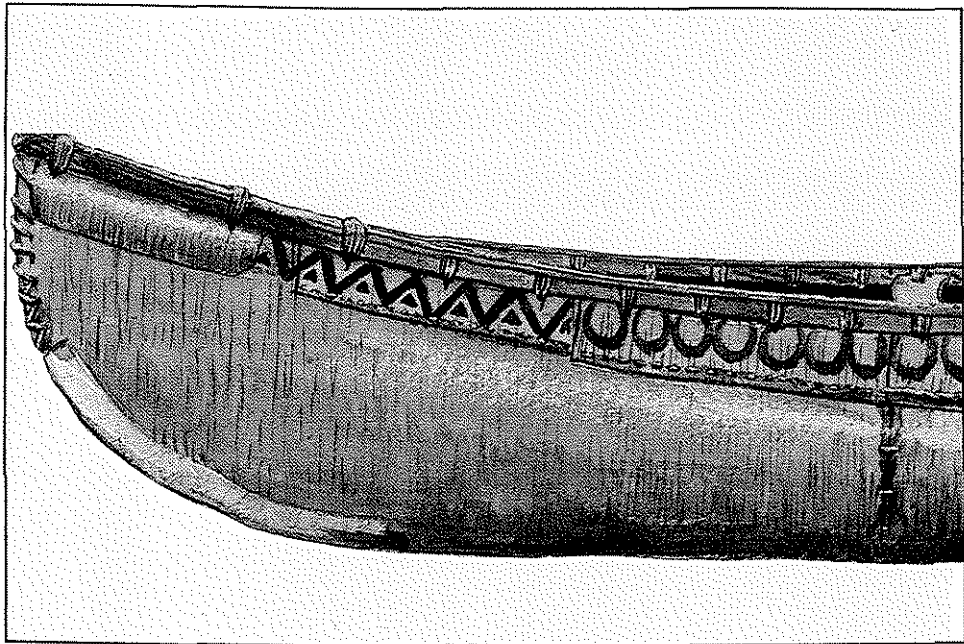


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JOHN

**The  
Survival  
of the  
Bark Canoe**

MCPHEE

THE  
SURVIVAL  
OF THE  
BARK  
CANOE

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McPHEE

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taut, was of differing shades of brown, trellised with dark seams. I guess I had expected something a little rough, rippled, crude, asymmetrical. These things, to the eye, were perfect in their symmetry. Their color was pleasing. Turn them over—their ribs, thwarts, and planking suggested cabinetwork. Their authenticity seemed built in, sewed in, lashed in, undeniable. In the sunlight of that cold November morning, they were the two most beautiful canoes I had ever seen. All this—when what I had frankly feared encountering were outsize, erratic souvenirs.

I had spent a good part of my early summers in canoes and on canoe trips, and all the canoes I used in those years were made of wood and canvas. They were Old Towns and E. M. Whites—lake canoes, river canoes, keeled, and keel-less. The bark canoe was gone, but not as long gone as I then—in the nineteen-thirties and forties—imagined. Now, in the nineteen-seventies, wood-and-canvas canoes were gradually becoming extinct, or seemed to be. They were seen about as frequently on canoe trails as bark canoes apparently were fifty years ago. What had replaced the wood and canvas were new generations of aluminum, Fiberglas, and plastic—canoe simulacra that lacked resonance, moved without elegance, fairly lurched through the forest. Some of them—white streaked with black—were designed to suggest birch bark. The sport in white water—where runs are made against a stopwatch—had been taken over by small Fiberglas boats that were called canoes but looked like kayaks. And now here was Henri Vaillancourt, whom I had heard of through a note in a newsletter of the Canoe Cruisers Association, standing in his yard beside bark-covered canoes—in full-time resolve to preserve them in the world—shyly and with what I then took to be modesty answering a most obvious question. Oh, don't worry, they were quite strong, really strong. They could take quite a blow. The ribs and planking were flexible, the bark elastic and durable. All

*The Survival of the Bark Canoe*

the wood in them had been split, none of it sawn. Split wood had more flexibility and more strength. If you hit a rock with sawn wood in your canoe you were more likely to crack the ribs and the planking. He cocked his arm and drove his fist into the bottom of one of the canoes with a punch that could have damaged a prizefighter. He is six feet tall and weighs a hundred and seventy-five pounds. The bottom of the canoe was unaffected. He remarked that the bark of the white birch was amazing stuff—strong, resinous, and waterproof. He said there was, in fact, virtually nothing the Indian canoe-makers did that was not as good as or better than what could be done with modern tools and materials.

His shyness was in his eyes—looking away, almost always, from the direction in which his voice was travelling—but not in his speech. He talked volubly, with nasal, staccato inflections, and if the subject was bark canoes he seemed in no hurry to stop. I stayed around the yard for a couple of days, and before I left we took one of the canoes and—as Vaillancourt likes to put it—“went for a spin” on a local pond. After paddling half a mile or so over rustling lily pads and open water, we rounded a point at one end of an island and Vaillancourt warned that the pond was shallow there and we might hit a rock. Crunch. We hit one. The canoe glanced off. It was moving fast—slicing, planing the water with much momentum and glide. Crunch. “Look out! There could be more!” Crunch.

The canoe moved on—dry, sound in the ribs. When we landed, we turned it over. On the bark, a couple of marks were visible of the sort that a fingernail might make on a piece of hide. “We hit a stump head on once, in Maine,” he said. “And the stump, you know, split in two.” He was happy enough, though, to have people go on thinking—as people apparently did—that bark canoes were fragile. Any canoe could be damaged, and the general welfare of bark canoes might be helped

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JOHN MCPHEE

by this common misconception. Bark canoes were actually so strong and flexible that Indians had used them not only in heavy rapids but also on the ocean. "But they're so rare today, you know, I wouldn't sell them to people who do white water. It's not the canoes I don't trust. I fully trust the canoes to go down white water. I don't trust the people who are paddling them. Bark canoes are so rare. There's no sense in wrecking even one."

The days are hot, and we often dip our cups in the river. Henri prefers Tang. He has the powder in his pack and a plastic jug by his feet as he paddles. He also has a supply of white bread—several loaves of it—and when he is hungry he pours honey onto the bread. In five minutes, he can prepare and finish a meal. Then he is ready to move on. We are in no hurry, like the shooting stars.

The river has many riffles, too minor to be labelled rapids. Nonetheless, they are stuffed with rock. The angle of the light is not always favorable. The rocks are hidden, and—smash—full tilt we hit them. The rocks make indentations that move along the bottom of the canoe, pressing in several inches and tracing a path toward the stern. It is as if the canoe were a pliant film sliding over the boulders. Still, I feel sorry and guilty when we hit one. I have been in white water and Rick has not, so he has asked me to paddle in the stern—to steer, to pick the route, to read the river—and I reward his confidence by smashing into another rock. Nothing cracks. If this were an aluminum canoe, it would be dented now, and, I must con-

*The Survival of the Bark Canoe*

fess, I would not really care. Of all the differences between this canoe and others I have travelled in, the first difference is a matter of care about them. The canoes can take a lot more abuse than we give them, but we all care. Landing, we are out of the canoes and in the water ourselves long before the bark can touch bottom. We load and launch in a foot of water. The Indians did just that, and the inclination to copy them is automatic—is not consciously remembered—with these Indian canoes.

Once, on the upper Delaware, in a fifteen-foot rented Grumman canoe, I ran through a pitch of white water called Skinner's Falls. On a big shelf of rock at the bottom of the rapid, a crowd of people watched. When the canoe came through dry, they gathered around and asked how that was done. They said they were novices—a ski club on a summer outing—and none of them had been able to run the rapid without taking in quantities of water. "Well," said my wife, getting out of our canoe, "if you think you've seen anything yet, just wait until you see what is going to happen now. My husband spent his whole childhood doing this sort of thing—and so did that man up there in the other canoe. The two of them are now going to run the rapid together."

I walked up the riverbank. When I joined my friend and got into his canoe (also a fifteen-foot aluminum), I saw that one of the skiers had set up a tripod on which was mounted a sixteen-millimetre movie camera. My wife later told me she had said to them that it was good that they had the camera, because they would be able to study the film and learn a great deal. Skinner's Falls is easiest on the right. It gets worse and worse the farther to the left you go. So, for the rash hell of it, we dug in hard, got up to high speed, and went into the extreme left side of the rapid. The canoe bucked twice before the bow caught a rock that swung us broadside to the current



are making—wandering at will in bark canoes—noting, and marking on inexact maps, the stands of pine. The big trees were there for the taking. They tended to cluster on the shores of the lakes. Loggers and log drivers followed, of course. Indian, hunter, cruiser, lumberer—this progression, in such beautiful country, could not help but lead to the tourist, the canoe-tripping tourist, and among the first of these (in all likelihood, *the* first tourist in the Maine woods) was Henry David Thoreau. He made two bark-canoe trips here, in 1853 and 1857, each time with an Indian guide. He went down this river. He went to the lake where Henri Vaillancourt—a hundred and twenty years later—would hide the felled cedar. Looking for moose in the night, he went up Moosehorn Stream. No moose. He had in his pack some pencils and an oilskin pouch full of scratch paper—actually letters that customers had written to his family's business, ordering plumbago and other printing supplies. On the backs of these discarded letters he made condensed, fragmentary, scarcely legible notes, and weeks later, when he had returned home to Concord, he composed his journal of the trip, slyly using the diary form, and writing at times in the present tense, to gain immediacy, to create the illusion of paragraphs written—as it is generally supposed they were written—virtually in the moments described. With the advantage of retrospect, he reconstructed the story to reveal a kind of significance that the notes do not reveal. Something new in journalism. With the journal as his principal source, he later crafted still another manuscript, in which he further shaped and rearranged the story, all the while adhering to a structure built on calendar dates. The result, published posthumously in hardcover form, was the book he called *The Maine Woods*.

Henri Vaillancourt's familiarity with books appears to be narrow, but he has read Thoreau—from *Walden* to *Cape Cod*, and most notably *The Maine Woods*. Rick Blanchette is sat-

*The Survival of the Bark Canoe*

urated in Thoreau. In every segment of the river, they remember things Thoreau did there—places where he camped, where he collected flora, where he searched for moose. “I’m into Thoreau, too,” Mike has said. “He writes about pickerel fishing, turtle hunting—the things I know and do.”

Vaillancourt is transfixed by the knowledge that Thoreau, at North East Carry, actually watched a group of Indians making bark canoes. “All of them sitting there whittling with crooked knives! What a life! I’d give anything to have been there.”

Back and forth between our two canoes, bits of Thoreau fly all day.

“Thoreau said the nose of the moose was the greatest delicacy, and after that the tongue.”

“Thoreau said it is a common accident for men camping in the woods to be killed by a falling tree.”

“Do you remember during the Allagash and East Branch trip when he said that all heroes and discoverers were insane?”

“No, that was in *Cape Cod*.”

“Some people think he was humorless, you know. I disagree.”

“Thoreau said . . .”

“Thoreau believed . . .”

“Do you remember the passage where . . .”

When it is not my turn to paddle and I am riding in the center of the canoe, I read to catch up. Thoreau’s trips were provisioned with smoked beef, coffee, sugar, tea, plum cake, salt, pepper, and lemons for flavoring the water. His tent was made from cut poles and cotton cloth. He had one blanket. He carried his gear in India-rubber bags, and it included an extra shirt, extra socks, two waistcoats, six dickies, a thick nightcap, a four-quart tin pail, a jackknife, a fishline, hooks, pins, needles, thread, matches, an umbrella, a towel, and soap. For foul weather, he had an India-rubber coat, in which he

sweated uncomfortably and got wetter than he would have in the rain. He ate his meals from birch-bark plates, using forks whittled from alder. For relief from mosquitoes, he wore a veil; he also threw damp leaves onto the fire and sat in the smoke. He slept in smoke, too—burning wet rotting logs all night.

Thoreau's guide on the first canoe trip was Joe Aitteon, and, on the second, Joe Polis—both Penobscots from Indian Island in Old Town, Maine. Henri Vaillancourt is at least as interested in these Indians as he is in Thoreau—particularly in Polis, who made his own canoes. Polis and Aitteon travelled light—no changes of clothing. Aitteon was a log driver. Polis was the better woodsman. Polis had represented his tribe in Washington. He had visited New York. He said, "I suppose, I live in New York, I be poorest hunter, I expect." Thoreau hired him for eleven dollars a week, which included the use of his canoe. Some eighteen feet in length, thirty inches wide, and a foot deep in the center, it was a longer, narrower canoe than the Vaillancourt canoes we are using. Thoreau's first canoe—on the 1853 trip with Aitteon—was more than nineteen feet long, and the bark was painted green. Our paddles are made from birch. Thoreau's were made from sugar maple. Thoreau was discomforted by the confinement of the paddling position, and he used the word "torture" to describe it. Sometimes he stood up in the canoe to stretch his legs. He appreciated nonetheless the genius of canoe technology. "The canoe implies a long antiquity in which its manufacture has been gradually perfected," he wrote in his journal. "It will ere long, perhaps, be ranked among the lost arts."

When Thoreau, from Mt. Katahdin, saw neither clearings nor cabins across huge domains of forest, lake, and river, he said, "It did not look as if a solitary traveller had cut so much as a walking-stick there." On closer view, though, from water level, he saw the stumps of timber a great deal larger than

he once wrote a letter promoting trade. Her canoe hangs from the shed rafters, on cinches. The canoe Henri is using on this trip was ordered by Idaho State University for a course on Indian canoeing and for the making of an educational film. John Farrell, of Warren, New Jersey, discovered Henri in the "Small Business & Crafts" section of *Yankee* magazine and ordered a fourteen-foot Vaillancourt canoe, which he uses for fishing and duck hunting on the upper Passaic River. Warren Soderberg, who owns a hardware store in Dresser, Wisconsin, bought an eighteen-foot Vaillancourt canoe so that, among other things, he could make fifteen-day canoe trips in Ontario during moose season in the fall. "I'd like to shoot a moose out of my birch-bark canoe with a bow and arrow," he said. "Why? Just to say that I've done it." Henri made a nine-foot hunter canoe for a woman in New Jersey who wanted one that small so she could lift it herself. It weighs twenty pounds.

Then, finally, an order came for a fur-trade canoe. The customer's name was Kent Reeves. He lived in Shokan, New York, and he was a professor of environmental education whose classroom was a forest (called the Ashokan Field Campus). It belonged to a subdivision of the State University. Reeves had conceived, and was in the process of organizing, a graduate course that would be one long field trip on the route of the *voyageurs*, mainly west of Superior. It would be called Frontier Life on the Voyageurs' Trail—six credits toward a master's degree. Beyond Reeves' considerable library on the fur-trade era, what the course needed most was a *canot du nord*. Reeves had sought out the names of people who could make one. He had visited them and had examined their work. He had arrived at an opinion of Henri that exactly coincided with Henri's opinion of himself: Henri was, by a considerable margin, the best. The two main considerations that brought Reeves to this conclusion were, in his words, "quality and authenticity." Henri wanted three thousand dol-

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*The Survival of the Bark Canoe*

lars. Reeves flinched, but he produced the money. The students who signed up for the course made their own paddles, sawing them out of basswood and finishing them with drawknives. They sewed their own billowy shirts and wove bright-colored sashes. They made *voyageur* hats, and they made moccasins with moose skin from the HBC. Meanwhile, Henri made the *canot du nord*. The bark was all it had appeared to be when it stood in the forest, and the canoe was representative of the best work he could do. He was still tapping in ribs as the course was about to begin, and the day he finished the canoe someone sent by Reeves arrived to take it away. Henri could not stand to see it go, and he was in an ugly mood for the rest of the summer. Finished in the morning, gone in the afternoon—never again would he let that happen, he decided. He was never going to be deadlined by a day, or even a month—the year alone was enough of a promise. He wanted his canoes around for a while when they were done. Wistfully, he wondered if the North Canoe would ever come back to Greenville for a touchup in “the yard.” Meanwhile, in the Quetico-Superior, it went up the Pigeon River on the route of the *voyageurs*. It was poled upstream and lined up rapids. It was a dry, sound, stable canoe—beautiful in sheer, smoothly seamed, with high, Christopherson ends. The graduate students sprayed themselves with Off and carried freeze-dried food, but they also learned and sang Loire Valley songs, ate some pork and dried peas, and drank from eight-gallon kegs of brandy. The course, moving northward, was a total success. It established itself in the curriculum. It left nothing in its wake but a lonely master of arts.

Allagash Stream, the highest reach of the river, drops to the head of Chamberlain Lake from the west-northwest. Recrossing the isthmus carry, we go in the morning to the mouth of the stream. By noon, we are literally in the water. As it pours toward us, it is too shallow to be paddled, too shallow to be poled. There is nothing to do but frog it—get out of the canoes and walk them up the current. If it is this shallow here, it is not in all likelihood going to get any deeper as we go along; therefore, as the map informs us, the best we can hope for is a seven-mile walk in the water.

Alternative routes are, for various reasons, less attractive, and do not include Allagash Lake, whose remoteness is written in its approaches: from the east, seven miles' sloshing up a rocky stream; from the west, a portage of three miles, by far the longest in the Allagash woods. So we drag the canoes—in two, three inches of water, jumping, bubbling, rushing at us. We lift them at the gunwales to reduce the draw. Now and again, we slide and fall on rock shelves covered with algae. In pools, we go in to the hips, to the chest, all the way. The cool water feels good coming on. It feels good rushing around the

*The Survival of the Bark Canoe*

ankles. It feels good closing overhead. I would prefer to frog fifty miles up a forest stream than paddle ten against a big lake head wind.

Often, it is necessary to heave rocks aside to create a channel wide enough for the canoes. On many of the rocks are heavy streaks of paint or aluminum left by hundreds of canoes that have come banging down this river in varying levels of water under the care of people who did not give a damn what they hit. What comes home once more at the sight of those aluminum-covered rocks is the world of difference in the way we feel toward our canoes, and it is the central pleasure of this trip: we care so much about them. We scrape a little, too, and it can't be helped. *Tant pis*, as Henri says. Bark leaves no marks behind. Warren, leading, voraciously sculpts the river—kicking stones aside, lifting rocks so large they appear to be ledges and stuffing them into the banks. Then he hauls the canoe up the freeways he has made. Henri walks behind with a rope in his hand. It is tied to the stern, which he moves from side to side, as if the canoe were a horse on a halter.

The stream is a white-water primer, for it is flowing much like a riverine rapid, which is what it is, scaled down. All in miniature, the haystacks, the standing waves, the souse holes, the eddies, the satin-water pillows are here, and usually there is a place to go—a *fil d'eau*—that is deeper and better than anywhere else. One learns to read the stream. After four hours, we have gone two miles.

Henri remarks that he is now hungry enough to eat a moose, and wouldn't mind trying if one were to appear.

"You have to see one before you can eat one, Henri."

"And how are your wife and your cattle?"

"God bless you, well."

A windfall fir lies across the stream now and stops us altogether, but Henri unsheathes his axe and sends flotillas of chips down the current. The log drops into the water. We