Birch Bark Canoe Building at Wabun

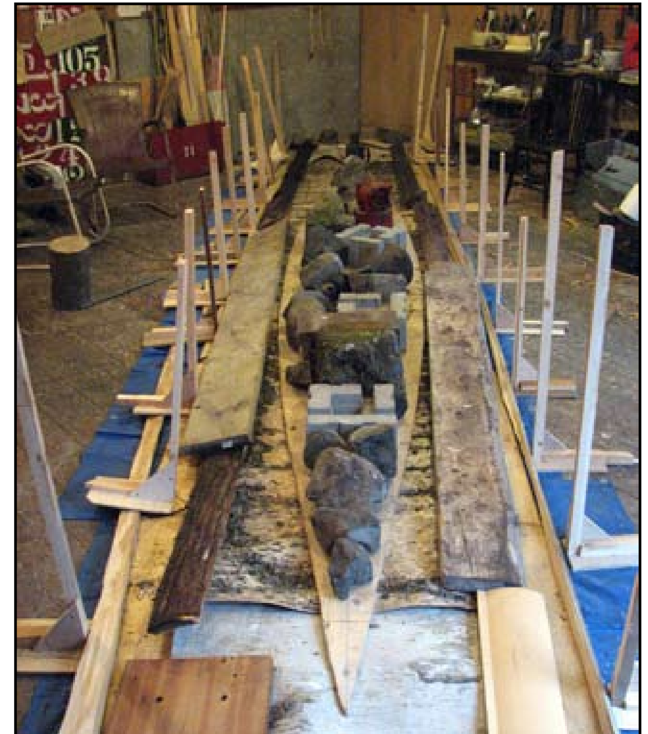
Written By Eliza Wicks-Arshack

There's something special about the north woods of Northern Ontario, something that draws me to the distant shores of Lake Temagami summer after summer, something that entices me to take arduous canoe journeys with people who recognize that same something. Maybe it's the blinding quality of the stars at night, or the sense of awe in seeing ancient pictographs. Perhaps it's the sound of the wind or the pureness of the water. Whatever it is, it was that something, the indefinable, intangible, wonderful feeling I get there, coupled with a desire to learn about the history of the people whose land I'd traveled extensively that drew me back to experience Temagami in the fall months and participate in the building of two birch bark canoes.

For thousands of years before the influence of Europeans, Native Americans and Canadians lived and prospered in North America. Northern Ontario is distinguished by its boreal forests and extensive waterways. Canoes have been an invaluable tool for natives, serving as hunting vessels, mode of transportation, and for communication. The flora of Northern Ontario conveniently provided the natives with the best, most durable bark for canoe making: birch bark, and they have long since developed and perfected the art of birch bark canoe making. When Europeans came to Northern Ontario they quickly appropriated the canoe as their own mode of transportation, making a larger version of the traditional birch bark canoe for fur trade: the voyager canoe. The lives of the natives quickly changed with the arrival of European influence in terms of religion, life style, etc. Similarly, modernity has caused birch bark canoe making to become a lost art. The role of the canoe has become increasingly less important with inventions such as the motorboat, importation of food and supplies, telephones, and mail services. Furthermore, the canoe has evolved into principally a recreational apparatus. In its new iteration, the canoe has come to be an enterprise, and is now produced in a plethora of materials (wood and canvas, ABS, Kevlar, fiberglass, etc) and in innumerable styles. The canoe has changed and developed, largely in the past century, but its history and home lies in the northern waters of Ontario.

After driving 1,862 miles from Colorado, I arrived in Temagami in mid-October, greeted by snow-covered boughs and chilly winds. Adam Wicks-Arshack, Xander Demetrios, and Peter Bruno arrived a month before me, joining John Zinser who'd been in Temagami since June when he joined Pete Gwyn in leading Wabun's Bay Trip. By the time I arrived, the four of them had gathered, harvested, and prepared most of the materials needed to build two birch bark canoes, one 24-foot voyager canoe and a second 13-foot canoe. This involved harvesting birch bark, gathering and preparing spruce root, harvesting and sculpting all the lumber needed, amounting to thousands of hours of work and rafters full of handcrafted materials - still no semblance of a canoe, but the building process was soon to begin.

Along with helping to build the canoes, I was interested in learning about the Teme-Augama Anishnabai, the people of the Temagami First Nation at the Bear Island Reserve. I was curious about how the community has changed over the years, the effect of modernity on the community, and specifically the role and history of the birch bark canoe in the community. Our first visit to Bear Island granted us the opportunity to view an 800-pound cow moose that was recently shot by a native and was hanging in a garage to be butchered in two days' time. The sight was quite powerful, a majestic beast in all its might, hanging lifelessly, sacrificed to feed several families for the winter. We were lucky enough to



be graciously given some of the moose meat. We dined upon the delicious, flavorful meat throughout our stay, concocting delicacies such as moose stew, moose-asparagus quiche, moose ribs with mashed potatoes, and numerous other dinner delights. Pete also took on cleaning the hide, scraping off the fat, and stretching it on a frame where it dried.

The canoe building continued. Building a birch bark canoe is done from the outside in. It begins by carefully unrolling the bark on a building platform which we had set up in the Wabun shop (with both the 24' and 13' canoes, it was quite crowded). The bark is weighed down with a building frame and rocks to prevent curling. Stakes are then positioned around the frame to support the sides. Side panels are inserted and sewn onto the bottom panel with the prepared

spruce root. Once sewn together, a several-day endeavor, the stakes are widened to allow the bark to spread and create the desired beam or width of the canoe. Gunwales are prepared, an inwale and outwale, both split from cedar logs, carved and whittled down with a crooked knife,

all by hand, then steam bent to create a curve at each end of the canoe. Thwarts are also carved and then connected to the inwale via a mortis and tenon. The gunwales and thwarts are placed

on the bark and secured with wooden pegs and spruce root lashings. The panels and gores are also sewn together with spruce root, unifying all of the bark. The stempieces and manboards are formed and inserted to create the shape and strength of the bow and stern. Our canoe was beginning to take shape, day by day resembling more a finished canoe.

Days were long. The five us of developed a routine: up at 7:22 (generally awakened by Adam), water on for coffee (a priority in the mornings), breakfast of oats, then work began and continued till supper. It was a joy, a different pace of life than that experienced at home. We

were there to build two birch bark canoes; that was our focus, what we lived for. The weather treated us well with an abnormally warm fall, allowing for tee shirts during the day and toasty fires at night. My interactions with Bear Island continued. I conducted several interviews with a few elders from the community and visitors from Bear Island came to Garden Island to view the canoes. They all were impressed and pleased that we were attempting to enliven an art which was once integral to their people's way of life.

The final stages of the canoes were underway. The next stage was preparing and bending the ribs for the canoes (amounting to 60 ribs for the large canoe and 34 for the smaller one). The ribs are laid out on the gunwales and marked four-fingers in from the gunwales on either side

(this is where the bend will be). The ribs were steamed to allow for pliability, bent in the appropriate place, and inserted into the canoe to dry. Of over 90 bent in the process, only five ribs broke. After drying for a day the ribs are removed and the ends cut to the appropriate height and carved to an angle in order to fit in under the beveled inwale. It took us several cuts to get the right fit. The third cut was the charm and the ribs

were installed with the sheathing meticulously positioned below. By this point in the building, work continued late into the night, finishing a day's work once at 4 am with the final rib in place (while not completely tapped in, the bark needs time to stretch before the ribs are completely in). With the wood in place and the sewing completed, the sealing began. While typically seams are sealed using a mixture of spruce resin (sap) and bear fat, due to lack of resin, we used roofing tar (a substitute commonly used in contemporary birch bark canoes). The tar was applied to all the seams in an attempt to completely waterproof it. After allowing the tar to dry and the bark to stretch, ribs were tapped in. On the final day

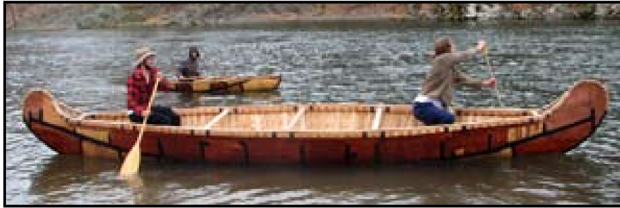
of work, while tapping in a rib we heard a tear. The bark below began to rip on a weak part of bark. The tear continued and made about an 8-inch hole on the bottom of our voyager canoe. It was heart breaking. This was the first major problem we were faced with, and we simply were devastated. Would the tear continue? Can we fix it? Do we have the bark to fix it? We had limited materials and up to now they seemed the

perfect amount. After a night's deliberation and postponing our maiden voyage to Bear Island, we removed the ribs and sheathing over the tear, sewed a patch, and crossed our fingers it would fix the problem. The wood went back in and the ribs carefully inserted over the patch. It seemed to work. Just a day behind schedule, we were ready to paddle to Bear Island.

The project, powered and directed by Adam and John, was quite an accomplishment. The two of them built their first bark canoe in the bush last summer, 12 feet long. This time they ambitiously aimed toward a 24-foot voyager canoe as their second birch bark canoe and simultaneously a 13-foot canoe for the third. The entire process was one of learning and ended successfully. We had just enough material, running out of nearly everything just in time, and finding solutions for all the problems we encountered.

After over 3,500 hours, collectively, of work, preparing thousands of feet of spruce root, and consuming about 15lbs of coffee, we set off

on our maiden voyage from Garden Island to Bear Island. While not completely waterproof (a fulltime bailer en route was necessary), she floated. The paddle to Bear Island was simply amazing. To paddle a canoe you've poured your life into, built from what the natives call the medicine of the land we were traveling on, towards the reserve of the Teme-Augama Anishnabai



whose culture we'd learned from and appropriated practices from, gave us the feeling of utter accomplishment, an unreal feeling.

People from the community greeted us

at the dock and were speechless. One woman said, "It's funny, it's gone full circle. It used to be the natives showing the white people birch bark canoes, now the whites are showing the natives." We portaged the canoe to the Elders Building to display it. They invited us inside for some moose stew, chili, and bannock.

Mary Katt, one of the elders in the community, said a prayer, some beautiful words, for our canoe and us. Another woman, Virginia McKenzie, smudged the canoe for us to cleanse it and sang a song calling the eagles to guide its way. They gifted us a Teme-Augama Anishnabai flag for the canoe and medicine bag pins containing the four essential medicines: tobacco, sweet grass, birch bark, and cedar. It was a gorgeous closure for an amazing project.

We left Wabun and Garden Island the next day in a hectic rush to pack everything up and drove all the way down to New York; heading back south after spending time in the north woods is always a hard transition. I learned endless amounts during the month I was up there, about building canoes, the history of the area, the current situation at Bear Island, and about myself. Getting to know Pete and Xander was wonderful, and spending time with Adam and John, two people I've known and loved forever, was very special. I thank you all for an amazing time. The canoes are now traveling cross-country, took a stop in New York City, continued on to Kentucky, passing through Colorado, and will eventually find a home in Washington State. The boys will use the canoe to lead educational trips for school groups. We've taken from Temagami's daki menan (our land), but have done so in a positive and respectful way that we hope will benefit many. We hope to return the canoe to Temagami to take a group of native children from the school on Bear Island on a canoe trip in a canoe made from their land.