

Journeys by Canoe

By Ole Hendrickson

Fall has always been a special time of year in the Ottawa Valley. Kirby Whiteduck of the Algonquins of Pikawakanagan in his book *Algonquin Traditional Culture*, and Stephen McGregor of the Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg in his book *Since Time Immemorial: Our Story*, describe life 500 years ago in the valley of the Kichi Sibi, the Great River, now known as the Ottawa.

For the original Algonquin inhabitants of the Valley, fall was when family groups said farewell to their friends and relatives with whom they had gathered on the main stem of the Kichi Sibi. They filled their birch bark canoes with hunting and fishing tools they had made during the summer, and with food provisions such as corn and dried fish, and headed upstream along the many tributaries of the watershed to their traditional hunting grounds. There they would construct wigwams covered with birch bark in which to spend the long cold winter; while pursuing game such as moose, caribou and deer; trapping beaver and other fur-bearing animals; and fishing through the ice of the frozen lakes.

In April, when the days lengthened and the ice began to break up, people ventured into the forest in search of long intact pieces of birch with which to build new canoes. When the tributary rivers were again navigable with the spring high water, families would venture downstream in their canoes, laden with the hides and furs procured during the winter.

The canoe also was the vehicle that enabled contact between the early European explorers and indigenous peoples. Samuel de Champlain, founder of Canada, journeyed up the Kichi Sibi with his Aboriginal guides by canoe in spring of 1613 and met with Algonquin leader Tessouat in the vicinity of present-day Pembroke. Champlain wanted to proceed further upriver through Algonquin territory and contact peoples living in the upper Great Lakes region. However, Tessouat thwarted Champlain's plan so as to maintain the Algonquins' control of shipping and trade along the Kichi Sibi. By way of compensation, Tessouat sent Champlain back downriver with a party of 40 canoes laden with furs. During the downriver voyage Champlain was able to witness a traditional tobacco ceremony at the Chaudiere Falls, in present-day Ottawa.

Some of the earliest French voyagers to the Ottawa Valley lived with indigenous peoples and had a chance to witness their survival skills first-hand. This even included Champlain. His second upriver trip in 1615 (400 years ago) included a military expedition with the allied Huron (also known as Wendat), Montagnais and Algonquin tribes against the Iroquois. Seriously injured, Champlain was carried in a basket by his Wendat allies to one of their villages, where he spent the winter and recovered from his wounds. In contrast to the Algonquins, the Wendat were mainly farming peoples and did not disperse to hunting territories in winter, although Champlain did accompany them on a deer hunt.

The birch bark canoe was the means of transporting trade goods along the Kichi Sibi, one of the main east-west trade routes across the North American continent. Stephen McGregor describes the trade between Algonquins and Wendat as follows:

"The Wendat lived in permanent villages so that they could cultivate the land. Corn was the main staple of their diet, as well as beans and squash, which supplemented fish and some game meat... Contact and trade between the Kichi Sibi Anishinabeg and Wendat nations was inevitable. The Wendat required large surpluses of hides and furs from which to make warm clothing. The Wendat traded ample supplies

of corn, tobacco and goods such as pottery with the Kichi Sibi in return for hides and furs... Over generations, the Wendat had refined their pottery techniques, making them lighter in weight but still durable. Wendat pottery was easier to transport on long journeys by canoe..."

Journeying by canoe was not without its hazards, particularly during spring. Kirby Whiteduck quotes from the journals of the Jesuit priests who traveled among the indigenous peoples to spread Christianity. Here is a priest's account of a trip on the lower St. Lawrence during ice breakup:

"On the fifth of the month of April, my host, the Apostate [i.e. non-believer], and I embarked in a little canoe to go to Kebec upon the great river... Now, as it was still cold, we had not gone far when we found that a little ice had formed during the night, which covered the surface of the water... we entered it, the Apostate, who was in front, breaking it with his paddle. But either it was too sharp, or the bark of our gondola too thin; for it made an opening which let the water into our canoe and fear into our hearts. So behold us all three in action, my two Savages paddling, and I baling out the water. We drew with all the strength of our paddles to an Island which we very fortunately encountered. When we set foot upon shore, the Savages seized the canoe, drew it out of the water, turned it upside down; lighted their tinder, made a fire, sewed up the slit in the bark; applied to it their resin, a kind of gum that runs out of trees; placed the canoe again in the water; and we re-embarked and continued on our journey."

Indigenous peoples made annual trips to and from their hunting territories by canoe. Early French explorers quickly learned that it was vastly superior to their own watercraft. It enabled trade, warfare and family gatherings. The canoe is one of the greatest technological innovations of the indigenous peoples of North America, and its importance in shaping Canadian history can hardly be overstated.