ANTHROPOLOGY 100 (A.) DAVID BUCKNA

THE KOOTENAI CANOE

The Kootenai or "Sturgeon-Nosed" Canoe has been used for many decades by the Lower Kootenay Indian Band near Creston, B.C. Generally speaking, this canoe is a very light and flexible structure, and makes for a rough water boat of excellent design. The following is an excerpt from a report made in 1899 by Otis T. Mason, then Curator, Ethnology Division of the U.S. National Museum at Washington, D.C.

"The model in question is not of birch-bark, but of pine-bark (pinusmonticola) White Pine, laid on with the inner or smooth side out. The canoes of this type are all pointed like a monitor at either end, on or below the water line; that is, they are longest on the line of the keel. When new, they seem to be straight along this line, but, from being loaded in the middle, they sag afterwards, and the pointed ends get turned up through striking the shore landing.

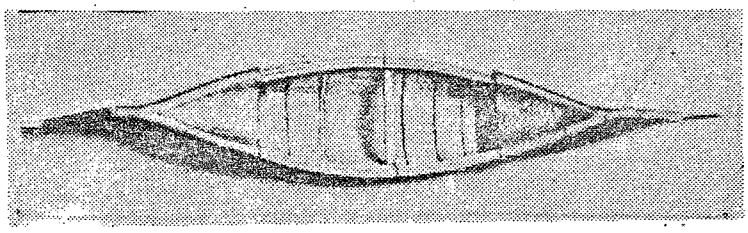
"A glance at the large collection of American Indian water craft throughout both continents reveals the fact that this pointed type is unique for the Western Hemisphere. In the North and East the birch-bark canoes prevail, and further north the kaiak and the Umiak. In the West the dugout is universal and assumes often large size and graceful outline. But every example of skin boat, bark canoe, and dugout of the Western Hemisphere, excepting the KOOTENAI CANOE is longer on the top and narrower at the bottom, or what would be the keel if any were present.

"Further examination into the water craft of North and South America fails to reveal any such forms as that of the Kootenai Canoe. The bark boats or "wood-skins" of the Amazon and its affluents and the Orinoco have no such motives. The reader will have to search in another part of the world for similar models...."

Indeed, one <u>will</u> have to search in another part of the world for a similar model; that which exists in the Amur River Basin of Siberia! The Kootenai Canoe bears not only a similar, but a uncanny resemblance to a canoe of this region. The Kootenai Canoe is even regarded by leading authorities on Indian lore as further evidence to the theory that the North American Indian originally migrated from Asia via Siberia and Alaska. Perhaps the early ancestors of the North American Indian migrated over a "land-bridge" which may have existed thousands of years ago! And perhaps, somehow, this technique of canoe construction managed to survive along with its people!

The similar canoe in question was made by the Goldi Indians of Siberia. The hull of their craft is a single piece of bark; a portion of the hold is covered at each end with another sheet of bark, forming two partial decks. It has been the good fortune of the residents of Creston to become acquainted with a portrait artist from Montreal, Mrs. Barbara Bachovaeff, who was born in Siberia and was very

familiar with the Goldi Canoes. She recognized a Kootenai model as being very similar to the "Dushegubka" (Destroyer of the Soul of Life), which she herself had seen on the Amur River.



GOLDI CANOE (Smithsonian Institute)

A complete description of the construction of the Kootenai Canoe also appears in Mr. Mason's report of 1899:

"The bark is stripped off in lengths equal to those of the desired canoes, about 15 feet, and in order to increase its gliding quality is turned inside out. At a convenient distance from the ends the margins of the bark are firmly tied together. Between these two points of union the edges are forced apart and held in place by thwarts varying in length. Outside the two points of union the ends of the bark are pinched together and triangular pieces cut from the corners, so that when the sloping edges are joined, a sloping or incurved line extends from the point of union on top to the extremities of the bottom, in fact, causing the canoe to look alike at each end, something like a modern "ram" or monitor.

"The bark is strengthened by rigs and by horizontal slats, and the parts are sewed together by means of vine, maple, pine, cedar or spruce root, or with strips of bark. A gunwhale is built up by splitting a cedar pole into three parts, one of them the segment circle in section for topwhale, the other two, inwhale and outwhale, are quarters of circles in section, so that they will fit neatly on top and along the outer and inner margin of the upper border of the bark. In this part of the construction the Kootenai craft is in contrast with other Northern bark canoes."

If you are completely lost in the above description, perhaps my own will make things more clearer. In the construction of an authentic Kootenai Canoe, the frame must be made first. White cedar is chosen as the building material as it is the most sturdy of all available woods in this region. The common dimensions of the frame include a length of approximately 12-15 feet, and a beam width of approximately 2½-3 feet. These dimensions may vary as a larger or smaller canoe can be built, depending on the number of individuals and the quantity of supplies. A canoe may be as large as 22 feet in length which could hold 6 people comfortably. At the midship section the bottom is made very flat.

The ribs of the frame, which are made of maple, are the first things to be shaped. Each rib is really a piece of bent wood, and they are all tied together

by cedar roots. The shape of the ribs vary along the length of the vessel, assuming greater curves towards the ends, and finally becoming complete curves inside the bow and stern.

It is interesting to note that the canoe has no true keel timbers. Instead, long split poles, which are very light and thin, are laid along the ribs and lashed to them about 2 inches or slightly more apart. These are then lashed into bundles at the ends to help sustain the snout shape. Lastly, all ribs are further lashed together with seasoned strips of a plant called dogbane.

The next phase in the canoe's construction is to secure the proper bark for the covering of the frame. One must first find a large white pine of the desired size and quality, which grew abundantly in this area before the white man arrived on the scene. The person must then climb up the tree to a height of approximately 15 feet, using rough ladders or by driving horn wedges into the tree in a vertical line and standing on them. He must then cut a ring completely around the bark with a curved tool made from a deer antler which was sharpened on a stone acquired from a certain formation found on the northern Kootenay Lake shore. At the same time a helper must cut a similar ring around the base of the tree. Next, an incision is made down the length of the trunk which connects the two rings. It is very important that the incision be as straight and accurate as possible. Then, a stick of approximately 2 inches in diameter is used to carefully pry the bark from the tree. The bark, now a "bark sheet", is then wrapped up so that it will remain moist and flexible in later use. This bark is not scraped or seasoned in any way, nor is it decorated. The inside or tree side of the bark will be used for the outside of the canoe, while the outside of the bark will be used for the inside of the canoe.

Next, the bark sheet is cut into the proper shape. Holes are bored along the ends of the bark to recieve the lashings to the frame. The knot-holes which are formed naturally in the bark, and those which are caused by the removal of small twigs are carefully plugged with melted pitch. The sheet is then carefully fastened to the frame and sewn on with strong dogbane cord. It should ne noted that the sheet is always put on in one piece, so that there are seams showing only at the ends of

the canoe.

A heavy stick is then inserted at the ends of the longest midship rib to act as a spreader. This gives the canoe additional lateral length, and keeps it spread apart in its proper shape during the tension of its use. Two additional sticks are then lashed along the concave lines of the bow and stern. These three sticks are really the only true "timbering" of the canoe.

The vessel is then made completely watertight at the seams with a liberal amount of melted pitch within and without.

I should have stated earlier that there is a period of only three months when the white pine is just right for stripping of the bark. In the case of the miniature replicas, the bark has to be peeled from the top of the tree. Then, maple ribs and cedar slats are used. The sinew-like thread is derived by stripping an outer covering from cedar roots; the ribbon-like binding is bark from the "wild cherry bush". The pitch for this model, unlike the large canoe, must only be acquired from the Ponderosa Pine.

Only some 50 years ago, hundreds of these canoes travelled the Kootenay River and Kootenay Lake transporting the occupants in their search for berries, fish, fowl, and furs. The Indians found that the Kootenai Canoe with its light weight was ideal for hunting in the shallows of the Kootenay Flats. Its "sturgeon-nose", which is the most outstanding characteristic of the Kootenai design, permitted it to be easily lodged in the mud banks. These snouts or projections also increased the ease of steering by permitting the canoe to manuvere very easily in between the cat-tails and reeds---splitting and dividing them as they went. They also gave the craft added bouyancy and speed.

If a portion of the band wished to journey for food a great distance away from the main village, a fleet of respectable size could be built in a matter of hours since all the materials needed for the canoes' construction was ready available. It is said that the Indians could travel the distance on Kootenay Lake from what is now Creston to the vacinity of Nelson in one day!

The canoes were a very temperamental craft and the Indians were very cautious when using them. In the operation of the canoe in water, the paddler kneels directly on the bottom with his feet tucked under him---his knees are spread out against the sides to keep the canoe properly balanced. The paddle was extremely simple in design, as both blade and handle were cut in one piece and had no artificial hand grip.

After the advent of the white man in this area, the Indians no longer used the white pine bark as the covering, as canvas was found to be much easier to work with and obtain---easier to obtain as the white man was now using the white pine in the pioneer lumber mills of this area.

Up to 1959, the only authentic full-scale White Pine Kootenai Canoe in existence was the one on display at the National Museum of Indian Relics in Ottawa. This canoe met with disaster in this year when the structure on which it was resting collapsed, smashing the fragile craft to bits. It was because of this accident that attention was drawn to the distinctiveness of the Kootenai Canoe. Mrs. Charlotte Basil, now 75, (although she claims to be 69) was the only remaining native who remembered the art of her forefathers; and so she was commissioned by the Museum to construct a White Pine Canoe to replace the one destroyed.

On seeing articles in local papers concerning the completion of the 1959 canoe, the Creston Booster Club decided to bring the Kootenai Canoe out into its proper position among the historical and scenic wonders of British Columbia. Mrs. Basil was called upon to construct authentic pine bark miniature replicas, which are museum pieces in themselves. It could be said that these models are Creston's distinctive souvenir emblem as they cannot be duplicated anywhere else in the world.

Much of the credit for preserving the art of canoe making is due to Mr. George Oliver, a Creston Valley resident. It was his suggestion in the first place to have Mrs. Basil make the miniature canoes, which, over the years, have been presented to distinguished guests to the Valley, among them being Premier W.A.C. Bennett.

Until very recently, (late Sept./71), the people of the Valley were concerned that the art of making these canoes was dying out. I interviewed along with Mrs. Basil, her daughter Agatha Jacobs, who also has learned to make the miniatures; so the art is being passed on to some extent. see photos

Fortuneately, there is also now a full-scale White Pine Canoe saved for posterity in the Creston-Erickson Centennial Library, where it is featured in the new Archives section; there is also one at the Fort Steele restoration. The British Museum and the Smithsonian Institute both have comprehensive information concerning the canoe.

Bibliography

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(1) Mon Sept. 27/71 volume 23 no. 77
(2) Christmas Edition Thurs. Dec. 24/70
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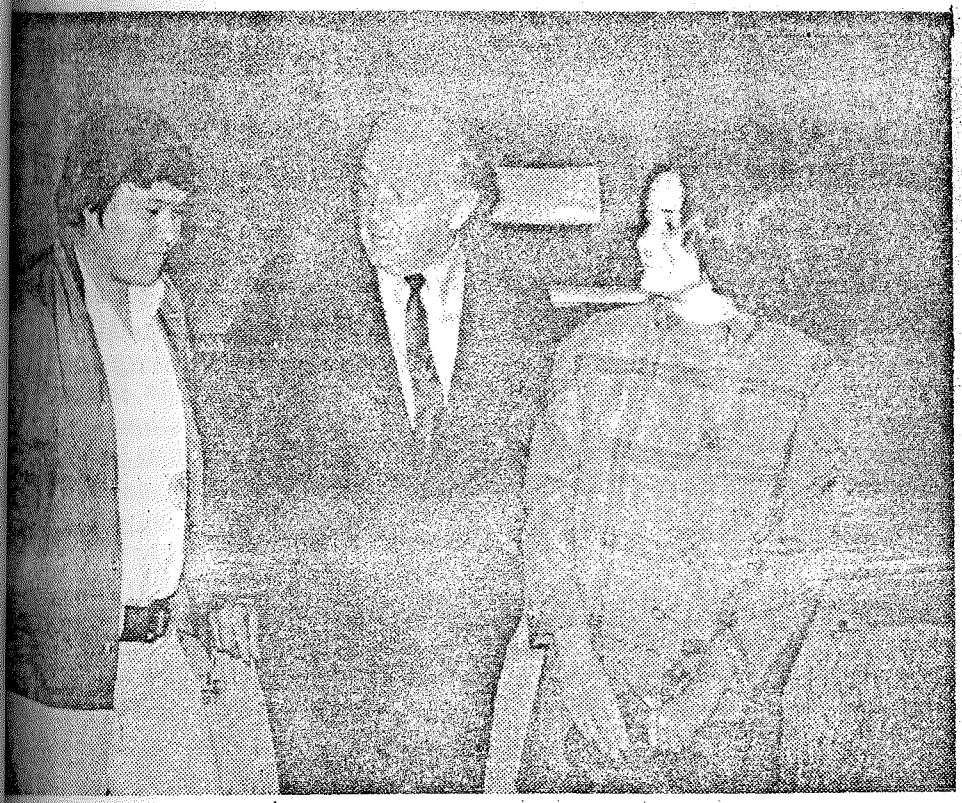
THE CRESTON VALLEY ADVANCE

y, 25¢ Mon. Del.; $3.25 Yr. Mailed. VOL. XXIII, No. 77 Mon. Sept. 27, 1971

pe To Develop Indian Crafts



liscussion on the possibility of assisting the Indian Band in developing handicraft skills he featured topic at the September meeting eston Chamber of Commerce held Tuesday Royal Canadian Legion.

sent were Professor M. A. Forsyth, head Social Science Department at Notre Dame rsity, Nelson; Kathy Ingham of Creston, as Project Co-Ordinator in an Opportunity outh program to help Indians this summer, hris Luke, Chief of the Lower Kootenay In- Band. They were invited by President H. L. for an in-depth study of the question of pro- g Indian handicrafts particularly the revival art of building the famed Kutenai Canoe.

, Forsyth, the pal speaker, hat from his lerable exper- he had found gle shred of ce that Indians ss intelligence ther peoples. "Let's get rid of this myth," he said. He was born and raised alongside the Blood Indian Reserve in Alberta and had studied anthropology, sociology, and human behavior but had yet to come across proof that Indians were genetically different.

The Indians had been forced into a legalistically difference. They had been obliged to accept Christianity, to accept Western names and denied the opportunity to follow their own desires.

Now it was unusual to find an Indian who wants to follow his own culture, the speaker stated. The Indian had to accept the white man's ways to retain any pride.

We should help them regain confidence by assisting them with discretion to build canoes, make beaded moccasins and jackets and eventually develop a commercial market for Indian handicrafts here.

Kutenai Canoes could be saleable to museums all over the world. The Indians could compete in local markets with their other handicrafts.

In order to reinstate the Indians' skills he had instituted this summer's program and with the help of young people such as Kathy, the Indians of St. Mary's Reserve, near Cranbrook, enjoyed making articles and staging an Indian Festival during the Sam Steele Days, They needed some administrative help from the white man.

Miss Ingham added that the Cranbrook Chamber of Commerce had offered money to assist the project. It was both a recreation and cultural program. The Teepee Village attracted a good many tourists. There had been some problems but most had been resolved.

Mr. Luke said he would like to start handicraft work here and put on a display during the Blossom Festival.

Mr. Dodd noted that there was only one of the genuine white pine Kutenai Canoes in the Creston area of the two or three in the world, and that was in the local library.

This type of canoe is said to be one of the four or five perfect instruments developed by man, Mr. Dodd stated.

There are only one or two people left in the local Band who retain the canoe-building art. To help revive this art, was the reason for assembling the panel of speakers.

Hearty applause was given the speakers by the light attendance of members. Mr. Dodd added that the Chamber had heard one of the strongest, most informed messages on the state of the Indian. He said the Chamber would like to "rectify the sins of our fathers" by assisting Chief Luke in his endeavours.

Editorial Sept. 27/71.

Chance for Co-operation

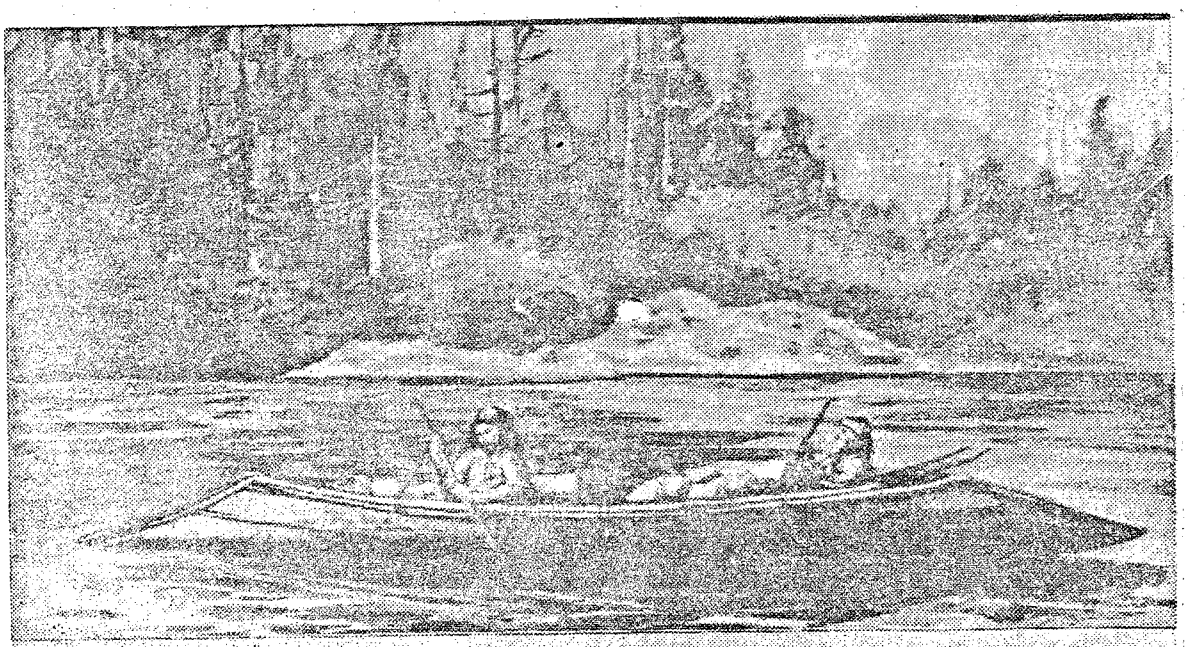
Hope for a resurgence of Indian handicrafts was expressed at the recent meeting of the Creston Chamber of Commerce.

Many people have indicated an interest in assisting the local Indian Band in reviving its crafts, some feeling that a successful commercial venture could be launched in the sale of these handicrafts particularly the Kutenai Canoe. Chris Luke, Chief of the Lower Indian Band, stated a number of his people are capable of making beaded moccasins, jackets and other products. Professor M. A. Forsyth feels that the unique Kutenai canoes are saleable to many museums in the world.

As far as the non-Indian citizens go, it has always been a problem of how to help without interfering.

It was said at the meeting that the Indians would likely need some administrative assistance in promoting their handicrafts.

Here is an opportunity for co-operation between Indians and non-Indians, not just to help the Band commcercially, but to maintain their ancient cultures and dignity.



KUTENAI CANOE IN MOTION Smithsonian Institute

PHOTOGRAPHS CAPTIONS:

1. Copy of plaque which accompanies the full scale white pine Kootenai Canoe which rests at the Creston -Erickson Centennial Library where it is featured in the Archives Section.

2. Mrs. Charlotte Basil displays a model canoe which she contructed and was presented to Premier Bennett during his visit to Creston in 1959.

3. Mrs. Charlotte Basil at work in her workshed constructing a miniature Kootenai Canoe.

4. The late Frank Basil carries his canoe in the traditional method of handling.

5. The late Frank Basil in a test run on a test run before this canoe was shipped to Ottawa. (National Museum of Indian Relics)

6. and 7. Mrs. Charlotte Basil is show with her daughter Mrs. Agatha Jacobs and grandchildren. Her daughter Mrs. Jacobs is being taught the craft of making the miniature Kootanai Canoe. David Buckna, Second Year Art student Selkirk College is on the right interviewing the family.

8. Three views of the model. Kootenai Canoe.

The Kuleñai Canoe. (1)

This Sturgeon-nosed Canoe
is used by the Indians of the Lower
Kootenay Band, living near Creston, B.C.
The Only other region in the World
where this type canoe has ever been found
is the Amur River area in Asia!
The Kuleñai Canoe is now accepted
as proof that the North American Indian
immigrated from Asia, via
Siberia & Alaska: