The Birchbark Canoe Makers of Lac Barrière

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In the territory of the Algonquin proper, the increasing use of canoes of canvas around the turn of the century was one of the major factors in the beginning of the disappearance of the birchbark canoe. But still into this century, birchbark canoes were used by white sportsmen and by Indians for hunting, trapping and transportation. Algonquin Indians continued to make birchbark canoes until late in the 20th century at such locations as Golden Lake, Ontario, and Maniwaki and Rapid Lake (Lac Barrière) in Québec.

Lac Barrière had always been isolated. Into the 1920s, the Indians used to come down to Maniwaki, 160 km away, by birchbark canoe. One of the old men of the settlement can remember long trips by birchbark canoe to trade furs at North Bay, Ontario, which is over 320 km away. In the late 1920s, an anthropologist from the United States visited Lac Barrière and wrote about the settlement at the time (Johnson 1930). The anthropologist spent 22 hours over two days to go the last 110 km of his journey. The settlement was then composed of 25 families. The chief was David Makakons, who died, probably from a heart attack, in 1964 after having fallen from the birchbark canoe he had used for decades. He had been a canoe maker all his life. He spoke neither French nor English but was renowned as an orator in Algonquin.

In those days, the authority of the chief was more or less limited to the time the band was in the summer settlement. The band was dispersed on hunting territories for most of the cold months where families spent as much as three-fourths of the year. In the late 1920s, many birchbark canoes were still in use at Lac Barrière, but there were already some canvas canoes with motors rigged to them.

The best-known of the Rapid Lake canoe makers of this century was Patrick Maranda, who was born in 1901 and died in the spring of 1987. The
band was known for its excellent canoe makers and Patrick Maranda was reputed to the most skilled. His canoes were characterized by a very elegant sheer and fairly straight rocker, along with fine crooked knife work on the ribs and sheathing. Three men in the settlement who still occasionally build birchbark canoes are John Ratt, his brother, Alec, and Jim Jerome.

Jim Jerome was born in 1918. He had sometimes slept in bark shelters when out on his trapline years ago, an indication of his closeness to the aboriginal mode of existence. He is a short, stocky man who walks slowly because of a slight limp in the right leg. His hair is close-cropped on the side and combed back on the top. He is very solicitous of his visitors' welfare and quick to laugh and make a joke. Angele, his second wife, helps during canoe making. Her job is to prepare and sew the spruce root and to keep the fire stoked and cook the meals.

The place where Jim had his camp was a small point about two kilometers across the lake from the Rapid Lake settlement. In addition to affording ample water to soak parts of the canoe, the point was swept by the wind most of the day and this kept the mosquitoes away. The canoe bed was located under some small birches which provided shade for the building bed. A shelter was often made for canoe building. In Jim's time, it was usually made of upright poles with a gabled roof. Bark sheets covered it, tawny sides down, and small sticks were laid on top to keep the bark down. The roof could be birch bark, spruce bark or cedar bark. Jim said that good bark was white with thin green moss on it. Bark that peeled in August had to be good, he said, otherwise it would not peel. Even before the advent of the chainsaw, the birch tree was cut down to take the bark off the tree for a canoe. In those days, they did it with an axe.

I arrived at the point where Jim was building his canoe when the construction was already in progress. The temporary sheathing was already in place in the bottom of the canoe and Jim was in the process of bending the ribs. His fire was about ten feet from the canoe. He soaked the ribs in an old drain pipe that was closed with a tin can at the bottom. This he filled with water. He stuck one end in a fire of four-foot birch logs he had recently cut near the building site. The other end was wired up on a post he had planted in the ground.

He placed all the ribs across the gunwales first and marked them off three finger lengths in from the gunwale. He bent them two at a time starting from the centre thwart and going toward each bow. He bent the ribs for one half of the canoe before doing the other half of the canoe. Jim put the binder in place and continued to adjust the ribs so that they would be perfectly vertical and placed snugly against the bottom of the canoe. To do this, he would tap the rib a little sideways along the bottom or he would use his hammer to tap the end of the rib down.
There are many constituent parts of a birchbark canoe. Ideally, all should be well-done and someone who has seen many birchbark canoes soon learns to discern whether the wood work has been well-carved with the crooked knife, whether the spruce root has been split and lashed evenly and whether the sheer and rocker lines are fair. But perhaps the most telling thing about the quality of birchbark canoe construction was something I noticed immediately about Jim Jerome’s canoe: when the ribs were bent and held in the canoe by the binder, they were nearly perfect in their bending with no uneven bends and they fit snugly in the bottom of the canoe with only the binder holding them down. It was obvious I was in the presence of a very good canoe maker.

Jim learned birchbark canoe making from his father, John. His uncle, Noel Jerome, and a lot of relatives in Rapid Lake were also birchbark canoe makers. According to Jim, roughly three-fourths of the men in former times were capable of making a birchbark canoe. This seemed a very high ratio of canoe makers to men in the general population compared to other reserves and it is probably due to the fact that it was only a few decades ago that canoes were the only transportation the Rapid Lake Indians had.

Jim first made a birchbark canoe when he was 21 years old. He had also made about a dozen canvas canoes. Interestingly, when the Indians at Rapid Lake first began making canvas canoes in the early part of the 20th century, they continued to carve the cedar members of the canvas canoes with the crooked knife. White builders of the canvas canoe would have sawn these members.

Jim Jerome last used a birchbark canoe to any great extent in the 1940s. When he was a young boy, he put his tarpaulin up in a birchbark canoe sometimes to use as a sail. “It was a lot easier than paddling,” he said. He remembered going as a child of ten, in 1928, with his parents and others in two birchbark canoes to Maniwaki, more than 150 km south by water, to get supplies. In 1959, he and his dog were stuck up in the bush after spring trapping about 30 km from the settlement. He made a birchbark canoe in four days using nails and then paddled home.

Jim put the canoe in the sun early in the morning so that the ribs would dry during the day. Then he began to make the sheathing. He had gotten the cedar for the sheathing on a point of land one km from the village. It was interesting to see that, even though the Algonquin canoes resembled each other closely most of the time, the builders with whom I worked sometimes had different ways of achieving the same result. Jim did the initial splitting of the cedar blank with a birch mallet and two birch wedges and he sometimes used an axe. When the blanks were perhaps 3 cm thick, he did the fine splitting with a strong-bladed knife. As soon as it was begun, he continued it by hand. When the split wanted to run too much
in one direction, he applied pressure in the opposite direction to bring the split back. He worked the split along with his hands all the way to the end of the blank. When he needed a little leverage to work the blank, he used a fork in a tree. When Jim finished splitting the sheathing, he planed the pieces, some by passing the crooked knife over them and some by using a hand plane.

His next step was to remove the ribs from their temporary placement in the canoe. First he marked the outside of the ribs equal to the top of the gunwale. When all the ribs were thus pencil-marked, he removed the binder from the canoe. The ribs were laid aside in two bunches, one for each half of the canoe.

In finishing the bows, Jim used his crooked knife to trim the bark back to the stem-piece so that the two bark sheets would not come together when the bow was sewn and the stem-piece would remain visible. For the other bow, he turned the canoe upside down, as he evidently changed his mind about its being easier to work this way. The lacing was a cross-stitch. Jim began with a length of spruce root about eight feet long.

While Jim was finishing the lacing on the second bow, Angèle started a fire and put a tin of tar on to start melting. She applied tar to the inside of the canoe with a wooden spatula. She spread tar on the gores and then placed a 5 cm strip of canvas over the tar. The birchbark canoe was to be well-sealed from the inside as well as from the outside. Jim said that tar was easier to work with than spruce gum because it stayed soft longer. He had often used gum from the white spruce and the black spruce.

Jim began fitting the sheathing pieces up along the stem-piece in the bow of the canoe. Angèle made a fire and began to bake bannock, as she had forgotten to get bread in the village the night before. When the fire was going well, Jim hung a five-gallon pail of water over it. He would use the water later to apply to the bark cover when inserting the ribs. At the same time, he again propped up the drain pipe that was used in bending the ribs. He took the gunwale caps from the lake and put them both in the pipe. The gunwale caps, about 4.2 m long, extended well out of the 1.8 m pipe and were supported against a branch.

The first rib Jim inserted in the canoe was the one inboard the end thwart. He skipped the rib outboard of the same thwart which he would put in later. He had earlier penciled the outside of all the ribs even with the gunwales. Now with his crooked knife, he beveled the ends of the first rib and inserted it, forcing it in with the hammer. He did not drive it to the vertical but left it slightly short of vertical, waiting until later to drive it home, when he would also be using the hot water to help the bark adjust. Now he did not use hot water.

When all the ribs were partially driven home, he took the big bucket
of hot water from the fire and poured it inside the canoe. He tipped the canoe from side to side, sloshing the hot water around so that it would wet the sheathing and bark beneath it. Then he let the canoe sit for half an hour and began hitting the ribs home to the vertical.

The gunwale caps were still in the steaming tube, although the fire had long since gone out. Angèle was sewing moccasins so I was enlisted to help put on the caps. Jim measured one cap at a time, making sure that it was long enough for the canoe. Then he found the mid-point of the gunwale cap, marked it and centred it in the middle of the lashing at the end of the centre thwart. I held the cap on Jim’s left while he pounded a nail through it and into the gunwale below.

Due to the gunwale line in plan view of the Rapid Lake canoe, the gunwale cap first curved inboard to the end thwart and then outboard to the tip of the bow from the end thwart. It was nailed all along every 30 cm or so. Once in a while, the nail was purposely driven into the spruce root lashing. This did not seem to cause Jim any regret although he generally tried to avoid it. The caps came to a point at the tip of the bow and at the end of the deck piece.

For supper, Angèle fixed us a large fry pan of moose meat. We ate it with bannock, butter and potatoes. A side dish was moose nose. This was scalded in the fire and the charred surface scraped off. It was scalded and scraped again until ready. In as much as I had tried moose nose before, I was quite content to settle with only moose meat.

For the gumming of the outside seams of the canoe, Jim used a tar that was more viscous than the tar he used inside. He said that he wanted the tar soft on the outside. He had most often made a birchbark canoe in the past with spruce gum. In fact, he said, he currently had a lot of white pine trees tapped so as to collect the gum. But he and Angèle had not had time to collect the pine gum so he was using tar. He applied the tar with a wooden spatula he had fashioned with a piece of cedar. He smoothed down the unevenness in the applied tar with a moistened thumb.

Jim was satisfied with the canoe and happy that the bark had been so good. One that he had made last year had bark that was not as good and the canoe had turned out poorly. The one thing he regretted on the project was that the bark had not been wide and had necessitated so much extra work sewing on and gumming the side panels.

REFERENCE
Johnson, Frederick