

Unwittingly, an Indian brave gave to Old Town its reason for being



## MAINE'S CANOE CAPITAL

by EARLE DOUCETTE

ONE SUMMER DAY IN 1880, a Penobscot Indian sat on the shore of the Indian Island Reservation near Old Town, Maine, looking glumly at a jagged hole in his birchbark canoe.

Since the tribe's supply of bark, gathered in the spring, was exhausted, repairs seemed impossible. At that time an Indian without a canoe was like a cowboy without a horse and, to add to his discomfort, his fellow braves had given him the Indian version of the Bronx cheer for his ineptness in striking the rock that had done the damage.

But the redskin was to have the last laugh. For, before the moon rose over his wigwam, he had hit upon a discovery that was to make the canoe popular throughout the world.

Why bother with birchbark anyway, he thought, as he looked at his damaged craft. Why not take a piece of the white man's canvas, daub it with paint to make it waterproof, and make it fast over the hole?

The canvas repair job was not only a big success, but it created a major sensation in the roadless back-country where you traveled

by canoe or not at all. If canvas worked as well as repair material why couldn't it be used as the entire covering of the canoe? Such a craft would not only retain the virtues of the Indian canoe but would be far stronger, more durable, and it would do away with the bother of searching the deep woods for the proper quality of birchbark.

Sensing the commercial possibilities of a canvas-covered canoe, several companies to make them were quickly formed in the United States; and overnight the new craft won phenomenal public acceptance.

Canoe clubs sprang up throughout the country, many of them boasting costly clubhouses. You were in the height of fashion if you had a canoe in which to take your best girl for a Sunday's paddle.

Although none of the manufacturers had any trouble selling canoes, these made at Old Town were vastly preferred since the craft had been developed in that area and it was thought that those made there were superior. "Old Town" and "canoe" soon became synonymous, and today the city of Old Town is the world's canoe-making center.

Only one Old Town firm had the

foresight or the good fortune to call itself the Old Town Canoe Company, and fortified by the magic name, it went quickly to the fore and has stayed there. Although there are possibly 30 makers of canvas-covered canoes, this company reputedly makes more than all the others combined. Indeed, only one other manufacturer has survived in Old Town, the White Canoe Company, makers of an excellent craft that has a faithful following.

THE OLD TOWN CANOE COMPANY is a corporation controlled by the Gray family of Old Town. George A. Gray, one of the founders, was among the first to make a canvas-covered canoe. His son, S. B. Gray, is now president of the company, with his sons S. B., Jr., and Deane as treasurer and sales manager, respectively.

As businessmen, the Grays are totally incomprehensible except to other Down East Yankees. In this age, when it is believed that success depends upon the vociferousness with which you proclaim the virtues of your product, the Grays retain the belief that self-praise is not only indecent, but probably immoral as well.

Under extreme pressure they will break down and admit that their canoe is "pretty good," but it would be unthinkable to make an out-and-out claim that it is better than a rival product. That would be "blowing your own horn."

The company's small advertisements, carried mostly in sporting magazines, are models of self-restraint. Much is said about the joys of canoeing, but the name of the

product is inserted as though it were an inconsequential afterthought.

There is a feeling of mutual pride between the townspeople and the company. Deane Gray explains it this way:

"When people ask the reason for the success of the company, I tell them to give credit to the men in the factory who make our canoes, and to the townspeople for their loyalty to us. They are really the Old Town Canoe Company. Actually, all we Grays do is watch the wheels go 'round."

The last is a magnificent understatement, of course, but it's the way they feel.

This passion for saying nothing praiseworthy about themselves, or bad about anyone else, was sorely tried a few years ago, but the Grays put temptation behind them.

At that time, a newly-developed aluminum canoe caught the public fancy and cut into their business. Instead of springing to the defense of their own product, the Grays said absolutely nothing. Now that they have found that even aluminum crafts don't affect their sales, they continue to say nothing, not even, "We could have told you so."

The Grays are the soul of old-fashioned courtesy and their innate friendliness is evident to even the most casual visitor to their factory. However, they are too sensitive, and too honest, to be back-slapping hail-fellows-well-met.

Visit the firm's rambling five-story factory and you will find that, on the theory that it's best to leave well enough alone, the Grays operate about the same as they did in the beginning. Aside from many

modern conveniences, the impersonal atmosphere of a modern factory is conspicuously missing.

Poke your head in the door of the old-fashioned office, tell one of the six ladies at work there that you want to see one or another of the Grays, and if he isn't on hand she will tell you smilingly that he is probably out in the factory, and go right out and look him up.

This deceptively casual way of doing business is reflected in the attitude of the 200 or so workers, of whom about a fifth are from the nearby Indian Island Reservation. No one hurries, no one looks harried. All hands go about their work with the quiet absorption of the craftsmen they are. An agent who wanted to sell group insurance for the employees was amazed to find the average age so great.

Recently, George Ranco, an elderly Indian, decided reluctantly to lay aside his tools after 37 years, because he wanted to live with a daughter who had moved from town.

"I am afraid we all got a little bit sentimental at the parting, for George was a fine gentleman and the place doesn't seem quite the same since he left," Deane Gray says.

To date, the company has made over 150,000 canoes. Prices have increased with the years, of course, but not as much as one would think. Their 16-foot Yankee model, standard of comparison in the trade, sells for \$189, F.O.B.

In recent years, the Grays have gone into the manufacture of almost all types of boats from dinghys to expensive outboard motor boats, but the canvas-covered canoe remains their pride and joy.



A peculiarity of Old Town canoe buyers is a deep conviction that the Grays take a personal interest in every canoe they make. This belief comes close to hitting the mark, as they are ardent canoeists themselves and enjoy swapping experiences with others.

Few would think of writing to the president of an automobile company commenting on his car, but it is a poor day when a stack of mail isn't forthcoming from Old Town owners scattered over the face of the earth. They write to tell of their adventures and experiences, as well as to express satisfaction.

Each letter is answered with genuine interest by a member of the family, for to delegate the task to someone else would be a serious breach of Down East courtesy.

Their prize letter is from a lady who wrote that she and her husband had spent happy days in a second-hand Old Town canoe. When their second child was born they were hard pressed for money and had to give the canoe to the doctor for his services, but when they were on their feet again financially, their first act was to regain possession of the prized craft.

Although the paddle has been the time-honored method of propelling a canoe, both sail and outboard motor are now available and canoeing has experienced a great

revival of interest all over the country.

In the Midwest, canoe marathons in which the nation's leading canoeists compete are leading summer events. Down rivers and across lakes, the contestants make astonishing time. For three consecutive years, Jay Stephan of Grayling, Michigan, and Ted Engel of Gaylord, Michigan, have won that state's marathon championship. They hold the record for the 240 mile course: 17 hours and 27 minutes.

Tourist agencies in the northern belt of states and in Canada are besieged each year by persons who want to enjoy canoe vacations.

One of the most famous canoe tours is Maine's Allagash River trip, a three weeks outing through the forests of northern Maine. Unless you feel like it, you don't have

to lift a paddle on this and other well-known trips. The guides do the paddling, cooking, and tent-pitching for the overnight stops; and you get about as far away from civilization as is possible these days.

The amateur canoeist is advised not to attempt the Allagash or similar trips without a guide who is also a professional canoe man. State tourist agencies at the various state capitals are glad to send booklets describing the various canoe trips within their states, including those safe for the amateur to take alone. The Canadian Tourist Bureau, at Ottawa, performs the same services.

Forest areas where roads are few and waterways numerous offer perfect summer playgrounds for woods-and-water enthusiasts who consider the canoe the ideal means of vacation transportation.



### Small Talk

THREE BRIGHT little lads entered a New York museum and made for the Egyptian exhibits where they told the attendant they had come to see "the dead men." He directed them to the mummies and they viewed them solemnly for about 15 minutes.

Leaving, one of the youngsters approached the attendant and asked, "You kill them and stuff them yourself?"

—Woodmen of the World Magazine

MY NINE-YEAR-OLD violinist was taken to her first symphony concert. Asked what she liked best, she replied without hesitation: "The harpoonist."

—HENRY W. PLATT

A LITTLE GIRL in Salt Lake City once asked a visitor where he came from.

"Boston," said the man. "Do you know about Boston?"

"Yes, indeed," the Mormon child answered. "We have a number of missionaries there." —Fortnight

A FIVE-YEAR-OLD girl, visiting a neighbor, was asked how many children there were in her family. "Seven," she answered.

The neighbor observed that so many children must cost a lot of money.

"Oh, no," the child replied, "we don't buy them—we raise them."

—Copper's Weekly