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# Survivors

by Atwood Manley

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A century after Rushton began building canoes, many still ply Adirondack waters

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**W**ith all the excitement focussed on the Winter Olympics at Lake Placid, little wonder that scant attention has been directed toward another historically significant event on the Adirondack calendar for 1980. Devoid of all of the fanfare and glitter of the Winter Olympics, the centennial of the founding of the American Canoe Association will be celebrated on Lake George from July 29 to August 2. It will then be just 100 years ago that "twenty-three extraordinary men" met, in response to Nathaniel Bishop's home-printed "First Call," at Crosbyside on Lake George early in August, 1880 to organize and hold races.

Today the ACA is still lusty, still active, and now both nationally and internationally recognized as the official representative of canoeists in summer Olympic competition.

Several generations of ACA members have passed from life's scene during the past century, so one might well assume that the all-wooden type of

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canoes paddled and sailed during those first encampments would have fared no better. Such, however—and luckily so—is not the case. At least one known canoe such as was then used remains, and one other survivor is the identical boat entered in one of the races held at the third (1882) ACA encampment, also at Lake George. This article is the story of how these and several other Rushton canoes have come out of the mists of history, some preserved in museums, others still doing yeoman duty on Adirondack waters and elsewhere. These survivors, approximately 100 in number, came to my notice as I was preparing *Rushton and His Times in American Canoeing* and in the correspondence and direct contacts that have followed its publication in 1968.

Beauty and utility figure in this record of survival to strengthen the case of modern advocates of wooden-boat construction. Today hobbyists and even commercial boat-builders are reviving the methods and materials of the old lapstrakes and smoothskin plank cedars of early ACA days.

Included in that group of enthusiasts at Crosbyside in 1880 was the tiny but irrepressible and aggressive boat

builder, J. Henry Rushton (1843-1906) of Canton, New York. He was already well known among canoeists, largely because of the attention Charles Hallock's *Forest and Stream* had been devoting to him. He had brought along one of his already famous Rob Roy canoes. He persuaded Commodore-elect William Alden to rechristen it the "American Traveling Canoe" and then to offer it as the prize to the winner of the free-for-all canoe race at that first, charter meet.

An early model Rob Roy/American Traveling Canoe referred to is the property of William H. Richardson, Jr., an industrialist of Sheboygan Falls, Wisconsin. In 1972 Bill Richardson's restored 22-foot launch, OLIAETTA, had won "Best Boat of the Show" honors at the Antique Boat Show held annually by the Thousand Islands Museum at Clayton, New York. Bill was back for the 1973 show. On the afternoon of the opening day he located me far out on the Municipal Pier where I was watching the St. Lawrence skiff sailing duel between the Herrick and Dodge family competitors. Tapping me on the shoulder, Bill said, "Have you seen the little old



Mason Smith

OLD JOE, a Princess sailing canoe owned by David Wells of Massena, is a much-admired fixture along the St. Lawrence.

Rushton canoe for sale up on the grass opposite the Shipyard Museum?" That is where my unbelieving eyes made a survey of the KEEGO. The outer hull varnish was frosty-gray with age. Richardson purchased KEEGO from a guide who gave his address as Rainbow Lake in the Adirondacks. The seller stated that 35 years previously his father purchased a home in Saranac Lake village and had found KEEGO in the attic. Further confirmation is lacking.

Another model which grew out of the early ACA encampments on Lake George was a Princess model canoe. In 1880 or 1881 the original Princess, designed by Judge Nicholas Longworth of the Cincinnati Canoe Club and built by other members, was shipped to Rushton, selected as builder for that club, to serve as a model for redesigning and refinements. Introduced in Rushton's catalogue for 1882, it quickly became one of the most popular models offered by the Boat Shop in Canton.

It has been my good luck to inspect

two surviving Princess models, one of them dating to 1882. This is the DIANA, which placed in one of the series of sailing races the ACA held in 1882 at Lake George. Through an obituary notice in the *New York Times* in 1964, I made contact with Lucien Wulsin, III, president of the D. C. Balwin Co. in Cincinnati. Family records showed that Rushton built the DIANA for Lucien Wulsin, I, a charter member of the ACA. This canoe had been preserved and was then at the Wulsin summer home on eastern Lake Superior. When informed of the historic significance of this boat, the Wulsin family offered it for permanent display at the Adirondack Museum. It is there now, preserved in its original condition.

OLD JOE, the other Princess, was entered in competition at the annual Thousand Islands Museum Antique Boat Show in 1970. Rushton built OLD JOE for his former employer and life-long friend, Joseph Barnes Ellsworth, Canton shoe merchant. Joe's son J. Stanley sold it in 1928 to Lott H. Wells of Canton, now a retired surrogate judge; it is now the property of the judge's grandson, David Wells.

OLD JOE has a long history of use as a

sailing canoe on the St. Lawrence and other local waters. Damaged on two or three occasions, it has required considerable restoration over the years. Yet when Nat Wells, David's father, sailed the craft up to the dock in Clayton in 1973, where I happened to be one of the three judges of the Antique Boat Show along with Howard Chapelle of the Smithsonian and John Gardner, technical editor of the *National Fisherman* and a curator at the Mystic Seaport Museum, we were unanimous in awarding "Best Boat of the Show" honors to OLD JOE. During the last two years the Rushton Princess type of sailing canoe has been revived and is being offered as one of the products of a boat builder on the West Coast.

By the time of the ACA meet in 1880, Rushton had already shipped to George Washington Sears the WOOD DRAKE OR NESSMUK NO. 1, the first of five featherweights he was to turn out for the little cobbler from Wellsboro, Pennsylvania, best known by his pseudonym "Nessmuk" in *Forest and Stream*. The first three were used on Nessmuk's Adirondack cruises of 1880, 1881, and 1883. The last of them, the



Photographs from Atwood Manley Collection

celebrated SAIRY GAMP, weighing just 10½ pounds, has survived to make its devious way into the Adirondack Museum. The late Dan Brenan is responsible for bringing this little canoe to light, just as he and his lifelong canoeing companion the late A. Fred Saunders, ex-Commodore of the ACA, persuaded me to write the Rushton book.

While preparing his *Adirondack Letters of George Washington Sears, Whose Pen Name was Nessmuk* (1962), Brenan traced the SAIRY GAMP from the *Forest and Stream* office, where it was on display for several months, through exhibits in New Orleans in 1884 and in Chicago at the Columbian Exposition of 1893, to a neglected resting place in the Smithsonian Institution. Brenan imparted this information and thus this historic craft was placed on permanent loan from the Smithsonian to the Adirondack Museum. It now occupies a place of honor in the Callahan Memorial Boat Building there, along with other Rushton craft.

Nessmuk named the SAIRY GAMP for the tipling nurse ("Sairey" in the original) in Dickens' *Martin Chuzzlewit*, who "never took water." And so she didn't (except once) on her Adirondack cruise by paddle and carry,

118 miles outward and 148 on the return. Nessmuk wrote to her maker: "She has astonished me; she will be more of a surprise to you . . . Remember you said you would not warrant her for an hour; she may go to pieces like an eggshell.' That's what you said; she don't go to pieces worth a cent . . . [She is] as tight and staunch as the day I took her at Boonville . . . I once said in *Forest and Stream* I was trying to find out how light a canoe it took to drown a man. I never shall know. The SAIRY GAMP has only ducked me once in a six weeks' cruise, and that by my own carelessness.

In 1881 Rushton began offering featherweight models, collectively known as Nessmuks, in his annual catalogues, and they continued to be produced until the final closing of his shop in 1916. One survivor, the WEE LASSIE, apparently based on the second craft Rushton made for Nessmuk, the SUSAN NIPPER, was purchased about 1893 by William West Durant. It came into the possession of Harold K. Hochschild, who presented it to the Adirondack Museum, where it is now on display. Another of the WEE LASSIE type is being presented to St. Lawrence University by the George K. Russells of Ithaca, along with an Indian Girl model.

At the 1882 meeting of the ACA, J. Henry Rushton modestly took a place at the extreme right, front row. Above right, author Manley in his VAYU; below, Nessmuk's SAIRY GAMP, now at the Adirondack Museum.

Four generations of the Charles E. Larkin family of Buffalo have used two Nessmuks purchased from the Rushton Boat Shop about 1910. Lashed atop the family car, these featherweights have traveled far and wide, have been paddled on countless streams, ponds and lakes, and are still tight and sound. Charles Larkin writes: "Wherever we stop a crowd soon collects, plaguing us with many questions, looking with awe at our two eggshells."

The CHEEMAUN, built by Rushton in 1889, now hangs on display in the Augsburg Physical Education Building at St. Lawrence University. In ordering it, Ledyard Hale and Frank Nash Cleaveland of Canton specified that a strip of linen soaked in white lead be placed between each joint of the side planks or strakes. This canoe is a smoothskin, a type Rushton began to offer in his catalogue of 1887. The CHEEMAUN remained in Canton till 1940 and thereafter was used in waters of Maryland and Virginia by Dr. and Mrs. Salisbury during their later years.



Dorothy Cleaveland Salisbury, daughter of one of the original owners, bequeathed it to St. Lawrence. It is in prime condition, sound and apparently watertight.

A 10½-foot sailing canoe, with the Rushton nameplate intact, was discovered by the Tim Eastlands while dining at a Connecticut restaurant. When asked what he proposed to do with it, the proprietor said: "Put four legs under it, tin the inside, and convert it to a clam bar." The Eastlands protested, bought the canoe, and transported their prize to show it at Blue Mountain Lake, Clayton, and finally to me on my lawn. It was fully equipped with two masts, sails, a double-bladed paddle, a Radix centerboard, and a wooden Rushton rudder.

In response to an article of mine on Rushton, Woodward Burkhart of Baltimore wrote in 1959 to report that his family had two all-cedar canoes of the Indian model, which Rushton developed near the end of the 19th century and called in a catalogue state-

ment "the finest model canoe ever built." SHAWANDASEE I was purchased about 1900 by Woody's father from a Baltimore drugstore clerk for \$20. In it Woody and his paddling companion Winter Myers cruised Chesapeake Bay. Myers married Woody's sister. One summer while vacationing on Lake Hopatcong in northern New Jersey, the two couples discovered a canoe of identical model buried deep in the mud of a remote cove. Except for a hole about three inches in diameter, it was in excellent condition. They salvaged it, repaired it, and have since used SHAWANDASEE II along with its twin.

Five other all-cedar Indians have since come to my notice. I located two in excellent condition and still in use one August afternoon in 1965 while cruising along the shores of Upper St. Regis Lake with Paul Jamieson, my associate in writing the Rushton book. Some of the forty-odd camps around the lake have been in the same families since 1890 or earlier, and the boat-houses are veritable museums of water-

craft. In one which we were invited to inspect at close hand, we discovered two freshly varnished, all-cedar Indians with the Rushton imprint on them.

The all-cedar Indian model is predecessor to the Indian Girl canvas-covered canoes which the Boat Shop began to turn out in 1902. The beauty of these wood-and-canvas craft and the lower price (they required less labor in fitting joints) made them very popular during the rest of Rushton's life and in the last decade of the Boat Shop. Survivors, repainted and often resheathed, are numerous. Now and then they can be seen today on Adirondack lakes and elsewhere.

In the 1978 Thousand Islands Antique Boat Show the Gilbert Slaters of Cranberry Lake took first with a beautiful refinished Indian Girl canoe with the imprint on the rear thwart reading:

*Patented  
Indian Girl Canoe  
J. H. Rushton  
Canton, N. Y.*

The Shipyard Museum in Clayton, among several other Rushton craft, has an Indian Girl in its original canvas, painted green. I was instrumental in procuring it for the museum from its owner, Charles Sayles of Star Lake. It had been stored for many years under the family cottage porch. The metal plate on the prow deck had been painted over. Scraping away the paint, I read "J. H. Rushton, Maker, Canton, N. Y."

Besides the exhibits of Rushton boats at the Shipyard Museum in Clayton and the Adirondack Museum at Blue Mountain Lake, the Mystic Seaport Museum has a Rushton sailing canoe of the Vesper model which was refinished for display in the early 1970s. I know of at least three more.

Individuals as well as museums have become collectors. The late Lloyd Blankman of Clinton, N.Y., owned several Rushton canoes which came from a guide's boathouse on Beaver Lake. His brother, Edward Blankman of Canton, retired professor at St. Lawrence University, now university historian and archivist, and frequent contributor to ADIRONDACK LIFE, has owned four Rushtons: an Indian Girl canvas-covered canoe, later sold; a Saranac Laker guideboat; a smoothskin open Canadian-type canoe "Punkie" purchased from his

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## Survivors

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brother Lloyd; and a trim little St. Lawrence sailing skiff which came from a boathouse loft near Clayton. (Although canoes were the mainstay of the Boat Shop, Rushton also designed and built rowboats, sailboats, and even motorboats.) Ed Blankman now uses his three remaining Rushtons at his camp on the Raquette River.

Aside from the museums, probably the finest grouping of surviving Rushtons

is found on Bisby Lake of the Adirondack League Club in the southern tier of the Adirondacks. Mary Call and her husband, Dean David Call, of the College of Agriculture and Life Science at Cornell University, have two, an Arkansas Traveler and a Saranac Laker guideboat. They report seven other Rushtons owned on that one lake, one a beautiful old Princess sailing canoe. Eight of the

nine are still in service.

The craft mentioned in this article are in the minority of the approximately one hundred Rushtons reported to the author since this research began in 1957.

Today Rushton canoes are not simply museum pieces and collector's items. Many are in actual use. In the Georgian Bay area of Ontario, Robert Strachan did not realize till about 1975 that the cedar canoe he had paddled for many years was a collector's item. The plate with the Rushton trademark on it meant nothing to him until, browsing through some back issues of the *National Fisherman*, he noticed John

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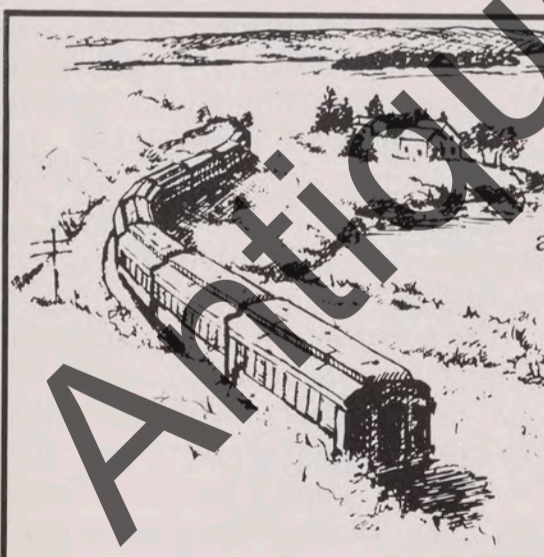
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Gardner's 1968 illustrated review of *Rushton and His Times*. Since buying the craft from a young man in Toronto, he has paddled it hundreds of miles on Ontario waters.

Of the two Rushtons I have owned, one, an Arkansas Traveler, is now on display at the Adirondack Museum; the other, which I still own and use, is the VAYU, purchased from Lloyd Blankman. It is a Canadian-style cedar smoothskin of Rushton's Ugo model, 15 feet long and 30 inches in beam. It has proved itself on many an Adirondack stream and lake, most notably one gusty day in late Septem-

ber 1968, two months after the Rushton book was published. My companion was Anne Knauerhase, an editor of the Syracuse University Press at the time, who had given the manuscript its final reading. Anne wanted to visit the Adirondack Museum and then cruise on the lake in a genuine Rushton canoe. She had taught canoeing several summers at Girl Scout camps.

A stiff wind was blowing as we put in at Steamboat Landing and paddled the two miles into the narrow channel between Blue Mountain Lake and Eagle Lake. The farther we paddled, the tougher the going became. The

wind was rising; waves were pounding the two rocky points we passed on the outgoing trip.

On our return from Eagle Lake, one quick look and I said: "Anne, we don't dare paddle close to shore. We'd probably be smashed against one of those rocky points. Our best bet is to strike out into the lake as far as we dare and with a following wind head straight for Steamboat Landing." Soon the full force of the gale hit us. High waves crested around us, often with the unpatterned turbulence of a mountain lake. The stern of the VAYU sank beneath me and the prow where Anne sat, braced and paddling like a demon, reared to the crest of the wave ahead. If we should swamp, no other boat was out in that gale to give help. The cherry gunwales of the Ugo model flare out beyond the hull a full inch amidship but taper to not much more than a quarter inch at the stern. Keeping a weather eye astern, I watched the big combers race up on us. That small rear gunwale checked the wave and rode it upward, lifting the stern with the upsurge as the prow dipped into the trough ahead. As we became accustomed to this gentle rocking-horse motion, our confidence grew.

The wind forced us to the right of the long wharf at Steamboat Landing. Since it would be a long carry from there to the car, I suggested to Anne that we put back into the lake far enough to clear the end of the wharf and come in on the left side. If we should flip on coming about, we could easily swim the short distance. The critical moment came when I backwatered to bring the VAYU about. The little cedar hull spun around like a top, and we made it to the beach without shipping more than a cup of water. Once again the VAYU had proved its buoyancy, maneuverability, and seaworthiness.

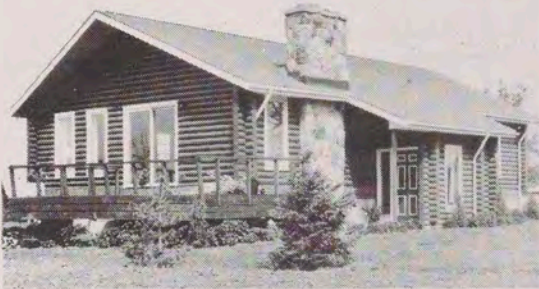
The VAYU is not the Stradivarius among surviving Rushton canoes, but it is typical of the skilled designing and the honest, expert craftsmanship that went into the construction of all Rushton boats. No wonder so many owners, from Maine to Seattle, from Palm Beach to Georgian Bay, have preserved their Rushton canoes with loving care and signified their pride in them by long-distance calls, mail, and displays in person, one and all apparently agreeing with Nessmuk that, "Rushton builded better than he knew." □

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