

Canoe Paddles - Why Wood?

A Family Tradition . . .

I think it is most interesting that many of our Nahanni friends began their canoeing adventures at a time when wooden paddles and cedar canvas canoes were still the norm. The sounds, smell and look of these materials melded well with the lakes and rivers we explored with them in hand.

While in my early teens, my eldest sister used me as her bowman on rivers flowing into the east shore of Georgian Bay in Ontario. The summer I was 15, she advanced my role as her understudy by taking me out for 28 days on a trip from Honey Harbour to just east of Sault Ste. Marie. Prior to the trip, I hand-sanded and varnished a couple of our family's wooden canoe paddles. These became well-worn traveling companions on the long trip that followed. This trip perked my own enthusiasm for canoe tripping. Out of necessity I began - by trial and error - to teach myself the trade of making wooden canoe paddles. My favorite design for the tripping I was doing at the time was one that I had received from Omer Stringer at a CRCA instructor's course in 1978 . . . a paddle much like the 'Sagamore' which can be found in the Traditional Section of Grey Owl Paddle Ltd.'s website, www.greyowlpaddles.com . (Omer Stringer is a legendary canoe guide who was born on the shores of Canoe Lake in Algonquin Park. Active well into his later years, Omer blessed a number of us young "trippers" with his lifelong and proven canoeing methods.)

In the 30 odd years that have passed since, I began my own love affair with wooden paddles. Much has changed in the materials used to build both canoes and paddles. Fortunately purists have kept the wood tradition alive and wood canvas canoes are still available in specialty shops. The rigors of an outfitting program in the North has taken us to the ABS Royalex canoes made from molds of the same shape as the old timers did. The Esquif 'Prospecteur' is one example where the lines have been preserved.

In terms of paddles, most paddling shops have a reasonable supply to choose from; however, it has been my observation that most outfitters have neglected to provide these. Surprisingly, it took my then nine-year-old son Luke to bring this to my attention! Several springs ago, he and I set out on a long-weekend canoe trip through the Badlands of Alberta's Red Deer River. In packing, I grabbed a number of plastic, aluminum and wood canoe paddles out of the shop with a plan to size Luke with one once we arrived at the put-in. At the river an old wooden paddle was Luke's first and only choice. He said he, "liked how it felt in his hands and how it moved in and out of the water." Interestingly enough, the paddle had come from an ash beam in my father-in law's dairy barn in the spring of 1980! My wife Wendy had used the same paddle on our honeymoon canoe trip in Newfoundland, and it had been in and out of the hands of family members ever since.

As Luke showed more and more satisfaction for his new-paddle, it dawned on me that most of the canoe guides and instructors I knew used wooden paddles. Why then, I had to ask myself, has the industry standard for the past 20 or more years for our guests been the cold aluminum and black plastic paddles made by Mohawk?

People come from around the world to experience Canada's North from a romantic canoe and we have been giving them a clumsy paddle to use. We are always looking for ways to increase the quality of our trips, so for many years we have made our mark by offering you a warm and personable wooden paddle to use on your trip. Our guides and I believe a wooden paddle will add meaning to your trip with us and help bring back your early days of canoeing. As for Luke, now in his fourth year of guiding on the Nahanni, his paddle of choice is a Grey Owl Marathon bent shaft.