

# Canoeing Milestones: Rio de Janeiro, August 2016

By: Brian Burton

In August this summer when flat water canoe racers from around the world hear the call to put their “Paddles Up” it will mark the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the introduction of flat water canoe sprint racing as an official sport to the Olympic Games. [The event became a full medal sport at the 1936 Berlin Games.]

Such is their canoeing racing skill that in the time it takes you to read the first few paragraphs of this article one paddler of a modern “state-of-the-art” flatwater single blade racing shell will cover the 200 m required to win the gold medal in approximately 43 seconds!

The winning time in the premier event; men’s 1000 m canoe singles will likely take less than 3 minutes and 50 seconds. [In fact in the time it takes you to read the entire article a 2-man tandem racing boat can traverse about 10 km!]

## Canada Introduced Sprint Canoe Racing to the Olympics

Canada introduced to sport of sprint canoe racing at the 1924 Paris games as a demonstration sport. (The 24 games are remembered chiefly because of Johnny Weissmuller’s 3 gold medals in swimming and Paavo Nurmi’s victories in the 1500, 5,000 and the cross country running races. Better known today as the “Flying Finn.”)

Francis [Frank] Amyot\* of Canada won the 1st first gold medal in sprint canoe racing in a time of 5 minutes and 32.1 seconds at the Berlin Olympics in 1936 when the sport actually became a full medal event.

*(\*Francis Amyot:(1904 -1962) a distinguished member of Canada’s Sports Hall of Fame, paddled for the Rideau Aquatic Club and the Britannia Boating Club. At 6 ft. 2 inches (188 cm) in height and weighing 185 lbs. (84 kg) he needed a custom-made racing shell and paddle to accommodate his remarkably long, powerful stroke. Amyot also won 6 Canadian national senior single-blade championships between 1924 and 1935 and served in the Royal Canadian Navy during WWII and later founded the Rideau Canoe Club in Ottawa.)*

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Modern canoe racers, skimming across the water at a remarkable velocity, likely represent a modern variant or adaptation if you will of Canada’s infamous merchant voyageurs - paddling 18 hours a day with a smiles on their faces. [These quixotic nomads of Canadian wilderness fearlessly guided the huge freighter canoes across thousands of miles of lakes and rivers when the fur trade was one of Canada’s most demanding and lucrative undertakings.]

Watch at [www.nfb.ca/film/voyageurs](http://www.nfb.ca/film/voyageurs)

## Vagabond Gypsy Troubadour - With a Paddle in his Hand.

Traversing Canada by canoe took its deadly toll on a regular and savage basis. The raging rivers cared little whether you were landed gentry or a hired slave euphemistically termed

“Voyageur.”

*“I have been a canoe man with 41 years in service and no portage was ever too long for me, 50 songs could I sing and have had 12 wives and 6 running dogs. I spent all of my money in pleasure and were I young again, I would spend my life the same way over. There is no life so happy as a voyageur's life!”*

When a voyageur lost his life on the “white water wilderness trail” his canoeing companions erected a plain simple wooden cross over his final resting place - it’s unlikely his name mattered to the fur trading companies who hired him. At Canadian portages sites and rapids across the nation - there are hundreds, some say thousands of wooden crosses.

A voyageur\* was a special breed of men is little more than a very strong and exceedingly nimble vagabond gypsy - with a paddle in his hand. Bohemians of the wilderness.

*(\*The best-known where the Québec Voyagers, French for traveler, who were hired by the North West Company - or its rival the Hudson’s Bay Company, in Québec both of which relentlessly sought to meet the demand for furs in Europe and desperately needed transportation to the source of the furs - and back again demand for furs in Europe)*

## **Paddling 48 Hours Without a Break**

The paddling feats and achievements of a typical French-Canadian canoeing voyageur were so vigorous that he probably retired by the age of 40. [In some respects they were much like modern-day professional athletes in that after 40 - it was time to “Hang up your Spurs”, so to speak. [If you don’t - management will hang them up for you!]

<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/voyageur/>

In some cases, there are descriptions of French-Canadian Voyageurs paddling for 48 hours without a break, simply to race another voyageur crew. On a typical day of up to 18 hours of paddling voyageurs could, on flat water, cover more than 60 miles a day! [Consider for a moment that this kind of effort requires about 7 to 9 pounds of protein – approximately 7000 calories per day.]

In fact, Archibald McDonald reported in 1826 that on a 3,181 mile trip from York Factory on Hudson Bay to Fort Langley BC, covered in 65 days, averaging 50 miles a day their daily food ration as 10 pounds of salmon and 3 pounds of pemmican, which is something like 7000 calories per day! <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/pemmican/>

The voyageurs diet was supplemented by just about anything they could hunt, find or gather and that included bears, moose, deer, beaver, ducks, turtles, duck and turtle eggs - and anything else they could manage to gather, catch, shoot or trap - when they weren’t busy paddling. By the way, voyageurs slept under their canoes with one blanket. Europeans described them as being immune to insect bites, cold, rain - and just about anything else nature or man could throw at them\*. *(\*A well-trained group recently tried to retrace some of their canoeing feats and gave up entirely after just 2 weeks!)*

## Orkney Canoe Man

The Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) had 2 main classes of employees: officers (management, in modern terms) and servants. One of the most important groups of HBC servants, besides the invaluable French-Canadian Voyagers, were the Orkney canoe men recruited from the Orkney Islands north of Scotland where life was tough and cold, and the Orkneymen proved themselves more suited to the conditions in Rupert's Land than Londoners.

Orkneymen were considered more sensible than the rash and indolent French Canadians and less likely to smuggle from the "Company". They were recruited for a 5 - year term of service and were given no living expenses whatsoever during that period. [More often than not he returned home with nothing more than the shirt on his back and empty pockets!]

"French-Canadian Canoeing Voyageurs possess lively and finicky dispositions, however they are rarely subject to depression of spirits, for long that is, for when circumstances are the most adverse they're full of gaiety and cheerfulness. They consider good eating and drinking the best time - however when necessity compels them to it, they submit to great privation and hardship, not only without complaining - but even with a smile on their face."

The British also noted that they seemed to be thoughtless, so to speak, and they made many resolutions, which were broken as soon as they were formed. "They never think of providing for the future and although they are exceedingly polite and may flatter a person to his face; they will, without hesitation, slander him behind his back. They cannot keep a secret and they rarely feel gratitude although they are often generous. They are being not faithful servants as a rule, but by flattering their vanity, of which they have a great deal, they can be persuaded to undertake the most difficult of enterprises!"

## Canada's Outstanding Flatwater Single Blade Paddlers

**Francis [Frank] Amyot\***, winner of Canada's first gold medal in canoeing at the Berlin Olympics in 1936 won the C-1 Canadian Championship in 1924, 1927, 1928, 1932, 1933, and 1935. Frank also placed second in 1925, 1926, and 1929. Frank is a member of the Canadian sports Hall of Fame and is also well known for rescuing three Ottawa Roughriders football player single-handedly from drowning.

*[\*Francis Amyot, [Frank], paddler (born at Toronto, Ont 14 Sept 1904; died at Ottawa 21 Nov 1962). His father, Dr John A. Amyot, was federal Deputy Minister of Health. Amyot canoed at the Rideau Aquatic Club and the Britannia Boating Club in Ottawa. A large man at 188 cm and 84 kg, he required a custom-made racing shell and paddle to accommodate his long, powerful body stroke. Frank Amyot won 6 national senior single-blade singles championships between 1924 and 1935. In 1936 he served as coach, manager and a member of the first Canadian Olympic canoeing team and at Berlin and won a gold medal in the 1000 m race. He served in the RCN during WWII and later was an organizer of the Rideau Canoe Club. NOTE: Before the time when "Canadian Canoe Racing" was introduced to international waters **Alistair Mackenzie** of Toronto Canoe*

*Club won 4 consecutive C-1 events between 1910 and 1914 at the Canadian canoeing championships]*

**Donald Stringer**, [1934 – 1979] from the Sudbury Canoe Club in Northern Ontario won the event in 1952, 1953, 1954, and 1955 when he broke the four-minute barrier finishing with an all-time best time of 3 min. and 53.8 seconds. Don also came second in 1958 and third in 1959. Stringer also won the North American Canoe Racing C-1 championship in 1953, 1954, 1955 and 1956.

Another powerhouse paddler of the 1950s was **George Bossy** of Cartierville Boating Club who won the event in 1956, 57, 58 and 1959. In the 60s the winning tradition of Cartierville Boating Club was carried on by Paul Stahl who won the event in 1961, 63, and 64.

Later in that decade a well-known paddler from Banook Canoe Club by the name of **Chris Hook** won the event 4 years running in 1967, 68, 69 and 1970.

**Dean Oldershaw** beat Hook in 1966 with a time of 4 min. and 34 seconds while Scott Lee came second to Chris in 1969 and 1970

In the 70s Ontario had a strong showing with 2 wins by **Scott Lee** of Mississauga Canoe Club.

Scott's wins were followed by 4 consecutive wins by **John Wood\*** [1950 – 2013] in 1973, 74, 75 and again in 1976 paddling for Mississauga Canoe Club.

In 1976 in Montreal John Wood won silver in the men's 500 m C-1 finishing second by 30/100th of a second.] <http://john-wood-olympian.blogspot.ca/p/olympic-silver-medalist-and-museum.html>

**Jeremy Abbott** won 2 in a row in 1978 and 1979 followed by Larry Cain of the Oakville Racing Canoe Club with winning performances in 1980, 81, 82, 83, and 1984.

## **Canada's Leading War Canoe Coxswains**

According to the record books Jim Mossman of Balmy Beach Canoe Club almost certainly lays claim to the best War Canoe Captain or Coxswain. These huge canoes which holds a total of 15 paddlers, including the Coxswain can typically keep obtain speeds of well over 20 km an hour. Mossman won the Open Mens War Canoe – C 15 at the Canadian Championships in 1947, 48, 49, 1950, 1951, 1954, 55, 56, 57 and managed to come second in 1952, 53 and 1959 and 1960. Mossman also won the senior men's war canoe race in 1949, 50, 54, 55, 56 and 1957. In that same event Mossman came second in 1959,60, 62 and 1963. He was third in 1965 and 1966.

He undoubtedly learned the craft well because paddling at Balmy Beach Canoe Club he was out on Lake Ontario where the waters are typically rough and windy. Of course he also had to compete against William [Bill] Collins and Bert Oldershaw just about every week when there was a canoe club on Toronto Island.

## **New Home for the Canadian Canoe Museum**

Canoeing aficionados will also be pleased with the recent announcement by Parks Canada

regarding a new \$45-million design for the Canadian Canoe Museum which will be located at the site of the 1904 Peterborough Lift Lock - a National Canadian Historic Site.

<http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/index.aspx>

The Agency, which has been preserving Canadian “paddling paradises” for well over 100 years has made it possible for both Canadians and visitors to Canada to view the countries iconic canoeing heritage at its finest. The splendid new complex will be located on Ontario’s Trent-Severn Waterway. Parks Canada, the Canadian Canoe Museum and the City of Peterborough are moving forward with the 1<sup>st</sup> steps towards the construction of this new home for the unique Museum which is expected to be ready in 2021.