

Our War Canoe... Where Did It Come From?

By: C. Fred Johnston

printed 2003 in the National Championships Program - Welland

The First War Canoe

It was in 1889, during the term of office of American Canoe Association Commodore, Lieut.-Col. Henry Cassady Rogers of Peterborough that what was to become the "racing war canoe" was introduced to the canoeing fraternity at the annual meet held at Stave Island in the St. Lawrence River. In that year the clubs in Canada, that collectively formed the Northern Division of the A.C.A., were responsible for selecting the site and the planning and organising of the annual meet. They went out of their way to make sure the meet of '89 would be memorable.

Memorable about Stave Island was the appearance of a large open canoe, inappropriately referred to as a "war canoe" because of its size, brought to camp by D. B. Jacques and a band of fourteen Toronto Canoe Club mates who had pooled their funds to purchase the canoe from the Ontario Canoe Company of Peterborough. Twenty-two inches deep and 50 inches wide at mid point, the mammoth 30-foot canoe had eight spreaders (thwarts) for the paddlers to sit on, two to a seat. It was named the **Unk-ta-hee**, in the language of the Ojibwa, "Lord of the Waters."



Against the deep blue St. Lawrence River water and the forest green backdrop of the surrounding islands, the huge crimson canoe propelled by 17 paddlers in whimsical, white, paper "soldier hats" made for a dramatic, if not humorous sight that caught the attention and imagination of meet participants from both Canada and the United States.

Bowyer Vaux, canoeist and historian, writing for *Outgoing Magazine* forecast a prominent role at the annual meet for what he called the big "club canoe"; he envisaged such canoes being used for "a long cruise," "a war canoe race," a "giant tug-of-war," and best of all "paddling with the fair sex as passenger and crew." Steeped in the lore of canoeing, Vaux predicted what habitually happens when some pursuit is confronted by some new idea.

The new idea will be carried to an extreme at once - that is the way with all new canoe ideas - and boats thirty-five or even forty feet long will be built. Then the practical side will assert itself, and the club canoes of the future will be boats about twenty or twenty-five feet long, in which eight or ten men can disport themselves with comfort and pleasure.

By the spring of 1890, rumours abounded of clubs on both sides of the border that had ordered a big club canoe.

Before Creation, There Was The Idea

Sail and Paddle Magazine of March 1891 carried an article entitled, *The Big Canoe Idea*, which explored the origins of the canoe that appeared at Stave Island the summer of '89. The article drew attention to a gigantic 60 foot, Haida dugout from the west coast of British Columbia, exhibited for many years at the American Museum of Natural History, New York City. A drawing of that "war canoe" was incorporated into a colorful menu designed by W.A. Rogers for the annual dinner of the New York Canoe Club in 1885. "The big club canoe idea is there expressed complete and perfect, and so far as we have been able to learn, it is the first published record of a very clever conception - one which has since materialized into such a pronounced and practical success... the artist in this case was a true prophet and foretold the coming of a new era."

If one wants to go back in time, one can associate the big canoe with native peoples; however, there was a more immediate model that may very well have been the inspiration for the Unk-ta-hee. By 1885 there was a vitally active community of boating clubs in and about the city of Montreal. In that year, a number of canoeing enthusiasts in the Lachine Boating Club, calling them the Lake St Louis Canoe Club, organized a regatta completely devoted to canoeing. This first ever, all canoe regatta, was heralded as "the best ever (regatta) held in the province of Quebec."

The following summer of 1886, the second canoeing regatta at Lachine attracted D. B. Jacques and his tandem partner, W.A. Leys from Toronto who were on hand to view a novelty race for the Lake St. Louis Canoe Club regatta - a race between two large canoes with crews drawn from the communities of Valois and Lachine. Enthusiasm was so high that five crews were organized necessitating a round robin tournament to reduce the entries to two finalists. To add to the spectacle and entertainment rival crews took to the boats in outlandish costumes, which featured "white plug hats", "miniature Dolly Varden hats", "red toques", "harlequin checked overalls". The final race pitted a Lachine Cottager Crew against the year-round Valois Villager crew, with the latter coming out on top in what was not the first "big boat " race at Lachine; but it was the first big-boat race by non-native paddlers.

The two boats used in the regatta in 1886 were said to be dugouts, borrowed from the local Mohawk native reserve of Kahnawake, across the lake from Lachine. This was not the first time native boats had been raced along the Lachine waterfront. The first "modern" race occurred at the first Lachine Regatta Sept. 3, 1864 when five crews of nine - from Kahnawake and Kanesatake (Oka) - vied for the prizes. For the next twenty-five years, the "Indian canoe race" was the highlight of the annual Lachine regatta. (Little is known about the canoes used by the native paddlers. Given that crews varied in number from 10 to 18, boat length was in the range of 25 to 35 feet.)

There was no big boat race in 1887 but Jacques and Leys were present Aug. 25, 1888 for the fourth LSLCC regatta at Lachine when five canoes borrowed from the Kahnawake band took to the water. This was not another novelty event. This was a race between crews from four local clubs, two from Lachine and one each from Dorval, Valois and Pointe Claire. Competitors and spectators alike were enthused with the event. Leys and Jacques, no doubt, returned to Toronto enthused with the possibility of testing the idea of the big canoe in Toronto waters. Jacques and his crew had their own big canoe by May 1, 1889.

The American Canoe Association Reception

Large clubs responded enthusiastically and promptly to the idea of incorporating the club canoe into their program. A war canoe race was planned for the summer meet of 1890 at Jessop's Neck on Peconic Bay, Long Island, N.Y. Press releases hyped the upcoming race predicting boats would come from four locations: Yonkers, N. Y., Philadelphia, Penn., Trenton, N.J., Albany, N.Y., and Toronto, Ontario. Clubs found early on, the difficulty of getting these huge craft to the site of the annual meet. Only one of the canoes made it to Jessop's Neck, the 35 foot **Ko-ko-ko-ho**, built for the Yonkers Canoe Club of New York by the St. Lawrence River Skiff Co. of Clayton, N.Y. But the popularity of the big boat "again demonstrated the value of the big canoe idea . . . some of the most enjoyable and socially successful excursions of the salt water meet were taken in this comfortable boat."

Mr. Barny, the canoe sailor of famed Pecowsic, from the Springfield Canoe Club on the Charles River, was one of the first to convey to the membership at large the potential impact of the club canoe.

Anyone who has seen a war canoe like the Unk-ta-hee, the Ko-ko-ko-ho or the Mohican under way can form an idea of what a race would be with four of these canoes manned by seventeen men in each, the crews uniformed in bright colours and the big single blades flashing. From a picturesque standpoint, the sight would far surpass a rowing race, ... and with the rivalry between the four Divisions the interest and rivalry would be fully great.

Canadians were not waiting for the ACA to carry the ball. In the summer of 1890 at the Third Annual Tournament of the Island Amateur Aquatic Association, the first war canoe race in Toronto was held pitting the Unk-ta-hee of the Toronto Canoe Club against the newly constructed **Argo** from the Toronto Argonaut Rowing Club. And at the Lake St. Louis Canoe Club Regatta at Lachine in July, two modern "war canoes" took to the water, with crews from Valois and Lachine, the latter winning by a length and a half. Thereafter "war canoe" races became the highlight of the regattas about Lake St. Louis, soon attracting boats from other clubs in the Montreal area.

In the United States it is doubtful that any other waterway had greater potential for canoeing to develop and prosper than the Charles River whose waters merge with the Atlantic Ocean at the seaport of Boston. Arthur F. Joy, and historian of the fabled waterway, attributed the popularity of canoeing at the turn of the century as a practical pastime to "the introduction of the exciting war canoe racing in the early 1900's." The Charles River was a fertile canoeing area within what was the Eastern Division of the ACA; within the Division was an organizational structure with the capacity of incorporating an idea such as the "club boat" and implement it on a division-wide basis.

In the fall of '93, there was launched on the Charles River, the first racing war canoe in New England - the 30 foot, **Wawbewaw**. Around the canoe gathered the nucleus of the organization, which took its name, the Wawbewawa Canoe Club. Over the course of the winter and spring similar canoes appeared at the Tatassit Canoe Club of Worcester, and at Springfield and Hartford. In May of 1894 the Wawbewawa had its first race at the Springfield meet of the Eastern Division of the American Canoe Association against crews from Springfield, Hartfords, Walthams and Puritans.

Getting the big boats to the annual ACA meet was another thing. In 1891, two "big canoes" did make it to the camp at Wells-borough Point, Lake Champlain, N.Y. and a race of sorts ensued. But the mismatch - the **Moh-ican**, a 30 footer with a crew of 13 from the Albany Canoe Club, Albany, N.Y. against the **Googoozenia**, a 20 footer with a crew of six from the Puritan Canoe Club from Auburndale, Mass. - failed to create any of the excitement or drama foretold by the prophets. No war canoes made it to the ACA summer camps from 1892 to 1896.

But the failure to capitalize on the potential of war canoe racing after 1889 was not entirely the fault of the A.C.A. What might have been perceived in the early nineties as an economic slump blossomed, in 1893; into a full-fledged depression that had a devastating impact on the economic life of the whole, western industrialized world. Not until the economic climate began to improve in 1897 did the ACA apply itself to the organizational problems inherited from the 1880's.

The failure to establish the war canoe as a class boat that would stimulate competition amongst diverse, geographical areas had a disastrous impact on the development of canoe racing at a critical time in the association's history. Throughout the ACA, boat specifications varied; in the Northern Division, 30-foot canoes were dominant but there were still old 35-foot boats in use. About New York, and New Jersey boat lengths varied from 35 to 20 feet; and in the Eastern Division, smaller boats were the norm, a twenty-five footer being the most popular.

During the meet of 97, Northern Division paddlers met with the intent of coming up with recommendations that, if implemented, would enhance competition with the single blade paddle - be it singles, tandem, fours or war canoe. One recommendation promoted a 35 foot war canoe. The ACA Technical Committee's compromise set the length of all new war canoes at 30 ft with a maximum crew of 15. However, existing 35 footers could continue to be used. The Northern division could live with the decision, but the small boat clubs in the Eastern Division were isolated.

Time did not permit clubs to respond to the change in the war canoe specifications for 1898. Only three clubs sent boats and crews to Stave Island for 1898: Buffalo Canoe Club, Brockville Rowing Club and the Toronto Canoe Club. But a meaningful race did take place, the first ever and held much promise for the following year. And those who waited in anticipation of a real war canoe race were not disappointed. The war canoe races in 1899 aroused an enthusiastic response never

before seen at an A.C.A. meet. Seven war canoes, thirty footers, all from Canada journeyed to Hay Island to race: two crews from Brockville, two from Ottawa and one from each of Montreal, Toronto and Kingston. No ACA camp had ever seen 105 paddlers on the water at one time. No camp event ever attracted the spectator gallery of canoes, skiffs and yachts, which lined the Course to watch this great war canoe race.

Before the race could begin the Committee had to deal with complaints associated with two boats from Brockville. Objections were raised against the metal steering fins attached to the hull of the Brockville Rowing Club canoe. The Committee ordered one to be removed. Opposition to the canoe of the Bohemian club could not be resolved so easily. That canoe met the specifications. Built by Mr. Gilbert of Brockville the canoe was "light, well cut away at the ends, and with a turtleback deck forward, a straight sheer and full lines of the bow ... giving the appearance of a torpedo boat." This canoe was not built for cruising, or touring; it was designed for racing. It was allowed to race.

The Bohemians with their short blades executing very fast, short strokes, took them to the finish line just ahead of the Britannias of Ottawa, followed by the Dorval Juniors from Montreal. A second race scheduled for Northern Division clubs only - this time a half-mile race that included a turn, was again won by the Bohemians, proving the first win was no mistake. The reporter for the Commercial Advertiser complimented the organizers on "the greatest canoe events ever held."

In 1899, the ACA selected William MacKendrick of the Toronto Canoe Club as its next Commodore, to take the association into the twentieth century. MacKendrick would have to contend with rumors that some Canadian clubs wanted to set up their own association, a Canadian Canoe Association, independent of the ACA.

Founding of the Canadian Canoe Association, May 12, 1900

The movement for change was strongest in Brockville where there was little support for the ACA. The three Brockville clubs were interested in war canoe racing; they had little interest in small boat racing. At a meeting April 3, 1900 the clubs proposed a War Canoe League be formed and circulated that idea to the Ottawa community. At a second meeting, 10th of April, the response from the Britannia and Ottawa Clubs indicated support for a meeting to establish a War Canoe League. That meeting was called for May 12 at Brockville.

Present at the founding meeting were representatives of nine clubs: Ottawa Canoe Club, Britannia Boat House Club, Brockville Y.M.C.A., Bohemian Amateur Athletic Association, Brockville Rowing Club, Grand Trunk Boating Club, Lachine Boating Club and the Kingston Yacht Club. Noticeably absent from the meeting were any clubs from central Ontario. Toronto Canoe Club's failure to attend was understandable given that William MacKendrick was the current Commodore of the American Canoe Association and a member of the Toronto Canoe Club.

During the winter of 1900 MacKendrick had visited Ottawa, Brockville and Kingston informing the clubs of the initiatives being taken by the ACA to accommodate Canadian war canoe advocates at the annual meet that was to take place on Lake Rousseau in the Muskoka region Ontario. On the programme were five war canoe races: an ACA One Mile Championship, a race between crews drawn

from each division, a Northern Division Championship, a challenge race between a local Muskoka Lakes Association crew and an ACA pick-up crew, and a War Canoe Tug-of-war competition.

Early on, in the founding meeting at Brockville, representatives agreed to pursue the organization of an independent Canadian Canoe Association. A constitution previously prepared by E. R. McNeil from Britannia, was approved along with competition rules and the date August 4th was set for the first Canadian Championships to be held in the city of Brockville. Five events constituted the first National Championships programme: four single blade races - singles, tandem, fours and war canoe - and one double blade singles race. The conflict of dates between the ACA and the new CCA doomed the ACA war canoe programme for Lake Rousseau. Only two war canoes from Toronto attended the meet.

At the first Canadian Championships, rather than save the best race until the last, working the audience up to a climax with the small boat races, the first Championship race of the programme was the 1/2 mile War Canoe Championship of Canada. To the local Brockville residents, war canoe racing WAS canoeing. The first CCA Championships was the long-awaited opportunity to see how the local men measured up against the best the visitors had to offer.

The-half mile course started upriver from Brockville and finished off the Brockville waterfront. "Thousands of people lined the docks, occupied reserved seats on the roofs of houses and sheds, and edged the shores wherever a view of the course could be obtained, while sail and row boats, canoes, and craft of every description, and all full of spectators, dotted the river."

Six clubs were entered: Carleton Place, Ottawa, Britannia, and the three Brockville clubs. Neither Lachine nor Grand Trunk was able to put a crew on the water. Money amongst the gentlemanly wagers was distributed fairly evenly between the favourites, Britannia and the Bohemians. All six crews kept an even pace from the start until around the three-quarter mark when it appeared the two favourites and Ottawa pulled out in front. Within a hundred yards of the flag it was anyone's race. On the outside of the course the Bohs rose to the occasion and "pushed the nose of their canoe ahead and across the line a half length in the lead with Britannia second and Ottawa third." A very popular local victory well received by the huge crowd. Subsequent small boat events seemed anticlimactic to the big boat race. As it was in 1900, so it is now, the most popular event with spectators.

Where did our war canoe come from? The idea of the big canoe came from our history, nurtured and presented to us as tradition about the waters of Lac St. Louis at Kahnawake and Lachine. The idea manifested itself as a modern board and batten canoe, crafted in a Peterborough, Ontario canoe factory to meet the requirements of a small group of Toronto Canoe Club sportsmen. It was the dream emanating from Ottawa and Brockville that led to the founding of the Canadian Canoe Association wherein the modern war canoe was able to establish itself, to develop, to survive. After 1906, with the Toronto clubs' entry into the CCA, the association burgee adopted the three stars as a symbolic representation of the three divisions - Western, Eastern and Northern - that collectively made a greater, national, war canoe league possible.

AFTERTHOUGHTS

Revised January 2015 by C. Fred Johnston

The First Fifty Years, 1900-1950

One of the most significant observations to make during these early years ironically was how little the sport changed once established as a national association. That was particularly true of war canoe racing in particular. The boat introduced by the Bohemian Club of Brockville at the ACA in 1899, with the torpedo deck, is virtually the same canoe we are using today. That it did not change was understandable. It was a big boat and it was expensive particularly at a time when it was assumed that club members purchased their own boats. The need for the club to purchase the war canoe broke down the resistance to the purchase of club boats, even club singles boats. Cost of the war canoe acted as a deterrent to innovation in design, a competition to design and produce a faster canoe, a canoe that would win.

Boat manufacturers during the first decade: Wm. English in Peterborough, Walter Dean in Toronto, the various permutations of the members of the Dey family in Ottawa were themselves a conservative lot. The racing community was a small community; the market was limited; and local clubs tended to purchase from local builders. There was not a lot of money to be made from racing clubs. There was little advantage putting time and money into redesigning canoes to win control of such a small market.

But there was a more rational reason for the ultra-conservatism of Canadian canoeing which provided a foundation on which to build the sport. Like the country itself, the sport was modest in size; competition in boatbuilding was not affordable. It made more sense to standardize the boats to make the sport into a competition between men and not a competition between boats. Let the difference be in the crew and not the boat. There was something "fair" about building the sport on such a premise; in retrospect, it seemed a very safe "Canadian" way of dealing with a sporting problem.

As the war canoe provided the sport with its feature event, so it had a profound impact on the ongoing development of the sport.

Role of the War Canoe in Club Development

War canoe was a very forgiving boat, given the length, beam and the flattened hull shape; it was a stable boat, novice paddlers could readily take to the boat and travel on the water without fear of capsizing. When you learned to paddle in a Canadian club, and this was probably true in the Massachusetts region of the U.S. you learned to paddle using a single blade. With experience new paddlers moved out of the war canoe into fours, tandem and the very difficult singles canoe, the so-called peanut. Consequently, Canadian clubs had little attraction to racing with a double bladed paddle. In the first National Championships, there was one double blade race, a singles race that attracted only two competitors. It remained on the programme until 1902; it was not on the programme in 1903. The single double blade race was removed from the programme the following year never to appear on the Championship programme until 1932, when Canadians became interested in the possibility of racing beyond Canada.

And the war canoe was a great boat for the young paddler. Many a young boy raced in a war canoe with young men before they reached the "proper" age. Although there were no races for females within the CCA, local clubs permitted young women to go out in the big boats on expeditions down the lake, up the river. The first opportunities for women to race against women probably took place in war canoes. At the national level the first races for women was the war canoe, introduced as an exhibition race in 1949 and as an official race in 1965.

The move to youth and age-class competition which began with the Juvenile age class began during the war years, in 1940 with war canoe racing. And so it has been all new classes both males or females commence competitive paddling in the war canoe. It truly has been the development boat on which the sport has expanded and grown. At the very roots of the sport, even to this day, is built on the foundation of war canoe racing.

During the first decade, one hears little about individual competitors, tandems and fours; the race which attracts attention in the press has been the war canoe races. Until 1906 the competition was between Grand Trunk Boating Club of Montreal and the Britannia Boat House Club of Ottawa. Behind both boats were the first of the great war canoe captains. C.W. McLean of Grand Trunk and E.R. McNeill of the Brits. With the entry of Toronto Canoe Club into CCA in 1906, it became a three-way rivalry. With the adoption of a point system in 1904, club rivalry, bitter rivalry associated with the war canoe races was shared with the collective effort of the club in the small boat races. But no club victory was greater than to win both the burgee and the war canoe.

The first trophy up for annual competition was the Fulford Cup first won in 1902 for the 1/2 mile war canoe race. Such was the enthusiastic response of the war canoe race that one was not enough, a second was added in 1902, - the Mile. Thereafter the quest for the Men's Club crew was to take the "Half and the Mile". And if you lost the first race, the half, there was no bloody way you would allow the winner of the half to take the Mile, with the resultant bragging rights that would give to the winner of both races. The Mile was the last race of the competition. Nothing was held in reserve. You gave it your all. Charlie McLean's Grand Trunk crew of 1903 was the first to capture "the Half and the Mile." And he repeated in 1905. No other Club achieved the feat until the great prewar paddlers with the Toronto Canoe Club achieved the double in 1912 and again in 1913.

Certain clubs stand out over the years. In the 30's it was Vince Chisholm's Lachine Racing Canoe Club crews that captured the Half and the Mile three years in a row 1931-33 and missed the double in 1930 and 34. Earl "Doc" Whittall took over from Chisholm in the 40's and 50's and always seemed to be in the medals. But the greatest record by a war canoe captain surely has to be the uncontested record achieved by Jim Mossman with an amazing Balmy Beach record that began in 1946 to the mid 1960's. Over that period of time Beach with Mossman took on Lachine with Whittall during the 40's and 50's and the great Cartierville crews coxed by Vince Ramsay in the late 50's and early 60's. During that stretch Beach with Mossman was always there in the medals. Mossman took six doubles, with a run of four. Ramsay with Cartierville took five successive doubles 1959-63.