

BUILDING THE PROSPECTOR CANOE:  
NARRATIVE INQUIRY IN A LIFE OF CRAFT

by

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## ABSTRACT

The initial research questions were formulated to examine some of the root desires and discourses embedded in craft work and hand-building for the author – drawing parallels to these motivations for the broader culture as a whole. I am a teacher of Technology Education and, as such, a person expected to instill in young people an excitement and set of values in craft and handwork. What are the sources and experiences that act on the compulsion to create such items? What are the factors that act on the desire to create at all? Other questions formulated include: Is the experience of crafting a hand-made article an artistic experience? What are the cultures of communication that exist in the workshop and how do they influence identity building and motivation for the craftsperson in the shop environment? Why do canoe building and canoes hold such iconic sway over popular and Canadian culture?

I chose crafts-based research (a modification of arts-based research) to address these questions because it lends itself as a set of tools to research the creative while creating— an investigation of one's own practice through that practice. The crafted article, in this case a traditionally built, bent-cedar and canvas canoe, becomes a literal and metaphorical vessel that carries the researcher through the experience. The crafting and hand-building of the canoe and the canoe itself are expressions of the same experience, thus becoming an artistic and personally/culturally transformative event and art(ifact) piece/practice. Through journaling, extensive still photography and, most importantly, the canoe itself, the process of building and creating was documented.

The research demonstrates that motivations for craft and hand-work are myriad and liminal, existing as diverse fragments of consciousness acting on the desire to build / create. I also found that this experience was fundamentally an artistic experience – one that built a new reality of social practice from snippets of inferences, ideals and icons. The findings, positioning shop work and shop culture in the realm of art making and art culture, justify this occupation and interruption of disciplinary turf. This research became an exercise of metaphorical map-making and served to reinvigorate my teaching practice in Technology / Craft Education with focus and purpose.

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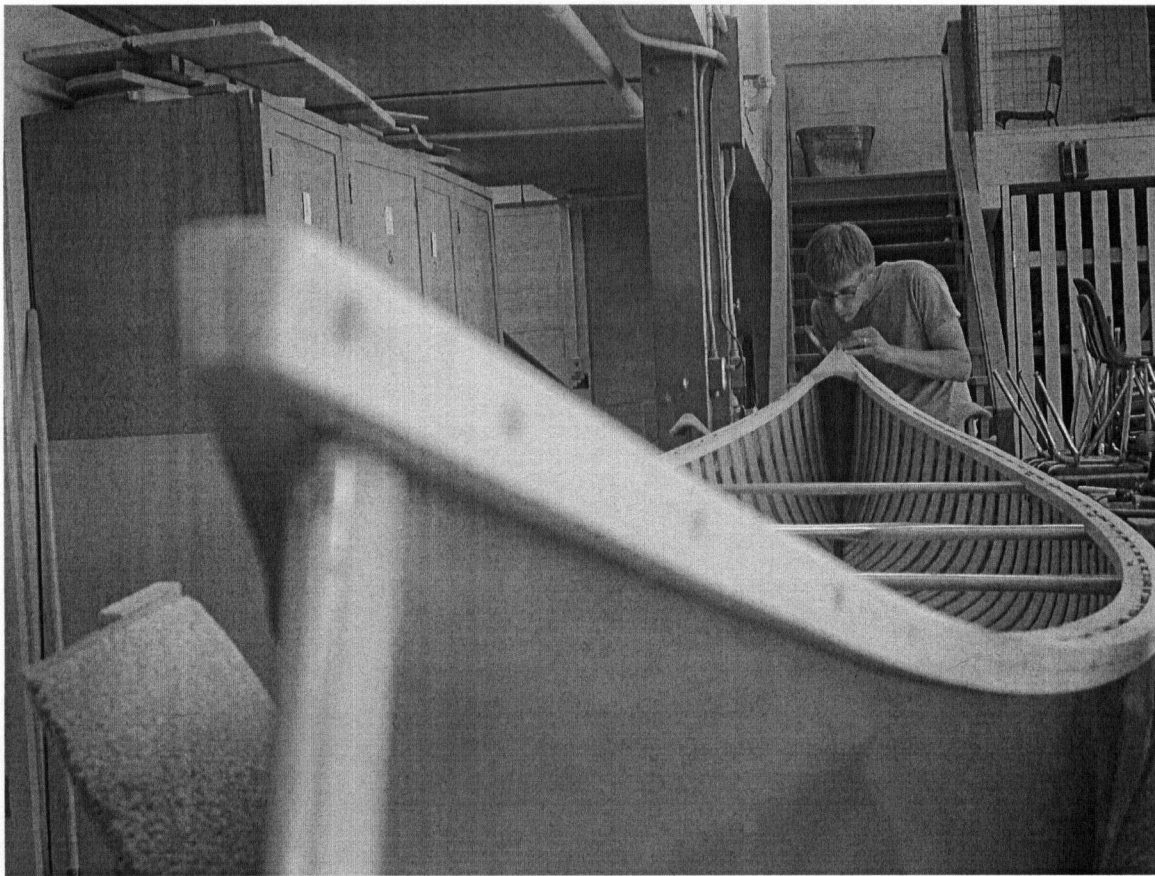
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## **DEDICATION**

To my new family, Julie, Arlo, Emmett and Rowan, with whom I hope to be paddling forever.

BUILDING THE PROSPECTOR CANOE:  
NARRATIVE INQUIRY IN A LIFE OF  
CRAFT



## I. Background and Introduction

Gaze upon the old cathedral front, examine once more those ugly goblins, and stern statues ... but do not mock at them, for they are signs of the life and liberty of every workman who struck the stone. *John Ruskin, The Nature of Gothic, 1853*

I am interested in researching some of the desires, experiences, and social elements that surround contemporary craft and hand-work. As I hand-build a traditional wood and canvas canoe, I examine, through narrative, the inner episteme of the crafted article. Among the phenomena acting on the practice of craft that are particularly of interest are those that affect craft as transformative personal and professional practice, and craft as a cultural and personal cartography. What direction can be found from building, making and creating? What reward structures exist to motivate this method of personal map making? I will examine craft as an artistic practice – the word art from artem, to fit -- the joining or hinging of things (realities, inferences and ideas) that become intertwined with the made article. Also among my interests is to examine what motivations lie in the shadow for the male creator. So often the contemporary male has couched his crafting and building experience within practical and traditional terms – a discourse that leaves much unexamined. As I have worked as a craftsman, I have begun to see craft and hand-making as a deeply contemplative practice and in some ways a prayerful act.

As a craftsman/artist I situate myself as the thoughtful builder/creator and through narrative and building, expose some of what is behind this emotional economy in the hand-made article, an article that among many essentialist discourses – capitalism, efficiency, mass production — has little value. Clearly alternative value systems are in

play when hand-making becomes a pastime. I will speak of materials and the soulful place they come to reside in the craftsperson's world. As I tell this story of my building, I reside in the context of other builders and creators of functional objects using wood and cloth. The wood used in canoes that explored a country new to them, the strong canvas that sheltered pioneer families while the first sod was broken, are materials carrying gravity in a history that demands reverence.

For a craftsperson the joy of the making experience often outflanks the perceived end – having. The lines between article creating, making, and having are blurred: the pride and purity of the making experience, the ‘flow of the plane’ as it cuts the wood moves from a means to an end itself. Ellen Dissanayake (1995, p. 40) writes: "There is an inherent pleasure in making." She calls it a *joie de faire* and notes that it is something far more than anticipation for the appreciation of the finished article. To create something that did not exist before is an inherent human pleasure: the currency of self-reliance and immediate satisfaction of material and emotional needs is valuable indeed. These and many other ethereal values add potency to the hand made article. It is this hidden weight in craft I seek to measure.

The *general focus* of this study will serve to shed light on the core threads of purpose and experience in my craft and crafting — making inferences and drawing parallels to the commonality of these experiences with other artistic and creative endeavors.

## ***Research Question(s)***

As I investigate, construct, and tell autobiographic narratives of building and transformation, both the process of research and the crafted article evolve towards each other – an articulated expression of item and idea that are one and the same. My purpose is to discover and describe— through my own crafting of canoes, through my writing, and through my interactions with other craftspeople— my experiences and ethic as a craftsperson/artist and some of the economies that fuel this intoxicating building/creating experience. These questions are situated in larger discourses about the nature and purpose of work, art, and leisure. As a craft and technology educator, I seek to further concretize and justify my vocational locus. As a young craftsperson situated at the beginning of a new millennium, but also at the end of another, I must hope my struggles, musings, and wood shavings inform a continued although recently somewhat lacking discourse on the status of hand-crafted creative endeavor. By bringing the newly appropriate methodologies of arts-based research and narrative inquiry into the world of craft, it is my hope that such a project breaks new ground: the style and substance being original.

## ***Literature Review***

Shaun McNiff (1998, p. 24) writes of successful arts-based research that “the inquiry is totally based in the material process of making.” He likens the process of inquiry in making objects to what a chemist does in a lab. The key, for McNiff, to keeping the creative arts as a primary mode of psychological inquiry becomes diligence in maintaining a focus of research on the creative experiment between media and

researcher. Tom Barone describes good art and good arts-based research: it creates in experiences around it a “virtual reality” and the “presence of ambiguity” (1997, pp. 73-74). The spaces of knowing left open in expressions of creativity allow separate and valid interpretations for both performer/builder/creator and observer.

Equally important is a diligent inclusion of the researcher in both participation and reporting language (i.e., narrative). Barone and Eisner (1997) assert that inquirers attend to make “vivid what is subtle, yet significant” in the research by being inside the research experience (p. 101). Barone (1997) writes of the appropriateness and effectiveness of disclosure through the “evocative and expressive language of an art critic” (p. 80). This hermeneutic turn encourages rather than discourages the immersion, inclusion, and exploratory activity of the researcher in the research. Arts-based researchers work in the tension of uncertainty, with only “a vague intention or hunch, an intuitive sense of the logic of the informing whole” (VanHalen-Faber & Diamond, 2002, p. 257). A discipline of attendance to the tantalizing mystery in minutia and an encouragement that the researcher fully engage with the subject of research are particularly suited to the proposed narrative of craft-based inquiry.

Blurring essentialist lines drawn between art and science is at the core of the arts/crafts-based research and art as research discourses (Petrina, Brennan, Brown, James, Krug, Peterson & Mutt, in press). That art and aesthetic appreciation are viable and reliable responses to questions scientific in nature is the contention of post-modernism and a foundational underpinning of my proposed research. From Plato to Galileo to Dewey, the debate of how to include aesthetic inference and data and indeed the paradigm of subjective vs. objective knowledge has polarized hermeneutics generally.



For the purposes of this research I shall use Dewey's (1934) seminal definition and outlook of art as process and experience, well paraphrased in Eisner and Powell (2002, p. 133):

Art... (is) not the sole possession of a unique class of objects hung in museums, but a living process that humans experience when a certain quality of attentiveness and emotion are a part of the engagement.

Under this rubric we as researchers are encouraged "to reestablish the connections of science to art through the vitality of ... learning engagements... and investigate the personal side of science" (Slattery & Langerock, 2002 p. 353). Eisner and Powell encourage the researcher to examine themselves and their experiences in the course of the research; indeed they suggest that these ministrations to the emotional and aesthetic geography of the researcher can remarkably enrich the findings. Cartesian modes of thought would have the researcher fully separate mind experiences and body experiences; conversely, in our new way of examining scientific questions, the experience of the body and mind are one. The satisfactions, empathies, and intuitions of the aesthetic senses are married to the physical. Included in the physical is a strong sense of place; the environment of the researcher, both social and physical, becomes newly important. Socially mitigated factors like competition, mastery, and mentorship, once spurned as contaminants of study control, now richly flavour the brew.

The process of building and creating in this research have become ingredients in an interdisciplinary stew – a metissage of hyphenated relationships that break up

traditional roles (Irwin, 2004, p. 30). Artist, Creator, Builder, Work-Shop Denizen and Researcher melt together to forge a new clarity.

Knowledge, now a *process* represented, is no longer a collection of facts on a clean plate: disembodied, trimmed of fat and rendered. Ultimately, in arts-based inquiry “content and form become one” (VanHalen-Faber & Diamond, 2002, p. 252). It is the job of the arts/crafts-based researcher to pull and tie together the many fractals of knowing and to communicate not only the finished idea, but the influences and experiences of this pulling and tying.

Finally, the arts/crafts-based researcher is allowed the fully unstructured state of the artist – and may not know or “be capable of articulating from the start what the finished product will sound and look like. Nor must [they] be able to say where [they] are headed each step of the way” (Jackson, 1998, p. 173).

“The word craft is, like so many important words in English, brief, pungent and ambiguous.”

Edward Lucie-Smith (1981, p.11)

Any discussion of craft and craft-making seems to need an adequate definition of the fundamental activity at hand – craft. This indeed becomes a difficult task very quickly enough. Peter Dormer (1997, p. 219) states in his volume, *The Culture of Craft*, of the difficulties in writing about a philosophy (craft) that uses, as its lexicon, a set of values and motives that “cannot, with any depth, be put into words.” McNiff (1998, p. 39) writes that “processes of... creation are always at least one step ahead of the reflecting mind.” Moreover it behooves craftspeople to discover more of their activity not through theory but through praxis – an awakening of theory through practice. Under

the widest definition, craft refers to the creation of objects through a concentrated and directed effort of the artist. In contemporary terms, the word craft must be examined in the context of economies of scale. Paul J. Smith (1986, p. 11) writes that “modern industrialized society eliminates the need to make by hand essentials for living.” Craft, now a frippery, gains the dubious reverence of the technically obsolete.

Craft...is defined by four simultaneous identities. First, it must be made substantially by hand. This is the primary root of all craft, the wellspring and reference point for everything else in the field. ...Craft is medium-specific: it is always identified with a material and the technologies invented to manipulate it. ...Craft is defined by use. Craft is also defined by its past. Each of the craft disciplines has a multicultural history that is documented mostly by objects, many from societies that have long since disappeared. (Metcalf, 1993, p. 40).

Notable craft scholar Edward Lucie-Smith (1981) contends craft has three distinct historical realms. Early in western tradition all manufactured articles are regarded as craft. All objects are useful, ritual, or decorative – all are hand-made. In the Renaissance a separation begins. Craft and fine art now start to live in different houses and fine art is seen as superior and the purest form of creativity. Still later the made article is further classified along lines that parallel changes in the social structures of the time – the Industrial Revolution. Here craft is distinguished between a hand-made object and one made by a machine. Through much of the twentieth century, craft, as an artifact of contemporary thought was seen as a dead end. Modernity, with its support for mass production and the common ideal, had effectively separated craft and design. The anxiety arising from the beginnings of this turn towards the modern consumptive city gave rise to the Arts and Crafts Movement – a largely reactionary discourse, led first by John Ruskin and later William Morris (Harrod, 1998).

One of the most interesting blips on the screen of modernist-twentieth-century attitudes towards craft and art came from the Bauhaus movement of the late 1910s and 1920s. Hand crafted and popular everyday items were impregnated with the avant-garde attitudes of the time. This was thought to represent and initiate the avant-garde revolution in art to a new revolutionary life for all (Kuspit, 1996). That this particular revolution has been completely institutionalized and emasculated of all populist energy does not surprise, considering its modernist and essentialist motivations.

Craft, it should be noted, is also a face of humanist opposition and a social movement. Bruce Metcalf (2002) sets out what amounts to a craft manifesto:

Craft still stands against the anonymity of mass-production and for the personalized object.

Craft still stands against ugliness and, on occasion, for beauty.

Craft still stands against big-money capitalism and for small-scale entrepreneurship.

Craft stands against corporate labour, where most workers are replaceable parts in a bureaucracy, and for individual self-determination.

Craft stands for the rich potential of the human body at work and against disembodiment in all its forms.

(pp. 16-17)

Richard D. Lakes (1990) similarly argues that the integral emotional examination of the self in craftwork also parlays into a broader social conscience – “a unification of art and labour” (p. 74). Those engaged in craft labour find new parallels with their labouring kin and “begin to acknowledge the debilitating effects of industrial work” (p.76).

Rose Slivka (1968) contends that time acts as an effective crusader in the name of craft. As history unfolds, the practical uses of an item become less potent, eventually rendering a made item to its pure aesthetic constituents. The story and skill of the maker are now the loudest voices heard from the crafted article – humble proletariat uses are emancipated to visual splendor and are honoured for their own sake as art. Butcher (1997) correctly classifies this phenomena as an issue of consumption. Many crafts once concerned with a particular practical use are now *consumed* as art in display. If alive, this can provide varying consternation and amusement to the maker(s), who are often rooted in the essentialism of their expert practice. Paradoxically, the economy of consumption that takes a practical item to the level of art often demands a purity and exacting standard in build quality that diminishes the true modernist and proletariat efficiency. Thus the “popular aesthetic of purity and simplicity, and the natural, commonsensical values” embedded in the making are usurped (p. 425). Kenneth Trapp, curator of the Renwick Gallery of American Studio Craft in Washington, sheepishly states that as a craftsperson’s “reputation rises and increases with the prices, the work becomes Sculpture” (cited in Risatti, 1996, p. 28).

For Peter Dormer (1997) the separation of art and craft is a relatively recent event in historical terms. “It has led to the separation of having ideas from making objects” (p. 3). This construct seems a reaction to the perception that industrial production is devoid of craft; with this, creativity is strictly a realm of the designer. Dormer claims that this has led to art without craft.

For Metcalf, an examination of the end use and the values at play in production cannot reconcile the tension developed between art and craft. That art and craft are both

analyzed visually in formal critical structures of examination seems to tie them together. By examining how craft objects are made and used however, the marriage of art and craft becomes difficult. Is one person's art the next person's craft and vice versa? Art for creativity's sake does not allow craft into the realm of the art gallery, particularly amid the still-heard rumblings of modernist art criticism and consumption. Conversely, in this argument, the factory floor is no place to find art. Thankfully Ruskin and Morris come again to the rescue, arguing creative recognition for the worker's humble hammer.

As an activity that was traditionally rooted in the guilds, craft was a practical endeavor. The manufacture by hand of goods used in everyday life has now metamorphosed to little more than boutique curiosity. Today's society finds value in efficiency and high technology – both processes highly removed from the end consumer but for the rudiments of cost. Paul J. Smith (1986) muses on the context of production and the knowledge of this production in the value given to the crafted article. Hand crafted items are regarded highly for the multiple stories they tell of their particular culture. Craft with “a unity of hand and spirit... reaffirm(s) the human element in daily life” (p. 11).

Without falling prey to overly romantic and historical conservatism, it seems that a wealth of knowledge surrounding craft and the crafted article stands a chance of being lost, disappearing without contemporary philosophical grounding. It is incumbent on this research to inform this vast realm of crafted human expression with a post-modernist and de-structured perspective.

Much of this above writing has been in aid of justifying why we should consider arts-based research and crafts-based research as, if not the same sort of inquiry, at least

sharing many philosophical foundations. Being careful not to stand on the same essentialist ground I castigate, it seems important and prudent to point out the differences between the two. In so doing, we must look deeply at the differences between the experiences of art and craft. The job of the artist, put simply, is to choose and select – images, items, colours, words, inferences – and to combine in expression. The job of the craftsperson, although much the same, is also importantly, to make by hand. Although the separation is blurry with much overlap, it can be made just sharp enough to justify distinction. Craftwork, as a distinct form of cultural production, links practices that are populist in nature to those of the art institution and academy. These “Border Intellectuals,” those practicing craft as popular and functional work with their hands, have the ability to connect practices that are transgressive of traditional disciplinary frontiers (Giroux, cited in Bachman, 2002, p. 48). Through many similarities, it is this fundamental process of hand-making, and all of its incumbent cultural trappings that finds difference between art and craft, artist and craftsperson, and ultimately the distinction between arts-based and crafts-based research.

## **Method**

This research consists of the manufacture of a traditionally constructed cedar and canvas canoe, and the accompanying production narrative(s) of these experiences both material and emotional. The production narrative includes extensive journal entries and photographs telling the multiple stories and economies of my experience.

It is my hope that this narrative of production informs and contextualizes the diaspora of contemporary craft and craft culture. I have sought to produce text that will

allow others to enter my world of craft and be urgently present in the experience, perhaps allowing a better understanding their own relationship with their craft.

Autobiographical narrative, as the lived text of experience, adds a different and additive voice to craft and crafting. Clandinin and Connelly argue that, for humans, experience and the recalling of that experience happens narratively. "Narrative inquiry is a form of narrative experience. Therefore, educational experience should be studied narratively" (2000, p. 2). Narrative allows for the boundaries between our public and private lives to collapse (Collins, 1998). It is this private life of craft I hope to uncover with narrative. Burdell and Swadener encourage the production of text that "is a movement away from distanced theoretical writing to writing that details the individual and imaginative aspects of agency" (1999, p. 22). The space between lived and planned curriculum crackles with compelling attraction. It is here that the "lines of movement" between the public and private, lived and planned, permit "stories, anecdotes, and narratives that embody the lived dimension of curriculum life" (Aoki, 1993, p. 263). It is in this place of ambiguity and tension that art and craft, and the connections between inferences, ideas, and physical materials find collective meaning.

Carol Witherell and Nel Noddings contend that "stories and narrative, whether personal or fictional, provide meaning and belonging in our lives... attach us to others, and to our own histories" (1991, p. 19). The building of the canoe will serve to unlock a hidden story of craft and open historical doors in my crafting experience.

People live stories, and in the telling of these stories, reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones. Stories lived and told educate the self and others, including the young and those such as researchers who are new to their communities. (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. xxvi)



Craft practice, as the practice of the artisan, journeyman, and ultimately the master, is the practice of story. "That the best listeners... are the ones who have forgotten themselves, and while their half-conscious minds are engaged in pot-throwing, spinning and weaving, and their bodies are seized by the gentle rhythm of work, the stories they hear" and tell communicate through their work and through their made article (Benjamin cited in Leslie, 1998, p. 5). The rough traces of fingers on a pot, the uneven gouges of a hand pushed plane on worked wood – these are stories of lives: motivation, self-reliance, optimism, and confidence. These are stories worth telling and stories worth listening to.

The canoe, like the canoe trip, is a metaphor for change, possibility, and a distinctly Canadian story. Like all metaphors, the experiences surrounding the canoe are ones built on linking one story to another and one history to another. Stories that change people are the ones most fascinating; I believe change and a canoe can be one and the same. The appropriateness of the canoe as the vessel of research in this thesis is key. My personal history with canoes and canoeing features large in my motivation to discover/uncover a story of craft in my canoe making. Chiarappa (1997) writes of the importance of local knowledge and the authority of place while investigating craft and crafts. He ascribes to this diaspora the term vernacular craft – "defined as artifact production that embodies the functional, historic and symbolic relevance of a community or region's occupations, social relations and environmental interaction" (p. 399). He posits that local knowledge and deeply engrained history add buoyancy to the

cultural logic of the crafted article and whisper of nineteenth century anti-modernism and romantic nationalism – both responses again heard in post-modern debate.

John Steinbeck in *Travels with Charley* writes that people don't take trips, trips take people, and that "many a trip continues long after movement in space and time have closed" (1963, p. 119). Such it is with a canoe. This transformative thread speaks in contemporary terms of one's connection to nature and how that relationship bears on the ever-transforming story of self. Academic discourse of deep ecology, Bob Henderson (1999) writes, urges us to fundamentally examine how our place and behavior in our world are, inherently, our place and behaviour in nature. The discourse of critical social theory asks us to change ourselves by actively changing our place in the world.

Why a canoe like this?

The Wood and Canvas canoe represents both a beginning and an ending in the rich history of wooden boat building in North America. As a vessel the canoe holds an iconic status in popular Canadian culture. The image of the canoe appears regularly in advertisements for banks, airlines, and food. The canoe embodies, for many, independence, adventure, and escape; this iconic image structure has been building strongly since the late 1800s to a peak in the 1920s. Part and parcel with the recent and firm dominance of the industrial revolution in North America during this time was the beginnings of a reaction to the accompanying essentialist paradigms of the day: big capitalism, mass production, and urban factory life. This reaction along with the rise of naturalism brought the canoe forward from a being an age-old relic of aboriginal and trapper transport vehicle to a main-stream leisure activity item (Stelmok & Thurlow,

1987, pp. 18). With this surge of popular demand came a technological advance of applying established boat building techniques to aboriginal birch bark methods. Thus the steam bent cedar and canvas covered canoe was born. For approximately thirty years this technique of building enjoyed a growing popularity until the post second world war years produced inexpensive fiberglass and aluminum, rendering the wood and canvas canoe materially obsolete.

My chief interest in pursuing this particular building style is that even during the nineteen-forties when thousands of these particular canoes were being produced, the process was largely a hand-made one. Although manufacturers attempted to modernize and streamline the construction of these vessels, canoes moved through their production in much the same fashion for the manufacture of one boat as for one thousand. The steam bent cedar and canvas covered canoe is a hand-crafted item.

Of the extensive literature in Canadian adventure writing, perhaps no other journey or set of misadventures captures the imagination of the reader more than the trips of Jack Hornby (Raffan, 1999). In the late nineteen-twenties, having survived poorly planned and badly executed travels in the far north, Hornby died from unplanned wintering on the remote Thelon river. That Hornby's journal and the diary of his young companion Edgar Christian were found has served to fuel continuing extremes of reaction and motivation in the northern canoe trip and its ever-romantic idealization. This journey has become for me a metaphor for the death of innocence, and for the trope a canoe becomes in Canadians' constant battle with their still-"savage" natural surroundings.

Ostensibly the intent of this research – a canoe trip of various definitions – is to discover a lived experience of craft. Like many epic journeys in canoe, this research starts as exploratory and scientific in nature and becomes far more. The vessel of change in this research is the canoe and in the mind's eye of the builder, the metaphorical canoe trip. In this building, writing, and crafting, a trip is undertaken and the possibility for stories of change abound.

## **II. Representation**

### **The Finished Canoe, Production Journal and Reflections**

#### ***The Finished Canoe***

#### ***Production Journal and Reflections***

#### **Getting Started: The Strongback**

Feb. 14, 2003

I've spent the last two days filtering in and out of the canoe process. I know this is how things start, with a rush of excitement followed by wavering insecurity of the process itself. I know I am susceptible to not following a plan – a major craftsman's taboo – and just winging it. I realize that this will not work this time or any other where the finished product has to fill a perfect goal. Is it cheating to end up with something beautiful but not what you started? In this case and in most others, yes. I am having trouble visualizing the exact process as far as modifying the plans go. I'm building from a full cedar strip plan and need to change things slightly to work with the classic cedar and canvas design. I want to get to work on the tools right away, but I've done this before, rushed into a project and began cutting material before it all fit together in my head. It seems the antithesis of the creative ideal, to know what I'll end up with before I begin, but I need to have all the puzzle pieces floating into place as I begin. The devil is in the

details indeed. There is nothing but details. I, typically, although with some reasonably careful figuring as to amounts, went ahead and bought the plywood for the form – the positive plug that the canoe will be built on. It felt good to bring myself to start in some fashion. The material for the form does not need to be deluxe by any measure but it should be strong and have true ninety degree angles. What I will do first is to build the strongback and begin laying out the station moulds. I am unsure as to how the process of changing the station moulds will go, I have to have an exceedingly high degree of accuracy with those curves that are going to transfer themselves all the way through to the finished product. Having to build an accurate form that could be used over and over again is blood curdling... I can't readily go back and fix mistakes once I realize the form is not fair in its curves. And the only time I'm really going to know if the form is fair is when I'm looking at the finished canoe. This is definitely enough to keep me from starting for a few days and procrastinating by going for walks and feeling overwhelmed and under-skilled. It's amazing how quickly the messages of negative skill, laziness and sloppiness crop up.

*I spent several hours yesterday pouring over the plans for the canoe and making undecipherable little scrawls on bits of ragged paper. Lists that will probably not be looked at again. Notes to self...*

*This is all part of the process. I know my real skills and the intense pleasure I will feel will be from the hand work and the hand work will feel ordinary and pale if I'm working on something fundamentally misshapen. So careful planning and detailed work for the beginning is the key.*

*This really is an immense undertaking. Bending the stems and learning that whole process alone is going to be huge. I'm lucky to have Toby and Guiseppe around to peek around the corner and offer advice.*

Feb. 15, 2003

I'll need to cut gunwale backers in to the plywood mold stations; this is not on the plans at all. Cutting the mold stations in general will be rewarding, as I know exactly how big they will be. I will do this first and let the stem pattern tumble around in my head a little. As the strongback and mold stations take shape, how to do the stems will eventually distill its way out. The amount of material in the mold is quite staggering; I hope I can rent it out someday and recover some of the cost. Or make another canoe to sell.

It was exciting to learn that West Wind Hardwoods has long lengths of red cedar specifically for canoes; I will definitely use red cedar for the planking and yellow for the ribs. I already have the rail stock and the decks will be something exotic to match the rails. I know where to get the canvas and the guy with the filler may come through for me.

*I spent the first nineteen years of my life living in Prince George, British Columbia, a city of seventy thousand people in the northern interior of the province. My parents worked as school-teachers and raised my younger sister and I. Many weekends and all summers, particularly when I was very young, were spent camping and canoeing in the outdoors.*

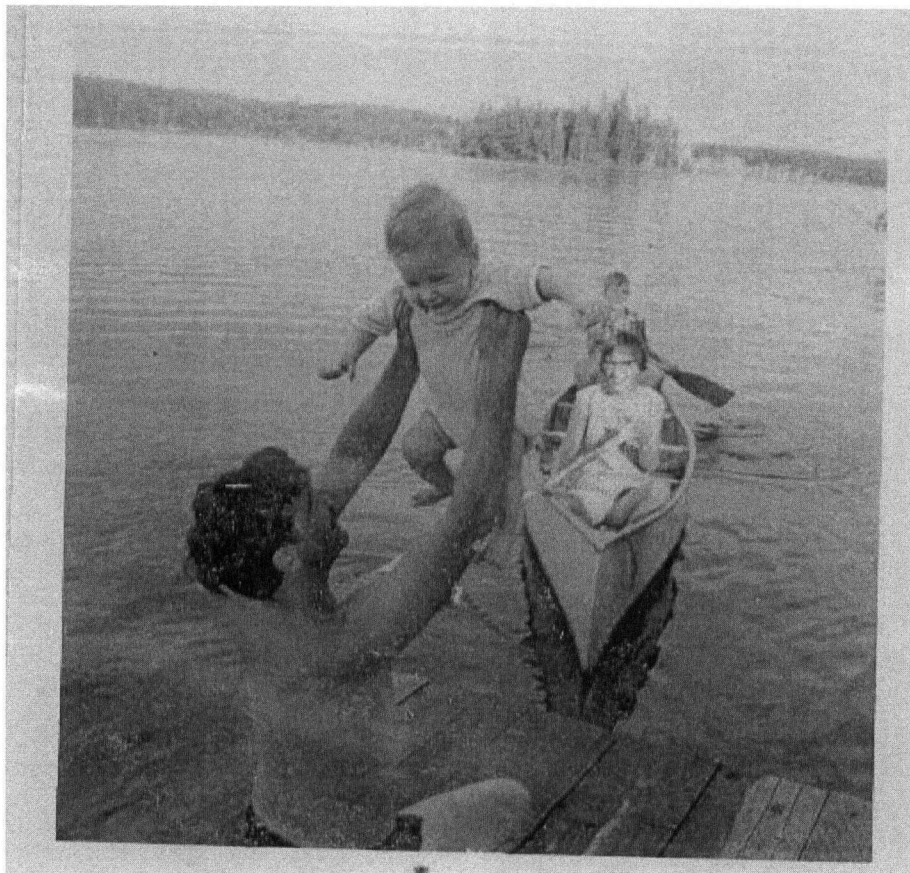


Figure 2. *My father and me, my mother and a friend.*

*My father who is, in most respects, terminally unhandy, built, with the help of a co-op of friends, a very functional fiberglass canoe.*





*Figure 3. In the orange canoe*

*We used it often and when I was of age to take it or one of many owned by friends out for the afternoon, we would. Our home in Prince George, surrounded by rivers and lakes became an adventure playground for expeditions of all sizes. As a teenager with a somewhat relaxed attitude towards attendance at school, I would sometimes find myself floating down the Nechako River during third and fourth block, practicing eddy-ferries and cross-bow draws with my friend Todd. This very early access to the independence and solace that canoes can provide made a strong impression. During the first few years after high school, as I worked at jobs always in the out-of-doors, the old orange canoe, and later a new red one, permanently adorned the roof of whatever vehicle I drove for much of the summer months. During this time my paddling varied to include a sea kayak that I built from a kit, but each summer the orange canoe always managed to find an adventure or two. As I attended B.C.I.T. and U.B.C., I tried to find a way to bring this love of the outdoors and of paddling into the urban setting of Vancouver. For some of*

*this time, I lived on a small sailboat in North Vancouver; the canoe lived on the dock next to the boat and on days that precluded the fuss of sailing, a quiet evening paddle in the harbor took me away from what I felt was the difficult bustle of the city.*

Feb. 17, 2003

I finally got into the shop and did some actual work with the tools today; it feels great to be started. Although I started ages ago, the first work with real tools and materials feels like the start proper. I began by mulling the plans over and getting a work area set up. I swept down a bench and laid out the plans. I knew that the mold would be quick once I started, but it actually has a staggering amount of wood in it.

I went to Home Depot and bought plywood; it's surprisingly good plywood for the price, I don't even want to know where it's made.

I calculated roughly how much I need and added 25% for good measure. I'm surprised at how much I berate myself over my usual tendency to buy not enough or the wrong thing. To waste time is a cardinal sin for the craftsman. Also to waste money. The double edged sword.

*I have lately been justifying to several people, and of course to myself, why I see my experience building the canoe as an artistic one, and not purely a technical exercise. I've been fantasizing about building a series of these canoes, each with a subtly and*

*increasingly morbid flaw – like a giant twist in the hull, or an ever-increasing rocker. The first in the series would be functionally perfect, the example from this research. Each successive canoe would be technically identical but for an ever more prominent twist or bend to the entire hull, rendering the final canoes in the series as technically perfect but functionally useless. Indeed to the craftsman's eye, the final twisted examples would carry extra emotional weight due to the added technical difficulty of twisting and turning the wood on the mould to form such functionally useless shapes. I see a gallery where canoes hang from the ceiling in a row and as gallery attendees move through them they encounter an increasing level of dysfunction with a rigid and exacting similarity in technical process. The idea being, of course, to comment on art: the interruption of the viewer's conception of usefulness, and to comment on the concept of art beginning where utility fails. I took some time to sketch these images as they feel so captivating and telling.*

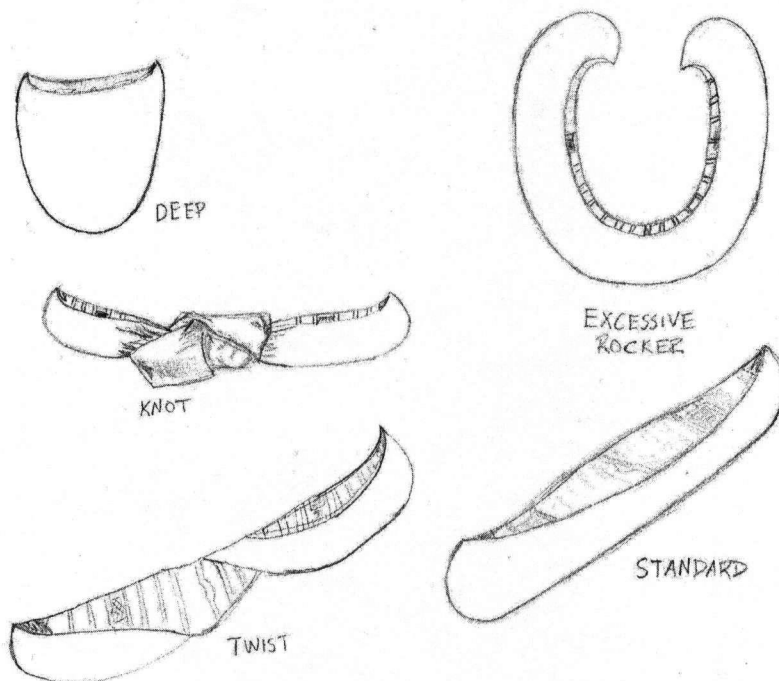


Figure 4. Morbid flaws

*I suppose the leap from item to art is made for some as the ironic statement increases. As the intended usefulness of the canoe decreases and decays to whimsy in ever misshapen examples, a discourse on what is art and where does art start and function end is serviced.*

Feb.17, 2003

I began cutting for the strongback and decided on the 14' length.

This will allow me to place the stem molds on the strongback after the station molds have been set. I am still unsure how the stem molds will work in regard to depth. I know it will be much easier to place the stem molds once the stations are in because I will have

less to have to visualize. I know there is a step in the shape of the stem molds that I am not completely sure of.

I have now finished the construction of the strongback; this is the structure – perfectly straight and square with which the entire canoe form is built on. The first section is perfectly straight and the longer section is reasonably straight. I can straighten things slightly with a block plane when I am able to look at all the stations laid out and held down properly.

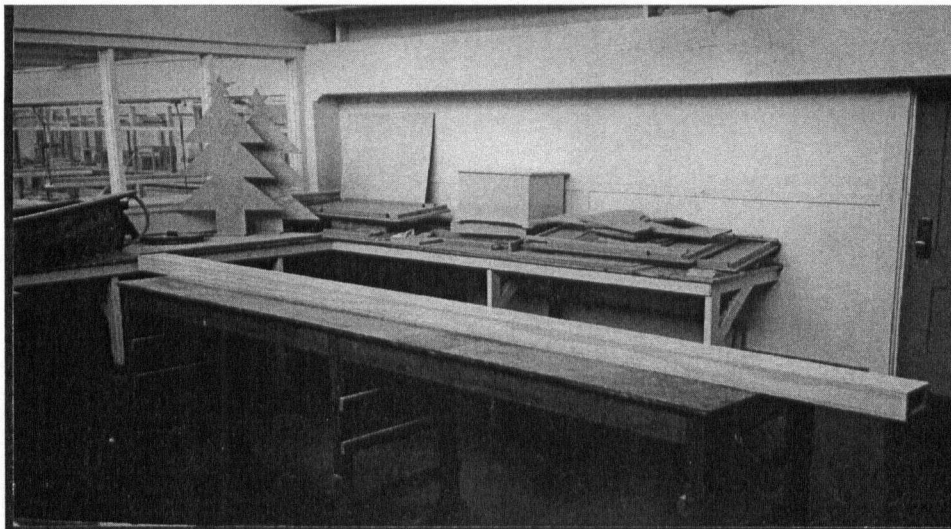


Figure 5. The strongback

I know this is not the time to rush, but it is hard not to surge ahead and let details slide. I bought drywall screws to hold the mold together, they work very well for plywood and were very reasonable. I bought enough to do the long strips for the mold as well.

I really can't wait to get back in the shop and keep working. It's amazing how strong this urge is. I'm willing to shirk duties, arrive

late for appointments etc. all to get some extra working time. My work space is great, with tools and machines all just downstairs, lots of natural light and, for a school, really out of the way, no-one intrudes or bothers me yet there are enough passersby and interested people around to sustain a social buzz in the shop.

*Workshops in general are magical places and the right place to work features large in the minds of craftspeople. Richard Probert, in his memoir, Archie's Way, writes that shops say more about a (person) than can ever be gleaned from talking (1998, p. 17). A central thread in the protestant work ethic, 'actions speak louder than words' dictates that the shop and what happens in it are a measure of the occupants' worth and a window to their root motivations and inner workings. I have often felt that the shop I work in has such a permanence and history that it is something for me to look after until the next person comes along. That the corners are full of wood scraps and off cuts adds, in my mind, to the possibilities of creativity and progress. The giant machines sit waiting for the students to learn and create as they have since 1928.*

*I have, by allowing my self the indulgence of building this canoe, replicated a time-honoured structure, and recreated somewhat the master and apprentice hierarchy that has existed in shops for millennia. That generally all workshops have such a social strata is indicative of two main constructs. Firstly, the method of teaching and imparting knowledge from one craftsman to another, must exist in a productive environment, that is to say the work at hand cannot be sacrificed through learning. As masters work alongside students or apprentices, their closely held techniques and methods are taught*

by example. Secondly, the shop is and has been, for better and worse, the domain of men. That men are in some ways in perpetual and instinctual competition with each other dictates that a hierarchy must exist. This subtle yet pervasive strata gives rise to the practical jokes and teasing that will always be a part of workshop life. Like young animals rolling each other onto their backs, young workers tease and gently bully each other, these tricks and jests often centering on the work at hand. This lightness salves the often terrifying prospect of trying some new technical endeavor, and for the joker serves to assert their place in the hierarchy. Workshops can be and are dangerous and deadly places, where often many hours are spent in solitary toil. The knee-slap buffoonery of practical jokes and teasing eases the serious foundation of what occurs in the workshop. Further to thoughts of space and place, I have lately been mulling the idea of crafts in general and the canoe in specific as way of constructing a place that is desired, yet for other reasons, unattainable. The idea of place as an emotional construct has been thought and written about extensively. As a society of largely displaced and uprooted individuals, we build our sense of place by surrounding ourselves with artifacts and bric-a-brac that evoke our ideal place – the place that we visited, the place we wish to be, or the place where we grew up. The crafts become, under this lens, “portable places”. (Greenhalgh, 2002, p. 10) In this way of thinking, the spaces that are filled with objects of symbolic importance or in many instances, the spaces where such objects are created, the workshop, become a place brimming with permanence. This permanence is an important coin in the currency of cultural memory.

## The Stations

Feb. 18, 2003

Today was thrilling. I laid out all of the stations and cut many of them. Using carbon paper, I traced the stations one by one and laid them out on plywood. I will go back and trace the actual cut pieces to form the mirror of most of the stations. I made a serious error at one stage and miscalculated the amount to compensate for the change in size from strip-built to plank-built on the plan. This could have been a disaster if I hadn't caught it early. As it was, I had to throw one completed station out. I can use this plywood for some of the smaller stations at the end of the canoe. I am a little wary of the looseness of the technique to lay out the lines on the stations, it seems that a pencil thickness here and there could easily get lost in the shuffle. I know that this is not a big deal and that I can always hand plane parts of the mold to take out little bumps and twists. All the books say that this is the case, but it still gives me the willies. I think I'll spend some time with a long framing level and some shims to make sure that the strongback is straight before I start attaching stations.



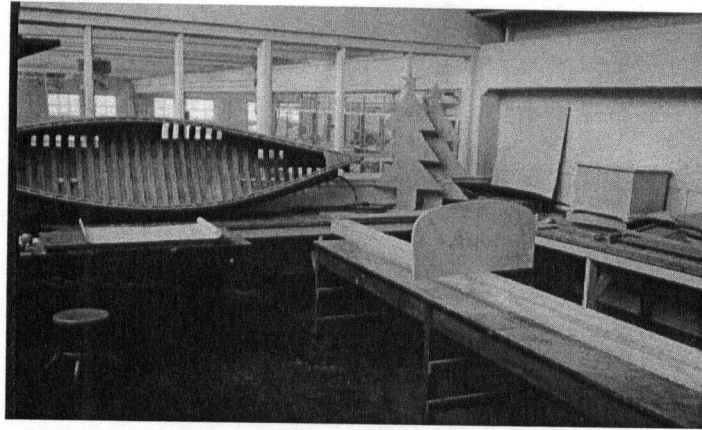


Figure 6. The first station

I have many of the stations left to cut and some wood to shop for. I may leave this shopping for when I have a helper to go through the pile at the lumber yard with me. I need some 16' lengths of 2x material to cut down and make the strips from. I can't offhand remember if nominal 2x will give me enough material to get two pieces  $\frac{3}{4}$ ". I will use white spruce, it is inexpensive and bends well in the quarters where there will be a fair amount of twist. I still need to do a quick calculation of the amount of this stuff that I'll need. I ran across a rough way of calculating the amount of planking I'll need for the entire hull in one of the books; this is to basically turn the hull dimensions into a rectangular box and find the area of the outside surface. This seems to add unnecessary amounts of wood, but taking into account the waste and the unusable material, I think it probably works out. I read in another source the appropriateness of Yellow Cedar for the rib stock, so I'm happy to have the materials I need available.

It feels great to be at school around technical enterprise unfolding. My teaching replacement is doing a good job and the shop seems in good repair.

I had been feeling somewhat ambivalent about the prospect of returning to school in September, but I think with a somewhat rested mind and a fresh perspective, it should be good.

*The creative process: craft, art, etc. is change. My creative process of constantly rebuilding myself as an emotionally grounded person living 'the good life' is an artistic and a creative process – a process of rounding my character. It is a process of taking that which already exists and pulling together pieces to (re)create a new whole. It is not unlike the process of building a canoe and a process that happens again and again. It is just the same for the craftsman. This emotional relationship that binds my craft to change feels like an unassailable and absolute truth.*

*This narrative of change is the only text that keeps up with the force of the changing mind... the new creation, the new article, the new identity of self. Narrative has the quickly available power to challenge the deadening sludge of stagnancy and allows creation of a bridge to new reality. Narrative allows the writer to create again and in this energy of creation, it forms the liberating trope. The power of this metonymy cannot be underestimated. It is art and craft and re-creation. What I'm reaching for here is to say that narrative is not and must not be regarded as a carbon copy of reality but can be seen as a new reality and an new opportunity for the writer to create and (re)create experience.*

Feb. 19, 2003

Today I started late in the shop, the pleasures of my new family of three kept me at home until 2pm. I began by tracing, cutting, and sanding the remaining stations. I now have all the stations at least once. I then began to trace and repeat those stations that are doubled (all but one).

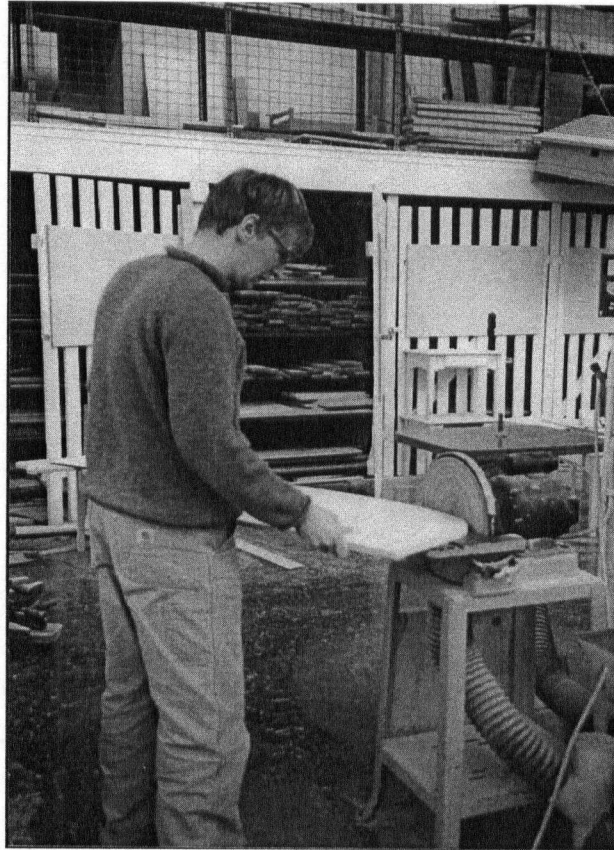


Figure 7. Sanding the stations

I discovered that the last of the stations will not fit on the strongback as it is built. This is a major problem and will not solve easily, but in the grand scheme of things is not that big of a deal. My options are to shorten the strongback and make the stem backer larger (I do not have the appropriate curve in the plans for this) or... I'm not sure.

*I like to think of this process of building the canoe as a metaphorical canoe trip of sorts. The wilderness canoe trip, part quest, part escape, and part adventure is itself, is a plunge into the unknown, and therefore a situation ripe with possibility. As Canadians, the idea of wilderness adventure is never far from our mind. That our young nation was mapped and settled by Europeans largely reliant on the canoe, is a fact that speaks to the appropriateness of this vessel as a symbol of our current collective adventurous spirit. It seems a cornerstone of human nature even, to be able to carry one's needs in a small conveyance and push off into the unknown as a test of spirit. Tales of these adventures and the cultures that surround them help weave the fabric of our national identity. As our weather dictates a constant relationship and conversation with the elements, so too (particularly in the West) does our proximity to truly wild terrain define us. That we are close to nature, gives us a good dose of our individual smallness and reduces our hubris, allowing a daily correction in our own individual environmental economy.*

*The canoe trip, as with all adventure travel, can promote what Paulo Freire terms a breaking of the "circles of certainty" that promote a "culture of silence." (1989, p. 23) This culture of silence, or for me, the inner silence that deafens when the hub-bub of urban life takes hold, is mitigated by a return to the natural world. All trips out of my comfort zone, and certainly all canoe trips, have reminded me that curiosity, wonder, and adversity are what make life rich.*

*Certainly the canoe trip has famously served our national consciousness as well. Upon losing the 1979 election, Pierre Elliott Trudeau (my middle namesake) paddled a trip on the Hanbury / Thelon river. To title his collected writings he chose Against the*

Current. *To open his television memoirs, he chose to paddle his red canoe. This choice was the deciding factor, along with wilderness safety, for me to paint my canoe red.*

*Trudeau writes of canoe trips:*

I would say that you return not so much a man who reasons more, but more a reasonable man. For throughout this time, your mind has learned to exercise itself in the working conditions which nature intended. Its primordial role has been to sustain the body in the struggle against a powerful universe. A good camper knows that it is more important to be ingenious than to be a genius. And conversely, the body, by demonstrating the true meaning of sensual pleasure, has been of service to the mind. (1996, p. 11)

Feb. 20, 2003

Today I sheepishly shortened the strongback and made the remaining stations. No mistake has yet been made that forces me to go totally back to some beginning and start over. I wasted very little wood in my one mismeasured station. I very successfully beveled the edges of the stations and took the lines off the plans with a sliding bevel for this operation. Toby helped me snap a chalk line on the strongback to make a center-line.

*I had an interesting talk with Guiseppe around the issue of “working in the now”, as he puts it. He said that when one starts work then doesn’t look up until 6 or 7 hours later, he is ‘in the now’. That feeling of satisfaction is similar to what James Krenov talks about as the disappearance of space between worker and material (1985, p. 26). When time and outside thoughts fall away, the craftsperson’s body and tools blend with the work piece, allowing the boundary between consciousness and detachment to become fuzzy. It could be said that there is something missing in our collective definition*

*of a human being: the need to make. The culture in which we live honours specific kinds of making (shaping or mis-shaping a family or business) but does not understand how central making itself is a manifestation and mirror of the self, fundamental as eating or sleeping. That feeling of mindful detachment from the world and a deep focus on the present activity is one of the foundational and fuelling activities of the craftsperson, and one that is banished as a bane to efficiency in a fully rationalized mass production environment. This feeling, this detachment from many stimuli coupled with an intense attachment to others is important to distinguish from the monotonous detachment felt while working on a repetitive task dismembered from the whole. The factory worker, removed from the big idea of the job at hand is left to toil with no vision of his actions as an important link in a chain. For the craftsperson, a joyous transcendental state of work must, as a precursor have the hand and the mind in full connection with each other. With the separation of the work into mental and menial components, separation or duality also exists between the worker and the object of work.*

*Along the same vein it is worth noting the objectification of time in the modern world of work. As the worker is disembodied from the job as a whole, he is answerable less to a sense of completion and accomplishment and more to the clock. Although this system is efficient in terms of production, it is a catastrophic blow to the enjoyment and personal ownership of the task at hand.*

## **The Stem Molds**

Feb. 24, 2003

I went in today despite being sick and made some progress but also discovered a stomach twisting mistake... or puzzle anyhow. The stem mold, the curved shape that forms the ends of the canoe, is just totally the wrong shape. It simply won't line up at the point where the transition is made to the rest of the hull. I can't figure it out. I'm sure it's the sort of thing that when I look at it with a fresh (healthy) mind, all will be well... with another recut on the stem mold. Oh well, I'm getting good at it and it's easy to cut it smaller. I cut the grooves in the stations for the gunwale backers first thing. I also walked down to the building supply store and came back up with some longer screws and a 12 foot long 2 x10. It was heavy but the sun was out and the walk did my head cold some good. I arrived back and carefully aligned the stations then attached them with the screws. For this I attached some little blocks to the stations then screwed them down. This was a satisfying exercise, seeing all the stations lined up on the strongback for the first time.

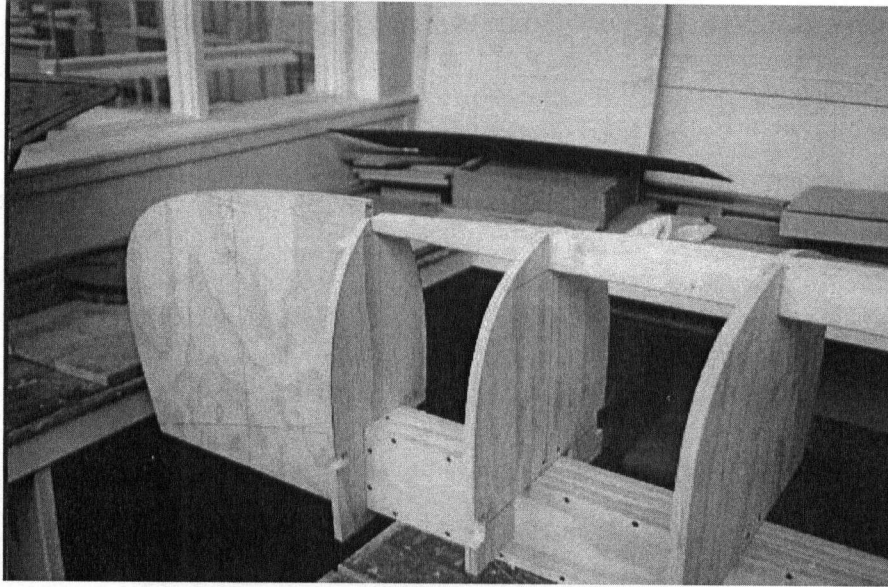


Figure 8. The stem mould

As I was packing up my tools, I realized that all the gunwale backer notches are slightly off... another measuring error. My cold is definitely affecting my thinking. If I feel like this tomorrow, I will have to do something that is somewhat mindless, perhaps mill out the gunwale backer stock. The thing about all this work at the beginning is that none of it is mindless. Any mistake will show up later as a lumpy canoe. (panic). I have been vigilant to go back and redo or fix any mistakes so far. I haven't started down the slippery slope of justifying the unjustifiable and letting shoddy work make it into the finished project.

I worked extensively on attaching the stem molds only to realize they are misshapen. Time to go home and get well; if I keep this up, I'll wreck the bloody thing.



Feb. 25, 2003

After measuring and trying the stem molds on the form over and over again, they measure to the correct size. They really don't look the right size at all. So I will carry on to the next step without the satisfaction of completing the last correctly. I can go back later and change the stems without too much trouble – which is good.



Figure 9. Stem mould with final station attached

*I am starting to feel genuinely frightened in regards to the size and complexity of this project. It is truly a massive undertaking. All of my difficulties so far have been around the issue of building one type of canoe from the plans for another. Having never built a boat before and having never really done any kind of lofting (the process of laying out a boat to be built), I remember Ted Aoki's voice encouraging life in liminal spaces. I exist on the edge of craftsman, amateur, historian, artist, and teacher and new parent*

*all at the same time. My creative experience of this project is massively satisfying thus far despite the blood curdling moments of realizing my complete lack of knowledge / technique. There are many moments when I feel that have taken on something utterly impossible and that I would have as much success if I was trying to build the space shuttle or a Swiss watch.*

I easily corrected the misplaced notches for the gunwale backers and have some work to do with a rasp on these. I am unsure as to why all the literature on these boats asks for hard wood backers particularly ash. Using ash will dictate steaming to make the backers fit. This seems quite a lot of effort just to make the backers. But I'll do it. I don't have any ash the full 16 foot length so I'll have to scarf some together. I started by milling out some stock to 7/8" square, enough for lengths on both sides of the mold. I haven't scarfed material before but having had adult students do it before in the night-school classes, I realized the need to get the matching angles perfect. I figured a little at the table saw and found a way to do it effectively. I have now 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the necessary scarfs on the pieces. The ash will need steaming, so I'll have to use epoxy to hold the joints together, measuring to make sure the joints locate at a strong station point.

*I am still quite sick, which is frustrating, the sluggish feeling pulling at me and knowing that I shouldn't be in a wood shop with all the dust and physical danger keeps me from getting up some serious momentum. I still feel that the hours fly by while I'm working but getting myself into the shop early and with a light heart is difficult.*

Feb. 27

I've done quite a bit of little stuff on the boat in the last few days. I spent a lot of time wrestling with the fact that the stems are misshapen. It's funny that when one wants to move on and make real progress, that a puzzle like this eats away at all progress until it must be dealt with. I suppose its like anything that's swept under the rug. I cut gunwale stock and milled it to finished size while I was avoiding dealing with the stem issue. It's quite difficult dealing with long lengths of stock – these are 20 footers. The gunwales are mahogany and they are beautiful already. I will need to bevel them to the finished angle and notch the outwale but this will come much later. The books on canoe construction complain about the time lost in milling stock, but I enjoy it immensely. Perhaps it's the fact that I have access to industrial quality tools and the milling work is easy – no jury rigging – or the fact that I enjoy the break from figuring things out and plotting yet another complex curve that if wrong threatens the whole project. I have the gunwale backers totally ready to steam, I just need a full day to do the whole thing: get the box heated, blanks in, and bend them. The blanks are soaking well now and should be ready whenever I choose to do it. I built a quick jig to bend over and it could use some sanding to get the line smoother. I'm confident that the curve is accurate and that it will do the job nicely.

*As a historical and national icon, the canoe is a controversial item. As the art Nouveau movement gave gradual birth to modernity in the early part of the twentieth century, so too did the canoe move from utility item to leisure item. This transition forced the manufacture of canoes away from its aboriginal and domestic roots and into the manufacturing realm of mainstream industry. Art Nouveau was a movement and a global culture that saw itself through world trade. That my version of the canoe is a piece of technological history from this transitional time is not lost on me. In fact, it is purposeful, making up a large part of my artistic commentary by robbing the image and the icon of the canoe out of utility and putting back in the realm of decorative arts. Placing myself in the late 1800's and looking forward, I can feel, as I work, the discomfort that this technology has with capitalist and industrial demands of efficiency and production. I can also feel, looking back now through the haze of essentialism to the past, how the canoe's transition carries with it all the typical baggage of modernity. Chief among these problems is modernity's lack of provision to deal with feminism and humanism. By presenting the canoe as a national symbol of exploration, Canadians allow all colonialist trappings to emerge. I am building and creating my canoe and my image of all of these historical canoes as a reaction to this essentialism in the icon "canoe". I recognize the desperate voices of aboriginal cultures rightfully claiming their contributions to the icon of the canoe, while suffering the irony of placing this vessel of their colonizers on a pedestal.*

*The role of Craft in delineating ethnicity is not lost on me. I craft this canoe as a way of pointing a finger at the stark lack of ethnic identity yet strident and unapologetic*

*nationalism in the classic Canadian canoe. Stark, because such a debt is owed and is as yet unpaid to the many aboriginal cultures responsible for the genius of this artful water conveyance. Strident, because the image of the canoe is prostituted in all contemporary Canadian popular culture from bank advertisements to national coins. I build my canoe as art in the face of this thinly veiled racism.*

*As an icon, the canoe has been with us since our national beginnings. My particular area of interest, centering around the time when my style of canoe was being built, includes as the canoe moved thousands of young people through their experience of summer camp in Canada's out-doors. The Canadian Summer Boy, illustrated below was part of the vast promotional material that was produced by shipping and railroad companies to lure new settlers to our country after the first-world war. This image of health, strength, and purity personifies the essentialist and utopian hope that fuelled much of Canada's early migration. That such a romanticized and unapologetic image was used to this end testifies to its iconic stature.*

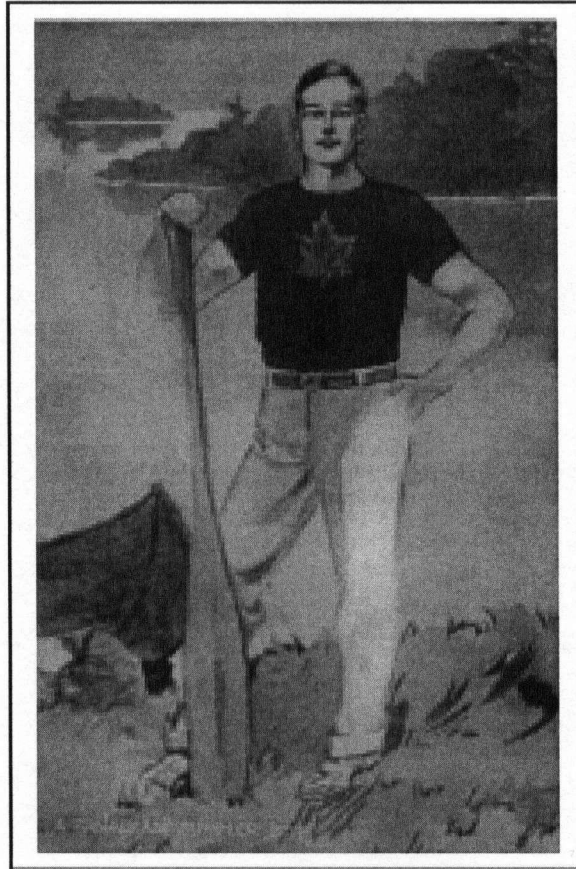


Figure 10. Canadian Summer Boy

## **The Stem Shape & Mould**

Feb. 28

I cut stealer planks for the bottom of the mold. The idea of the stealer planks is that as the strips are applied, they take the curve evenly and in their amount, have about the same area of hull to cover. I ended up making the stealers twice, as I made a measuring error on their length. I guessed somewhat as to their shape as it's not crucial; the shape came out almost perfectly. Screwing them down was satisfying to say the least. I immediately

saw the curve of the mould and the rocker in the top of the stealers and can now picture the hull coming together.

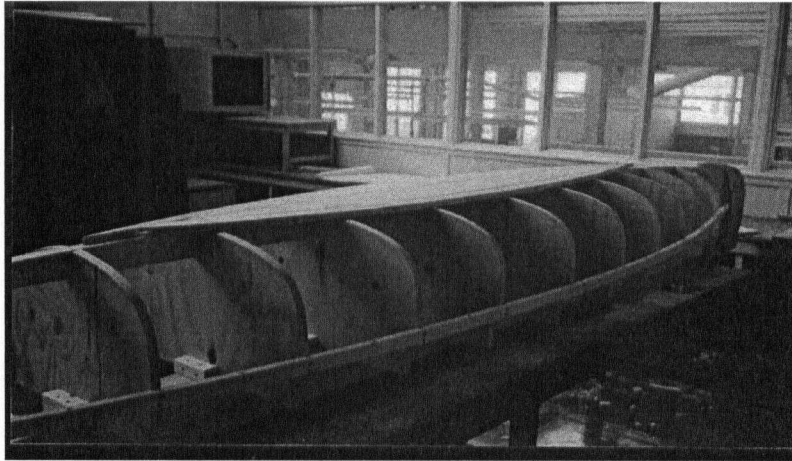


Figure 11. Steeler Planks installed, strips begun

March 4, 2003

Todd came to visit today and helped me extensively. The problem of the stem shape has been eating away at me and keeping me from working. I needed to solve this problem and could not figure it out at all. The curve is correct to the plan but not to the final mold height. This error, if left, would leave a step at the point of transition between the stem curve and the beginning of the hull bottom – a disaster. Todd helped me by explaining how to plot a complex curve on the actual stem mold, not from or on the plan. This allows me to correct for the added variations that are in the mold by plotting the finish curve on the actual hull form.

Boatbuilding... whew. I would like to do this tomorrow if I have



time; I don't want to forget how to do it before I need it. This really opens up a huge volume of work to be done.

*My relationship with my friend Todd is worth noting here. It has always been very close and rewarding, although sometimes strained and difficult. We are in all ways the very best of friends. He was best man at my wedding, we have been in school together since the age of 13 and now have the same career, following each other through various permutations of post secondary education and beginning teaching. He teaches woodwork in Courtenay, on Vancouver Island. Neither Todd nor I are particularly aligned to talking on the phone and our relationship has never been based largely on chat. Consequently, when we do spend time together, there seems to always be comfort for both of us to have a strong focus of something to do, usually with our hands. Over the years this has come to be many things. There have been days spent tearing apart houses, fixing cars, hiking, or driving down long dirt roads to no-where. We share books, ideas and experiences through participation in each other's projects of the moment. Recently Todd finished his M.Ed. in Curriculum Studies at U.B.C. Todd's technical expertise, I sometimes find daunting, but I know that there are subtle strengths and differences in our abilities. We are in many ways equal. Typical of craftsmen, our verbal exchanges tend to run to as much unsaid as said. Our most comfortable moments have likely been after a few days of spending time together, we are working on a project where our collective imagination is engaged. We control the emotional transaction of our relationship through a patois of technical musings and anecdotes – some running to the fantastical. Douglas Harper writes of this language in the workshop as the "moral*

*ables" that build relationships among participants (1987, p. 180). The control of these fables and to the degree that the story telling takes precedent over the job at hand is generally in the control of the most technically proficient member of the workshop community present. As stated above, I share a remarkable equality with Todd; this makes our technical and creative endeavors very enjoyable time together, free of the power structures too often present in male relations. The rhythm of my friendship with Todd has yet to find a way through living in different cities – something we have not done for any great length of time since we met. When we get together now, it takes longer for us to get to the point where we've found this rhythm. The canoe project has been great for both of us. We are not bound by the dictates of leisure time after work but have spent several mornings just working away.*

March 12, 2003

Yesterday I came in and immediately cleaned the shop, moving old projects out of the way and clearing up the detritus of the stem mould cutting and attaching process. I relish the volume of work ahead as I understand how it will unfold. As I begin to attach strips of wood to the form, the shape of the canoe appears as if by magic.

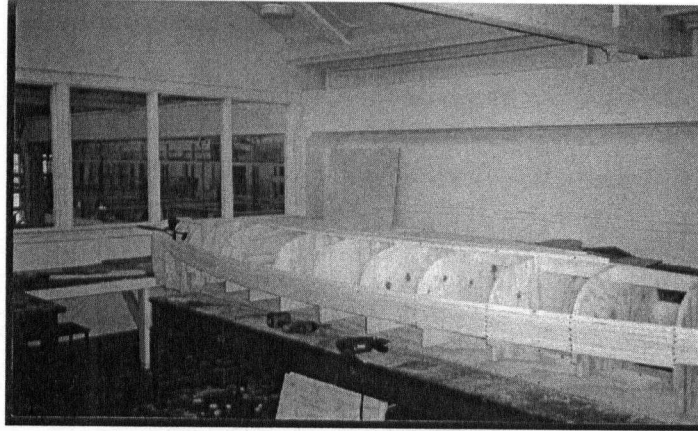


Figure 12. Many of the strips installed

What I'm really doing here is building the canoe from the inside out, completely from scratch, including the form (the mould) that gives the canoe its shape.

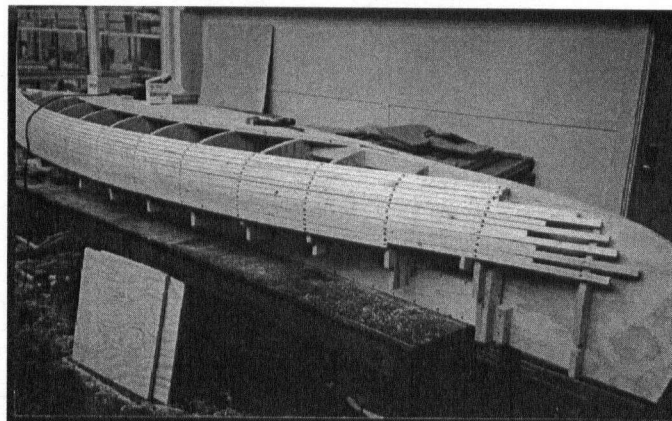


Figure 13. The form nearly complete

All the work I've done so far will not be part of the finished canoe, but the form. If all goes well, many canoes can be made on this form.

As the boat shape becomes more obvious, the traffic through the shop begins to trickle over to my work area with curious passersby.

I can tell already that students in general are going to be really into this project.

Somehow no-one is immune to the lure of a canoe.

*Why does a more difficult technical undertaking evoke more awe in appreciative eyes when something less will do neatly and cleanly? Craftspeople, to generalize, prefer to see complexity of effort in technical solution to problems, even when this effort is, practically speaking, self-indulgent. This seems to point out hypocrisy in traditional shop culture and the complex behaviors we undertake as we appreciate each other's work. As an example, a hand cut dovetail joint in wood is really no stronger or more effective than a simple spline-mitre joint, the fact that this hallowed style of woodwork, the hand cut dovetail, is employed and highly appreciated flies in the face of the ever-present 'simpler is better' manifesto that many craftsmen cling to. It's almost as if in an economy of time, a craftsman says something permanent about value when he makes an unnecessarily complex solution to a simple problem. Richard Ezra Probert in his memoir Archie's Way talks of this social tension rooted in the economy of practicality (pp 17). Men in particular seem to have had few options when it comes to appreciating each other and each other's work. A compliment of one's work, in many shop cultures, is hardly and subtly different than fawning; to compliment can often put up a barrier to further conversation that is impossible to remove. Dictates of hierarchy passed down from the master and apprentice relations of the middle ages set out a complex and fearsome code of conduct for visitors and newcomers to the shop.*

Mar 13, 2003

Todd and I also bought two more 2x6s to rip into strips, which I later did. The material will serve as more strips tying the stations together. I will pre-drill the holes in these strips to prevent splitting. For basically the first time I can see the shape of the canoe by dropping a sheet over the stations as they sit all together on the strongback. This is really an exciting and dramatic moment – the first time that the canoe leaps to life from the imagination to the physical. I can walk around it, touch it, and think about it in ways not yet possible.

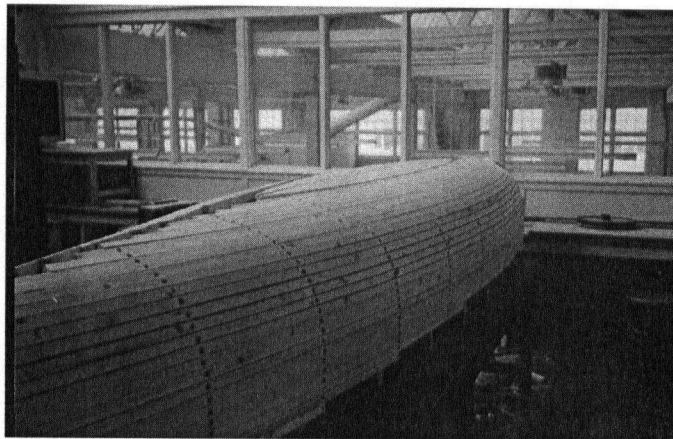


Figure 14. The fully stripped form

*I am often left thinking, while I'm teaching my teenage students, about the differences in all people's abilities to visualize. I know that I can only see so far ahead in a given project, and that ability to see ahead in shapes, colors and contours makes up what we call a mechanical mind -- is this something teachable and learnable or is it a static commodity? Of course, as a teacher, I must believe in my ability to uncover and nurture such ways of thinking in my students, but I know that I can become frustrated at my apparent sometime inability to see more than three or four steps ahead. This visualization is the core language in this strange and ethereal motivation to build. I can*

*see the next piece of wood fitting in as I cut the plank to length and width. This experience becomes almost a permanent and rotating tantalizing dissatisfaction. As I finish one step, I picture the next and am picturing the next and the next. Finding the balance between enjoying what I'm doing at any given moment and looking and picturing the next step becomes a delicate dance of satisfaction. The forward thinking almost flies in the face of what I'm calling the 'life in the now' perspective but the pattern of visualizing then success, then visualizing, then success has its own lulling rhythm of tension and release, challenge and reward.*

Apr. 14, 2003

I spent the day preparing for and bending the stems. The stem is the piece of hardwood at either end of the canoe that ties all of the others together. It is the most structurally important piece of the canoe and by far the most difficult to manufacture correctly. It must be light, very strong, and bent to the curve that forms the shape at each end of the boat. There may be no hidden forces in the stem pushing the finished canoe out of its dictated shape. To make this bend, I must take a piece of hardwood of the proper dimension, soak it in water for about a week, heat it in a steam chamber of some kind for about 1 ½ hours and quickly bend it around a plywood form that is exactly the shape I need, clamping it in place to let it cool and dry. This process changes the memory of the long cells in the wood, forcing them into new positions and

holding them there until they can't return. This impossible process really cements in my mind that I am working with a plant material. Wood is something born of water and heat, and that having the right tricks in my toolbox, I can mess with nature itself – twisting and forming a machine-straight piece of lumber back to a natural curve that will slice the water silently.

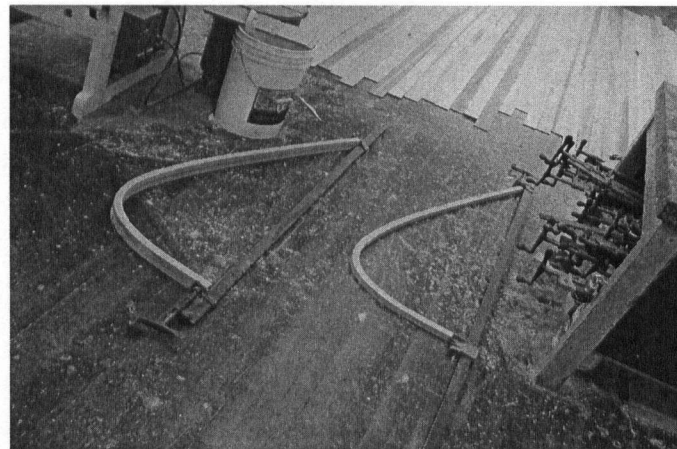
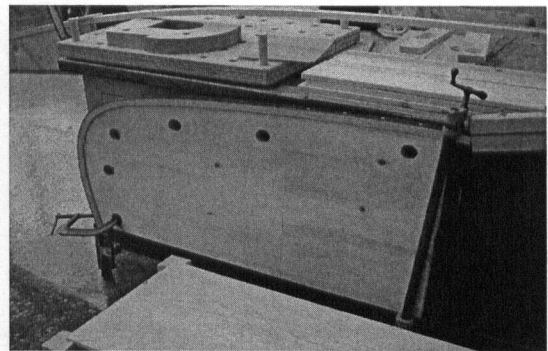
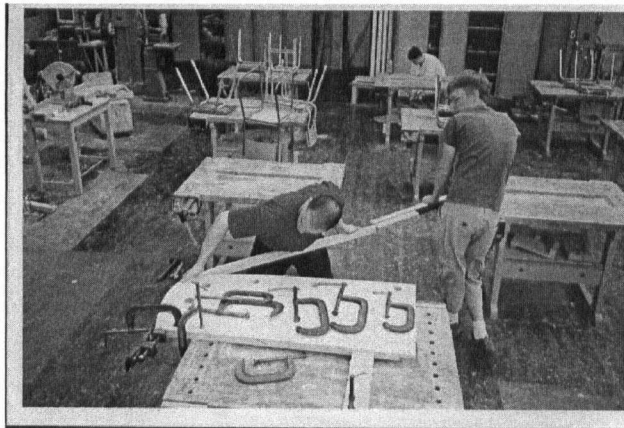


Figure 15. Bending the Stems

As part of the preparation for this project, I experimented with some smaller pieces in the fall to learn how to steam and bend wood. I had several students helping me with the process and used

this as an informal teaching opportunity. The force needed to bend the wood is huge and many times a winch is used in this technique, although in this instance one or two of us pulling on a six foot lever of hard wood worked well. As we bent the first of our experiments, the piece slipped out of the lever half way through the bend and leaped past my head and the face of one of the students, coming to a rest across the shop. We eliminated the risk of this being repeated by placing a couple of clamps on the wood as soon as it began to bend, but the incident imbued seriousness to our further trials.

*As I do this work and the excitement I'm feeling rubs off on those around me, I realize again what good teaching of technology can be. My frenzy and fervor with the wood steaming, complete with kettles boiling and strange plywood boxes disgorging wisps of vapour, fascinates almost all of the students. Even when I make an error, my keenness overcomes any loss of credibility and the repetition of the job increases mine and the students' emotional investment. I find the purposeful repetition and conscious practice of technique an entirely satisfying endeavor and a very effective teaching tool. As long as the student(s) have the chance to fail in an environment that couches their failure in terms of 'figuring it (the problem) out' they can take on, and have great success at very difficult technology. Their failures, taken light-heartedly and in the spirit of effort, can be fun. It is this "exercise of reason" that allows us to slip the tresses in the paradigm of right and wrong and learn with joy (Noddings, 2003, p. 10).*



April 16, 2003

I have finished building the mould for the canoe. All the strips are in place and the metal straps have been installed that will serve to clinch the nails.

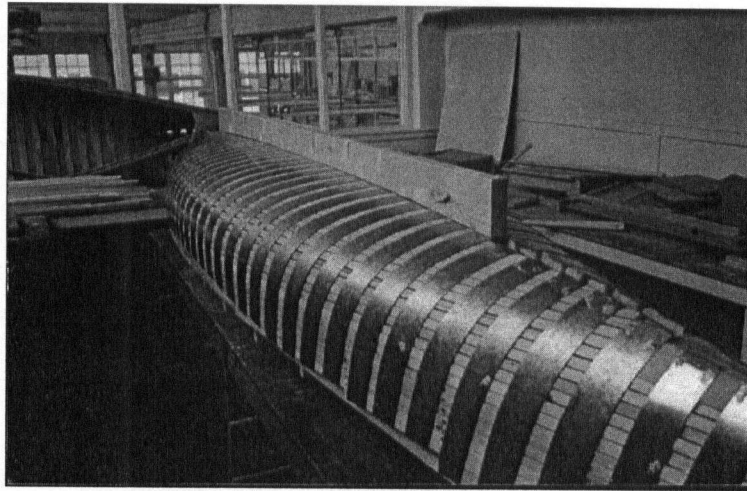


Figure 16. The form with galvanized metal strips installed

Clinching refers to the process whereby a nail comes through both pieces meant to be attached together, then upon striking the hard metal underneath, it bends back on itself and the bent end digs into the wood. This bent or clinched end, now somewhat hook shaped, adds formidable strength to the joint of the two pieces. The stem backing moulds are in place and the stems are ready to be installed. I cut the sheet metal for the strips out of old galvanized shelving as the galvanization will have the properties of hardness needed to allow the nails to clinch and not discolour the ribs when they are wet from steaming.

*My use of old materials and cast-offs that clutter up the shop to build the form gain more depth when viewed from the perspective of Claude Levi-Strauss, writing about the working knowledge of people in "prior" societies. In The Savage Mind (1966), Levi-Strauss calls this ongoing process of problem solving the "science of the concrete" – forming one's survival by adapting the bricoles of the world. Bricolage is making use of such bricoles – the odds and ends, the bits left over, the set of unrelated or oddly related objects and processes. According Levi-Strauss the bricoleur is most typically found as the natural man of savage (Levi-Strauss would prefer "prior") societies, but his method resembles that of the handy-man, the English odd-job man, or the jack-of-all-trades. During my regular teaching, I am consistently aggravated when upon entering the shop, some visitor or other comments on the clutter. The clutter and the ever-shifting strata of partially finished projects speak of possibility and opportunity, not of neglect and decay. What others see as junk, I can often see as the ingredients of item or experience.*

*Levi-Strauss writes of his bricoleur:*

*the rules of his game are always to make do with whatever is at hand, that is to say with a set of tools and materials which is always finite and is also heterogeneous because what it contains bears no relation to the current projects or indeed to any particular project, but it is the contingent result of all the occasions there have been to renew or enrich the stock or to maintain it with the remains of previous constructions or destructions. (1966, p. 21)*

*In my work as a bricoleur, I define and extend myself. It is not only that my work solves material problems, but also that my life choices take on the same characteristics as the decisions made in the course of work. It is in the replication of the means that the material work influences the mental. The idea that the bricoleur is first a thinker and*

*then a worker or moreover that these two identities are intertwined and inseparable resonates strongly for me. One of my night school students is, among other things, a Latin scholar and she helped me come up with a personal motto for myself: Omnia Sapienter which translates: All things (done) thoughtfully. At first read, this smacks a tad of pomp and treacle, but as the innermost thread in a strong cord of purpose, I find this amusingly definitive of my nature.*

*In our current world, the bricoleur's skills and mind-set are almost daily losing their currency – becoming an existence ever more marginal. As capitalism decrees vocations that constantly specialize, the bricoleur must sacrifice variety for an expert's existence. Time, and its resolute march forward, are perennially working against the bricoleur. I typically have at least six major projects on the go at once, and the experience of the canoe has again been one of resisting the pull to other projects. As portions of the canoe become either intimidating or mildly monotonous, I am drawn away from the work by an idea or an inspiration erupting to birth another soon to be half-started project.*

April. 18, 2003

As I walked to the shop this morning I went over all the details of installing the inwale (the inner half of the gunwale) and of beginning the process of bending the ribs on the form.

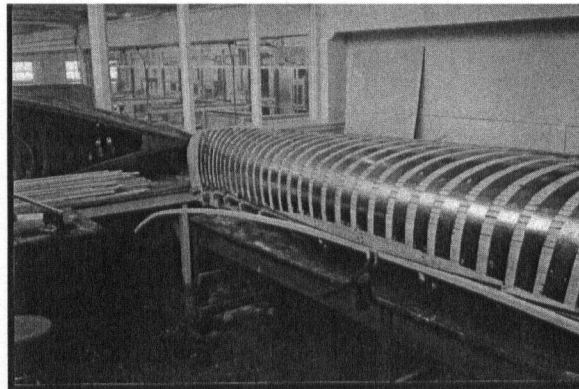
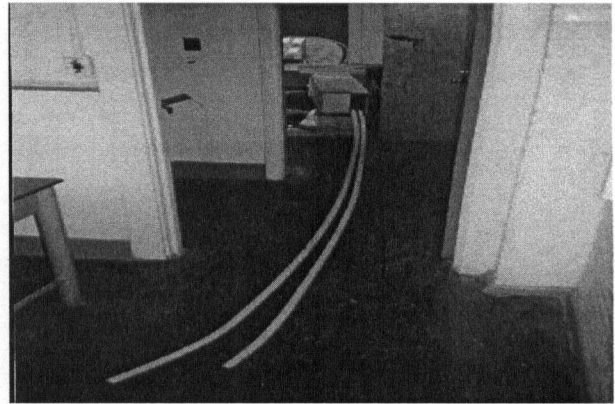


Figure 17. Steam bending and installing the inwales

This is really where the process of boat building begins in earnest. I made a trip to Lee Valley Hardware and handed over what seemed like a million dollars for the silicon-bronze nails that hold the ends of the ribs to the inwales.

## The Ribs

April 20, 2003

Picking through the pile at a lumber yard is something I'm getting better at. There is an informal language at a lumber yard that can be difficult to learn and I think for many is quite intimidating.

Today I went out to Delta and bought the yellow cedar for the rib stock. I ended up in the sort of place catering entirely to the do-it-yourself crowd. It's a place that strikes fear into those who know a little bit about what they're looking for and blithely fleeces the wallets of those who don't. Next to the precut picnic table kits and pre-made fence panels was a large shed, far too clean and expensive looking, full of absolutely perfect yellow cedar. I felt as if I should kidnap it all and save it from its fate as the latticework of suburbia. Although experienced now, I am consistently intimidated by yet prefer places frequented by professional builders and where ignorance of the process of selecting and buying material generally gives short shrift to the uninitiated.

*It seems that the way men communicate and what they choose to talk about in a shop or technical environment, like any language, holds to a special set of rules. This predominantly male centered shop-talk that surrounds craft-work can and is many times an exercise in speaking without saying. What I mean by this is that like talk of the weather, the talk surrounding work in the shop can often be no more than avoiding*

*talking about anything else. Guiseppe and I will go for long periods where our technical musings and teasing builds us to a point where intimacy is briefly attained. Our constant testing of each other's technical opinion and the exchange of technique forms a balm of acceptance whereby the innermost fears and realizations can be aired. I suppose that this is in many ways like a knitting circle. We busy ourselves in thoughtful work as a way to expose ourselves to each other in comfort. Shop-talk is a language unto itself: hard, pointed, and initially intimidating, yet full of the teasing that belies its ritual and intimate importance.*

*Running through shop-talk are strange traditions of what Adorno termed reification; things like measurements and machines become abstract and are attributed to have even their own purpose. When I mutter "my table saw is fighting me today," am I not abstracting my own experience of this inanimate machine to the point where it comes alive and is self empowered, even has feelings and rights like a person? So, just as we find comfort in objectifying everything uniquely visceral and emotional for us in the shop, with that very same action we inadvertently grant our work-space and tools a life and spectral magic of their own. This magic allows us an intimacy and reverence with each other. Where industrialism would shun such tender qualities as hindrances to all modernist battle-cries: productivity! efficiency! progress! – We shop dwellers: craftspeople, masters, apprentices, and hangers on, create an environment where human tenderness can flourish.*

April 21, 2003

I spent the day milling out the ribs from the yellow cedar.

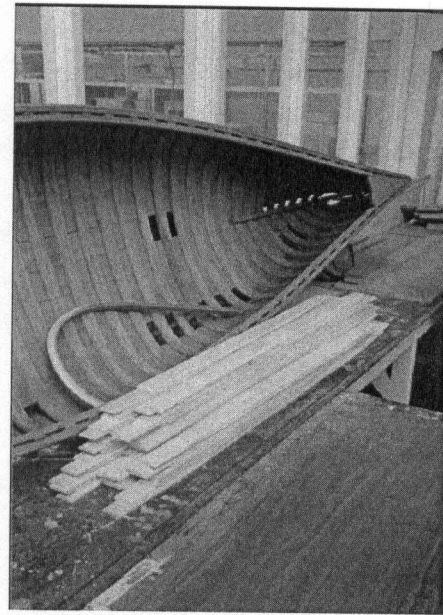
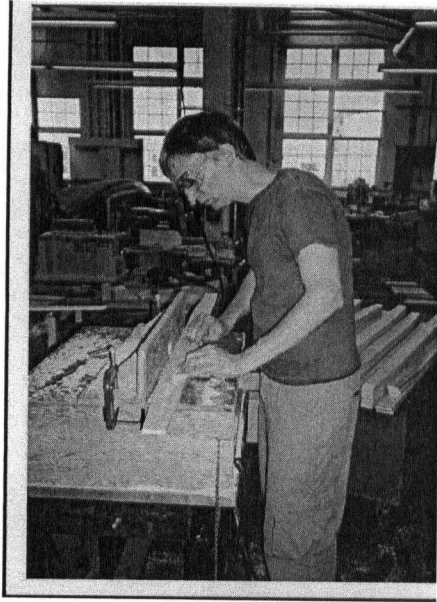


Figure 18. Milling the ribs

They had to be planed and tapered and routed on the edges. I put them in to soak and made up a bath for this to happen in.

April 26, 2003

Today I steamed and bent the first few of the ribs over the building form.

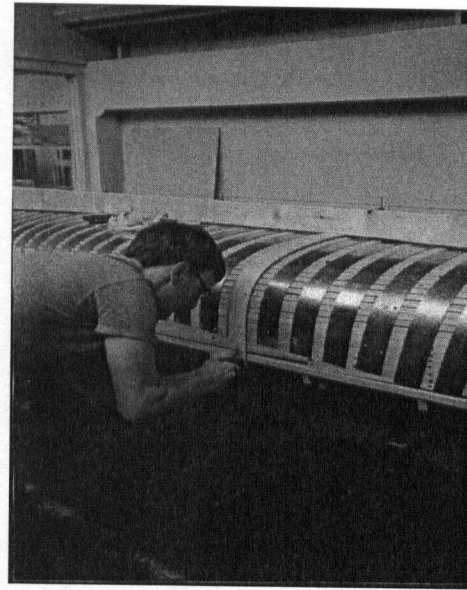
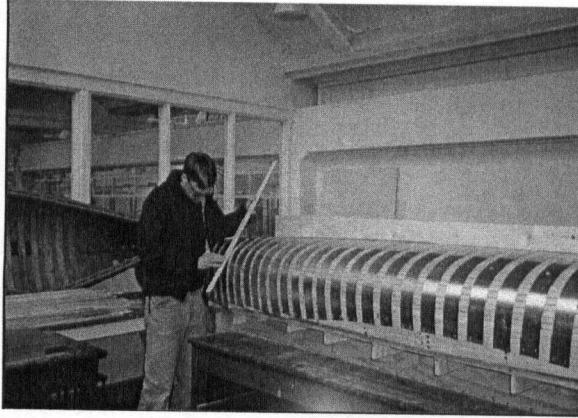
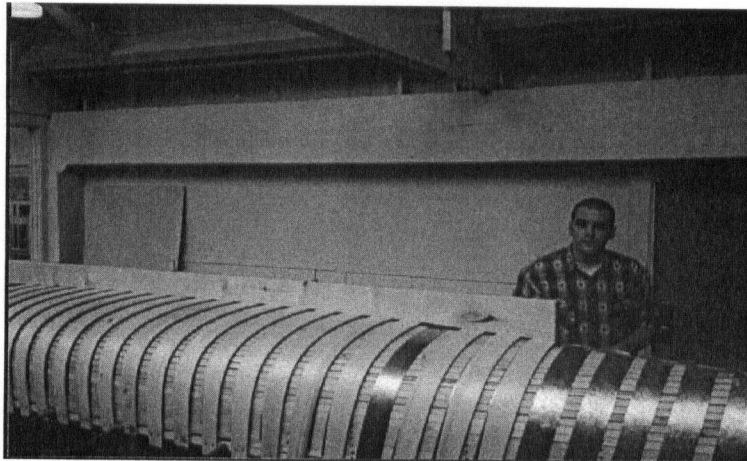


Figure 19. Bending on the first ribs

To make this process work, I had to use green wood (not kiln dried wood). It worked perfectly and when bent had the consistency and flexibility of thick leather.

April 30, 2003

Once begun, the bending of the ribs went very quickly.





I now had a system in place and a helper (Guiseppe) that could spend a few hours in the shop; I completed all the ribs in the canoe in about 2 ½ hours. As we bent the ribs over the form we would nail them to the edge of the inwale, now firmly jammed into a slot down in the edge of the form.

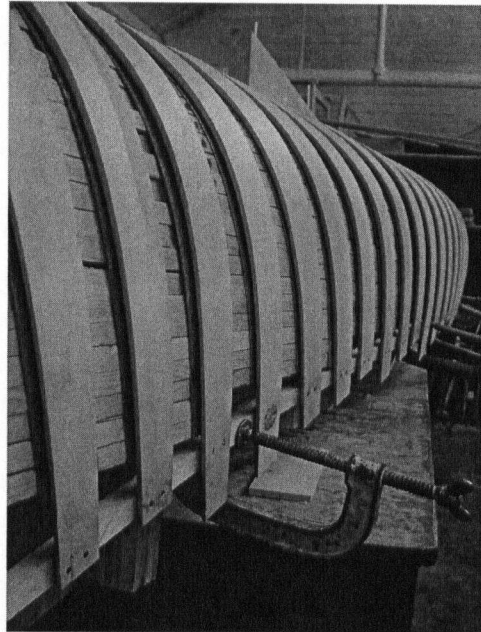


Figure 20. The ribs complete

## **The Planking**

May 01, 2003

I'm getting close to needing the red cedar wood for the planking. Several weeks ago I made contact with a very small sawmill that does specialty cutting of old-growth cedar. On the phone the two brothers that run the mill sound like quite alternative guys. One of the brothers informed me within the first two minutes of the call that (among many other far-ranging things) he was a disbarred

lawyer, and that if they didn't like the sound of my project I would be sent elsewhere to buy my wood. After passing the informal interview and waiting two weeks for them to prepare the perfectly straight grained, twenty-foot lengths I require, I went out to their mill on the Fraser River in Maple Ridge. It was a relatively small set-up, outdoors under the cover of a large shed roof, piled high with cedar chips and abandoned lumber, graying in the cool spring air. On the deck of the band saw lay the log that my wood had come from. I could easily count by tens of years up to six hundred the growth rings that indicate the tree's age. He had bought the log from a shake mill just up the river and had dragged it up out of the water (forty feet away) with a modified truck winch. The planks cut for me were exquisite and priced reasonably. The deal was cash and by evidence of the rum bottles and coke cans lying about, profits would be quickly poured back into the operation.

*I was again confronted with a strange and wonderful craft and building dialect in Maple Ridge. Through questions and teasing my technical expertise was tested by the younger of the two brothers whose age I would estimate at 70 or so. Details of the canoe project awoke experiences of childhood summers in a canoe and over the course of two hours stories were told, my wood was packed onto the car, and I was given a substantial discount. I knew I had passed some sort of informal barrier when I was offered a rum and coke, mixed in the can. I enquired about their operation delicately, and without*

*fawning, noted the size of the machinery and, more importantly, the customized jigs and fixtures that enable the brothers to make the long cuts they specialize in. I was careful to couch my language in a tone of respect without letting my enthusiasm become patronizing. As Richard Probert writes, any show of arrogance would end the conversation immediately and send me on my way (1998, p. 10).*

May 17, 2003

I've begun the process of planking the hull with the cedar I bought in Maple Ridge. It feels entirely indulgent to use such beautiful wood. Considering this log was headed for a shake mill, I don't feel that guilty. My building of a canoe as a conveyance to the natural world plays into to my complex riddle of justification as well. Thinking metaphorically, my canoe carries me away from the modern city of industry to a keener and closer relationship with the natural world. I can justify the use of this old growth material that no doubt will take fully six hundred years to regenerate to this quality by thinking of all the fence posts and roof shingles that it could have become. That this ancient cedar wood will become a canoe and have so much 'value added' brings the my relationship with the material back to some natural harmony.

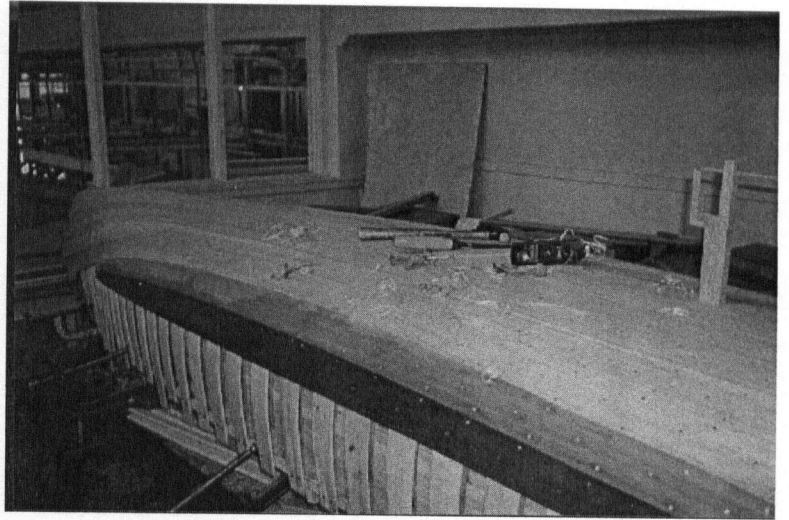
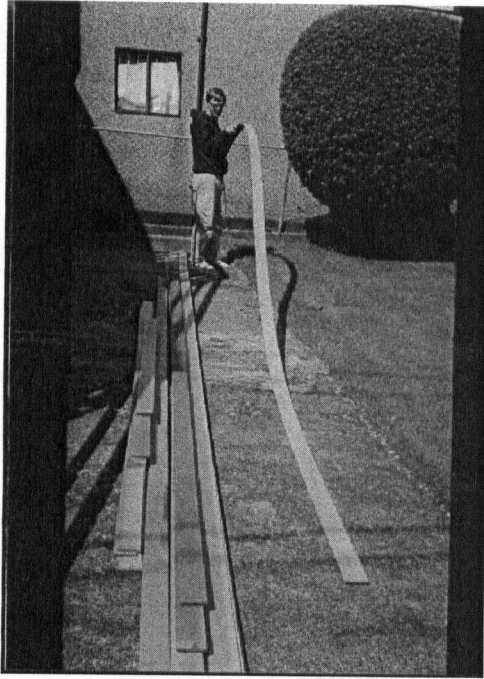


Figure 21. The Planking

As I bash in hundreds of tiny brass tacks, I marvel at this system of fastening. As the tack punches through both the plank and the rib, it pulls the two together; the tip of the tack then hits the galvanized metal on the form below and bends back around, burying itself in the plank.

This process, referred to as clinching, is astoundingly strong. I'm thinking of all the different things this glue-free system could be used to make. I see a series of summer dwellings, like giant baskets, clinched together, temporarily affording more permanence than tents.

*As I beat away at this edifice I'm creating, I come to think of my hammer as an extension of my arm, and of the twenty or so hammers in the shop, I come to have favorites for the strangest of reasons. My favorite for the last week or so has been a 13 oz. Stanley claw hammer with a wooden handle. The hammer, coated with years of varnish and countless dents, has several holes drilled through the handle in odd places; scars left behind by one or two of the possibly thousands of students who have used it.*

*I often ask my grade 8 students about the differences between tool and machine, and am met with a variety of strange and romantic notions of what a tool is. Essentially a device that applies a force without changing the direction or application of that force, tools are everywhere and everything. While machines take on a spectral life of their own, tools in essence, are extensions of ourselves. Although for the most part, mass-produced, tools are the dismembered limbs of all who have worked with them before, and by so being, exude an aura. "Like the nails on a beast's paws," Eric Sloane writes, "the old tools were so much an extension of a man's hand, or an added appendage to his arm, that the resulting workmanship seemed to flow directly from the body of the maker and to carry something of himself into the work" (1991, p. 8). Old tools are to some, relics of a mythic past, and to others antidotes to the anonymity of automation, standardization, and to the brand of soft utopianism that holds all change to be progress. Although wary of nostalgia and groundless sentimentality, I know tools carry well the baggage of culture -- representing these tensions admirably.*

*The shop I work in, a museum of twentieth century industrial thinking, could serve well as a set for any of the tool fetishist programs that abound on cable television. Tucked in many corners, are cupboards full of old hammers, chisels and planes.*

*Although tools like these are still used by professionals, these tools in this place (a comprehensive secondary school shop) are less items to unlock a desire of career, and now more articles of diversion from an academic course load. The dawn of amateurism in the 1940s began a do-it-yourself craze that thrives to today on cheap mass-produced tools. There is irony in the fact that people buy inexpensive made-in-China knock-offs of iconic tools,, in order to do amateur manual labour while workers laid off by the traditional manufacturers of these tools seek employment in the service industry.*

May 21, 2003

I'm in the middle of goring the planking using the block plane.

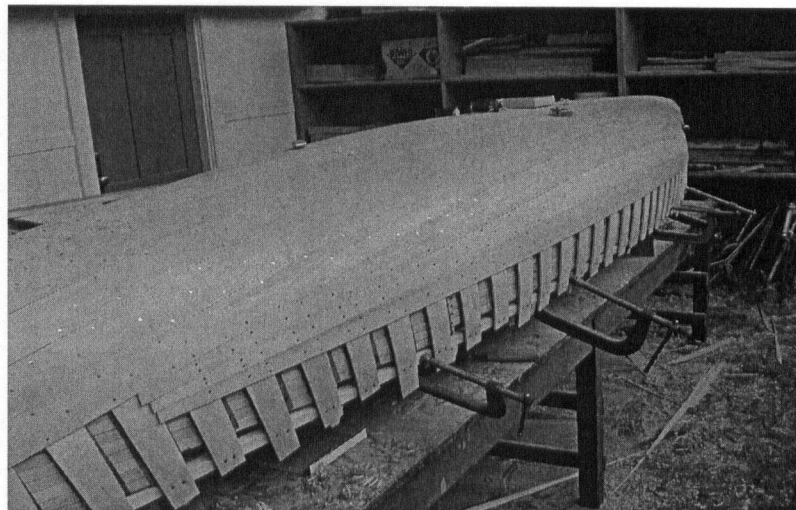


Figure 22. Goring the planking

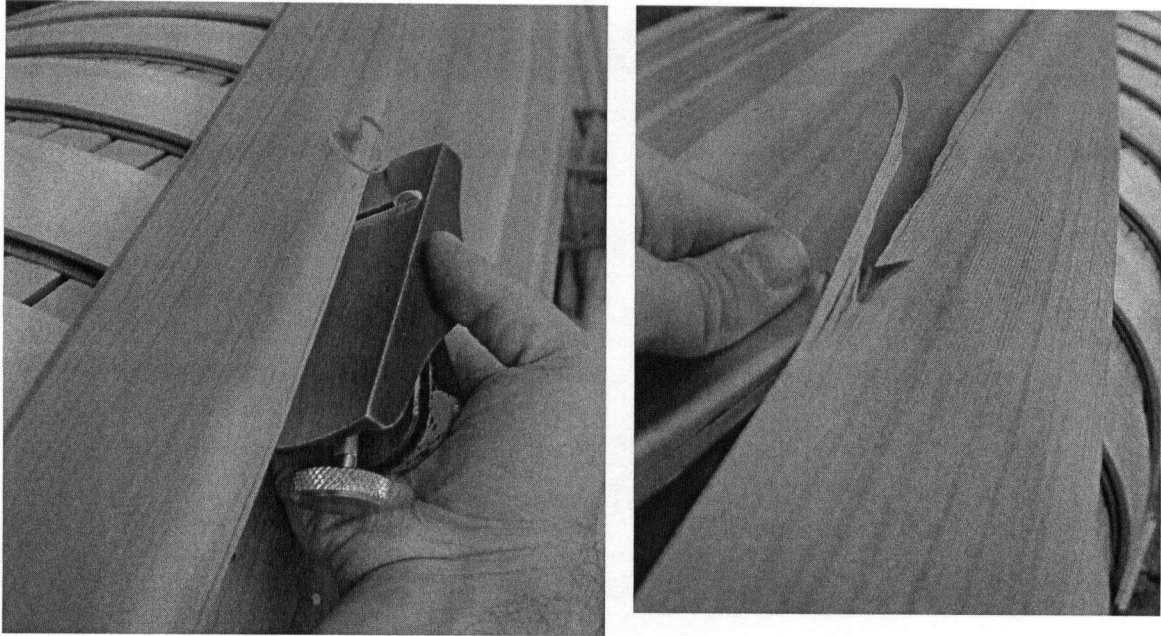


Figure 23. Trimming the planking to fit

I made up a special little gauge to facilitate the marking out of each plank in relative terms to the last.

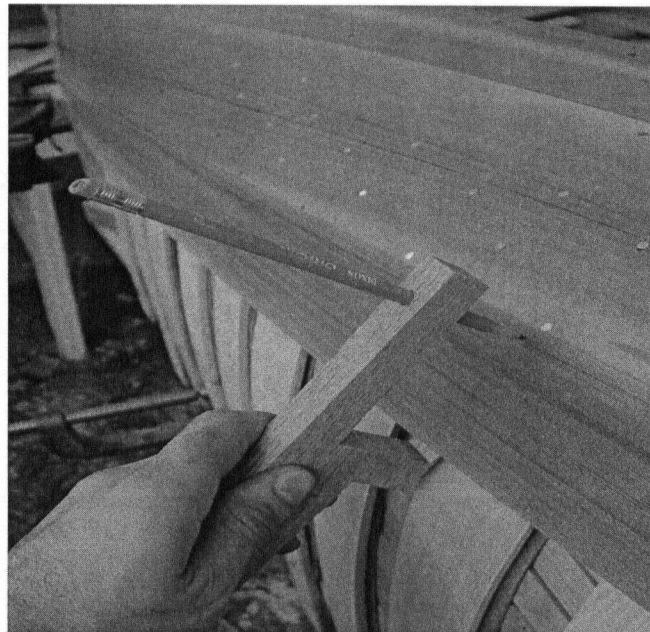


Figure 24. The planking gauge

*It seems the word craft and the activity Craft have restricted and belittled the activity of hand building throughout the last 120 years. Craft as a discipline, in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century up to present day, evokes images of busy troops of girl guides, grandmothers, and five-year-olds hot-gluing pipe cleaners and macaroni to bits of cardboard. Alternatively, under the light of a different social strata, craft includes the artisanry of peasant hand work made popular starting in the 1960s. In our western modernist culture, this would include weaving, pottery, beadwork etc. Although the bead and pipe-cleaner way of thinking about craft, for some a childhood rite of passage, and for others, a nexus of more thoughtful hand-work, restricts craft. I see Craft as less an essentialist term describing a set of rigid disciplinary structures and more a term that post-modernity accepts as a political endeavor. To look back before the industrial revolution and describe all hand- work as craft in the same realm as the craft of today is to miss the point entirely. Pre industrial revolution hand-work is simply the industry of that moment. To revere all shop work and production of goods that are pre-industrial revolution as contemporary craft is romantic piffle. Rather, an "expanded concept that encompasses the synthesis and symbiosis of craft and industry of our Post-Modern age" is in keeping with the spirit of this research (Secondo, p. 117). I am building my canoe partially as an ironic reaction to my circumstance; as a modern-day jack-of-all-trades, I work as much in artistic response to modern efficiency as I do in busy industrious production. I work less in the romantic slop of historical idealism, and more in hedonistic enjoyment of the handyman's self-sufficiency.*



May 24, 2003

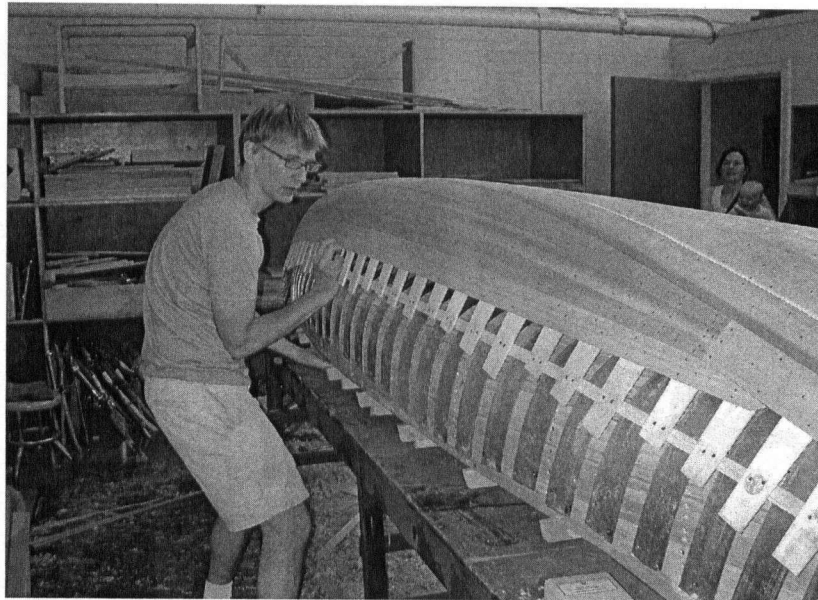


Figure 25. Removing the hull from the form

I've finished the planking to the point where the hull can be removed from the form. This is an exciting moment. For the first time, I will see the inside of the canoe as it will appear finished. The process and structure evokes some kind of prehistoric ribcage or carapace as I coax the hull from the form; I feel how an archeologist must, gently prying a specimen from the sand. As the hull comes off the form, I catch a glimpse of the gleaming yellow cedar cast against the copper of the red cedar. It is lighter in weight than I had imagined -- the whole hull can held like a suitcase once it's off. Certain smells can instantly remind one of things long past. The damp cedar now released from the clutches of the building form brings back strong memories of visiting the museum of anthropology at U.B.C. when I was very young --

standing ankle deep in cedar chips with my family and watching the totem poles be carved. What an ingenious and bewitching material cedar is – extreme water resistance, a strength to weight ratio that rivals any modern material with a look and feel that is decidedly and alluringly soft.

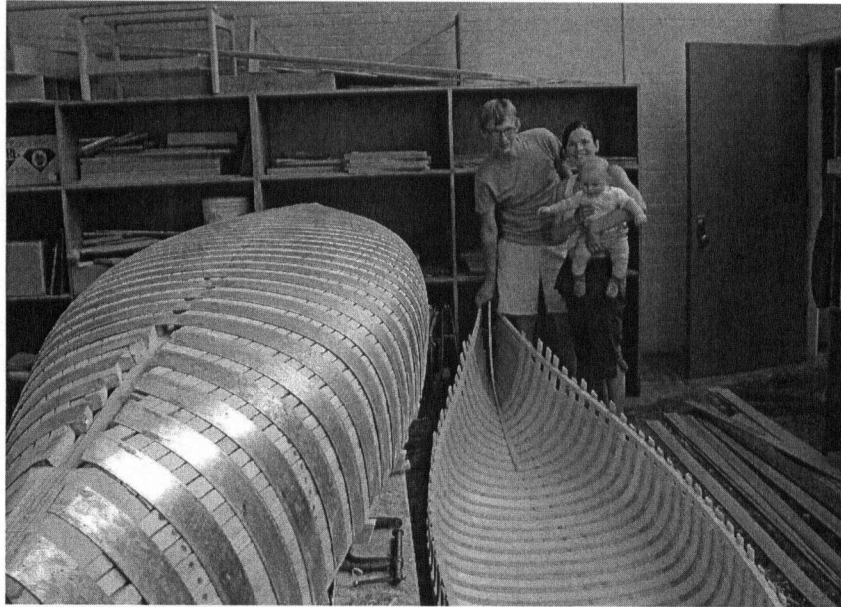


Figure 26. The hull removed

*I've lately been frustrated by the overwhelming vocational focus that my colleagues embed in their programs. As craft and technology educators, I believe we are meant to instill a holistic awareness and excitement in these intertwined realms, not structure our programs after trades based training institutions. Our history as a discipline shines a light on our future; the most successful and long-lasting technology education programs were and are those that approach technology as world to be aware of and not as a set of skills to be learned. Across British Columbia technology educators as a group are much more vulnerable to broad cultural ideas and romantic notions of industry than they are to progressive and informed thought about the nature and purpose*

*of our discipline. This dichotomy lives large, even in our school technology education department. Departmental colleagues stop by the canoe-building corner of the shop, and with detached amusement make comments on the vocational usefulness of this sort of enterprise. Others are swept up by the excitement and try to find a way to justify this sort of behavior in terms of leisure. My zealotry does not amount to engaging wholeheartedly in heated debate at every instance, but I am now trying to couch all of my descriptions and discussions of this project to my colleagues in terms that describe it as a personal and professional investigation of curriculum practice. It is amazing how this frame of reference can be, in some colleagues, a threatening and ridiculous approach.*

## **The Hull**

May 26

Now that the hull is off the form and downstairs, I can quickly finish the planking and add the decks. I want nothing more at this point than to climb inside the hull and sit in the bottom, running my hands over the impossibly bent ribs. I'm sure the structure of the hull is strong enough for such silliness, but like many an enterprise, the rewards of the process are best not sampled before the end.



Figure 27. The hull downstairs

May 29, 2003

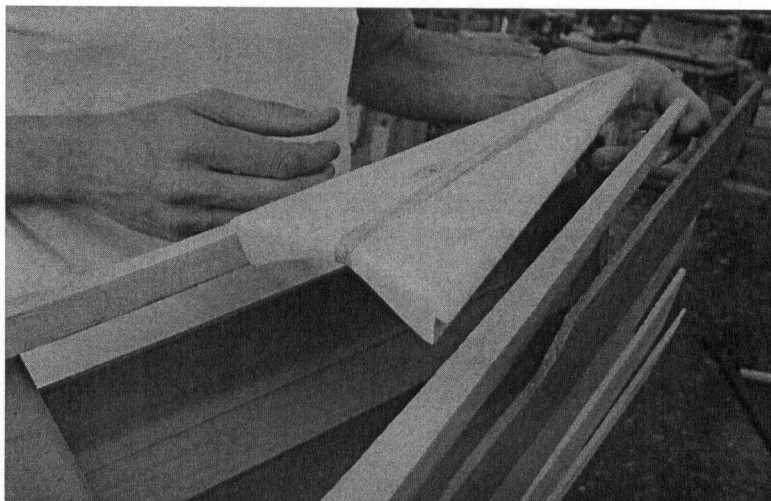
Adding the decks and straightening the hull is a rewarding process.

With each small step the boat looks more and more canoe-like.

Several of the students said I should take it down to Trout Lake

just to make sure it works before I put more work into it.

Figure 28. Adding the decks



Clinching the nails is a backbreaking process. I try not to count the number of tacks ahead and project this thinking forward to estimate a time when it might be over.

*The astounding belief in the possibility that the canoe might “not work” and what follows, a general disbelief of the hand-made article actually being functional is an outlook I have come across surprisingly often while teaching on the east side of Vancouver. Many times I have had grade nine students ask me, with obvious great doubt in their hearts, if their year-end table-project will work and actually hold something off the floor when they are finished. They seem to think that their hand in manufacture, even as motivated students, will positively result in a dysfunctional and at best ornamental object. Although my upbringing in a slightly more self sufficient environment can account for some of this chasm of difference in my thinking in relation to that of my students’, I am left mystified as to how the difference can be so great. I suppose this is one focus of my career – to imbue young people to the possibility in their hands and minds.*

June 1, 2003

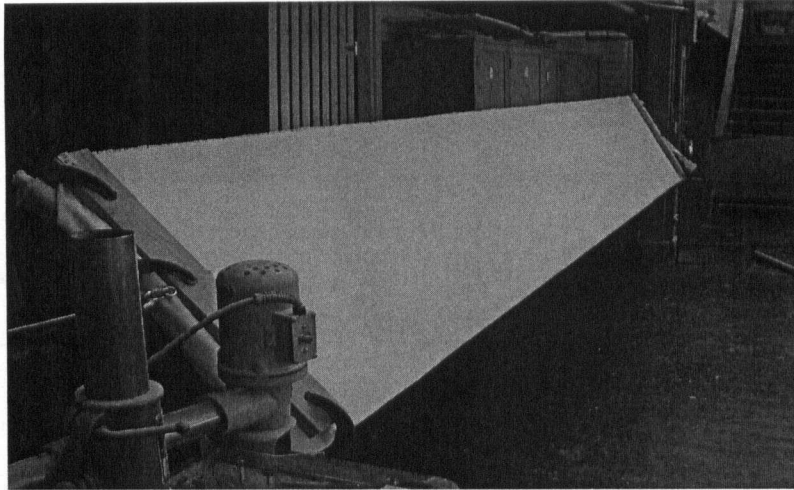


Figure 29. Stretching the canvas

Having sanded the hull completely, I am ready to canvas the boat.

This process really does seem like black magic and the students are fascinated that an envelope of cloth and paint could render this weird vessel water-worthy.



Figure 30. The hull inside the canvas

I have made two giant clothes pins out of wood and with these and a portable winch, stretch the canvas between two poles in the shop,

applying about 1500 lbs. of tension force. When the canvas has stretched for two days, I loosen the winch slightly and jam the hull of the canoe into the pocket of canvas, bracing it to the ceiling to keep it from popping out. I then retighten the winch and pull the excess canvas over the gunwale and tack it down.



Figure 31. Tacking the canvas to the edge of the hull

June 3, 2003

As I have just finished tacking and trimming the last of the canvas down, I will now treat it by burning it slightly with a torch to remove the fuzz and nap then fill the canvas with a paste putty/filler.



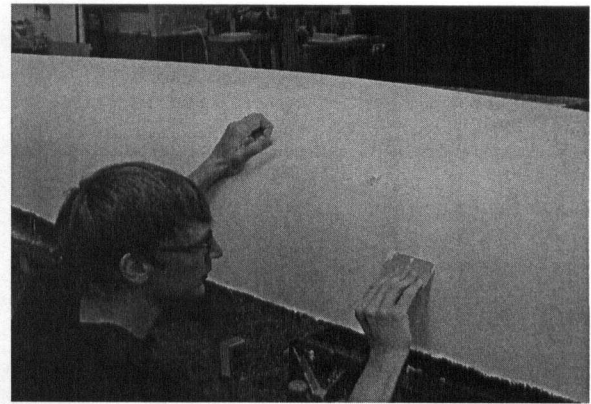
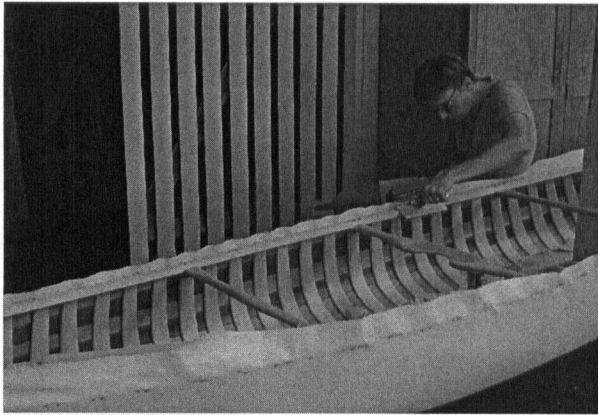


Figure 32. Filling the weave of the canvas

June 8, 2003

During the last few days I've let the filler on the outside of the boat harden up and I've sanded and varnished the now complete inside of the boat. Over the last few months when waiting on wood or needing to do some hand work in the middle of the planking process, I've made seats, thwarts and a yoke.

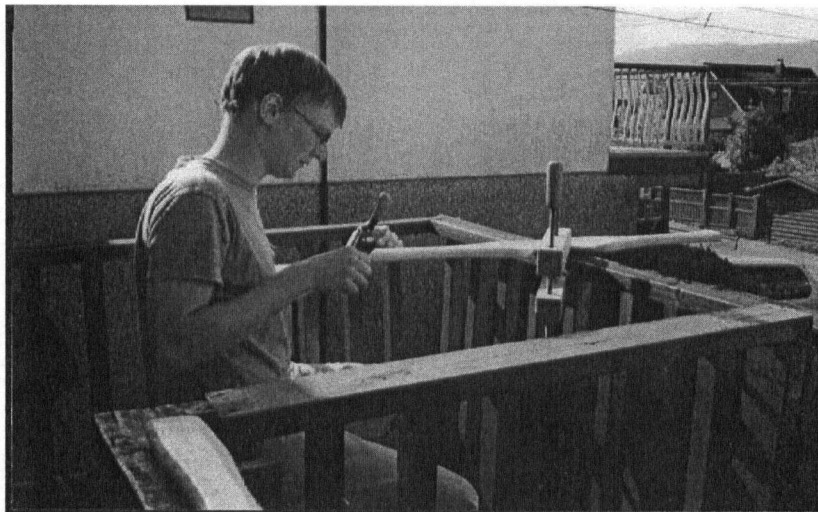


Figure 33. Carving the yoke and thwarts



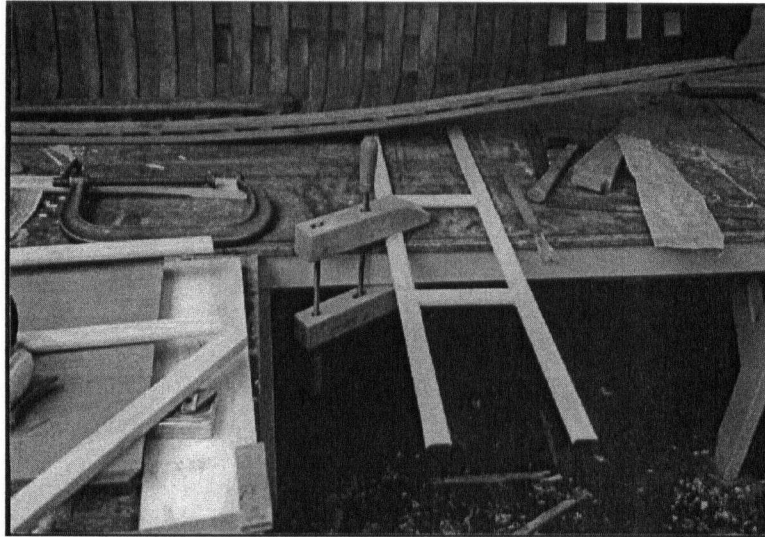


Figure 34. The yoke, thwarts, and seats

I hunted through China town and found a little store that sold woven rattan in sheets. This I carefully installed in the seats. I made the seats, thwarts and yoke out of ash for incredible strength and beauty. When the varnish hits the highly sanded ash of these

pieces, its as if they become liquid themselves. They gleam with a jewel like luster.

*I want to talk more about the root urges of why I love to hand make things, and by generalization why other people hand make things as well. There are two main threads that need unraveling here and they are generally delineated, for me, by thinking of them as the means and the ends. For the means, I want to try and describe the action of making, itself and the unstoppable flow of motivation that has me in a constant cycle of visualizing, building, assembling, and admiring.*

*It is difficult to describe how enthralling and all-consuming the process of building can be; distilling meaning and purpose out of this instinctual pleasure is akin to describing one's very core. It just is. I'm sure for an athlete to describe what set of endorphins and physical/emotional needs are met by soaring over a high-jump bar is just as difficult to describe the raw exhilaration I feel when making, fixing, or discovering some technical wonder.*

*Although much of the writing and thinking thus far has concentrated on the socio-cultural aspects of these desires, I think it is worth noting here the actual physical sense of calm and focus that, for me, flows from hand-work. The Toaist I Ching confirms "it is beneficial to have somewhere to go" (Liu I-ming, 1796/1986). As all places and senses of places are portable, the place of craftwork and hand-building is this sacred place for me. I stumble on the word sacred here, only because if this is a religious experience, it is an experience that I have come to without the assistance of dogma or formal organization. It seems that this desire to create is the stuff of which my very core is constructed. I know that this lightning inside me, this desire to create and build, is the*

*currency of my teaching and my power of possibility with children in the workshop. I have, in the past, with my work in the teacher's union, harboured thoughts of administrative or executive career choices, but know deep inside that these choices would be hollow and temporary because of their lack of hand-work. Crafting is a way to depollute or erase the self-doubt that flows through me. It is a way to cleanse myself of the niggling guilt that consumerism can motivate. As I live in a world where I am used to buying almost everything, tackling craftwork continually asks me to think what it means to create something from nothing. As I have stated, I am creating something of myself, as well as by and for myself.*

*I realize the permanent and unbreakable grip this feeling has over me and sheafs of paper littered through my house and my life, covered with sketches and ideas testify to this fact. I will, no doubt, be thinking of the next project and the next idea until my last days.*

*By the ends I mean the imagined life of the object itself -- that which starts at its making's completion, and the emotional weight it carries as it moves through the world. To ascribe to things a life and a sentience of their own I realize is pure whimsy, but to acknowledge that objects play a huge role in our definition of ourselves as a culture is reality. Objects invite us to know them. They compel us to touch them, obsess over them, save for them and steal them. "They also carry social messages" (Flood, 2002, p.100). The diamonds hanging from a gangster's neck, the Volvo driven by the aging hippie, these are markers and badges of great social import. My canoe, I envisage, will be a part of my family for many years, and the legacy of my canoe making with students will weave itself into the fabric of my (I hope) fulfilling career as a public school teacher.*

*What will my object, the canoe, go on to do after it leaves me? Will it be stolen and sold? Will it stay with my sons to be enjoyed for many years and end up planted with tulips? As I work, I consider these stories yet to come and they give my making a tension and emotional stake that adds great invisible weight.*

June 11, 2003

This week I am taking care of the last few details of the canoe. I have attached the outer half of the gunwale and have obsessively made all of the screw heads orient in the same direction.



Figure 35. The yoke and thwarts installed

June 13, 2003

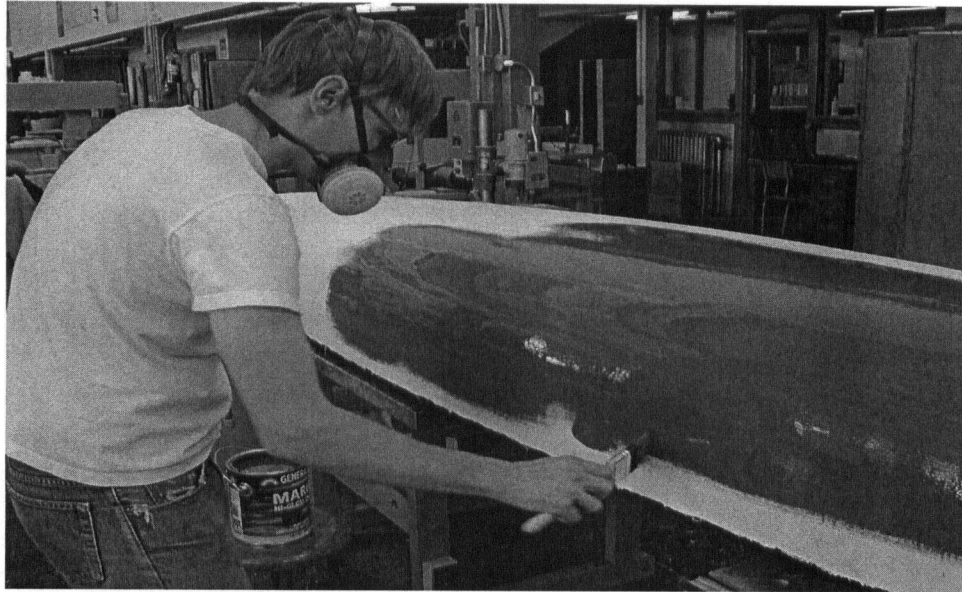


Figure 36. Adding the red paint

I spent the day putting on the second coat of red paint on the outside of the hull, then packing up and putting away tools. Many people have been through to see the now finished canoe.

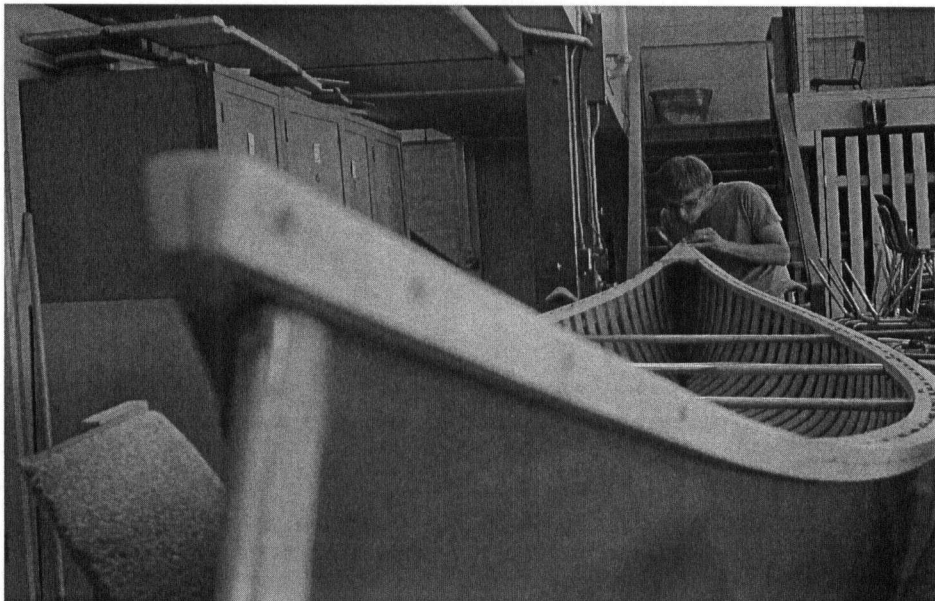


Figure 37. Final touches

A geography teacher and friend who is retiring this year, Rod McNeil, spoke briefly in his retirement speech to the staff about the importance of excitement in teaching and how he has seen me really get excited this year. To have a teacher of his stature give public recognition of my project and my motivations in his retirement speech is quite an honour.

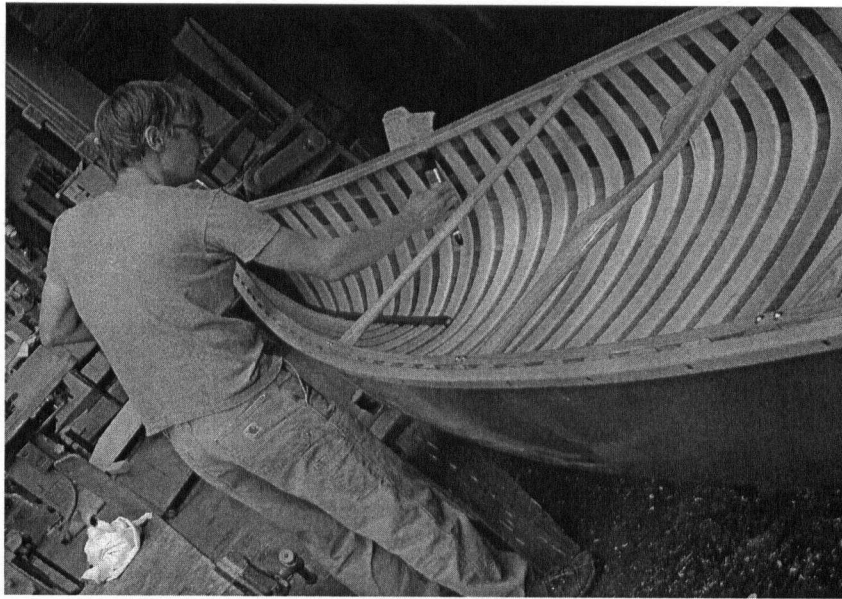


Figure 38. The last coat of varnish

I rewarded myself by leaving the final coat of varnish on the bright work to the very last, literally stepping away from the totally complete canoe with paintbrush in hand.

### ***(my) Work and (my) Self***

*A person is many things: teacher, mate, parent, entertainer, community member.*

*Self-consciousness, and, sometimes, self-deception integrates the often contradictory*

*demands of different roles. In traditional or pre-industrial societies there are relatively few of these personal role contradictions. My community(ies), though tied to educational society, are in this way a great deal like the traditional world. Work is the well from which the other components of self are drawn. The single source makes the different roles minor variations rather than entirely different personae. By purposely living and working in the same urban community, I consciously and purposely engage my students and the families of my students on multiple levels. I do this in some ways to replicate the village feel of my childhood where threads of connection between individuals crossed generational and professional boundaries – making for surprising and refreshing relationships. As I build the canoe I think about myself both in the immediate sphere of this canoe work and in the context of this community.*

*I find myself through work. To study my attitude toward work, then, is to study my attitude toward my own being. I hope to build my relationship with my own children around my attitudes of work and hope they recognize my skill and understand its value because they see and participate in the project of the day -- overhearing the conversations and stories that are always taking place.*

*My relationship with Julie, my wife, is strongly rooted, of course among other things, in my work. We both, curiously, work at the same school and our paths joined in our year of teacher training at U.B.C. We share, successfully, an understanding of the role work – teaching, building, and craft play in my self-value. My self image exists in the context of these many crossed threads of community. My self-status is tangled in this work-world and extends into such varied roles as teacher's union representative, staff committee member, union executive member, and Teacher /Parent Advisory Council*

*liaison. My self-image comes, these days, from the various human contexts I live in – all largely tied to the educational world.*

June 21, 2003

Yesterday afternoon, Julie and I loaded the canoe onto the top of our car and took it over to Dundarave Beach in West Vancouver for a launching party. I have let the paint, varnish and canvas filler harden up for a few days and have spent some time writing, cleaning up and thinking about the process as a whole. We met at the beach with Julie's parents and my sister and her guy, Bruce. After burgers and fries, Bruce and I carried the canoe to the water. In front of many sunbathers, families sharing their evening meal, and sea wall walkers, I paddled the canoe solo out into the smooth ocean. The water was calm with a two-foot swell, just enough to make me have to pay attention to where the waves were coming from to execute the first turn back towards the beach. I was surprised at how light the boat felt in the waves and how easily it initiated a turn. This truly is a river boat, a classic hull of Canadian discovery with just enough width to counter the wild responsiveness of the pronounced rocker. I can tell that the hull will calm slightly with the addition of weight – the perfect canoe-trip boat.





Figure 39. The first paddle

*In a very light-hearted way, I am somewhat letdown by finishing the canoe. I have allowed myself to work completely self indulgently, without income, for almost six months on the building of this boat. In the course of this time I've rebuilt myself as a person as I built the canoe: I have literally built a way to float to a new identity as a teacher.*

Six months later...

Jan. 17, 2004

Today Dylan, one of my grade twelve students, really got earnestly into planking the hull of his canoe. I knew when I started this process that students could eventually build on the form that I've constructed, but having it happen this year is great. I am and was nervous that he wouldn't get finished at the end of the year, but although his skill level is not high as far as general woodwork

goes, he is very motivated and completely captivated by the magic of the enterprise. He understands the fundamental concepts and his presence in the shop for three blocks out of eight fascinates the younger students. I know this contributes very strongly to the work ethic of all the students in the shop. As the grade eights work on their piggy banks and note paper boxes, they observe serious and important work happening on the canoe. This is important for the way they develop their own attitude towards this kind of work in the shop. The level of excitement and engagement they observe defines a reference for their own process. Their curiosity, it seems, is driven by seeing an actual live student producing, in front of them, something they see as impossible for a student to do. They begin to see themselves in this position of emotional risk and a boundless energy and imagination is tapped. It was indeed Dylan's observance of my trials and tribulations that gave me credibility as a teacher in his eyes.

*Peter Fleming talks of this reality and describes the "professional involvement with the heartbreak and exultation of making that ensures [his] currency as a teacher" (2002, p 64). I know that in my teaching practice, this excitement and risk is the real fuel of the learning process. When I am engaged in this space of ambiguity and find myself saying things to students like "I don't know if it will work, let's try it," my students begin to own and engage in their work in ways not before discovered. They know they are an*

*integral part in this grand process and sense immediately my honesty in telling them of our collective risk. David Pye's writing on the definition of what he calls the "workmanship of risk vs. the workmanship of certainty" (1968, pp. 21) illuminates gold to be mined from this tension. I contend he correctly posits that the corollary of reward, satisfaction, and success, is direct to difficulty and the unknown. When one places oneself directly in the way of difficulty and obstacle, as solutions become clear, a deep satisfaction is reaped. Pye also talks of the inherent relativity of workmanship and how it has "no exclusive prerogative of quality" but more an immensely various "range of qualities, without which at its command the art of design becomes arid and impoverished." His take on the importance of appreciative scale is an interesting side note. As the world of design gives us the big picture, Pye's world of workmanship brings us in contact with the details of life. The art of workmanship is so evidently important as our hands grasp the everyday items in our lives. As design begins to "fail to control the appearance of the environment at just those ranges at which the environment most impinges on us," the hand of workmanship takes over, giving us the feel, sense, and touch (Pye, 1985 cited in Ryan et al.).*

March 12, 2004

By manufacturing the mould as something that could be used again and again, I have now awoken an urge in many people to build a canoe. Somehow the combination of canoe and canoe building is irresistible in people's imagination. Two of my teaching colleagues, both completely unskilled in woodwork want in on the

process. They have seen the finished product and seen that now four hulls in total have been produced from the single mould.



Figure 40. The process replicated

June 27, 2004

Today Dylan, an exceptional grade 12 student, left the shop with a completed canoe on the roof of his parent's car. I helped him yesterday paint on the last coat of varnish and touch up some small areas of the paint-work. The process of his canoe has gone very well. It seemed impossible to imagine a student having success at this just because of its colossal volume, but here we are at the end of the school year with a finished boat. All sorts of wild ideas like a launching party and reception were hatched during the building process, but in the end the time-crunch dictated a quiet finish. I was quoted in the Vancouver School Board's newsletter in the local paper commenting on the "miracle of handwork" and there was a picture of Dylan working on the canoe.



**Figure 41.** Article on Dylan

*I've now taught for 6 years and, without exaggeration, feel that the experience of a student finishing a historically accurate canoe is a bright highlight. I, like many who do the work of craft as a profession, came to this work in spite of the traditional demarcations of shop work and intellectual work. Having tried to finish high school as an academic streamed student, my high school experience was largely an academically unengaged one. I was perhaps saved a place at graduation by my love of reading, tinkering, and the out-of-doors. I wonder what experiences would be different for me if I had been encouraged to take courses leading to training in the manual arts, trades etc. Although my student who finished the canoe will no doubt go on to his plans of a degree in communications at Simon Fraser University, he has told me the fundamentally motivating factor for his general achievement and excitement in grade 12 was the building of the canoe.*

*Nel Noddings writes that schools have become a place where "creative thinkers have their genuine interests dulled by the demands of routine work in the classroom"*

*(2004 pp 216). I would posit she is correct but for the moments when students are allowed a window out of preconceived notions of intellectual work and vocational work. I know, although largely happenstance, that the student canoe project has interrupted this disciplinary rigidity in my workshop. I would also contend that for the canoe student the learning around self- direction, creativity, work ethic and the importance of focus were marks made indelible in the workshop with tools in hand.*

Aug. 14, 2005

Today I took my canoe, completely and beautifully finished and untouched for a year and four months, to the Vancouver International Wooden Boat Show, setting it up as a static display. It was in amazing position, right in front of the Market on the wood board-walk by the water. The sun was orange and low in the sky and the day had been clear. Granville Island had a beautiful and sun-exhausted feel, as it does in the summer. Already, even on a late Thursday evening, there were hundreds of people strolling by and having a look at the boats being set up.

*I feel immensely proud yet strangely shy. I know that ultimately this experience has authentically been for me and me alone, but I cannot help wanting the recognition. As I build anything, I realize rationally that I am also building a multi-layered experience at the same time. I've moved past the anonymity of a technician stamping out parts and I'm personally within the process as a whole. The work is a part of me, and I'm the*

*work. The artifact 'canoe' and the experience 'working on the canoe' become strands in my value of myself -- informing and contextualizing all my future hands-on experiences, excitements, disappointments, etc. In a way, I am getting ready for myself by making and thinking. Although this is a rational, conscious and intrinsic reward, the delicious indulgence of public recognition has an intoxicating draw. I imagine myself in conversation with other craftspeople, describing processes of steaming, bending, and planing away shavings for a perfect fit. This is not the reason I've worked and built, but this extrinsic reward and limelight feels like an award, or a recognition from peers. I know that when some craftspeople stand with me at the canoe, they think, and many say, that I am too young to have developed the skills necessary to build this canoe.*

Aug. 17, 2005

The organizers of the festival would like me to stick around and be with the boat all weekend to answer questions and talk about the experience (as noted above, I would like this as well), but this weekend is the first weekend that we take possession our house that we've bought. I know there will be many hours spent ripping out carpets, putting up sheets of drywall and trips to the dump.

The house was almost half of a million dollars and we still will not be able to even live in it for probably six weeks. There is a vast amount of work ahead of me and none of it has much of anything to do with the canoe or working in the shop. I haven't really settled into the aluminum boat project yet but already in my mind

I'm up on the outside of Vancouver Island's Nootka Sound again only this time doing  
boat camping on those untouched beaches with Julie and the boys.

*I haven't paddled the boat at all since it went in the water for the first time for those few minutes in West Vancouver. I find it amusing and somewhat infuriating that my reverence and nervousness for this process has transcended practicality and I'm living hypocritically, treating my work as a museum piece.*

Aug. 19, 2005

I thought about the canoe all weekend as we ripped down paneled walls and pushed broken appliances out into the yard at the new house. I knew that I had to get down to Granville Island by five or so on Sunday afternoon before the festival organizers packed up for good. When I arrived at the Island my cousin whom I had not seen in several years was there at the boat. He had recognized me from some of the pictures I had left at the boat and he had come back at festival closing to meet me. What a wonderful surprise. He has always been a boat-oriented person and his appreciation of my work was lovely. What was also a total shock and somewhat overwhelming was winning the best small boat-in-show prize. I was up against all the professional builders who use the festival as a trade show with their stunning cedar kayaks, all the small sailboats, all the dinghies and anything else under eighteen feet.



This is no small feat and I'm aware that this prize is generally traded back and forth yearly between the few small boat professionals based in the area.

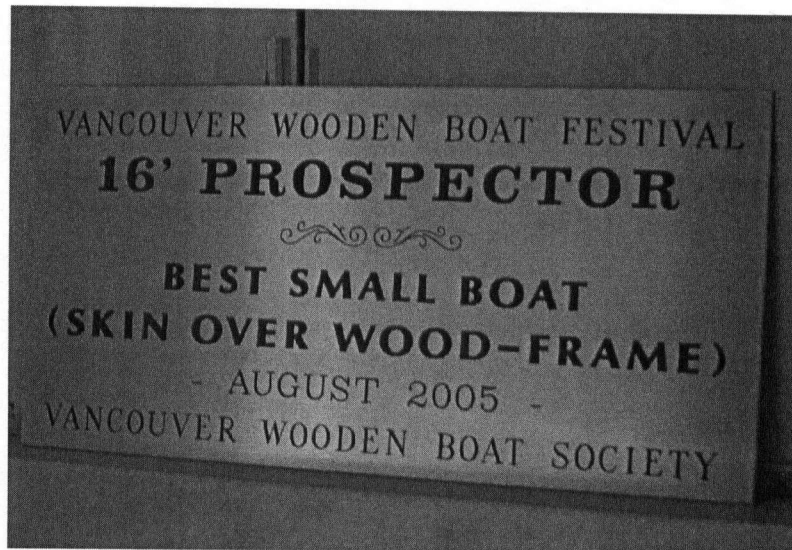


Figure 42. My award

*Craftspeople tend to judge each other's personal value less by what is said than by what they themselves see and feel. Richard E. Probert, quotes his grandfather in Archie's Way by saying a workshop is a sacred place. "By looking at a person's shop, you peer into his soul" (pp. 57). Certainly the workshop is a kind of church; all the trappings of religion both good and bad are present. In my experience as a high school wood shop teacher I can see the stifling dogma of a shop too clean and too locked up as well as the outright danger and madness of uncontrolled clutter and students with no perceivable structure to their activities.*

*I, of course, fall into the tool and technology fetishism that grips craftsmen when they look upon other's handwork. What I fail to find in the work, if I fail to look, is the story and the experience of the builder. Infused in these dimensions is where the art of*

*the object and experience lives. To objectify these elements is to deny the craftsman his 'heart' in the work.*

Sept. 06, 2005

We've just started another school year. My crew of seniors is keen to try many different things and I'm debating whether to let one of them start a dinghy. I know it won't be long before we attempt some sort of boat project. I just can't seem to stay away from it.

The idea of taking a material that comes to us as straight and machined, then coaxing it and combining it back into a round and natural vessel seems too alluring and intoxicating to pass by.

### **III. Sweeping up the shavings, Getting the paddles out of the Shed**

It is my hope that this thesis has served to flavour the discourse of craft through a personal narrative of the crafting process. This narrative has been, among many other things, a report of the position and meaning of hand-making and craft within my culture and society. It has sought to find my motivation and values behind craft and my crafting of canoes and to blur the lines between art and craft – bringing craft into the realm of experience that has previously been known as fine art. Inversely that which was known only as art has been examined and valued as craft.

I am crafting and building in this research as a way of making sense of my worlds. I make sense of my desires surrounding canoes and the natural world by crafting myself a canoe. I have lived the experience: canoe building, and through this creating I constructed a floating metaphor of self-reliance and self-sufficiency. I have made this canoe because that is what I do; I make things to make sense of things. I craft in the face of industrial irrelevance and I craft in the spirit of cultural change. I craft in defiance to the cynical careerism of fine art. I craft to create an environment where any and all acts of making add value to the humanness of my surroundings. When I find moments of creation in my everyday activities, I also find simple satisfaction. The power of creating gives me the confidence to live my life with all the vigorousness possible. By crafting, I participate in a soulful practice that is self-determined and proactive. I craft to understand my work as a teacher – casting my outmoded techniques in a bronze of contemporary thought. I build and craft to navigate my way through an intense

conservatism and confusion that casts a pall over my professional discipline. In many ways, I craft to survive as a thoughtful person.

My use of narrative in this research, both as a way to keep track of the building, and as reflection on this process, has kept the substance of the research very much grounded in the practical. I make comment on my own process; by doing this, my first foray into this new world – academia – feels rigorous in both senses of the word. By blending arts-based research and narrative, I am allowed to examine my questions from the place that seems the most relevant. When doubts arise as to the academic appropriateness of these methods, I take solace by invoking Peter Cole's humorous indignance at the "please spare us ... academic geyser spouting up" (2002, p. 447). Cole defends his metaphorical canoe trip by invoking his roots and announcing this *aboriginalness* as the legitimate voice for his research. Like Cole, my canoe and the resulting text that flows from it, feels less like the said "romantic piffle" he defends against, and more the only valid way for me to comment on the liminal locus of my craft motivation. These representations, the floating canoe and the written text, are immediate and real; they, like much human endeavor, are messy, turbulent, and omni-disciplinary.

I also craft this canoe as a definitive way of identity building in a national sense. Although the macro politics of national identity leave me cold, I must examine how the idea of the canoe has worked itself so deeply into my system. Although uncomfortable with the outright appropriation of the image of the canoe by white, European culture, I am carried, by the ideology of the canoe. I float out of this Euro-centric past, deep into the wilderness, where I am reborn as a citizen of the New World. I share the genius of this conveyance with the carvers of the massive cedar canoes of the Pacific and the light,

fragile birch-bark canoes of the eastern woodlands. The red canoe in my world has emerged as the mother image of the national dreamlife, the symbol of a rugged northern landscape, the vessel in which I am created as a Canadian.

The threads of emancipatory and transformative personal change through craft and crafting are continuously woven through the writing and building of this project. I feel that I have discovered some of the basic stirrings that fuel my work with my hands. I have also, importantly, grown up as a teacher and as a Canadian, and as a teacher of Canadians, by making myself examine my work. My feverish and naked excitement about the canoe has proven that this process of peeling back layers of protection to find root causes is contagious and motivating to others. I am a better teacher when I present myself honestly – in the full throws of obsession for my current project. I can always find ways to excite students when I reside in the shop as the artist/craftsperson with technical and emancipating secrets to share. Peter Dormer (1997, p. 222) writes that practicing craft “as a disciplined piece of knowledge,... is inevitably an activity of self-exploration.” “Joyfulness in creative work,” says Ross Laird (2001), “can be a path leading home” (p. 26). It is part of this path home I have found. The writing and building in this research is for me a touchstone of justification in my purpose. It has informed my crafting/creative process and cemented purpose for future creative endeavor. As well, my family and I have ended up with a beautiful canoe to paddle.

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