

## COMEBACK OF THE CANOE

by Keith Monroe

**In the 1920's canoeing was condemned as a dangerous, even deadly, activity; then the BSA launched a national effort to teach proper technique and safety.**

There was a time, around 1920 to 1925, when most Scout camps kept canoes padlocked, to be used only by certified experts or skilled swimmers. Other camps and public parks enforced similar taboos. Canoes were widely shunned as dangerous and deadly.

Yet canoes had been popular in earlier decades. Parks had rented them by the hour, no questions asked. Camps had owned fleets of canoes, and paddling one had seemed as ordinary as riding a bicycle.

Meanwhile drownings mounted, but they were scattered. Nobody collected totals. (The National Safety Council, organized in 1916, was busy trying to cut calamities on roads and in homes and factories.)

Hardly any holiday canoeists knew a j-stroke or draw stroke. They just kept switching paddle sides to stay somewhat straight. When they tried a U-turn, some swamped or capsized. In the water they sank fast. Most were fully clothed nonswimmers. (Swimming was a rare skill in that era. But life jackets were just for ships, and flotation cushions were unknown.)

### Sounding the alarm

New Englanders were first to sound the alarm. The Massachusetts Humane Society, a pioneer in water safety, agitated about deaths on the Charles River.

In February 1920 the weekly *Illustrated World* canvassed 50 miles of the Merrimack, tallied body counts in 20 towns, and found that canoe drownings in that strip averaged almost eight per Sunday. "Is Canoeing a Safe Sport?" the weekly headlined, and other publications like *The Outlook* and *Scribner's* pressed the question.

The nation was shocked.

Public lakes banned canoes. River front canoe-rental stands disappeared. Although accidents were rare at camps, directors heeded the outcry and clamped down. In five years, 275 canoe makers closed.

Lifelong canoe enthusiasts were dismayed and mystified. Why were other people's canoes capsizing?

They investigated and found out manufacturers had introduced canoes with seats, which swept the market. The public no longer paddled kneeling, with buttocks against a thwart, as past generations had.

Now they sat with knees high. They were more comfortable, nevermind so top-heavy that some fell out without even capsizing.

## **Seats to the firewood pile**

A struggle to save canoeing began in an unexpected quarter, the American Red Cross. The agency hadn't thought much about canoes; since its start in 1881 it had worked mostly on disaster relief, services to armed forces, and first-aid classes. But when the Red Cross noticed that the U.S. Volunteer Life Saving Corps was getting busier every summer, it swung into learn-to-swim campaigns with the Scouts and YMCA.

It began training aquatic staffs for camps. And it studied drownings, hoping to reduce them. This turned the agency's attention to canoes.

Red Cross aquatic specialist Fred C. Mills and colleague Wallace Van B. Claussen were working on methods for teaching safe canoeing when the BSA asked Mills to help Scouting's safety effort. For a new edition of a BSA manual on swimming and water safety, Mills got Claussen to prepare a 40-page section on canoeing, unmentioned in earlier editions. It exhorted, "For safe canoeing, remove seats and replace with thwarts... Seats have been relegated to their proper home, the firewood pile:"

Mills visited 32 Scout camps in 1925, persuading directors to unlock canoes and teach campers to paddle kneeling, in bathing suits or shorts. He also taught all Scout camps to keep nonswimmers and beginners out of canoes.

Together the BSA, the Red Cross, and the American Canoe Association induced a few canoe companies to resume producing the classic seatless canoes on assurances that camps would buy them. Mills got a blanket commitment from the BSA, whose 569 camps bought about 3,000 canoes in six years.

But first he had to convert Scout executives who hated canoes. A show down was arranged. At the 1926 national conference of Scout executives, 64 professionals (out of 708 present) went seven miles to Fountain Lake Park, where Mills taught them basic canoeing. But they weren't a majority. The conference debated. Speakers maintained that even seatless canoes were treacherous. Someone who had travelled in Canada pointed out that riverbanks were dotted with white crosses marking graves of voyageurs whose seatless canoes betrayed them. Mills explained that those craft bore tons of cargo, were paddled by bold recruits in winter garb, and were bucking turbulent streams.

## **A new merit badge**

Others predicted: "Scouts won't kneel. If there aren't seats they'll sit on the thwarts." But John B. May of Boston, who had operated boys' and girls' camps, replied that resilient kneeling pads, perhaps just sneakers, eased the discomfort. "Our Winnetaska girls often paddle 15 miles a day, kneeling, and only rarely ask to sit up for a few minutes... A point which appeals to boys is that kneeling gives greater leverage and hence faster speed."

The pro-canoeists won. The conference report said: "It is generally conceded that the canoe can be used more extensively in Scout camps, and with greater benefit. When properly handled, it may be safely used by any boy of Scout age who is a capable swimmer."

The conference voted to introduce a Canoeing merit badge. Claussen wrote the instruction pamphlet. In 1928, the first year the badge was offered, 1,441 Scouts earned it. The totals jumped about 24 percent yearly for many summers thereafter.

## **Return of the seated paddler**

But times change, and so do canoes. A birchbark or canvas canoe is now almost a museum piece. Even the once innovative aluminum canoe is virtually obsolete.

Today 109 manufacturers sell 920 models and lengths of canoe, mostly in fiberglass and other plastics. Among these it's hard to find any seatless canoe. The two companies that share two-fifths of the \$60-million-a-year market stopped making seatless canoes about 1980.

"Camps don't buy seatless canoes," manufacturers point out. And the danger of sitting in a canoe has been lessened by new designs that widened the craft, creating pontoon systems that help steady them. Some newer canoes are so stable that two people can sit on a gunwale (side) without shipping water.

Today's seated paddlers, wearing the now-required personal flotation device, still tip over sometimes but are unlikely to drown.

Canoeing today is popular with 14 million Americans. Quite a turnaround for a craft that once seemed headed for extinction.