

# ABORIGINAL TRANSPORTATION

## THE BIRCH BARK CANOE

Archaeological evidence indicates that people have lived in Southern Ontario for 12,000 to 15,000 years. At that time the glaciation caused by the most recent ice-age was receding. The lakes and rivers we know were being formed and the land itself was like the tundra of Northern Canada. Land travel for the inhabitants was by foot, carrying their belongings in their arms, on their backs or, during winter, by sled.

Although dugout canoes were used by First Nations people (the dugout canoe is still used in various countries around the world) it is the birch bark canoe that has become a Canadian icon.

The birch bark canoe had many advantages. It was:

- reliable
- light in weight
- easy to carry
- easily repaired
- highly maneuverable and
- could be quickly built from materials at hand.



*"Solitary Hunter" by Unknown*

The frame, usually of cedar, was soaked in water and bent to the shape of the canoe. It was covered by the lightweight bark of the birch tree or sometimes the bark of the elm or cedar tree. It was all held together by lashings made from the roots of pine or spruce with the seams made waterproof by a coating of heated pine or spruce pitch. The skills required to build birch bark canoes were passed on through generations of master builders.

After the arrival of the Europeans and the growth of the fur trade, the native peoples could no longer supply all the canoes needed, and around 1750 the French set up a factory at Trois-Rivières. Canoes up to 12 meters long were soon produced, capable of carrying a crew of 6-12 plus a cargo of over 1200 kg.

The style of the bow stems of birch bark canoes varied with the waters for which the canoe was intended, the preferences of the builder, but also the tribe or area from which the canoe came. The more popular styles of stems today are the Chippewa (Ojibwa) stem, the Voyageur stem used by the Hudson's Bay and North West Companies, the Algonquin stem, and the Malecite or Passamaquoddy stem which is most closely reflected in modern synthetic canoes.



*Women Harvesting Rice  
by Seth Eastman*

Canoeing continues to have an avid following as a recreational sport and means of transportation. A number of groups of "birch bark canoe enthusiasts" build and paddle these wonderful canoes today.

*"What the camel is to desert tribes, what the horse is to the Arab, what the ship is to the colonizing Briton, what all modern means of locomotion are to the civilized world today, that, and more than that, the canoe was to the Indian who lived beside the innumerable waterways of Canada." (William Wood - All Afloat: A Chronicle of Craft and Waterways)*

