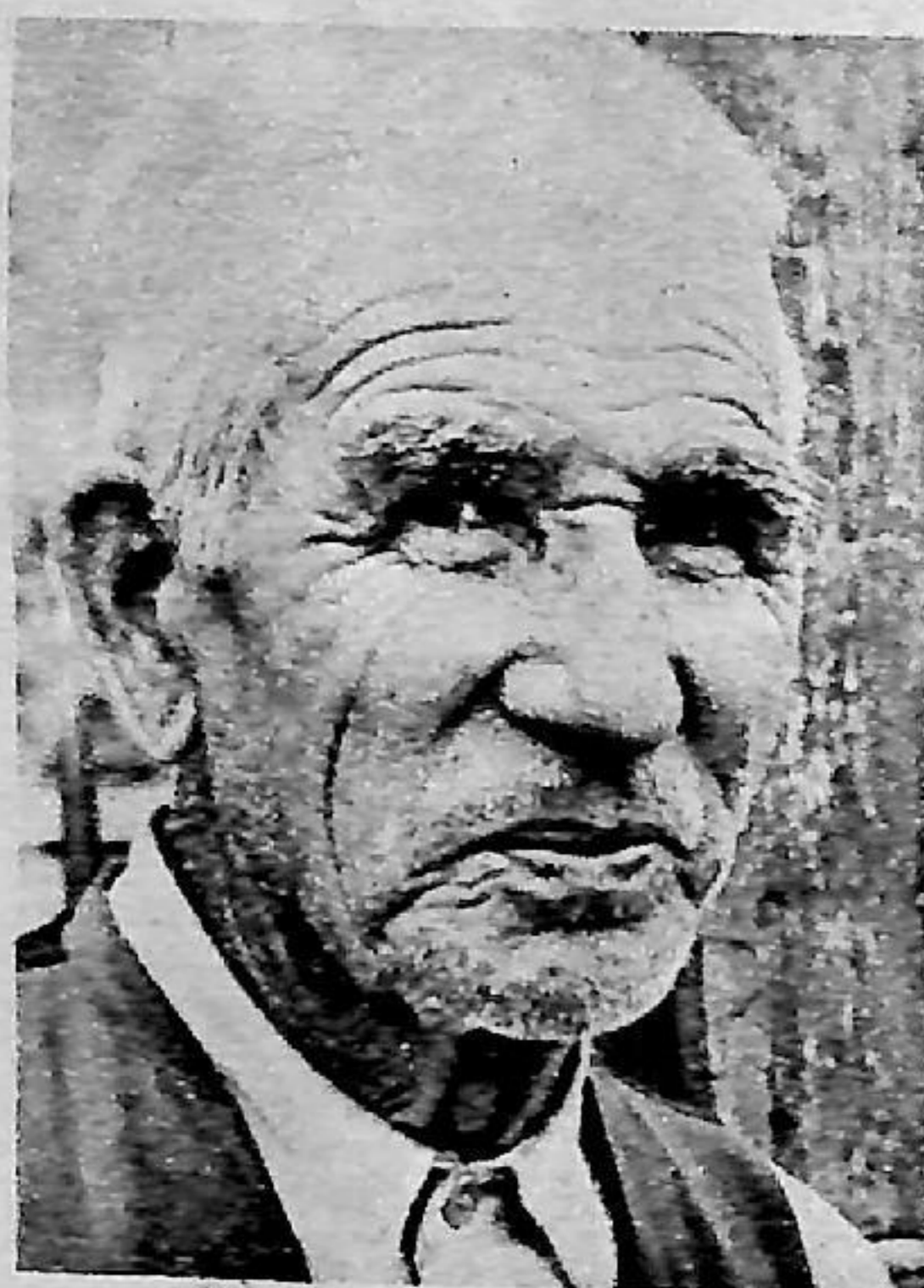




This replica of the huge birchbark canoes used by early fur traders was built for the National Museum, Ottawa. Project was



Matt Bernard, of Golden Lake Indian Reserve, used old skills of his people in building canoe.

*An 81-year-old Indian craftsman puts  
a lifetime's learning into the*

# Last Of The Great Canoes

**M**ATT BERNARD, an 81-year-old Chippewa Indian who is one of the few remaining authorities on a vanishing Canadian handicraft, recently put the finishing touches to his masterpiece: the biggest birchbark canoe in the world. An authentic replica of the "Montreal canoes" used by fur traders on their journeys across Canada in the early days of the last century, the canoe can carry 16 paddlers and a sizable amount of cargo.

Launched in September, Matt's masterpiece proved entirely seaworthy. But it will never sail again. Instead, it is destined for the National Museum in Ottawa, where it will provide one more link with the life of early Canada.

The suggestion that the museum should have such a canoe was made in 1955 by D. A. Gillies, a Braeside, Ont., lumber manufacturer whose hobby is Canadian history. Museum officials welcomed his offer to provide them with one, and Gillies went ahead with his project.

He financed a search for suitable birchbark—trees of the size needed are much in demand for making plywood, and the search entailed travelling about 1,000 miles by jeep and many more on foot. Gillies also selected Matt Bernard as his builder.

Matt, who was born at Chapeau, Que., has lived for the past 50 years at the Golden Lake Indian Reservation, on the edge of Ontario's Algonquin Park. His parents died when he was still a child, and at the age of seven he was already supporting himself by selling fish to hotels. Some

of his earnings also went to buy clay pipes and tobacco for local Indian craftsmen, who taught him in return the ancient art of canoe-building.

Today Matt has five sons and three daughters, 34 grandchildren and 14 great-grandchildren. "I find it hard to remember all their names," he says.

When Gillies commissioned him to build the huge canoe, Matt chose his son Mike as his chief assistant. Together they set out to assemble their materials: the bark, which had to be tough but as supple as leather; spruce roots, which are soaked in water and then split to make wattap, used to sew the strips of bark together; straight-grained white ash for gunwales and thwarts; and knot-free cedar for the lining and ribs.

Building began last June, and the canoe was ready by the end of September. Weighing almost three-quarters of a ton, it is 36 feet long, six feet wide and three feet deep.

After going along as a passenger on its first trip, Gillies arranged for a truck to take the completed canoe to Ottawa, where it was stored in an annex to the museum, awaiting display space. "I am sure," he says, "that the many people who put their knowledge and advice at the disposal of the project will be glad that this great canoe has been built for posterity while there are still a few men alive with the skill to do it."

Says Matt Bernard: "At my age, it is the last canoe of the kind I will ever build."