

# The Historical Traditions of Canoeing in Kingston

## C. Fred Johnston

From the earliest times the canoe has been a common sight on the waters that seem to surround Kingston, Ontario. Before the age of European exploration, Indians in fragile bark canoes passed by as they journeyed from Lake Ontario to the Ottawa Valley by way of the Cataraqui River. The route was used by Champlain and his Huron allies in 1615 when they returned from their Iroquois expedition in what is now upper New York State. Other explorers followed Champlain, the most famous being Frontenac who built the first fort on the site of Kingston in 1673. The re-enactment of Frontenac's landing in 1973 recalled the city's memorable beginnings and the important role played by the canoe.

Although Kingston was remote from the Voyageur canoe route between Montreal and the head of Lake Superior, by way of the Ottawa River, it no doubt witnessed many a canoe passing its shores during the eighteenth century. Early settlers must have used the canoe as a vehicle of transportation, although the all-consuming preoccupation with survival meant that little time was available for what is currently called leisure activity. If the history of Kingston is typical of other waterside communities, there were occasions when people assembled to celebrate, and at such times they probably indulged themselves in canoe contests or matches. But the sport of canoeing, the unique invention of the nineteenth century was totally foreign to the times.

Kingston's early role as a military base was dictated by its strategic location at the entrance to Lake Ontario and the presence of armed forces had a significant impact on the development of sports, in general, and aquatic sports in particular. The city is reputed to have hosted the first single sculls race in British North America in the early 1830's on the occasion of a regatta held on the Cataraqui River below Barriefield. Whether canoe races were held in conjunction with this event is not known. Little mention is made of such activity in the popular press of the time but this may be due to the fact that the canoe was not out-of-the-ordinary and did not warrant special attention. In any case rowing and sculling preceded the development of the sport of canoeing but when the former appeared the latter was not far behind.

The development of the sport of canoeing, indeed of most sports in the modern age, is closely linked with the trend to industrialization and urbanization. Understandably the sport of canoeing emerged in centres of population where people had the luxury of time and money in which to pursue leisure activities. It follows that the earliest canoe races were associated with the more affluent middle class. By the 1860's interest in aquatic sports manifested itself with the formation of clubs in and about large cities such as Halifax, Montreal and Toronto. In the eighties canoe clubs sprang up in settled communities with suitable water.

The formation of the American Canoe Association in 1880 at Lake George, New York state added a real impetus to canoe development and expansion and many Canadians joined that organization, which from 1880 had an annual camp where canoe racing was the prime activity. Following the meet of 1880, the Toronto Canoe Club took form in that city.

Sometime during the late 1880's or 1890's, an association of gentlemen canoeists emerged in the city of Kingston and called itself the Cataraqui Canoe Club. And it was sufficiently strong in 1893 to act as the host club for the annual camp of the ACA. The ACA was organized into a number of divisions, one being the Northern Division which took in all of Canada; the host division also selected the Commodore of the Association for that year. In 1893, the Commodore was Lieutenant Corneal Wm. H. Cotton of Kingston and Secretary-Treasurer was an indefatigable worker, Easton Burns. The two spearheaded the local committee in organizing the camp that was held at Long Island Park, on Brophy's Point, Wolfe Island just off from the Kingston waterfront. The park's owner at the time was a young man of about 23, John Joseph Brophy, whose descendants still own the point.

The Wolfe Island Camp, held from August 11 to 24 followed the same pattern as previous ones; leisure paddling and canoe sailing took up the first few days, to allow stragglers to get to camp, followed by two or three days of competitions, with the evenings devoted to entertainment. In the competitions the best local performance was turned in by a remarkable, one-armed sailing canoeist, Kenneth Cameron, who pushed Archibald of Pointe Claire, Quebec, but had to settle for second place. But the Kingston contingent excelled at entertainment and spared no expense to bring to camp the celebrated Indian poet, Pauline Johnson who, by the way, was accompanied by her 70 year old mother, a former Kingston resident. It made for a memorable evening.

As darkness settled down the crackling of flames rose higher; the assembled canoeists were enthused to do their best by way of entertainment. Suddenly during a pause in the programme, there glided from the fringing forest into the circle of light, an Indian Maiden. Then Pauline Johnson's voice arose in her favourite Indian poems to the great delight of the assembled canoeists who already knew her canoe songs. (Gibbon, *The Romance of the Canadian Canoe*, p. 140.)

Next day the canoeists were doubly impressed by Pauline as she took to the waters in her bark canoe, Wildcat. Long after that summer the old timers recalled the Camp of '93 when Pauline Johnson recited her poetry and paddled Wildcat.

Little is known about the Cataraqui Canoe Club after 1893. Kingstonians retained membership in the ACA and no doubt attended succeeding camps.

In 1896 when a group of Kingstonian sailors were forming a yacht club, they invited the members of the Cataraqui Canoe Club to join forces with them in pursuit of a new building. A merger took place, a handsome building was constructed which provided storage for a number of skiffs and canoes. (Kingston Daily News, April 22, 1896.) and thereafter the canoeing fraternity was part of the Kingston Yacht Club.

In May of 1900, a number of Canadian clubs - Lachine and Grand Trunk from Montreal, Ottawa and Britannia from Ottawa, Carleton Place, Kingston and three Brockville Clubs, the YMCA, the Brockville Rowing Club and the Bohemian Athletic Club - met at the Revere House Hotel in Brockville and laid the foundations for a distinctly Canadian national canoe organization to be known as the Canadian Canoe Association. During the first year Kingston's representative to the CCA was a young lawyer, John Mowat, who went on to become Mayor of Kingston in 1906-1907.

On Saturday, August 4, the first national canoe championships were held in Brockville under the auspices of the Bohemian Club. Four Kingstonians journeyed to Brockville by mail boat to take part in the historic event. J. Mowat, G.F. Dalton, R.E. Burns and H. Britton had little time to prepare for the regatta but still managed to turn in a good performance. "In the four canoe and tandem races there was only half a length difference between the Kingston crew and the winners. The local men were third in the tandem race." (Kingston Daily Whig, August 7, 1900).

Canoe sailing appeared to be the main thrust of the Kingston group and as that type of canoeing seemed to decline around the turn of the century as popular sailing craft increased in size, the canoeing group was gradually submerged into the sailing community of the Yacht Club. Occasionally the names of several canoeists appeared to reaffirm canoeing's presence in the club and the community.

An outstanding single blade tandem crew emerged in 1909, R.B. Shorey and C.H. Nelson. At the Dominion Day Regatta in Toronto that year the limestone city crew pressed the reigning national senior tandem crew — Arthur McNichol and Robt. C. Blackburn — from the renowned Toronto Canoe Club but had to settle for a second. Strangely, the Kingston couple failed to compete in the Canadian Championships at St. John's, Quebec, but they did turn up at the ACA competitions which were held at Sugar Island in the St. Lawrence, off shore from Gananoque. They turned in an impressive performance: Shorey took a second in the double blade singles; Nelson won a second in the single blade singles where he failed to defeat Charles Riddy from Toronto; and they teamed up to take second in the double blade tandem and had to settle for a second in the single blade tandem when they again failed to take the measure of McNichol and Blackburn. (Toronto Star, August 16, 1909)

The success of the Kingston paddlers may account for the appearance of a new canoe club — the Kingston Canoe Club — sometime between 1909 and 1914. Little is known about this phase of canoeing in the community. World War One stifled the fledgling club and it failed to survive the war years, along with numerous other sporting organizations in communities across Canada.

But canoeing was revived in Kingston in 1936 when the Cataraqui Canoe Club reappeared. A prominent founding member of that club was Henry Cartwright, a young lawyer who moved to Kingston from Toronto in 1929. In Toronto, Cartwright was an Islander who developed an interest in canoeing as a young boy at the famous Island Aquatic Club. After getting a practice established in Kingston, he returned to canoeing as a recreational pastime purchasing his own racing canoe from the Toronto builder Thomas Enyon. The lure of competition led him to join the closest club, the Gananoque Canoe and Motor Boat club in 1932 where, in his first year he made the Gan single blade fours crew that won the Junior Fours Championship of Canada.

Cartwright trained in Kingston and while out canoeing frequently ran into another avid paddler, Gordon McMann. The two struck upon the idea of forming a local club and did so. Charter members of the new club were: Gordon Bond, King Whitney, Ed McMillan — a former Ottawa paddler and a past Commodore of the Canadian Canoe Association — Bill Walsh and, of course, McMann and Cartwright.

A site on the property presently occupied by H.M.C.S. Cataraqui was leased from the Federal Government and a World War One hut from Barriefield was moved to the river location. Several canoes were scrounged from local supporters and an ancient war canoe was purchased from Carleton

Place Canoe Club for \$50.00. A prominent faction in the club at the time was a contingent of about thirty members of the Signal Corp. stationed in the city.

By 1938 the club was sufficiently established to apply for and receive the Canadian Championship Regatta which was held inside the causeway on the Greater Cataraqui River — in spite of the weeds. Cataraqui Club members did little on the water, but the event did much to stimulate canoeing in the Kingston community.

Yet again did war intervene, and with it the decline of canoeing in the community as young men were drawn away to do battle. A nucleus of canoeists persisted with the club during these years and even managed to compete in several CCA Championships. A crew of J. Descent, J. Bryant, A. Stowinski and A. Ruddell came third in the National Championships held in Ottawa in 1941. No CCA championships were held between 1942-45 and the Cataraqui Canoe Club was little heard from during these years.

In 1946 when the annual meeting of the CCA was held the Cataraqui Club informed the Association that it would not compete that year but would return to competition in 1947. But they failed to do so and in the late 40's the club ceased to function. The canoes were sold to the Gananoque Club and the funds loaned to a new aquatic organization in the Kingston community which planned to build a brigantine sailing ship. Cash on hand was converted into a Government of Canada Bond that was held in trust by J. Descent. Canoeists are eternal optimists and those who oversaw the decline of one club were, in fact, planning the formation of another.

A new canoeing community appeared in 1964 led by Moira Dickson Stanton, a former Sudbury Canoe Club paddler and Peter Eggleton, a former Montreal paddler with plans to revive the Cataraqui Canoe Club. In 1965 the club took up quarters on the east side of the Cataraqui River, a bit north of the old site, and applied for membership in the CCA. The new group was aided by Henry Cartwright who requested the Brigantine Association repay its loan to the canoe club which it did. J. Descent appeared on the scene with funds from the bond that had been held in trust. These funds along with those derived from a variety of fund raising schemes set the club up with a modern compliment of racing canoes and kayaks. Kingston Parks and Recreation Department generously donated two "hockey shacks" each spring and these were assembled on a vacant property between the Water Treatment Plant and the Woollen Mill on Orchard Street. Each fall they took back the shacks and stored the boats in a Parks storage building in a local park north of the club site. During these years Anne Boumeester established herself as an up-and-coming paddler at the national level. But the unreliable, restricted and temporary facilities on the Greater Cataraqui hampered the growth of the club and it failed to expand beyond a small and loyal following.

The club seemed on the verge of collapsing in the early seventies when the decision was made to discontinue racing and to devote time, energy and resources to resolving the building problem.

Building a community base for the club became a prime objective. A canoeing and water safety program was established in 1971 under the direction of Fred Johnston, a former Sudbury Canoe Club paddler who had moved to Kingston in 1968 and had set up canoeing and water safety programs in Sudbury and in Port Credit at the Mississauga Canoe Club in 1960. In the same year Dwayne Ramsay initiated a series of weekend canoe outings for the membership and this attracted new enthusiasts to the club. The recreational touring and the canoeing and water safety programs were instant successes

and prompted the club to embark on a building campaign. An appeal for assistance was made to a number of prominent, community-minded individuals which led to the formation of a Building Advisory Committee under Chairman Fred Johnston. Serving on that Committee were: Gordon Eligh, Manager of Sears Department Store, King Whitney, a local merchant and a member of the Cataraqui Canoe Club from the 1940's, Dr. Donald MacIntosh, Queen's University, Mr. Albert Tierney, Bank Manager and the club Commodore, Dwayne Ramsay, Manager of Kingston Dye and Chemical. Numerous overtures were made to local businesses and service clubs but to no avail. Finally the Kiwanis Club of Kingston agreed to help out with a \$10,000 materials grant if the club was able to apply for and receive funds through a Federal Government Winter Works Program. The Chair prepared a proposal which was submitted and approved and construction commenced in February 1973. The preferred site for the Club was on the Greater Cataraqui River. The temporary site on Orchard Street was private property and the club could not afford to purchase it. A site on the south shoreline of the Municipal Golf course was made available by the City Parks and Recreation Department but test holes proved the site to be unsuitable for a building of the size contemplated. When construction began in February 1973 it was on a site in Lake Ontario Park leased to the club from the City. Numerous local businesses stretched the Kiwanis dollars through outright donations or rock-bottom prices for materials. The building was completed in the early summer and on June 9, 1974 the club was officially opened.

A competitive canoeing program was restored in that year. The Club under Commodore Michael Sayers applied for and received a Wintario Grant in 1975 that enabled the club to purchase six new racing boats, the first new boats since 1965. A successful fundraising campaign by Mark Trudeau provided funds for new double blade paddles, kneeling pads and floatation belts. A grant from the 1976 Kingston Olympic Programme Committee provided funds for improvement of the docks and hosting the 1976 Olympic Regatta, Kingston. In that regatta some 40 Kingston area young people took part. The addition of a competitive canoeing to an active water safety program, and a popular canoe touring program made for a well balanced canoeing program.

But there was a fatal flaw in the location of the new club. The setting of the clubhouse in Lake Ontario Park was idyllic but the waters for paddling were less so, especially for novice paddlers attempting to become proficient in handling temperamental and tippy Olympic style canoes and kayaks. The club prospered but the developing proficiency of our paddlers was hampered.

In 1979 the Club was approached by Mr. John Armitage a rowing enthusiast from Brockville with plans to build a rowing club in Kingston on the site of the old Cataraqui Canoe Club on Orchard Street, recently purchased by the city. The proposal was for the two clubs to build separate change rooms and boat storage facilities with common, jointly-owned training and meeting rooms. There was a distinct advantage for the club to be located on the protected waters of the Greater Cataraqui River and so it entered into the partnership. John Armitage for the Kingston Rowing Club and Fred Johnston for the Cataraqui Canoe Club formed a Building Committee and jointly applied for a capital Works Project Grant from the Ontario Ministry of Culture and Recreation. The Club sold its building in Lake Ontario Park to the City and the City leased a section of the Orchard Street Park site to the two clubs for the construction of the new Canoeing/ Rowing facility. A grant from the Ontario Ministry Culture and Recreation was approved and construction commenced in the fall of 1979. By the spring of 1980 the new clubs were up and running.

Unfortunately, while the club moved from the west to the east side of the city, many of its young members did not do so and the Club was faced with a major membership campaign which never really got off the ground. The fortunes of the club declined with the decline in the racing program. Competitive racing demanded competent coaching and the club was unable to finance that coaching. The one program that continued to prosper was the touring program but these members were not in need of boat house facilities. They met in parking lots to launch their weekend outings to the lakes and rivers that surround the Kingston region.

Over time as the membership of the touring group changed, they lost all contact with the "Catarqui Canoe Club". The building was mothballed. For funds to maintain the building Fred Johnston and Jim Atkinson, the last elected Commodore, rented racing boats to the Carleton Place Canoe Club and space to the Rowing Club. A war canoe was sold to the Rideau Canoe Club to pay off a long standing club loan that had been personally covered by Johnston and Atkinson. Revenue from rentals was placed in the bank. Canoeists are eternal optimists ...

In 1984 Mike Fisher leader of the "Catarqui Canoe Club Outers" approached Fred Johnston wanting to know if there was, in fact, a club building belonging to the "Catarqui Canoe Club". Over a period of time the Outers were reincorporated into the Canoe Club and provided administrative leadership that was lacking. Canoeing and water safety courses were reintroduced and efforts have been made to reintroduce canoe racing but with little sustained success. But the club is very active with a touring program for both flat and white water and recently has initiated, albeit tentatively, "ocean kayaking". Canoeing is still a going concern in the Kingston area.

**Notes:**

1. This history of canoeing in the Kingston area is a revision of an earlier version which appeared in a club regatta program in 1976.
2. The author wishes to thank Mr. Ken Brodie, Archivist for the Kingston Yacht Club for his assistance, as well as the Canadian Canoe Association for the use of its archival resources.

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