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The Micmac Birch-bark Canoe 'W' ,,,, • ?*'v. Within the incredible limitations of stone-age materials and tools, the Indians brought the canoe to its peak in both design and construction prior to their first associations with whites. It is one of the few elements of Indian culture the whites took to immediately, making no other changes except that of increasing the size. For economy of line, sufficient lightness for a single man to carry it from one stream to another, ease of maneuverability, speed and repair • the Indian canoe was unsurpassed. Whites introduced nails and steel tools, including the froe for splitting and the shaving horse • all of which the Indians quickly adopted • but existing models indicate that workmanship was never better than that achieved with the stone and bone tools used formerly. What follows is a description of how a Micmac birch-bark canoe was built. It is essentially a reduction from the book by Adney and Chappelle: *The Bark Canoes and Skin Boats of North America* (available through Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.) For clarity, we'll begin here with a one-paragraph telling of the steps of construction • and recommend looking ahead at all the photographs, canoe plans and drawings of parts • so the reader will know in advance where each step is leading. Simply stated, once materials are gathered and at the building site, the birch-bark canoe is constructed in these steps: The gunwales (the upper edge of the canoe) are split out of cedar and given the shape of the sheer, and maple thwarts (the cross-pieces) are carved with tenons on each end. Mortises to receive these tenons are chisled along each gunwale. Then starting by placing the tenon of the middle thwart in each gunwale and pegging it there, the gunwales are heated and drawn together at the ends into the characteristic bow • the ends pegged and lashed with spruce roots. (See drawing) The gunwale is the building frame and is placed on the carefully leveled ground of the building site. Stakes are driven in the ground around the gunwale. (See First Stage Drawing) The stakes are removed, the gunwale frame removed and the birch-bark cover is rolled out over the bed. The gunwale is replaced. The bark is cut so, the sides can be raised • and the stakes are replaced, holding the upraised bark. Inner stakes hold the bark to the outer stakes. (See Second Stage Drawing) The gunwale is raised to the proper sheer height, held on posts and carefully weighted in place. If needed, bark is added for width, trimmed and lashed with spruce root the length of the gunwale. The ends of the thwarts are lashed to the gunwale. Side seams are sewn and the canoe ends are shaped, battened and seamed. All seams inside are sealed with spruce gum. White cedar sheathing is split, placed along the inside and held with temporary ribs of basket ash. About fifty ribs have been shaped from white cedar and they are now fitted and then worked up in-between the gunwales and the bark cover. Maple headboards and the "frogs" to hold them are shaped. The ends of the canoe are stuffed with dry moss or cedar shavings and the headboards are lashed in place. The gunwale caps are pegged on the length of the gunwales and lashed at the ends. All seams are gummed on the outside. And that, basically, is how the birch-bark canoe is built. We often have this idea of the lone Indian out building his



canoe, but actually it was extremely rare and difficult for a single man to build on. Normally, the entire family participated in construction, and building sites were often used for generations. The chosen site was usually close to a brook and shaded to prevent the sun from drying the bark too quickly. The ground would be cleared of sticks, stones and roots • anything that might damage the bark • and the earth would be carefully leveled. The materials for canoe construction were simple and local but had to be ga-

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