

# A Summer Confluence



Alex Comb

## Launching Two Restored Morris Canoes, Revisiting Joe Seliga's Legacy and Celebrating YMCA Camp Widjiwagan's Ninetieth Anniversary: Part I

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### **Widjiwagan**

Wooden Canoe readers who are familiar with the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW) in northeastern Minnesota or the Quetico Provincial Park in northern Ontario may also be familiar with YMCA Camp Widjiwagan, located at the edge of the BWCAW near Ely, Minnesota, and its wilderness programs for youth eleven to eighteen years of age. Perhaps you've run into a trail group unloading their canoe as they stood knee-deep in water, protecting it from touching rocks, preparing to flip it up and head off on the portage to the next lake. Or perhaps you've seen a Widjiwagan trail group silently paddle out of the mist in their wood-canvas canoes, heading for their next destination.

Widjiwagan is an Ojibwe word meaning "comradeship" or, according to another translation, "they help, accompany each other in a good way."<sup>1</sup> Since its founding in 1929, thousands of youth have traveled together in small groups to experience the wilderness through the camp's canoeing and backpacking programs.

By living and working closely with others, campers learn to work together and demonstrate the values of caring, honesty, respect, and responsibility. That was true in the earliest days of the camp and continues today.

*Above: The restored Morris canoes on display in Camp Widjiwagan's Trail Building during their 90th Anniversary Reunion weekend.*

This past summer, the camp observed its 90th anniversary. Hundreds of alumni and friends attended a reunion to reconnect,<sup>2</sup> to witness the launching of two one-hundred-plus-year-old Morris canoes, to hear the debut reading of *Canoeing Joe*<sup>3</sup> by its author and illustrator, to tell stories, and to reflect on the difference the camp has made in the lives of the former campers.

Prior to the reunion weekend, Widjiwagan had a fleet of 199 canoes, including 112 wood-canvas or wood-fiberglass canoes. Nine of these are among the original ten Old Town canoes purchased between 1937 and 1943. The fleet included fifty-seven canoes made by Joe Seliga, the largest collection of Seliga canoes anywhere. The fleet also included seven "Heritage" canoes constructed by the camp's Canoe Master, campers, and staff using the Joe Seliga form. Widjiwagan's wood-canvas and wood-fiberglass fleet is the largest in the United States and the third-largest in North America.

In anticipation of the 90th Reunion Celebration, camp management had decided to have two old Morris canoes once belonging to canoe-making legend Joe Seliga restored and added to the fleet. The 15-foot canoe was given to Wi-



djiwagan by Joe and Nora Seliga in 1994, and the 18-foot canoe, which the family still calls a Veazie, was donated to Widjiwagan by John and Gloria Seliga, Joe's nephew and his wife, following Joe's death in December 2005.

The purpose in restoring these canoes is to continue to honor the legacy of Joe and Nora Seliga and their canoe-building partnership as well as to have two historically-significant working canoes that are water-ready and can be used by Widjiwagan groups yet to come.

Restoring a canoe that is over 100 years old requires a knowledge of history and canoe design, as well as a great deal of creativity. We asked two canoe restorers with a strong reputation for quality, and both former friends of the Seligas, to take on these restorations. The Widjiwagan Fleet Management Sub-Committee asked Alex Comb of Stewart River Boatworks (Knife River, Minnesota) to restore the 18-foot 1906 B. N. Morris canoe, and Tim Eaton and the experienced volunteer restoration crew at Urban Boatbuilders (Saint Paul, Minnesota) to restore the 15-foot 1903 Morris.

Following the reunion, the Widjiwagan fleet is now comprised of 201 canoes, 114 of them wood-canvas or wood-fiberglass.

### **B. N. Morris Canoes**

Morris canoes were, because of design and performance, considered by many to be the finest of all the early wood-canvas canoes, and are still appreciated by wooden canoe fans today.

Morris canoes are often written about in the pages of *Wooden Canoe*, in particular the recent series of articles by Howard Herman-Haase,<sup>4</sup> and Kathy Klos Campbell<sup>5</sup> has written a book about Morris and his canoes. There are often discussions about Morris canoes on the WCHA Forums at the Wooden Canoe Heritage Association web site.

According to one of the Herman-Haase articles, Bert Morris came from a long line of Maine woodworkers. His great-great-grandfather, his great-grandfather, his grandfa-

*Photo of a Seliga family outing in 1907. The 18-foot canoe is on the left, and the 15-foot canoe on the right. Joe wasn't born yet but his mother Anna, sister Ann, and his father Stephen are in the 15-foot canoe.*

ther, his father, and two older brothers were all carpenters. One of them, Charles, built carriages, coffins, and lapstrake boats. Bert was trained as a cabinet maker. Sawdust was in his veins.

Bert Morris, then 21, and his brother Charlie, age 27, started the B. N. Morris Canoe Company in the late 1880s and continued until a fire in 1919 destroyed the factory in Veazie, Maine.

In an interview in 1984, Joe Seliga said, "I don't think anyone built a finer canoe than B. N. Morris. It's a canoe that when it gets in the water, it is like a swan—proud."<sup>6</sup>

If Bert was brought to canoe building through family, woodworking, and the challenge of craftsmanship, Joe was brought there by family excursions in the woods, and the challenge of correcting a problem.

### **Joe Seliga**

If you know canoes and have spent time with any canoeists from the Upper Midwest, you'll likely know about Joe Seliga canoes.

Readers of *The Art of the Canoe with Joe Seliga* by Jerry Stelmok<sup>7</sup> will be familiar with the impact of two Morris canoes on Joe Seliga, a young iron mine worker during the first half of the twentieth century.

In 1905, Joe's father, Stephen, purchased a barely used 15-foot Morris, and in 1906 he purchased a new 18-foot Morris Model D, serial number 4101. These were important members of the Seliga family in northern Minnesota.

The 15-foot canoe is a Morris Special Indian Model 62, serial number 2204. It was built circa 1903 and was the thirty-fourth canoe shipped in January 1904.

It seems a safe bet to say that without those Morris canoes, and the experience they provided to a young Joe Seliga, we might not have the heritage of Seliga canoes to

celebrate. These canoes are the foundation for Joe's design and canoe production.

In his *Wooden Canoe* article titled "Joe Seliga Remembered,"<sup>8</sup> Jerry Stelmok refers to these two Morris canoes as "cherished friends to Joe as he approached adulthood, and served as the inspiration for his own canoe building." These cherished friends had a formative impact on Joe.

In part due to these canoes, his steady optimism and problem solving abilities, Joe became an almost mythical canoe builder. Joe never stopped tinkering, always trying to improve the quality of each canoe. Joe Smith, Widjiwagan Caretaker and a friend of Joe's, said that "he was often tuning his form to make some adjustments nobody else noticed."

Three events stand out as major life-shaping events, although their impact might not have been understood at the time. If you have read the *Art of the Canoe with Joe Seliga* you'll be familiar with them.

Jerry Stelmok points out that families in the Ely area depended on the bounty of the north woods.<sup>9</sup> These two canoes were an essential part of the Seliga family, a means for augmenting their food supply, and providing enriching, shared family activities.

Imagine the sense of loss when, in 1919, Stephen discovered the 18-foot canoe had been stolen from their boathouse on Shagawa Lake.

The canoe was found through a tip, but it took an Ely Municipal Court hearing in May 1921 to get it back to the Seliga family. The judge fined the defendant \$55 in damages and \$6.75 in costs.<sup>10</sup> The canoe was returned, but not in its original pristine condition. The interior had been painted, presumably to make it harder to identify as the Seliga's canoe. But the thief had not removed the identifying serial numbers.

Stelmok states that "while the family was grateful to have the canoe back they were dismayed by the ugly painted interior."<sup>11</sup> He goes on to say that "Joe decided to do something about it. Stripping and refinishing the Morris' interior would be the first large-scale canoe work of his career." When finished, the canoe reportedly was as beautiful as the day his father bought it.

Someone, probably a young Joe, took steps to be sure the serial numbers of both canoes were clear on each canoe in the event of being stolen again. The 15-foot canoe has its serial number stamped in about a dozen places—under the seats, on the decks, and on the inwales. Also, on the underside of the middle thwart on the 18-foot canoe, someone had carved "Steve J. Seliga."

The second event happened in the spring of 1934. Joe and his father were on the thaw-flooded Nina Moose River when there was an accident and the canoe was badly damaged. Stelmok describes it, "the sides and bottom of the canoe



MARK GARRISON

*Joe's father's name carved into the underside of a thwart on the 18-foot canoe.*

were badly out of shape and the whole craft flexed oddly—twenty-one ribs were cracked or broken, many of them badly." They were able to get home where they assessed the canoe more closely.<sup>12</sup> Stelmok wrote, "the canoe was badly damaged and for all they knew beyond repair. It was a significant loss to their lifestyle and livelihood."

Joe was a problem solver. Perhaps he inherited that, and the gumption to strive for quality, from his parents. Joe took some time to plan his steps but eventually undertook the complete repair of that canoe. It was another formative incident.

Dwight Ericsson, in *Widjiwagan, a History from 1929 to 1989*, states that the "experience started something going inside of" Joe.<sup>13</sup>

Friends and neighbors who saw the repaired canoe were impressed. Soon, Joe had a steady number of boats and canoes to repair.<sup>14</sup> And sometime after that, he came up with a plan for the making of his own canoe using the 15-foot canoe as the mold.

The Seliga Morris canoes are significant because he used the 15-foot canoe as a mold to build twenty-seven 16-foot canoes, and the 18-foot canoe became the model for the forms he used to build a small number of 18-foot and a larger number of 17-foot canoes, a model he preferred for wilderness tripping.

The modifications he made to the 15-foot canoe included creating a stem channel by removing part of each splayed stem. The light cedar hull was reinforced from underneath with a strongback and sawn-to-shape inserts. Metal bands for clinching tacks were added on the exterior of the hull at every rib.<sup>15</sup>

Of the twenty-seven 16-foot canoes, the first seven were bought by Widjiwagan in 1948 and 1949. Five of them are still part of the fleet.

Joe made 618 canoes in his lifetime but he did not do so alone. While growing up, Richard, Joe and Nora's son, helped Joe in the shop until he went in the service in 1951. At that time, Nora began to help Joe in canoe building in

small ways at first, then steam bending and tacking. Family stories point out that Nora did not relinquish her role as Joe's partner. From July 1951 to 2001, they made 556 canoes together.

In 1938, Joe Seliga, unaware of the fire nearly twenty years earlier at the Morris canoe factory, wrote to Bert to explore the possibility of becoming a Morris dealer but Bert declined, saying he only built the occasional canoe as a hobby and did not want the pressure of filling orders. There is no evidence of earlier or later communication between the two craftsmen. Bert died two years later in 1940.

Joe considered Bert to have been his mentor, even though they never met and had only corresponded a couple of times regarding the dealership. These Morris canoes were his teachers. And he'd been an apt student.

The third formative event was a fire in his garage workshop in 1994 that destroyed much of the workshop. Joe and

Nora's operation almost suffered the same ending as the B. N. Morris Canoe Company.

The 15-foot canoe survived the fire with only a charred bow. It was salvageable and found a new home at Widjiwagan.

Unlike Bert Morris, the fire did not stop Joe and Nora. They went on to make an additional 85 canoes after the fire.

Joe's determination, curiosity, steady optimism, and problem solving about building canoes led to his becoming an almost mythical canoe builder. Together, he and Nora made 618 canoes, plus two bookcases.<sup>16</sup> And in part, these two Morris canoes, which were the inspiration for Joe, plus Bert's silent mentorship helped to get Joe started. He and Nora did the rest. x

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*Part 2 will continue with the story of the restoration of these two canoes.*

*For twenty-four years the 15-foot canoe hung from the rafters of a camp pole barn, nestled inside the fiberglass mold Joe used in the late 1950s to make nine fiberglass canoes.*



BRUCE CASSELTON



BRUCE CASSELTON

*Upon arrival at the UBB shop, one could see the indication of where the metal bands were placed on the 15-foot canoe in order to use it as a mold. Somehow, this pine cone had been securely jammed through the rib.*

## Endnotes

- 1 James Vukelich *Ojibwe Word of the Day* <https://www.facebook.com/james.vukelich.7/videos/10216028617443878/UzpfSTExMTQ1MDIxNDc6MTAyMTl3MzQ4NTA5ODIxOTI/>
- 2 Throughout the 90th anniversary reunion weekend, testimonials of Widjiwagan's impact were abundant in the comments and stories told by former campers and staff. The reunion truly was an opportunity to celebrate or reflect upon the magic of this camp: "I never felt that it was me against the woods, a survival thing. I learned how to get along, even with the dense forest on long portages. I learned how to reach my limits and go beyond them. I learned how to be part of something bigger than me." "I learned how to appreciate the incredible wilderness and the beauty of the earth, we have to take care of it." "Camp saved my life, and so did my counselors."
- 3 A children's book about Joe and Nora Seliga written by Robin Radcliffe and illustrator Consie Powell, published in 2019 by Green Writer's Press.
- 4 Issue 205, February 2018; Issue 206, April 2018; Issue 207, June 2018; Issue 209, October 2019; Issue 211, February 2019; Issue 214, October 2019.
- 5 The Morris Canoe: Legacy of an American Family, Kathryn Hillard Klos, self-published, 2014.

- 6 *Wooden Canoe*, Spring 1984, Issue 18
- 7 *The Art of the Canoe with Joe Seliga*, Jerry Stelmok, Photography by Deborah Sussex, MBI Publishing, 2002
- 8 *Wooden Canoe*, Issue 133, February 2006
- 9 Stelmok and Sussex, *The Art of the Canoe with Joe Seliga*, pp 23–30.
- 10 Case 2498, May 3, 1921. *Judgment Rolls, State of Minnesota, County of St. Louis, Municipal Court, City of Ely. The Court found in favor of Stephen Seliga and fined the defendant \$55 in damages plus \$6.75 in costs and disbursements.*
- 11 Stelmok and Sussex, p. 30
- 12 Stelmok and Sussex, pp. 33–34
- 13 *Widjiwagan: A History from 1929 to 1989*, Dwight Ericsson and John Shepard, published by Bewell Offset, 1999, p. 121
- 14 Stelmok and Sussex, p. 34
- 15 Stelmok and Sussex, p. 48
- 16 Thanks to WCHA member Dan Lindberg for his helpful stewardship of the Seliga saga and production records.