

A SUMMER CONFLUENCE: LAUNCHING TWO RESTORED MORRIS CANOES

Revisiting Joe Seliga's Legacy, and Celebrating YMCA Camp Widjiwagan's Ninetieth Anniversary – Part 2

By Matt Poppleton, Alex Comb, Tim Eaton & Bruce Casselton



Photo supplied by the Seliga Family

Seliga family outing in May, 1908. The 18' is on the left, the 15' on the right. Joe wasn't born yet but his mother Anna, sister Ann, and his father Stephen are in the 15'

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he Camp Widjiwagan Fleet Management Committee commissioned the restoration of two cherished Morris canoes from the Seliga family. These restorations were undertaken in anticipation of the Camp Widjiwagan Reunion in celebration of its 90th anniversary, after which the canoes would join the Widjiwagan canoe fleet to return to the water and wilderness travels.

Urban Boatbuilders (UBB) of St. Paul, MN, took on the restoration of the 15-foot Morris as part of its youth program helping teens develop life and work skills through boat building. The UBB crew included Richard Shank, Karen Keeney, John Moriarty, Mike Baudino, Denny Newell, Bob Kinghorn and Tim Eaton. While this wasn't their first Morris restoration, it likely was their most challenging. Upon initial inspection, it was clear that getting charred in the 1994 Seliga shop fire wasn't the worst part of the old canoe's history. It had literally taken a beating of some 60,000 hammer blows while serving as a form for construction of Seliga's 16-foot canoes.

"Wow, it is in much worse shape than I was expecting," said one of the restoration crew members upon first sight of the canoe. Despite all of the inherent problems, though, Tim noted that "the canoe still displays a sweeping sheer line with high profile

decks, gorgeous and generous tumblehome, and perhaps the most beautiful convex decks that I have witnessed in a manufactured canoe. B.N. Morris truly had an eye for aesthetics."

WCHA member Kathy Klos Campbell has catalogued about four-hundred existing Morris canoes out of the nearly 20,000 Morris canoes built, including only about a dozen 15-foot models, so this one was special. It also has some unusual features including padded seats, hair-filled and covered with Moroccoline, an early synthetic leather.

Restoration of the 15-foot Morris required the installation of new Sitka spruce gunwales, repair of many rib tops, and back-side repair of breaks and cracks in 41 ribs including two that Joe Seliga had cut away near the stems as part of the canoe's use as a building form. Finally, some of the planking was replaced including sections from the bow that were charred in the Seliga shop fire.

The mahogany seat frames were restored and re-upholstered using new Moroccoline. In the process of restoring the seats, specks of red paint, thought to be the original canoe color, were discovered, as well as the serial number (2204) which Joe had stamped on the bottom along with his father's name: S J Seliga. This number was also stamped in nearly a dozen other places, probably by a young Joe Seliga, but the original oval serial number tag is missing, evidenced only by two nail holes on the port gunwale.

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RECOVERY STROKE

The original mahogany center thwart had been shortened and moved forward by Joe in order to add a second thwart. During restoration, the canoe was returned to its original single-thwart design. New pieces of mahogany were scarfed onto the original thwart, which was moved back to its original position, 4" aft of center. When cleaning the decks, the original Morris decal was discovered. It's interesting that in this version of the decal, the word "paddling" is misspelled as "paddling."

Jerry Stelmok noted that in order to use the 15-foot Morris as a canoe-building form, Seliga cut a channel down the center of each of the original stems to accommodate the stem for each newly-built canoe. When he finished using the canoe as a form, he inserted hardwood pieces in that channel. These three-piece stems were retained during restoration because they so vividly illustrated the canoe's unique history.

Each piece of planking on the entire canoe was removed in stages, stripped, sanded, treated with boiled linseed-oil, and then given two coats of shellac and a coat of varnish before being reinstalled. New deck tips were scarfed on, and #8 canvas was stretched on and filled, after which the canoe was primed and then painted with Kirby's #8 Sec Red. The missing keel was replaced, screwing it on at every-other rib (most later model Morris canoe have the keel attached at every rib). The canoe was finished with additional coats of matte varnish.



The 12-inch mahogany heart-shaped deck and remnants of the Morris Canoe decal (version two). Photo: Tim Eaton



The UBB crew paused to reflect on their role in the rebirth of this Seliga family canoe with horsehair-filled Moroccoline seats, beautifully upswept sheer-line, and generous tumblehome. According to Tim Eaton of UBB, "This is a very special and unusual canoe."

Restoration of the 18' 1906 Seliga family Morris was undertaken by Alex Comb's Stewart River Boatworks of Knife River, MN. When delivered to Alex's shop, only one stem was in place, temporary outer gunwales had been installed for travel, and the bow deck was missing. Various pieces of the canoe were in a pile, and the canoe had long ago lost its original shape, having relaxed and spread out over 12".

Alex began by removing a myriad of different finishes including remnants of the gray paint used to alter the canoe's appearance when it was stolen from the Seligas. Stripping made visible some earlier repairs: planking repairs and 11 ribs of vertical grain red cedar (not Morris' usual white cedar). These are likely the repairs made by Joe after the Nina Moose River incident.

To return the hull to its original shape, while the wood was still wet from stripping, Alex laid a heavy blanket laid over the hull and ran steam into it. He regularly tightened web clamps around the canoe over an hour of steaming, and then moved the re-shaped hull onto a rack in

Joe's father's name carved into the underside of a thwart on the 18'.



Photo: Mark Garrison

An example of the damaged rib tips in the 15-footer.



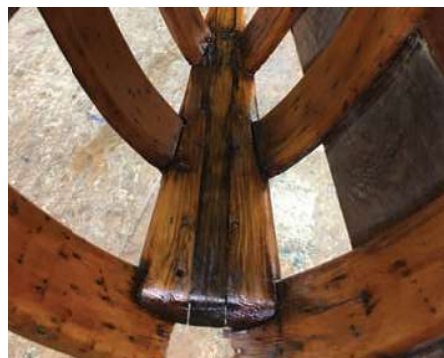
Photo: Tim Eaton

his shed, clamped it into its renewed shape, and left it in traction over the winter. In spring he repeated this process. "I tried," Alex noted, "to pull it back to the proper width, but this rounded out the bottom and raised the sheer line in the middle." In the end, the bottom was brought to near its original position, which pushed the sheer line up only about a half an inch amidships. A new sheer line was established and that half inch at the center of the canoe sawn off.

To re-establish the stem profile and the sheer line at the decks, Alex had the inside cover photo from Stelmok's "The Art of the Canoe" scanned and enlarged for an accurate, full-sized profile which he used to make jigs for bending new stems and gunwales.

Likely after his father's mishap in the canoe, the then 23-year-old Joe replaced the damaged planking with Northern white cedar, some of which split. Alex considered leaving the split planks as he found them – he usually won't fix a builder's mistake – but in this case he did so for his friend Joe Seliga.

Reflecting on the canoe, Alex said "I had always wondered how Joe had come up with such a sweet, fair design, as my first attempts were nothing like that. Now I was staring at the answer. This was the Morris that had been the guiding design for Joe to make his original 18-foot canoe form, which he later shortened to the more familiar 17-foot length. I had always thought it funny when Joe said that his canoe was inspired by the Morris but he had done this, and done that, rebuild the ends, softened the sharp rise of the sheer at the bow, and so on. I thought Joe's comments almost laughable, yet that is what he did! My job was to get this inspiration of a canoe back to being a Morris. The sheer line and the stem profiles are unique to Morris canoes. They all have a look about them. I am proud and honored to have had the opportunity to restore this canoe."



RESTORATION RESULTS

The restoration of these two very special canoes culminated in a dedication on the Saturday afternoon of the Widjiwagan reunion weekend, after which attendees were able to take the canoes out on Burntside Lake. The 15-foot Morris had not been on the water since 1948 when it was converted into a building form. Seventy-one years out of the water is a long time, but paddler after paddler spoke of the "sweet ride" of that canoe. And the restorers, as they deserved, were visibly moved by the appreciation expressed for their efforts. No one mentioned the original poor condition of the canoes; instead they spoke of the pride of having had these canoes rescued and returned to Widjiwagan.

In *Widjiwagan: a History from 1929 to 1989*, Dwight Ericsson described the setting when the early founders of camp visited the site for the first time in 1929, seeing the unusable shoreline thickly littered with drifted logs and stumps left from logging operations twenty years earlier. He wrote that "the dreamer sees what might be, and is not deterred by what is." That seems an apt phrase to describe the past, current and future Widjiwagan stewards, as well as Bert Morris, and Joe and Nora Seliga. It also describes Tim and crew at UBB and Alex Comb, who demonstrated the same creative problem solving in these complex restorations that Joe showed earlier. The legacy lives on.

Each summer select Widjiwagan camper groups will use these canoes on trail. In doing so, Widjiwagan will continue the Morris and Seliga legacy, keeping alive the spirit, creativity, optimism, uniqueness and strength of these canoe builders. These canoes and this legacy will be shared sources of inspiration for current and future Widjiwagan generations, and they will help teach Widjiwagan's mission of respect.

Restoration of these two Seliga-family Morris canoes was supported by generous funding from friends of Widjiwagan, Seliga canoe owners, others with an appreciation of wood canvas canoes, and an important initial \$500 grant from the Wooden Canoe Heritage Association.

About the Authors: Matt Poppleton is the Director of YMCA Camp Widjiwagan. Alex Comb has operated Stewart River Boatworks since 1979 where he builds and restores wooden canoes. Tim Eaton is a retired graphic designer, current President of Canoeing.com, former UBB Board Member, and current UBB volunteer heading up canoe and boat restorations for the organization. Bruce Casselton is one of those former campers and staff who benefited from the wilderness experience as a young adult. He is chair of the Widjiwagan Fleet Management Committee and author of a young adult fiction novel, *Canoe Camp*, available on Amazon.com.



Facing page: The three-piece splayed stem that Joe adapted to provide a stem channel for building the 16-foot Seliga canoes. Photo: Tim Eaton
This page starting top left, clockwise: Fitting rib piece for placement; The stem areas are repaired and the restoration crew has signed-off on the wood repairs; Bending rib for repair of missing rib piece near the splayed stem band. Photos by Bruce Casselton.
Center: The 15' ready for the water; Bottom: The 15' ready for paddlers; The 15' Morris canoe launched at last! Photos by Tim Eaton