

# Valley Angler

## The Perfect Fishing Craft

by Bill Thompson

Necessity being the mother of invention it is a good bet that the first guy ever to lash a few logs together for a raft was trying to get out to where the fish were. It was the second guy, the one that hollowed out the center of a log to make the first canoe, who really started the ball rolling in the right direction. Ever since these humble beginnings men have been searching for the perfect fishing vessel.

Like everything else we have made great technical advances in both material and design in the quest for the perfect fishing boat. Today's modern bass boat and salt water sport fishing boats are representative of these advances. Constructed of high tech plastics, powered by powerful motors and fitted with electronic devices they are the epitome of the art. However, in my opinion, that fellow with the hollowed out log had the right idea.

After another few thousand years or so another bright fellow took the same principal as the log design and came up with the birch bark canoe. I am guessing, but he was probably inspired by his wife who was already making cooking utensils out of the stuff. One day he no doubt dropped one of her birch bark bowls into the lake and discovered that it floated. After several disastrous attempts she probably showed him the correct way to stitch and seal the bark. Latter on she gave him the idea for ribs and gunnels.

Another thousand years went by when, what we now refer to as Euro-Americans, showed up and began to make some changes of their own to the canoe. Birch bark was replaced by canvas and eventually by fiberglass and aluminum. Around the turn of the last century some of these white guys went through some kind of revolution of thought and made some wonderful changes to the basic canoe and created some of the most beautiful fishing craft ever made.

Right after the Civil War American's found they had some free time on their hands and started to look into leisure activities to take up the slack. For a number of years prior to the Civil War American's, at least in the east, had been leaving the farm and flocking to the cities to participate in the great industrial revolution of the time. Just about the time everybody got comfortable living in the cities a bunch of different writers and thinkers of the day started a "back to the woods" movement. Apparently cities like New York and Boston, much like they are today, were pretty foul places to live. These scholars proposed that the antidote to over work, stress and the unhealthy conditions of the cities was a return to nature. The rugged outdoor life was just the thing to keep one healthy, fit and keen of mind. As a result of their teaching hunting, fishing, camping and canoeing became very popular with the masses.

One writer that was very influential in this movement was a fellow by the name of George W. Sears or as he was better known, Nessmuk. Mr. Nessmuk spent a great deal of time prowling around the Adirondack's in upstate New York. In his quest for the perfect boat he had a fellow by the name of J. Henry Rushton make him a small light weight canoe like boat. The boat was an

one man affair and extremely light weight in order to easily portage from one Adirondack lake to another.

Rushton was already engaged in making a hybrid wooden canoe that became known as the Adirondack. With the help of the publicity garnered from Nessmuk's book *Woodcraft and Camping*, there was a demand for these boats from guides and the many tourists that were heading into the woods. To be fair at about the same time Maine Guides were also experimenting with the same basic design and these craft would become the famous Rangeley Boat.

It is said that Rushton drew inspiration from both the Native American canoe and the St. Lawrence skiff. Rushton had traveled extensively in Canada and was very familiar with these boats. A typical Adirondack boat is double ended like a canoe and is made from wood planking usually applied in a lapstrake style. The boats can be rowed from the center of the boat or from the stern. They are light enough that they can easily be carried by means of a yoke on the shoulders of one man.

The other evening I had the great pleasure of fishing from one of these boats. We had invited a friend to fish with us on a local pond and he said that he would bring his boat. The boat turned out to be an Adirondack Guide boat that was built in 1929 for this gentleman's grandfather. It was said that local Adirondack guides guided all summer and built boats all winter. Most of these craft were 16 foot in length, but this one was a scaled down version and was only 13 foot. As you might expect the craftsmanship was superb. To my way of thinking there is nothing prettier than a wooden boat.

My friend rowed from the stern and we glided effortlessly across the water. It was a bit tricky getting in but once underway it was a dream. It was easy to imagine a more gentle time when wooded boats ruled and the outboard had yet to be invented. It was almost a shame that we fished with graphite rods; a bamboo rod would have been more appropriate. In a way these boats catch the essence of what fly fishing is all about. Fly fishing is sometimes called the "quite sport". It was, after all, Izaak Walton who said, "Study to be quite". My friend said to me, "you relax in a boat like this" and it is true.

The introduction of the outboard motor sure made it a lot easier to get around, but in the long run I am not sure that it made fishing any more fun and in the end it may even have taken something away. Old Nessmuk was right. We do need to escape from the world we have created and return to nature. Wooden boats and fly fishing have a way of making the trip more fun.

See you on the river.