

# Wooden Canoe Heritage Association

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## NORTHWEST CHAPTER

**Northwest Chapter WCHA**

**Fall Newsletter**

**November 2022**



*Dawn Patrol's view of Lightning Lakes at Manning Park.*

*Mike Livdahl photo.*

## **NW Chapter Fall Meet September 18–21, 2022**

Between Covid, new border regulations and forest fires, the NW Chapter didn't know until the Friday before the Sunday arrival day that the Fall Meet would actually happen! A fire in Manning Park east of Lightning Lakes had closed the highway, and the lodge and campground were poised to evacuate. Fortunately, rain helped contain the fire, the campground was open, the sun came out, and the Meet was on! How good to see friends we haven't seen for the past three years! The group thoroughly appreciated the beautiful lakes, the company, and of course, the variety of lovely and graceful boats.

## Two Interesting Historic Boats, discussed by Mike Elliott (notes by Mary Norton)

Two special older boats at the Meet gave chapter members the opportunity to enjoy a canoe-building history discussion by Mike Elliott. With the Ellsworth's 1921 Willits and Des Winterbottom's circa 1920's Peterborough sailing canoe displayed side by side, Mike discussed the evolution of the manufacture of these beautiful boats.

Birchbark and dugout canoes were the original First Nations/Native American canoes of the eastern Canadian and US coasts, and by the mid-1800's, many boat builders were experimenting with canoe building methods. Peterborough, Ontario was a center of canoe building activity, and builders borrowed many traditional European boat-building techniques in the quest for light and durable wooden canoes that could be built on a factory scale.

By 1859, Sir John Stephenson of Peterborough was building a rib and batten canoe built on a solid wooden form (perhaps a dugout, or modeled after a dugout). Like European boat builders, he began with a keelson set on wider planks, then utilized 5/8<sup>th</sup> "rock-elm steam bent ribs held in place by copper nails, using pre-drilled holes. Board planks of basswood or cedar were bent longitudinally over the form and held with copper nails. Inside longitudinal battens, also copper nailed, covered the planking butt-joints. When the canoe was finished, it was pried loose from the wooden form, and the copper nails bent towards the keelson, a process called "dubbing" (as opposed to "clinch"). Approximately 4,000 16 gauge copper nails might be used in a 16' canoe.

Stephenson next (1879) patented his "cedar rib" construction method, also over a solid wood form, utilizing wide white cedar steam-bent ribs fitted closely together by tongue and groove joints, and longitudinal stringers. In 1883, he patented his third construction innovation, this time utilizing separate rock-elm ribs bent over the solid wood form, and covered with hand-tapered ship-lapped cedar planking, held again by dubbed copper nails. In 1988—over a century later-- Stephenson was inducted into the Peterborough Sports Hall of Fame for his canoe innovations!

South of Peterborough, at Gore's Landing, another creative canoe builder, Dan Herald, patented his own "double-planked" canoe method in 1871, also using a solid wood form—and later, sheathed the form with metal. Wide cedar planks were steam bent over the form gunwale to gunwale, and butt-jointed. A layer of cotton muslin soaked in pine tar or white lead covered the transverse planks, then a second layer of longitudinal planks covered the muslin, all held by thin copper tacks. With a metal-sheathed form, the tacks would hit the metal and double back, or "clinch" the tacks. After Herald's death in a train accident, his sons continued to build canoes as the Herald Brothers Company, and later, as Rice Lake Canoes.



*Des Winterbottom's Peterborough sailing canoe (left) and the Ellsworth's Willits, (right) with Mike Elliott (left) and Mike Livdahl (right) J McElroy photo*



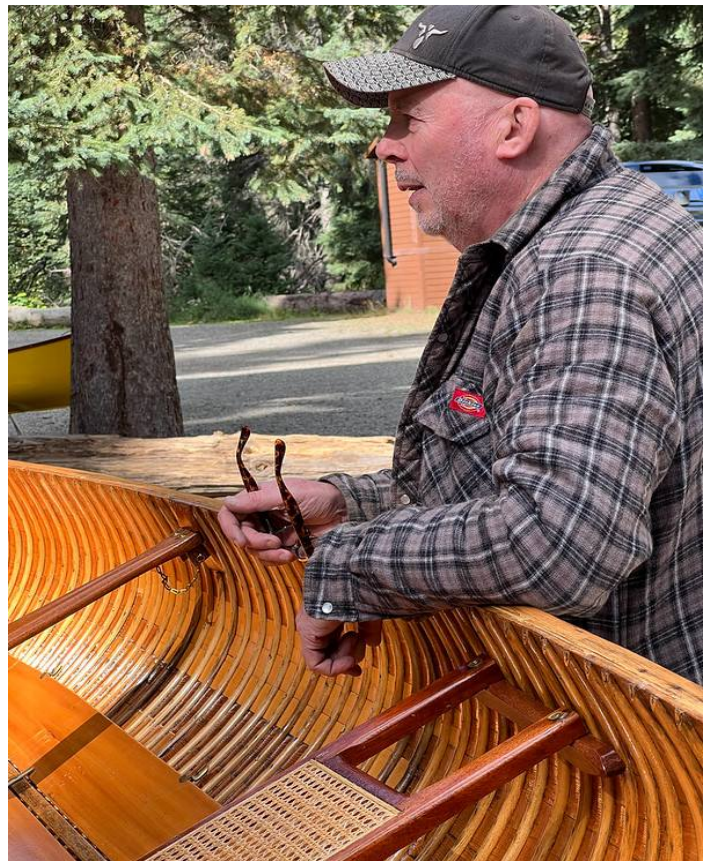
Wealthy sportsmen in Ontario and Maine appreciated the light weight of birchbark canoes, and canoe builders experimented with canvas to cover their canoes, rather than birch bark. Evan Gerrish, of Bangor, Maine, heard about building canoes upside down over a metal-sheathed form, and is generally credited with building the first factory-built wood and canvas canoes, in the 1870's. Gerrish canoes shared a number of features seen in birch bark canoes, such as the ribs attaching to hardwood inwales, capped inwales, outwales extending beyond the decks, and cane-wrapped deck and outwale trim to mimic the birch bark canoe's spruce-root bindings. Other Maine builders—notably E.M. White, Morris and Carleton followed with their own wood-canvas canoes.

Meanwhile, in the 1900's, two brothers, Earl and Floyd Willits were growing up interested in boating, first in Illinois, then Iowa, and finally on the west coast, in Tacoma, Washington. They built several experimental canoes together, and took mechanical drawing, woodworking and metal shop in high school. While still in high school, they began their canoe business, combining Herald's double planked method modeled after the Rice Lake canoes, and utilizing the clinched tack techniques of other builders. Between 1908 and 1967, they built around 975 double-planked canoes together, with Earl manufacturing the individual parts and Floyd assembling the canoes. Their signature canoe was 17', with a coaming, outwales, and a framed two-piece deck with the deck join covered with a king plank. Following Floyd's death in 1962, Earl felt that he was unable to complete the finished canoes to the level of quality to which he expected and was committed, and he closed the canoe factory.

The Ellsworth's beautiful Willits canoe is a 1921 "special order" model with book-matched alternating light and dark cedar planking, and mahogany seats and thwarts. Like the Herald canoes and other Willits canoes, it has wide outwales and no inwales.

Des Winterbottom's Peterborough sailing canoe, circa 1920-1930, looked related to early guideboats and similar rowing boats. The longitudinal quarter-sawn white cedar planking was hand-planed to create the needed tapers, and to create the shiplap plank joints, then joined with nails through the laps. End-to-end plank joints were not butt-jointed, but planed to a 45 degree angle, making planking repairs (as with the Willits canoes) extremely challenging. A cotton tape at the joints would swell to make the canoe watertight. These boats were often painted, with the top of the line boats varnished, with chestnut or white butternut decks. Des's varnished canoe also has a narrow contrasting decorative strip of mahogany planking, and an original mahogany coaming. Originally it would have had a triangular lateen sail with spar, leeboards (perhaps piano-hinged), but likely was raced without a rudder.

Thank you to Mike Elliott for pointing out the construction details of these lovely canoes, and placing the boats and their builders in historic perspective. Seeing the two canoes together enhanced the group's appreciation of the materials, creativity and craftsmanship that created boats to last 100 years and that are still beautiful and functional!



Mike Elliott's new book, ***This Fancy Old Canoe***, available soon, will include additional canoe construction history.  
*Livdahl photo*



## An Unexpected Treat!

Sunday evening was a cold and quiet night at camp, with the first arrivals gathered outside the dark cookshelter, talking for a bit before bed. The evening was greatly enlivened when Nancy Douglas arrived with brightly colorful canoe cookies! She had planned ahead to make them well in advance of their pre-Meet travels, and most people could identify “their own” canoe to enjoy. Canoe cookies by candlelight could become a new tradition! Thank you, Nancy!



*Canoe cookies by candlelight on a cold night!  
Livdahl photo*

## Picnic Paddle

Monday morning began with Dawn Patrol in frosty canoes, on the misty lake. Mid-morning, many of the group paddled the chain of lakes to the west end creek outlet for a picnic lunch. Signs of beaver activity were seen on the lake banks, and a loon pair were observed fishing. A gravel bar offered the opportunity to beach the canoes and eat on shore.



*The canoes traveling down the lake; the air is still a bit smokey.*

*J McElroy photo*



*Dick and Sue Cross enjoying the sunshine. J.McElroy photo*



*Gravel bar at the end of the lake offered a good pull-out point. J. McElroy photo*



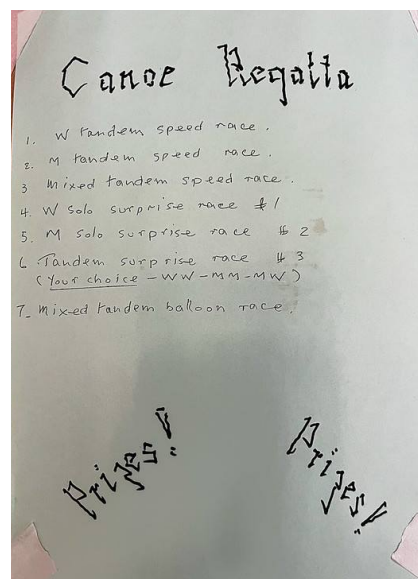
## Canoe Regatta, Boudi-style!

Tuesday morning, chapter members were handed an exciting flyer: a canoe regatta, with tantalizing chocolate prizes! Soon, canoes were lining up for the first race. (No canoes were harmed in this regatta.)



Canoes line up under Boudi's supervision, to wait for their final instructions.

N. Douglas photo



Livdahl photo



Judges are ready onshore at the finish line: Joyce Manary & Joan Ellsworth

N. Douglas photo



And the final instructions: do a 180 turn and paddle backwards to the finish!

N. Douglas photo



Jan Heikkila wins the backwards paddle race.

N. Douglas photo



A surprise race: only the bow person paddled, while stern shouted instructions.

N. Douglas photo





*Intense competition for chocolate bars in the balloon collection race.  
Christianson photo*



*Vern Heikkila grabs another balloon.*

*Chrisitanson photo*

## Meet the canoes

A number of beautiful canoes, in addition to Des Winterbottom's Peterborough and the Ellsworth's Willits, were lined up on the beach at this Meet. Two boats were having their first re-launch, after undergoing restoration.



*The newly restored Heikkila 18' OT Guide was a fast boat with 4 paddlers, called changes and Jan setting a fast pace.  
Livdahl photo*



Vern and Jan Heikkila brought their recent project, an 18' Old Town "Guide" model, which had been donated to the chapter in poor condition, along with another canoe, some years ago at Camp Bishop. At the time, Vern bought this canoe at the auction, and Mike Wooten bought its companion, a Penn Yan. After two years of work, with two new stems, all new gunwales, 3 new ribs and several new planks, the sleek white canoe looked new. Vern used tiger-striped maple for the decks, with spruce gunwales and floorboards, and Jan wove new diamond-patterned paracord seats.

Bob and Carol Podesta also re-launched a recently restored canoe, a 16' Greenwood of unknown age, obtained from their friend Marek at Copper Canyon Canoes. With mahogany seats replacing the original oak, and beveled decks for easy hand-carrying, the canoe gleamed in rosy paint that set off its varnished wood, ready for its next adventures.



Bob Podesta discusses their Greenwood canoe.  
Livdahl photo



Bob and Carol Podesta in restored Greenwood canoe after re-launch.

Livdahl photo

Mike Elliott brought his 16' Chestnut "Pal", built in the 1960's, designed for rivers and canoe camping, with a 36" beam. This canoe, fully restored, is featured on the cover of his book *This Old Canoe*.

The Ellsworths' 1921 Willits special order canoe, with book matched light and dark cedar planking, and mahogany trim, seats and thwarts, joined the other canoes on the beach. This canoe weighs about 80 pounds, and celebrated being 101 years old by emerging without a scratch following an unfortunate regatta collision!

Mike Livdahl brought his 1967 Old Town Otca, with its sturdy ballistic nylon skin. The skin, now about 10 years old, has protected the boat through periods of outdoor storage and rocky beach landings.

Scott Christianson showed his 16' White "Guide", built by Scott in 1999, at Jerry Stelmok's shop. Mentored by Jerry, Scott completed the canoe to the point of filled canvas in 11 days. The 65 pound canoe has a shellac bottom, and distinctive northwest logo.



Scott Christianson's White "Guide" canoe.

Livdahl photo



*Kurt and Laura Schmidt launch their Kennebec for a paddle.  
Livdahl photo*

Kurt and Laura Schmidt brought their 1917 Kennebec, purchased by Kurt's dad in Wisconsin in the mid-1940's as a restoration project. After multiple moves, including cross-country, Kurt actually began the restoration project in 2011. The finished boat –another boat over 100 years old at this Meet!-- includes maple seats and thwarts milled from wood from Kurt's grandfather's farm, and maple from their own Whidbey yard.

Dick and Sue Cross came with Sue's sleek pin-striped green canoe, beautifully restored by Dick with gracefully sweeping new bow and stern profiles.

The Norton/McElroys brought their 16' mystery canoe, an exciting raffle prize at a past Manning Meet, and described by the donating owner as a 1942 Peterborough. The smooth-paddling canoe was discovered by that owner in 1969, stored in the backcountry of the Boundary Waters, in a tree, and already covered in fiberglass. He purchased it from the original owner's widow, and had the fiberglass removed and the canoe recovered with canvas. The canoe then traveled with the donating family between Minnesota summers and California winters yearly for many years. However, at this Meet, opinions varied both as to the age of the canoe (not that old?) or if was actually a Peterborough. With no serial number, or identifying marks, the canoe's origins may remain a mystery.



*Dick and Sue Cross enjoy an early Dawn Patrol.*

*Livdahl photo*





J. McElroy photo

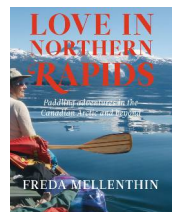
## NW Chapter Meeting, Auction and Potluck

President Mike Livdahl held a brief chapter meeting on Tuesday afternoon. We will hold the **Spring Meet at Camp Bishop, Shelton, WA**, due to the availability of indoor facilities in case of bad weather. The dates are **May 11, 12, 13, 14, 2023**, with the Thursday being a work party day. The camp and those involved with the new Canoe House hope to hold a formal dedication ceremony during the Meet.

The next **Fall Meet will be at Manning Park, September 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 2023**, back to our more usual schedule of weekdays leading into the weekend.

Discussions continue regarding new home of the Camp Kirby-donated war canoe, presently stored by Michael Davidson and Ginger Fortier. We await further news regarding this canoe.

Again, a wide variety of interesting items were donated for the chapter auction, and sold to a laughing crowd by Kurt Schmidt and Mike Livdahl. Some restoration items—canoe seats, copper tacks, and tools—were saved until the Spring Meet, when there may be a broader market for those items. Freda Mellenthin's family donated a number of copies of her compelling and inspiring book, *Love in Northern Rapids*, some of which will also be available in the spring. Andy Whitmore, unable to stay for the Meet, brought by a number of auction items to benefit the chapter, including books, magazines and canoe paddles. Mike Elliott again donated a light, lovely Bearclaw paddle. Other highlights included cranberry vinegar, a mounted Livdahl outdoor photo taken at Yosemite, and an old-growth red cedar canoe model built by Vern Heikkila, a scale model of an 1890's tribal-built 32' canoe owned by the Aberdeen Museum.



The auction earned \$442 for the chapter, enabling the Fall Meet to pay expenses plus earn a small profit for the group. Following the auction, the group gathered for a luscious potluck, with lights (thank you, Des!), hot chili (thank you, Mike and Nancy!) and many salads and desserts. Who knew the multi-talented Mike Elliott could make bakery-quality raspberry cheesecake?!





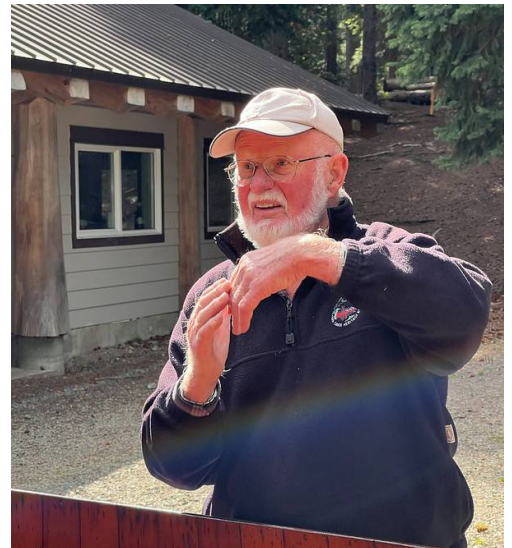
*Nights were cool, with frost on the canoes in the morning.  
Livdahl photo*



*Dawn patrol was beautiful. Nancy Douglas dressed to stay warm. Livdahl photo*



*Mike Livdahl, Steve Ellsworth and Scott Christianson carry the 1921 Willits. N. Douglas photo*



*Des Winterbottom explains a canoe planking repair issue.  
Livdahl photo*



*Joyce Manary and Boudi Van Oldenborg enjoy the sun at the lake shore. Livdahl photo*



## An Interesting Camp Visitor



photo by Mike Livdahl



photo by Joan Ellsworth



photo by Joan Ellsworth



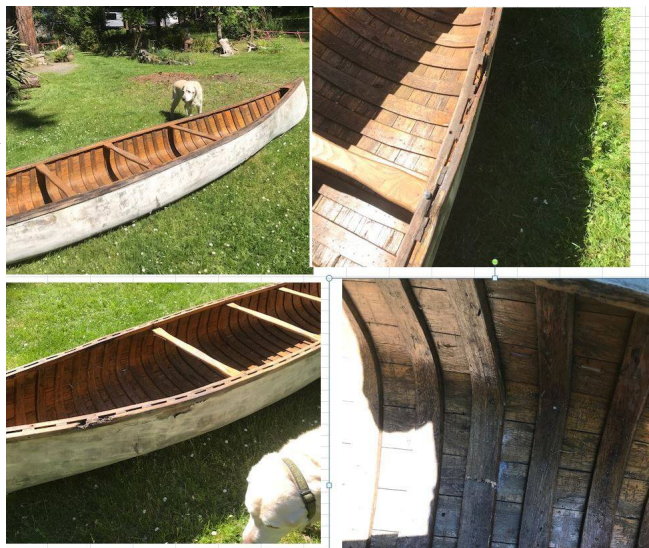
photo by Scott Christianson

Yes, the sign *did* say “do not feed the wildlife”, and yes, we all did know better. But he was so cute, and maybe he would even eat out of someone’s hand . . . And so began the group’s interaction with a bird described in literature as “ . . .gregarious, intelligent, noisy, opportunistic omnivores.” A larger cousin to the crow, the common raven (*Corvus corax*) has a large bill, facial bristles, and heavier neck and throat feathers. They mate for life, and can eat almost anything. Wild ravens commonly live 10–15 years, sometimes more than 20 years, but documented ravens in semi-captivity have lived over 40 years. They have many vocalizations, and if adopted as young birds, can learn to say some human phrases. Interestingly, ravens originated in Europe and Asia, and are believed to have crossed the Bering Strait land bridge in at least two distinct periods, first about 2 million years ago, moving south to California and Mexico. After another time of glaciation, slightly genetically distinct ravens arrived, possibly following human migrations. Now, although the southwestern birds are genetically distinct from other north American ravens, the birds can interbreed, so the distinction may decrease over time. A group of ravens is aptly called “a conspiracy”.

Our visitor charmed the group, then spent the day trying to open containers, packs, roof racks and cars. He could puncture heavy plastic containers, and fly away with items to open at leisure, staying one step ahead of those trying to re-capture the item to avoid littering. Next time, perhaps we’ll heed the sign. But he was certainly a handsome and interesting bird!

## Chestnut Prospector Project Available contact Richard Stewart [<rstewartcr@gmail.com>](mailto:rstewartcr@gmail.com)

In 1974 I bought a new 16 foot Chestnut Prospector canoe. I chose this canoe after reading RM Patterson- the Dangerous River . I used it for say 10 years for river, lake and some ocean canoeing . it has been stored both inside an unheated garage and more recently (say 15 years)outside carefully wrapped under a tarp for the remaining years. -note that both inside and outside gunnels would have to be replaced , -new canvas required -one cracked rib and outside adjacent plank , - seats are gone , otherwise I could not detect any dry rot . I live in Victoria and have no use for it. I have a strong emotional attachment to the canoe and the memories that go with it. I am not interested in any money. There is of course the transportation issue: I live in Victoria, BC.







*Partial Group photo Fall 2022: front: Joan Ellsworth, Joyce Manary, Laura Schmidt, Carol Podesta, Bob Podesta, Mary Norton. Back: Joe McElroy, Steve Ellsworth, Kurt Schmidt, Boudi Van Oldenborg, Jan Heikkila, Mike Elliott, Nancy Douglas, Vern Heikkila, Scott Christianson, Des Winterbottom. missing: Dick and Sue Cross, Mike Livdahl (photographer) dogs: Copper Elliott, Sean and Duff Norton/McElroy*



*Mike Livdahl, Steve Ellsworth, Scott Christianson and Kurt Schmidt help load the Ellsworth's canoe. Livdahl photo*

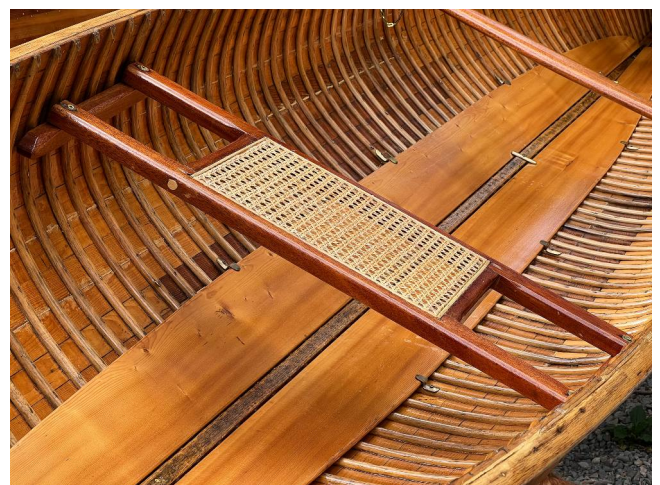


*Mike Livdahl and helper carry to the car. N. Douglas photo*

## **Mark Your Calendar!**

**Spring Meet: Camp Bishop, Shelton, WA  
May 11, 12, 13, 14, 2023!**

**Fall Meet: Manning Park, B.C.  
September 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 2023!**



*Interior of Peterborough sailing canoe with keelson and ironwood ribs. Livdahl photo*



## Willits Canoe News by Joan Ellsworth



Willits canoes line up at Willits Bros. Regatta and Gathering. photo shared by J.Ellsworth



Willits canoes, with Antique Airplane Museum hanger in background. photo shared by J. Ellsworth

Steve and I were surprised to see the email forwarded in late June this year through Martin Ferwerda regarding a Willits Brothers Canoes, Regatta and Gathering. Who are these Willits enthusiasts, we at first wondered? Surely, they had a connection to Pat Chapman, NW WCHA Chapter member and author of the best -selling book, [The Willits Brothers and Their Canoes.](#)

We reached out to Phil Miller, listed as the contact in this email, and learned, Yes, indeed, they have been talking not only with Pat, but with the Willits Family and the Foss Waterway Working Waterfront Maritime Museum (Tacoma).

Discussions between the Willits Family and the museum have continued over several years with the goal to preserve as much of the Willits' shop and equipment as possible prior to the family selling the land. The process of actually cataloging and moving the entire treasure will take place this Fall (October timeframe). There will be more about this acquisition through future Museum communications.

Meanwhile, Phil and other Willits Canoe fans, mostly from the greater Tacoma area, organized a Regatta and Gathering to showcase local Willits canoes and create a more visible Willits community. The hope is to locate and identify (using hull #'s) other Willits Canoes, as well as to celebrate the history and path forward for this new community of canoe owners and fans. The event took place Sunday, August 21, 2022 at the Tacoma Narrows Airport Antique Airplane Museum in Gig Harbor, Washington. It was a beautiful day and a great venue. Just picture these amazing canoes and meticulously restored airplanes together on the tarmac. Quite a sight!



Willits sailing canoe in beautiful condition. photo shared by J.Ellsworth



We car-topped our 1921 Willits to the event along with another couple from Lake Samish and their Willits. There were 15 Willits Canoes and over 30 folks attending. Many were people who knew about Willits canoes, but were not owners . . . yet! One couple that attended became so “jazzed” about the canoes, Phil later located one in Tacoma which they happily purchased! Phil encourages all those who are interested in and/or have a Willits Canoe to come to next year’s event, “even if they have a Willits that isn’t water-worthy.”



*Willits construction demands skilled restoration. photo shared by J.Ellsworth*

We launched 9 canoes (2 of the 15 canoes present are currently under restoration) and enjoyed a 2 hour-long paddle in the saltwater of Wollochet Bay, near where the Tacoma Narrows Bridge terminates on the Gig Harbor Peninsula. Likely, there were doubts about having the canoes in the saltwater given the wood and the thousands of tacks used in Willits Canoe construction, but Phil had arranged for a washing station back at the airport to clean the canoes. It was this attention to logistics and detail, as well as the new friends with a Willits connection that made the day especially memorable.

Phil Miller is your main contact for information on next year’s event (likely August). He can be reached at **253-651-4703** or via email [seeeeds@comcast.net](mailto:seeeeds@comcast.net) Phil is happy to field any questions you may have regarding Willits in general, the progress in transitioning Willits Family artifacts to the Foss Museum, the 2023 Willits Gathering, or to help you locate a Willits of your very own. His stated goal is to put 20 Willits Canoes in the water in 2023.



*Nine Willits canoes enjoyed Wollochet Bay, then rinsed the saltwater off in the airplane hanger afterwards. Photo shared by J. Ellsworth*



## Some presidential musings:

While a half gallon an hour is not enough to sink the boat there was finally enough water sloshing around my cameras this fall to get me working on cleaning up the old canoe. Ok to be honest it was both the leaks and some “gentle” prodding from Nancy about the peeling hull and ... well ... some ribbing about my almost varnish bare ribs too...

The rotted up stem, inwales, cant ribs, and deck that were revealed in all their epoxy puttied glory when I peeled off the nylon led me to appreciate how much it means to be part of a group like the NW Chapter.

It's not just that all canoeists are special people or that I now know who to call for help :-). It is the freedom and generosity with which we share our passions, like running into a Bill Paine youtube video on recanvassing a canoe. It is the attitude that comes from heading out across the water in a boat that many times we have built/resurrected with our own hands. It is about folks seeing through the crust and rot to the beauty of what was to what still might be.

And you have to admire the dogged tenacity of anyone who has successfully stripped the interior of a canoe.

So for now to take advantage of that spirit of sharing, my question is should I shellac the interior before sanding and varnish?

Happy Paddling, Stripping, Sanding, Varnishing, Stretching..

Mike Livdahl



Mike Livdahl at work.

Dick Howland photo

## Northwest.wcha.org

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Geoff Harvey	
Martin Ferwerda	<i>Webmaster</i>
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Laura Schmidt	
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