

Part 1 Introduction

The Weymontaching Indians: Geographical and Ethnological Background

The Weymontaching Band is made up of some four hundred individuals living in several local groups in and around Sanmaur, in the upper St-Maurice region. Situated about a hundred miles north of La Tuque, the village serves as home base for a small white community established near the railroad that runs from Abitibi to southern Quebec. The Indian reserve itself consists of over seven thousand acres along the banks of Rivière St-Maurice, at the mouth of Rivière Manouane.

Weymontaching—"place where you can see for a great distance"—has been the gathering place of the Band, but nowadays the Indians meet there only in summer for the missionary's visit and in winter for Christmas and New Year's festivities. The rest of the year they live in groups of related families near their hunting grounds or the "headquarters" of the lumbering companies that employ them for cutting and logging operations. Their lands stretch from Rivière Vermillon west to Parent, north to the Gouin dam, and south to Lac Kempt; they are bordered in the southwest by the territory of the Manouane Indians and in the northwest by that of the Obedjiwan. The Weymontaching, Manouane and Obedjiwan Indians thus share the whole plateau and valley drained by the St-Maurice and its tributaries.

The three bands have a common linguistic and ethnic origin, and exchanges of members among them, particularly through marriage, are frequent. Next to the band itself, this group of three bands represents the most significant unit of solidarity for the individual. The Indians not included in this group do not belong to the same family; the Pointe-Bleue Montagnais to the east, the Gatineau and Ottawa River Algonkians to the west, and the Waswanipi Crees and the Amos Indians to the north have no real connection with the Weymontaching, Manouane and Obedjiwan Indians.

Ethnological literature refers to the St-Maurice Indians by the less familiar name *Têtes de Boule* (Mooney in Hodge 1913: 452), and sometimes also by the name *Poissons blancs* (white-fish people), which is a literal translation of the local expression *Attikamek*, a name apparently used by the

Indians themselves in earlier times. These terms are no longer used by the Weymontaching; instead, like the Manouane and Obedjiwan Indians, they now use the name of the territory or the band to which they belong. For example, in the local dialect *Wemontassi IrinUk* means "Weymontaching Indian", or more literally, "Weymontaching man". In this paper the term *Têtes de Boule* will be used mainly to describe the kind of canoe used by the Indians of the St-Maurice region.

Our canoe was built at Dam C, a settlement of about ten families, on the banks of the Manouane, 13 miles from Weymontaching. Dam C takes its name from a holding dam, third of a series built on the Manouane, which is a tributary of the St-Maurice. Founded about twelve years ago when a lumbering company began operations in the area, the settlement was abandoned by the company when the cutting was finished, but the Indians who had worked there and whose hunting grounds were nearby chose to remain. Although the settlement has no real stability of population, some families, such as that of the builder of our canoe, live there all year round.

The Shape of the Têtes de Boule Canoe and Its Pattern of Distribution

Birchbark canoes are usually classified (Vaugh 1919; Ritzenthaler 1950; Adney and Chapelle 1964) according to the shape of the tips; the variations largely reflect those ethnic differences that anthropologists recognize within the great Algonkian-speaking family. There are two other distinctive features in the overall lines of these canoes: the sheer of the gunwale and the bottom profile of the hull. When the curve of the stempiece is long and gradual, the curvature of the hull is noticeably sharper. Similarly, a high bow and stern create a sharp curve at the ends of the gunwales, provided that the depth of the hull remains constant. Variations also exist in the bottoms of these canoes, which can be flat, rounded or V-shaped.

This method of identification cannot, however, be rigidly applied, for these features sometimes occur in unexpected combinations. Furthermore, two quite different types of canoe are sometimes found within

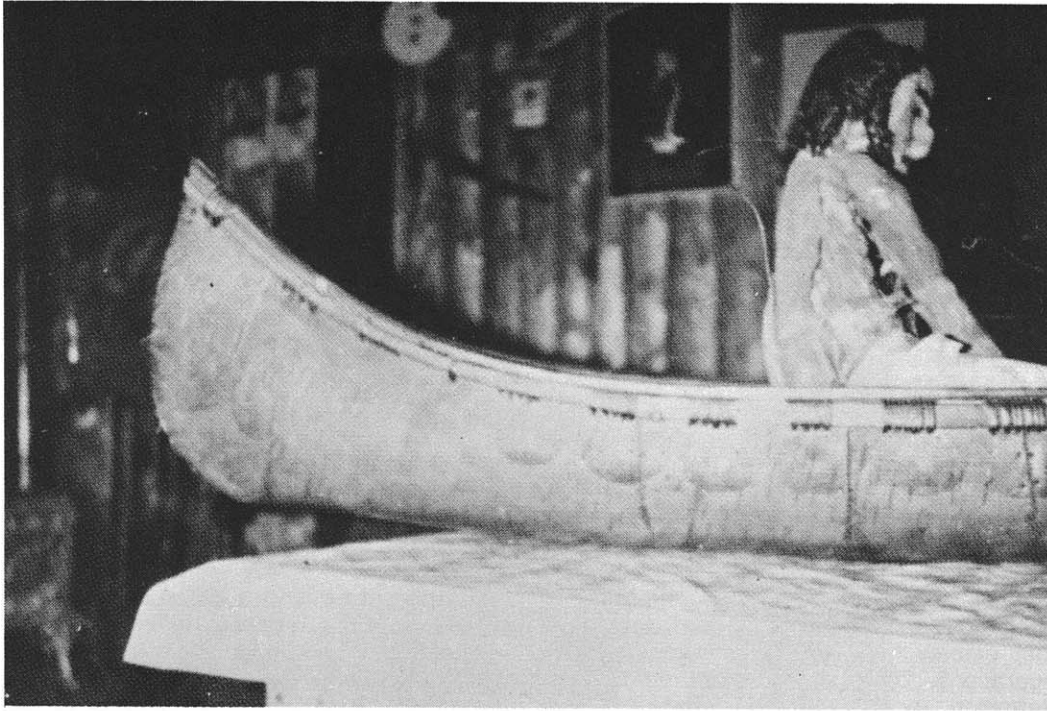


Plate 1
Model of a Manouane canoe (National Museums of Canada, III-C49a)

a single tribal group among the Gatineau Algonkians. Nevertheless, this system of classification does make it possible to distinguish dominant technical trends within a group, and to note major differences in shape between craft used by related ethnic groups. I shall follow this classification in my general description of the *Têtes de Boule* birchbark canoe, noting the more obvious differences that distinguish it from those used by neighbouring groups.

The *Têtes de Boule* canoe is characterized by a flat bottom, a very slight hull curvature, a rather abrupt sheer of the gunwales at both ends, and a regular and gentle curve of the stempieces.

The hull curvature is slight, although there is a brief slope near the stempieces. In this the Indians of the St-Maurice region resemble the Algonkians and Ojibways to the west; the bottom of their canoe is flat and straight for almost its entire length. The hull curvature is more pronounced among the Montagnais to the east, and even more so among the Crees on the eastern shores of James Bay, where the ends are

so high that the hull takes on a cradle shape.

The sheer of the gunwales is also indicative of the intermediate position of the Indians of St-Maurice. South of the St. Lawrence and in the Maritimes, the slope of the gunwales is very slight and gradual, with the exception of the Beothuk canoe, whose distinguishing characteristics appear marginal, and that of the St-François Abenakis, which is very similar in shape to the *Têtes de Boule* canoe. Among the Algonkians and Ojibways, the slope is even sharper than on the *Têtes de Boule* canoe.

In the canoe of the St-Maurice region, the sharp curve of the stempiece at the waterline gives a slight curvature to the hull. The top of the stempiece bends slightly inward, retaining an almost vertical position. Thus the end of the canoe describes a very open arc in comparison with the long-prowed Ojibway canoe, in which the tip of the stempiece curves inward and rests on the forward part of the canoe. Curiously enough, a similar mode of construction is found at the other extremity of

the cultural area, among the Micmacs. Elsewhere south of the St. Lawrence, the top of the stempiece is nearly vertical. The Algonkians bend it inward and downward to fit into the headboard that supports the ends of the gunwales, which in turn rest on the inside curve of the stempiece. This unusual form of construction is found in most of the *canots de maître*, or *rabascas*. This kind of canoe is also common among the Ojibways; I shall call it "Algonkin" here, to distinguish it from the long-prowed canoe peculiar to the Ojibways. Among the eastern Crees and Montagnais, the curve of the tip of the stempiece is like that characteristic of the *Têtes de Boule*, except that it ends under the gunwales instead of projecting vertically between them.

These remarks outline the distinctive characteristics of the *Têtes de Boule* birch-bark canoe. As for its area of use, it is common to the Weymontaching, Manouane and Obedjiwan bands. With respect to the Obedjiwan, we have to rely on the words of our informant and builder, who did, however, note that the Obedjiwan canoe was flatter and had straighter sides "like the Iroquois canoes", by which he meant the *canots de maître*. The *Têtes de Boule* canoe is also found, with minor differences, among the Grand-Lac-Victoria and Lac Simon Algonkians. I was unable to determine whether the typical Algonkin canoe existed in that region, but it seems unlikely. These groups are the immediate neighbours of the St-Maurice Indians to the northwest, although neither group acknowledges any ties. The Maniwaki and Lac Barrière Algonkians have different origins from the first group, even though they occupy adjacent lands. In addition to a canoe with semi-circular stempieces, these Algonkians build a craft that is classified here as *Têtes de Boule*. Adney and Chapelle (1964: 119) refer to it as *wabinaki chiman*, which is the local term. This represents the western limit of the area of use of the *Têtes de Boule* canoe, although it is also found occasionally among the Ojibways. Clearly, the techniques used by the Indians of the St-Maurice region link them to the western groups, at least insofar as the shape of their birch-bark canoe is concerned. It should be added, however, that the St-François Abenakis south of the St. Lawrence have, in addition to a canoe with no noticeable sheer, an-

other model similar to the *Têtes de Boule* canoe. Furthermore, their hunting grounds are known to have extended in earlier times as far as Rivière Vermillon in the St-Maurice region, thus bordering on the hunting grounds of the Weymontaching band. This indicates an unbroken pattern of distribution for the *Têtes de Boule* canoe.

The One-Man Hunting Canoe

The builder of the canoe that will be described here stated that it was a one-man hunting canoe; such craft vary between 8 and 12 ft in length, and are not really capable of carrying more than one hunter and his equipment. Canoes 14 ft or more in length can easily carry a number of people on a hunting expedition, or move a hunter's family and their belongings from winter to summer quarters. Sociological studies of hunting in the subarctic regions suggest that two-man teams of hunters are typical, but investigations of their material culture indicate the use of one-man canoes in many tribal groups. Adney and Chapelle make specific references to its use among the Montagnais, *Têtes de Boule*, Algonkin and Ojibway Indians (1964: 106, 107, 116, 123). How is this wide pattern of distribution to be interpreted?

There is reason to believe that, in addition to the two-man hunt, the less common practice of the one-man hunt also existed. A study of Weymontaching trapping by groups indicates a few such cases (Guy 1966). Rogers (1963: 58) also reports that Mistassini trappers sometimes work alone. The moose-hunting technique described by Dunning (1959: 25) for the Pekangekum Band can be used by one man; the author adds, however, that a novice generally accompanied the experienced hunter. Even with a group of several hunters, it was not unknown for them to work alone in certain circumstances, and at such times the one-man hunting canoe offered obvious advantages.

The shortness and lightness of the small canoe were features appreciated by the individual hunter, and according to our informant, account for its use. With such a canoe, the hunter could negotiate difficult portages and out-of-the-way trails to reach otherwise inaccessible places. It could also serve as a useful complement to a longer,



Plate 2
Manouane decorated canoes

more spacious craft used for other purposes. We can only guess at this, since ethnohistorical works dealing with this socioeconomic aspect seem virtually nonexistent. There is no way to determine with any real certainty the probable uses of this little craft. Contemporary ethnography adds nothing to our knowledge since birch-bark canoes are no longer being built, except for museums and private collections, and the manufactured canvas canoe is usually more than 14 ft long. In any case, it seems most unlikely that the small canoe could have served to carry a family from summer or fall camps to their winter quarters. It seems much more likely that it was used for hunting and fishing around spring and summer camps, for the reasons already mentioned.