Part 4 The Builder

Albert Birote is a 67-year-old member of the Weymontaching Band, with a reputation as a good hunter and fisherman, and as a canoe builder. Another Dam C resident, his son's father-in-law, excelled him in that respect; Narcisse Coocoo's bark canoes sold well, and he used to build two or three every summer. Since the latter's death, however, Albert seems to be taking his place in the art. Pit Neashit, a native of Waswanipi, who has lived with the group for a long time, shows the same skill as a craftsman, but he is too old now for such strenuous work. So Albert remains the only member of the Weymontaching Band who can build a birchbark canoe.

He learned his trade as a boy from his father, at a time when bark canoes seem still to have been in frequent use. He helped his father on many occasions, learning the techniques of construction and the methods of treating the raw materials. He knows the correct term for every part of the canoe. This is far from common knowledge; many of the Indians seemed as interested as I was in the building of a birchbark canoe, as if it were something they had never seen before. After his apprenticeship, Albert built a number of canoes by himself, including one built with materials at hand one winter, when he had to get from his hunting grounds to the trading post; the trapping had been excellent that year and he needed two canoes to carry all the furs and equipment. Since that time, he had had only one opportunity to use his talents; that was ten years earlier, when some Americans took him and another Manouane Indian to New York, Boston and Chicago, where they built a birchbark canoe and a log cabin.

When we asked him to build a canoe for the Museum, he accepted eagerly. Although it was some years since he had built one, he had no trouble in applying his skills to each technical problem as it arose. Nor do I feel that the authenticity of the canoe suffered from his lack of practice, an opinion borne out by Pit Neashit, the other old craftsman, who followed the sequence of operations closely. Pit's conviction that he was still capable of doing the work made him all the more critical, but on the whole his reactions were favourable. He did feel that the canoe was too shallow, yet its dimensions are in accordance with those given by Adney and Chapelle (1964: 111) for canoes from that region.

The reactions of the builder himself to his completed work are perhaps more significant. He was quite upset that the bark covering bulged in several places from the pressure of the ribs, a fault that could have been corrected by trimming the ribs slightly at the pressure points. A minor miscalculation at this step can result in a disproportionately large distortion in the finished canoe, and only experience can give the craftsman the accuracy required to produce a perfect article. Similarly, some of the ribs had slipped too far between the main gunwales and outwales, and had slightly lifted the gunwale caps, which should lie flat on the upper edges of the gunwales. Albert provided a similar explanation for this defect: the excessive length of some of the ribs, and the fact that the gunwale caps had not been attached firmly enough to the gunwales. These are minor technical errors, for which there are specific remedies, and they do not indicate a lack of technical knowledge. It is rather a matter of the relative perfection of the finished product; absolute perfection can be achieved only by an experienced craftsman whose skill is supplemented by the familiarity with proportions and the accuracy that come only with a great deal of experience.

Some construction details do not agree with the description given by Adney and Chapelle (1964: 107) for the *Têtes de Boule* birchbark canoe. The most important difference lies in the use of a building frame. We saw how the assembly consisting of main gunwales and temporary thwarts was used as a building frame in the early stages of construction, and was later raised to gunwale height. The same authors note (1964: 109) that the stempiece usually stops short below the gunwales instead of running between the main gunwales and outwales as we have described it. They also mention that the last rib is "broken".

To what can these differences be attributed? Adney and Chapelle (1964) do not specify the origin of the canoes they describe, but give merely the general region they come from. Thus, for them the *Têtes de Boule* region includes the Algonkin bands of Lac Barrière and Grand-Lac-Victoria. There may be minor variations between the bands in the St-Maurice region,

but major ones if we include the Algonkin bands to the west, who, as we have pointed out, have no ties with the other groups. We must therefore leave the question unanswered for want of more information. It should be noted, however, that a birchbark canoe from Lac Barrière, which is in the possession of the National Museums of Canada, has its stempieces projecting between the gunwales, in the manner described above. Moreover, a general style of construction does not exclude the possibility of minor variations even within a single group. In practice, every craftsman has at his disposal a whole range of techniques from which he can select those that best suit his purpose. Details of construction may also be modified to suit the quality of the materials, the requirements of a multipurpose craft, and the manner in which it will be used.