

# SMALL BOAT Journal

Number 30

May 1983

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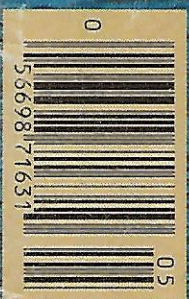
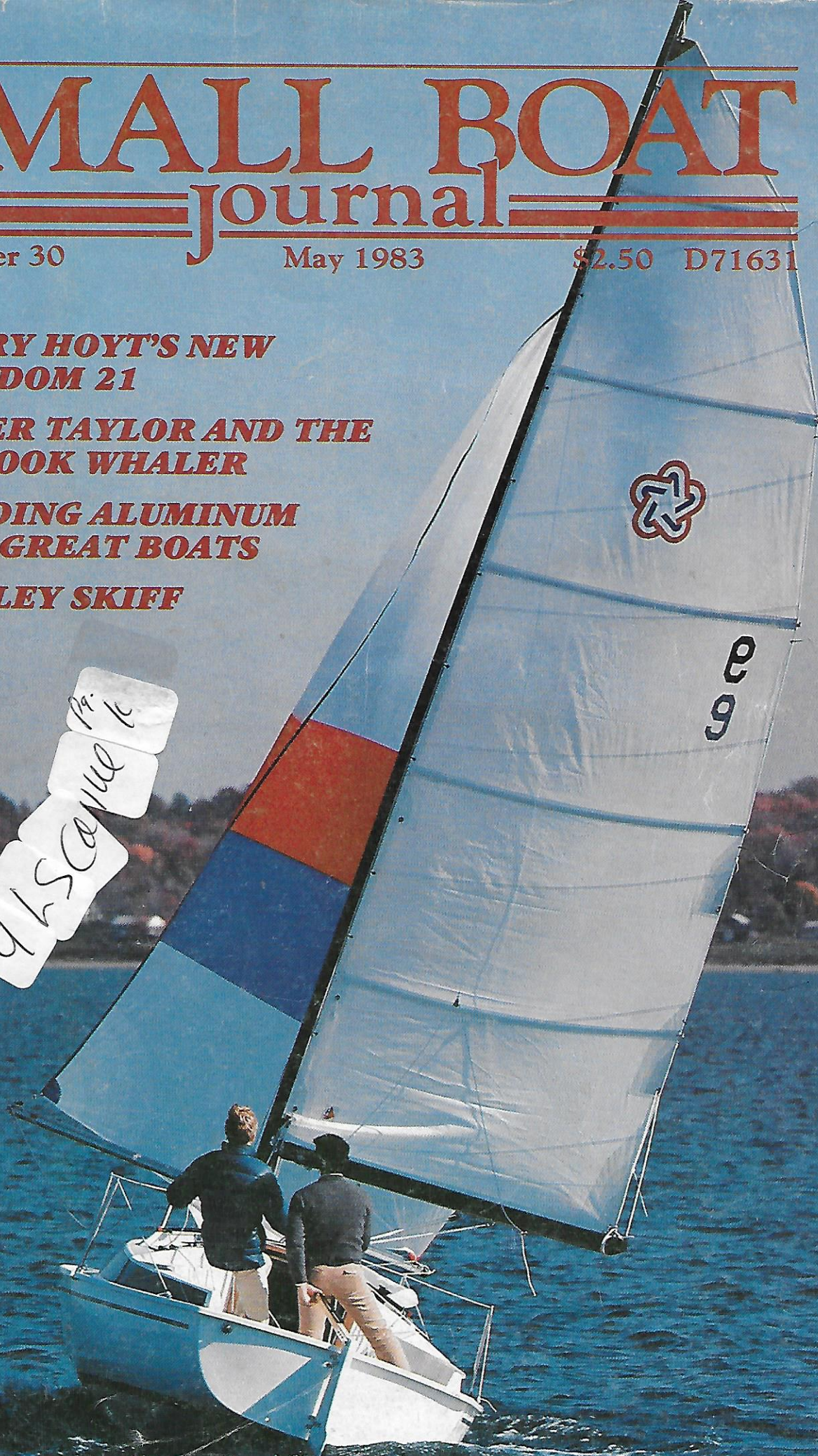
**GARRY HOYT'S NEW  
FREEDOM 21**

**ROGER TAYLOR AND THE  
TANCOOK WHALER**

**WELDING ALUMINUM  
INTO GREAT BOATS**

**ROWLEY SKIFF**

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# Dr. Canoe and Mr. Motorboat

by Jay Sperling

"Almost at the center of the old Passamaquoddy tribal lands," wrote Minnie Atkinson in 1920, "...[lies] a tangled chain of lakes and streams like trinkets of silver on the deep green earth." West Grand Lake is near the middle of this multi-colored jewelry. It is a special place that shaped the character of a breed of boat and the men who build them.

No swift whitewater rivers or raucous waterfalls feed West Grand; instead, the water eases in from more than two dozen ponds and lakes. Pocum-

cuss, Sysladobsis, Mill Privilege, and Pickerel are familiar names to the people who fish for sport — for bottle, keg, duck, trout — and to the men who guide them. Although the water steals into the lake like a busload of tourists who arrive late to the theater, a strong northwest wind can work terror on West Grand, enraging the surface into a violent chop in less time than you need to change bait. You'll want a special boat to work this water day in, day out, and down at the foot of the lake in the town of Grand Lake Stream, you'll find the Grand Lake Stream canoe — the Grandlaker.

A twenty-foot, square-sterned canoe, the Grandlaker's evolution from the familiar double-ended canoe began in the 1920s when early versions of the outboard motor arrived at Grand Lake Stream. Since that time, variations on the original have sprung up, found use, then have been reworked — all in the interest of improving the breed.

The first Grandlakers were as narrow as their double-ended forefathers, but over the years builders spread the

*A Grandlaker ready for a day's fishing. A cushion for the guide: a lounge chair for the sport.*



David R. Getchell, Sr.



beam (40 to 46 inches is common now), flattened the rocker, and widened and deepened the transom, mostly in response to demands from local guides and their "sports" for boats that could carry larger outboards. The changes, including a more pronounced bow, make the Grandlakers better motorboats than canoes, but they also help the boats cope with West Grand Lake's fits of anger.

These canoes would be noteworthy enough if all they accomplished was the seaworthiness to handle rough going and the ability to shoulder enough power to travel with some speed. Yet, the boats have also retained vestiges of the paddling ease inherent in the double-enders. Fishermen appreciate the Grandlaker's stealthy moves in tight quarters. Nor are they difficult to transport. Two adults can easily handle one, yet the boat will carry three in comfort and safety—with room enough for two of them to fish steadily. Covering the hulls with fiberglass lends strength and durability absent from the early canvas-covered boats. Modern Grandlakers will put up with a lot of abuse.

All variety of craft ply West Grand, particularly in the spring when people

pour in towing everything from the practical to the abominable, but the Grandlakers continue to hold their own against the competition. The guides still use them, but not simply because they're great guide boats; Grandlakers remain favorites because the relationship between the boats and the men who use them is a long and rich one. Few other craft have enjoyed such full and active testing, and few builders have received such direct and certain evaluation of their efforts. Certainly, the Grandlaker has been refined in equal measure to the usefulness it has provided its employers. One of the guides expressed the reasons for his loyalty this way: "Whenever I'm in a boat (as opposed to a canoe, mind you), it feels like the damn boat is running me!"

Grand Lake Stream is a no-nonsense fishing town. There are no tennis courts, Dairy Freezes, or family vacation spas. The only neon in town hangs over the beer cooler inside the general store, a place that offers provisions and a bit of hearsay about where the fish might have been yesterday. Outside the store, the town is a postcard of small homes, and the lakeshore is dotted with fishing camps and sports-

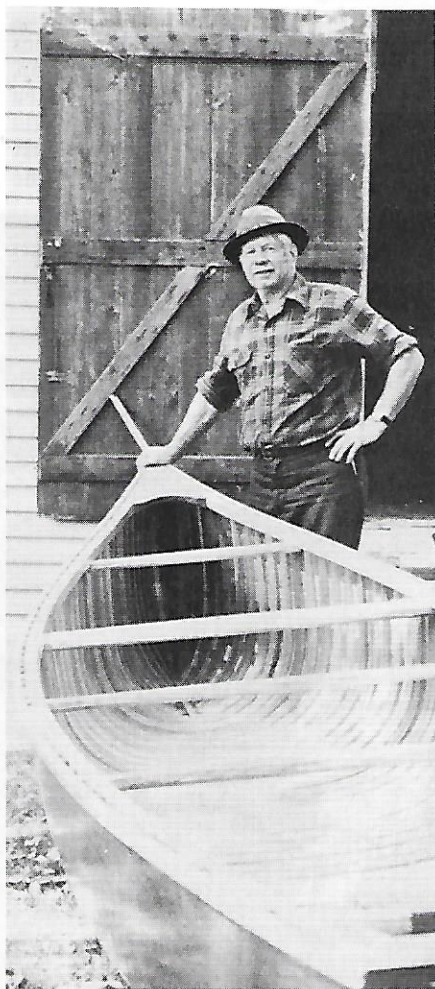
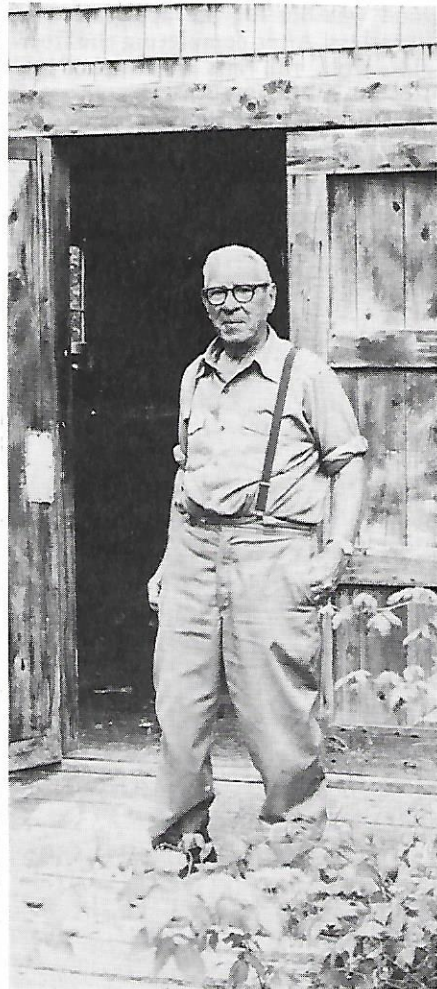
man's lodges. If "Main Street" is the center of a town's commerce, then in this case, the lake's outlet — Grand Lake Stream itself — most aptly fits that description. The stream sluices through the wooden dam at the foot of the lake and flows through the middle of town, neatly cleaving its namesake into halves which mirror one another. A flourishing business in trout and landlocked salmon is conducted along this thoroughfare, and some visitors shop here almost exclusively.

Along the edges of the stream are traces of a tannery, once the world's largest, which operated here during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Hides were shipped here from all over the world to be tanned with the acid gleaned from the bark of the hemlock tree. Thousands of acres of these giant trees were lumbered to feed this operation; the woods' crews alone em-

### ***Half canoe, half outboard skiff, the Grandlakers draw character from the men who build them***



Far left: Timmy Bacon outside his shop. A dozen years ago, Timmy walked out the door and hasn't gone back. Now, he hopes his grandson will take up canoe building. Left: Kenny Wheaton and a recently completed canoe outside his shop. Above: early morning trolling on West Grand Lake.





ployed two or three hundred men and four hundred teams of horses.

Even before the tannery commenced business, however, word had gotten out about the fishing. West Grand Lake was one of less than a half dozen lakes in Maine with a native stock of landlocked salmon, and by the mid-1850s, as many as fifty tents would line the banks of Grand Lake Stream in the spring, sheltering sports who came to try their luck. It didn't take much; older residents reminisced for Atkinson's history, "It was nothing for a sport to catch a hundred salmon a day."

Two things happened simultaneously with the opening of the tannery around 1870: Trolling for salmon came into vogue, and innumerable boarding houses, run by ambitious wives of tannery workers, appeared in town, both of which had a noticeable impact later on.

Even during the tannery's heyday, there were fish in the stream. Although accounts hold that town was an "unattractive" place, sports would sporadically appear along the banks of the stream and do a bit of fishing, but it never amounted to much.

When the tannery began to expire, Mrs. Lavonia Ripley, a boardinghouse proprietor, was inspired to make special provision for sportsmen. Her efforts were an immediate success, and in the early 1890s, the first true sportsman's lodge opened. It took its name Ouaniche, from the Indian word for salmon.

By the turn of the century, the tannery was completely shut down, and

Grand Lake Stream had lost half its population; roughly a quarter of those left were guides! Guiding had joined trapping and lumbering as one of the main occupations.

A couple of decades later, a few townsfolk started fiddling around, trying to fit one of those newfangled outboard motors onto a canoe.

Kenny Wheaton is one of two men left in town who build Grandlakers. He lives along the bank of Grand Lake Stream not far short of where it leaves town, diving over the first drop on its way to nearby Big Lake. Down behind his house, hard by the stream, Kenny maintains a shop where he builds and repairs canoes. Like the man, the shop is neat and well organized.

In 1946, Kenny and his brother Woody, both experienced guides, pooled their ideas and built a mold for a Grandlaker. Kenny still uses this mold. "We built together the first three or four years," he says, "and until 1962 I built anywhere from six to twelve each winter. In 1962, I took over the store, and I only built one or two while I was there. Storekeeping was a demanding occupation."

Retiring from the store in 1977, Kenny began to do a little guiding summers and took up building canoes again. "I like to do it. I've got the shop, the tools, the material...I've always tried to have lots of material ahead. I'll build what I have time for; I built two last spring, and two this spring. That's the

time to build around here, March and April. Things are breaking up, and there's nothing else to do."

Kenny has no plans to build more than three or four a year, although he admits that demand has been pretty high. He leans across the Grandlaker awaiting fiberglass in his shop and adds, smiling, "I don't do anymore than I can help. You agree to build one in your own good time and the next thing you know they're hounding you for it! You could do that until it'd drive you crazy. I'll do it for somebody I know, but..."

A Grandlaker is constructed like any other wooden canoe. A mold, in effect a smaller version of the finished canoe, is built first. The stem, transom, and inside gunwales are temporarily attached to the mold. The proper number of cedar ribs are cut to length, shaped, steamed, and bent into place. The ribs are attached to the gunwales with copper ring nails. Cedar planking, 3/16-inch thick, is fastened to the ribs with small copper tacks.

The hull is removed from the mold, the tacks are bucked tight, and the thwarts and seats are installed. A small bow deck is added for strength, as are naturally crooked reinforcing knees in the stern. The hull is set aside to await good weather for the application of fiberglass. After completing the fiberglass work, rub rails are attached and

*Canadian modifications to the Grandlaker type. The two on the right have sponsons.*



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the inside of the hull is varnished.

Naturally, different builders have always shown variations in construction method or detail. Kenny employs white oak for thwarts and transoms and uses spruce for the rub rails. He widens one of the forward thwarts, which provides a handy perch for casting.

The width of the stern has always distinguished one builder's work from another's, and sterns remain a contentious topic among both builders and guides. Clearly, the wider the stern, the further one has deviated from canoe towards "boat." Also, the wider the stern, the more stability and capability to handle larger outboards, but at the expense of maneuverability and paddling ease.

Kenny Wheaton's Grandlakers are still fairly narrow. "The first ones built were very narrow. They've gotten wider to take a good motor, but I like a stern you can paddle."

Kenny looks over at the two Grandlakers resting in his shop, "I like working with the wood and the old stuff. Of course, the wood is harder to find. I cut the planking myself from the woods. You need big growth cedar, and you have to know what you're looking for and where to look." He pauses as though deep in thought, then ruefully adds, "You know, if you kept track of your time, you'd probably never bother to build another one." Kenny doesn't know

*A Grandlaker upside down on the beach shows little bearing aft.*

exactly why he continues building Grandlakers, but he will. "I like this canoe," he says. "They're a lot more comfortable to fish from than anything I know of."

All of the streets in Grand Lake Stream are side streets. They make short inroads into the surrounding forest and then either vanish entirely or dissolve into the ubiquitous gravel road network which settlers and loggers flung over northern and eastern Maine.

Laurence "Pop" Moore lives down one such side street, not far from Kenny Wheaton. You could heave a stone between the two houses, but traveling from one to the other is not unlike visiting another country. If Kenny's operation is orderly, Pop's seems haphazard, going on chaotic. The small yard behind Pop's house is an obstacle course between driveway and canoe shop — as though a bulldozer has run amok in a lumberyard. Piles of logs and lumber are jumbled about, and various pieces of unrecognizable machinery hulk in the corners. There are hills of sawdust everywhere.

Don't be fooled. Pop Moore has been building canoes for a long time, and he can guide you surely through this maze, explaining steps in the process of constructing a canoe without a moment's hesitation. He knows exactly where everything is — one benefit of having put all of it there himself.

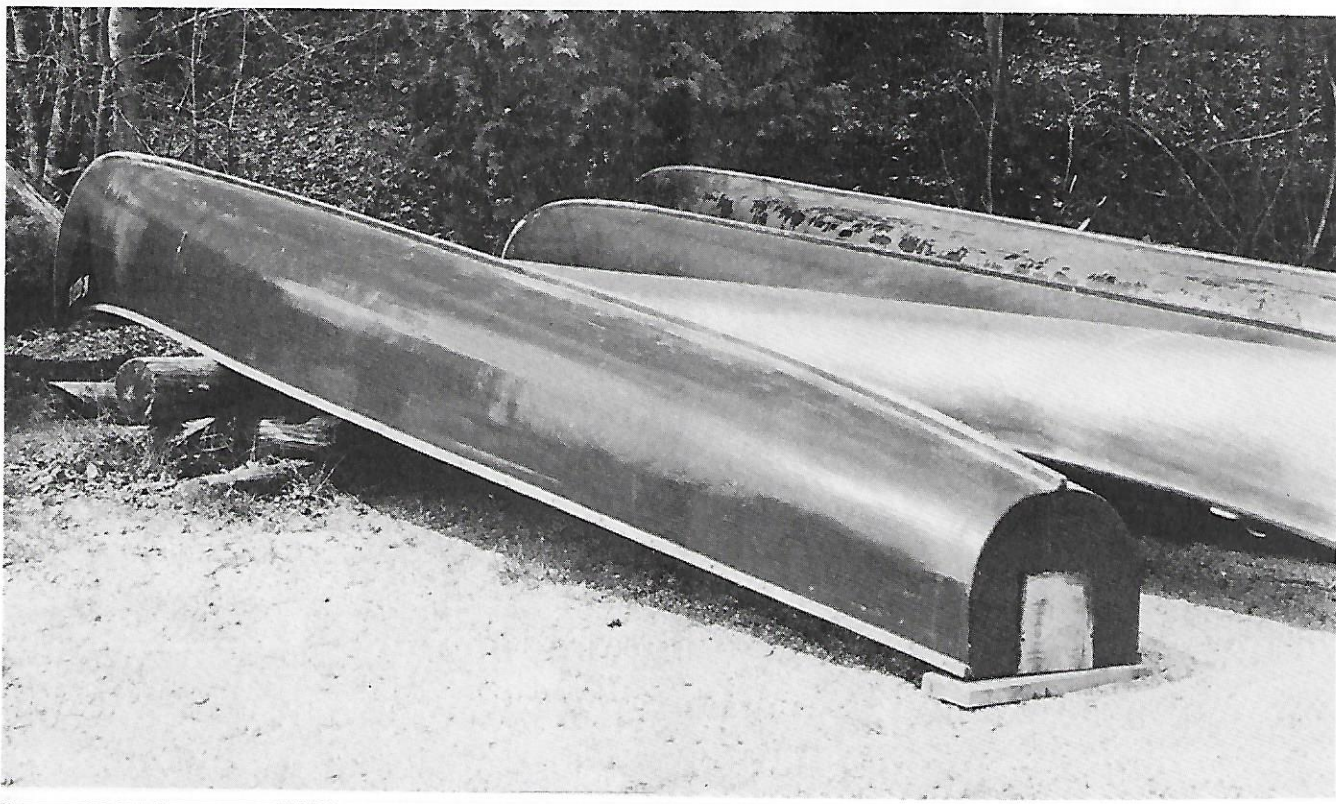
Pop is past the day when most men relax a bit. As he says, "I won't see

seventy again." We should all do so well at half that! Pop has given up most of his guiding trade, but he still cuts and mills all his own cedar. He goes into the woods, selects a tree, fells it, carries it out to his pickup truck, mills it with a chainsaw mill, squares it, and then finally resaws it into planking or ribs. Small wonder he claims, "Getting the wood ready is the big job. Once the wood is ready you can make a couple of boats a week."

Pop's entry into the canoe business was about as direct as you can get. "I used to help a fellow a lot. When he got through with his mold, he gave it to me. I've shifted it some — higher, longer, changed the stern." The fellow Pop worked with was Joe Sprague. He and Herb Bacon were primarily responsible for developing the Grandlaker. Pop built his first canoe while he was still a teenager.

"I've been building quite a while. I've started, stopped, started again. Usually I built five or six a year. The most I ever built was fifteen. Now I build all the canoes I can, which ain't many. I just try to have a few around. Oh, I'll always build them, but it won't be on order anymore." Like Kenny, Pop has found that customers, no matter how patient they profess to be, can get pretty anxious when fishing season rolls around. "They're in no hurry, except they want them as soon as they can get 'em," Pop says, regretting the impatience. "I'm just not gonna have anyone pushing me."

Pop was the first to build a wide-



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stern Grandlaker to take outboards of up to ten horsepower. "Stern was real wide for a while, but I've shifted it to go in between. Six or seven horsepower is fine. Now I can make two kinds: one you can paddle pretty good, the other you can motor." Pop's canoes have a fuller stern than most, and he has added more rocker to make the hull more responsive — "Swings better," he says.

Pop installs ash rails and uses ash or oak for thwarts. He selects mahogany for decks and transoms because it is so resistant to checking.

He also repairs canoes, and propped against the house in one corner of the yard is a rack of craft awaiting the cure. Down on the lake, tucked into his boathouse, is a lobster boat — honest! — which he uses for constructing docks and hauling material around the lake. Crammed into the rafters of the boathouse are a number of canoes awaiting delivery, sale, or are just in storage. And he says he's slowing down!

Towards the end of the morning, Pop and his wife talked over coffee. They talked of fishing and hunting, of Grandlakers, and of the disturbing changes they notice around them, even in this remote section of the state. They recalled a trip made to visit their son on

an island off the coast of Alaska. The journey across Alaska was a disappointment. Instead of terrific wilderness fishing, they found the waters as depleted as any in New England. Pop's face lighted up when he recalled their excitement at finding the fishing on the island all they had hoped for and more. He glanced up from his coffee, smiling, "I'm going back, too."

Timmy Bacon's shop still rests on a knoll behind his neat streamside home, looking much as it did twelve years ago when Timmy stopped building. "It's just like it was then," he says. "I just walked out the door." Even though he no longer builds canoes, Timmy deserves mention in this gallery. He built a lot of canoes, and he built them in a good tradition. His father was Herb Bacon.

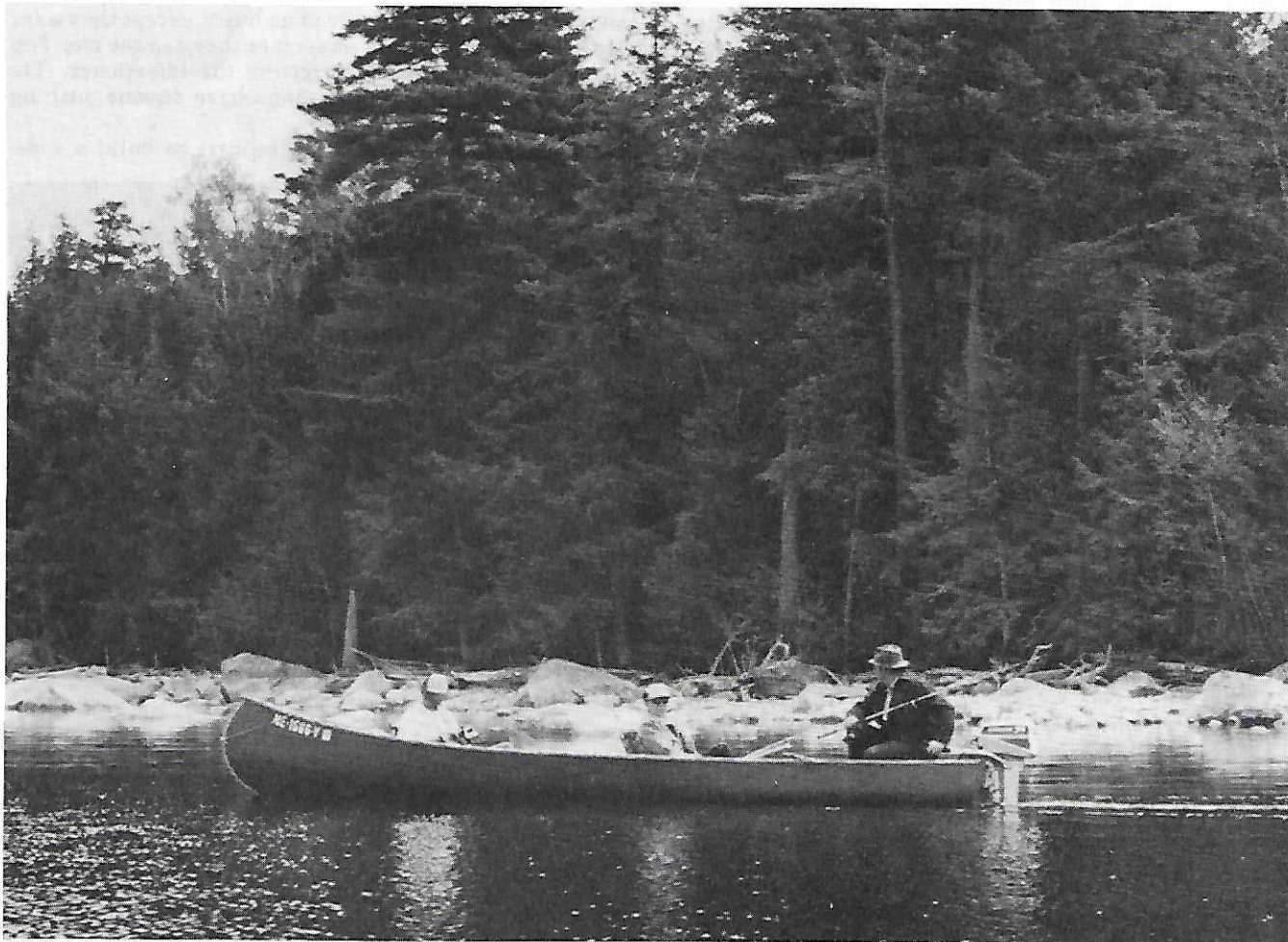
"My father was the canoebuilder in this town. There were others, too, but he was known as a real good one. He started out working on bark canoes! I'll tell you something — bark canoes got a reputation as being easy to paddle, but they weren't. They were just like dragging a porcupine by the tail!

"When my father finished building he said to me, 'There's the shop. I'll tell you anything you want, but I won't

help you.' I was all that winter building three!"

Timmy gave up building years ago in order to go to work full time as a line-man. "Working for myself just didn't pay. You'd work all winter long with everything going out and nothing coming in. I made fifteen canoes nine winters running, working between Thanksgiving and May 10. I'll tell you though, I could make a better living back then selling canoes for \$75 than I would now selling them for \$1,500. Things have changed so. You know, I stayed in that shop almost seven days a week, ten hours a day."

Despite the intrusions of modern life, Grand Lake Stream remains an evergreen-encircled island, in many ways undisturbed. The canoe which takes its name from this town can claim a rich and worthy genealogy; not many craft have a history so clearly interwoven with a people and a place. Too many boats produced nowadays seem products of a marketing survey, fashion, or whim. It's reassuring to find that Grand Lake Stream has evolved a beautiful and fitting canoe, and that's it's still being built, even if you need over \$1,500 to buy a new one. □



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