Canoes

By Oliver Cameron
with Ole Wik

Transportation is a big subject—there are so many variables that might be included. There are boats, sleds, dog teams, pack dogs, even backpacks, and of course airplanes, especially in Alaska. I don't know where to start.

I don't want to go into too much detail about boats, but maybe we could start with canoes, since they are quite important in the Bush in the summertime.

I have a used aluminum canoe. Some people had a tourist lodge on a lake somewhere. They had a number of canoes. When they sold out, the new people sold most of the canoes, quite reasonably. George bought a sixteen-footer for me, tied onto the floats of his airplane, and brought it to the lake. I've had it at the landing ever since.

The only problem was that it was old and beat up. I straightened it up a bit. Some of the rivets were loose and leaking, so I put an anvil on one side and peened the other, and that took care of the matter.

Aluminum canoes are better than plastic in many ways, especially since bears and others are not so apt to bother them—they delight in beating plastic boats around. Also, you don't have to worry if an aluminum canoe punctures or cracks, or gets full of rainwater.

Lightweight canoes are designed for portaging. The aluminum is quite thin and is easily torn if you run onto a rock or something. For all-around use, you want to get one with a little thicker material in the hull. You can check that by the gross weight of the boat.

For a certain length and width, the heavier one is the one you want. Mine weighs 65 pounds or so. It can be dragged or carried quite a long ways.

I found that the center thwart was a darned nuisance in many situations, so I removed it to get it out of the way. To stabilize the place where that thwart had been, I reinforced both sides with two pieces of 3" aluminum angle from the sides of a solar panel that a bear had torn. I riveted them to the gunwales where the thwart had been.

The angle aluminum was straight but the gunwale was curved, so there was a 2-1/2" gap between them. I took a couple of pieces of stove wood about 10" by 3" by 3", tapered the ends somewhat so that they fit in the gap, and fastened them in place with a couple of bolts.

Removing the thwart put me in a better position for rowing. If I'm by myself, out in the clear and away from the very edge, I'd rather row. It's a lot more efficient, because when you're paddling, you're working against yourself. One of your hands is a fulcrum against which the other hand pushes. With oars, you're putting twice as much energy into moving the boat as you would with a paddle on one side.

Oliver in his aluminum canoe with a visitor.
Image: Devta Khalsa

I made a couple of holes in each block and put thole pins in them. The pins were about 3/4" in diameter, hewn out of a stick. I whittled the bottoms of the pins down to 3/8" and drilled crossway holes through them for attachment of strings. I fastened the strings to the inside of the canoe so that when I pulled the pins out to work with a net or something like that, they'd be tethered and wouldn't get lost.

Example of thole pins.
Image: http://schooner-adventure.org/?page_id=1442

I fastened strings and let them come up through the holes in the blocks so that the pins would dangle inside out of the way when I wanted to prop the boat alongside the side of a tree or brush or whatever.

Example of thole pins in use.
Image: http://hear-the-boat-sing.blogspot.com/2011_01_01_archive.html

When you're using thole pins to row against, your oars have a tendency to ride up, so you drill the holes so that the two pins on each side lean in to each other.

Dyre Dammann in Oliver's modified canoe. Note the missing center thwart, aluminum brace, thole pin block, and thole pins. Image: Rein Dammann

I use a stabilizer, kind of like an outrigger, when I'm working over the side of a canoe to check a net. It's on same side of the boat as the net. It consists of a board fastened across the boat, about

a quarter of the way from bow, where the front thwart is. That way I have not only the gunwales to tie to, but something to keep the board from twisting around.

The board extends out 2-1/2' or so beyond the side of the boat, like a pontoon. There's an empty five gallon container at the end, on the bottom side, so it takes quite a bit to sink the can. Of course a person could make any kind of outrigger that would work the same way, but that was convenient.

I only use this outrigger when I'm working on a net or needing to guard against flipping over. Sometimes my net is near the landing, but it varies. If it's some distance, I take the outrigger off and put it in the boat. It's a nuisance if the wind is blowing.

For shorter trips, it's easy to shift weight and trim the canoe to raise the can out of the water. I can also untie the board on the side where the float is in order to lift it out of the water a little bit.

I sit just ahead of the rear thwart. That gives me some maneuverability when I'm checking the net. The dog usually is with me. I teach her to stay ahead of the forward thwart.

I have a life vest, but quite often I don't use it. Instead, I use solid foam, 1/2 or 3/8" thick. I cut a couple of mats of such a length that they make a roll about 8" diameter. I also tie it to my belt as a flotation device. It doesn't absorb water, but it won't keep your head out of the water. You'd have to look out for yourself.

There was originally one seat in the front of the canoe and another in the back, a little lower than the gunwale. They were too high, so I removed both of them.

When I was younger I used to be able to kneel in a boat, sitting on my heels. Paddling and flexing were enough to keep the circulation going. But now my feet tend to go to sleep in that situation, so I sit straddling the foam.

I prefer a double-ended canoe, but some of them have a square stern for a small motor. If the stern has a blunt end on it, and if it doesn't go quite to the bottom, it won't cause you much loss of efficiency. However, the motor will depress the stern. You must have buckets of water or some other counterweight up front to hold the bow down.

You can also make a bracket to fasten to the gunwales ahead of the stern a bit, and clamp a tiny motor on that, alongside the gunwale. It won't be as efficient as it would be if it were on the stern.