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THE PAST

Paddle through canoe's past

History of Canadian Canoe Co. touches on entire cycle of a famous local industry

The Trent Valley Archives has an excellent copy of the October 1895 bird's eye view of Peterborough mounted and framed very appropriately in walnut. The map is surrounded by splendid lithograph drawings of various local businesses and industries. Our copy has an anomaly. One of the drawings has been covered very neatly with a lithograph print from the 1893 Canadian Canoe Company catalogue.



Elwood Jones
HISTORIAN
AT WORK

We have research copies of this map and so we know that the image that has been covered is of the Peterborough Canoe Company. From the provenance we can trace the ownership of this map through Claude Rogers, who was a supervisor of works at the Canadian Canoe Company. The map already contained a nice image of the Canadian Canoe Company factory in 1895. So we concluded that the framed map hung in the office of someone who did not want to see the Peterborough Canoe Company advertisement, and would rather see two different images of the Canadian Canoe Company. This suggests that the rivalry between the two canoe companies was very serious. We decided not to remove the paste-over because the change was likely made soon after the map appeared in 1895. In archives, provenance is so important to preserving how our history was created.

Ken Brown, an accountant and local historian widely known for his long stewardship of the Peterborough Jazz Society, has written a fantastic history of the Canadian Canoe Company that was just published by Cover to Cover Publishing in Peterborough. The book is available at Trent Valley Archives and at local museums and bookstores.

In the course of telling the Canadian Canoe Company story he makes important references to Peterborough's other canoe companies. He has included an aerial view of Peterborough from 1950 on which he has identified the several industries that dominated our central core. He also has a map showing all the sites identified with the manufacture of canoes and boats. A central theme of the book is that a craft in which artisans made canoes was transformed by 1880 into a manufacturing enterprise that built canoes with an international reputation for excellence, and sent these to all parts of the world. The "Peterborough," a distinctive style of boat made of boards, longitudinal or vertical, shaped around a mould, and characteristically without decking, became world-famous.

BITTER BATTLE

The bitterness between the Canadian Canoe Company and the Peterborough Canoe Company came to a head in 1893, as Brown discusses in a pivotal chapter of his new book. James Z. Rogers had owned the Ontario Canoe Company until it burned to the ground in May 1892. Within months of the fire, three new canoe companies emerged: Strickland Canoe Company in Lakefield, and in Peterborough the Peterborough Canoe and Canadian Canoe Company. As well, canoes were being made by the English Canoe Company on Charlotte St. and the Herald Canoe Company in Gore's Landing. Canoes made in the area surrounding Peterborough were recognized as distinctive even by the 1880s.

In 1893, Rogers challenged the use of "Canadian" in the name of the Canadian Canoe Company. James Stevenson, MP, presented the case to the federal Secretary of State, John Costigan. There was concern that some customers would confuse the name with the former Ontario Canoe Company, and also because the Ontario Canoe Company in 1883 had been denied use of the name. The Canadian Canoe Company was able to prove there was no confusion.

As well, in 1883 the Ontario Canoe Company had been seeking an Ontario charter and the name "Canadian" was considered to be a national name. The Canadian Canoe Company had a federal charter. It was also argued that no one builder should be able to expropriate the generic name for the open-style canoe. However, ironically,



Ken Brown collection



The first Canadian Canoe Company factory (left) at 439 Water St. (south-west corner of Brock and Water, now the parking lot behind Knock On Wood), 1892-1904. Secretary-treasurer Felix Brownscombe has his arms crossed and wears a shirt and tie. The photo above is in the company workshop.

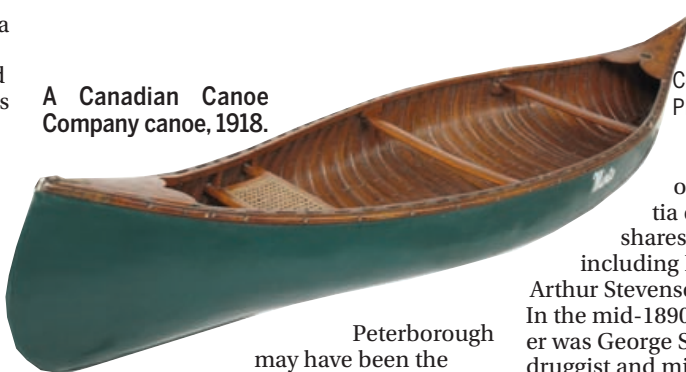


Courtesy of Peterborough Museum and Archives, Balsillie Collection of Roy Studio Photos



Courtesy of Jim English

The William English Canoe Company was one of the earliest canoe factories. This picture was taken in front of the factory at 182 Charlotte St., west of George St., where the company operated from 1861 to 1915. It was a relatively small operation that seldom had more than 10 employees. At left is the cricket pitch at what is now Cricket Place in Ashburnham, with the Ontario Canoe Company in the background.



A Canadian Canoe Company canoe, 1918.

Courtesy of Jack Brownscombe Photo Trent Photographics

Peterborough may have been the more generic name. Certainly, the Canadian Canoe Company was able to show that current canoe catalogues rarely used "Canadian" as a generic name. Both sides marshalled support for their view. Samuel English said the English Company canoes were commonly known as Canadian canoes. In both the Eastern Townships and in British Columbia, the canoes were best known as "Peterborough" canoes. The Privy Council concluded that, "No intelligent person would be likely to confuse the two names."

AFTER THE FIRE

The fight was interesting, though, for other reasons. The two companies were comparatively new. The Peterborough Canoe Company was on paper even before the fire at the Ontario Canoe Company, but the Canadian Canoe Company was on the ground doing business by August 1892, some months before the Peterborough Canoe Company. However, in Brown's careful and impressive analysis, the initial advantages were with the Peterborough Canoe Company. They had the management of James Rogers, the 10-year experience of the Ontario Canoe Company, and a tight group of investors from Ashburnham, arguably the centre of canoe manufacturing until 1892. The big shareholders in the Peterborough Canoe Company were brewer Henry Calcutt (\$1,000); Henry Neil, brewer (\$500); W. H. Robertson, the owner and publisher of the Peterborough Times (\$500); W. H. Hill, insurance agent (\$500); W. S. Scollie, canoe builder (\$500). Rogers and lawyer E. B. Edwards, a founder of the American Canoe Association, rounded out the leadership at the Peterborough Canoe

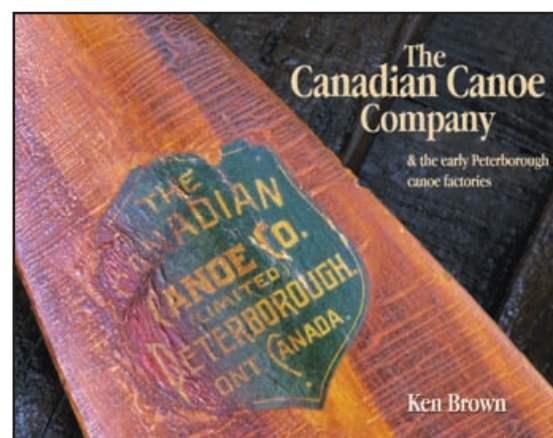
Company. Most of the officers in the local militia eventually bought shares in the company, including R. M. Dennistoun, Arthur Stevenson and John Burnham. In the mid-1890s the largest shareholder was George Schofield, a George St. druggist and militia officer. James R. Stratton, publisher of The Examiner, also became a shareholder. As well, the Peterborough Canoe Company had the advantage of moving into a new, purpose-built building at King and Water streets in 1893.

DAVID VS. GOLIATH

In the David versus Goliath scenario, the Canadian Canoe Company had the youthful Arthur Tebb, 28, and Felix Brownscombe, 29, and their spouses. Tebb had worked for James Rogers at the Ontario Canoe Company and had left to start his own Peterboro Canoe Company in Victoria, British Columbia. When his company was hit with a fire he was able to return to Peterborough. The company occupied several sites over the years.

Brown's background as an accountant helps him make sense of many aspects of this business story. He took the advice of local historians to cast a wide net. While his focus is on the Canadian Canoe Company, it was clearly important to know what the other canoe companies were doing, or to know how other parts of the economy coped or prospered at different times. It was good to know the interconnections between people and to be in a position to assess the energy and vision of the participants. Brown's wife was a Brownscombe and that certainly was important in helping him find inspiration, archival records and family connections. Felix Brownscombe seems very like Ken Brown.

This is a book that pleasantly surprises the reader in countless ways. A picture of a game being played at the cricket grounds in Ashburnham (on what is now Cricket Place) shows the Ontario Canoe Company in the background.



Ken Brown



The Book

Ken Brown
The Canadian Canoe Company and the early Peterborough canoe factories (Peterborough. Cover to Cover, 2011)
Pp. 152, illustrations, maps.

Ken Brown's history of local canoe manufacturing is available from Trent Valley Archives, Peterborough

Clearly the picture was taken before May 1892, when the factory burned, and the exceptional wide angle photo even shows St. Luke's Anglican Church in the middle distance. The photographer was probably R. M. Roy or another professional, but the clarity of each part of the picture is remarkable. This picture was used as the backdrop for an exhibit at the Canadian Canoe Museum but the original is in the Peterborough Museum and Archives.

SUPERB ILLUSTRATIONS

Brown found a picture of E. B. Edwards at the New York State Historical Society. The book is rich in superb illustrations that make connections with a much wider world. In this regard, he has included shots from the MacKendrick scrapbook at the Canadian Canoe Museum and has used the John Stephenson fonds at the Trent Valley Archives, also to good effect.

He has used a 1919 air photo panoramic to identify the industrial landscape of Peterborough. On the inside cover he has taken a 1920s blank map and superimposed dots and photographs marking all the sites associ-

Museum and Archives, Canadian Canoe Museum, Titles, Chapters, Lockside Trading (both at Lansdowne Place and Youngs Point), Wildrock, Adventure Outfitters (Lakefield), Happenstance (Lakefield), Furby House Books (Port Hope), Kerr's Corner Books (Campbellford), and Avid Reader (Cobourg). Booksellers may order the book from <http://www.covertocover.ca>.

with the canoe industry. After 1928, the Canadian Canoe Company became part of Canadian Waterways Limited, which also included the Peterborough Canoe Company, the English Canoe Company and the Chestnut Canoe Company. The later generations of canoe owners and builders operated in a different world and with different restrictions. Brown sticks with the story to the end, but you just know that his heart was with the early entrepreneurs who made a viable manufacturing industry out of a classic artisanal trade.

This is the book of the season for anyone interested in Peterborough history, or local sports, or canoes. The book matured over 15 years, and the wait has been worthwhile.

Elwood H. Jones, author of several books on Peterborough's history and Professor Emeritus of History at Trent University, is the archivist at the Trent Valley Archives, 567 Carnegie Avenue, Peterborough, 705-745-4404, and editor of the Heritage Gazette of the Trent Valley. He can be reached at ejones55@cogeco.ca.