

This artist's interpretation of the Old Town Canoe factory first appeared in the 1920 catalog. (Compare this idealized version with the photograph of the factory on the facing page.) The caption accompanying the illustration reads in part, "Here is where 'OLD TOWN CANOES' are made. The continuous length of the buildings is over 570 ft. Total floor space is over 150,000 sq. ft. It is the largest Canoe Factory in the world."

An Era Ends in Old Town

by Benson Gray

Maine Governor John Baldacci declared Tuesday, November 10, 2009, "Old Town Canoe Day" in Maine to celebrate the consolidation of Old Town Canoe Company's watercraft production in a new facility in Old Town. This is great news in many ways for the Old Town, Maine area, but I found it sad since this leaves the original Old Town Canoe Company factory building on Middle Street empty and facing an uncertain future.

The moving of the production feels to me somewhat like the death of a very old relative who has been suffering in recent years. It may be time for a good wake to celebrate over one hundred years of making wooden canoes in the same building on Middle Street in Old Town, Maine. The first Old Town Canoes were built in a hardware store building on Shirley Street in Old Town. The business needed more room and purchased the former Keith Shoe Company on Middle Street in October, 1901.

Johnson Outdoors is the parent company of Old Town Canoe Company and has also announced that the Island Falls Canoe Company in Atkinson, Maine, will now make wooden canoes for Old Town on a contractual basis. This represents a chance for a rebirth in the hands of someone



Above, left. The Keith Shoe Company in the late 1800s before the canoe company moved in.

Left. The Indian Old Town Canoe Company as it was originally known in 1901. The special five-part canoe built for the Baldwin-Zeigler Polar Expedition is shown in the foreground.

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE GRAY FAMILY COLLECTIONS



who understands both the history and the potential for the future. Long live the wooden canoe!

The “Indian Old Town Canoe Company” name was painted on the outside of the building when the business moved into the old Keith Shoe Company in 1901. A photograph taken shortly after the move shows a canoe in the foreground which was specially made for the Baldwin-Ziegler Polar Expedition. The canoe was built in sections to be more easily be transported on dogsleds. The idea was to use this canoe to help them over any open water

Above, left. A photograph of the Robertson & Old Town Canoe Company from around 1902. This photograph may have been touched up since the “Robertson” lettering is different from the rest of the “Old Town Canoe Company” style.

Above, right. The Old Town Canoe Company from after 1903. Below. A photograph of The Old Town Canoe Company from after 1910 showing the new brick additions.

sections on the race to the North Pole. They did not reach the Pole but the trip did produce several articles for various magazines including the *National Geographic*. It appears that the canoe may have helped the explorers escape to an island in open water after shifting sea ice made it impossible for the rescue ship to get to the original camp.

Old Town’s brief partnership with J.R. Robertson is evident in one photograph from the 1902 catalog. It appears that this image may have been touched up and that the Robertson name may not have ever been actually painted on the building itself. A photo taken after 1903 shows that the “Old Town Canoe Co.” was then painted on the building. The first brick addition was added in 1910 along the railroad line.

Later photographs show workers on the roof of the building stacking canoes on racks while the canvas filler dried. The canoes were tied down so that they would not blow away in a storm.



I'd like to offer the photographs on these pages and on the back cover as tribute to the many woodworkers who have been part of the wooden canoe building tradition in the Middle Street factory for more than a century. ✂

WCHA Board member Benson Gray, a regular contributor to Wooden Canoe, is the grandson of the founder of the Old Town Canoe Company, Samuel Gray.

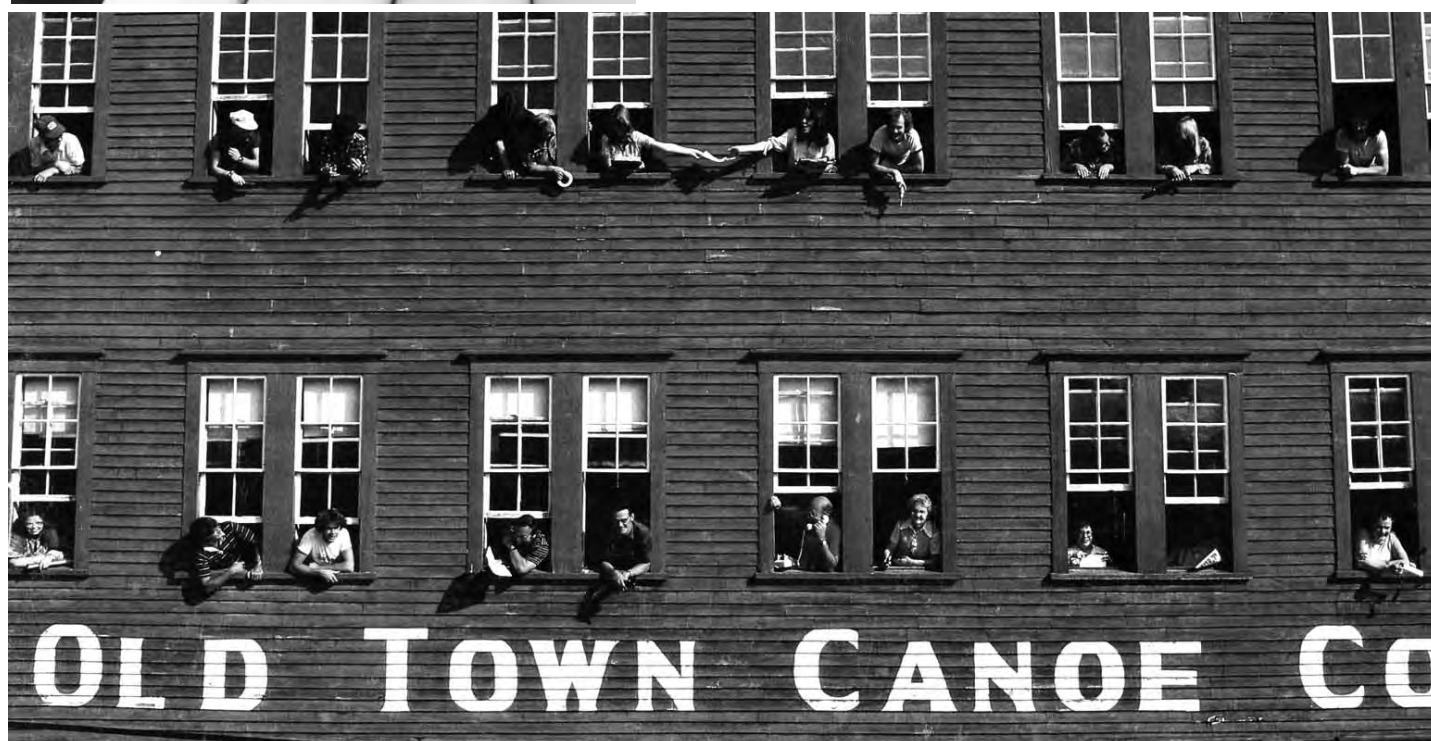


Above and left. The roof of the building was used to store the canoes as the filler dried.



Above. Old Town Canoe Company workers on a postcard from before 1910.

Below. The factory windows filled with workers. This photograph was used as the cover for the 1980 catalog. More photographs of the workers in the Old Town Factory are found on the back cover.



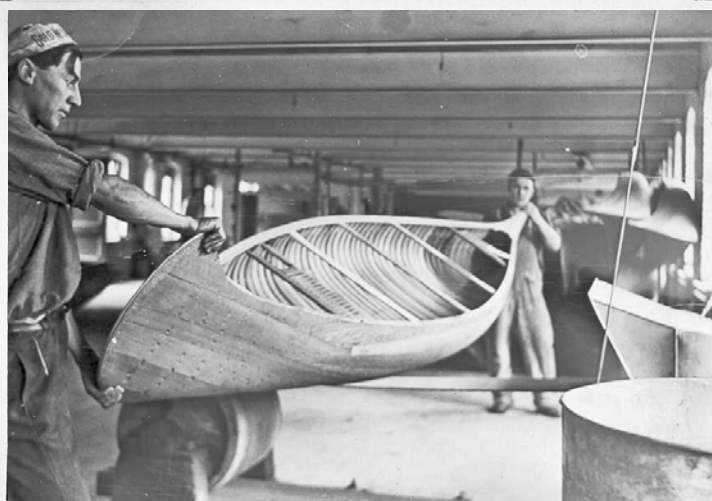


Making ribs

Working at the Old Town Canoe Factory



Building a seat back



Turning a canoe



Paddle making



Sanding a paddle