

‘It May Have Hidden Secrets’: The Old Canoe in the Woods

On a remote Alaska island, a discovery illuminates traditional Haida and Tlingit boat making.

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An abandoned canoe discovered in southeast Alaska offers insights into traditional Haida boat-making techniques. Photo by Joshua Hunt.

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When I first see the canoe, in May, it takes a moment to distinguish the long, shapely slab of cedar from the patch of earth that has spent more than a century trying to reclaim it. Covered in

moss and ravaged by decades of slow rot, the narrow boat lay in the same spot where Indigenous Alaskans had carved it from the trunk of a western red cedar.

They did this in the place where the tree fell — first by cutting it into two pieces, then by fashioning the canoe from the lower portion of the tree so that it sits between the stump and the abandoned upper part of the trunk like a philosophical question made real: excised and reshaped but never moved from where it fell, is it not still part of the tree? Seaworthy but destined never to touch the sea, is it not still a boat?

I'd travelled halfway around the world for a glimpse of this forest-floor tableau: a long flight from my home in Tokyo, Japan, to Seattle, Washington, followed by a shorter trip to Ketchikan, a small town in southeast Alaska where I spent much of my childhood.

From there, a very small plane took me to Prince of Wales Island to meet my guide, Stormy Hamar, who shepherded me to the canoe site by car, then on a small skiff powered by a 60-horsepower outboard engine, and eventually on foot.

With no clear path to follow, we made our own way from the shoreline to the island's lush, hilly interior, climbing over trees felled by wind, crawling beneath spiky tendrils of devil's club, passing through shallow streams and around walls of dense brush. The canoe's location, deep in the wild, is a closely guarded secret meant to protect the unique archeological site from adventure-seeking tourists.

Hamar — also known by his Haida name, Gitáang — agreed to take me in part because of my Tlingit heritage, which makes my history entwined with that of his own Haida ancestors, who are thought to have carved the canoe roughly 140 years ago before abandoning it for reasons we will never know.

A grim weather forecast made it necessary to rush from the airstrip to the canoe site, still dressed in the slacks and shirt I put on for my flight out of Tokyo. Hamar, who is 57, wears black Carhartt pants, a patterned knit sweater and a pair of round-framed eyeglasses beneath a broad-brimmed hat made from woven red cedar bark. A thick handlebar moustache and large pistol and holster strapped to his side reinforce his outdoorsman bona fides.



Stormy Hamar, 57, has studied traditional Haida boat-making techniques long enough to know the unfinished canoe is something special. Photo by Luke Holton.

He first heard about this place over a decade earlier, he tells me, from a local man who stumbled upon it while scouting the island for a prospective helicopter logging operation. This man was employed by one of 13 Alaska Native regional corporations tasked with managing tribal assets and investments for enrolled Indigenous beneficiaries throughout the state: in this case, the Sealaska Corp., which represents the interests of Tlingit and Haida shareholders like Hamar and me.

For decades, much of Sealaska's revenue has been tied to the extraction of resources from its significant landholdings, including the patch of old-growth forest where the canoe was found. The scout who discovered the site was far from the waterline, high up in the kind of steep terrain considered ideal for helicopter logging, when he noticed an unusual number of stumps for a site where cutting had not yet begun. Then he noticed that many of the fallen logs next to those stumps were missing sections of their trunks up to 10 metres long. Only after finding a single canoe that had been carved but not hauled away did he realize where the missing sections had gone.

Sealaska abandoned its plans to log the site and brought in a handful of people by helicopter to help decide what to do with the canoe. Hamar, who lives in the nearby village of Kasaan and is active in tribal and community affairs, was among them. By the time he got his first glimpse of

the canoe, Hamar had already studied traditional Haida boat-making techniques long enough to know he was looking at something special.

One thing in particular caught his attention. Traditionally, once dugout canoes have been carved from a single cedar or spruce log, they are filled with sea water and heated rocks to produce a water vapour that is then trapped beneath a heavy tarp made from woven cedar, causing the wood to expand and the boat to become much broader and stronger.

This canoe's narrow hull and shallow interior told Hamar that its creators had finished the carving work but abandoned the boat before carrying out the steaming process. Because wooden boats don't typically last long in wet environments — and because Alaska's southeastern archipelago is largely temperate rainforest — unfinished canoes are rare in the archeological record.

This and others found in coastal British Columbia and Alaska stand apart from canoes preserved in museums or built by modern craftspeople for the clues they may offer about boat-making traditions lost during the period after colonization and before post-assimilation initiatives aimed at preserving Alaska Native culture. In particular, this canoe offers insight into the vital step before steaming, a process that changes a boat's shape considerably.



The unfinished canoe was discovered on Prince of Wales Island in southeast Alaska, pictured here. Photo by Design Pics Inc. via Alamy.

“When we look at the old canoe in the woods, even though it’s falling apart and there’s not too much left of it, there may be things we can learn from it, especially relating to the shape,” Hamar says. “It may have hidden secrets.”

The only place it has ever existed

Hamar has not been to the canoe site in well over a year, so one of the obstacles we must overcome to get there is his imperfect memory. There is no path, after all, and whatever brush he cleared the last time is by now overgrown. False landmarks lead us astray, and areas that have become impassable since his last visit force us to turn back more than once. As he leads the way, I think about our pairing through the lens of history.

For thousands of years, our Tlingit and Haida ancestors fought bitterly over resources and power, resulting in two quasi-nomadic societies that had lived so close to one another, for so long, that our cultures became nearly indistinguishable. Identifying a totem pole as Tlingit rather than Haida, or a canoe as Haida rather than Tlingit, requires real expertise, and sometimes hinges on knowing which tribe controlled the area at the time it was made.

Canoes were among the most important objects made by Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian people, whose way of life depended on navigating the inhospitable geography of what is now southeast Alaska and coastal British Columbia. The region’s dense temperate rainforest and snowy peaks are spread out across more than 1,100 islands, separated by broad ocean channels, winding rivers and narrow streams.

Moving through this network of sinuous waterways was so important that each tribe developed a range of sophisticated canoes: some meant for trade or warfare; some for hunting, fishing and foraging; others for moving large numbers of people from the clan’s winter village to its summer one. Some were suitable for travelling long distances on the open ocean; others engineered for speed, stealth or stability in rough waters. The largest war canoes held 60 or more people, while the smallest vessels carried only a lone pilot. Large or small, all were dugout-style canoes.



A historical image of Kasaan, Alaska. Some of the canoes pictured here may have been carved at the site of the unfinished canoe. Photo courtesy of the New York Public Library.

The Tlingit and Haida were especially renowned canoe carvers, in part because they so relied on them, and in part because they had access to arguably the best trees of all the coastal tribes of the Pacific Northwest.

One Spaniard sailing through the region in the late 1700s wrote that the canoes were “exactly proportioned” and “extremely light and strong and very well shaped.” Initially, the arrival of Europeans meant that more canoes were needed to satisfy the demand for fur from otters and seals, which could be most effectively hunted from this sort of vessel. Later, as trade with Europeans led to the spread of diseases such as smallpox, and as white missionaries sought to replace Indigenous culture with Christianity and commerce, traditions like the carving of canoes and totem poles suffered. In 1884, Canada’s government outlawed the Indigenous funerary and

gift-giving celebration known as the potlatch, for which new canoes and totem poles were often made. Demand for both [subsided](#).

Still, the traditions never fully disappeared. When Hamar was a kid in the 1970s and early '80s, living in a floathouse anchored off the coast of Prince of Wales Island, he and his brother mounted an outboard motor on a crude dugout canoe they found washed up on the beach and piloted it to and from school.

Then, around 2008, he apprenticed under the late Tsimshian master carver Stan Marsden. Marsden was part of a generation of carvers who carried on the renaissance that emerged from a [New Deal program](#), which funded training for Alaska Natives to craft totem poles for parks. His last totem pole still stands in front of the school in Kasaan, reminding Hamar of how Marsden's mentorship helped him navigate a difficult time in his life.



Stormy Hamar grew up in a floathouse off the coast of Prince of Wales Island in the 1970s and '80s. Photo courtesy of Stormy Hamar.

“It was essentially a time of healing for me,” Hamar says. “He put me to work as a volunteer, and I just spent my days there for over a year helping him on that totem pole. I learned a lot from him, and not just about carving.”

Hamar and his family had recently moved to Kasaan from a nearby village, and he had quit logging, a trade he learned from his father before the clear-cutting years of Alaska’s timber boom.

“Somewhere in that time period, I really just made a shift in my life and committed myself to carving canoes and totem poles and basically doing as many cultural activities as I could think of,” Hamar says.

Today, he crafts canoes in a covered tent behind his home, and compiles scrapbooks filled with archival photographs, articles and other research materials on canoe building. Through his research, he tells me, he became increasingly fascinated by the gaps in passed-down knowledge that resulted from efforts to erase and outlaw Tlingit and Haida culture.

Hamar's quest to fill in these gaps has drawn us deep into the forest in old Haida territory, where we suddenly come across the abandoned canoe. At first, my eyes struggle to discern its shape, in the same way they seek out the familiar contours of my bedside lamp when I wake in pitch blackness. Once revealed to me, though, the outline of the vessel is so obvious that it could almost serve as the model for an emoji of a canoe.

The effect of seeing it in the wild is jarring in a way I had not expected. Instead of resting behind glass in a sterile museum, where its context would depend on educational placards and set decoration to make it appear as a kind of enormous diorama, the object stands before me in the only place it has ever existed. The craftspeople who shaped it, now long dead, had done the work here, in this very forest.



Rather than remove the decomposing boat, stakeholders have opted to study it without removing it from the place where it was carved. Photo by Stormy Hamar.

“They very well may have been sleeping around here somewhere,” Hamar says. “It seems like it would be most efficient to live here, you know, given the amount of time it would take to create the canoe.”

Long after its builders departed, the canoe remains more or less as they left it — raised off the ground by two logs that sit beneath it at either end like two massive sawhorses. Undisturbed, unstudied and exposed to the elements, the canoe lay beneath a coat of moss and rot that, when Hamar first encountered it, made the matter of deciding its fate especially urgent.

If the canoe was to be moved to a museum, it would need to be done before it rotted further, and with the understanding that the process itself could end up destroying the delicate vessel. Leaving it to the elements, on the other hand, would preserve the object in its natural surroundings but make its long-term preservation impossible and its study difficult.

“There’s one thought process, for example, that when a totem pole gets old and starts deteriorating, you kind of let it go back to the earth without interference,” Hamar says. “And then there’s another mindset that you would maintain it just like you might maintain your boat or your car. These are just opinions, of course, and I go back and forth, but essentially, I think it would be a shame if any information is lost, because we really don’t know the significance of what we might be losing.”

The Haida Canoe Revitalization Group

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, months after the last tourists had departed Kasaan, a solution to Hamar’s dilemma presented itself in the form of an unfamiliar vehicle that pulled up in front of his property. It was driven by a man named Jason Rucker, who was sailing through southeast Alaska with his wife. The pair stopped after noticing a huge cedar log near the tent where Hamar spends his days carving, and soon they found themselves in the middle of an impromptu tour. “It was really inspiring and moving,” Rucker says, “hearing him talk about his work on these canoes.”

Before they left, Hamar mentioned the decaying Haida canoe and his hope to document it for posterity. It was at this point that Rucker’s wife turned to him and said, “You have to tell this guy what you do.”

“I have been into wooden boats, and worked on wooden boats, for my entire adult life,” Rucker tells me.

For years, he had done repair and restoration work for the San Francisco Maritime Museum, where he also made specialized drawings of significant boats for the historical record. Called “line drawings,” they resemble architectural renderings, but for maritime vessels.

“Not to get too poetic about it, but the way I think of it is that all those boats are telling part of the story of the evolution of [that type of] boat, and the variations of the boat,” Rucker says. “And the whole history of the boat.”



Jason Rucker stands before a 10-metre canoe carved by Stormy Hamar. Photo by Stormy Hamar. Rucker and Hamar stayed in touch. Before long, they'd secured a Maritime Heritage Grant, made available through Alaska's Office of History and Archaeology, to document the canoe, and formalized the project under the umbrella of Hamar's non-profit, the [Haida Canoe Revitalization](#)

Group. Then Rucker roped in Cultural Heritage Imaging, a San Francisco-based non-profit that uses technology to create sophisticated digital images and 3D renderings of cultural artifacts, with an emphasis on helping Indigenous groups “take control of their own cultural narratives.” When I speak with Mark Mudge, co-founder of Cultural Heritage Imaging, he underscores the significance of such efforts by recalling a trip to Nigeria to teach locals basic imaging skills for digitally preserving heritage artifacts.

“We were at this beautiful Nigerian state museum,” he says. “I was given a tour and I thought, as we went along, that would be a nice thing to image, and that would be a nice thing to image.”

But when Mudge asked the students themselves to choose something, they “brought back an object that I would never have selected in a million years.”

Similarly, he tells me, the Haida canoe represents “a superb example of... enabling Indigenous communities to document what’s important to them,” as opposed to what’s of interest to anthropologists.



Creating high-resolution 3D images of cultural items is especially important in Alaska, where many people live in places with no road access, making it difficult to travel to museums to see artifacts taken from their communities. Cultural Heritage Imaging had already worked with the

Alaska Native Heritage Center in Anchorage to write a grant and train staff as part of a broader effort to [digitally repatriate](#) hundreds of cultural materials before those objects are later physically repatriated to communities. If all goes according to plan, the digital reproductions will one day be freely available to anyone with an internet connection.

To create a similar digital rendering of the Haida canoe was a daunting proposition, given the remoteness of the site. It took years for the Haida Canoe Revitalization Group team to prepare. Finally, just a few days after my own visit, Rucker, Hamar, Hamar's daughter Stephanie and Stephanie's four-year-old daughter are ready to make the journey, along with a pair of archeologists and a graduate student from the University of Alaska Southeast, in Juneau. The weather, which had limited travel to and from Prince of Wales for days, suddenly clears.

At the canoe site, the team spreads out and gets to work. Rucker and Stephanie Hamar use a digital camera to photograph the boat, capturing tens of millions of measurements of spatial positions that will ultimately fit together like jigsaw pieces to produce a hyper-accurate 3D model.

One of the archeologists maps the area with a large drone equipped with lidar, a mapping technology that uses a laser capable of penetrating vegetation, while the other archeologist and Stormy Hamar survey the site by foot. The pair confirms what the logger who found the site had suspected: not just one canoe but a whole fleet had been carved here, making it a kind of Haida boatyard.



Members of the Haida Canoe Revitalization Group document the canoe in the forest. Photo by Luke Holton.

Later that night, back at Hamar's house, the team transmits hundreds of photographs to Mudge's server in San Francisco, using the painfully slow internet available in Kasaan. As Mudge stitches the photos together, he identifies missing angles, and Rucker and Stephanie trudge back to the canoe site several times over the next few days to get the missing shots. Piece by piece, the secrets of the canoe hidden beneath decades of moss and decay begin to reveal themselves.

A digital model for future generations



On the last day of my visit, as Hamar had driven me from Kasaan to the small airstrip in Klawock, we'd stopped at another wood shop. The building wasn't unlike a small airplane

hangar, with a simple, sturdy construction and high ceilings, but instead of an aircraft, it was made to accommodate a new totem pole that two men were carving.

Inside, the men talked about local politics while shaping the massive log using adzes and other specialized tools. The overpowering scent of cedar shavings brought back childhood memories — of Tlingit halibut hooks and canoe paddles carved by my uncle, and countless totem poles and canoes I'd seen take shape in the southeast Alaska communities where I grew up.

A few weeks later, I send Hamar a text message from Tokyo, and get a swift reply saying he's about to embark on a long canoe trip from Kasaan to Juneau to take part in Celebration 2024, a four-day Alaska Native festival. Since 2008, this decades-old biennial celebration of dancing, art, food and fellowship has commenced with a “coming ashore ceremony” on a beach near Juneau. Paddlers from Kake, Ketchikan, Angoon and elsewhere leave their homes days before, sometimes paddling hundreds of kilometres in hand-carved canoes to reach the beach. Many of the vessels were carved by what might be called ambitious novices, who have honed their craft through years of study and apprenticeship, trial and error.



Stormy Hamar and a group of paddlers on their way to Celebration 2024, a four-day festival held in Juneau, Alaska. Photo by Carol Coho.

These artisans and others like them are among those who might benefit from the work documenting and digitally preserving the canoe in the forest. Once the digital rendering is complete, carvers throughout the region will be able to access it from their own homes and communities, peering at the canoe's precise measurements, or at cross-sections that show, for instance, how the bottom curve of the canoe corresponds perfectly with a growth ring deep in the heartwood of the cedar it came from. They'll be able to see exactly how much girth was removed from the exterior of the tree before the carving began, or examine the nuances of how the hull was shaped before it was altered by steaming.

The canoe itself will stay in the forest where it was carved, rotting into soil, preserved only as drawings in a book or images on a computer screen. The team hopes to eventually take measurements and make similar digital models of other canoes — including up to 20 more found abandoned in forests in British Columbia and Alaska — creating an archive of boats from around the region.

Back in Tokyo, the first entry in this prospective digital archive reaches me via email. I open it and see the 3D rendering of the canoe, displayed in sharp yellow, green and brown pixels. On my computer screen, the ghostly canoe rotates on command, over and over again. If I stare intently enough, I can conjure the familiar smell of a tree becoming timber and timber becoming totem.