



Listening Point canoe landing. A rare sandy spot on Burntside Lake near the sauna at Sig Olson's camp. The arrowhead is the symbol of Sig Olson's Border Lakes Outfitting.

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY DAVE OSBORN

MEETING SIG OLSON

by Dave Osborn

It was a strange set of circumstances that led me to the acquisition of a Border Lakes Outfitting canoe, purchased in 1935 by Sigurd Olson, author, teacher, and champion for wilderness preservation. Sig Olson, the man and the writer, has always captivated me. From the time that I first came to know the Boundary Waters Canoe Area in Northern Minnesota and Quetico Provincial Park to the north in Ontario, I have known through his writings how Sig felt about the vast Quetico-Superior country and all other wild lands as well. (As I write this in August 2011, I am on my twenty-sixth Quetico Park canoe trip, and Sig's words are as alive as ever!)

I was in Fargo, North Dakota, defending my employer's process for heat treatment of a steel component. Amid product failures, our customer hired a metallurgist to prove that our process was the cause of the failures. I don't recall the outcome of the meeting, but I do know that our customer's "hired gun," Mac, and I ended up together in the Fargo airport. We struck up a conversation beyond metallurgical processes and principles, and he mentioned that his home town was Ely, Minnesota. That sounded off alarms and whistles in my head. Can you imagine growing up in Ely, the doorway to the Boundary Waters, home of Sig Olson, Dorothy Molter, Joe Seliga and Bill Rom? Did he know those folks? You bet he did!

Unfortunately with planes to catch, our conversation was too short. It would have been fun to hear stories of

growing up in Ely and what it was like to know the cast of characters and curmudgeons in Ely in the 1940s, '50s and '60s. As we were about to part, I mentioned that my hobby was restoring wooden canoes. Mac mentioned that his father had bought two wooden canoes from the Ely area in the early 1950s and that he wanted to sell the one that was left. I told Mac that I would be interested in knowing more about his canoe, and within a few days photos, a serial number, and price arrived.

I could tell from the photos that the canoe had been fiberglassed. Normally, I don't walk away from glassed wooden canoes—I run (especially at \$600). When the cost of the canoe is added to a 600-mile round trip, lodging and expenses, it is really a no-brainer. I would politely say, "No thanks," and find a better canoe that was closer, cheaper, and without that post-war miracle covering that was supposed to save all wooden craft for eternity.

It must have been fate that caused me to be curious about the build record. Whatever it was, I posted the serial number on the WCHA Web site forum. Shortly thereafter, Dan Miller reported the number belonged to a 16-foot Old Town Yankee, sold to Border Lakes Outfitting, Mr. Sig Olson, manager, in June 1935. I had just finished *A Wilderness Within: The Life of Sigurd Olson*, a biography of Sig by David Backes. From the biography, I had learned that Sig co-owned Border Lakes Outfitting from early in 1929, managed it until about 1947, and sold his interest to his two partners in 1951. It is with that

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knowledge that I made arrangements to travel from my then home in northern Illinois to the Minneapolis area to purchase the canoe. I didn't bat an eye at the price or condition. I just wanted it. I was fired up.

Once at home with the canoe, I shelved it for a couple of years. I paddled it once, and it leaked badly. There were several hairline cracks where the planking seams were, so I duct taped it for the remainder of the short river trip.

Well, the 'glass was destined to come off anyway, so in late 2005 I started removing the covering. As many restorers know, fiberglass either comes off rather easily or it gives you a battle. This 'glass had its heels and claws dug into the planking and was not easily persuaded to come off. Square inch by square inch the heat gun warmed the resin, and it reluctantly gave up its grip.

Once the fiberglass was removed, it was easy to see the numerous repairs that had been done over the years, as you might expect of a wooden canoe whose life was spent as a rental in rugged bush country. The many previous planking repairs that remained included a piece of sheet copper and a part of a tobacco tin, which may well have belonged to the pipe-smoking Sig. Some ribs were repaired and replaced as well. The gunwales were not the original spruce on the build record.

It was at this point that the wicked death grip of the fiberglass showed its destruction. The planking on the bottom that was flat-sawn was extremely brittle and split, while the quarter-sawn planks were not so bad. It is my theory that the flat sawn planks when wet and dry, swell and shrink the most. However, trying to do so in the grip of a great fiberglass job is futile and ultimately the cause of the flat-sawn planking failure. I replaced the bad planking with planks from a "sacrificial" 1940 Otca that was beyond any reasonable chance for a restoration. The vintage planking was a perfect match to the old patina on the Yankee, and the game of stain matching was avoided.

A series of life-changing events caused me to shelve the canoe for a few years. One of these changes was moving to northern Wisconsin in 2007 and becoming a full-time restorer of vintage wooden canoes and small boats. Much to my surprise, my restoration backlog grew quickly, and I had no time to devote to restoring my own craft.

In the late summer of 2010, I received a call from Alan Craig, curator at the Wisconsin Canoe Heritage Museum in Spooner, Wisconsin. The WCHM houses the collection of canoes that were owned by WCHA founders Jeff and Jill Dean, among many other historical canoes. Alan had heard that I had a Sig Olson Border Lakes canoe and went

on to explain that the feature exhibit in the museum for 2011 was to be called "Wildness in the Soul: Sigurd Olson and the Canoe," showcasing Sigurd Olson, Border Lakes Outfitting, and Sig's canoe-related exploits.

Alan's call was in regard to loaning the canoe to the museum for the display. My answer was "Yes, of course," knowing I had my work cut out for me if I were to complete it in time for the museum opening while continuing to work on customer craft. So, the canoe was dusted off, and the restoration continued.

A large percentage of the rib tips were bad, so new tips were scarfed in. The original oak decks were strengthened. Rotten inwales and outwales were replaced with build-record appropriate spruce. Vintage Old Town seats replaced the broken seats that had served for so many years. The varnish, canvas, fill, and paint process was rather uneventful and went like clockwork. The last touch was the Border Lakes Outfitting logo of an arrowhead painted on the bow.

Since I purchased the canoe, it had always been my goal to paddle it on some of its home waters near Ely, Minnesota. I had finished the restoration about ten days before the exhibit's opening when the museum began its season. Using that window of time, I made arrangements to paddle the canoe on Burntside Lake, just outside of Ely, to the location of Sigurd Olson's famed Listening Point. Listening Point is on the National Register of Historic Places and is owned and maintained by the Listening Point Foundation. It consists of several dozen acres of boreal forest on Burntside Lake, a dovetailed log shack, a wood-fired sauna, and an unbelievable view. Sigurd Olson bought the property in 1956, moved the log shack there, and spent lots of time along with his wife, Elizabeth, there. It was a



Usually fiberglass would be game changer for the author when it came to buying a canoe, but this one was special and the 'glass will come off with a bit of effort.

place of solace and an inspiration for writing and contemplation about the wilderness he so loved and fought so hard to preserve.

My friend Nancy Swanson and I put the Old Town Yankee in Burntside Lake on a cool May morning. There was something spiritual about entering the lake. In fact, as we paddled toward Listening Point, I looked shoreward and saw an older man in a red and black plaid jacket, not unlike what Sig would have been wearing. As he walked and we paddled, he “ghosted” between and behind trees, disappearing and reappearing. A bit later, a pair of mergansers flew over and tipped a wing to get a better look—eerie, yet spirit-filled encounters.

As Nancy and I approached Listening Point, we did so slowly with deliberate reverence. We saw the point, and a couple of strokes later the shack began to appear in the background. Around the point, we landed near a small dock and sandy shore line. The wood-fired sauna was visible in the woods. There was no doubt—we had landed where Sig and others would have bailed out of the heat, reddened with cedar bough beatings, and jumped into the lake for an exhilarating and quick cool down.

We walked a narrow path along the shore and up a small hill to see the shack. A modest, one-room, log structure with a stone porch and stone fireplace. Having received permission from the foundation, we entered the shack. It looked as though Sig and Elizabeth had just left moments before, even though Sig had passed away twenty-nine years ago. I could feel a solemn reverence in the air and both Nancy and I were experiencing it. We slowly scanned the shack. It held all the very basic amenities, but it was Sig’s stuff. Simple camp-style furniture, coffee pot on the stove, day beds made up with plaid wool blankets, books, paddles, fishing and camp gear, artifacts and memorabilia from past trips, and an E.M. White canoe and portage yoke hanging in the rafters.

Nancy and I ate our lunch at the large table, feeling as though we were invited guests of Sig and Elizabeth. After lunch we walked to the end of Listening Point, some one hundred yards from the shack. What a great vista! It was easy to understand how the point got its name and how it affected Sig’s life so. We reflected and “listened” for a short time then returned to the cabin for lock down. Before we left, I opened a guest register to sign it, and not to much to my surprise, the last entry said, “SIG LIVES.” Nancy and I couldn’t have agreed more at that very moment.

The next day, we departed Ely with the canoe, enroute to Spooner and the Wisconsin Canoe Heritage Museum,



A well worn Border Lakes Outfitting portage yoke was also part of the restoration.

where we dropped the canoe off so it could be placed in the featured exhibit that would open the following weekend.

Opening weekend at the museum was well attended. There was a great wooden boat show and food, local brew, and music was in abundance. Robert “Bob” Olson, the youngest of Sig’s two sons, was the guest of honor. Alan Craig, the

museum’s curator, and several museum volunteers had set up an excellent forested Northwoods campsite display. Bob was impressed with the display that not only included the 1935 Yankee, but also a tent, sleeping bag, paddles, clothing articles, Sig’s ever-present pipe, packs, and other personal gear of Sigurd Olson and his Border Lakes Outfitting business.

It was a real pleasure to re-introduce Robert to a Border Lakes Outfitting canoe as well as listen to him talk about his dad, his upbringing, and Ely in days gone by. I mentioned to Robert that I had seen photos of him, his older brother Sig Jr., and his parents with Border Lakes Outfitting canoes. Robert mentioned that family outings were always in Border Lakes canoes. He also said, “Dad always kept some Border Lakes canoes out late in the season for us to hunt ducks from.”

The canoe will come back to me shortly, as the museum has closed for the season and plans for a new featured display are underway. I fully intend to use the Yankee just as Border Lakes Outfitting and Sigurd Olson did. I will incorporate it into my guide service in some way, and use it for special occasions, displays, and boat shows.▲

Dave Osborn resides in Boulder Junction, Wisconsin, and owns Little Lakes Canoe Restoration and Guide Service, specializing in the restoration of wooden canoes and small boats. He also guides fishermen and outdoor enthusiasts on small back-country lakes, using a vintage wood/canvas canoe (www.littlelakescanoe.com). “I would be remiss,” he writes, “if I did not thank some of those whose help make this story possible. Thank you to Margaret Fisher (AKA ‘Splinter’ on the WCHA forum) for the arrowhead logo stencil and help with fiberglass removal and to my friend, birch bark-canoe builder extraordinaire Ferdy Goode, for being my third and fourth hands when bending and fitting gunwales and stretching canvas. Thanks to Nancy Swanson for her enthusiasm for the whole Sig Olson thing and for being my paddling and traveling companion and cheerleader. A big thank-you to Alanna Dore, director of the Listening Point Foundation (www.listeningpointfoundation.org) for trusting me to enter and leave the shack without divulging the highly secure, double-secret, protocol for entry.