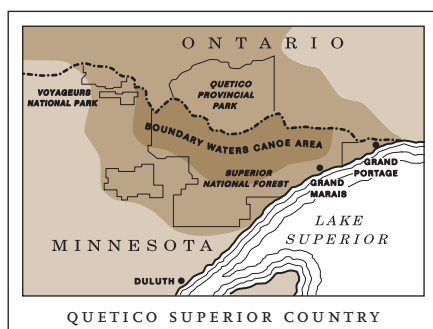


Wilderness News

FROM THE QUETICO SUPERIOR FOUNDATION FALL 2003



The Quetico Superior Foundation, established in 1946, encourages and supports the protection of the ecological, cultural and historical resources of the Quetico Superior region.

“The charm of a canoe trip is in the quiet as one drifts along the shores, being part of the rocks and trees and every living thing. At times on quiet waters one does not speak aloud but only whispers, for then all noise is sacrilege.”

—Sigurd F. Olson, *The Singing Wilderness*



Wilderness News

Published by the Quetico Superior Foundation
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BWCAW Permit Deadline

The deadline for 2004 BWCAW lottery permit applications submitted by mail is **January 10, 2004**. Online applications are due Jan. 15, and first-come first-served permit reservations begin Jan. 20. For more information, visit www.bwca.org or request an application by phone at: (218) 626-4300.

Special Feature Part I:

THE HISTORIC LODGES OF THE BOUNDARY WATERS

By Kari Finkler, Wilderness News Contributor

If you’ve paddled Basswood Lake to Crooked Lake, you’ve travelled an ancient route— favored by indigenous tribes and the Voyageurs, through a wild and peaceful chain of lakes, leading you to the spectacular Curtain Falls. Just barely visible over the falls are the remains of a rough stone foundation, dock footings, and stone steps to a portage. The next time you follow this route, stop for a moment and look for these remains— they are remnants of the vibrant resort community that flourished in the Boundary Waters from the 1930s to the 1950s.

The Changing Northwoods

The 1900s-1920s signalled rapid change in the northwoods of Minnesota— railroads brought a booming logging industry, roads were built, and the population surged with the demand for lumber. Yet, while commercial interests gained speed, a public concern for protecting the border lakes from industry was also rising. The Superior



Main lodge at Peterson Fishing Camp, Basswood Lake near Ely, 1943. Photo courtesy Minnesota Historical Society

National Forest was established in 1909, and with the passage of the Shipstead-Newton-Nolan Act in 1930, logging industries went into decline. The Act restricted logging within 400 feet of shorelines to protect water levels, and prohibited hydroelectric dams.

With most of the old growth timber depleted, and faced with an economic crisis, former loggers and trappers looked to tourism to sustain their way of life. The border lakes, now protected from industry, seemed to be the perfect place. A few determined families purchased land from the logging companies, felled trees, and hauled supplies

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Basswood Fishing Lodge, Basswood Lake near Ely, 1933. Photo courtesy Minnesota Historical Society



Postcard, men fishing from from a seaplane, 1945. Photo courtesy Minnesota Historical Society



Catch of the day at Wegen's Wilderness Camp, Winton, MN, 1925. Photo courtesy of Doris Patton Wegen



Hauling logs over the ice to build cabins near Winton, MN, 1926. Photo courtesy of Doris Patton Wegen

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across the frozen lakes to build rustic cabins. They gathered boats and gear, and with their in-depth knowledge of the lakes, they developed the first 'fishing camps'.

The camps grew quickly as word spread of unparalleled sport fishing and the extraordinary beauty of the northwoods. In the midst of a post-war industrial boom, more people looked for a retreat from city life. The outdoors offered a healthy way to have fun with the family, and more families planned summer road trips as highways improved, and cars became more affordable.

'The Playground of A Nation'

The early fishing camps became resorts and lodges, spreading outward from established trails to remote lakes including Basswood, Kekekabic, Crooked Lake, Seagull, Lac La Croix, and Knife, on both the Minnesota and Ontario sides of the border. By the early 1940s, there were more than 40 resorts in what is now the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. In their prime, they collectively employed over 300 people annually, attracting thousands of visitors from across the U.S. each summer.

These resorts reflected an outdoors-focused lifestyle. Most were centered around a hand-hewn main lodge that served as bunkhouse, dining hall, trading post, and recreation room, and might accommodate several families. Dining halls were hung with trophy fish, deer, moose, and the occasional bear, and meals were often prepared by grizzled ex-logging camp

cooks. Larger resorts offered the 'American Plan' in which meals were included in the price of lodging. Or, the thrifty guest could rent private 'housekeeping cabins' which were equipped with beds, linens, and wood-fired kitchens. A few resorts advertised electricity and other 'modern conveniences' including outhouses, running water, showers, and Finnish steam baths.

To support the flourishing tourist trade, Ely, Grand Marais, and other key entry points distributed colorful pamphlets advertising sport fishing, an outdoors lifestyle, and the health benefits of this new travel destination. Ely built an airport, golf course, and the town boomed with the new tourist trade.

In addition to fishing, families enjoyed overnight canoe trips, swimming, organized games, boating, and hunting in season. The resorts offered gear and expert guided trips, either to the best fishing spots, or to overnight tent camps on distant lakes. Many Minnesotans remember fondly the long drives 'up north' and the cabins that they rented year after year, forming lasting friendships with the lodge owners and other families.

After WWII, airplane travel became a convenient way to get people quickly out of the cities, transporting them deep into the wilderness in a matter of hours. Ex-airforce pilots returned home to Minnesota and found employment as bush pilots. By the late 1940s, there were as many as 38 seaplane flights over Ely in one day, and air traffic had increased enough to make Ely the largest freshwater seaplane base in the continental U.S. At least 25

local planes flew regularly, in addition to flights from Chicago, Duluth, Minneapolis, Cleveland and St. Louis— and one savvy promoter boasted a non-stop flight from Florida to Crooked Lake. The resorts flourished with the increase in seaplane travel, and a few started their own seaplane service, offering flights daily in and out of Ely. The bush pilot became known as part daredevil, part adventure guide— and they knew the lakes like no-one else. They increased the popularity of the remote lakes— transporting thousands of visitors into the wilderness each year, and serving double duty as emergency medical airlifts and forest fire crews.

By the 1950s, resorts were spread throughout the roadless area from Lac La Croix to Grand Marais, from Burntside Lake to Saganaga— but for many of these resorts, the prosperous days were coming to an end.

To Be Continued— Part II of this story will appear in the Spring 2004 issue of Wilderness News. □

Do you have a story about the historic lodges of the BWCA that you'd like to share? We'd love to hear from you, and we may print part or all of your story.

Write us:

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Minneapolis, MN 55402-1498

The Foundation Mourns the Loss of Board Members

Ted Hall – a force for local activism and wilderness preservation

A Quetico Superior Foundation board director for 32 years, Edward (Ted) Hall passed away September 23, 2003, at age 82 in Littlefork, MN.



Ted Hall
Photo courtesy Rosalie Hall

Ted was best known for his publication, the *Rainy Lake Chronicle*, which was enjoyed by thousands of readers nationwide. With dedication, he championed the importance of local government, and his writings stirred public debate both in Ranier, and around the region. Ted was outspoken and passionately worked for preservation of the wilderness during a critical time in northern Minnesota's history.

Ted published the *Chronicle* until 1980, going on to write for other publications, and his book *Growing With the Grass*. His enthusiasm and activism will be greatly missed.

Elizabeth Wyman embodied her family's dedication to wilderness protection

In this issue of *Wilderness News*, we honor the many contributions of a 29-year member of the Quetico Superior Foundation board of directors, Elizabeth "Betts" Wyman of Minneapolis, who died September 4 at age 79. She was the daughter of Donald Winston, whose twin brother, Frederick Winston, established the Foundation in the 1930s to take on the challenge of protecting the Rainy River watershed from commercial development.

Her son, Jim Wyman, who also is a board member, said his mother enjoyed the outdoors and was an avid walker and hiker. While she was involved in many charitable causes in the Twin Cities and was very active in the Minnetonka Garden Club, she also loved to spend time at the family's cabin on the shore of Lake Superior in Beaver Bay.

"She was very dedicated in her attendance at board meetings and added a perspective and sense of responsibility that came from my grandfather and his brother's interest in wilderness preservation," Jim said.

Dr. Jock Bishop wrote: "Betts was a charming person whom I came to admire for her thoughtful comments in board meetings... They were always to the point and wise. She will be greatly missed..."



Betts Wyman
Photo courtesy Jim Wyman

We'll miss you, Elizabeth.

Joe Seliga

His canoes are used as part of a wilderness experience teaching respect and integrity to young adults.

By Timothy Eaton, Wilderness News Contributor



Joe Seliga, Wooden Boat Show & Summer Solstice Festival, North House Folk School, Grand Marais, MN June 20, 2003. Photo by Timothy Eaton

In preparing this profile I've had the pleasure of visiting with Joe on numerous occasions this past summer; first at the Wooden Boat Show and Summer Solstice in Grand Marais, again at the 5th Annual Canoe Rendezvous in Duluth, at his canoe shop in Ely and most recently in Grand Rapids. Collectively, my visits have deeply attracted me to this delightful man—his humility, his passion for life and the purpose and mission for which he lives.

*I would also like to acknowledge and thank Jerry Stelmok for recording the life of Joe Seliga in his book *The Art of the Canoe with Joe Seliga*. His book has guided my conversations with Joe—about his life, his views on the environment, changes to the Quetico Superior wilderness and his connection to the canoe camps of northern Minnesota.*

One of Joe's favorite stories about canoeing with the Veazie took place in 1934 on an early spring lake trout fishing trip with his father, Steven. Water levels were high and as they approached the lower rapids between Big Moose and Nina Moose Lakes all they could see was the wild spray of white water. Steven directed Joe to portage the gear around; he would run the Veazie empty down the rapids. To this day, Joe still remembers the roar of the river, and the sound of wood cracking as the canoe hit a deadfall on the way down. Joe ran to the icy river's edge where he pulled both his father and the canoe to shore. The Veazie would need repair with 21 broken ribs.

Working together, Joe and his dad cut birch saplings and using copper fishing line, repaired the canoe and managed to paddle it back to Ely. Distraught by their misfortune, Joe lay awake at night thinking about the canoe and how to make permanent repairs. He studied the canoe's construction and experimented with bending wood and stretching canvas. Finally, eighteen months later the 21 broken ribs had been replaced and a new canvas cover had been applied. Their Veazie was as good as new and the family again had their beloved canoe, and more importantly, access to the wilderness experiences they loved.

Part-time business

Word got around of Joe's success and soon he had a part-time business repairing wood-canvas canoes. By the 1930s there was a road into Ely and with it came fisherman, wooden boats and motors. In 1938, using the families' 15-foot Morris canoe as the form, Joe designed and built his first canoe, a 16-foot square stern fishing canoe which he sold the day it was finished. He built another, and another, and another. But no sooner had Joe

many people don't realize is how his love and respect for the canoe has touched many young people's lives.

The Widji Way

Camp Widjiwagan has a fleet of 100 wood canvas canoes, and is the only camp today that maintains the tradition of using wooden canoes as an integral part of the wilderness experience.

Teaching respect for the canoe, respect for one's fellow travelers and respect the wilderness has been the hallmark at Camp Widjiwagan since 1929.

"I have watched groups from Widjiwagan approach a portage. The canoe is unloaded while it floats, never touching land, the youth standing up to their knees in water, passing the packs to shore. When unloaded, the canoe is lifted from the lake, carried through the forest, and set down gently in the water. There is no noise, no grating of aluminum or fiberglass on rock, no telltale bits of ground up canoe on boulders to mark their passing. Even when one of the canoes is not wood, its treated with equal care. If all visitors to the wilderness took such care, it would be better for it."

So writes author Michael Furtman in his book *A Season for Wilderness* (Northword Press, 1989) in the chapter entitled "The Widji Way".

A Special Place in Joe's Heart

Using the canoe as the experiential icon for teaching human and wilderness values sits well with Joe Seliga. And for this reason, Camp Widjiwagan holds a special place in Joe's heart. Four years ago, Joe willed his two canoe forms and the Seliga canoe legacy to Camp Widjiwagan with a goal in mind—to create a one million dollar endowment



Seliga 17-foot Voyageur; Serial No. 905482 Photo by Martin Berglin

Joe Seliga grew up in the pristine Quetico Superior wilderness in the small mining town of Ely, Minnesota. Ely was 25 miles from the nearest road in 1911 when Joe was born. And for the first thirteen years of his life the only way in or out of town was by train or canoe. The Seligas (mom, dad, Joe and 11 brothers and sisters) were fortunate, they owned two Morris canoes. These canoes provided transportation, recreation, and the mobility to explore the wilderness and subsidize their lifestyle with fresh fish, game and wild berries. Later, these canoes would inspire Joe to self-learn a trade—the craft of wood-canvas canoe building. Today, Joe Seliga is known around the world as the master canoe builder from Ely.

A favorite story of Joe's

The Seliga family owned a 15-foot and an 18-foot canoe built by B.N. Morris. Morris was the most respected canoe builder of the time, and founded Morris Canoe Company of Veazie, Maine. The family affectionately referred to the 18-foot as their "Veazie".

started than the U.S. entered the war in Europe—suddenly there was little time for recreation and little demand for his canoe boat. As materials ran scarce, Joe returned to the local mine working double shifts to support his young family. Consequently, there were no canoes built between 1942-1945.

Building canoes for the camps

In 1948 Joe modified his 16-foot square stern canoe form and built a double-ended model which he sold to a St. Paul boys YMCA camp—Camp Widjiwagan. Upon delivery they ordered five more. In 1949, Camp Northland, the girls YMCA camp, ordered 8 canoes which Joe delivered that year for a mere \$36 dollars a piece—the cost of materials.

Since the first canoe was completed in 1938 Joe has built 664 wood-canvas canoes, and of those, 237 for the YMCA and church camps using the BWCA and Quetico Parks.

At the beginning of a new century, Joe Seliga is known around the world for his craft, but what

to build a canoe shop, and fund a full-time craftsman to maintain the camp's fleet of wood-canvas canoes. The endowment goal was exceeded with generous gifts from individuals and friends close to Joe. In 2001, the camp built a new canoe maintenance building and now employs both a full-time Canoe Master and an assistant to care for the fleet of Seliga Scout and Voyageur canoes.

Widji makes a difference

"Widji is everything" exclaims Joe. "If Widji makes a difference in one kid's life it is worth every minute (of my time)". There is a permanent place set at the banquet table in the Widji dining hall for Joe. On Tuesday evenings, campers returning from the trail assemble in the banquet hall to share their experiences, comradery and stories of wilderness exploration. Joe rarely misses the opportunity to be present at these gatherings. At 92, Joe is very proud of the fact that two of his great-grandchildren have shared their Widji experiences with him on these special Tuesday evenings.

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Wilderness News

Fall 2003

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Kekekabic prescribed burn. Photo By Ellen Bogardus-Szymaniak

Fall Prescribed Burns Produce Positive Results

The US Forest Service, partnering with the Ontario Fire Service, carried out two successful prescribed burns within the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW) on October 10th and 11th. The Arc Lake and Honker Lake Area burns were conducted in conjunction with a burn in the Kekekabic region, along the western edge of the Gunflint Trail, but outside of the BWCAW. The three burns, which covered 6,401 acres, were the largest prescribed burns in the Gunflint region since the July 4, 1999 storm. The burns were conducted by roughly 140 people from the US Forest Service and the Ontario Fire Service.

The 2,633 acres of the Arc Lake area prescribed burn were ignited on October 10th using plastic fire propellants, helitorches, and hand ignition methods. The fire went as planned with no fire spread occurring in non blowdown areas. The Honker Lake area burn was also ignited using plastic fire propellants and two helitorches. Only 75% of the 1,553 acres were burned due to a strong wet weather system that shut down operations.

And, although not all of the blowdown area was successfully burned, the objectives were met in most of the area with no reports of fire spread or other significant events.

The US Forest Service has plans to burn 20,000 acres in 2004 with the majority of the prescribed burns in the Gunflint District.

Completed Prescribed Burns within the BWCA

Fall 2001	912 acres
FTU 201/Liam Grade	298
Skipper Lake	192
Iron Mash	109
Brule River	313
Spring 2002	2,253 acres
Magnetic Lake	1,090
Meditation Lake	129
Three Mile Island	1,034
Fall 2003	3,798 acres
Honker Lake	1,165
Arc Lake	2,633
Long-Range Plan	75,000 acres
To Date	6,963

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Remembering the Past

A boyhood experience Joe remembers vividly is his dad portaging their 18-foot Veazie through town (they did not own a car at the time) with a pack on his back and their fishing poles in hand. Joe followed in toe, headed for Burntside Lake and a full day of lake trout fishing. “Dad would carry that canoe two miles through town (Ely) to the shore of Lake Shagawa. From there it was another two portages into Burntside Lake, which had the best tasting lake trout short of my favorite fishing holes in the Quetico.” (Joe is still reluctant to disclose this lake).

Embracing Change

Over his 92 years, Joe Seliga has seen many changes; to Burntside Lake, to the town of Ely, and to the BWCA and Quetico Parks. “Of course I can see it now” Joe acknowledged, “because so many people come here. You have to put on restrictions to preserve what’s here.”

“I have been in favor of almost every change to protect this wilderness area,” claims Joe. “I was happy the day they banned the airplanes— they were too noisy. And, they should not have allowed the use of chain saws to clear the portages after the 1999 blowdown— that was wrong.” Joe, like Sig Olson, got the best of it— before everyone else knew about the area.

His Book

On a follow-up visit I asked Joe about the notoriety that has come with his recent book *The Art of the Canoe with Joe Seliga* by Jerry Stelmok. Joe’s humble reply, “I don’t know what all this fuss is about, I’m just Joe Seliga from Ely, Minnesota.

Respect for canoes, respect for our fellow man and respect for the wilderness— these values epitomize Joe Seliga. □

Add your name to our Mailing List

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