

Joe Seliga's Canoe

by Dave Greenlee

I was eighteen years old when I fell in love with Joe Seliga's wood and canvas canoe. That was back in 1968, the year I began guiding canoe trips from the Charles L. Sommers Wilderness Canoe Base near Ely, Minnesota. Joe had built hundreds of canoes before the one I paddled, and since then has built hundreds more. At age eighty-eight, Joe no longer maintains a list of people who have put down a deposit to wait for him to build their canoe. On the other hand, I don't think you could say he has retired. He keeps very busy refurbishing canoes and still manages to build a few new ones each year. I think he is pretty selective about who gets the new ones. When you consider the care and workmanship that goes into one of his canoes, you can understand why he likes to decide where they go.



Until this year, I had pretty much given up hope that I would ever own a Seliga. That changed last winter when my wife Sue and my good friend Dave Hyink hatched a secret plan. They called Joe and told him how much I love his canoes, and how my 50th birthday would be special if he could build me a Seliga. Suffice it to say that in April, Joe called Sue to say he was ready to start building canoe #996404. In mid-July, he called to say it was done. Never has a birthday been more special!



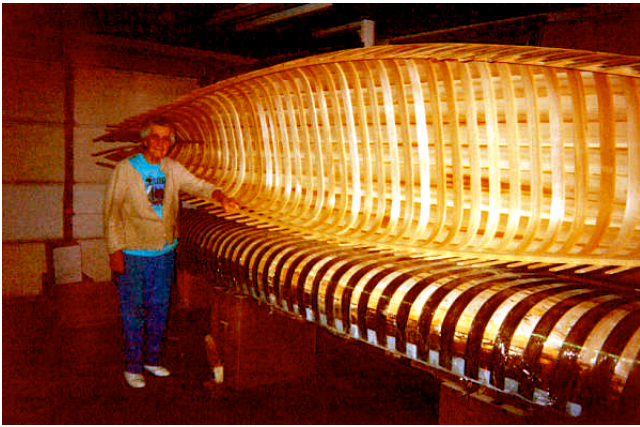
When Sue and I got to Joe's shop in Ely, we talked to him for hours, writing down all the details that we will want to remember. After all the years I paddled his canoes, this was the first time I had really talked to him. Inspired from a picture by Ron Miles that now hangs in the lodge, we snapped a shot of his garage floor, where multicolored drips of paint form a 60-year historic record of the hundreds of canoes that have taken shape here. For scale (and maybe a few more colors), Joe included his boot in the picture.

Joe is quick to give credit to his wife Nora for all the brass nails she has clinched and the ribs she has helped to bend. As Joe and I adjusted the car top canoe rack, the canoe sat out by the shop in the sun for the first time. Nora looked at it in the grass and remarked, "Oh, Joe, this is a pretty one. Look how the sun brings out the color in the wood here." Later, when Sue and I compared notes on a campsite in Horseshoe Lake, we agreed that Joe and Nora make a great team.



In the 32 years since I first sat in the stern of a Seliga, I have paddled many other canoes and even developed an attachment to a few of them. I now own a '56 Grumman, a Wenonah Jensen, a 29 lb. kevlar Pro-Boat, and a solo racer. I will say that I have never paddled a canoe that is the equal of a Seliga, even the first well used Seliga I was issued. That one had a fiberglass skin and was pretty darned heavy. I loved that first Seliga and learned how to take good care of it. In my third year guiding, I was issued a brand new wood and canvas model that is very much like the one that Joe built this year.





As I have begun to get familiar with this new canoe, it has reawakened some feelings I had while guiding. Back then I developed a reverence for the Seliga that will always be with me. It is a beautiful canoe to paddle, with just a bit of rocker that makes it maneuverable without giving up much speed. While it is fast, it is also full, very capable of carrying three people and a lot of gear. In our first outing in the new canoe, Sue and Tucker and I with all our gear posed no problem at all. In high winds, a Seliga rides the waves and doesn't dig in like a straight tracking racing canoe. In a tail wind, I can hold it on a line and it doesn't wedge and slide into the troughs as does my Jensen. In a Seliga, I am reminded of Sig Olson's words in Wilderness Days:

There is balance in handling a canoe, the feeling of it being a part of the bodily swing. No matter how big the waves or how the currents swirl, you are riding them as you would ride a horse, at one with their every motion.





My feelings are not just for the way a Seliga paddles. I think of the way this canoe glides in still water, the way it sounds when you set it in the lake at the end of a portage, and the way water slips through the gunnels and by your shoulders as you flip it up. The precise balance of the portage yolk and the fit of the yolk pads tell you that this canoe was designed to portage as well as to paddle. It gives off the rich colors of cedar and ash, and shows the meticulous workmanship of clinched brass nails that hold planking to the steamed and formed ribs. But these are just words; a Seliga is all that and much more. Every time I portage or paddle this canoe, or just look at it, I realize more fully what Bill Mason says in his book *Path of the Paddle*:

The first thing you must learn about canoeing is that the canoe is not a lifeless, inanimate object; it feels very much alive, alive with the life of the river. Life is transmitted to the canoe by currents of air and water upon which it rides. The behavior and temperament of the canoe is dependent upon the elements: from the slightest breeze to a raging storm, from the smallest ripple to a towering wave, or from a meandering stream to a thundering rapid.



Just a few days after we brought the canoe home from Ely, Sue and I had the opportunity to take it out to the Black Hills where my parents spend their summers. These are the people who took me on my first canoe trip when I was 11 years old. We took the Seliga out to Pactola Reservoir and enjoyed a few precious moments on the water. As we reminisced about canoe trips past, I realized how hard my mom had worked to make those family trips into quality time, despite the bugs, the bears, and the rain. And after all these years, my dad still has a strong and natural stroke that makes me comfortable taking the bow seat.



On the day Sue and I came to pick up the canoe, Joe told us with a wry smile and a twinkle in his eye, "use it but don't abuse it". By then, we had already figured out where this canoe would live. It is in our living room, round side up, with indirect lighting that allows the warm color of the cedar to fill the room. This is not a permanent canoe rest; I can easily take the canoe down and head for a nearby river or lake anytime I get the urge.

This much is certain. Joe's canoe will be used and it will not be abused.

