

A Tale of Two Boats; The 21st century craft of building an Adirondack Guideboat.

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Introduction

In the 19th century, Adirondack (ADK) guides first crafted a boat capable of carrying heavy loads while simultaneously remaining light enough to be portaged by one person. The ADK guideboat, as it became known, was specifically designed and built to be used by guides navigating the difficult terrain of the ADK. A marvel of engineering completely unique to the region, this boat remains a symbol of ADK culture and history. People still build guideboats today, but there is a shift currently happening in the world of guideboat building that likely mirrors 21st century values and ideals – time vs. technique, or marketing vs. craftsmanship. The demand for traditionally built guideboats is dwindling in favor of newer, easier, and quicker building techniques. In these two styles there is a distinct divide among builders, and whether or not an Adirondack guideboat is defined by its construction process is the main question at hand. In this study, I analyze what this means for the future of the guideboat culture and craft, and the broader implications happening not just with guideboats but with all specialized crafts.

Methodology

To assess the different perspectives and views on contemporary guideboat building, I interviewed 5 different guideboat builders from different backgrounds.

- Christopher Woodward of Woodward Boat Shop in Saranac Lake, NY first learned the craft of traditional guideboat building from a class in 1980 at the North Country Community College and has been building and repairing traditional guideboats ever since .
- Robbie Frenette of Raquette River Outfitters in Tupper Lake, NY took a more basic understanding of wooden boatbuilding and applied it to the job of repairing historic and traditional guideboats, where he learned the traditional craft process through tear down and reconstruction.
- John Michne is a recreational guideboat builder from Clifton Park, NY who got into the craft of building modern, cedar planked guideboats out of a love for their design and co-wrote a book detailing the construction process of modern guideboats.
- Bob Green is a recreational builder from Oswego NY who started building guideboats as a challenge after building wooden crafts as a hobby, he has built two modern guideboats and is working on his third.
- Steve Kaulback is the founder of Adirondack-Guide-Boat.com, a manufacturer and distributor of modern guideboats based in various locations in the Northeast region.

Process or Product?



Figure 1: chart showcasing the two methods of guideboat building and their steps.

Discussion

As seen in Figure 1, there are two distinct methods of building an Adirondack guideboat: the traditional lapstrake methods used throughout the history of the guideboat, and the more modern cedar planked and fiberglassed methods developed recently with modern technology. Traditional builders such as Robbie Frenette and Chris Woodward have concluded that in order for a boat to be properly called a guideboat and marketed as such, it must be constructed using the traditional lapstrake planking, spruce root natural crook ribbing, and all of the skill and time that goes into it. Alternately, more modern guideboat builders such as John Michne define the guideboat by its unique shape and style, they build the guideboats using modern boatbuilding techniques such as strip-planking and fiberglassing in order to forego the incredibly complicated traditional process. The result of both methods looks very similar, but the traditional craft creates a boat that is lighter, rides smoother in the water, and will last much longer when properly cared for. The modern methods can create a boat that has the style and shape of the guideboat, still capturing its beauty out of the water without having to have specific knowledge of a niche craft and an incredible amount of labor.

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Findings

Due to new technologies and marketing strategies the Adirondack guideboat is starting to reach a wide-ranging audience that may not have as much experience with the history and culture of the boat and its craft. This means that the newer and more modern methods of guideboat building, which are being marketed towards a much larger audience, are becoming more popular and in demand than those of the very private and hard to come by traditional lapstrake style of building. Guideboats have been and will likely continue to transition from being a style of boat defined by its building process into a boat defined by its style and shape. While the traditional lapstraked guideboats will always have a place in the history books and the guide camps, the modern cedar planked boats will be much more widespread and live in the homes of regular people to be used and appreciated. This mirrors a greater trend of shifting from specialized craft to modern methods as a result of the greater accessibility of modern methods. The historic and traditional crafts will always have a small place in the heart of culture and tradition, but the greater supply and demand will shift towards the widely accessible modern crafts.

Conclusion

While it may seem grim that traditional skilled craft is being taken over by modern methods, it is not the death sentence that it may initially seem. Traditional crafts will still stay alive and well within the niche corner of society that covets tradition and culture, if there are laborers around with the skill to make traditional crafts, I expect there will always be a market. However, just as the marketing is moving society at large away from traditional craft so is it moving society away from traditional methods of teaching and passing on skills. The greater issue at hand is not a matter of whether the demand for traditional crafts will die out but is more the struggle of teaching new generations the skills required for such crafts in order to keep them alive. New methods of teaching must be embraced for this to happen as the traditional methods of passing on a craft that are so familiar to the craftsman of past generations are giving way to the more visible and wide-ranging teaching methods of today.

Works Cited:

- Michne, John D. *Building An Adirondack Guideboat*. 2nd ed. 2018.
Sulavik, Stephen B. *The Adirondack Guideboat*. Peterborough, NH: Bauhan Publishing, 2018.
Woodward, Christopher. Guideboats.com. Last modified, 2009. <http://www.guideboats.com/>.



Figure 2: Picture of John Michne checking the alignment on a modern guideboat.



Figure 4: Topographical map of the Adirondacks



Figure 3: Picture of Christopher Woodward (right) next to his mentor Carl Hathoway (left) with a nearly finished traditional guideboat.



Figure 5: Historic image of a guideboat on the water.