



#### EMBRACING A PADDLE CLOSE TO HEART

Left: Joanie and Gary McGuffin  
Right (pictured counter-clockwise from top): Ed Gillet, Greg Barton, Derek Hutchinson, Jim Snyder, Bill Mason, Eric Evans, Ralph Frese, Tom Johnson, Frank Havens, Verlen Kruger, and Nolan Whitecoll



Inscribing a book to a friend several years ago, Verlen Kruger wrote, "We keep reaching because a ship in a harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are built for." Conservationist, artist, and award-winning filmmaker Bill Mason dedicated his classic book of canoeing, *Path of the Paddle*, to his father, "whose tales of his journeys by canoe fired the imagination of a small boy," and "to my mother, who watched with trepidation as I launched my first canoe at the age of 12."

In their dedications, Kruger and Mason certainly captured the bookends of feelings encompassed by novice and experienced paddlers. On another plane, whitewater slalom racer Eric Evans wrote [with John Burton], "Whitewater racing means going fast without making errors . . . through lots of practice, hard training, and intellectual strain." At any level, the rewards of racing are significant and extremely satisfying, though once the basics are mastered, racing seems to get more complicated. "It is then you will know the utter thrill of succeeding against a real challenge to yourself."

For every paddler who has written about boating, there are thousands more who haven't. Undoubtedly, these are the paddlers you've heard of because they have shared a bit of water with you. Of the ones you don't know, many have been called loony or wild and some have even been called stupid. But in doing whatever it took to achieve those monikers, they stretched the boundaries of the sport while testing the limits of their skill and experience. Experts they are—but they weren't always. Like anybody else, they were once beginners, and their experiences on water have had a profound influence on their lives.

#### TAKE THE LONG WAY HOME

When Verlen Kruger was 49 years old, he took up canoeing in a serious way. With his friend Clayton Klein, Kruger embarked on a 7,000-mile trip across Canada from the Saint Lawrence Seaway to Nome. His book *One Incredible Journey* was made into a movie, but the Michigan resident was only warming up for something truly grand. Between 1980 and 1983, paddling the *Loon*, a decked-over canoe, he made a 28,000-mile canoe trip around North America.

Paddling changed Kruger's life. "I was born and raised on an Indiana farm. Why did I wait so long? I didn't know any better." He wasn't exposed to canoeing until he went on a fishing trip in Ontario with a 17-foot aluminum Grumman. "I hardly knew one end from the other," he recalls. "I'd been in all 50 states before I took up canoeing, and now I've paddled in all but 2. What you see is so different when you see things from a canoe."

Kruger also sees how important water is to everything. "Water is

essential to life. Waterways are historic highways. You can go anywhere you want and it's all connected. You may start in a local stream, but that connects to bigger and bigger streams, and the next thing you know it connects up to the ocean. There's a cycle to it and you can become part of it."

Kruger suggests that beginners can enjoy canoeing in different ways, depending on what type of boating is most appealing. "It's very important that you get the right boat," he says. A stable boat and an understanding of simple principles will help beginners who are scared of capsizing. "Too many canoes are built with the seats too high," and that's what leads to instability.

With a quiet conviction that comes from many years spent paddling, Kruger says, "There are so many different ways you can enjoy a canoe. It's more than a recreational thing, more than a toy. The original canoe was built for a function, but for me, I'm happiest when I'm on the move, and a canoe is an ideal way of doing it." He pauses before adding, "I don't think people realize that until they experience it. I didn't. I was sitting around happy, not paddling." That's all changed now.

According to Ed Gillet, "In 1987, when I said that I was planning to paddle across 2,200 miles of open ocean in a 20-foot kayak, people looked at me as though I had told them I was going to commit suicide."

In a specially designed double Tofino made by Necky Kayaks, Gillet paddled from Monterey, California, to Kahului, Maui, in 63 days using a sextant and a small calculator programmed to calculate navigation sights. His boat was packed with 60 days' worth of food and 25 gallons of fresh water, plus a reverse-osmosis pump to make more. Gillet believes, "Survival at sea depends on preparation, experience, and prudence." He also took a compact VHF radio, fishing gear, tools, spare parts, and an emergency radio beacon.

Despite his planning, Gillet's journey was not easy. He suffered mightily from pounding Pacific swells, saltwater sores on his butt, and hands so salt-encrusted, chapped, and sore that he needed to take painkillers to continue paddling. He spent two weeks paddling in 30-knot winds and surfing down 15-foot swells. Nights were spent trying to sleep in the bottom of his boat as waves crashed over the deck, inundating the cockpit. To reach Hawaii meant relying on the trade winds, but he ended up becalmed for two weeks. Then he ran out of food.

He ended up on *The Tonight Show* and was asked by Johnny Carson, "Why?" His reply was, "It's the longest trip I thought I'd have a chance of making." It's not as if Gillet had never spent time in a sea kayak before. He had done many long-distance tours, including 5,000 miles along the Pacific coast of South America.

Gillet got started in sea kayaking at age 30, when a friend, climber and inventor Ray Jardine, convinced him to paddle 550 miles down the Sea of Cortez. This was in 1980, and "there were no commercially available sea kayaks at the time. I had a 14-foot river boat with no foot pedals and no float bags, and we had to improvise a rudder."

He was hooked, but not by the thrilling part of kayaking. "Knowing nothing about kayaking, every time we went around a point of land was exciting." Gillet came from a sailing background, so he was accustomed to moving small boats along a coastline. "Kayaking offered that kind of thing on a long-distance touring model, and at the same time combined a physical challenge with the navigational and intellectual challenge of route finding, finding campsites, and finding anchorage."

Touring has come to dominate his life, and Gillet still can't believe it. "It's more than an avocation. It turned into a vocation." With his wife, Katie, he owns Southwest Kayaks, in San Diego, and runs trips to Baja California, teaching others

how to sea kayak. "I never would have guessed it would turn into that."

"I find paddling to be saner than anything else I do and more meaningful because it is simpler and more process oriented." Gillet is particularly drawn to being in un-

spoiled places where you can "make eye contact with whales, see dolphins swimming alongside you; where everyday paddling is something new."

Gillet feels it's important that beginners not underestimate their potential for paddling long distances. "So much of what I see going on in the sport is making things easier and more comfortable. I would say, don't give in to the line of least resistance. Seek out the more difficult trips and rise to the occasion. You might be surprised by what you're capable of."

## I CANOE. CAN YOU CANOE?

When canoeists think of classics, the first thing that comes to mind is Bill Mason's *Path of the Paddle*. Within its 200 pages lies anything you would ever need, or want, to know about canoeing. When the book appeared in 1980 there wasn't much in print on the subject, and the sheer breadth of information made it an instant favorite. But more than that, *Path* is a joy to read. In every word of text it is clear that conservationist Bill Mason was walking hand in hand with author Bill Mason.

Mason's son, Paul, agrees with that assessment. "Dad was quite forthright about paddlers sharing his view of nature and the envi-



Verlen Kruger



Ed Gillet



Ralph Freese



Bill Mason

ronment versus the outdoors just being someplace to go and use. He wanted to present this point of view without turning people off." As people read the book and learn the sport, "they're getting this through osmosis." Regardless of the topic, "Dad always worked in a message without scaring people away."

When *Path of the Paddle* first appeared it was an advanced book. Skill levels were not very advanced. Now, says Paul Mason, it is a beginner's book because "everybody who gets involved in the sport has those skills." What hasn't changed is that the highest risk in the sport is for novices and experts. "As a novice, everything looks hard. You can't tell the difference between a hard rapid and an easy one. Then when you know more, you're at risk again because you are pushing yourself and your skill level." Those are the types of issues that Bill Mason addressed so well in his book.

Growing up with a father who had a reputation for expert canoeing wasn't as difficult as you would expect for Paul Mason and his sister Becky. It was easy to see Bill Mason as a person, not someone famous for doing something. "As a kid you're unaware of the rest of the world. I assumed everybody spent the summer out paddling. Our skills progressed slowly, working in canvas canoes, because you had to be careful or the boat was ruined. Now, it's no big deal to hit rocks!"

A standing family joke helped. They used to call it "The Bill Mason Swim Club. Because he was always pushing himself, Dad would swim a lot." Since the people who viewed Bill Mason's films didn't see the experimentation in techniques that went into filming a scene, they didn't realize that when experts push themselves, they end up in the water a lot of times. "He'd be in the water as much or more than the rest of us!"

Canoeing has progressed since *Path of the Paddle* first came out, but some things have stayed the same. "Start with the right people to help you," advises Paul Mason to beginners. "A book or a video can only go so far," though it's a great place to start. "Lessons and instructors have improved so much over the years that it's not hard to get quality instructors that don't drive you away." Amen to that. "There is nothing worse than a cold, wet day and an instructor trying to get you to do something you don't want to do." Mason says, "Get safety basics from a book or real live person. Once the novice has some knowledge, you have enough to stay out of trouble and still learn."

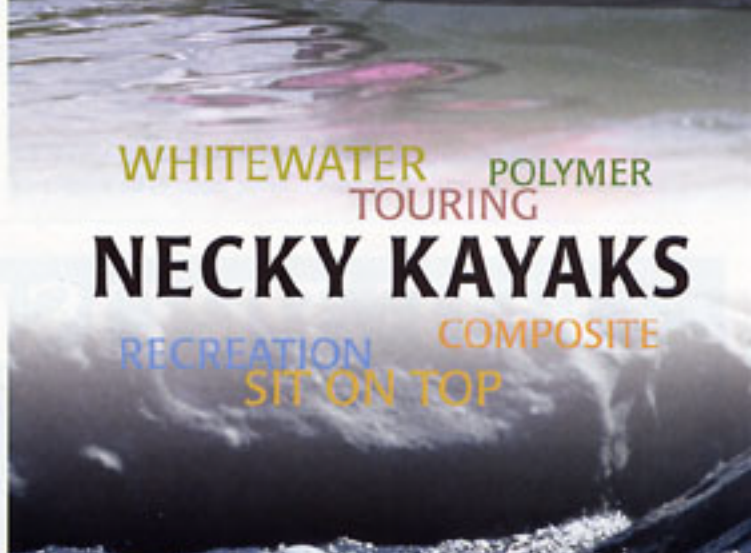
**Chicagoland Canoe Base** is run by Ralph Frese. The store is probably one of the most unusual canoe retail outlets in the world. Besides offering the regular stuff—guided trips, rentals, gear, paddle clothing, instructional books, and videos—Frese can set you up with everything you need to build, repair, or restore wood/canvas and wood canoes. Frese is, himself, a builder of realistic-looking birchbark replicas and dugouts. A fourth-generation blacksmith, a collector of vintage canoes, and a historian, he delivers talks at symposia on such topics as "The Canadians and the Canadian Canoe in the Opening of the American Midwest." He is a man with the spirit of the voyageur in him.

Ralph Frese got started in canoeing as a way to investigate the natural world. Exploring the rivers surrounding his Illinois home became a passion. Frese believes that "wherever there is water, nature is always more fascinating." And when you know something about natural history, "it opens up the world that much more when you understand the country you travel in."

In 1940, at the age of 14, Frese picked up his first canoe. The boat was an old one and made of canvas, and young Ralph spent



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lots of time fixing it up. "My Dad was not a canoeist, but he let me dull his tools!" he remembers.

Curiosity kept him involved. He always wanted to know, "What's around the next bend?" He read a lot, still does as a matter of fact, and the more he read, the more he wanted to know. And the more he knew, the more he wanted to be in his boat. "As I read about the waterways around Chicago, I began to read about the history. Everything around here began one way or another in a canoe over 327 years ago. This developed my interest in maritime history."

That interest also led Frese into two major reenactments of historical events: the 1672 multi-river journey of Joliet and Marquette from Saint Ignace, Michigan, to a point below the mouth of the Arkansas River, and La Salle's 1682 trip down the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico. Each expedition used birchbark canoes built at Chicagoland. The 3,500-mile La Salle reenactment was done with six canoes and 23 people.

"All over the world, maritime heritage begins with a canoe," says Frese. "The canoe is the only watercraft designed by man that has not outlived its use and design. New innovations, fuels, and designs have superseded every other boat," he maintains. "And in some corners of the world, the canoe is still the only affordable transportation for many people."

This experienced canoeist and boatbuilder has sound advice for beginners. "Try to read, read, read," Frese says. "The subject of



Nolan Whitesell

canoeing has some of the most exciting adventure reading to be had. Just try reading about Verien Kruger's experiences!" Also, he says, "Learn the basics of canoe design, and you'll know why one is good and another handles like a dog." He feels strongly that "all you read in catalogs is BS and only designed to make you bite."

Forty-three years ago Frese started a canoe race with his scout troop. During peak years, "We had a thousand boats with 2,000 people." Eventually he came to learn that "this is the only trail that leaves no trace of your passing. If those same 2,000 people had been on a hiking trail together, it would have been devastating." That's why Frese sees the importance of getting involved with local, state, or national clubs. "Help preserve some of our rivers. Only then do you get everything you can out of the acquisition of a canoe."

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**Nolan Whitesell** is a whitewater paddler based in North Carolina who got involved with making boats. A big-water boater known for his exploits in open canoes, he's been making Whitesell Canoes since the 1970s. He was interested in the open canoe as a whitewater playboat, so the transition from boater to boatbuilder was natural. "When I was doing the majority of my exploratory boating in the early seventies, boats were strictly conversions of race designs. I never had an inkling of desire to be in the canoe business."

Whitesell's original Piranha was the first whitewater canoe designed to be playful, dry running, stable, and easily responsive to

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