

THE ACQUISITION AND DOCUMENTATION OF AN ARTIFACT



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*This article is reprinted
from the Canadian Museums
gazette (vol. 10 no. 3, pp. 18-34).*

We often hear curators lament the dying-off of the last aged culture-bearer able to sing a certain style of song or make and use a particular artifact. Despite this, there are still many people who are able to remember in detail how something was done and in many cases, to construct the item and demonstrate its use. If we carefully examine our collections and the literature that supports them, it is always possible to spot gaps either in the collections themselves or in what we know about their manufacture and use.

During my current long-term study of Arctic kayaks, I noted a number of such gaps that were still possible to fill. Many facets of Eskimo culture and their attendant artifacts are long gone, barely a memory in the minds of the oldest living people and thus non-recoverable. Therefore, when attempting to fill gaps in knowledge or collections we must assess the importance of filling one gap as opposed to any other. It is also important to appraise the probability of finding good informants and evaluate the recovered information for its aid in understanding current collections of artifacts and knowledge.

In our collection of over forty kayaks in the National Museum of Man in Ottawa we have no examples from Siberia, South Alaska or the Aleutian Islands. Even if Siberia were not politically out of the question, acculturation since the October Revolution has eliminated the use of kayaks among the Chukchi, Koryak and Eskimo peoples. The Aleuts, too, are so far past their heyday of sea otter hunting by kayak that information gathering there is almost impossible. South

Alaska, on the other hand, still had kayaks in use in one or two communities according to the best information I could gather from my anthropological acquaintances.

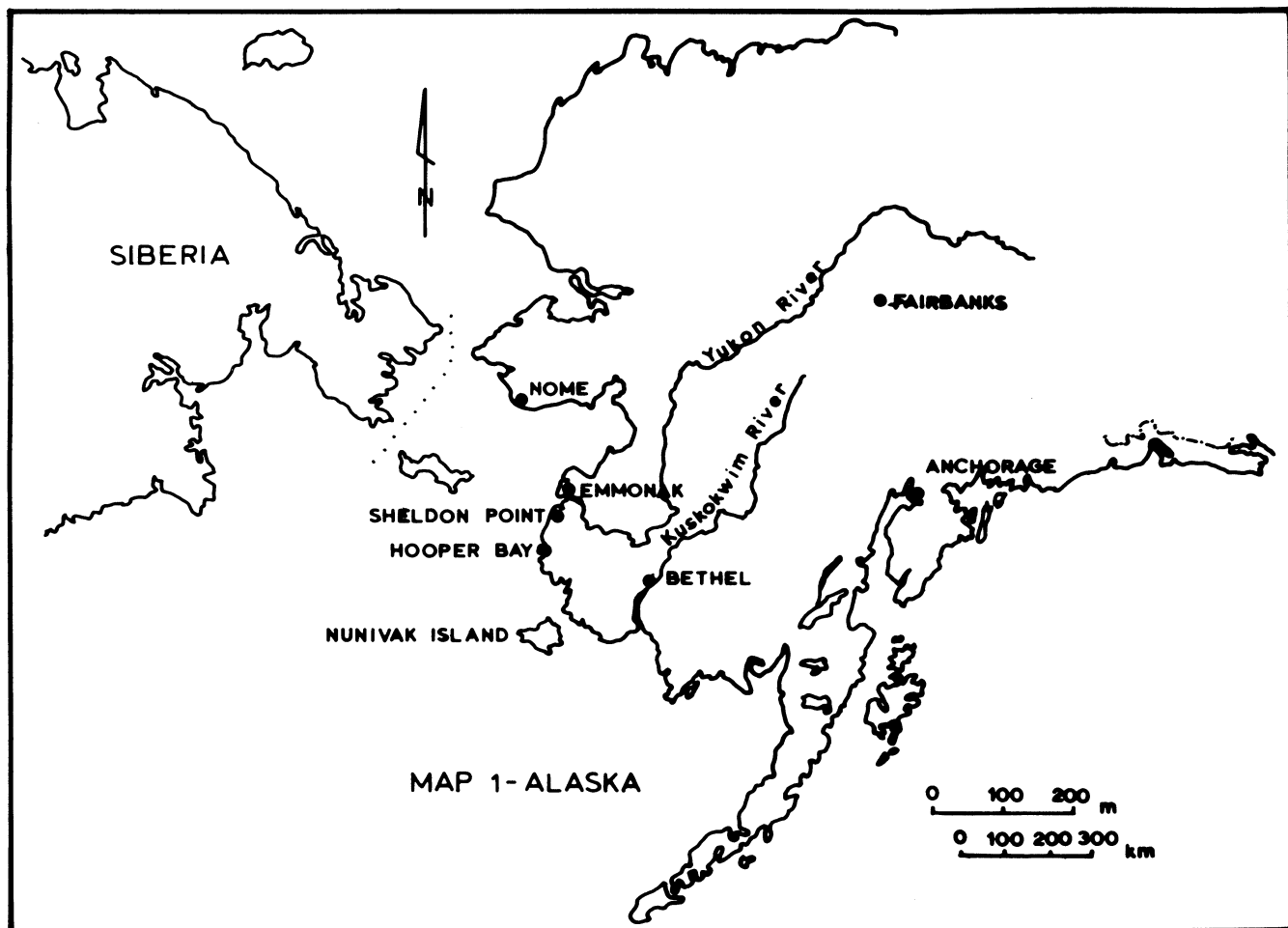
The type of kayak I wanted was, according to the literature, made over the whole Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta area from the mouth of the Yukon River in the north to Cape Newenham in the south. Bristol Bay was said to have had a slightly different type of kayak. Accordingly, I started preparations to go to Alaska in the fall of last year. I chose this time of year because I was told the men were too busy putting away fish in the summer, winter was too cold for some of the outside work that had to be done, and in the spring everyone was busy with seal hunting and with preparing gear and boats for the summer fishing. Fall was all that was left.

My plan was to go to Sheldon Point, a small Yukon community my contact said had kayak builders, and find a man able and willing to construct a kayak. During the building I would completely document the process as well as gather supplementary information on the use of the kayak. When my project was approved I had to plan in detail what equipment and supplies were necessary.

What I consider complete documentation of an artifact includes the following:

1 Written Documentation

1. Complete written log of all work performed giving date, time, persons involved, the tasks they performed and other pertinent data on their background such as how they are



all related, previous experience, type and amount of payments received, if any, etc.

2. Descriptions of all tools used with notes on the names and methods of manufacture of the tools themselves if locally made.

3. Descriptions and drawings of all processes involved such as methods of alignment and measurement. This should include drawings with measurements of all pieces at various steps during the process of manufacture. Finished pieces should be traced full size if possible and also measured in detail before their incorporation into the finished whole.

II Audiovisual Documentation

Black and white and colour still photographs should be taken of each different step in the processes of manufacture including views that show closeups of the artifact, medium shots of craftsmen at work and wider views that include the social context of the work. A log should be kept giving date, time, place, film, camera and names of people involved along with short descriptions of what is taking place.

I use a Nikon F for black and white (usually Kodak Plus-X film) and a Nikkormat EL, which is automatic, for colour (normally Kodachrome 25 slide film). Having two cameras with interchangeable lenses, such as the ones above, helps cut down on the number of lenses and peripheral equipment carried. It is also insurance against being put out of business by having a camera fail halfway through the work. My most-used lens is the 55mm f/3.5 Micro-Nikkor which can focus from infinity down to several inches from an object. Used with my Vivitar 283 electronic flash, which automatically adjusts the light depending on distance, the combination enables me to take 95 percent of all desired shots without lens change or the need for additional paraphernalia.

Everything documented with still photographs should also be filmed with Super-8 or 16mm colour sound film. The difference is that with moving picture film, emphasis is placed on shooting complete processes instead of only slices of them. The different uses of an adze, for example, are best understood by seeing it in use on cine film. Here, even a thousand words would not suffice while ten seconds of film make the whole process clear. This is not the place to go into moviemaking techniques, however, the proper documentation of technological processes requires long takes uninterrupted by camera movement. If processes are repeated in the manufacture of an artifact, as they usually are, they should be filmed two or three times, each time varying the focal length and camera angle.

Some authorities recommend shooting 16mm film and the use of a film crew consisting of soundman, cameraman and a third hand to take still photos and additional notes. In practice, however, this seldom works out. The crew would have to be constantly available, although only working on and off depending on the weather, the informants' work habits, etc. Not only is this time consuming and therefore expensive, but also, a crew usually is in the way in such small houses and causes other logistic problems. Any gain in information may be offset by having that same information changed due to the presence of the crew itself. There are times, however, when I felt that one unassuming assistant would be very useful.

Without a film crew, though, the gear that one needs to shoot sound movies in 16mm is heavy to carry around and costs a small fortune just for excess baggage expenses. The film stock is expensive as is processing and the charge for copies and workprints. Because of this excess bulk, weight and cost, I have switched from 16mm to Super-8. For cameras, I use a Beaulieu 5008S with a Beaulieu 4008ZM2 for backup.

Normally I shoot single-system sound film, that is, the film has a magnetic sound strip already affixed to it and all that is necessary to shoot sound film in perfect synchronization is to plug in a microphone to the camera, point it and the camera at the action and press the buttons. Whenever possible, I shoot from a tripod (the Bolex movie tripod is both sturdy and inexpensive) and use an Electro-Voice DL42 shotgun-type microphone which is very directional and thus able to cut out camera noise. This microphone is a bit large and occasionally, I have no room for it or am unable to film and point it at the action. In this case I use an omni-directional Electro-Voice RE16 microphone.

The film stock includes Kodachrome 40 (KMA 594), used for normal outdoor conditions and indoors when sufficient artificial light is available; Ektachrome 160 (ELA 594) or Ektachrome SM 7244 (SMA 594) for low light conditions, especially indoors with only moderate light available; and Ektachrome EF 7242 (EFB 594) when light is so low that the film must be "pushed" one or two *f* stops. All these films are in sound cartridges that run about two and three-quarter minutes at the recommended speed of 24 frames per second.

When artificial lighting is necessary I use one or two Lowell TOTA-LIGHTS which are highly portable and allow the use of blue gels in front of the light so that one can shoot indoors with natural light coming in the windows and still maintain the proper colour balance. The lights are small and portable and pack in a small briefcase-type container.

While I have mentioned how portable each item is, when you have to carry it all through airports and in a small community, it becomes a burden indeed and often necessitates paying people to provide short-term transportation in boat, snowmobile, car, or small plane.

The above documentation will adequately cover the manufacture of an artifact, but there still remains the coverage of the use of the item within the culture. The same written and audiovisual documentation is desirable and one should be careful to do this under all the varied conditions that may occur. This could mean several field trips of a short duration if the object is used throughout the year for different purposes. It also means that a number of informants should be interviewed both in casual conversation and formally with tape recorded sessions. Informants should be a good sample of both men and women, young and old and different occupational groups to find the different approaches, views and expectations people may have towards the same object or event.

Completeness of still and cine film coverage will include "scene setting" with general views of the area and activities of the inhabitants. The latter should especially include the informants with whom one has worked, along with other members of their families and some of their daily activities.

Having stated my views concerning ideal documentation of an artifact made and used in the field, I'll now describe what happened when I went to Alaska to have a kayak constructed.

I left Ottawa on Friday, October 1, 1976 and arrived in Anchorage, Alaska the next day having stayed overnight in Seattle, Washington. After two days of orienting myself to Alaska and making the rounds of the local museum and native crafts stores, I flew to Bethel, an historic inland Eskimo town on the Kuskokwim River. It is an intermediate-sized community serving as a supply depot and regional center for the smaller coastal communities such as Frobisher Bay is in Baffin Island or Churchill, Manitoba in Western Hudson Bay.

In the small, but very interesting regional museum in

Bethel named Yuktavik, I made a start in examining a kayak and other traditional Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta Eskimo artifacts. My little knowledge of the Canadian Eskimo language was of minor use here as the Eskimos south of Norton Sound in Alaska speak a dialect of Yupik, the other Eskimo language. I had a text on conversational Yupik Eskimo with me and after hiring an informant for a few hours to teach me the basic pronunciation, I was in a position to hear some of the words and be able to write them down when necessary. The percentage of bilingual people in this area is much higher than in Canada and it is not until one talks to people more than sixty years of age that monolingual speakers are found.

After an early morning flight by Twin-Otter on Thursday October 7, I arrived in the small community of Emmonak at the mouth of the Yukon River. It was the last stop for Wien Air's bush flight. From here to Sheldon Point, I had to fly a local semi-scheduled charter line. The scheduled flight was not until the next day, but the pilot was willing to fly me there immediately. We took off in a small single-engine plane with all seven pieces of my luggage and made the trip to Sheldon Point in under fifteen minutes. I was just about to ask the pilot where the landing strip was when he circled the seventeen houses in the community and then headed for some high ground on an island across the channel. We landed on bumpy ground, unloaded my baggage and then waited for someone from the village to motor over in a skiff to pick me up.

Joe, the manager of the local store arrived and took me to his house where I explained what I wanted. I gave him the names of several men I was told could build kayaks including one man to whom I had written, but had received no reply. Joe introduced me to these people, but it was all too quickly and painfully apparent that kayak building was a thing of the past in this community and even the oldest man was not in any position to help me. A desolate feeling came over me when I thought that maybe I had spent all that plane-fare and time to come so many thousands of miles to find it was all for nothing.

My first thought was to get out of there and I tried to contact Bud McConnel, the pilot and co-owner of the charter service in Emmonak. Joe took me to a house where a CB radio was installed. We were able to contact a man in Alakanuk, a small community between Sheldon Point and Emmonak. He promised to relay my message to Bud in Emmonak. Finally it was straightened out and, while it was too dark for Bud to pick me up that night, he promised to come first thing in the morning.

To while away the evening, I went to visit the local schoolteachers, a married couple, and offered to show my film on modern Eskimos of Baffin Island to anyone who was interested. They gathered a small crowd in the school and the day was saved by good conversation with the Eskimos and teachers.

Bud picked me up early in the morning and after stowing all my gear in his plane, we bounced along the rutted ground until finally on one big bounce we failed to touch ground again. We flew south towards Hooper Bay, an old community of around 600 people, where, I was assured by the people in Sheldon Point, kayaks were still used in local subsistence activities. We landed unannounced and I was picked up by a man in an open four-wheeled vehicle. I explained to him that I needed a place to stay and someone with the expertise to build a kayak for me. He knew a man, he said, who could provide me with both these things and so it was that I was introduced to 69 year-old widower Dick Bunyan and his 17 year-old daughter Rosalie.

Dick had two houses joined together with a common connecting inside porch. Both houses consisted of one room with an oil stove for heat and cooking. My house or apartment or whatever, was quite ample with two beds, a table and chairs, large freezer that wasn't functioning, and a fully furnished dry sink. I had to haul or "pack" water in buckets from the common community well about a city block away. Fuel oil also had to be carried from the Native Store and cost one dollar a gallon (the brown well water was free). As there was no fuel gauge, I never knew if I was about to run out until I did, usually in the middle of the night. Sanitary facilities consisted of an enameled chamber pot on the floor behind the stove. For fifty cents a throw, I hired a neighbour boy to empty it out back whenever the odour became unbearable. In a town of crowded living conditions, I was very lucky to have a place completely to myself. I spent the rest of the first day walking around town taking pictures, had supper with my new landlord and then went to the local movie house where for three dollars I saw "Battle for the Planet of the Apes".

The next day, Saturday, October 9, Dick started working on the kayak. He selected a large stump from a pile he had gathered in back of his house and, using an axe and wooden wedges, split it into pieces that would be suitable for the curved deck beams of the kayak. He explained that maximum strength was obtained by having wood with a grain that was already curved the way the finished piece would be. I set up the tripod and started to film the work in progress. In addition I took colour and black and white stills and started a notebook with descriptions of what Dick was doing. I had started a daily journal when I left Ottawa in which I noted in general my activities each day and anything else of interest. The journal was in a bound notebook measuring four by six and three-quarter inches. As this was a handy size to carry with me in my pocket, I also used it for my cine film log and for other specialized uses such as kayak terminology (in Eskimo) and a running inventory of all the kayaks in town. Later, each day or every few days, I transferred the data from this small notebook to a three-ring binder on graph paper ruled in millimeters. The graph paper was helpful in keeping neat notes and in making small drawings of knots and ties and parts of kayaks, sleds, etc.

After I had seen, filmed and described the splitting and shaping of a few deck beams, I left Dick to continue with the rest. Meanwhile I worked on my kayak inventory, talked to other informants, collected artifacts for the museum and made plans to go out with neighbour Aloysius Hale who would be using both his homebuilt skiff and kayak for fishing with a gill net in the bay shallows during flood tide.

Aloysius was in his mid-fifties and used a kayak made by his father. He knew how to repair and re-canvas a kayak, but had never made one himself. This was the case with most men in his age bracket and below. Dick Bunyan, by contrast, had a string of at least twenty kayaks to his lifetime building record and was considered somewhat of a specialist in this regard. On my first, and all subsequent trips with Aloysius, I filmed him at work using his kayak and going about his activities. Often we were alone and I was expected to help with the work as well as carry out my own duties. Under these conditions, it was very difficult to keep film and cameras clean and dry and notes legible. As Dick worked on the kayak seven days a week and often up to midnight and even later, I was constantly on the move to keep pace with my documentation.

My only respite was once or twice a week when Dick went to play bingo. I know I missed filming some of the construction because I was either too tired or was busy writing

up the previous day's activities or interviewing different informants or looking at the numerous grass baskets and other artifacts brought in a steady stream to my door for sale. For diversions, I went to the local movies and occasionally visited with the teachers. At this time there was no television and the town's only phone had been disconnected by the phone company because the town was delinquent in paying the bill. Also there was a mail strike in Canada and thus neither my family nor the museum knew where I was. They had all expected me to be in Sheldon Point. Finally, I wrote to a friend in the U.S. and asked him to call my family and assure them I was alright.

While I had allotted one month for the construction of the kayak, I had not reckoned with the purism and patient craftsmanship of Dick Bunyan. He only knew one way to make a kayak and that was the right way — no slipshod work was tolerated by him and I felt lucky to have hired him as the kayak builder. During this time, I bought an older used kayak that was past its prime and almost unsalvageable, yet it provided a record of the final development of kayaks where nails were used to join ribs to stringers and bailing wire and even insulated house wiring was used to make repairs. By the last part of October, freezeup was upon us and the last barge had long departed for warmer regions. As there are no roads to or from Hooper Bay, the only means of transportation left was by air. The normal daily scheduled plane was a Twin-Otter with large double side-loading doors. I found out from the pilot what the maximum size crate was that could be loaded into the plane and designed one accordingly. It was just long enough to hold the fifteen foot kayaks (I would have two with the new frame and the old hulk) and would have extra space inside to store a small kayak sled, a paddle and some other long artifacts I had purchased. The crate was made from two-by-fours and ripped sixteen foot one-by-eights. All four rectangular sides had double diagonal bracing. The ends were solid plywood pieces and the sides were left open to cut down on the weight. Just after I started to make the crate the weather turned bad and I continually lost nails and boards in snowstorms. The work progressed, however, and I soon had the old kayak secured and all in readiness for the frame.

Meanwhile, Dick was working on the kayak inside his house. Normally this would not present any problem except that all his lights were fluorescent and he seemed to work best with as few on as possible. Even by pushing the movie film I couldn't obtain enough light. On this first trip to Hooper Bay I did not have any artificial lighting with me, but had to do something. In the Native Store I purchased a mechanic's drop light and put a 200 watt incandescent bulb in it. This gave me an additional problem in that if I set my camera for incandescent light, then the fluorescent lights would turn the film blue. If I shot at the daylight setting, the film would look a little "warm" or orange because of the incandescent light. I chose the latter fortunately and the film does not look too bad. Holding the drop light in one hand and operating the camera focus, zoom and on/off switch in the other presented quite another problem. Dick also found the drop light hard on his eyes as it would blind him. He became irritated.

Fortunately at this time Dick had one and sometimes two men helping him and he became more of a supervisor as

the skill needed in the work decreased. All parts were almost complete before any actual assembly of the frame began. Once the gunwales were finished, the assembly took only three days. When the frame was finally complete, a window had to be removed from my room to let the kayak out. It just fit.

I crated the frame the same day and with the help of Aloysius and his sled and snowmobile, we hauled the thing to the airstrip. For ease in handling and as an extra strength feature I nailed two-by-fours lengthwise on the bottom of the crate. I checked with the pilot and baggage handler that day and found that the crate would not fit in the Twin-Otter anymore. I cleaned up my room, paid my bills, said my goodbyes and left the next day. I arrived in Bethel to find that the electricity was out and I could not get a meal anywhere. I did get a plane a few hours later for Anchorage and was asleep in a hotel room by midnight.

My problem then, of course, was to arrange for transportation for the kayak crate from Hooper Bay to Ottawa. I phoned Wien Air Alaska and asked that they arrange a way-bill to charter the crate from Hooper Bay to Bethel, then travel on their aircraft to Anchorage and Seattle and then on Eastern Air Lines to Vancouver where the crate could be transferred to the Canadian National Railways. I also made arrangements with a customs broker in Anchorage to fill out the necessary papers to allow the crate to go to Ottawa in bond and then be cleared by the museum's customs broker here. All this was to be done collect as I was fresh out of money and had to travel the last couple of days on credit cards. I was amazed. Everyone agreed and it all actually worked the way it was planned. The kayaks arrived at the museum in January and although there was some damage to the crate, the kayaks came through it all unscathed.

Post field work that has been a direct result of the Hooper Bay study includes scale drawings of the kayak and full-size drawings of each part. From these plans I have constructed and tested a full-size reproduction of Dick Bunyan's kayak and will teach a course in Hooper Bay kayak building in the extension division of a local technical college. From this, I hope to perfect plans and instructions and publish a popular booklet on how to build this kayak. More detailed technical papers should also result from this study. Finally, the kayak frame will eventually go on exhibit in some form supported by the films, still photos and published materials.■

EDITOR'S NOTE

Dr. Zimmerly obtained his doctorate in Anthropology at the University of Colorado and was appointed Arctic Ethnologist at the National Museum of Man in 1971. Besides his current long-term study of kayaks, he has also been involved in ethnographic film-making, collecting Eskimo life histories and music, and studying the Canadian Eskimo language and modern techniques of hunting and fishing.