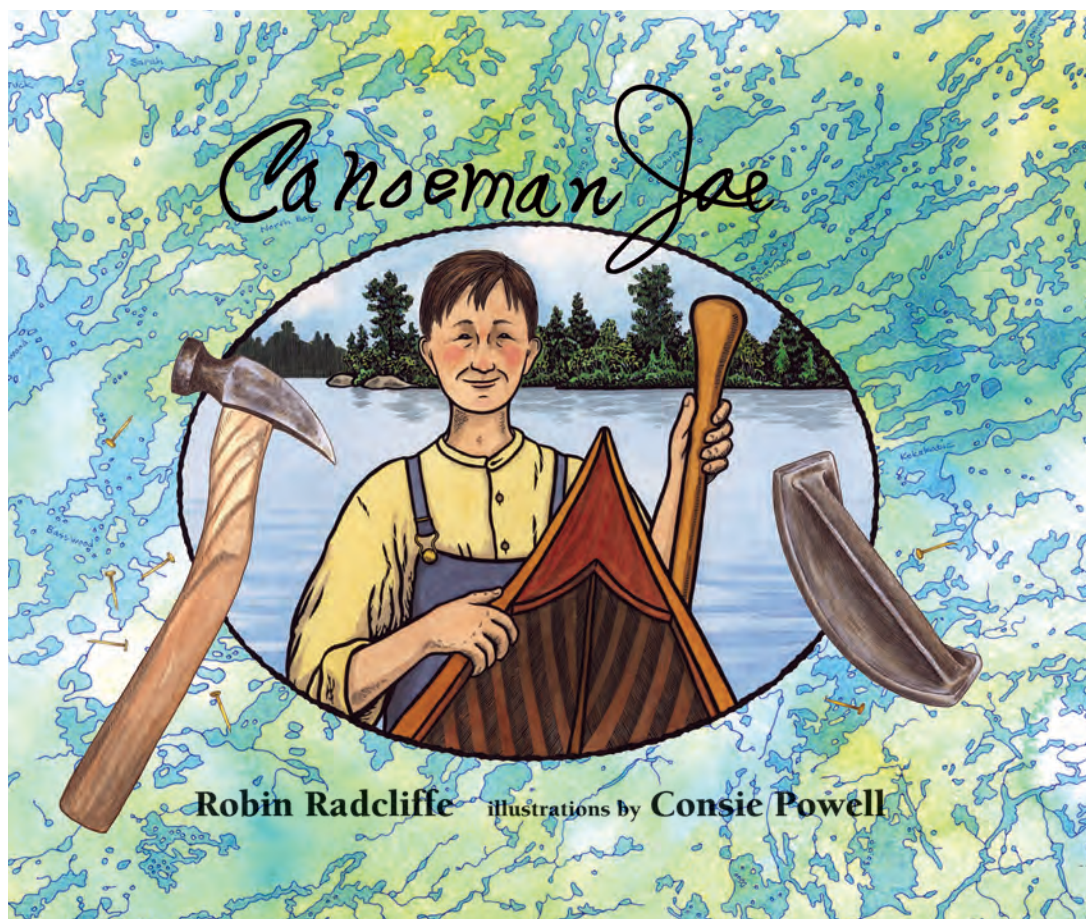




A Place on Joe's List

*Editor's note: Robin Radcliffe wrote and Consie Powell illustrated a children's book, **Canoeman Joe**, coming out in August about Joe Seliga, the master wood-and-canvas canoe maker from Ely, Minnesota. To mark the publication of the book by Green Writers Press, Robin tell us the story of how he became interested in Joe and his skills.*

by Robin Radcliffe

Joe Seliga was known for his can-do attitude, quick wit and gentle smile. His smile lingered most in my memory after I finally met Joe inside the storefront of Piragis Northwoods Company in Ely, Minnesota.

For me, as for many young canoe explorers who revered the Quetico-Lake Superior country, Joe was an icon. The day I met him, I determined

to write about him. It took a decade, but I did, opening *Canoeman Joe*, my just published book for young readers, with just a hint:

"In a land of water and stone, where rugged miners in candlestick hats filled railcars with Minnesota ore, there lived a boy who loved canoes and wood more than trains and steel."

Joe's life story is a juxtaposition, much like the water and stone of his beloved border country. Without a manual, a teacher, or a boat-building school, Joe taught himself how to make wood and canvas canoes, all while working as a jack of all trades to support his growing family. He was both a miner and an outdoorsman, long before the town sought to find a balance between resource extraction and recreation. The wild places around Ely could be a hostile environment for one ill prepared to

venture there, or it could be a place holding immeasurable beauty and untold secrets for the intrepid traveler.

If you are a Minnesotan with a love of water and canoes, you may already know of Joe Seliga. Over a span of 67 years, Joe made a remarkable 618 canoes, pausing only briefly during World War II. And a Seliga wood-and-canvas canoe was hard to get. Joe liked to say he never "sold" a canoe; he only made them in one quality: the best. If you were lucky enough to land a spot on Joe's famous list – the one where he recorded all new canoe orders – you could expect the finest handmade canoe money could buy. And you had to pick the canoe up in person in Ely. Joe would meet you with a firm handshake and his trademark smile.

The first time I called Joe, he told me he had more canoe orders than he

thought he could fill in a lifetime. He was 89 years old. Then he asked me if I wanted a keel and if I had a favorite color. For many years I thought I had never made it onto Joe's list. I had been told that in his later years, Joe did not always write a name down since he knew he would not get to all of the people on his list. That did not sound like Joe. No matter; I would find my own Seliga canoe. I searched the marketplace ads in every issue of *Wooden Canoe Journal* for the regal Seliga, but it rarely came up. People held onto their Seligas.

I was in college when I found my canoe. A Camp Widjiwagan guide decided to part with his Seliga to make room for a solo Bourquin boat. By that time, I had built two wooden canoes of my own, but I had to have a Seliga.

I remember the day in 2005 when I called Joe's house, the fifth time in as many weeks, to make some final arrangements for a visit. It had been five years since we met at Piragis Store, and Joe wanted me to stop by his shop with my first Seliga canoe, blue No. 390. I would ask him then if I ever made it onto his list. It was mid-December and Joe's daughter answered the phone.

"Can I speak to Joe?" I asked.

"I am so sorry," JoAnn said, "but Joe passed away this morning."

It felt like I'd lost a friend. Why is



it that this quiet and gentle man who made beautiful canoes had such an influence on me?

Canoes and making things from wood have been a part of me since I was very small. My first memory of being in a canoe must have been in Quetico Provincial Park. At that time, airplanes were still allowed on a few of the larger bodies of water and all of us – mom, dad, big sister, older brother and twin brother – flew into Quetico Lake to camp and fish. I remember shore lunches by the canoe and portages over twisted pine roots and glaciated rocks. I loved those portages because they offered a break from the endless rhythm of paddling. Rollicking twin brothers ran over hard ground, climbed trees and boulders and searched for birds and insects. Sloping granite rocks made perfect tables to snack in the sun and the moss spots beneath towering white pines seemed to grow there for the sole purpose of pitching a tent.

Gangling teenagers went off to college, but the lure of exploration lurked beneath the pages of school notebooks. Canoe treks followed to wild northern rivers; the Wabenaki in Ontario, the Noatak in Alaska and the Horton in the Northwest Territories. Canoes brought adventure. I remember the rainbow dappled skies above endless expanses of Alaskan tundra and the Horton's peculiar martian landscape where sulfur gases rise from smoking hills. Sigurd Olson's words came to mind on these journeys, "He who is part of a canoe, is part of all that canoes have ever known."

After travels to faraway places, I found myself returning again and again to the border country of Minnesota, Wisconsin and Ontario – that land of water and stone where my love of canoes began. The more I paddled my Seliga, the more I felt connected to this place. The hardness of granite contrasted with the forgiveness of cedar, and only water kept the two from meeting. I was at home embraced within the wooden shell of a Seliga. Joe's treasured canoe and his determined spirit instilled a tradition of self-reliance in me and a whole generation of campers across the lake country of northern Minnesota. I saw Joe as a trusted artisan, but he was much more than that.

One could learn a lot from Joe in



ROBIN RADCLIFFE COLLECTION

The author paddles through Quetico Provincial Park on the Canadian boundary waters in his Seliga Canoe No. 390. The other illustrations within this story are by Consie Powell from a new children's book, *Canoeman Joe*.

Next, Joe pounded tacks while Nora stooped over the canoe to hold the clinching iron up against each new rib. Every time Joe hammered a brass tack through the hull, Nora's heavy iron bent it back over into the soft cedar, clinching it in place.

Afterwards, Joe and Nora admired the orderly dimples.



The canvas shell flummoxed Joe. He needed to wrap a flat piece of cloth around the curving shape of the hull without any wrinkles. After much deliberating, he rigged a contraption, and with Nora's help, pulled a canvas sheet tight over the boat's bottom. Joe nailed the canvas to the end of each rib and to wooden stems at the bow and stern before smoothing thick filler into the

canvas and leaving it to cure. Three weeks later, Joe painted the hull. The canoe gleamed.

Nora was the canoe inspector. "Your paint is perfect," Nora announced. "But we need a smoother finish."

Joe sanded the hull and brushed on five more coats of varnish until Nora smiled.



more ways than wood and canvas. Ely's past is steeped in a rich history of iron mining, and of mining families living from the land. And a present that values the land for its recreation, adventure and natural beauty. Joe lived them both. Joe's model of respect and integrity for a wooden canoe was something I wanted to share through my book: if you take care of it, it will take care of you. And Joe knew that the same could be said of the earth, a good friend, and a lot of other things.

My book about Joe was in its final pre-publication round of editing when I called Joe's daughter JoAnn again. We talked several more times before any mention of Joe's list came up. Then one late October day, I told her I'd ordered a canoe from Joe years before, but must not have made it onto his list.

"That's not like Dad!" she said.

JoAnn paused and said she would go have a look. I wondered: Did she have Joe's original list?

Minutes passed before JoAnn returned, an excited tone in her voice.

"I found your name on dad's list!" she cheered, and then read Joe's words aloud to me: "Robin called, said he put his name on list 2 years ago."

JoAnn raced off again, leaving me to ponder. And then she was back.

"You are on Joe's list ... twice!"

I grinned a grin as big as Joe once did.

