

# THE LOST HISTORY OF THE PAUL BUNYAN CANOE DERBY

Frank Bures

## THE RESCUE: 1949

On Saturday morning, July 16, 1949, 18-year-old Billy Smith Jr. and his partner Bob Bergstrom, a speed skater in his early thirties, got in their canoe and started paddling across Lake Winnibigoshish, a reservoir on the Mississippi River in north-

central Minnesota. At nearly 20 miles across, it's one of the most dangerous stretches of the upper Mississippi.<sup>1</sup>

The two were racing in the 450-mile Paul Bunyan Aquatennial Canoe Derby from Bemidji to Minneapolis. Of the 49 teams that had started on

Lake Bemidji on Friday, only 34 would remain by Saturday night.<sup>2</sup>

When Smith and Bergstrom started across, the lake was calm.

"Once we got out on the water, the wind picked up and it got pretty wavy," says Smith, now 93, at his small



home in Shorewood, Minnesota. Water washed over their gunnels. The boat began to fill.

"Before the race started," Smith says, "I noticed the experienced paddlers had coffee cans in their boats. I thought they were for peeing, but I found out the hard way it was for bailing. So we just slowly sank."

The two were in the water, hanging onto the swamped canoe when a small motorboat came skimming across the lake. Piloting it was Jesse Tibbetts, a 56-year-old Ojibwe former canoe racer from Ball Club, Minnesota, a small town on the Mississippi that, like Lake Winnibigoshish, sits within the Leech Lake Reservation.<sup>3</sup>

"He came bouncing on top of these waves. Then he came over, picked up our canoe, and dumped out the water. We said, 'Thank you,' and we took off. He saved the day for us."

That was the second time in two days that Smith and Bergstrom had been saved by Ojibwe paddlers. The day before, after the race had started on Lake Bemidji, they got stranded in the middle.

"I was so excited," Smith says, "that I broke two paddles on Lake Bemidji. And I was sitting there with my partner Bob."

Then along came two other racers, brothers Jim and Bernie Smith, also Native American paddlers (no relation to Billy Smith), also from Ball Club, Minnesota. This was their fourth derby, and they had placed in the top five in every race so far. They pulled up next to Billy Smith Jr. and threw him a paddle. "Here, use this," they said.

At the end of the day, they were waiting for him. They told him to

keep the paddle. "That's when I decided: These guys are my friends," says Smith.

The 1949 derby would not be a great year for Jim and Bernie, who dropped out at Aitkin, less than half-way through. But Billy Smith and Bob Bergstrom would go on to finish fourth overall, winning \$750 (nearly \$10,000 in 2024 dollars), enough for Billy to pay for a year of college at the University of Minnesota.<sup>4</sup>

## RACING THROUGH HISTORY

North America has a history of at least 4,500 years of Native American communities plying waterways in the Upper Midwest via canoe. Yet documentation of early canoe racing in Minnesota is hard to come by. Calls to tribes and historians around the state yielded just two photographs from June 1910 labeled "Indian canoe race, White Earth, Minn."

More evidence of early racing documents people of white European descent participating in the sport. In the summer of 1912, various competitions on the Chain of Lakes in Minneapolis included a series of "war canoe" races, with 12 paddlers to a canoe. In September 1913, the Minnesota River Canoe Club held a 25-mile canoe marathon from Savage to Fort Snelling on the Minnesota River. Paddlers left at 2:30 Sunday afternoon.

The *Minneapolis Morning Tribune* went on to report, "At what time they will arrive, or to be more exact, just who will arrive, remains to be seen."<sup>5</sup>

## THE MISSISSIPPI MARATHON: 1919

The first recorded long-distance canoe race in Minnesota took place on July 3, 1919. Paddlers in the Mississippi Marathon went from Minneapolis downstream 133 miles to Winona. It was the brainchild of W. A. Frisbie, editor of the *Minneapolis Daily News* and author of popular children's books like *Mother Goose ABC* and *The Pirate Frog and Other Tales*. The *Winona Republican Herald* reported, "Contestants may make a continuous run of it or may camp along shore as they see fit."<sup>6</sup>

The race started at 11:45 a.m. just below the new Ford Dam (there were no other dams between Minneapolis and Winona). All the canoes carried food and water bottles. The paddlers were hit by a storm on Lake Pepin, but most just paddled through it. One team capsized twice on the lake but still managed to finish. Another canoe got lost in the backwaters near Wabasha. Of the 36 teams that started, only 22 finished. The winners, Louis Loughway and Art Hughley, of Wabasha, paddled a 17-foot Old Town. They arrived in Winona at 7:55 a.m. on July 4.

Despite limited success unearthing evidence of past Native canoe racing in Minnesota, the author learned such races almost certainly took place. According to Wayne Valliere of the Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa in Wisconsin, one of just six remaining master canoe builders in the Midwest, his band has records of canoe races dating back to the early 1900s and continuing through to today. These races typically were sprints in the one-mile range, but could span the length of Lac du Flambeau, up to 25 miles. And he thinks likely most Ojibwe communities had races. "Anishinaabe are a very competitive people," Valliere says. "We had lacrosse. We had the snow snake game. And canoes were a huge part of our culture. They carried everything. So you can bet that if we had them, we raced them."

FACING: Four-time derby winner Tom Estes and his brother, Phil Estes, paddle canoe number 13 in the 1951 Paul Bunyan Canoe Derby. Also pictured are Richard and Donald Meyer of Wayzata in canoe number 1, and Dick Butler and George Messing in canoe number 15. (MNHS COLLECTIONS)



An early Ojibwe canoe race in White Earth, Minnesota, 1910

## THE DIAMOND JUBILEE CANOE MARATHON: 1928

In 1928, W. A. Frisbie was in charge of another race. As chairman of the Diamond Jubilee Committee, he oversaw plans to celebrate 75 years since the naming of Minneapolis. Among the festivities was a canoe race from the beginning of the Mississippi in northwestern Minnesota to Minneapolis, sponsored and run by the Elks Club.<sup>7</sup>

The race started at Elk Lake, which feeds into Lake Itasca—the Mississippi’s source. Excitement was high, and not just among paddlers of European descent. But the news coverage, while often surprisingly matter-of-fact, occasionally patronized Native racers and trafficked in stereotypes: “Indians and halfbreeds with their birch bark canoes will compete with their white brothers from all over the state in a test of ability and stamina.”<sup>8</sup>

The race was a rich affair: “Cash prizes totaling \$1,000 have been hung up for the winners, with medals and merchandise prizes also to be awarded to the competitors.” First place would receive two diamond-studded medals and \$500 (a little over \$8,900 in 2024 dollars). Second place got two gold medals and \$200. And third place would receive two silver medals and \$150. Fourth place would get \$100.<sup>9</sup>

On Sunday morning, May 13, 19 teams showed up at Elk Lake for the start. Sixteen others were unable to make it because of forest fires. Two Ojibwe teams came with birchbark canoes, but “the committee decided that their birch bark canoes were not strong enough for the trip. Chief Green Hill of Cass Lake, Chippewa tribes offered to get other canoes if the start of the derby could be postponed one day. Because of pre-arranged plans, however, the commit-

tee could not consent to this request, and the four Indians dropped out.”<sup>10</sup>

At 10 a.m., 14 teams set out, two at a time. A few tipped in the rapids. John Wilson and Joe Morgan, Ojibwe paddlers from Ball Club, were in the lead until they punctured their canoe running a rapids. They kept going and finished fifth for the day.<sup>11</sup>

On day two, another team of Native paddlers from Ball Club pulled ahead: Ben Tibbetts and Bill Reynolds. Once they did, they never looked back. When they came into Minneapolis, the *Sunday Tribune* captured the scene: “Around the bend in the river two dots swept into view, and the sun flashed on dripping water. They grew larger, took on shape, and were canoes. Just behind them came two, three, then half a dozen other dots that became canoes.”<sup>12</sup>

Ben Tibbetts and Bill Reynolds won the race, with Ben’s brothers

# Canoe Marathon Finish and Derby Winners



Minneapolis saw the finish of its first canoe derby Saturday, and 22 tired young men, who have been paddling 800 miles in two weeks, welcomed it. At the top, left, are Ben Tibbetts and Bill Reynolds, Chippewa Indians who won the derby. They are being greeted by Mayor Leach. At the right are Gussie Gustafson and Al Hendrickson of St. Cloud, who led the derbyists into Minneapolis, winning the final lap.

*Pioneer Days Recalled by 1860*

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LEFT PHOTO: Ben Tibbetts and Bill Reynolds, winners of the 1928 Diamond Jubilee Canoe Marathon;  
RIGHT PHOTO: Al Hendrickson and Gussie Gustafson, fourth-place finishers and winners of the final lap

Tom and James Tibbetts taking second. On the following Wednesday, the two pairs had a two-mile sprint race, from the Plymouth Avenue Bridge to the Third Avenue Bridge in Minneapolis. More than 5,000 people turned out to watch the runoff. Tom and Jim trailed by as much as two canoe lengths, but in the end, they won by 16 inches in the “thrilling two-mile race.” It was calculated that they covered the distance at a speed of nearly 15 miles per hour.<sup>13</sup>

## THE DAWN OF THE DERBY: 1940

In 1939, Minneapolis city leaders started planning a celebration—the Aquatennial—for the following year. They wanted it to show off what the city, and the state, had to offer. The kickoff event would be the Paul Bunyan Canoe Derby, a race down the Mississippi River from Bemidji to

Minneapolis. It was modeled on the 1928 Diamond Jubilee race. It would take eight days. After each lap, or segment, paddlers would stay overnight, then start again in the morning.<sup>14</sup>

Six veterans of the 1928 race signed up, including 60-year-old Ben Tibbetts, who decided to “come out of retirement” and race with his younger brother Jesse Tibbetts, age 47. Five other Tibbettses entered the race as well. The Tibbetts family name would be stamped on almost every derby held.<sup>15</sup>

On Saturday July 13, 1940, at 7:30 a.m., 28 teams gathered at the edge of Lake Bemidji. They were sent off at one-minute intervals to avoid a jam at the narrow outlet. By the time they got to Grand Rapids on day two, four of the top seven teams were Ojibwe. Bud and Harry Tibbetts had moved into third, while Ed and Ace Eliason (a former St. Olaf heavyweight boxing



A map of the Paul Bunyan Canoe Derby route, from Bemidji to Minneapolis, from the Minneapolis Sunday Tribune, July 12, 1959

champion) had moved into first place. Only 12 minutes separated the first three teams.<sup>16</sup>

The river was low. The wind was fierce. George Faust, former Gopher football quarterback, dropped out. He said it was “the hardest grind of any sport I know.”

The racers arrived in Minneapolis on Saturday. Below the falls, the teams lined up for the final sprint, with 100,000 people watching. Harry and Bud Tibbetts battled Ace and Ed Eliason for victory. They won the sprint and took second place overall. The Eliasons won the derby. Ben and Jesse Tibbetts finished seventh. The *Minneapolis Star Journal* reported that “The Aquatennial canoe derby is due to become a national classic.”<sup>17</sup>

### THE WAR YEARS: 1941–1946

In 1941, another successful Paul Bunyan Canoe Derby was held, though it was marred by some controversy over what qualified as a canoe. Two racers from Chicago entered with a plywood “racing shell.” These “city slickers” took the lead on day one and held it all the way. When they arrived in Minneapolis, again 100,000 people lined the river to watch.<sup>18</sup>

A Canadian team finished second. Walter and Orbid Heineman, brothers from Aitkin and Crosby, finished third. Harry and Bud Tibbetts finished sixth. Jesse and his brother Jim Tibbetts were ninth.<sup>19</sup>

By 1942, most people’s minds were overseas with the troops fighting World War II. There wasn’t as much

news about the Paul Bunyan Canoe Derby in the papers. Yet the race went ahead. Eighteen teams registered, but only nine set off from Bemidji. These included the Heinemans, Jesse Tibbetts and Jim Tibbetts, and Bill Evers of St. Paul, who was not Ojibwe but who had married Jesse Tibbetts’s daughter Wanda. Evers had never been in a canoe before the start of the race.<sup>20</sup>

The Heinemans won in 62 hours, 54 minutes, and 14 seconds. Jesse and LeRoy Goodin finished second, while Karl Ketter and Earl Couture were third, two hours behind the Heinemans. Next were the Tibbettses.<sup>21</sup>

“Those grand Indian veterans, Jess and Jim Tibbetts of Deer River and Ball Club, surprised everyone by



1940 Derby winners Ace and Ed Eliason, of Grand Marais, against Harry and Bud Tibbetts in the final sprint into Minneapolis

## In 1944 and 1945, the war had an even bigger impact on the derby. It was just four miles on Lake Calhoun (Bde Maka Ska) and limited to under-17-year-olds.

finishing fourth. It was not figured that the two old warriors could hold a pace for nine days to remain up with the leaders," said the paper.<sup>22</sup>

In 1943, the canoe derby was shortened to a four-lap, 45-mile course on the Chain of Lakes in Minneapolis. Wrestling legend Verne Gagne entered with Wayne Carlson, but the team didn't finish. Walter Heineman won the race with a new partner. They received \$150 in war bonds.<sup>23</sup>

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By 1946, the war was over, and the Paul Bunyan Canoe Derby was back. Warner Brothers came to film the event for its *Sports Shorts*, with 3,200 feet of Technicolor film. The total purse was \$2,000. Jim and Bernie Smith, a new team of Ojibwe brothers from Ball Club, entered, as did Tom and Bill Tibbetts. Bud (Marvin) and Bob Tibbetts, just out of the navy, would be paddling the same canoe that Ben Tibbetts and Bill Reynolds raced in 1928.<sup>25</sup>

Walter and Orbid Heineman, the 1942 champions, were the favorites, while Jesse Tibbetts had moved into the role of coach and mentor. He was dubbed "the Dean of the Derby."<sup>26</sup>

On Wednesday, July 10 at 9 a.m., 2,000 people turned out for the start. The sky was clear, but a "brisk" wind blew from the west. The water was so rough that five teams capsized on their way across Lakes Bemidji and Cass.<sup>27</sup>

The Heinemans began out front, but Bob and Bud Tibbetts gave chase, passing canoe after canoe on the rough waters to take first place for the day. The second day, the Heinemans moved back into first and stayed there for the \$500 first prize (about \$7,800 today).<sup>28</sup>

Bob and Bud Tibbetts held onto second for \$300, and a Mankato team, longtime racer Harvey Anderson, 53 (a 1928 race veteran), and his partner, Augie Schueneman, 38, got \$200 for third. Jim and Bernie Smith, in fourth, won \$100, while Ray Tibbetts and Bill Evers received \$80 for fifth place.<sup>29</sup>

### THE DEAN RULES THE DERBY: 1947

On May 25, an article appeared with the headline: "One-time Wrestler, Son in Canoe Derby." It was about Billy Smith Sr., a former professional wrestler, and his son, Billy Smith Jr., who were planning to race in the 1947 Paul Bunyan Aquatennial Canoe Derby. They had been training on the 15-mile stretch of the Mississippi between the Camden Bridge in Minneapolis and Anoka to the northwest. Billy Smith Jr. weighed 138 pounds. There was a photo of him feeling his father's muscular arm.<sup>30</sup>

"The first race was my dad's idea," says Smith, now 93. "He was strictly out for self-promotion. I had just turned 16, so I just went along for the ride."<sup>31</sup>

The Ojibwe communities fielded at least six teams. "This looms as a big year for the paddling Chippewas in the Paul Bunyan canoe race," wrote

outdoors reporter Ed Shave. "At least, that's the surging hope and ambition of genial Jess Tibbetts, who has been identified with all the Aquatennial canoe classics, first as a competitor and later as a coach of the colorful Indian duets. Last year Indian teams placed second, fourth and fifth."<sup>32</sup>

Now, Tibbetts's son Ray and son-in-law Bill Evers (who was not Ojibwe) were racing together. Ray had been in a car accident that "severely lacerated his wrist, the tendons being severed." They couldn't start training until two weeks before the race.<sup>33</sup>

The Heineman brothers, two-time derby champions; Karl Ketter and Buzzy Peterson; and Jim and Bernie Smith were all back. "The Smith brothers," wrote Ed Shave, "appear in much better condition and will be stroking a vastly improved canoe."<sup>34</sup>

At 9 a.m. on Wednesday July 9, the 64 paddlers gathered at Lake Bemidji. Governor Luther Youngdahl fired the starting gun, and the teams set off in pairs at one-minute intervals.<sup>35</sup>

As the race progressed, the Heinemans didn't have it easy: Ray Tibbetts and Bill Evers finished one minute and 25 seconds ahead on the first lap. The next day, Walter Heineman "succumbed to cramps" and "was near collapse" on their way across the lake. They packed up and headed home.<sup>36</sup>

Now in front, Evers and Tibbetts fended off Ketter and Peterson. At Palisade, Tibbetts was rushed to the hospital because his hand was infected from blisters. The next day, he was back.<sup>37</sup>

The ranks thinned, but Billy Smith Jr. and his dad hung onto thirteenth

place. "If you're a slow team," says Smith in 2023, "every day you got to see the fast guys go by, which is a good time to learn what really good canoers are. At that time those were the Indians from up around Ball Club, Minnesota. When the Indians went by, they actually glided by rather than bounced by."<sup>38</sup>

As the racers came into Minneapolis, an estimated 10,000 people gathered to watch. Jim and Bernie Smith were the first to arrive. Evers and Tibbetts won the final sprint and the whole derby. They got \$500 (about \$7,000 today) and finished just 13 minutes ahead of Ketter and Peterson. Of the top 10 teams in the 1947 derby, five were coached by Jesse Tibbetts.<sup>39</sup>

### DANCING ON THE WAVES: 1948

In 1948, Billy Smith Jr. decided not to race. Instead, he drove for two paddlers he knew from north Minneapolis: Eugene Jensen and Tom Estes, who were 19 and 21 years old. They were part of the same group that trained on the Mississippi River above St. Anthony Falls. Jensen was a laborer. Estes was an assembly worker. The derby was always a mostly blue-collar affair.<sup>40</sup>

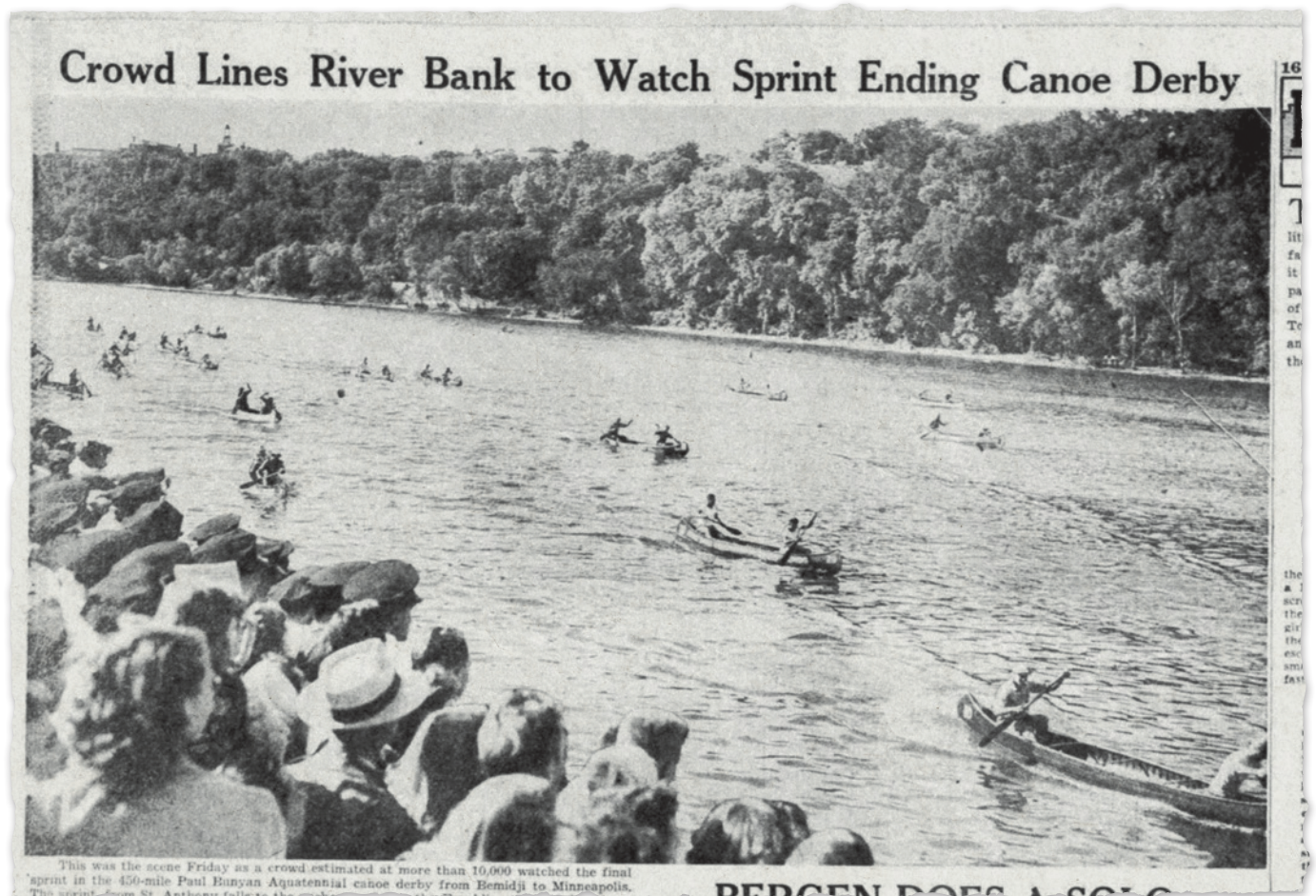
By the time the race started, 30 teams had registered. "There are more well-conditioned duos in the race than ever before," reported Ed Shave. "Many of the teams have been in hard training for several weeks." There were several Tibbetts in the 1948 race, including Jesse's brother

Jim, at 56. Jim and Bernie Smith were back.<sup>41</sup>

The overall purse was \$2,800, with \$1,000 for first place (just over \$12,700 today), \$500 for second, \$300 for third, and so on. There were also prizes—mostly Scott-Atwater outboard motors—for winning the daily laps.<sup>42</sup>

On the first day, Ray Tibbetts and Bill Evers were in the lead again, but just as they came into Wolf Lake, a rock in the rapids ripped four feet of canvas off their canoe. It was impossible to repair. "Both were extremely despondent," journalist Jack Connor reported.<sup>43</sup>

To everyone's surprise, these unknown kids from north Minneapolis moved into first place and never



Entrants in the 1947 derby race in the final one-mile sprint in Minneapolis, from St. Anthony Falls to the Franklin Avenue Bridge

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looked back. “Furious paddling allowed Eugene Jensen and Tom Estes of Minneapolis to jump from third to first place.” They paddled a Peterborough canoe. Billy Smith Jr., as their driver, stopped at bridges to lower water and food on a rope and met them at the end of the lap.<sup>44</sup>

Every day, Billy Smith Jr. watched the paddlers go by. One canoe caught his eye: Jim and Bernie Smith’s. “I noticed how Jim and Bernie Smith were literally dancing on the waves,” he says, “like a surfer going on top of the water. They paddled with quick strokes. It was just poetry in motion to watch that boat go.” Like many of the Ojibwe paddlers, Jim and Bernie had built their own canoe. “They said they could go into the woods and come out seven days later with a canoe,” says Billy Smith. “So, I saw

their canoe and I admired it very much. It really had some beautiful lines to it. It was a design with a low bow, and once you got up to a certain speed it could ride that speed without rocking, if you were a smooth paddler. It was strictly me falling in love with that canoe.”<sup>45</sup>

Estes and Jensen won the race that year and the \$1,000 prize. Jim and Bernie Smith, ages 49 and 46, took home \$150 for fourth place. After the race, 17-year-old Billy Smith approached Jim and Bernie about their boat. “When we got to Minneapolis,” Smith says, “I had them drop over to the house. I said ‘Bring the canoe. I’d like to buy it.’ I think it was \$100, which I didn’t have at the time. So, I traded them a couple of my best guns as collateral and said, ‘I’ll send you \$10 a month until the canoe is paid up.’

So, for 10 months, I sent them the payments. Jesse Tibbetts was the holder of the guns, and when I got it paid in full, he had the guns shipped back to me.”<sup>46</sup>

### THE CANOE THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING: 1949

For the 1949 Paul Bunyan Canoe Derby, Billy Smith Jr. found a new partner, a speed skater in his thirties named Bob Bergstrom. Together, they practiced on the Mississippi River, traveling to Brainerd and paddling down to Minneapolis.<sup>47</sup>

Tom Estes and Gene Jensen were back with a V-bottom canoe they’d made. They were also in excellent condition: In his garage, Jensen had rigged up a paddle attached to a pulley system and a greased slide. They had trained all winter.<sup>48</sup>

The stakes were high: Nearly 50 teams would compete for \$10,000 worth of cash and prizes (just over \$130,000 in 2024 dollars). First prize was \$2,000 (\$26,000 today). Much of the money came from the Minnesota and Ontario Paper Company (nicknamed Mando), which is why the 1949 race was officially called the Mando-Aquatennial Canoe Derby.<sup>49</sup>

On Friday morning, 48 teams were ready to start, including Grace Sunde, paddling with Bernard Monson. Sunde was a 43-year-old mother of 12 (nine living) and grandmother, and the first woman entrant since 1940, when Dorothy Messing and her husband competed. Some 3,000 people lined the shore and docks or sat in boats to watch. A few even chartered seaplanes.<sup>50</sup>



LEFT TO RIGHT: Bernie and Virginia Smith, Charlotte and Scottie Cummings, Beatrice Smith (daughter) and her parents, Jim and Beatrice Smith, at a pause in Anoka during the 1948 derby





Bob Bergstrom (left) and Billy Smith Jr. in a qualifying race from Fort Ripley to Minneapolis on July 4, 1949. Paddling Jim and Bernie Smith's canoe, the two finished just 29 seconds behind Tom Estes and Gene Jensen. "I remember all the guys at the table actually sucked in their breath," says Smith of the announcement. "No one had ever come that close to beating them."

At 9 a.m., Governor Youngdahl started the derby. Weeks of heavy rain had raised the water level a foot, so the race was fast. On day one, the top three teams finished within four minutes of each other. First was Estes and Jensen; then a new, young team from Bemidji, Eric Hughes and Harold Westby; followed by Buzzy Peterson and his brother Floyd.<sup>51</sup>

After breaking two paddles on Lake Bemidji (and getting a new one from Jim and Bernie Smith), Billy Smith and Bob Bergstrom were surprised to find themselves in seventh place, just behind the 1947 champions, Ray Tibbetts and Bill Evers. Jim and Bernie Smith were down at twelfth.<sup>52</sup>

The second day, paddlers set off at 5 a.m. across Lake Winnibigoshish. For the third time in race history, they crossed the lake (some years they were trucked around it due to heavy winds and dangerous waves). Several canoes capsized, but rescue boats were on hand. Billy Smith and Bob Bergstrom were saved by Jesse

Tibbetts, a detail that has never been reported.<sup>53</sup>

Many teams dropped out: Ray Tibbetts and Bill Evers became "very ill" and were taken to a physician. Bob Tibbetts and Pat Murphy were also sick and stepped aside. Before long, 22 of the original 40 teams were out of the running.<sup>54</sup>

Estes and Jensen extended their lead every day. Behind them were Buzzy and Floyd Peterson, followed by Hughes and Westby. Billy Smith and Bob Bergstrom held their own. "Most of the fireworks were furnished by Bergstrom and Smith as they advanced from seventh position to fourth," reported Ed Shave one day.<sup>55</sup>

"We were racing for third," says Smith. "But we tipped over and spent more time swimming than we did canoeing. The guys ahead of us paddled a Peterborough, and there was no competition between the Peterborough and our design from Jim and Bernie Smith. Not even close. We were faster, but you had to have the canoe in the water."

Around Aitkin, Billy saw Jim and Bernie Smith sitting on the shore with friends. "We chatted for a bit," Bill recalls, "and that's when I found out they'd decided not to continue. They could see the money wasn't there for them. And they had to make a decision: If they continued, all of the sudden they're down in Minneapolis, which was not Indian friendly."<sup>56</sup>

At the front, Estes and Jensen ran away with the lead, while Grace Sunde plugged away in last. She "was given a great ovation by her family," as she passed her hometown, River-ton. Later, she pulled a muscle in her shoulder when a wind gust caught their canoe, but she was determined to finish. "I just don't want them to say that a woman couldn't make it," she said.<sup>57</sup>

On the afternoon of Friday, July 22, 26 teams raced into Minneapolis. An estimated 20,000 people lined the bridges and shores. Estes and Jensen arrived first. They finished in 56 hours, 53 minutes, and four seconds. They were 44 minutes ahead of

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second-place Buzzy and Floyd Peterson. They beat the 1947 record by more than five hours. Grace Sunde finished too, showing that a woman, a mother, and a grandmother could also do the derby.<sup>58</sup>

Many were convinced Estes and Jensen’s advantage was their V-bottom canoe. But Billy Smith knew the truth. So did Gene Jensen. The day after the race, Jensen came over to Smith’s house, which was a block from the river. “He wasn’t celebrating any accolades or anything,” says Smith. “He was right there. He said, ‘I want take a look at that boat.’”

Smith and Jensen carried their canoes down to the river. “He got in his canoe, and I got in mine,” says Smith, “and we paddled against one another. Then he said, ‘You know, yours is faster.’ That’s all he said. He could see how good the boat really was. That’s when he fell in love with it.”

Smith told Jensen he wouldn’t sell the canoe, but he noted that it had a tendency to veer to the right. If Jensen could straighten it out, he could borrow it for the rest of the season.

So, Estes and Jensen took the canoe Jim and Bernie Smith had given to Billy, fixed it, and then took it up to the *Classique internationale de canots de la Mauricie*, a three-day race in Quebec that would become one of the Triple Crown canoe races. They won the first of four victories there for Jensen and six for Estes. The modern era of canoe racing had begun.<sup>59</sup>

### THE DYNASTY: 1950

After watching Estes and Jensen destroy the field in 1949, many teams showed up with V-bottom canoes. Even Jesse Tibbetts built a V-bottom for Bob Tibbetts and Pat Murphy. Reporter Jack Connor called Jesse Tibbetts’s new canoe a “trim and tippy craft,” while Jesse himself said, “They can’t even part their hair on the side to ride this one.”<sup>60</sup>

But Estes and Jensen had a new canoe with a round bottom and lines very similar to Jim and Bernie Smith’s. (Billy Smith Jr. did not race.)<sup>61</sup>

On Friday July 14, at 9:02 a.m., Governor Youngdahl fired the opening shot. Departing at two-minute intervals, Estes and Jensen were the last

to leave. Within two and a half hours they had passed all the canoes but two. At the end of the lap, they were more than 15 minutes ahead.<sup>62</sup>

This year, the river was two to three feet higher than usual, and the race was faster than ever. By the time they got to Minneapolis, only 14 teams were left. Estes and Jensen won the derby and \$2,000 (over \$25,000 in 2024 dollars). Their time of 54 hours, 54 minutes, and 43 seconds broke the record by almost two hours. No one would ever beat it.<sup>63</sup>

Bob Tibbetts and Pat Murphy ended up getting \$80 (about \$1,000 in 2024 dollars) for seventh place. Jesse Tibbetts was chagrined. “In 1948 Estes and Jensen won with a Peterborough canoe,” Jesse said.



*The legendary canoe racers and designers, Tom Estes and Gene Jensen*

“The next year, everybody went with Peterboroughs. But Estes and Jensen had a V-bottomed canoe they built themselves. So, this year the paddlers went all out for V-bottoms. And what happens? Estes and Jensen win with a round bottom job they built themselves. There just ain’t no justice.”<sup>64</sup>

### THE DERBY’S DECLINE: 1951

Gene Jensen was out for the 1951 derby, stationed with the US Air Force in Bermuda. (The Korean War was going full force.) So, Tom Estes paired up with his brother Phil.<sup>65</sup>

On the morning of Friday, July 13, 19 teams started paddling across Lake Bemidji. First over the line were Harlow Thompson and Richard Peck. Their boat was built “along the same lines” as Jensen and Estes’s 1950 boat, which in turn was built along the lines of Jim and Bernie Smith’s. Peck had taken those lines and lengthened them to 24 feet, which seemed to be what the river liked. “We finally got the boat for this race,” he said.<sup>66</sup>

Thomson and Peck ran away with the derby. Their winning time of 57 hours, 21 minutes, and 20 seconds was 47 minutes faster than second-place Karl Ketter and Buzzy Peterson.<sup>67</sup>

Bob Tibbetts finished fifth. It was a hard race, but he had no regrets. “It’s one of those things,” he said in an interview. “You swear you’ll never get in another canoe derby, but now that it is nearly over you look back and think of the fun you had, and the grind, and the crowds, and you wouldn’t trade it for anything.”<sup>68</sup>

### THE DERBY DENIED: 1952–1958

In March of 1952, the Aquatennial committee voted to replace the Paul Bunyan Canoe Derby with speedboat races to be held in the same towns the derby had passed through: Bemidji,

**When they got to Lake Winnibigoshish, the waves were six feet high. Three canoes swamped out on the open water. Of the 20 teams that started, at least five dropped out by the second day.**

Grand Rapids, Aitkin, Brainerd, Little Falls, St. Cloud, and Minneapolis.

The derby was done. No reason was given.<sup>69</sup>

As a sort of consolation, an eight-mile canoe race was held on the Chain of Lakes in Minneapolis, and was won by Buzzy Peterson and Wayne Carlson, followed by Tom and Phil Estes, then Karl Ketter and Harold Westby.<sup>70</sup>

In 1953, a partial revival of the derby took place from Anoka to Minneapolis. Eleven teams raced. Wayne Carlson and Buzzy Peterson came in first, while 3,000 people turned out for the finish.<sup>71</sup>

In 1954, the race stretched from St. Cloud to Minneapolis. It had a purse of \$600, with \$300 for first, plus another \$100 for a final two-mile sprint. Gene Jensen was back, partnering with Karl Ketter. They finished third, while Buzzy Peterson and Russell Scott won both races.<sup>72</sup>

There was no mention of any derby in 1955, 1956, or 1957.

But in 1958, the *Minneapolis Star* announced that the derby was back, with \$20,000 in prizes and \$4,000 for first place (about \$46,500 today). “Minnesota’s once greatest test of endurance, the Aquatennial Paul Bunyan Canoe Derby, is going to be revived this year just as it was in its heyday when the event received international recognition,” the paper reported.<sup>73</sup>

Then on May 23, a small item appeared in the paper. “Canoe Derby called off, Brandt quits.” There were

few details: “Ned Brandt, general manager of the Paul Bunyan Canoe Derby, Co. resigned yesterday for personal reasons. Derby plans collapsed with Brandt’s resignation.”<sup>74</sup>

### THE RACE RISES: 1959

The next year, however, the race was back on—this time for real. But the disputes and protests about which canoes were legal continued. Some racers threatened to withdraw if others were allowed to race.

“Irked at the dissension,” Estes and Jensen withdrew and announced that their race-approved canoe was for sale. The Aquatennial president bought it on the spot and gave it to Gordon Kossow and Howard Thompson—iron miners and cousins from Deer River, Minnesota. They got in it for the first time 30 seconds before the race began.<sup>75</sup>

At 10:30 on Wednesday, July 8, the teams started across Lake Bemidji in a strong northwest wind. When they got to Lake Winnibigoshish, the waves were six feet high. Three canoes swamped out on the open water. Of the 20 teams that started, at least five dropped out by the second day. One paddler chipped a bone in his elbow and couldn’t move his arm.<sup>76</sup>

Kossow and Thompson took the lead. Jim and Bernie Smith, who were in eleventh place after the first day, quit when they got to Ball Club. That left only one Ojibwe team, Benny Tonce and Arnold Kingbird, in sixth.

Two weeks before the race, Tonce had had the tip of his middle finger cut off in a logging accident, but a doctor had reattached it.<sup>77</sup>

In the end, Kossow and Thompson won. They were two and a half hours faster than second place. They received \$1,500 in cash (about \$16,000 today) and a “paid-up life insurance price of \$1500 each.” At ages 35 and 27, they were the oldest team in the field. “We’ll all be back next year,” said Kossow. “Everybody who finished this one will be back.”<sup>78</sup>

## THE FINALE: 1960

In 1960, the Paul Bunyan Aquatennial Derby returned, and this time, so did Gene Jensen and Tom Estes. By the middle of June, 52 teams wanted to sign up. One of those teams was Stan Droogsma, a teacher; and Dick Mueller, a former Big Ten wrestling champion who had teamed with Phil Estes in the 1950 derby. “When Dick said, ‘Let’s do it,’ I knew what was involved,” says Droogsma, now 91. “If there’s something in your heart that says there’s nobody tougher and better than me, then you want to go and prove that.”<sup>79</sup>

Mueller and Droogsma trained hard. “We paddled north on the Rum River for practice,” Droogsma says. “And we got in shape. I weighed 165, and by the time we were done practicing, I was 155. By the time we got done with the 10-day race, I was 144. So that tells you what happens.”<sup>80</sup>

Estes and Jensen had “a home-made craft of wood and fiberglass bearing the number 16.” Longtime derby reporter Jack Connor wrote, “It looks like no canoe you ever saw before. Low at bow and stern, to minimize wind resistance, it suddenly flares out in amidships to meet the requirement of the 30-inch beam. At 65 pounds it is one of the lighter canoes in the race and its lines are



*Ojibwe paddlers Benny and Frank Tonce, tenth-place finishers in the 1960 canoe derby*

the essence of speed. Estes built the canoe.”<sup>81</sup>

A total of 46 teams entered in the 1960 derby, including two Ojibwe teams: Arnold Kingbird and Benny Tonce each partnered with their brothers, Daniel Kingbird and Frank Tonce.<sup>82</sup>

On the morning of Wednesday July 6, the paddlers assembled at Lake Bemidji for the start. The sky was clear, with just a faint breeze. Governor Orville Freeman fired the starting gun. Estes and Jensen won the first lap.<sup>83</sup>

Day two always brought a lot of carnage, but 1960 was the worst: Ten teams dropped out even before the second day started because of “blisters, pulled muscles, heat exhaustion and hopelessly slow canoes.”<sup>84</sup>

The remaining teams set off across Winnibigoshish. The waves were five feet high. Estes and Jensen loaded a 25-pound rock in the stern to stabilize their boat. Other teams were not so lucky: Six capsized and were out of the race.<sup>85</sup>

Droogsma and Mueller had a canvas cover that shed water, and they

were now in eighth place. But they had trouble in the back channels. “We had passed everybody and were out in front,” says Droogsma. “I said ‘Dick, I think we should go right. He said, ‘I think so too.’ So, we went right, and five canoes passed us before we got back to the main channel. When we got in that night, we went to the guys in charge, and said, ‘That’s dirty pool. We took the wrong turn because you didn’t have it marked like you said it was going to be.’ Dick really laid into them, and I did too. They threatened to throw us out of the race if we kept giving them lip.”<sup>86</sup>

Estes and Jensen won the derby. They got \$1,500 (about \$15,700 today), plus a three-day, all-expenses paid trip for four to Las Vegas. Droogsma and Mueller were seventh. They got \$250. Benny and Frank Tonce were tenth. Benny would go on to teach Ojibwe language at the Leech Lake Tribal College. Today, the school has a Benny Tonce Drum Room and a Benny Tonce Memorial Scholarship.<sup>87</sup>

“One of the greatest exhibitions of physical stamina, perfect condition and courage comes to an end today,” wrote columnist Charles Johnson.

“Our reporters who made the jaunt . . . say that this was the best run and most peaceful derby yet staged. There should be no doubt now as to the permanency of this grueling grind.”<sup>88</sup>

## THE CHILDREN’S CRUSADE: 1961–1964

On June 4, 1961, an article by long-time derby reporter Jack Connor ran in the *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*: “Canoe Derby Features Youth.” It said the derby would have a “completely new format,” and “explorer scouts” would be the only competitors. The race would be 323 miles long and would take seven days instead of 10. Teams of eight boys would paddle in relays for designated distances before switching.<sup>89</sup>

No reason was given for the change; the new derby just wasn’t the same. Public interest was low, though it was meaningful to those who raced—boys like George Arimond, who became a canoe racer and went on to study the biomechanics of canoe paddling and teach at the University of Wisconsin–La Crosse. Arimond took part in the 1961 Explorer Scout Derby on the Pine City team, which had a fierce rivalry with Brooklyn Center.

“We were only six seconds behind Brooklyn Center at the end of the race,” says Arimond now. “It was really close. Then we found out they had a professional canoe racer coaching them. All we had was a bunch of dads who were recreational canoers. Their coach was Gene Jensen.”<sup>90</sup>

Brooklyn Center won the 1961, 1962, and 1963 Explorer Scout Canoe Derbies.<sup>91</sup>

## As the race flowed through reservations and ricing territory, through cities and suburbs, it linked Indian country with white America.

In 1964, there was a scheduling conflict with the Boy Scout Jamboree in Pennsylvania, so the derby was replaced with a two-day canoe race. It never returned.<sup>92</sup>

### LEGACY

Looking back, the impact of the Paul Bunyan Aquatennial Canoe Derby is hard to quantify but impossible to deny. Every year, tens of thousands of people in the state stood along riverbanks and watched the final sprint through the Twin Cities, while hundreds of thousands more read the daily coverage or listened to the radio reports. It’s one reason why there are still so many canoes in so many backyards.

Poised at mid-century, the derby stood at the intersection of myriad things. It linked the older, nonmotorized world with a newer mechanized one. As the race flowed through reservations and ricing territory, through cities and suburbs, it linked Indian country with white America. The derby was a kind of neutral ground for two cultures to find competition and camaraderie. It made the river a meeting place like we’ve never had.

The derby also played a major role in launching the canoe-racing boom of the late twentieth century. The only race older than the Paul Bunyan Canoe Derby was the *Classique inter-*

*nationale de canots de la Mauricie* in Quebec, which started in 1934. All the other races came afterward. And derby racers themselves—Buzzy Peterson, Gene Jensen, Karl Ketter, and so many others—went on to dominate contests across North America.

In 1961, the year after the demise of the derby, those same canoeists founded the Minnesota Canoe Association. If not for the Paul Bunyan Aquatennial Canoe Derby, it’s hard to know if they would have found each other and built that organization. For many years, the Minnesota Canoe Association published a magazine, *Hut!*, which documented the changing face of canoeing as expeditions, Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness tripping, whitewater kayaking, and other paddling trends emerged.

Another unappreciated impact of the derby was the diffusion of Ojibwe canoe-building knowledge, epitomized here by Jim and Bernie Smith’s canoe, as the kind of technology transfer that fuels major leaps forward. No one is denying that Gene Jensen, creator of the bent-shaft paddle and other innovations, wasn’t a canoe design genius. And yet, it must be acknowledged that part of his brilliance was recognizing another genius when he saw one.

In the early 2000s, more than 50 years after racing in the Paul Bunyan Canoe Derby, Bill Smith was in upstate New York. He pulled into the parking lot of a grocery store, and there was a canoe on a car.

“I’d forgot all this canoe business,” he says now. “And I looked over [and]

Frank Bures’s book, *Pushing the River: An Epic Battle, a Lost History, a Near Death, and Other True Canoeing Stories*, will be published in April 2025 by the Minnesota Historical Society Press.

I saw this beautiful canoe. I said, 'Oh my God, that's our canoe!' I recognized it right away. It was upside down on the car. It just brought back this flood of memories. I thought, I'm gonna check this guy and see where he got it."

Smith walked over to look at the canoe. There on the side was a name he knew well. In plain letters, it read: JENSEN.<sup>93</sup> □

## Notes

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3. *Grand Rapids Herald Tribune*, May 1, 1978.
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14. *MST*, June 30, 1940, p. 39.
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21. *MMT*, July 21, 1942, p. 13.
22. *MMT*, July 21, 1942, p. 13.
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27. *Minneapolis Star-Journal*, July 10, 1946, p. 18; *MMT*, July 11, 1946, p. 16.
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29. *MMT*, July 20, 1946, p. 8.
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37. *MST*, July 13, 1947, p. 30.
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