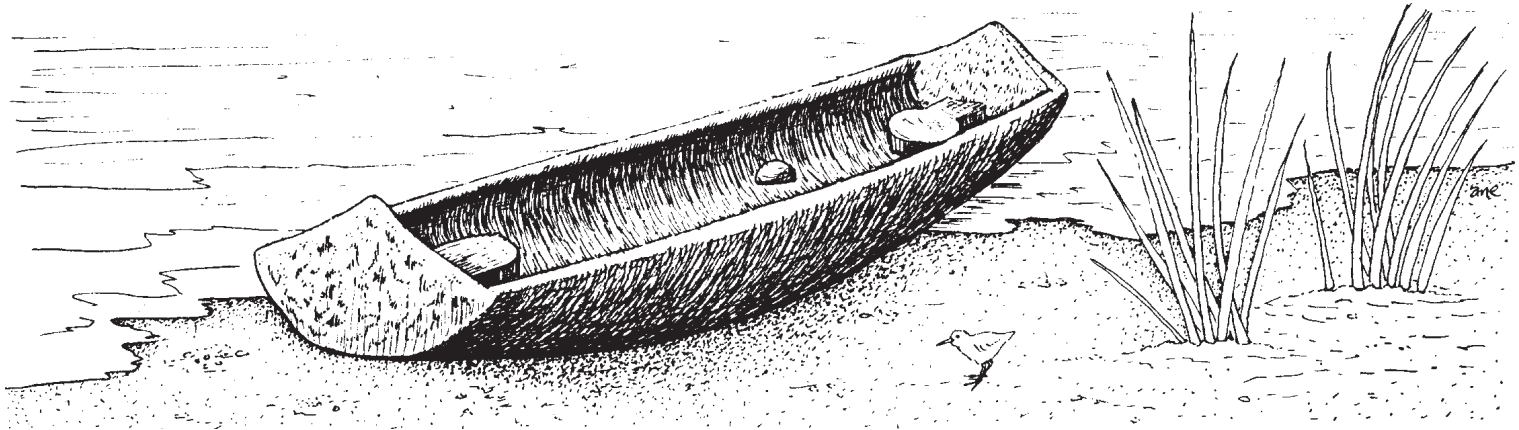




The Making of a Yurok Canoe



Yurok elders Dewey George and Jimmy James carved this canoe in 1968 with help from Jimmy James Jr. and Chuck Donahue. Mr. and Mrs. Chester Paul commissioned the canoe for display at Paul's Cannery in Klamath, California, and Mrs. Paul later donated it to the park in 1987.

The canoe is 18 feet long, 3½ feet wide, and 1½ feet deep. It was made from one half of a solid redwood log and reflects the traditional features

of a Yurok canoe: square prow, gradually curving underside, a heart near the front, and a seat and foot braces in back. To use this canoe on the river, the sides and bottom would require further thinning for maximum maneuverability.

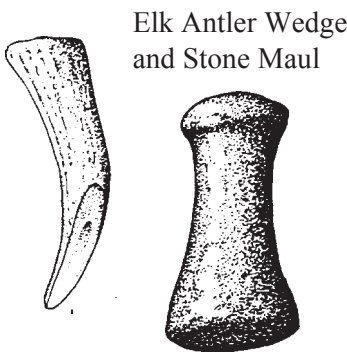
You might notice water in the canoe. The water prevents the canoe from drying out and splitting.

From the Beginning

Yurok people have always been closely tied to fresh and salt water. Their main staple foods were fish and eels, along with acorns, berries, and deer meat. People travelled extensively by canoe: fishing, eeling, hunting, gathering food and basket making materials, visiting friends and family, attending ceremonial dances, and trading all types of items. Longer, sturdier canoes were used to hunt sea lions offshore and to ferry people and goods along the coast.

The canoe was an essential part of each family's household. Without one, the families would be limited to local travel or to paying someone else, usually with dentalium shells (as money), for a ride to their destination. Canoes were also used for the Boat Dance, an integral part of the White Deerskin Dance, which was held every two years as a world renewal ceremony.

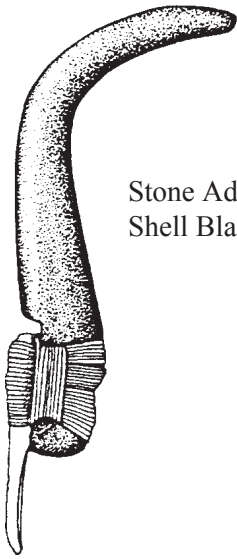
Traditional Construction



Elk Antler Wedge
and Stone Maul

Coast redwood trees (*Sequoia sempervirens*) have always been the preferred wood for Yurok canoe-making. Found in abundance in the coastal areas of northern California, redwood is resistant to insect damage and rotting, both essential to the longevity of a canoe left year-round on the streambank.

Rarely would a carver use an elk antler wedge and stone maul to cut down a massive standing redwood tree. Rather, trees knocked over in a storm or felled by lightning were most often used for canoe-making. When choosing a tree, the canoe-maker looked for one that would not split easily, ensuring a solid, sturdy canoe.



Stone Adze with
Shell Blade

To begin a canoe, the log was split into two sections lengthwise, producing two blanks for two canoes. Often, the logs or blanks would be left in a shady, cool place for up to a year to season, further ensuring the soundness of the wood.

When the carving began, the center or interior of the tree became the bottom of the canoe, and the outside of the tree became the top of the canoe. This was done because the interior wood has a much tighter grain and is therefore heavier. Also

the interior has fewer knots (removing a limb leaves a knot).

In the past, mussel-shell adzes and slow burning fires were used to hollow out the inside of the canoe. Adzes were again used to finish the canoe, producing a smooth, splinter-free surface that would withstand changes in climate, constant beachings along the shore, and heavy loads carried in the canoe. Boats were almost always in use. Otherwise, they were kept in a shady place so they would not crack from the drying heat of direct sun.



In the Water

Redwood canoes were navigated both upriver and downriver. When traveling downriver, a wider paddle made of cedar or redwood was used to get through the riffles. The boat could be navigated by one or two people, with one seated in the back of the boat and the other standing or kneeling in the front of the boat. For upriver passage, one or two people maneuvered the canoe along the bank

of the river and through the eddies using a long cedar or redwood pole to propel and control the canoe.

Both men and women used canoes. Women were frequently seen navigating the Klamath River by themselves, traveling up the river with their boat heavily loaded, a 25-mile journey from Pecwan to the ocean.



Modern Construction

Like any other object made by humans, the canoe has changed during the last 100 years. From the old form described above, the canoe evolved to redwood motor boats with traditional Yurok-shaped hulls, to cedar plank boats with traditional paddles, and back to classic redwood dugouts still used today for ceremonies, for display and, occasionally for everyday use on the river.

In the 1930s, canoe-makers obtained trees from individuals or timber company lands. They moved to the site of the “blank,” set up camp, and made a dugout canoe that they put into the water and paddled home.

Today’s carvers continue the tradition. Logs are obtained from donations from private companies or from state or federal agencies. Canoes are often made in a public setting so many can benefit from the knowledge and expertise of the carvers.

Yurok carvers have always made dugouts with certain traditional characteristics. However, like any artistic work, each canoe will vary to a degree, telling us something about that person’s taste and interpretation of traditional ways.



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Our thanks to George Blake and William and Henry Van Pelt for sharing their knowledge of canoe-making. Thanks to Coleen Kelley Marks for technical assistance.