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A BABY**
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A century of whitewater canoes

by Bob Hoyer

On a fine summer's weekend, we enjoyed paddling the latest in readily available tandem playboats as well as its unfortunately very much less available counterpart from 1905. A Class 2-2 section of clear moving water and a clear mountain lake, both north of Vancouver, provided ideal conditions for testing the best from the old and new worlds of tandem canoeing. In their own way, both were very rewarding.

The Dagger Caption is a popular tandem. With lots of rocker and soft-chines, it has sufficiently dynamic responses for even the smaller eddies and peelouts as well as for comfortable surfing. The specs come in at 14' long with maximum beam at 32" and a waterline width of 30". The mid-ship depth is 15.5" and the rocker is 5" fore and aft. All this adds up to a rated capacity of 850 pounds.

with double rodeo-type thigh straps providing comfortable and secure positions. The latter was assuring as, although Pam has had a lot of experience in slalom racing in the bow of longer canoes, she hadn't been paddling for the last five years. As for me, I've enjoyed a number of solo playboats, but have had negligible experience in tandem white-water paddling so the introduction, as the saying goes, was interesting.

Although unstated, there was the occasional nervous thought as the rigging was adjusted and air bags inflated. Accustomed to a longer boat, Pam was uncertain if the standard strokes would be as effective from an almost central pedestal. My cheerful, "Well, just paddle as if it was a solo position" was met with a response about minimal experience in a solo boat.

The put-in is at a drop with a short set of slalom gates. After a couple of ferries and modest eddy turns, confidence grew and the fun began. Fortunately, the gates were not in place, removing an implacable adju-

Chestnut, in 1905, was the first manufacturer of wood-canvas canoes to design and although they didn't use the term, a white water playboat. Early catalogues describe their Cruisers as a special canoe designed to "navigate white water". Carrying capacity was reduced to improve handling. A relatively narrow hull with a more rounded bottom provided speed and liberal (for the day) rocker and no hindering keel enhanced turning ability.

Cruisers were made in three lengths – the 16' was named the Kruger and, with a 32" beam, it had a rated capacity of 600 lbs. – a low volume performer. The 17-footer was called the Cronje and the 18-footer, which was the favourite for stock model down river racing, was appropriately named the Leader. The shape featured fine entry lines and the relatively high bow and stern assisted a drier ride in rough water.

Later sales brochures exclaimed "Designed For Racing And Running Dangerous White Waters". The standard colour was "gray", which is actually an attractive mossy gray-green that, with its incredible shear, makes the 18-footer a visual classic. The Cruiser series was produced for 82 years.

The Leader is still one of the fastest of recreational canoes and, with 2" of rocker to the rear and 3" forward, it is surprisingly maneuverable. For speed, the width at the 4" water line is close to today's marathon racers at 32". As with today, performance goes with low volume and this was stressed in the catalogues. The Leader was rated at only 700 lbs. of capacity. This compares with Chestnut's figures of 1100 lbs. for the same length Prospector and 850 lbs. for the much shorter 16' Prospector. These were designed and marketed as work boats for trappers, surveyors, and timber cruisers as well as prospectors.

Some twenty-five years ago, a dedicated racer in Kamloops – Harvey Fraser – made and modified a mould based upon the Leader. Originally in fiberglass, the boat became a winner without the inconvenience of broken ribs or planks.

More recently, in a version with a lighter kevlar lay up, he won the 25th Similkameen, which is the last down river race still run in B.C. When asked if he were to start all over again with making the mould, he said he would go back to the high bow and stern of the original Leader.

When it comes to moving water, it seems that Chestnut had it well sorted out in 1905.

My Leader was made in 1978 and is refinished in the original matte "gray" and warm interior varnish. Naturally, with a



Pam and Bob in their Dagger Caption on the Mamquam River

In July, the Mamquam River is fed almost vertically from snow melt, so it is free of silt or glacial flour. Within the narrow section, the water was transparent with the dark green provided by the overhanging "wet-coast" rain forest. Coming out of the mini-canyon, the river bed widens and, despite the massive Tantalus Range, there was enough open sky to add blue reflections to the water.

The borrowed Caption was well set up

dication of our true abilities. However, the highlight was slipping into a biased wave and shredding it to river right – irresistibly as it turned out. On the next go, we had enough authority to shred it both ways. The third attempt blew us out forcefully and without a flip. Tandem white water paddling, when agreeably coordinated, has a huge grin quotient. The rule of the whiter the water, the bluer the language was not prevailing.



Bob Hoyer

The timeless grace of a Chestnut Leader

vintage canoe it makes sense to avoid rocks and the appropriate change of water was found on a nearby but remote mountain lake.


At an elevation of around 3500 feet, the lake was part of the scenery in reflecting the surrounding crags and steeply rising snowfields. As a lingering reminder of other seasons, there was still snow within shading trees on the south side.

On a cloudless day, the unruffled surface provided unusually clear optics to the depths below. In some places, the bottom was rippled sand and at others the cold waters had preserved large sections of Fir trees blasted off the cliffs above by lightning or winter storms.

After the agreeable intimacy provided by the Caption, Pam seemed a long way away. Actually, at about 11 feet, the distance exceeded the overall length of the latest solo canoe by at least a foot. Nevertheless, communications were fine. Based upon years of tandem experience, she noted that the acceleration and speed were outstanding. Then, with some strong strokes overwhelming the high polar moment of distanced partners, the Leader turned beautifully. The catalogue's claim about the Cruisers being "extremely alert to the paddle stroke" is accurate for modest corrections as well. In its day, the 16-footer must have been amazing.

The weekend of paddling and reflection provided insight into almost a century of

macho canoeing. One regular race in the 1960s took 14 hours to run the 139 miles down the Stuart and Nechako from Fort St. James to Prince George. In those days, a design from 1905 was the thoroughbred of down river racing. Today's heroes are into trick boating and the tandem we used is an outstanding playboat.

There are enough airbags lying around to outfit the Leader and, with thigh straps somehow installed, we are talking about doing the Thompson some September. Dry country and warm water is appealing and the combination of no obstacles and up to 10-foot waves is ranked as Class II. These seem ideal conditions for seriously testing a vintage racer. 

Bob Hoyer is editor of Institutional Advisors and has no interest in the financial markets when paddling. His introduction to canoeing started as a student on a mining exploration project in the N.W.T. It was so long ago that a 16' Peterborough Prospector was used for fishing and our crew of four used an eighteen-foot Freighter to commute to work on a new showing down the lake.

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