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A man returning to the forest

Tim Wees

I was sitting at a picnic table, of a sunny Saturday afternoon, at [Summerfolk](#). The curried chicken was delectable. The coffee was superb. There was a lot of fun in the air.

An interesting looking gentleman asked if he could join me. Sure. We introduced each other and it wasn't long before I asked if I could turn on the tape and we could call this an interview. Sure.

His name is Marcel Labelle.

Marcel, Mahigan in his own tongue, is a child of the trap-line. His father and his grandfather were both trappers and Marcel was duly initiated into a lifestyle hundreds of years old. He grew up in the bush and knows the ways of the forest well.



The place is Mattawa at the juncture of the Mattawa and Ottawa rivers, east from North Bay. Mattawa was once a busy port of call, being on the major fur-trading route, the Voyageur Waterway, to the west. Samuel de Champlain was through here in 1615, and the aboriginal people have been living here for some 6000 years.

In the early 90's the trapping way of life ended. The market for fur dried up. It was the work of animal rights activists says Marcel, and, whatever the reason, the public stopped wearing fur and buying fur and in a moment life was over.

"In '91 when the industry collapsed I almost died," Says Marcel. "But I am a survivor so I went to school." He went on to earn a degree at Nipissing University in North Bay and from there to a good paying job, complete with pension plan in Arthur, "But I was in an office. I was dying."

Small wonder. Marcel was remembering his trapper's cabin. If you have a cabin in the bush it is anti-social, to say the least, to have a lock on the door. Marcel had a sign on his door that said, "If you need food it is here. If you need

heat it is here. If you need shelter it is here." The exact phrasing might be off, but that was the message. This is not quite the way it works in Arthur.

In 2004 Marcel had a strong calling, a vision, to go to the mountains, "But not the mountains in Mattawa, the big ones out west." He talked with his friends and decided that a vision quest to the Rockies was a good idea. He gave one month's notice at work. They thought he was nuts to leave a good paying job, remembers Marcel. And he was gone.

A vision quest is serious business. This is not a holiday. It is about putting yourself at risk and asking for guidance from the Creator. The mind takes a back seat for this one. You follow your heart, and it's a good plan to have a strong heart to follow.

Marcel's was obviously strong enough. He and his friends prepared some tobacco at a six nations ceremony, and then he and a companion headed west, all the way to Tofino and a swim in the Pacific. On the return journey they stopped at a special place, near Roger's Pass, and left the tobacco.

While growing up in the woods, Marcel had also learned about birch bark, how to harvest it and fashion it into a canoe. He also learned how to make cedar ribbing and sheathing. And this all includes being able to walk the forest and find just the right tree. If a tree looks just so and about the right size, Marcel will give it a hug.

"I go in the forest and I hug trees. I'm a tree hugger. From trapper to tree hugger. I think that's funny." So Marcel will wrap his arms around the tree.

"If my fingertips touch together, I walk away. If my fingertips don't touch together, I get excited."

Marcel will cut the bark, in one long piece, from the tree. He will cut deeply enough to get the thick leathery bark he will need, but not so deeply that the tree dies. He reports that the trees actually cover themselves with a new skin.

"I can show you trees I took the bark off four years ago. They're still growing leaves. The tree grows a protective skin." That's a nice touch.

Thus building birch bark canoes became his new calling. The whole canoe is built from forest materials, including roots to bind it all together. And they float too. Marcel has pictures at his website and is out there paddling around. That may well be the same canoe he has on display here at Summerfolk.

Quality stuff these canoes. Take a breath. They cost \$655 a foot. Be prepared to come up with \$10,000 for your new transportation. Or you can take a course Marcel is putting together at Trent University. He'll teach you how and you can walk the forest and find the right tree and build your own.

For more go to www.birchbarkcanoes.ca.