

Outside the Cubicle: Paddlesports rep and Penobscot Indian Scott Phillips rekindles culture of his ancestors

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In the waning days of the summer of 2003, Scott Phillips, a rep for Johnson Outdoors, and his father, Butch, hoisted their birchbark canoe and walked the western shore of Maine's Penobscot River to skirt Debsconeag Falls, a long tumble of water crashing over granite.



Scott and Butch (*photo - right*) had taken many paddling trips together over the years, but this moment was extraordinary. As members of the Penobscot Indian Nation, they were walking the same path their ancestors had trod thousands of years ago, carrying the same type of craft the ancients had paddled.

"We just stopped for a moment," Butch recalled, "and I told Scott, 'It's been a long time since members of our tribe have carried a canoe up over these falls.'"

The Penobscots are one of the few Indian nations that were never driven from their homeland, and modern members of the tribe still live along the Penobscot River, which largely shaped Penobscot culture. But their old way of life has faded with the march of time. Most tribe members have left behind ancient skills, such as the construction of birchbark canoes, and dams placed along the Penobscot River over the last 100 years have blocked ancient canoe routes and cut off the Indians from fish and other natural resources.

But Scott, his family and fellow tribe members have worked the last 30 years to bring Penobscot traditions back to life. They have resurrected the art of building birchbark canoes, embarked on 100-mile canoe journeys to Mount Katahdin (the tribe's spiritual center), and are helping lead a massive restoration project on the Penobscot River. While paddling is an essential element of Scott's professional life as a rep, it is also the tie that binds him to his Indian heritage.

Embracing the past

Unlike his father, Scott did not actually grow up on the Penobscot reservation, which is located on Indian Island, in the heart of Old Town, Maine. He was raised in a town 50 miles away, but Scott's parents raised him to understand and respect Penobscot Indian traditions, such as canoeing. "I've been paddling my whole life," said Scott.

Like many of the 2,500 members of the Penobscot Nation, Scott seemed to be born with the desire to paddle and explore rivers. While attending the University of Maine, he took up whitewater canoeing and worked with the school's recreation department, building trails and canoe access campsites. After college, Scott moved to Old Town to live on the reservation, and continued to develop his canoeing skills. "He was a natural," said Butch, noting that his son was an eight-time Downriver Whitewater National Champion.

But canoeing was more than sport to Scott – he said it was the thing that strengthened his connection to the land and the rivers, and awakened his desire to be more active in his tribe. He was particularly interested in helping to manage the more than 100,000 acres of forestland owned by the Penobscot Nation.

Scott eventually served for 10 years on the Penobscot Fish and Game committee, which regulates hunting on tribe land. "We also helped foresters and wildlife biologists direct policies for the health of the animals and fisheries," said Scott. He is now on the tribe's guide board, which is a collection of Penobscots who are professional guides. They manage hunting, fishing and paddling activities on Penobscot land, lead non-tribal members on outings, and also auction off moose hunting permits to raise money for the tribe's game warden services, because the Penobscots police their own land.

Over the years of leading moose hunting trips, Scott grew interested in the hunting methods of the ancient Penobscots, and in 2004, he crafted his own traditional longbow out of white ash. It's an unusual tool, with four limbs, including a main bow, plus a smaller longbow attached at the handle. There is a string for the large bow, and strings for the smaller bow.

"The idea for it was either as a war bow, because you could cast a heavy arrow farther, or for moose hunting," said Scott. "Basically, the way it works is my bow draws 65 pounds, but it shoots like a 75-pound bow."

Scott had to find a mentor to teach him how to build the bow, because the construction techniques are not widely known in the tribe. "A few people in the tribe are doing it," said Scott, "but it's like a lot of things, over the last decade that stuff has not been forgotten but put aside because it's certainly easier to go get a moose with a rifle than a longbow."

A piece of history

While the art of building a longbow had faded within the tribe, so had the knowledge of building birchbark canoes, which were for hundreds of years the primary means of transportation for the Penobscot Indians. "Our people didn't have horses or other animals to aid in travel," said Scott. Over the last several years, Scott, his first cousin, Barry Dana, and Butch have learned how to build birchbark canoes, and also shared their knowledge with fellow members of the tribe.

In 2003, Dana got a master canoe builder to lead a tribal class in boat building, and a group of eight Penobscots worked together to construct three birchbark canoes. Butch said that, at the time, "a birchbark canoe hadn't been built on the reservation for 60 years."



Scott said the most difficult aspect of building such a boat is finding a piece of birchbark that is big enough. "You need a tree you can barely get your arms around -- about 54 inches around," said Scott. "The real trick is that not all birchbark is the same. When you find a tree, you cut a four- by four-inch square out and bend it back and forth, and if it delaminates it's no good. You need to find one that has really thick, leather-like bark, and that's not easy. The tree also has to be straight with no limbs on it for the first 20 feet."

Scott and Butch now take their birchbark canoes to festivals and schools to educate people about the traditions of the Penobscot Indians.

"There's great interest in the birchbark canoe because that culture was dormant for so long that most people have never seen one or know how it's built," said Butch.

He added that about six years ago, Maine passed a law requiring all schools to teach Indian history. "So, schools are clamoring for speakers to come and talk about the culture, traditions and history," said Butch. "They get just a touch of the history from their teachers, and the main reason we do this is to change the kids' thinking, because a lot of what they learn in school is a stereotypical picture of Indians. The kids think we wear buckskins and live in teepees."

The 100-mile journey

While Scott and his family strive to teach the public about Penobscot culture, they have also worked within the tribe to launch more private events that honor their history. For the past 28 years, tribe members and invited guests have participated in the Katahdin 100, a journey from Indian Island to Mount Katahdin, the spiritual center of the Penobscot homeland. Each Memorial Day weekend, participants run, paddle, bike or walk the 100 miles to honor the long distances that Penobscots once traveled by foot or canoe to hunt or reach seasonal hunting and fishing grounds.

"It's not a competition; it's not a race; you just do it to do it," said Scott. "It's basically our way of keeping our culture and traditions alive and honoring our ancestors' ways."

The event began in 1980 when Barry Dana read about his ancestors being long-distance runners. The Penobscot Indians trained young boys to run down game, and the running tradition continued into the modern age as tribe members competed in running events in the Olympics and even took first place in the Boston Marathon multiple times. Inspired by this, Dana ran from Indian Island to Mount Katahdin in 24 hours.

"The whole idea is that, at one time, our people had a lifestyle where 100 miles was nothing. It was the blink of an eye," said Dana. "Now it's a big deal because our lifestyles are such that we're not physical day-in and day-out. We have to carve out time to workout."



Each year, about 50 people participate in the Katahdin 100, which is not advertised among the general public, but is open to non-tribal members.

"Probably a third of the people are not tribal members, but they are really into the culture and respect it," said Scott.

Dana and Scott have paddled the 100 miles together, going upriver against the current (*photo - right*). Dana, who competes in whitewater canoeing races, said that Penobscot Indians just seem to have paddling in their genes, and his cousin, Scott, is especially gifted.

"Watching Scott going upriver is like watching a famous artist work on a painting," said Dana. "His precision and knowledge of reading currents -- he's at a master level. It's fun to be with anybody who does their thing that well."

Restoring the river

Canoeing has always been central to the Penobscot way of life because rivers provided the food and transportation routes that sustained life. But modern industry has for the past 100 years dramatically altered the Penobscot River. A series of dams prevent fish from migrating between the river and the ocean, and they have altered the character of the river, burying rapids and blocking old canoe routes.

Members of the Penobscot Nation have for years fought to have the dams removed, and fortunately, a

massive Penobscot River restoration project is now underway. The tribe, the Penobscot River Restoration Trust (www.penobscotriver.org <<http://www.penobscotriver.org/>>) and the Nature Conservancy have acquired the rights to buy three hydroelectric dams -- the Veazie, the Great Works and the Howland -- from the PPL power company and remove them. The power company has devised ways that, even without the dams, it will create the same amount of energy as it always has.

"Basically, we're going to open up about 500 miles of upstream fish-spawning habitat that fish have had a problem getting to in the last 100 years," said Scott, who, along with his father and other tribe members, serves as a river ambassador for the project. The ambassadors speak to all types of community groups to educate the public and rally support for the river restoration.

"As an ambassador, I've worked on the recreation end, letting people know that taking those dams out will create recreational and economic opportunities," said Scott. "Once the dams are removed, you'll be able to put a canoe in at downtown Old Town and paddle to the ocean unimpeded -- in the river's natural state. I can't wait."

Laura Rose Day, executive director of the Penobscot River Restoration Trust, said the Penobscot Nation has played a critical role in the project, not only informing the public but also serving as advisors and negotiators. "Scott has been a fantastic spokesperson because he can relate to people that the river not only means many things to many people, but it means a lot to one person. It means a lot to him as a tribe member, but also his professional life. When you dam a river, you bury the rapids and riffles and all those things we think of when we think of a healthy river."

Developing tourism

When the dams come down, wildlife along the Penobscot River should flourish, and this could improve all types of recreation around the city of Old Town, from paddling to fishing to wildlife observation. The city has launched a Stay and Play program (stayandplay.org <<http://stayandplay.org/>>), encouraging people from outside the area to come to the Old Town/Bangor area, stay in local hotels and go on paddling excursions, guided by Penobscot Indians or other guides.

Likewise, the Penobscot Nation is trying to develop ecotourism by encouraging people to take paddling trips that include education about the tribe. "You can go anywhere in the country and have someone guide you down a river," said Scott, "but the one thing the tribe has, and is starting to market now, is that we'll take you down the river and show you how our people lived for the last 10,000 years. Even so far as taking some of the people in a birchbark canoe." He said they might camp on Indian Island, tell stories and do some drumming around the campfire. "You can't get that from most places," he said. "People are willing to pay to get that type of experience they can't get anywhere else."

Scott said he hopes that people from all over New England will appreciate getting a taste of what it was like to explore the Maine woods as Indians did hundreds of years ago. And perhaps they'll get some sense of the thrill he felt that summer day when he and his father carried their boat past Debsconeag Falls.

"The day my father and I carried that birchbark canoe up that ancient portage trail, it still gives me goose bumps," said Scott. "We were literally walking in our ancestors' footsteps. Pretty powerful stuff."
--*Marcus Woolf*

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