

# The Basic Strokes

"Don't enter a canoe unless you're prepared to go in the water." I learned this lesson early and taught it to dozens of others. The teaching also included the basic strokes and how to rescue a swamped canoe. That little bit of knowledge opened up a world of beautiful streams and quiet water.

Canoes are basically unstable. Long and slender, they easily tip. When the gunnel, the edge of the canoe, reaches the water, the boat quickly floods and tosses its occupants into the waiting body of water.

Guiding a canoe is also a challenge. A single stroke changes its direction. So does a brief gust of wind and a steady wind provides a continual need for corrective strokes. Knowing those strokes is the difference between enjoyment and frustration.

My first unplanned entry into the water came after I had taken the basic canoeing course. The Harrisburg Red Cross provided boats, materials and instructors. That gave me confidence that I could handle myself in a canoe. That confidence, however, did not keep me from going in the water.

Wildware Outfitter's sold canoes and offered an event each spring for taking test rides before purchasing. The outfitter held the event on the



upstream side of City Island, where the Susquehanna waters slowed as they approached the Dock Street Dam.

I dressed in shorts and river sandals, knowing that my feet would get wet getting in and out of the canoes. Unfortunately, the shorts held my keys and wallet, safely tucked into zippered pockets.

Canoes come in many materials and sizes. I had narrowed my choices to two kevlar boats. One was a twelve foot solo canoe; the other was a fifteen foot tandem. Both were light enough to carry by myself. I carried the tandem boat down the beach and into the water. I had learned to enter a canoe without tipping, so launching the boat was not a problem. I had also learned to rock the canoe from side to side, to test its stability. On this test, I went a little too far, dipping the gunnel into the water and instantly flooding the canoe.

Flooded canoes have the stability of a beach ball. I instantly rolled off into three feet of water. That was enough to soak all my clothes and all the contents of my wallet. Despite its dunking, I bought that canoe.

Years later, I took the Red Cross instructor course and began teaching the basic strokes. The class met on Wednesday evening at the Red Cross headquarters. After viewing a film on hyperthermia, I took the students out to the gated parking lot where I had my minivan and my canoe tied to the top. Using my light canoe, I had them practice carrying it



and showed them how to lift it solo onto the vehicle. On Saturday they would carry the much heavier aluminum canoes provided by the Red Cross. With the canoe safely atop the minivan, I showed them how to safely tie it down.

Saturday morning started early. I returned to the gated parking lot to pick up the canoes. The Red Cross trailer held eight canoes. A Jeep wagon hauled them to Pinchot State Park where its lake provided calm waters for learning canoeing. My learning experience was hitching the trailer to the Jeep and driving it carefully through city streets, over the interstate, and up and down country roads.

The two days at Pinchot covered many topics. Safe ways of getting in and out of the canoe were the first. Then came the basic strokes: forward, backward, J-stroke, sweep strokes, draws and push always. Each stroke received an on-shore demonstration and practice on the water.

Open water rescue got everyone wet in time for lunch. Each practiced flooding the boat, helping a rescuing canoe empty it, and climbing back into the emptied canoe.

The lessons ended with a trip around the lake. That gave the students a chance to practice their strokes and enjoy the scenery. With

their new found skills, they were ready to experience the streams and lakes within easy reach of Harrisburg.

The basic course made canoeing as safe as it could be. And it taught the students how to survive getting wet.

