

Superior Tapestry:
Weaving the Threads of Upper Michigan History
By Deborah K. Frontiera

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In the actual book, a map of Michigan's Upper Peninsula and a larger detailed map of the Keweenaw are included showing the locations for each chapter.

Introduction-From the Author

This book is the result of a conversation with Tony at Copper World in Calumet, MI. Tony and I have done business for a number of years and in the summer of 2019, he asked me when I was going to write a new “Michigan book” for him to stock in his gift shop. I said I’d been writing other things and hadn’t thought much about it. He asked what kind of things and I told him about my novella, *Midnight in the Pawn Shop*. “Hey, why don’t you do something like that with things all over the U.P.?” he asked.

My first reaction was to swirl my finger around in little circles and then point to my head—I didn’t need any more ideas added to all those already rattling around in my brain. But the thought continued to nag me, so one day, I sat and brainstormed a list of possible “things” in the U.P. that I could “bring to life.” Within ten minutes, I had listed over twenty!

Once a good idea gets hold of me, it won’t go away, haunting my dreams until I do it. So, Tony, here’s your idea brought to life after many hours of research, drafting, writing and rewriting. May you and my readers enjoy the result, *Superior Tapestry*. May you imagine the “lives” of other places and things as you visit my native Yooper Land from Ironwood to Sault Ste. Marie and from Copper Harbor to Menominee.

As I did with *Midnight in the Pawn Shop*, the artifacts, trees, rocks, and rivers tell the stories from their points of view. I brought them to life in the hope that the stories they tell will draw my readers more completely into the experience.

While doing research for this book, I found that there are several ways to spell some of the Ojibwa place names, etc., including the spelling of “Ojibwa” itself. If as a reader, you find that some of the spellings are different from those you know, please don’t be upset. I’ve at least tried to be consistent across my own work. A list of references has been provided in the Appendix.

I also met (by phone and online) many fascinating, knowledgeable and helpful people all across the U.P., who assisted with research, provided helpful links to web sites, and contributed their own expertise as historians and writers. This book would not be what it is without them. Many thanks to all of you listed in the Appendix.

Note on photos: Most of the photographs in this work were taken by the author. Any photos by others are credited to their owners in the captions.

Chapter 1

Birch Bark Canoe

NOTE: The book contains photos in all places indicated. But the photos didn't want to insert into this file.

Caption: You will need to look up to see the Birch Bark (B.B.) Canoe in the Museum of Ojibwa Culture in Saint Ignace, Michigan. You'll see many other fascinating artifacts there, too.

The great sturgeon fish slides swiftly and gracefully through the water. Ojibwa legends say that it inspired the shape of their canoes. Using a canoe is very much faster than walking, so that's how the Ojibwa liked to travel. Lakes and rivers were their highways because forest paths were hard to walk on, and went up and down mountains.

Canoes were carefully built, and looked after to last many years.

One winter, the wind howled, and blew the trees day after day. The old birch tree had swayed and stood tall through many such blizzards, but she was old and weak now. A mighty gust struck her, and she fell flat between two trees in the forest behind her. She hoped she would turn into soil to feed new birch seedlings, even though she knew that would take many years. She had seen Ojibwa women carry baskets made of birch bark when they came to pick berries in summer, so knew they might come to strip her bark. She knew that Birch Bark, or B.B. as she liked to call herself, is good in many ways. It stops fungus from spoiling food stored in such a basket.

The cut of a stone axe awakened the fallen tree when the snow melted. It hurt as the axe split B.B. down the length of the tree's trunk, but the wedges prying B.B. away from the rest of the log seemed to free her to a new life.

The men walked heel to toe, counting. When they reached eighteen, they nodded. One said, "Good. We can make this new canoe from a single log." One of them picked up the long curl of bark and carried her away.

B.B. managed to whisper, "Goodbye" to the rest of the tree as the man carried her across the meadow and into the forest on the other side. She wondered what a canoe was. Not long after, she found herself on the ground in the middle of an Ojibwa village. Since it was getting dark, the man who carried her entered his wigwam, which is what they called their houses.

A crow landed on B.B. She knew him because he had often landed on her branches in the forest. "What's a canoe?" she asked him.

"People sit in it and travel over water, Crow said. "This village of the People is close to where the waters of two Great Lakes come together. You will see it in the morning."

Then he went on to explain that many Native Peoples often got together where Lake Michigan and Lake Huron join up with narrow strips of water called "straits." Mackinac Island is there, and St. Ignace, and Mackinaw City.

The Ojibwa from the Lake Superior area, the Ottawa from the Lake Michigan region, and the Huron people shared many customs. Their languages were also similar, since all three were part of a greater group known as the *Anishnabe*, which meant "first man."

They lived from the land, hunting many types of animals. They used tree roots, bark and leaves for medicine, baskets, and many other things. In the meadows and marshes they gathered berries, wild rice and other plants for food, and caught fish in the lakes and rivers. Nothing was wasted, since nearly every part of the animals and plants provided something of use.

"I've watched these people for many years," Crow said. "They are almost as smart as I am. They do some clever things, such as making the birch bark canoes like you will be."

The next morning, two men lay B.B in a long, narrow trench in the ground. They poured hot water over her to soften her so she could be formed into the shape they wanted. It felt lovely. She was no longer afraid and let herself relax and enjoy this bath. As she soaked, Crow told her that if the water had been cold, she would have had to soak from one full moon until the next.

Here is how they heated water: They made bags from the stomachs of animals they had hunted, and filled these with water. They heated stones in a fire, then put the hot rocks and the water sacks in a pit until the water was hot enough.

B.B. watched as the people used other pieces of bark taken from the smaller branches of the birch tree to make many other things: baskets, cups, roof coverings called “shingles” for wigwams, fans, scrolls for ritual art, and pictorial maps.

B.B. and these objects sometimes smiled at each other from a distance. They never had a chance to speak, since all those things were carried inside the lodges once they were complete and B.B. was always outside. Once B.B.’s bark was soft from soaking, men drove stakes into the ground in parallel lines to make the canoe the correct width, and tied her top edges to these stakes with strips of basswood bark so she would dry in a gently curved shape. Stones anchored the bottom of the curve to the ground.

As B. B. waited to gain a new shape, she watched the men go into the woods again. Crow told her they went to gather other needed supplies like white cedar, which they would soak and cut into strips for her ribs and rails. Other strips of bark from basswood trees would be used for tying and binding, and thin roots from white or black spruce made perfect twine for sewing.

“I know these trees from their odor, color and texture,” B.B. said to Crow.

“All the wood strips and bark have to be soaked like you to make them flexible enough for what they want to do,” Crow replied.

B.B. watched women go into the forest, too. The moon had changed from a thin crescent to well past full by the time the People gathered everything they needed. Crow told B.B. he had to leave to help his mate raise their hatchlings.

B.B. was fascinated to listen to a man explain to his son that a tree’s roots are the same under the ground as the branches above. So, he looked up, followed a branch, and then dug for the root right under it. The father said that they wanted only the thinnest roots near the surface. When they returned from the forest with many roots, he showed his son how to strip the bark of the root away until only a twine-like string he called *watap* remained. The moon waned, became new, and began to wax once more as the men soaked the roots and worked various timber parts of the canoe into place. The longest was the keel, which went from front to back to be the backbone of the canoe. There was a handrail, cedar ribs stiffening it side to side, and cedar strips to put their feet and goods carried in the canoe on. They didn’t want anything to make a hole in the birch bark hull!

Now it was the women’s turn to work on B.B. Canoe. They cut the ends to form a curve and began to sew the pieces together. She felt the poke of the pointed bone awl as it made holes in the two parts to be joined, but it didn’t hurt. Then the women wove the *watap* in and out through the holes. That tickled. They also sewed or tied the cedar keel, hand rail, and ribs into place with strips of thicker cedar or basswood bark. This took several days.

B. B. watched the women who had brought lumps of raw balsam fir sap back to the camp. She had heard an older woman speak yesterday of scraping it from those trees and placing the sticky stuff into deerskin bags. They hung these bags high enough above the crackling fire to heat them but not so close that the bags were burned. The gum rose to the surface, leaving bits of dirt and bark in the bottom of the bag. They squeezed and stretched the gum until there was no water left and the gum looked like honey. Then the women added tallow (fat) from the animals hunted by the men and heated the mixture in a bag again to blend it all. This they put into cold water, and finally wrung all the water out of it again.

An old woman told her daughter, “This makes sure the resin doesn’t shrink or crack in cold water, or melt in the hot sun, causing leaks.” Finally, the woman demonstrated how to splay the end of an ashwood

stick into a brush to paint the resin onto all the seams and holes of B.B. Canoe so she would be completely watertight.

When will I be ready to go into the water? B.B. wondered.

It was early fall by the time B.B. was ready for use. Two men carried her into shallow water. Oh, how cold it was! Waves sloshed along B.B.'s sides as she slid around the sheltered bay on the northern shore of Lake Huron. Soon, the water no longer seemed so frigid. One man pointed to an island, now called Mackinac Island, asking if they should go there, but the other shook his head and they paddled back to shore.

Her first voyages that fall were short, with women paddling her into marshes where they gathered wild rice. B.B. enjoyed listening to the women chat with each other as they cut stalks of wild rice right at the water's surface and piled bundles of it into B.B.'s curved bottom. Their talk, like that of women everywhere through the ages, involved which young man liked which young woman, whether or not they had gathered and dried enough berries, and now wild rice, to feed their clan through a long, cold winter, and whether the men had caught enough fish (which the women had worked hard to dry or smoke) and hunted enough meat to last the same amount of time.

It seemed to B. B. that all of the warm months had been spent preparing for the cold ones. She understood this. Did not the tree she had come from do the same thing? All the trees soaked up summer sun, warm air and rain to produce extra sweet sap sent down for storage in their roots. In the spring, that sap would rise to feed the tree until new leaves grew from buds to make more food for the tree.

Once the rice harvest was over, snowflakes began to fall, and the first sheen of ice formed on the lake. B.B. Canoe was taken onto shore and turned over to protect her from the many blizzards of winter that would soon come. She slept all winter, just as she had when she was a tree.

One day, B.B. felt rain pouring over her, melting the snow all around. Her friend Crow returned. "No more fishing through holes in the ice for the men. It has broken up."

New leaves formed a green veil on the trees when the men began to take her out onto Lake Huron to fish. When the leaves were near fully green, and white flowers with yellow centers bloomed around the camp, two men strange to the clan and to B.B. arrived with some of their southern Huron cousins. The strange men had grizzled hair on their faces and wore clothes not made from the skins of animals. Two Huron paddled the canoe with these strange men in it. They also brought things the People had never seen before.

B.B. could not hear the discussions between the Huron cousins and the leaders of her clan, but the canoe they came in was beached right next to her. "I've come from a place to the south and east of here," this canoe told her. "There are many people there dressed like these two. The Huron people have been trading with them for quite a while, to the benefit of both. Now these men want to trade with your group and others even farther away."

"What does 'trade' mean?"

"Your group would give these men the furs of animals they hunt in the woods and streams, especially beaver. It seems these people really like the fur of beavers and it is sent even farther away than I have ever been. I see their huge ships on a great river far from here. These ships are many times our size and have long poles sticking up with huge white cloths. The wind blows them where they want to go. Then these men give your group things like those I carried here for your people to see."

The other canoe called that far-away place the St. Lawrence River. She told B.B. that she had heard that the first contact between Europeans, specifically the French-Canadians and Jesuit missionaries, in the upper Great Lakes was somewhere around a year they called 1640, perhaps a generation ago.

"What are all these things you brought?" B. B. asked.

The other canoe was glad to show off her knowledge. "The metal kettles with the handles can be hung over a fire to cook food and to heat water. There are axes and knives made of iron. Your people will find

them far better than their stone tools—at least the People where I come from think so. There are also beads and trinkets that the women will like.”

“But I don’t see enough goods for very many people here.”

“No, not on this trip. I heard the men say that they hope to show them to all the clans of people all along these lakes and invite them to come to the opposite shore next spring with many furs in enough canoes for your people to trade for all the things they want. They are hoping a couple men from your village will go with them and introduce them to other clans.”

“What a wonderful adventure! I hope I am chosen to go with you.”

When the elders of the clan, the Huron Cousins, and the two strange men came out of the meeting lodge, everyone was smiling. The women admired the kettles, commenting on how much easier heating water and cooking would be with these. Women also admired the beads and trinkets. Men picked up the knives and axes, and exclaimed about how sharp they were. The strange men invited them to try them out and talked about how many furs they should give to receive the gift of a kettle, knife, or axe in return.

The clan chief pointed out two good men to paddle with the others and then pointed to B.B. “This is our newest and best canoe. Take it.”

B.B.’s heart nearly burst in excitement.

Early the following morning, they left the village and paddled eastward to a narrow channel between the mainland and a large island, reaching there in the late afternoon. They could have gone farther before dark, but there were Ojibwa villages both on the mainland and the island, people the traders wanted to talk to.

These clans also smiled and approved of the trade goods—even speaking to each other of the greater effort they would put forth in hunting beaver between then and the following spring. They said they knew of the place where the big meeting would happen and would come to share in the exchange of gifts.

The next morning, they didn’t leave early, since they only planned to travel as far as *Bahweting of Gitchi Gumi Sipe*, where they would have to portage, or carry, the canoes along the shore around the rapids of what the fur traders would later name the St. Mary’s River. Many clans would meet there soon for a summer festival, so they would stay several days and be able to feast and talk. Other canoes full of people from their own clan would be joining them for the celebration and then return to their village while B.B. and the same two paddlers would travel on with the traders.

Family groups arrived at the festival on different days, but nobody minded. B.B. knew that it was just after the new moon when they had arrived at the rapids. She had such a wonderful time listening to the festivities that she hoped she would be paddled to this place every summer for many years to come. Singing, dancing, and eating went on for many days. The People sat around great fires and listened to the stories of the past every night while the stars twinkled brightly above.

B.B. and the other canoes also heard pleasant talk among the clans about the coming gift exchange. Men described the number of days of travel ahead for the traders and some of the dangers along the way. The traders were pleased to hear that since the clans of the Keweenaw had come to the festival that year, they could save two days travel around the point of that peninsula with a short distance they had to portage their canoes around marshes at the two ends of an inner lake.

The moon was past full on the last night of the festival. B.B. was anxious to see the huge lake, *Gitchi Gumi*, which lay above the river. A strong west wind blew that morning, so the group decided to stay near the shore. They camped that night at what would later be called Whitefish Point, where they would be protected from the waves building up in that wind. B.B. heard the French traders give their own name to this largest of the Great Lakes, *Lac Superior*—the lake above. As it turned out, they would remain in the lee, the side protected from the wind, of Whitefish Point for two days, waiting for the wind and waves to return to a safe traveling level. B.B. thought the waves were still too large but the wind was calm now. The men said these waves were only “rollers” and paddled on. B.B. saw how her bow cut through the top of each wave and bobbed up and down. The men were right.

It was a full day of hard paddling from there to a safe bay later named Grand Marais. There they spoke with another clan and rested a day. The clan here said the stretch of shore ahead was sometimes dangerous, going along great sand hills and then cliffs with no safe place to land if the wind and waves rose quickly. B.B. gasped when she saw those great hills of sand coming straight down, no place to beach a canoe. The cliffs following were even larger. They stopped briefly at the only beach. There the People offered tobacco to the spirits of the cliffs, asking for continued safe travel. B.B. watched all around for any signs of increasing wind as they passed by colorful cliffs, one of which a Frenchman said looked like a castle. B.B. didn't understand the word.

Another clan met them in a bay protected by a large island once they were safely past the cliffs. This clan smiled and nodded at the talk of exchanging gifts with the French. Then it was an easy day's paddle to a safe place that would later be named Presque Isle, where yet another clan welcomed them. It was such a lovely place, B.B. wished they had stayed longer.

Their next segment would be their longest paddle yet in one day, all the way to what the French would name L'Anse, the end of the bay. Good weather favored them as they left during the pre-sunrise light, and they did not arrive until the post-sunset twilight, never stopping even to eat, but paddling with long, hard strokes the whole day. They could have stopped along the way in places where rivers entered Lake Superior providing safe harbors, but chose not to. A cliff at L'Anse, similar to the ones B.B. had seen a few days before but not nearly so long, dropped off into a flat area with a sandy beach in front of a marsh. They rested a few days and had good meetings with the clans in that area. It had now been nearly one moon since they had left B. B.'s village and the fur traders spoke well of the journey so far.

The next morning, they woke to cold, drizzling rain. The local clan's elders warned that worse weather might be on the way. So, they decided to stay close to the eastern shore of Keweenaw Bay and got into the safety of the inner lake beyond the marshes as soon as they could. The group turned B.B. and the other canoe over so they would not fill with rainwater. She was glad to stay put for a while—heavy waves made her feel unsteady. It was a good decision, as two days of heavy rain and wind did indeed follow. On the third morning, the weather cleared and they had good paddling through the inner lake. It was a quick haul around a shallow marsh, and then back onto *Gitchi Gumi*. It was good paddling all the way to the mouth of the Ontonagon River. The Ojibwa clan there welcomed them and agreed to trade in the coming years, but at that time, they did not take the strange new men up the river to see their great secret. They did, however, send a canoe of their own to show them which islands in a group later named the Apostle Islands housed other clans who might like to meet them.

B.B. and the group spent two days amid those lovely islands off the shore of what would later be named Bayfield, Wisconsin. One more jaunt took them to the "nose" of Lake Superior and a clan of Ojibwa in the area now called Duluth, Minnesota. They had been traveling over a month now, and decided to rest a few days. B.B. and the other canoes were glad of it and enjoyed listening to the discussions between the fur traders and the Ojibwa clan elders as they sat around camp fires.

"There are many more clans along the rivers up this shore," B.B. heard, "many days more travel—first north, then east and then south again, much farther than you have already come, before you will circle back to where you began on *Gitchi Gumi*."

Another added, "If you trust us, leave these trade things with us, and we will make the journey at least to the north shore at the head of the lake and as far as Lake Nipigon, telling them of the place of trade you describe."

The Frenchmen nodded.

The following day, they began the journey back along the way they had come. Now they paddled harder and farther each day, cutting through the middle of the Keweenaw again, but this time heading straight across the bay and on beyond it. They spent the nights in protected river entrances they found along the way. The weather remained good, so the journey back required only half the time of the trip west.

The home clan welcomed the travelers back after their journey. B.B. had enjoyed her long adventure, but she was glad to be home, too. The women were relieved to have their best canoe back; it was time for the rice harvest. Their Huron cousins left with the two Frenchmen two days later.

B.B. Canoe had proven that her people were experts in the art of canoe building. Her hope to be at many summer festivals came to pass. Her adventures would continue over many years for trade, fishing, and for the wild rice harvests.

You can see a replica of Birch Bark Canoe at the Museum of Ojibwa Culture, 500 N. State St., Saint Ignace, Michigan, 49781. It is open Memorial Day to June 30, seven days a week from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.; July 1 through Labor Day from 9:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m., and from Labor Day to Oct. 31, from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Check for any changes in hours or for tours by calling 906-643-9161 or: museumofojibwaculture.net/index.html or: ojibmus@lighthouse.net