

Beginnings of the Oregon Kayak and Canoe Club

Rob Blickensderfer, July 13, 2018

In the Beginning

Today's kayaks are the result of an evolution that started with the kayaks used by the indigenous peoples of the Arctic regions. The early kayaks were used for hunting in the ocean and transporting goods. In contrast, today's kayaks are for fun and sport.

Most early kayaks had a single hatch for one person, the hunter, who was sealed in the hatch with a skirt to keep out water. Some kayaks had two or more hatches. Kayaks for hauling goods were open on the top. Boats were constructed of ribs of graduated sizes made of bone or driftwood spaced along the length of the boat. Longitudinal stringers were sewn to the ribs with animal sinews. The structure was covered with seal or sea lion skin. Boats were narrow and often 20 or more feet long.

By the late 19th century, canvas replaced the animal skins on both kayaks and birchbark canoes of North America. The canvas was stretched over the frame and waterproofed with pitch, or beeswax, or by rubbing clay into the fabric and painting it. Around the early 1900's, the sport of kayaking first developed in southern Germany on rivers running from the Alps. Later, the boats were designed to fold and put into a bag for ease of transporting to the river. The kayak was assembled on the bank and then inserted into its fabric skin. It was called *das Faltboot*, the Foldboat. By 1950, with the development of vinyl coated fabrics, boats were further improved. The sports of paddling down a river, racing down a river, and running slalom gates in whitewater began to grow – especially in Europe.



Put-in, Wind River Race, 1951. Few boats finished the race. Photo by Clyde Jones.

Meanwhile, in Oregon...

Even though Oregon had some of the finest whitewater rivers in the U.S., it was among the last places to see the sport of whitewater kayaking develop. When I came to the Willamette Valley in 1959 I saw no kayaks and only an occasional canoe. During the 1960's a few foldboats appeared. Some were the folding take-apart type, others were the fixed rigid-frame type. Some were made by the Folbot Company in the U. S. Some were purchased from England as a kit which was shipped across the Atlantic by freighter for a total price of about \$100. I purchased a non-folding Folbot in 1964. Being 16 to 18 feet in length, these kayaks were fast on flatwater, but in whitewater they were difficult to maneuver.



The Author's Vinyl-over-wood-frame Folbot. Willamette River, 1965.

Photo by the author

By 1965 a small group of tandem foldboaters had formed in the Corvallis area and we were paddling the class 1 and 2 sections of rivers such as the McKenzie, Santiam and Umpqua. In Portland a few kayakers were running solo foldboats on rivers such as the Clackamas, Sandy and Deschutes. Tandem canoes were sometimes seen in Oregon, but most were aluminum with a full-length keel. Thus, canoers paddled mostly flat water and class 1 rivers. McKenzie River drift boats, however, had been used in Oregon by fishers since the 1920's or earlier. Skilled rowers could run class 3 and some class 4 rapids. Drift boats were a smaller version of the New England dory used for fishing off the Atlantic Coast. Prince Helfrich of Eugene was a well-known drift boat guide who made first descents on several Oregon rivers, including the class 4 Owyhee River above Rome.

Wooden drift boats were the standard craft on the Rogue River. When six Californians from the San Francisco Bay area arrived to run the Rogue in 1965, it made news with photos in the Grants Pass newspaper. Among the group was Rod Kiel who had come earlier from Germany. Most of the group

paddled foldboats, one woman paddled a fiberglass kayak, and Rod Kiel paddled a Klepper slalom folding boat. Rod had considerable experience paddling it in the whitewater rivers of California. He shortly thereafter came to Portland and joined the few paddlers there.



Klepper Slalom Foldboat. 1966. Rod Kiel, an original member of OKCC.

Photo by Dagmar Kiel.

The Great Leap Forward

Fiberglass-epoxy composites were developed in the U.S. in the 1940's for WW2 aircraft. It seems that construction of fiberglass kayaks began in Germany during the 1950's. This drastically changed kayak construction by eliminating the internal frame and creating a hard-shell exterior. The fiberglass kayaks resulted in a large increase in the sport of whitewater boating. Slalom racing also became more popular as the sport grew. These fast, sleek, maneuverable kayaks appeared in New England around 1960 and began to spread around the United States. From New England the fiberglass kayaks and the sport of whitewater kayaking spread quickly to the rivers of Appalachia, Minnesota-Wisconsin, the Ozarks, Colorado, California, and Washington ---and then to OREGON.

According to Rod Kiel, the first fiberglass kayaks made in Oregon were probably those made in Portland by Spencer Beebe in 1966 from molds made from two Klepper fiberglass kayaks from Germany. Ted Ragsdale had previously taught Spencer how to make fiberglass kayak molds and kayaks in Colorado. They produce a significant number of fiberglass kayaks and called their business Northwest Kayaks. Spencer and Ted were probably the first whitewater kayakers in Oregon, but they were not involved in the formation OKCC.

Scott Arighi, who had learned to kayak in Wisconsin, came to Oregon in 1964. He paddled C-1 but soon changed to a kayak. Finding other paddlers was not easy. Margie Smith came from Wisconsin in 1967 to join Scott as co-leader for a University of Wisconsin Hoofers trip on the Lower Salmon River. They paddled an OC-2 together and it went so well that Margie returned to Oregon in 1968 to marry Scott. They began paddling solo kayaks actively with the Portland group.

In December of 1970 the active Portland paddlers got together to form a kayak club. Rod Kiel recalls that they met at a restaurant in NW Portland. In attendance were Scott Arighi, Margie Arighi, Rod Kiel, Bob Collmer, Lloyd Likens, Gene Adolphson, Clark Stanley, and others. Because Clark had experience with the kayaking group of the San Francisco Sierra Club, he was elected President of the

new Club. Margi Arighi was elected Secretary with the job of sending out trip schedules. The club was named the Oregon Kayak and Canoe Club, founded in late, probably December, 1970.

The club initially had no formal newsletter. The Secretary, Margi Arighi contacted the members by phone to conscript trip leaders. With two or more trips listed every week, members kayaked a lot and maintained their enthusiasm and comradery. The earliest trip schedule known is one I saved -- a hand-written single-page post marked 27 April 1971, just a few months after the formation of OKCC. It is the Spring schedule for March through May with 19 trips scheduled! They include the upper Wilson, upper Molalla, Nahalem exploratory, North Santiam, Washougal, Clackamas, Kalama, Sandy, upper McKenzie, and Toutle Gorge, Class 4 before Mt. St Helens blew up. Trip leaders included the Arighis, Clark Stanley, Bob Collmer, Lloyd Likens, Bev Karplus, and Jay and Jed Langley. The Arighis led nine trips!

This small group of early OKCC kayakers was obviously very active. The OKCC grew rapidly and in a few years had 80 members. The Arighis were very active exploring the river of Oregon. They found put-ins and take-outs and classified the difficulty of many of the popular rivers we run today. Many Trips were a first descent. Rod Kiel, Ted Ragsdale, and Paul Ho were the first to run some of the more difficult runs, such as the Sandy River Gorge, 1977, and many others. Paul Ho later returned to Taiwan and introduced the sport of kayaking there.

Swimming Pools

About the time OKCC was formed, it was learned that the Washington Kayak Club in Seattle used a swimming pool for teaching the Eskimo roll. Scott Arighi, a chemistry professor at Reed College, got permission to use the college pool. The first pool kayak rolling classes in Oregon were taught by the Arighis in 1969 or 1970. In 1979 Rod Kiel started teaching kayaking at the Tualatin Hills Recreation Center. He continued that as well as offering English Gate Slalom practice for 5 years.



Margie and Scott Arighi, Original Members of OKCC. Photo by the author



Fiberglass Kayaks and Wetsuits. All boats were 4 meters long. Note 90-degree feather paddles. OKCC trip on the North Santiam River. Early 1980's. Photo by the author.



Bob Collmer, First Signed Member of OKCC. John Day River, 1988. Photo by the author

In 1970 OKCC put on the first slalom kayak race in Oregon. It was on the Roaring River section of the Clackamas River. Some of the kayakers got knocked over in the race and not all could roll up. All kayaks were 4 meters long. Various kayak hull designs were developed but the hull length was standardized at 4 meters. That length was agreed upon to level the playing field for all slalom racers. As a result, the length of ALL recreational kayaks was 4 meters (13 ft, 2 inches) until about 1980.



The First Slalom Race in Oregon. Clackamas River, 1970. Photo by the author.

In 1972 the Collowash Kayak Slalom was put on by OKCC. It was the first designated Olympic Qualifying Race in Oregon.

The Bob's Hole event on the Clackamas River was started around 1971. The event involved playing in Bob's Hole. Judges gave points for the quality and finesse of each paddler. This became an annual event for many years. Bob's Hole itself was named for Bob Brietenstein because every time he kayaked the Clackamas River he tried to punch the hole, and every time it ate him.



Bob's Hole Rodeo Began circa 1971.

Photo 1987 by the author.

In the spring of 1970 the OKCC offered a beginning kayaking class organized by Scott and Margie Arighi who were also the principal instructors. Bob Collmer and Lloyd Likens helped with instruction and rescue. The first session was on the lower Sandy River where they taught basic strokes and eddy turns with a low brace. Eight of us from Corvallis took the course and some of us continued boating regularly with OKCC. In 1975, Chuck Leach and I, gave up on the Sierra Club contingent, Marys Kayak Club, for lack of members. With others in the Corvallis region we formed our own club, the **Willamette Kayak and Canoe Club**. A few years later, a group of flat water canoers in Portland, who had been paddling together for several years, founded the **Lower Columbia Canoe Club**. The exact date is not known, but according to Dennis Deck, a canoer in that early group, it was probably 1979 or 1980.

The **decked** canoe made its appearance in Oregon in 1971 when Jay and Jed Langley joined the OKCC. The decked canoe is more like a kayak than a canoe. The cockpit, spray skirt, hull shape, and length are similar to a kayak, and it behaves much like a kayak. Technically, it's a canoe because the paddler kneels and uses a single blade paddle. Most of us had never seen a decked canoe before.

About 1973, decked canoe paddlers Bruce and Genny Weber arrived in Oregon and joined the OKCC. Bruce had raced in National competitions. The decked canoe never gained popularity in Oregon. The cramped kneeling position and a very small cockpit were quite uncomfortable, which resulted in its demise.



Fiberglass kayak punching Spencer's Hole. North Santiam River, OKCC Trip, November 1972. The kayaker is the 16- year-old son of the author. Note wetsuit. Photo by the author.

Finding Boats and Equipment

Finding kayaks for sale in the early years was very difficult because none of the manufacturers we know today existed. In Europe, however, kayaks were being manufactured. As boats made their way to the U. S. they could be replicated. In the late 1960's a small fiberglass shop in Portland that built fiberglass water tanks began making kayaks from molds taken from two kayaks that OKCC members had purchased from Europe – a Prijon and a Mandesta , German and Italian slalom racing designs. The cost was \$150. Quite a few were made the early 1970's, and they were popular among Oregon's kayakers. All kayaks were the still the same length, 4 meters or 13 ft 2 in. About this time the superior Mark IV kayak, from Germany, appeared in the eastern US and made its way to Oregon. Easy Rider in Washington State started making the German Augsburg kayak, a well-liked boat. The first roto-molded plastic boat, the Hollowform, appeared in the mid 1970's, but it's poor performance and susceptibility to hull cracking soon gave it a bad reputation. It was nicknamed "The Slug".

We had to make our own spray skirts -- from coated nylon. Helmets were desired, but not available. Some boaters used bike helmets. I recall a three-day OKCC trip on the Deschutes River during which Rod Keil wore only a gentleman's fedora, for sun protection. Flotation --- we hadn't heard of in the early days, but when we did, we stuffed an old inner tube into the stern and a beach ball into the bow. Most paddles were made of wood and were 86 to 92 inches (218 to 234 cm) long. Clark Stanley and Scott Arighi began making shorter paddles with larger, flat, fiberglass blades on aluminum shafts. All paddles had a 90-degree feather. If the blades were asymmetrical in shape, the paddle became either a right-hand or left-hand control. The standard was left-hand control, so most of us



The Problem with Fiberglass Kayaks. Photo by the author.

were left-hand control paddlers. By 1975 Bob Collmer of the OKCC began making very good paddles in his garage. The paddles had fiberglass blades on an aluminum shaft. I conducted bend and strength tests on his fiberglass-resin composites to help him optimize the epoxy-fiberglass lay-ups. Bob built many Collmer paddles until selling his business to Hank Hays, an expert OC-1 paddler and an OKCC member. Hank continued the business as Lightning Paddles until selling the business in 2008 to a company in Germany.

The Next Step Forward

By the beginning of the 1980's, fiberglass kayaks were essentially replaced by the new roto-molded plastic boats. These boats were much tougher and very resistant to the hard knocks that could destroy a fiberglass boat. It was about this time also, when the length of boats began shrinking. These shorter, tougher boats allowed boaters to make amazing moves with abandon and little concern over smashing their boat.

River Camping Trips

The Arighis loved extended river trips with camping along the river. Quite a few kayakers experienced their first overnight self-supported river trip by boating with the Arighis. During the 1970's the Arighis organized many overnight kayak trips. These trips were always self-supported because there were no rafters to carry gear. Large rafts, outfitted with rowing frames, and rowed with the techniques used by drift boat oarsmen had not yet appeared in most of Oregon. Such rafts were not commercially available but existed as WW2 surplus life rafts. They were owned and operated primarily by river guides on the Colorado Grand Canyon, the Rogue, the Salmon of Idaho, and a few other rivers. Rafts rapidly gained popularity as whitewater craft because they were much more forgiving than wooden drift boats.



Campfires were normal. No stoves. There was plenty of firewood. No chairs! Photo by the author.

River camping trips without raft support for carrying food and gear were the norm. The Arighis developed packing systems for fitting all the required food and gear into a kayak. Dry bags, as we know them today, had not yet been developed. But heavy-duty rubber bags were found in WW2 war-surplus stores, and they kept out water even better than most dry bags of today! Alternatively, items would be double wrapped in plastic bags and packed into an abrasion resistant cloth bag, such as an Army canvas bivey sack. Margie developed minimalistic food packaging to an art. Food items were removed from their original packages. The measured amounts of food and seasonings needed for a one-pot meal were mixed and sealed in a plastic bag. To prepare the meal, food was dumped into a pot of boiling water. No fresh fruits or vegetables were allowed -- they had to be dehydrated to save space and weight. We took turns preparing the group dinner. This was efficient and provided a variety of excellent dinners. It also gave everyone else free time. To further save weight, neither a cook stove nor fuel was carried. Wood was plentiful at any campsite, so we cooked on wood fires. Cooking utensils and dishes were washed in the river. The toilet system was a trowel or the heel of a shoe for digging a hole. Not a problem, because no one would likely use *that* campsite again for several years and if so, it would probably be one of us.



Chuck Leach. River camp. Cooking a group dinner. Photo by the author.



Washing dishes in the river after dinner. Ellen Oliver and Sara Blickensderfer.
Photo by the author.

The Arighis were explorers. They led OKCC kayakers on many first descents, including the upper Mollalla, upper McKenzie, Trask, Nehalem, and Little North Santiam Troll's Teeth section. It is difficult for most kayakers today to realize how little information about the rivers in Oregon was available. Most of the put-ins and take-out of today did not exist. The character of a river was often unknown – were there big pour overs, boulder gardens, log jams? We soon learned that asking the local folks about the details of a river was futile.

While exploring rivers, Margie took notes of rapids, river features, landmarks, camp sites and estimated distances. She wrote with a grease pencil on a sheet of plastic secured to the front deck of her kayak. The exploring and note taking by the Arighis culminated in their 1974 book, ***Wildwater Touring***, published by MacMillan Co. which was among the very early whitewater kayaking books in the U.S. The book gave information and precautions on running rivers, packing for extended trips. Detailed maps showed major rapids, campgrounds, and mileage for several major rivers in Oregon and the Salmon River of Idaho.

An impetus for writing the book was the need for more private boaters on the rivers to fight for river protection and private boater rights. In the 70's and 80's Scott went to Salem several times to lobby against requiring boat licenses for kayaks and canoes. Margie published several articles in American Whitewater.

I do not know much about OKCC after 1980 because I was involved with the Willamette Kayak and Canoe Club. The last time I boated with OKCC was in 1993 on an early trip down the Salmonberry River.

The author welcomes any additional pertinent information. Contact: blickr29@gmail.com

Many Thanks to All the Early Oregon Kayakers

Thank you for introducing whitewater kayaking to Oregon and founding the Oregon Kayak and Canoe Club. You instructed and encouraged many boaters along the way.

My special thanks to the Arighis with whom I paddled many a mile. They invited me on many overnight river camping adventures. These include my first of many trips down the Owyhee from Three Forks to Rome, the Selway River, Middle Fork Salmon, and sea kayaking among islands in British Columbia.

Note: The Arighis, Rod Kiel, and Bob Collmer are living in the Portland area (2018). Margi still kayaks the John Day River and Rod still does day trips.