

Maushop Brings His People Home

Dugout Canoe Trip to Martha's Vineyard

Linda Coombs, *Associate Director, Wampanoag Indian Program*

Maushop was a Wampanoag man of the earliest ancient times. Our history tells us he was a giant who created the Elizabeth Islands, Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket, among other areas. At a point too far back to fathom, he brought his people to Aquinnah on the island of Noepe (Martha's Vineyard) to live. It was a peaceful place and very abundant. To feed his family, he caught whales with his bare hands, dashed them against the clay cliffs of Aquinnah, forever staining some of the clay red. At times when heavy fogs engulf the Cape and Islands, Maushop is known to be smoking his pipe.

While Maushop, being a giant, could easily step from the Cape to island to island, the rest of the People of our size used dugout canoes. These boats were made of the logs of white pine, oak, or chestnut and were hollowed out with fire, and then the charred wood scraped away. The Wampanoag people were excellent navigators and regularly traveled from many points on the mainland to the Cape and all the islands in what is now Vineyard Sound.

Traveling the rivers and lakes as well as the ocean in the dugouts had been done for many thousands of years. Canoeing and travel by foot were the main forms of transportation and had always been. We don't know when the making and use of dugout canoes began to decline, but like many other indigenous ways, it was a gradual decline. When it finally stopped, we don't real-

ly know. One educated guess might be by the 18th century as Wampanoag men became prominent as whalers. It could be that for 200 years, Wampanoag people did not make or use dugout canoes until well into the 20th century. Around 1980, two Mashpee Wampanoag women paddled a dugout of their making down the Nemasket River, which is known as the "Wampanoag Canoe Trail."

That is also about the time that the Wampanoag Indian Program (WIP) began making canoes. For more than 20 years, canoes have been back on the Eel River in Plymouth. Every spring and every fall a canoe has been created on and launched from the banks of the river. They have been plied back and forth to the delight of the visitors and enjoyment of staff (sometimes far more than the allotted 10 minutes off site). They have been raced during Strawberry Thanksgiving, where some have won, some have sunk (those non-staff novices), and some have just gone around in circles. Some have even participated in a cross-cultural endeavor performed by the local graduating class in their apparently annual ritual of releasing one of the boats to the freedom of the river currents.

So the dugouts live once again. To paddle on the Eel River Pond, however, is one thing. To do what our ancestors did and travel from the mainland out to the islands is another thing completely. To do what has not been done in 200 years is an awesome and profound undertaking.



A heavy fog gave a very ethereal feeling to the trip, but also provided cover from the morning sun.

The trip to Martha's Vineyard is something that WIP staff had been hoping to do for five years before it actually came to happen, and we had several reasons for wanting to undertake this crossing. Traditional Wampanoag territory includes Martha's Vineyard, Nantucket, and the Elizabeth Islands, with part of the western border being at Narragansett Bay. Prior to European contact and for many years after, people traveled all these waters on well-known routes. They were completely familiar with the tides and currents, rips and shoals, seasons and weather patterns. The trip last August was to acknowledge the navigational prowess of our ancestors; to celebrate our traditional way of life which we understand to be viable and sustainable; and to remind us of our connection to our ancestors, the earth and waters, and our responsibility to them.

It was a trip of very historic import as it happened within the ancestral Wampanoag homeland, and with Wampanoag people from several tribes: Aquinnah, Mashpee, and Manomet (Herring Pond). Other staff and community members of other nations joined us as well, including Micmac, Narragansett, and Pequot. The trip was made with two canoes made at Hobbamock's

Homesite. The larger is 28 feet long and made of tulip poplar, and the other 20 feet and of white pine.

The trip is something we feel was meant to happen when it did. It was not something that was in our budget, so we got the go-ahead to fundraise for it. This process, however, did not begin until March. That was very late considering our time frame: for the trip in August we wanted to begin weekly canoe practices in April. A very generous contribution from our friend and long-time supporter, Mrs. Susan Jackson, Trustee and Chair of the Wampanoag Advisory Committee, enabled us to begin. The Mohegan Tribe of Connecticut also granted us a donation, and to them both we are extremely grateful. Participation in this project was voluntary, but we wanted to reciprocate everyone's interest and dedication. As practices were usually from 5:30 – 7:30, we provided a healthy snack beforehand so people wouldn't have to ply the waters on an empty stomach. Everyone also received a dinner and mileage allowance. Most people traveled long distances to attend practices, coming from the Cape, New Bedford, and southern Rhode Island.

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The mishoons arrive at Tashmoo on Martha's Vineyard after only one hour and 45 minutes.

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In organizing the trip, WIP staff worked with a team of consultants. An Aquinnah tribal member, Brian "Chip" Vanderhoop, assisted in locating the departure and landing points. Chip owns a charter fishing boat service, Conomo Charters, and was also one of our guide boats during the crossing. Earl Mills, Jr., Mashpee Wampanoag, assisted in training staff in handling a boat in open waters. He is an experienced ocean-canoer, having canoed over the Bay of Fundy and down the coast to Boston. The Maritime Artisans of Plimoth Plantation assisted us with the transportation of the dugouts to and from the points of departure, and with navigational aspects as well.

We very graciously were offered a second guide boat owned by Vernon Welch of Aquinnah, husband of Aquinnah tribal member Berta Welch, Overseer and member of the Wampanoag Committee. Both guide boats served to carry staff, a nurse, photographers, and videographers from PAC-TV.

The weekly practices did begin in April, rain or shine. We only cancelled a couple of times because of weather. Those participating had to be ready to handle any number of conditions: wind, rain, waves, currents. The two canoes were moored down by *Mayflower II*, and at first, practices took place around the harbor. Soon the boats were headed out toward Clark's Island, which is five miles offshore. Going out there and back became the usual destination of the practices.

It was finally decided that the dugouts would leave from Falmouth just below the lighthouse and go across to Tashmoo, below Tisbury on the Island. This is a five mile straight shot, and the shortest distance between two points. Mrs. Jackson came through for us once again, as it happens that relatives of hers live on the beach near the lighthouse. They graciously offered to let us leave from the beach in front of their house, as well as to come there for some practices. As it turned out, only one practice the week before the crossing took place in Falmouth, although more had been wanted.

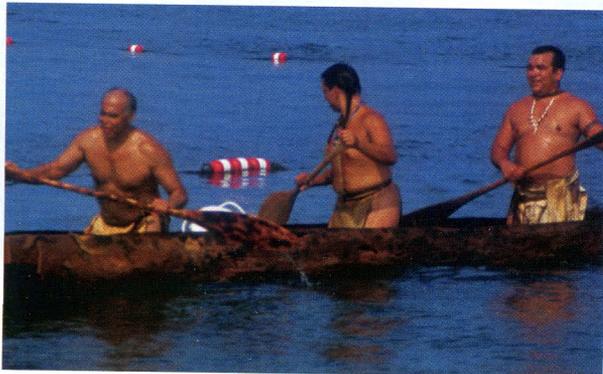
August 17 was fast approaching, and excitement was very high. That particular date was chosen to coordinate with the annual presentation by the Aquinnah Wampanoag of the "Legends of Maushop," which is also referred to as the Pageant. The history portrayed in the Pageant is that of the Aquinnah Wampanoag, and is acted out in pantomime to the narration of the stories. The plan for the day was as follows: meet guide boats or be at beach in Falmouth (depending on which boat one was traveling in) at 6:00 am; make the crossing to Tashmoo, which was estimated to take 4 to 5 hours; get transported by guide boat or van up to Lobsterville Beach in Aquinnah for a traditional clam-bake; attend or participate in the Pageant that evening.

As it always does, 6:00 am rolled around pretty fast. We awoke to a very overcast morning, but no rain and no wind. Those going on the guide boats waited for them at the docks in Falmouth Harbor, and watched them materialize out of pea soup fog. From that point we went over to the beach where the dugouts were to leave from. They were already in the water, and participants, dressed in traditional deerskin clothing, were making their own preparations. Quite a sizeable crowd had gathered on the beach to see boats make their historic launch. They watched until guide boats and canoes both disappeared into the fog, six men and one woman in the larger canoe and three men in the smaller.

At first we were concerned about the fog because it was so thick. However, it turned out to be a blessing because it provided a cover against the sun beating down, which it was trying very hard to do in the middle of the ocean. The water could not have been calmer, save for the wakes of a few other boats we passed. It was a mystical scene to see canoes and paddlers silhouetted in the fog now glowing with a golden hue from the rays of the morning sun. The Woods Hole - Martha's Vineyard ferry went by somewhat closely, providing the challenge of a large wake and a mystical experience of a different kind. But then the fog lifted and before long we could see the beach at Tashmoo. You should have seen the faces of the people whose homes are right there when canoes and swimmers pulled up on the beach, everyone in breechcloths and all manner of 17th-century dress. I think they had a mystical experience, too.

Those of us who arrived by canoe and guide boat actually beat the rest of the WIP staff who had come over on the ferry and were coming up-island by van. The canoe crossing had only taken 1 hour and 45 minutes. As stated earlier, conditions were absolutely perfect. It was a trip meant to happen. A circle completed. By now the sun was fully out and the fog completely gone, and it was very hot, so everyone went swimming while waiting for the van with the rest of our folks.

Some went by van and some stayed right on the guide boats to ride over to Aquinnah, which was 45 minutes away by water. Upon arrival in Lobsterville many pitched in with preparations for the clambake, went swimming, went to check out their hotel accommodations, or just rested. And finally the chowder was ready! And then finally the bake itself was done and ready to be served! If no one felt like moving after paddling over there, they really didn't after that meal! Talk about working up an appetite.



By then it was getting close to sunset, and we all headed up to the Aquinnah Tribal Building. It was time to get ready for the Pageant. Many of the Aquinnah people were already there getting dressed. When everyone was ready – regalia on, hair combed and braided, lost moccasins found or quickly replaced, props all set to go – we ran through the songs and dances to be done in the Pageant to get everyone warmed up. Behind the building is a natural amphitheatre with a stage built of earth and held in front by small boulders. There is a small wetu built on the stage. The stage is surrounded by the woods, and the audience sits on the hill that comes down from the Tribal Building to the stage.

As dusk drops into night, “Maushop” gathers his people over by a path through the woods that leads to the stage. The singers walk down the hill amidst a great feeling of anticipation and go up on the stage behind a large painted mural of the clay cliffs. The only light is from the fire burning brightly in front of the wetu, and the moon and stars shining from above. The only sound is from the surf and the summer night crickets. There is always a feeling of peacefulness out there. There is a feeling of softness and balminess and timelessness. It feels as if couldn't have been much different way back when Maushop actually was there. As the narrator begins to speak, Maushop's people come through a path in the woods, carrying torches to light their way. It is quite a stunning sight to see them moving through the trees in the dark under the clear starlit sky.

The Pageant is such that it holds the audience mesmerized, if only for its short hour. It marked the end of a long but extremely rewarding day. It was indeed a day of mending the hoop. As a matter of fact, almost as soon as the dugouts landed, people were already saying “What are we going to do next year?” Someone else said “Next time we should do a women's trip!” And I've heard that more than once now. Well, folks, it won't be this year for a trip. Once again, it was not able to go into the budget; and fundraising last minute on top of other responsibilities is more than a bit overwhelming. But we can plan for a little farther in the future. And we can always start practicing now anyway, get those biceps in shape. Well, Wamp ladies, what do you say? – meet you at the harbor?

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left: Paddling was still hard work even though there was no wind and the water was calm.

right: The mishoons prepare to launch from the beach below the Falmouth lighthouse.

