

The Birch Canoe Builder, Filmmaker: Craig Hinde, copyright 1970. 16 mm, color, sound over, 23 minutes. Produced by Southern Illinois University. Distributed by ACI Films, 35 West 45th St., New York, N. Y. 10026. Purchase \$275.

by Ormond H. Loomis

Bill Hafeman is one of less than a dozen craftsman who still make birch bark canoes. Thus, by filming Hofeman, Craig Hinde has made a valuable contribution to material culture studies. Considering what could have been done, though, with this septuagenarian artist, The Birch Canoe Builder is a disappointment. Yet, in many respects, Canoe Builder is delightful. It takes the viewer to the woods of Minnesota, where he watches Hafeman and his wife make a canoe. Some details of the work are explained by Hafeman's accompanying monologue. Occasional remarks about the craftsman's motivation and world view add a refreshing dimension not found in routine "how to do it" films. If you like traditional crafts, and have never seen a canoe built, you will enjoy this film.

The technical quality of Canoe Builder helps make it a treat. The sound track is clear and easy to follow. The beautiful color scenes of the north woods are on par with shots from Disney nature films. Only the sporadic insertion of black and white still photos, which supply historical background, disrupts the placid mood of this sylvan portrait.

As an examination of Hafeman's work, however, Canoe Builder is superficial. Except for chance statements, i.e., that Hafeman learned from a fellow named McLain how to build without using nails, no real attention is given to the sources of Hafeman's knowledge. Similarly, the coverage of his equipment is inadequate. At one point, he is shown using a shaving horse and drawknife, and at another he uses an electric drill. Hinde makes no effort to identify the age and associated skills behind these and other tools, or to indicate which Hafeman introduced to his building and which he maintains from tradition. Even the consideration of Hafeman's motives, one of the film's strong points, is slight; the sound track is edited in such a way that the audience cannot tell whether the discussion flows spontaneously or in response to deleted questions. It would seem that Hinde took more care to focus his cameras than his interview.

Although the flyer accompanying Canoe Builder says that "all the steps in the making of the canoe are shown," far too much information on birch canoe manufacture is omitted. The complex way bow stems and gunwale ends are laminated to make bending possible, is not shown for instance. Facts are neglected, such as the preferred seasons for harvesting bark, roots, and other materials. The irony of Hafeman's remarks about man's devastating effect upon the ecological balance, juxtaposed with his cutting the protective bark off a paper birch is left unexplored. Mrs. Hafeman's role in the manufacture, the qualitative differences between birch bark and other canoes, economic considerations regarding time invested, cost of materials, and buyer demands and a long list of other pertinent details are grossly overlooked.

The Birch Canoe Builder should appeal to a popular audience. Assuming that it was made with such intent, it is commendably instructive and provocative. Folklorists seeing it, however, are likely to be frustrated that Hinde did not go the extra mile to produce a documentary which might be used comparatively with other works on canoe building to reveal how this American tradition is evolving. Considering the state of this vanishing craft and Hafeman's age, a thorough documentary is needed.

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