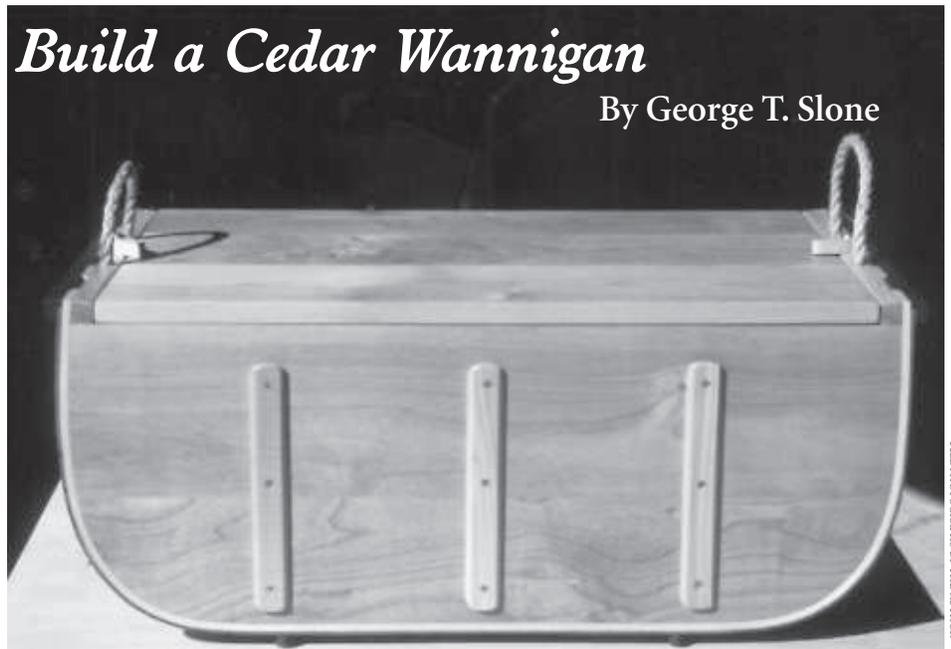


Build a Cedar Wannigan

By George T. Slone

George Slone has a solution for those of us who would like to have the satisfaction of using canoe building techniques without the spending the time needed to build a canoe.



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There are many ways to transport material in a canoe, ranging from packs, paper grocery bags (not good when the bottoms get wet), plastic bags, and junk thrown inside your jacket and tied at the top to approach the shape of a bag to fancy waterproof zippered packs. Or you can build a wannigan.

During the early exploration and trading by the voyageurs of the Northwest and Hudson Bay Companies material to be traded to the Indians for furs was transported in heavy freight canoes often in wooden boxes. The Indians of the area had never seen wooden boxes. Their main method of storage was simple birch bark containers and holes dug into the ground for food storage. The Ojibway Indians, at least based upon historical insight, described these boxes with their word wannigan (wanikan).

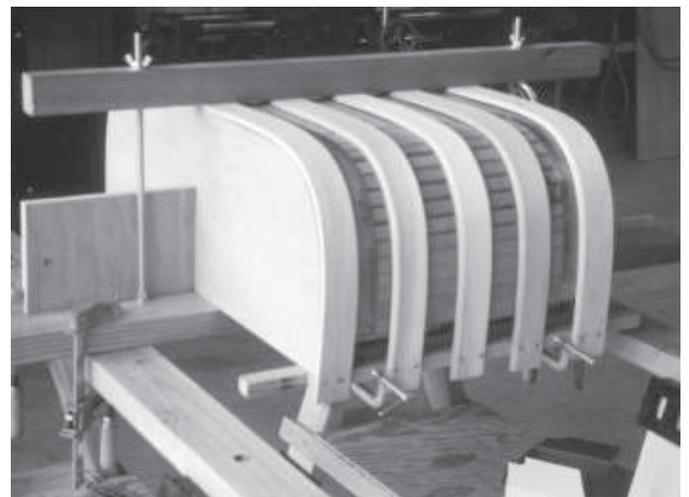


The author bending the ribs over the wannigan form.

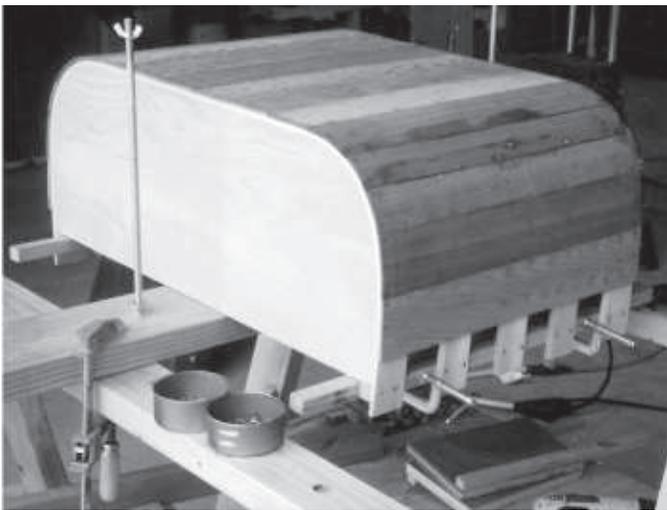
The literal meaning is “man-made hole in the ground,” which is a very logical description of this item new to the Ojibway.

Wannigans have been made from many different materials, including plastic, plywood, and metal. A few years ago, Rob Stevens wrote a well-received article for *Wooden Canoe* (Dec. 1999, Vol. 22, No. 6, Issue 96) on making a square-shaped wannigan. Another method of construction is to build them in the shape of a traditional wood and canvas canoe. Not only are these types pleasing to look at but they fit easily and comfortably inside the canoe, making them convenient to take in and out of the canoe. They tend not to damage the inside of the canoe as do some square shaped containers. I built my first canoe-shaped wannigan in the mid-1960s from a discarded wood and canvas canoe by merely chopping the canoe off and nailing on plywood ends. (Sometimes teenagers do strange things.)

The method of constructing this wannigan follows very



The ribs and sides in place on the form.



With all but the last few planks attached, the wannigan is ready to be removed from the form.

closely the construction methods that have been used in building traditional wood and canvas canoes for the last 130 years. For many people the methods used in wood and canvas canoe building are very satisfying but labor-intensive. The advantage of building this type of wannigan is that most of the canoe building methods are used—form building, steam bending ribs, inner and outer gunwales, planking, clinching canoe tacks, varnishing, and using typical boatbuilding fasteners.

First, a form is made over which the body of the wannigan is built. The form is made similar to a canoe form, $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch by $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch pine strips over plywood stations matched to the size of your canoe. Next sheet metal strips are placed on the form where the steam bent ribs will be positioned. Then, the sides of the wannigan are placed alongside the form.

The steamed ribs are next bent over the form and nailed to the inner gunwales and sideboards with silicon bronze ring nails. Next, the planking is attached using brass canoe tacks, which clinch themselves after contacting the sheet metal strips as in planking a canoe. All except the last few planks are attached so that the wannigan can be lifted off the form.

After it is off the form, the last planks and outer gunwales are attached, all tacks re-clinched, and the inside and outside surfaces sanded. The top is made so that it sits on top of the sideboards and is held in place with swivel knobs attached with silicon bronze screws and finish washers. Next holes are drilled in the inner gunwales for the rope handles, and cleats are attached to the sides and inside surface of the top. Either marine grade spar varnish or Dan-

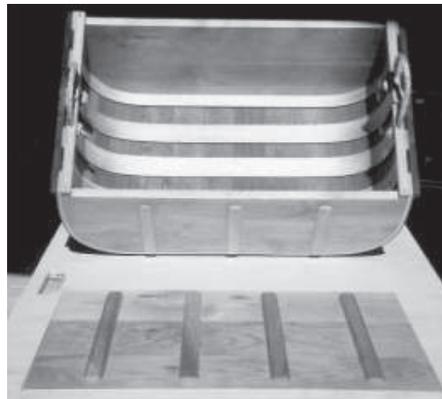
ish oil can be used for finishing the inside and outside of the wannigan.

You obviously have a broader choice of woods for making a wannigan than for canoe building. Normally, I use northern white cedar for the ribs, but I have used Port Orford cedar and elm, which will add a slight amount of weight. The sides and top can be made of northern white cedar or western red cedar; cypress or red alder can be used, but there will be a slight increase in weight. The inner and outer gunwales can be made from any clear hardwoods such as ash, oak, cherry, walnut, hickory, and sassafras. I usually use northern white cedar or western red cedar for planking, mainly due to their lightweight and decay resistance, but given a little imagination, I'm sure you'll find other woods that will work since you only have a small curvature in one direction at the bilge to worry about. Alaska yellow cedar, Port Orford cedar and Atlantic white cedar would be likely candidates. As in most boat building methods, all fasteners should be of copper, silicon bronze, or stainless steel. The overall dimensions for this particular wannigan are 29 inches long by 18 inches

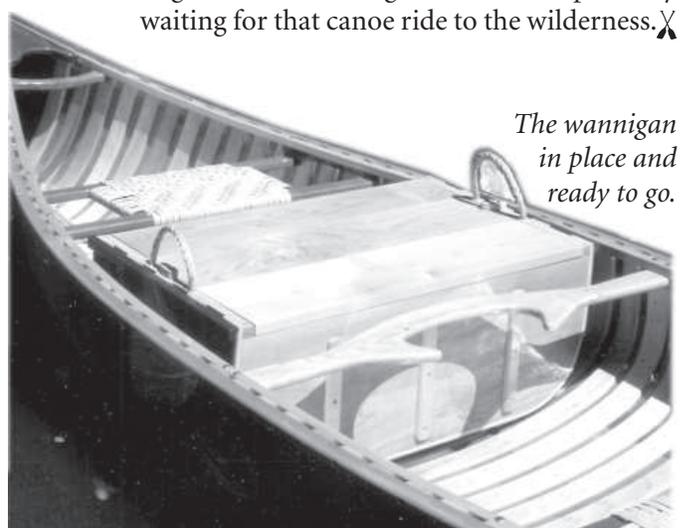
wide by 12 inches deep. The ribs are $\frac{1}{4}$ inch thick by 2 inches wide, the planking is $\frac{5}{32}$ inch thick by 3 inches wide, except for the bilge areas where they decrease in width to prevent splitting. The gunwales are $\frac{3}{4}$ inch square; the side cleats are $\frac{1}{4}$ inch thick by $1\frac{1}{4}$ inches wide. Made from Northern white cedar or western red cedar, this wannigan weighs approximately 12 pounds. One of sitka spruce would weigh about 15 pounds, one from cypress about 17 pounds. The removable top allows easy access to food and gear

and provides a flat table for use at the campsite.

When off duty these containers are many times used for storage in cabins, cottages and homes, patiently waiting for that canoe ride to the wilderness. X



The inside of the finished wannigan.



The wannigan in place and ready to go.