

Who's Paddling? Len Thunberg

By Dave Biss



Len lives in Alexandria, VA and has been a member of the CPA since September 2003.

What brought you to paddling? That's kind of interesting. My wife and I have been vacationing in Maine for about twenty-some years; every summer the same place, Boothbay Harbor. I would say about the second or third year we were up there I gave into the desire that I had of wanting to try a kayak; so I rented one for an hour or two. Just long enough to paddle from the kayak rental place to my cottage and back. I have always had problems with my wrists. I enjoyed the new feel of paddling, but it hurt. I would do this over the next 15 years. I would rent a kayak for about an hour or two. Eventually my wife even tried it once, but it scared her. I always had the idea that it was something that I wanted to do but also that I would not be able to keep it up because of my wrists.

In 2003, I decided I did not want to fool around with sail boats anymore, because it was getting too hard on my body. I started thinking more about kayaking. I stopped at L.L.Bean up in Maine on my way home. I ran across a guy who was a Greenland paddling enthusiast, which I had never heard of. He spent a half hour telling me about the wonders of Greenland paddling; how it is easier on this and easier on that. I thought "Wow, I'm going to look into this." So I went home and sold my last sailboat, went over to Atlantic Kayaks and looked at kayaks. I ended up ordering a Betsy Bay Greenland paddle. I had already bought a kayak, and based upon what was told to me about the Greenland paddle, I decided to start with one to make things easier on my wrists and shoulders. And the Betsy Bay did that. I would occasionally try other people's euro-paddles and they would hurt.

One of the people who worked at Atlantic Kayak at that time was a protégé of Mark Rogers. She had built a kayak with him, and she was a superb paddler and roller; she was really graceful. She told me about the Qajaq USA site, and I started looking at that and reading about these skin-on-frames kayaks, and I thought "that sounds neat!" And then a year later I did not really want to try building a kayak on my own, so I signed up to take a course with Superior Kayaks in one of their SOF building workshops. That worked out great. I really liked the boat that I produced. Then last year, I went to the Washington D.C. craft show where Nick Shade had a strip built boat on display. I just fell in love with the look of it. He had a model called the Petrel. I wanted a kayak with somewhat of a lower deck. He pointed out that there is a Greenland version of his Night Heron. I looked at that and decided I wanted to try one of these. That brings me to what I am finishing up now.

So you started paddling with a Greenland paddle. Would you recommend this strategy to other new kayakers? I started paddling by using a Greenland paddle because of physical problems I have had. Being forced to start that way is a unique experience, but I would recommend to anyone who is not going into whitewater or surfing to try a Greenland paddle. It has no downsides outside of doing one of these two things. And even in surf, people are starting to use Greenland paddles. I am interested in using the technology which the Greenlanders developed to make something that works for me. Greenland style paddles can make the sport more accessible to many people. Another example is the light materials that skin-on-frame boats are made from. These make a finished craft lighter and easier to move around. If I ever start another kayak, I would make it with a nylon covering in order to keep the weight down even more than those I have built already.

Since I have known you, you have always been in the midst of building some kayak or paddle. What have you been working on now? I am finishing off a 'stripper' now. It is the Greenlander Night Heron. I have been working on it since January or the previous year, and am hoping to have it finished by the Delmarva Greenland event this October.

Are there any places you have paddled or things you have done in a kayak that really stand out in your memory? Maine. Boothbay Harbor. There is a lot to look at there. Seals come out while you paddle by. The topography is very interesting, although there are a lot of rocky landings. I also like the Occoquan Reservoir at Fountainhead state park. That is a great local place for a diversion. It is well protected, and has very little boat traffic. Another one of my favorite local places is the Potomac at Belle Haven. But I would have to say my favorite local place to paddle is the South River at Pier 7. I like paddling out of there.

If you could describe the way you think about kayaking, how would you word that? I like spending time in the water. I used to swim varsity, owned sailboats, and rowed a lot. I really love the idea of human powered water craft and the rhythm that is involved in moving these vessels. The same thing has even attracted me to bicycling. To be able to focus on the power you are putting into the activity and the rhythmical feel that comes out of the action.

What brought you to the CPA? During the time that I was visiting Atlantic Kayak regularly, I learned about the club. The CPA has quite a variety to offer. There is a little bit for everyone in the club activities. Participating with the club makes kayaking a very social sport. If one was willing to travel far enough, there is probably something that could be done with other CPA members at least five days a week over the paddling season.

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