



A Good Boat Speaks for Itself: Isle Royale Fishermen and Their Boats

Timothy Cochrane



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Isle Royale is a sliver of land in the rugged northern reaches of Lake Superior. Now a national park renowned for its isolation and untamed natural beauty, Isle Royale was home to a vibrant fishing community from its settlement during the 1880s by Norwegian and Swedish immigrants until the collapse of Lake Superior commercial fishing in the 1950s. Full of historical photographs and diagrams of now derelict watercraft, *A Good Boat Speaks for Itself* tells the story of this unique community through its wooden boats and the stories of those who built and used them.

Timothy Cochrane and Hawk Tolson interviewed dozens of men and women who fished the lake and built the boats that made this life possible. Through these accounts they trace the evolution of this maritime community through the various boat designs used over the years on Isle Royale. From the original Mackinaw sailboats to the gas boats and herring skiffs developed specifically for the harsh conditions of Lake Superior, these wooden boats incorporated Old World traditions of handicraft and pioneering New World technologies. They were an extension of the fishermen who relied on them, helping them to navigate miles out on the open lake in both "dirty weather" and on bright clear days, and were part of a family tradition in which for generations fathers taught sons how to fish, what to look for in a boat, and how to eke out a living from the "Big Lake."

A Good Boat Speaks for Itself is an absorbing chronicle of fishing families who adapted to the rigors of Lake Superior and a valuable historical resource for anyone with an interest in wooden boats.

Timothy Cochrane is superintendent of Grand Portage National Monument on the border of Minnesota and Ontario. He has worked as a folklorist, oral historian, and ranger at Isle Royale. Hawk Tolson has been a freelance archaeologist since 1985, and has participated in projects across the Great Lakes, Southwest, Gulf Coast, and Caribbean. He serves on the board of directors for the Center for Maritime and Underwater Resource Management.



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