



CANADIAN OUTRIGGER HALL OF FAME

Ruth English Matson



Summary

Ruth English Matson is a living legend. During the worst of the COVID Global Pandemic (early/mid/late 2020), the CORA Historical Committee was building a massive collection of Canadian outrigger canoeing history. One of the elusive threads was the story of the emergence and disappearance of a mysterious OC6 named *"The Burrard"*. [01] The pursuit of this story led from Heather Taylor to Jackie Bell to Annie Boulding to the mention of someone named Ruth Matson. Three years of research by the CORA Historical Committee has finally resulted in this story waiting to be told for almost 40 years. Whereas Hugh Fisher and a band of BC flatwater paddlers were the first men in Canada doing outrigger canoeing, it was Ruth Matson and an all-Canadian women crew that paved the way for women in Canada doing outrigger canoeing.

Early Career

Ruth was born in 1946 in Vancouver BC. At the age of 3 months, Ruth and her family moved to Dunsmuir logging camp near Qualicum BC. Her father and family built a cabin on Shack Island that set-in motion a lifetime on the water for Ruth. Ruth has deep roots in Nanaimo. She is the 3rd generation of Shack Islanders. Her grand-father built one of the original cabins on the island. As time went on, the English family would acquire 4 cabins on Shack Island. Ruth picked up her rowing skills by racing cousins from Shack Island over to the wells located down Hammond Bay Road. Ruth had quite the large expectations to be a veterinarian, but she met her husband (Allan Matson) and soon was married. The White Raven Canoe & Kayak Club originated in 1965 as a Voyageur, then White-Water, then Marathon Canoe club when 4 white men raced with the Nanaimo Natives on Cultus Lake. The 4 founders were Ted Barsby Jr., Wally Robinson, Marvil Schlitz, Bob Pederson, and they paddled with skip Bill Seward from the Sneyumeux First Nation. This core group was later joined by Norm Kogstad, Dick Tinga, Bob Strang, and Allan Matson They joined the CCA from 1986-1990, and continue to regroup and race periodically. Sometimes they raced in dug out war canoes but predominantly Voyageurs. It was a natural evolution for Ruth to start paddling as she waited on the shores of Departure Bay for her husband Allan to come in from paddling with White Raven Canoe & Kayak Club. [02] If they were missing a paddler, then Ruth would just hop in. Often the First Nation women (Klutchmen) would be going out while the White Ravens were out and Ruth would be invited to fill a seat. For a time, Mavis Seward (First Nation) & Ruth raced two-person canoes against the men crews as there were no women racers. White Raven Canoe & Kayak Club paddled the 8-hour crossing from Nanaimo to Vancouver for 10 straight years as fund raising for the Variety Club Telethon. This was when Ruth started to steer, as it seemed the men always yarded the Voyageurs around, and Ruth thought she could do a better job picking the fast water and straight lining. Annie Boulding and Ruth met during this time as they have a long history of racing with and against each other, starting with river races down the Puntledge River in Campbell River. Ruth has cited several key influencers in her life. Bill Seward (Tuknuska) of "Sneyumeux" Nation was the skip on the ladies "Klutchmen" team and who embraced Ruth into the First Nations tribes, and invited Ruth to many sacred events and moments. Arvid Charlie of the Cowichan tribe, often shared skills and tricks of the trade, and taught Ruth to read the water, as they would sit on the beach or study the rivers before launching for a river run or river races.

Pioneering Achievements

1981 would be the first time that Ruth would find herself steering an outrigger canoe. A crew doing Molokai Hoe as "Blazing Paddles", consisting of Canadians (Andy Toro, Ron Williams of Smithers BC, Bruce Hawkenson, Bob Strang, Allan Matson) and 4 other USA down-river racers fresh from Europe races, would place 3rd Koa Open division. Ruth found herself steering a practice in Ala Wai Canal as the "Blazing Paddles" steersman had yet to arrive. The outrigger canoe hulled and this was the first time that Ruth met Albert "Rabbit" Kekai as he helped the crew with water changes and gave Ruth steering tips. [03]

Ruth is the first and only woman to have raced the 6-to-7-hour Hyack Hope to New Westminster marathon canoe race on the Fraser River, and accomplished this twice teamed with her husband Allan. Ruth was in bow the first year and was steering the second year.

Early in 1985 during the marathon canoe racing season and going into the Canadian Nationals, the concept of a first-time ever all-Canadian crew for Molokai Na Wahine has set in motion. [04] The *"Whistlers Canoe Club"* crew consisting of paddling legends Annie Boulding, Cathy Nixon, Diane Chippindale, Gail Timmer, Janice Henderson, Joanne Woods, Kathy Gallagher, Lee-Ann Hodgkinson, Sheila Chadwick, Sheila Taylor, and Ruth would place 5th overall for the best-ever showing for an all-Canadian women crew at Molokai Na Wahine for at least 37 years. [05] Ruth would steer the 1985 Molokai Na Wahine iron and was acknowledged in the Hawaiian press as the first woman to ever iron

steer the Kaiwi Channel Crossing. [06] It was during the training on Oahu and during the Kaiwi Channel Crossing, that Ruth and the all-Canadian crew had the good fortune to be coached by Waikiki Beach Boys legend Albert "Rabbit" Kekai. [07] [08] [09]

This 1985 Molokai Na Wahine crew would set in motion the arrival of the first outrigger canoe to Canada. When the crew returned to California after the race, Billy Whitford had a 600-lb hull cut in half at the midsection and loaded onto the roof of Annie Boulding's whitewater instructor's motorhome and the two halves of the hull of "*The Burrard*" were brought north. FCRC paddlers reassembled the hull and "*The Burrard*" launched in early 1987 for the first time.

Outrigger Canoeing Achievements

Ruth would continue her outrigger canoeing career in 1990 with another all-Canadian women crew at Molokai Na Wahine. This FCRC crew consisting of Annie Boulding (lead steersperson), Audrey Mowchenko, Catherine Slimming/VanBuren, Alison Hart, Jeannette Callahan, Justine Barton, Daphne Hougard, Sheila Taylor, daughter Helena Matson, and Ruth Matson (backup steersperson) would place 7th overall. [10] Nanaimo Canoe & Kayak Club (NCKC) had acquired several outrigger canoes by the early 2000s. Wolfgang Presslauer and Chris Breaky convinced Ruth to join the outrigger canoe program at NCKC. Just weeks before the 2010 New Caledonia IVF World Sprints, Ruth was invited to steer a Masters and a Senior Masters Women V6 and V12 crew. [11] In 2011, Ruth would steer a NCKC Masters 40+ Women crew, that she affectionately named "Just for Kicks", through rough seas to their 2nd consecutive CORA Distance Championships title, and then again in 2012 for 3 consecutive years "hat trick". [12] Ruth would be a Finalist at the 2012 Nanaimo Sports Achievement Awards in the Masters Athlete Of The Year category. [13] In 2013, Ruth would steer a NCKC Women V6 crew on Saturday, a Mixed V12 crew on Sunday, and a Mixed V6 Change crew on Monday at Queen Liliuokalani. Ruth would steer crews at Queen Liliuokalani 3 times and once with an all First Nations Womens crew. [14] In 2014, Ruth would steer a NCKC crew at the 20KM FGPC Wet-Dashe dock change-out event. [15] In 2018, [16] Ruth would steer a Powell River Masters Women crew for Team Canada to Gold & Silver at the 2018 Tahiti IVF World Sprints. [17] [18] In 2022, Ruth would steer a Masters Women crew for Team Canada to Gold & Silver at the 2022 London IVF World Sprints. [19] In 2023, Ruth will steer a Masters Women V6 Team Canada crew at the 2023 Samoa IVF World Distance, and we fully expect to be updating this Bio with further exploits from that event.

Coach-Builder Achievements

Ruth was for many years the Provincial Representative for BC Marathon Canoe Racing Association, where she wrote and published the monthly newsletter for BC Marathon Canoe Racing, and acquired coaching certification for C1 / C2. The unplanned effort to collect CORA outrigger canoeing history was a spin-off from the CORA Canoe Registry initiative. [22] Ruth agreed to sit for interviews in 2022 that resulted in a vast set of material on White Raven Canoe & Kayak Club, Nanaimo Canoe & Kayak (NCKC,) and Nanaimo Ocean Paddling Club (NOPC). Ruth provided a wealth of photos / names / dates that will become the "*The Nanaimo Legacy*" (1965-2022). [23] She then took it upon herself to conduct research to confirm events / dates / places / individuals and diligently proof-read several drafts until the content was factually / politically correct.

Exemplary Achievements

Sometimes the greatest legacy we leave is our children. Ruth and Allan Matson are parents to 2 daughters, Helena Matson, and Carina Matson. Both daughters gave birth to twin daughters within the same year just 5 months apart. Helena (Filmer) and Carina Matson (Heyes) went to Burnaby Canoe & Kayak Club where they were coached in K2 and K4 by flatwater coach Hugh Fisher. Helena was rowing for the National Rowing crews years ago and has raced Molokai Na Wahine with Ruth at least once. Carina often crews with Ruth for outrigger canoe races bringing Ruth into a much younger Age Division. Ruth and family travelled to Brazil to see grand-daughter Cailleigh (Matson) Filmer, who used to see how fast she could paddle around the Nanaimo Shack Islands, take Bronze with Team Canada in women's Coxed Eights at the 2016 Brazil Olympics, as the youngest Canadian Rower since 1976 Montreal Summer Olympics. [20] Cailleigh, along with teammate Hillary Janssens of Surrey would take Bronze in Women's Pair at the 2021 Tokyo Olympics, [21] while Ruth and Allan Matson, watched the racing on TV from their Cassidy home. [22]

In 2004, Ruth published her acclaimed book "*Shack Island, a Nanaimo riddle, nae herring, nae fish.*", which captured her family history as well as photos and stories of her early life and the families on Shack Island. [23] Excerpts from this book were referenced in the Friends of Plan Nanaimo Society 2005 publication "*Critical Perspectives on Growth, Planning and the New Nanaimo Centre*" regarding park development around the lagoon at Shack Island. [24] Ruth would be invited to the Nanaimo Historical Society, May 18th, 2006 Regular Meeting as a Guest Speaker to share with the audience experiences from her 2004 publication on "*Shack Island*". [25] Ruth would be invited to the Rotary Club of Nanaimo April 7th, 2010 Monthly Meeting as a Guest Speaker to present material from her 2004 publication on "*Shack Island*". [26] As of 2010, Ruth had already spent more than 20 years as Coordinator for the Senior Peer Counselling Programme at Nanaimo Family Life. [27]

References

Note	Article	Link
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[03]	Albert "Rabbit" Kekai Life & Times	https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rabbit_Kekai
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[16]	2018 Tahiti IVF World Sprints Powell River	https://www.facebook.com/canadianoutrigger/posts/great-article-on-our-amazing-70s-crew-at-the-world-sprintshhttpswwwprpeakcomsport/2013319912019734/
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[18]	2018 Tahiti IVF World Sprints Results	http://www.ivfiv.org/uploads/2/5/3/8/25381158/world_sprints_results_all_days_2018.pdf
[19]	2022 London IVF World Sprints Results	http://www.ivfiv.org/uploads/1/3/7/9/137911945/results_-_all_days.pdf
[20]	2016 Rio Olympics Caileigh (Matson) Filmer	https://olympics.com/en/athletes/caileigh-filmer
[21]	2021 Tokyo Olympics Caileigh (Matson) Filmer	https://olympics.com/en/olympic-games/tokyo-2020/results/rowing
[22]	2021 Tokyo Olympics Caileigh (Matson) Filmer	https://www.vancouverislandfreedaily.com/sports/grandparents-cheer-from-nanaimo-as-granddaughter-wins-canadas-first-rowing-medal-of-olympics/
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