

George Cobb tapes

Tape 46
Transcription

This transcription is available to researchers for private research purposes only.
All responsibility for issues of copyright is assumed by the researcher.

The following digitized transcription was made from a typed transcription located in the Kenneth Kidd fonds (93-011 Box 1), Trent University Archives. Sections appearing to have been offered as explanation by the interviewer have been italicized by Archives staff.

Dow Taylor, Curve Lake, recorded by George Cobb, July 2 1966

My father had a trap line from Deer Bay and then Lovesick Lake and then down Stony Lake. We used to be away a couple of weeks in the spring, just when the ice is going away, around about the last of April. You know the rats just run for about a week and after that you can't get any more. That's when they breed, you know, when the ice goes out of the lake. Then they hole up. We used to get the odd coon but they were no good. We used to let them go. There are plenty of coons up there now, but they were pretty scarce them days.

I used to go with my father and my brother. George Henry was with us that time. He went down to Stony Lake, and my brother was along. There was just the three of us. He'd be in one boat and I'd be going with the old man.

Somebody else told me this. They saw this man come paddling with his wife in a canoe and they asked him where he was going. He said, "just back of the island there to kill my wife." And sure enough, they heard a shot, right after he went around the island. He was there (on the island) for maybe an hour. I don't know how long he stayed there, but anyway he came back and they knew that he meant what he said, for he came back alone.

I don't know how many years that was and then I was hunting ducks on the island there one morning, some time after I heard this and the fellow I was with just took a walk, you know. It's only a small island and then he brought out the jaw bone. He showed it to me and asked me what that was. I told him and he threw it. I don't know where it went and then we put it back where the remainder was. About a couple of years ago I thought I'd prowl around the island. I knew where the bones were, you know, and I saw one of the bones just sticking up through the ground, but now the water is very close to it. The ground is all washing away. I have told several fellows about it. They have been to look but they can't find the place. I'm the only one that knows it, where them bones are, so if anybody wants to go there some day I'll show them where it is. I don't know how long ago this was. Even the fellow that told me didn't know. I did hear old stories from my grandfather but I've forgot all about them. Some days I'll think about something and then the next day I can't remember it.

My mother used to make baskets. We used to go round the farmers, peddling them, you know, in the winter. We'd bring home lots of Kuckoosh, that's pork. We just traded the baskets in for something to eat. We always had plenty. My dad was always working over on the island there, cutting cordwood for Mr. Nicholls, that was his name, that was the fellow he used to work for, and then he (dad) used to make a trip to Peterborough, weekend, you know, buy supply.

In the winter you could go right across the lake there on the ice. It's about 10 miles shorter in the winter. But now you have to take this road. It's always snow ploughed now if there is only a little snow storm. The snowplough will run in. We never get stuck here. That's a good thing. The road is a lot better now that it has been oiled.

We used to make the baskets out of black ash but you have to do a lot of pounding. You get an old axe and you pound that so that it will peel. We used to make strips about 2 inches wide. We'd make a mark here and another 2 inches away, and we'd start pounding between them, the whole length of that log. It might be 4 or 6 feet long and then you could just peel pieces off. You could raise it up and make another notch 2 inches away, and you start pounding again.

It would take you about a couple of hours to pound 8 strips, but you can make about a dozen baskets from that.

The women then scraped it so that it would be smooth. They put it on their knee. They have some kind of a cloth over it and then they scrape it smooth. Then, if the splint is too thick, they generally bend it just at the end and cut (split) it with a knife, about half the depth. Then they can just peel that back and split it. They had a little tool to make the strips the right width, binders they called them. I had one here but I gave it away. I don't know who I gave it to. Sometimes they colour the strips. There's quite a bit of work. When they make their baskets, you have to look for timber to put along there. Hickory was best. We'd get one, not very big, and split them up. Ash was good, too. They used to bind them with sweet grass.

They used to make the baskets in the winter, but not now. They don't even make them, well, there's a few makes them. They must get a good price for them in the store. (His son-in-law made the totem poles outside the new store at Curve Lake and has since made others, which he has sold to one of the lodges for resale to tourists). Yes, those poles we took, I think he got \$135 or \$140. We took three of them and that big bird, that eagle, was over 4 feet long. He got my son-in-law to make him another one. They were painted to make them look kind of decent, you know. He just learned it himself (how to carve them).

My daughter is the head one down here (in the store workshop). She makes leather coats, buckskin jackets, moccasins, everything. They don't tan hides here. They buy all their hides. They used to tan them long ago. Now they don't bother. My dad used to tan a few, you know,

but it takes a lot of work. I don't know what sort of water he used to put the hides in there, so the hair will come off, and then after that, why, he scrapes them. He had a log at an angle where he laid the deer skin and he had some kind of an iron, 3-corner one, and he used to scrape the hair off, and then he'd stretch it, and then take it in the woods there and smoke it, so it would be nice and brown. Nice smell, too, you know, when they tan them that way. But they wouldn't get to be dry. They used to hang it up right over the fire. Of course, it's not blazing, you know, just the smoke. When they get a blaze, they get that one out, throw some more stuff on there.

The moccasins used to last longer than they do now, the way they used to tan them (they are very thin now). Now you'll have to wear insole in them. We used to dry muskrat. They used to take all their bones out and then they'd hang them on a line outside and they'd get dried and they would get just like that (he taps the table) in 3 or 4 days. They never spoil, you know, when they dry like that. I don't know how they done it. They used to put them some place. They don't do anything like that now.

I used to salt fish myself. They keep pretty good that way. There was one summer I was guiding down Buckhorn, that's what I done, you know. The people I had out did not want all they caught. They just kept so many, so they gave me the rest, so I fixed them up and salt them down and bring them home, and keep them in the cellar. I just put them in dry and put quite a bit of salt on them so the flies wouldn't get at them. They taste good in the winter. Just like fresh fish, but a little salty, but we put them in water over night, anyway.

And I saw some of the salmon, too, one winter. I went up to Georgian Bay. That's where my wife was, just for a visit. I had a job here to guide Americans, and I told her I would come and fetch her, when I was through with these people, but they stayed around about 10 days, and I went up after that and got her. A couple of fellows there got me to go out with them, the day before I left. I had good luck. I got 18 salmon trout there. I think I brought home a dozen. They weighed 117 pounds. I had to weigh them before I could ship them to Peterborough. I paid so much a pound for the freight.

I was up there a couple of years ago and got some of them pike, but they don't know where the salmon went to. They may be way out in the middle but they are not around where they used to catch them. I remember one place there, when we were trolling for those salmon, I could see the boulders way down. The water was awful clear. I could see them (the fish) and every time my bait gets to them I could feel a tug. We just fished a couple of hours. We had to drive quite a piece. When I got the fish to where my wife was staying, the fellow wouldn't believe I'd caught them. He thought I'd stole them some place. They never did get that many themselves. It was just luck.

In the winter, we used to get a paper from the Indian agent, for to kill the deer. There would be three or four of us go back. We'd just stay a couple of days, just stay over night. We'd take the horses right with us. There used to be some buildings, way in the woods there, and that's where we used to go and put up the horses, and I had taken up feed for the horses. The camp where we used to stay was a good camp, you know. The deer hunters used to stay in that camp in the fall and they used to fix it up and there would be a stove in there, right at home there.

My dad was a crack shot. There was one time there, they had never got a deer all week, and Sunday morning they thought they would go out. By Gosh! pretty soon they heard shots, you know, just like that, six shots, there were five deer laying there, not in the same place, but right on in line there. I suppose they tried to get away from him, but he put them down. He got five deer there, about an hour after they went out Sunday morning. All the week they never got it. They never got a thing.

There are quite a few deer yet, but there are more poor shots than there were in my days. By God, nowadays, those young fellows, and they shoot at anything. I know a party that used to be at the next lake, where I used to camp. Sucker Lake, that's where this party was. I seed him one morning. He told me he was going way up on the []. By God, you know somebody shot at him. Well, he had his cap on, just like that, and when he got to that runway, and he was so hot, you know from running to that runway, and he thought he would pull his cap up just like that. He heard a shot, and a bullet went in there and came out here. Just missed his skull, but he dropped on the ground. He had a black sweater on and this fellow that shot him, I suppose, thought he was a bear. I suppose he just seen that black sweater move, and he shot at it. I seen the cap and I seen that fellow that afternoon. He was just burning mad. And he told me that time that he'd never go back deer hunting, but he went back the next year. But I did not talk to him very much then.

You know they get excited and they shoot at anything. They don't try to find out what they see. The just see something moving. It might be a man, or a deer, you know. They just take a chance and they shoot at it.

There are a lot of wolves back there, too, but they don't bother nobody. You hardly ever see them in the daytime. I pretty near stepped on one. I was portaging at Eel Lake, that's near Apsley. I was portaging and there was a river right alongside. There were a lot of suckers. I suppose he (the wolf) was eating a sucker in that little hollow. I had a gun here and a gun here. I had a load and a packsack on my back, taking the stuff over first, before the canoe. I was about half way and I saw that wolf a few yards away. He did not see me till I was just going to step on him. He made a jump and he jumped pretty near across that river. I just saw the water splash about half way. Then he got on the other side. There was a kind of a thick brush along the shore and went along in the brush. His tail was going just like that when he jumped up. So that's pretty close. If I hadn't had that packsack on my back, I might have had a chance to shoot at him.

Last summer they used to see one back here on this road. There was a pack on each side of me there one morning. I walked about three miles from the lake. I went way up. When I got there, there was a bunch back this way, and another bunch over here. I was right in the middle. They were hollering, you know. I was pretty close. I didn't want them to sneak up on me. I got up on a rock where I could see both ways. I suppose they were a way off, you know. I don't think they were very close to me.

Yes sir, I have been deer hunting quite a bit, you know, and I've never seen a wolf yet. At nights you can hear them all around where you were the day before. When you kill a deer and take the insides out, they'll feed on them, same as the bears.

I know a big den back here where there are bears. They use the same den every year. I have never seen any other rock carving (like at Burleigh Falls). I went around quite a bit myself, but I never bothered to look at any rock. I just looked for the game! Maybe I stepped over

a lot of them.

I saw a lead mine. The vein was that wide on a rock, pure lead. You could see the vein going around (the rock). I don't think I could find it now. It's not far from Buckhorn either, about three miles. If I went there now, maybe I'd find it. We were standing there. We were river driving. Some of the boys came home Saturday night but we stayed there and then me and this fellow took a walk that afternoon. That's what we came across. That vein of lead was pretty near a foot wide. I think I'd find it again. That's quite a while ago, must be sixty years ago.

I'll be 76 my next birthday. I've always lived here in the village. I used to go back with Cliff (Whetung), too, and his wife went along one time. She can walk. She can get deer, too, a good shot. They did not stay long, about a week. There were a couple of Americans and some boys from here.

We get enough bark at this time of year to last all through the winter. We have enough till the [] peels off again, in about May. It's kinda wet, you know, you got to dry it out. But what bark you get now is dried up. (They get the bark about the first two weeks of July). Pretty near dry, it don't peel.

There was one time when my wife went out with me, selling it (bark). We had a whole field of it, drying it out, you know, all over the field. Then we fix it up, roll it up, that afternoon. You can roll it up when it is dry, but you got to know the way to bend it. The grain has got to be crossways on the roll. Then in another couple of years, you can peel that same place (tree). It don't hurt the tree (the cambrian layer, which takes the sap is left on the tree).

But some thinks you kill the tree, some will give you blaze if they catch you around their woods you know, getting this bark. They claim that you kill the trees, but you don't kill them. We were at that a long time before we found out (when to peel the trees). We'd go there like today and then next week again, we'd try one and it wouldn't be ready to peel. We'd go back another week, by God, it's peeling then and we'd go to work. We'd slit it down with a knife all the way down. I got some last week. (Small talk; he goes to the back room and gets a sheet of bark that he peeled from the tree last week). You can peel the white papery outside from the rest. That is used for making the rattles at Cliff's (store). (The thicker inside layers can be split into many layers, depending on how thick it is needed to work with for boxes, etc.) You can tell when you are peeling it off the tree that it will be easy to peel (split), some you can't. Some trees you can't take it apart like this.

The outside is just about as thin as a sheet of paper. Some Americans, they go to work and they peel them, write on it and send it home. I've never seen any of the old picture writing on the bark. One day when they want to make baskets (small birch bark boxes) they put a line there and cut it with scissors.

The piece of bark is about 3 feet by 1 foot, from a tree about one foot in diameter. (The bark is being folded round so that we can see the size of tree it came from). When you get the bark the second time, it is rough on the outside. The inside is smooth and there are marks where there was a limb. We don't cut the limbs off the trees when they are young so that the pieces of bark will be larger. We don't bother cutting them limbs. We use the spaces in between the limbs. Some trees we only get about one sheet. We just take the bark as high up as you can reach, that's all. We might get 2 or 3 sheets out of one tree.

Sweet Grass.

It grows in with the other grass. It mixes right in there. You can tell the sweet grass. It shines and you can smell it, too. You pick it before it is ripe. June is the best time. After that it gets coloured, a lot of brown spots on it. We peel it and then dry it up. You peel it. You can get 3 or 4 stems out of one piece of gras. Then you dry it out so you can put it away for the winter. Some dry it in the sun, but I just hang it up. (It was hanging up, roots to the top, in small bunches, about an inch or two across). I haven't got much, you know, just what I pull up when I come up from my boat. (He told me that one of the few places that they get the sweet grass had been sprayed by the hydro this year, as the hydro wires were overhead). A lot of them here don't know what sweet grass looks like.

A few of the women still make sweet grass baskets. Years ago we used to have a lot of sweet grass. My wife's mother lived way up Georgian Bay. They had a nice big field, about 25 acres, and they had a lot of sweet grass there and she used to go there and pick there and send it to her daughter over here. We used to have big bunches of it. We'd have enough for the winter. But to make a basket now (of sweet grass) you could go and sell it right away. You don't keep them. There are only about 2 or 3 in the village now who can make them. One of them works at Cliffords. Her name is Mrs. Taylor (his brother's wife). She is the one that does the quill work. She's not very stout. She can put your name down on a box, too (and work it in quills). She colours the quills. She has to buy the dyes.

Pounding Black Ash Logs.

You can peel them if you get a log about 4 feet long, just like that sweet grass. You could make about 12 baskets out of one whole log depending on the size. It's a lot of work. You have to pound it 3 or 4 times in one place and then pound it the whole length of it. Then you get a knife and peel that and then you can peel it right off. You can do that to the log anytime, as long as the log ain't frozen. You have to keep it in the house in the winter to stop it freezing. Pretty near everybody used to make baskets.

When I first pounded a log, I didn't want anyone to see me and I had an old building there and I'd pound away in there. Well sir, my ears were ringing, they're still ringing. I shouldn't have done that, pounding that log inside that building. I pretty near ruined my ears. You could hear them ringing. It's a job to do out of doors.

Quills.

When you kill a porcupine, you look at the quills and if they look good, you can bring it home and the wife will pick the quills out. They just know how. They get a big handful and pull them right out. It doesn't take them long to clean up one, you know. There are only a certain amount of quills you get out of one porcupine. They don't bother with the long ones. The ones they want are about a couple of inches long.

They get those on their back, from their head back to the middle of their back. They're bad, you want to know how to handle those quills. If you get one in your hand, you stretch your skin about that far before it comes out. They are rough on the end. I know what it's like. They didn't know when I swallowed one. I told them but they looked and couldn't see none. It was in a piece of venison. When they were back deer hunting, you see, and when they were coming home, they just put the deer in the sleigh for the winter, and they put some porcupines in the box, too, and maybe one of them quills got in one of them deer. And I was eating the venison, the steak part of it, too. Had it fried and it was good, but when I felt that thing in my throat, I quit. I couldn't eat any more. That thing (the quill) was in my throat for 3 or 4 months before it came out. It was going to work this way, down through my throat and came out at the top of my breastbone. (He had said earlier that there was a small white pimple on the top of his breast bone, and when he squeezed it, he saw the end of the quill. His wife came and pulled it out. It was about an inch long). I'll show you the mark. Can you see it? That's what done that, that's where that thing came out. You'd go crazy at night. You'd feel alright all day, then at night, when the porcupines start to move around, why, this thing moves around. Then in the morning, just coming daylight, the pain leaves you again. During the day you are alright, but in the evening again, watch out!

My son-in-law, McKue [McCue] has made several birch bark canoes. He has sold them, too. He got a good price for them. He went out the other day to look for bark. He couldn't get any, not big enough for a canoe. Lot of work in a canoe. He was thinking about making another one this year. He hired a boat. He knowed where there were 2 or 3 big birch but the bark was no good. He was the one that made the totem poles. He has made another eagle. He gets about \$125 for one. He made that one in 3 or 4 days.