PADDLING WITH PENOBSCOTS
Revisiting the unwritten chapter of Thoreau’s Maine Woods

BY MATTHEW STURDEVANT

IN THE REMOTE WOODS OF NORTHERN MAINE, a proud Penobscot elder sings and drums a steady rhythm. The sound echoes across Matagamon Lake to a party of canoeists who land at Birch Point to celebrate with the Penobscots, feasting on moose stew and swirled fiddlehead ferns.

This is not the 1600s. This is May 2014.

A group of Maine guides, literary scholars, and members of the Penobscot Indian Nation are retracing Henry David Thoreau’s 1857 journey to honor the 150th anniversary of his book The Maine Woods. The modern 16-day, 325-mile expedition seeks to promote the region’s recreational riches as it traces the network of lakes and rivers that slice through dense swaths of pine, spruce, and fir.

Though Thoreau gets the attention whenever people outside Maine talk about the state’s northern wilderness, he wouldn’t have survived, or even found his way, if not for his Penobscot guides.

Mike Wilson, senior program director for the Northern Forest Center, notes the particular importance of Joseph Attean, who led Thoreau on an 1853 excursion, and Joe Polis, who guided the 1857 expedition. As the team retraces that journey 150 years later, the Penobscot Nation once again plays a major planning role, especially Chris Sockalexis, the Penobscots’ 44-year-old tribal historic preservation officer. Early in
the trip, the voyagers paddled to Mount Kineo, a rocky monolith that rises 700 feet above the waters of Moosehead Lake. It’s a place where Paleo-Indians came to make stone tools 11,000 years ago. Sockalexis, who’s studied archaeology and flint knapping, shared the history of the place, demonstrating how to sharpen the rhyolite into a projectile point.

The scholar-paddlers are quick to point out that Thoreau had a sincere fascination with Native American culture, seeing in their traditions “an alternative to the market revolution that was happening at the time and the way that American culture was transitioning into capitalism,” says paddler James Finley, editor of the Thoreau Society Bulletin and English professor at New Mexico State University.

You can hardly blame Thoreau for feeling disenfranchised as the agrarian society he grew up in gave way to industrialization. Maine then was not exactly pristine woods traversed only by Penobscots deftly maneuvering birch-bark canoes; since the 1600s, its vast timber fueled the demands of both the British Navy and its ever-growing colonies. By the mid-1800s, armies of men were felling trees in the winter, and hauling them onto frozen lakes. The spring thaw would rush a tangled torrent of logs to mills downriver. Occasionally, logs would jam up, only to be freed by daring men in spiked shoes who scrambled over the heaped timber and sometimes used dynamite to clear the jams.

Maine’s Penobscot were also not isolated in some idealized “primitive past” apart from the modernizing nation, as even Thoreau stereotyped them. In fact, Finley points out that Attean, Thoreau’s first guide, worked in the logging camps, dressed like a logger and used “Anglo-American colloquialisms.”

While the Penobscot still hunt moose on Matagamon Lake as Attean and Polis did, the tribe has assimilated through constant change. So too has the forest. Logging is still a reality, though it’s done away from a buffer of trees along the waterways. Modern land-use regulation allows timber harvesting, but it also preserves a wilderness for canoeists and kayakers. If Thoreau arrived in Maine with a romanticized idea of the woods and the Indians, he still came away with an important environmental treatise vividly describing his experience. The book entices paddlers to interact with the region to this day, and for that, we owe thanks to the influence of The Maine Woods.