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## Final canoe steaming takes place in Skidegate

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By Heather Ramsay

It was carved in one shape with the expectation that it will take on another, says Guujaaw of the cedar canoe he successfully steamed last week.

The ancient design of the Haida sea-faring canoes didn't evolve, he says, it was given to his ancestors by the supernaturals. One of the key components of this design involves spreading the sides of the canoe by first softening the pliable red cedar with steam.

So rocks were heated in a big fire on the beach at the Haida Heritage Centre on July 2 starting around 6 pm, and carried to the 36-foot vessel. A layer of cedar boughs and seawater lined the bottom and with the hot rocks in place the canoe was wrapped in a tarp.

An hour later with over 100 people witnessing the event, Guujaaw and his son Jaalen Edenshaw placed boards between the gunnels to widen the boat and then, as an extra precaution, placed more hot rocks to steam the boat again.

Guujaaw says the steaming not only spreads the gunnels, but also ensures the shape swings into one long swoop and gives the bottom a rockable curve.

"That gives it the ability to pivot and turn," he says.

Guujaaw, who worked on the prototype for Bill Reid's 50-foot Loo Taa, says he and others had to do a lot of research to uncover the secrets of building a successful Haida canoe before starting that project in the mid-1980s.

It had been 60 years since a canoe had been completed on the islands before that and Guujaaw was able to speak with people who had been there.

He and Captain Gold also visited around 40 different canoes found in different stages of development in the forests of Haida Gwaii and learned more clues about the process.

Blueprints of old canoes made by a shipwright revealed that the boats were true to within 1/16th of an inch by any measure.

Guujaaw also learned that when Europeans first encountered Haida canoes in the late 1700s, no other boats had flared prows. The Haida design, which provides better displacement, speed and maneuverability, has become the standard for boats today, he said.

Although he tried not to advertise the time that the steaming would occur, word spread quickly and many people gathered.

"It's not really a thing where you want a bunch of people around," he said. Although he has worked on others, this was the first canoe Guujaaw was completely in charge of, so as any canoe maker, he was worried about the cedar cracking during the steaming.

"It's probably the biggest test you put yourself through when you do these things," he said. Guujaaw's canoe was the third and final canoe to be steamed as part of the Skidegate Band Council's canoe project.

Master carvers Guujaaw, Garner Moody and Bill Bellis each worked with their own teams to create three canoes that will be showcased at the opening of the Haida Heritage Centre.

The canoes will also be available for use at community events like Skidegate Days and for families to use on overnight trips.

The next steps for Guujaaw's canoe include putting in seats, painting it and making paddles.

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