

RAD Story Lodge | Episode 7

The Living Legacy of the Birchbark Canoe

Randi: Oki and hello. Welcome to the RAD Story Lodge, a place where you will hear stories from the land and learn from Indigenous communities who are advancing regenerative economies and reshaping the way we think about conservation.

Amberly: For thousands of years, birchbark canoes carried our ancestors across the waterways of Turtle Island. They carried families, stories, trade, ceremony, survival and a way of seeing the world rooted in relationship with the land. In today's special episode, I sit down with master birchbark canoe builder Chuck Commanda to talk about the canoe legacy. As Chuck begins stepping into retirement, I'm honored to now walk alongside him as his apprentice, not only learning how to build canoes, but how to see the land differently through them.

Miigwech for being here, and let's get into it.

Amberly: Aaniin. My name is Amberly Quakegesic and I am a member of Brunswick House First Nation, and I live in Chapleau, Ontario. I'm a counselor for my First Nation and I am apprenticing as a traditional birchbark canoe builder. I'm here with Chuck. You wanna introduce yourself?

Chuck: Yeah. My name's Chuck Commanda. I am Algonquin from Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg First Nation, which is just on the other side in the Quebec side from Ottawa.

Amberly: Okay, awesome. Today we are here to talk a little bit about what we're doing and what you've been doing for a really long time. How long have you been doing all this?

Chuck: Okay. So I've been building birch canoes now for close to 20 years. When I got back into the canoe business it started off with basket making and the main reason I started baskets was, everybody who was anybody would praise my grandfather as being the world renowned canoe maker. But, my grandmother was 50% of that business, which led us –led me to believe anyways– that canoe making especially was a male and a female job, if you want to call it that.

And, so I got into basket making and I was to pay homage to her, and got so good at it I ended up doing some, some traveling. I guess the most famous trip I took was to Washington, DC to the National Museum of the American Indian, which I found out was part of the Smithsonian Institute.

When I got back home, my grandfather heard about what I was doing, invited me up to his place and asked me if I'd make him a canoe. And, I gladly accepted. And, took me a little while to remember the steps and when I was almost complete, my grandfather came and visited the canoe and gave me the green light, thumbs up.

And, at that point now, I knew the circle had been complete—meaning I was no longer a student, but I was a teacher now. Yeah. And so that's how that got started.

Amberly: Amazing. And now you're my teacher.

Chuck: And now you, you're my student. You're my apprentice.

Amberly: Yeah. Honored to be.

We could talk a little bit about our origin story, our story of how we met.

Chuck: Okay. Yeah. Yeah.

Amberly: That was back in 2020.

Chuck: 'cause that's when they had the lockdown.

Amberly: Yeah, it was, it was during the lockdown.

Chuck: Yeah.

Amberly: And then you came to Chapleau. I was working for Wahkohtowin as a Guardian and you were there to teach us how to build canoes.

Chuck: Yeah, I like the way David flood,

Amberly: General Manager,

Chuck: of Wahkohtowin. He wanted me to come down ahead of time, of the canoe build to teach what to look for, how to harvest material. And I ended up spending a week with you and him.

And, we, I find we had a good time. We sourced them, sourced out some bark. sourced out some cedar.

And, over the course of two weeks we put that canoe together. Yeah. And we ended up launching it. That was the first time I had experienced something like that is, the people involved in the build actually walked the canoe about a kilometer to the launch site.

Amberly: If you had told me in 2020 that six years later I'd be on this journey with you, I don't know. I would've been like, really? That's so cool. I didn't know that it was something that I could do,

If it wasn't for the Guardian program and being able to connect with and be inspired by different people, I wouldn't be on this path. No. I wouldn't have met you.

It healed things in me to be able to learn about our ancestors and to be a lot more interested in what's happening on the land and what ceremony does. And then just to start to understand what indigenous values are and Two Eyed Seeing. And then to build canoes and then really understand the ingenious contributions, right to society that still exists today.

Chuck: Yeah.

Amberly: It's all super uplifting and it changed my world, and the way that I look at the forest and what I know about it, what I value about it, and what I wanna protect about it.

Chuck: I have to admit too, that there was one point in my life, before I got back into doing canoes where, I was working in the woods and I'd look at a tree and I'd see dollar signs.

But after I started making canoes, it wasn't so much a dollar sign anymore. It was more of a spiritual thing, and then I had found my spirituality already. Mind you, I was still like a rookie, but I was on the path now. And then I guess what, what we started doing, or I started doing and I guess maybe you just watched me and then you a or somebody asked me, or if not, then I explained as, we'll

walk up to the tree, let's say the birch tree, and we'll have, we'll put the tobacco in our left hand.

Then we'll ask the spirit of the tree. We'll thank it and thank Mother Earth, thank Creator for the bounties. Then we'd ask that spirit in that tree to come and come and live in the canoe.

You know? And 'cause that's another thing that I've learned about the canoe is, even though that we kill the trees during the harvest, because we asked that spirit to come and live in the canoe, it's still a living thing.

And then how do I know? I went on a canoe trip once and I ran over a dead head. I think got the way of that, eh, and I watched the canoe flex as it passed over that deadhead, and it seems like that it was moving and conforming to that deadhead,

Amberly: Which is a rock, right?

Chuck: No, it's, it's, a piece of wood that's been lodged.

Oh. It's been in the water now for hundreds of years. Okay. Maybe decades. Yeah. So when we went over that, or I went, when I went over that deadhead, I watched the canoe flex and then returned to his normal shape, and then that then taught me, it's still a living thing.

Maybe it is because we offered tobacco. More than likely, it would pay homage to that, the spirit of that tree. And just like that word, that was my grandfather's word, was Ginawaydaganuc. And the translation is "everything is connected".

Amberly: Yes.

Chuck: Spiritually. Yeah. The interconnectedness of all things. And that's even in the universe.

Amberly: Absolutely.

Chuck: Yeah.

Amberly: I feel like I can relate to this more in my life now than ever because like when you and I are out harvesting and we're doing all these things and we

bring all the processed materials to canoes, I'll recognize roots and certain pieces of cedar and I'll be, oh, I remember splitting that one.

I love that one. It's beautiful. And then you use it and you put the materials together and you do have this like intimate relationship with this canoe at the end.

Chuck: Yeah.

Amberly: And it like breaks my heart a little bit, to pass it on without continuing. I would love to know how they're doing, and yeah, I would love to know that they're being taken care of and maintained and that, maybe there's ceremony involved.

I don't have a relationship like that with any other boat I've ever had, Yeah. Like it's not just a boat. You told me this actually, that, *jiiman*, the word for canoe translates to "spirit carrying vessel".

Right.

Chuck: Yeah. 'cause we're spirit.

But that's another thing too, is, like what you were just saying is, I had an attachment, developed an attachment to the canoe.

Why? Number one, it's become very personal. Number two, as you find out that what the canoe was meant for isn't, it isn't gonna be used for that,

And so then I had to learn then to detach.

Amberly: Right?

Chuck: Yeah. Because it's no longer my canoe.

Amberly: Right.

Chuck: It's the client or the customer, whatever it is. And now because they paid for it, they can do whatever they want with it. Never more so than when I made two canoes for - I forget the name of the college - but they hung them from the ceiling and they drilled through them. Oh yeah. So the canoes never hit the water again. But then the new one I made never hit the water.

Amberly: Right.

Chuck: Yeah. And then the old one, the old one, I put it on the water a couple of times. Yeah. So at least that.

Amberly: So I feel like a piece of you is also saying that like when we do the launches, that is a big important moment. Oh yeah. Like I've been a part of four now, I think. No, I've been a part of more than that now.

Chuck: Yes ma'am.

Amberly: Five or six, nine canoes total. But I didn't, I wasn't, and I did get to ride in all of them actually.

And it is the most incredible experience. Can you like, describe to me how that feels to you?

Chuck: I have to think about that there.

I don't know, freedom.

Amberly: Yeah.

Chuck: I've rode different styles, canoes in the past, but for some reason, the ability to make your own from raw materials from the forest and then by offering that tobacco, it's a totally different feeling. Number one is it's so responsive in the water and the things that you probably can do with it. I heard a story once about this big canoe race in Quebec somewhere, and you'd have people from all over the world, they'd bring their canoes, big fancy canoes, expensive canoes, and part of the race was on rapids.

Amberly: Oh

Chuck: Yeah. So there was one native guy, he brought his birchbark canoe, and every year he'd win. Why? Because he'd float over the rocks on the rapids while these big, fancy canoes, they didn't want them destroyed, so they'd end up putting them on the shore.

And portaging around the rapids. So in my mind then that canoe, it's so resilient, so buoyant that you can literally float over the rocks and the rapids.

Amberly: Yeah.

Chuck: And so that's what stands out in my mind the most.

Amberly: Yeah. Beautiful.

Chuck: Yeah.

Amberly: Okay. Another thing I wanted to just touch on too is, like the importance of all this, I feel has a lot to do with Nations, our Nation's understanding, especially like our young people who, and like our history hasn't always been very well told, right? There's gaps. But if we could remember how independent we used to be, I feel like the canoe symbolizes our independence, and our relationship to land. 'cause how could you possibly, how could we have possibly learned all these things on how to, which materials were best and all the things that you've been teaching me over the last years. Right.

And yeah, just speaking to,

Chuck: One thing we gotta remember too is the birchbark canoe is what shaped Canada or shaped North America, Turtle Island if you want.

The eastern woodlands part anyways, because, those are the people that, that used the birchbark canoe. Other nations had their own form of canoes.

But it was the birchbark canoe that helped shape we'll say Canada. Why? If we go back in history, you take the Explorer Champlain. Champlain with this big ship can only come up to St. Lawrence so far. And that was, I think east of Montreal where the Lachine Rapids are.

He couldn't get past the Lachine Rapids, so he had to make friends with the Anishinabe people there, which was the Algonquins. That would've been the eastern part of our territory. And so I guess he sweet talked his way into meeting some of our hereditary chiefs. 'cause we had a hereditary chieftainship here system.

Yeah. And I say one of the last ones was, his name was Paginawatik. And that would've been a descendant, or my grandfather's a descendant of that chief. Oh, wow. Yeah. So maybe Champlain made friends with him. And then somewhere Paginawatik, he suggested that maybe Champlain go with his son or somebody in the nation, in the tribe, in the community, go on the canoe and come in further in, inland.

And maybe he got to the Ottawa River, the outlet out of the Ottawa River, and he decided he wanted to go up there. And eventually he came to Ottawa here and crossed the dam, the rapids, and eventually made his way up to Tamiskaming Lake, whatever it was called back then. And I guess at some point he decided he wanted to go further and lo and behold, eventually formed the, was it the Hudson Bay Company?

Amberly: Yeah.

Chuck: Yeah. And so that was all based on his ability to make friends with the Algonquin, and they allowed him on the canoe.

Amberly: Wow.

Chuck: Yeah. And so I'm assuming at some point then they started making their own.

Amberly: Right.

Chuck: Right. And that then allowed them to come even further in the mother or Turtle Island, I guess eventually they got to the Great Lakes.

And if memory serves. I guess it might have been Columbus was looking for a shorter passage to India.

Amberly: Yeah.

Chuck: But he, I guess he was found almost dead, by the Caribbean, whoever they were when the Mexicans, I don't know what they, who they were at this point anymore. So he thought that he had found a shortcut to India.

Chuck: So now, he could go a little further north and then they came across these big lakes and that's where he probably would've ran into the Ojibwe Nation. Yeah. And so once again, he probably seen the people doing their thing on the birchbark, canoe. Yeah.

Amberly: Yeah.

Chuck: And then us being so kind and always wanting to share resources and help out, we gave them that information. The ability to make their own.

Amberly: Shared knowledge.

Chuck: But I don't know if you wanna edit this part. I've known people in the past that said that maybe what we should have done was cap that explorer and the second in command, ask them if they wanna deal with us on a more humane or human level.

Amberly: Right?

Chuck: Yeah. Maybe it would've been different the way the native person is treated today.

Amberly: Yeah. If they could have understood like the worldview, right? Yeah. Like the connection to nature in order to be able to create that canoe.

Chuck: Yeah. That's it.

Amberly: You had to know, be a part of the land, essentially.

Chuck: Yeah. 'cause from what I remember learning in school is the white man always wanted to change nature. Change it to the point where he can control it.

Amberly: Yeah.

Chuck: But nature's mother earth is uncontrollable.

Amberly: Yeah.

Chuck: So we have to work with her.

Amberly: That's true. What about, okay, let's fast forward to today actually.

This is a good segue into the limitations and challenges that we face or that you've seen in your lifetime doing what you do. Looking for birch and cedar. Like what kind of, how have things changed?

Chuck: All I know is, the material now for the canoe is in such deplorable condition, it's a wonder that we can find decent material to make these spirit carrying vessels.

Amberly: Related to extraction and forestry.

Chuck: But our ancestors have been telling us for years, decades, centuries, even, is we're part of nature and in turn, nature's part of us. And we have to get along with nature, respect nature.

And if we fast forward to today, a lot of our people have forgotten that, but there's a big movement that's coming back. That we're starting to take care of the land more.

And that's another thing that I wanted to say is, canoe building in my mind has helped me return to my role in the medicine wheel. Which was to take care of the land. And so now every time I go to an Indigenous community, I see Indigenous kids in schools. That's, it seems like that's the role that they wanna return to. And take care of the land. And stewards of the land if you want, Yeah. And then with that comes wanting to take care of the waters.

Amberly: Looking into the future, what are your hopes and dreams or what do you have coming up?

Chuck: In all seriousness, I'd like to see the prophecy fulfilled. The Prophecy of the Seven Fires.

Where it says that all races are gonna be living here in Turtle Island. And the prophecy says that we all, we have to put away our differences and accept that there's only one Creator, and join minds and join our hearts, so we take care of the earth, because if we don't we're just quickening our extinction as humans. But the prophecy says that it's gonna be up to the rich and the elite to make that choice for us.

And so there's only two choices. It's continue raping the land or go the spiritual way. And by, by going a spiritual way, then, number one, we stopped raping the land and, yeah, we'll start I guess focusing more on the spiritual aspect of it.

Amberly: Yeah. Absolutely. And that leads into also like the exciting project that we get to be a part of this year too, right?

Chuck: Yeah.

Amberly: With the Birch Bark Canoe Tree Management Project.

Chuck: Oh, yeah. That's quite the undertaking that, I think, we've embarked on.

But that in my mind is giving hope to the future.

Amberly: It is. It's beautiful.

The idea is to manage a forest using Indigenous values such as the birch bark, the birch tree. And if we were to protect it, prove that the forest will still thrive because it's not a value that the Western system recognizes. Right.

Chuck: That's true.

Amberly: That's kind, that's what we're trying to do is work with, and the Guardians to do forestry forest management through a more Indigenous lens guided by our Indigenous values.

Chuck: Yeah. And I think, that will be the first of its kind.

Amberly: Absolutely. And then this forest is not even one that will live to see.

Chuck: Yeah. Unfortunately.

Amberly: But that's so seven generations and I think it's such a beautiful vision.

Chuck: Yeah. Yeah.

Amberly: And it shows like a turn in where the world is at, and like just to like reimagine systems that aren't necessarily working for us anymore.

Chuck: Right.

Amberly: I think that's so exciting to be a part of.

Chuck: Yeah. Yeah. I, at the same time I find that it's so sad to learn about what the Governments are doing to the earth, doing to the land.

And not realizing that what they're doing to the land and actually doing to themselves. I can't figure out why they don't see that, Indigenous knowledge and actually give it some weight. And this is what we're trying to accomplish.

For centuries, we've been telling them.

Amberly: Yeah. It's frustrating. If it's not close to your home, you're not as, you're not as concerned. And that seems to be the biggest thing that I'm learning and all of the things that I'm learning. Like with the mines taking all the water.

Nobody cares if it's not right out their backyard. Yeah. All the forestry companies are spraying. People don't seem to care unless it's gonna affect them or if they even know about it. That's the other side of things, but yeah, it's, it is frustrating. The land should be top priority for everyone.

Chuck: Recently too, I heard that there was supposed to be some kind of a mining operation opening up near Chapleau and they, what they call that, the Ring of Fire. And they're looking for groundwater to help clean, whatever extraction they're gonna take up, which eventually is gonna hurt the water table.

So I don't understand. It's like they're shooting themselves in the foot there, not realizing, I'm sure they must know that water is the element that gives life. And without clean drinking water, once again, we're killing ourselves.

Amberly: Yeah. And when you say things like that, like I'm lucky to have participated in a fast one time, so I didn't have water or food for four days. And when I think about not having water, I feel like people don't always understand the gravity of what that is and like what, how that affects you. And there are people all over the world and even in Canada who don't have clean drinking water and like they understand the urgency.

But when we have a tap that just has water all day and like systems that don't care about or don't prioritize people saving water or trying to preserve it, it just creates this mentality that, oh, it's there forever.

Chuck: Yeah.

Amberly: We don't have to worry about it.

Chuck: Yep. Not to mention the amount of chemicals that you put in it.

Amberly: We could just talk about this for days. Okay, we might as well wrap this up soon. The last thing we were gonna talk about was, that you're planning to retire soon.

Chuck: Yeah. Yeah. I was hoping to slow down this year, but it's not looking like that's gonna happen. We're already booked, fully booked for the summer or the season. And, so I said, I'll make a decision and next year then maybe only take three, four. But we're already fully booked for the summer again.

And that's next year.

Amberly: Yeah.

Chuck: So now what I was hoping is that, you as my apprentice, my mentee, would, how do you say that? Pick, pick things up or, no, that's not a good way to say it. Become more responsible.

Yeah. And maybe at some point then I'll give you more responsibility. And if not next summer, the summer after, then whoever contacts me, I would pass them off to you. And one of the good things about technology is we can communicate far distances.

If you're doing a canoe build that I gave to you or I recommended to you, we can always contact each other through the internet. I don't have to be there.

Amberly: Yeah.

Chuck: But I can coach you from. Yeah. So that's what I'm hoping happens.

So that means by what, 2028?

Amberly: Yep.

Chuck: Yeah. I'm gonna take a step back now.

Amberly: You're gonna make a little graduation cap.

Chuck: Yeah. And, what I find is happening is another chapter is opening up now, attending more of these conferences. April alone, I've been asked to do two presentations where I'll be the keynote speaker.

And, I feel this is what Creator is leading me down this road now. Yeah.

Amberly: Yeah,

Chuck: Because I think I can be used in other places when it comes to more, of, to the forest forestry and trying to get that message across.

And I really enjoyed myself when I was asked by David and Leigh to go and meet with the Health Canada scientists. And, by me being there with a piece of bark it actually opened their eyes. And we were talking about the effects of

glyphosate on the environment and to have them able to hold something, like a piece of bark. Yeah. And show them what's going on with the environment.

Maybe this piece of bark is not so much about glyphosate as it is to other I don't know chemicals that are being pumped into the atmosphere and being pumped into the ground.

Amberly: Yeah.

Chuck: And so now they actually had their eyes opened because they didn't know what was going on. They're being told by other supposed professionals that there's nothing to worry about. And, to have them, their eyes open and it's "wow, really? This is what's going on?" And Yeah. Yeah.

Amberly: Wow.

Chuck: And so I feel like that's, my life is going down that road now.

Amberly: Yeah. So even your eyes were open to the power and influence that you have with the knowledge that you carry and relationship that you have with the bark and the material?

Chuck: Yeah, with the land.

Amberly: Because you saw the difference just in that small interaction. You saw them understand what you're trying to say.

Chuck: Always being in the woods too you see the subtle changes that are happening. Some are huge and some are not so huge, not so big. But it still doesn't matter. They're still having an effect on nature. Nature in general.

Amberly: Yeah.

Chuck: What I try to tell 'em, you've heard of the Beach Bark disease? And you've seen what it's doing to the beach trees.

Amberly: Yep.

Chuck: So I said, I've seen these white blotches. Now they're appearing on the hard maple, the sugar maple.

Amberly: I have seen that.

Chuck: Yeah. So that's a fungus that's attacking our sugar maples. So if it gets to the point where it starts killing off that species, there goes the maple syrup industry. Okay. Which contributes billions to the economy.

Amberly: We have to change the flag! I'm just kidding. Put a canoe.

Chuck: We try not to paint a bleak picture of the future and we try to always put a positive spin on it. And, I think for the most part, we're doing a pretty good job. And I'm not only speaking for myself.

Amberly: And I feel like I really, I'll never forget when I approached you and asked you about joining you to be your helper, how you really emphasize the importance that one day I have my own apprentices as well.

Chuck: Yeah. That would be for you to decide.

Amberly: Yeah. I just love that that was important to you. And it is absolutely important to me. And I feel that I'm also meant to be on this path, like having a teaching background and like a law background and a social work and then just all this land background too. My love for it. It all just grows and I just, I think, I look forward to eventually having my own apprentices as well and making sure that this carries on.

Chuck: Yeah. And I suppose another way to look at it too, there is if you ever take on a partner, if they don't know you can teach them and you can build a vehicle, so to speak, and then return to, return to our way.

Amberly: Yeah. You know what? And then, you know what, let's finish on a, where you share your dream. You've shared your dream with me before.

Chuck: My dream, my dream, I actually seen it in a dream, is, I wanted to see hundreds if not thousands of canoes on the waterways and then maybe meeting at a special spot. And I think that special spot was here in Ottawa at Victoria Island because from what I understand, I already knew through my grandfather, but to have Douglas Cardinal, the world renowned architect and describe it that way as well, he said that Victoria Island, where they wanted to have that healing center. He says that was a special place and native people from all over North and South America used to come and make a journey there, and they'd pray.

Amberly: Oh, wow.

Chuck: Yeah. And so they probably had celebrations, feasts, dances, singing, and that was my dream. And that would've been the perfect spot for them to all come and meet.

Amberly: Yeah. Maybe one day we'll get to see that, a bunch of canoes on the water.

Chuck: And then what's even more ironic, but coincidental at the same time was, David, the Manager too of Wahkohtowin, when he had the same dream, but it was more in that area up there, which was what, Southeast of Lake Superior.

Yeah, it would be to have hundreds of canoes on the water again and that special meeting place, I guess maybe. What's the name of that river? Right behind the Innovation Center.

Amberly: Oh, Keksquashing?

Chuck: And that's where he thought that or he had his vision. And I said, oh, okay. So maybe we can meet halfway somewhere. Maybe Lake Nipising.

Amberly: Watch for the smoke signal.

Chuck: Yeah.

Amberly: Okay. Perfect. Wow. I love that vision and I really hope that we get to see that.

Chuck: Yeah. So do I. As long as I'm here and I'm still breathing, I wanna see that dream fulfilled.

Amberly: You and I both.

Chuck: Yeah.

Amberly: Okay. Do you have any, anything else you wanna say?

Chuck: Final thoughts, deep thoughts? I would hope that someday that the people will want to, on their own, return to their role in the medicine wheel, which was to become caretakers of the land. And, not expecting anything in return. And I know that we need this all powerful dollar now to live, but maybe,

start by not needing that dollar. To return to our role and take care of the land. Yeah.

Amberly: Yeah. That'd be beautiful.

Chuck: And then at some point then maybe, we'll, I don't know. We'll have our own currency, we'll have our own ways of taking care of ourselves.

Amberly: Yeah. I love that. My final note would be to go out there and try the land-based initiatives. Because like at this point, like ever since canoe building, I tried hide tanning, I've tried ricing, I've tried like a number of really, I do birch tapping and maple tapping. And I have a special place in my heart for all these things, but nothing calls to me quite like the canoe building does.

And I wouldn't have learned that if I hadn't like been a part of that. And I'm lucky that this stumbled onto my lap. But ever since that, now I seek it. I seek new experiences and I try to, and I essentially am learning about myself and, I just want everybody to be challenged to do that because it's important.

And you'd be surprised what, what comes out of it. Even if it's not that day. It could be years down the road.

Alright, well miigwetch, baamaapii!

Amberly: Thank you for listening to the RAD Story Lodge. We hope you enjoyed today's episode. To learn more, visit radnetwork.ca. Follow us on Instagram and LinkedIn and be sure to subscribe to the podcast so you never miss an episode. This episode was produced by Karim Rizkallah and hosted by myself, Amberly Quakegesic.

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