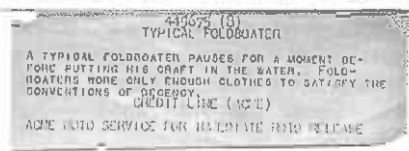


popular nautical magazine, *The Rudder*. He called the boat *Walrus* and it was a canvas version of a South Greenland kayak with a larger cockpit opening and widened beam for more stability. The 17-foot, 22-inch beam kayak weighed 45 pounds, cost about \$10 in materials, and took a week to build. Along with the construction plans, Skene wrote, "The sport of kayaking is one which few people are familiar with, but which deserves great popularity. It is the finest kind of athletics, combining vigorous exercise, sea bathing and sun bathing. Clad in an abbreviated bathing suit and equipped with a light double-bladed paddle, one can travel long distances without fatigue in this easily-driven, sporty little craft. An occasional plunge overboard adds to the zest of kayaking. With practice one can climb in again without difficulty."

Skene lived by the words he wrote. On June 4, 1932, he paddled his kayak from the Marblehead, Massachusetts harbor out into the Atlantic. He was an athletic 50 years old and was training for a trip that would take him from Marblehead north up the coastline some 14 miles to Gloucester. But Skene never returned from his workout and that morning he became one of America's first sea kayaking fatalities. His kayak washed up on the shore with a large gash in the canvas. His broken paddle was later found, and authorities speculated the shaft somehow snapped and punctured the boat's skin, flooding the hull. Despite a large-scale search, Skene's body was never found.

Skene wasn't the only one building kayaks during the 1920s. You didn't even have to be a naval architect to design your own boat, as evidenced by a 1926 newspaper headline that proclaimed "Maine Boys Try 'Kayaking'—Wiscasset Lads Build Eskimo Canoes and Adopt New Sport." The article reported that a few unnamed local boys were inspired by Eskimo pictures, built their own similarly styled crafts and "have discovered a new outdoor sport, kayaking." According to the reporter, the harbor and waterfront were dotted with the small boats.

Do-it-yourself boats became even more popular during the Depression years. The stock market crash in October 1929 was only the beginning of the economic crisis. In the months and years that followed it got worse. By 1933, one out of four Americans was unemployed. And those lucky enough to have jobs often found their wages slashed in half compared to just a few years prior. Plans for simple and inexpensive kayaks started showing up in magazines and a few companies began producing low-cost kits.



"Typical foldboater"

But kayaks never came close to displacing the venerable canoe. It took a while for someone to finally realize the drownings were a direct result of manufacturers putting seats in canoes. Up until then you kneeled to paddle. But sitting down was much more comfortable, even though it raised the paddler's center of gravity and made the boat unstable. Redesigned boats and an extensive public education program launched by the American Canoe Association, Boy Scouts and Red Cross saved what was left of the canoe industry by 1927. Yet it would take a number of years for the public to get over the stigma of "killer" canoes.

Even among all the fear, uncertainty and doubt, canoe traditionalists went out of their way to tout the supremacy of their boats. A classic example was an informal race in New York City held in December, 1927 where a Baffin Bay kayak and another kayak from Alaska were pitted against a canoe paddled by Pendleton Canoe Club champion Ernest Riedel. Two native Eskimos, who were in town as part of a retail store promotion, were recruited to pilot the kayaks—the newspaper account didn't mention their paddling experience. They were game, but in examining the boats, one muttered he had never seen a kayak look like the one he was about to paddle. Riedel was reported to loiter across the Hudson River, crossing in an easy 15 minutes. His competitors, battling wind, waves and taking on water, finished ten minutes behind.

If you wanted an alternative to a canoe, but weren't handy or didn't care for the confined space of an Eskimo kayak, there was another option. However, most people didn't know about them; they were hard to find in the U.S., and weren't exactly cheap.

The Faltboot Fad

Many people think Johann Klepper (1868–1949) invented the faltboot (German for folding boat), but that credit goes to Alfred Heurich (1883–1967), a Bavarian architecture student with a passion for small boats. As a child Heurich had built craft out of wood, bamboo and canvas. Then one day in 1905, while at the Munich Ethnological Museum, he spotted an Inuit kayak and had an inspiration: Instead of a rigid constructed boat, what if a portable kayak could be built, that could be easily assembled, taken apart and stored in a bag?

On May 30, 1905, after three weeks of work, he launched the first folding kayak on the Isar River near his home of Bad Tölz, Germany. He paddled the boat about 30 miles downstream to Munich, disassembled it, and headed home. Heurich made and sold kayaks, patented his invention in 1906 and continued to refine it. In 1907 he licensed the design to Johann Klepper, a tailor from Rosenheim, Germany, who specialized in making ski clothes.

Klepper recognized the market potential of folding kayaks, but Heurich's original design could only be produced by hand on a small scale. That and the start of World War I slowed the growth of faltbooting. But by the early 1920s Klepper made some important design improvements that allowed mass production of the faltboot, notably using mountain ash wood for the frame.

Klepper's timing couldn't have been better. Germany was in dire financial straits following the war; but train rides were inexpensive and faltboats were fairly affordable. The combination meant cheap entertainment since you could hop on a train with your kayak in a bag, take it to a river, paddle downstream to another city, then fold the kayak up and cart it to a train station for a ride home. The post-war years also saw the growth of a back-to-nature youth movement called Wandervogel. Hiking, adventure and romanticism were key parts of the movement and the faltboats fit right in. Folding kayaks on trains, rivers and lakes became common sights; not just in Germany but in other European countries too. Faltbooting became the latest thing and popularity boomed; at its height it's