

# Rail Bird Hunting

## *The Boat, the River, and the Bird*

Theme: Maritime History

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### Subject Areas

Language Art, Science, Art

### Duration

One or two class periods

### Setting

Indoors or outdoors\*

\* Simulated field trip with guided imagery and story telling

### Skills

Critical listening, interpreting, visualizing, applying, describing

### Charting the Course

The traditional sport of rail bird hunting is indicative of the historical use of the Maurice River. The Camp family is exclusively and intimately intertwined with all aspects of this recreational activity. The Camp family still organizes hunts and has exclusive domain over rail bird hunting to this day. Included in this activity is a descriptive account of the personal experience of Pete Dunne (New Jersey Audubon Society) on a recent rail bird hunting excursion. This activity examines the various components of this traditional and cultural significant use of the area's resources. Through visualizing the details described by Pete Dunne, the students will re-create an illustration of rail bird hunting, using an actual diagram of the Camp rail bird boat.

### Vocabulary

Rail bird, and others as required for interpretation of the story, although most are defined by context clues within the writing of Pete Dunne

### Correlation to NJ Core Curriculum Content Standards

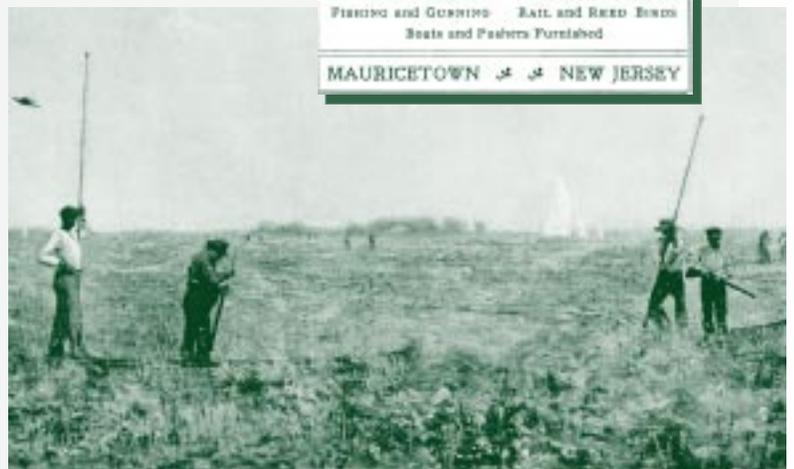
Language Arts	Art
<b>3.2</b> (1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7)	<b>1.2</b> (1, 2, 3, 4)
<b>3.4</b> (1, 2, 3, 8, 9, 15)	<b>1.3</b> (1, 2)
<b>3.5</b> (1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 10, 12)	<b>1.5</b> (4)

### Science

**5.12** (1, 2, 4, 5, 6)



*Below: a scene from an oil painting by Thomas Eakins. The complete picture can be seen on page M33.*



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### ■ Objectives

Students will:

Describe and illustrate the tradition of rail bird hunting including habitat, techniques, and behavior of the birds, the boat, and the hunter based on a simulated field trip

### ■ Materials

Copy of rail bird boat handout

Pencil

Art supplies including watercolor paints or other preferred medium for illustration

Large roll of paper for mural (optional)

### ■ Making Connections

Rail bird hunting has been a long standing tradition in the Down Jersey region.

*An excerpt from **Tide and Time** by Pete Dunne, **Charting a Course for the Delaware Bay Watershed**, Harriet B. Honigfeld, New Jersey Conservation Foundation, 1997.*

“Every year for four generations, the Camps of Port Elizabeth have poled gunners through the stands of wild rice that lines the banks of the Maurice River. When the axis of the earth inclines toward autumn and the winds turn chill, rail birds

migrate south. They reach Delaware Bay’s marshes after a night of travel and gather in the rice beds, feasting on the grains. This is why sportsmen the world over travel to this obscure Bayshore community and for seventy-five dollars secure the services of the Camps — ‘for a (full) tide.’

“President Benjamin Harris hunted these marshes a century ago and maybe he was pushed by a Camp. Teddy Roosevelt, the president who championed wildlife conservation, was likewise drawn, as was Philadelphia painter Thomas Eakins. So enamored of this esoteric brand of bird hunting was Eakins that he depicted the pageant no fewer than six times. What sort of bird can claim the favor of presidents and painters and place them in collusion with New Jersey baymen? Why, the sora rail, a small, chicken-like marsh bird that lofts into the air like a grasshopper, flies like the Wright Brothers, and falls like a stone a split instant before gunners loosen the charge of shot that passes, often as not, cleanly over the backs of the birds.

“In the last quarter of the 19th century, over a hundred thousand soras a year were taken from the marshes flanking the Maurice — most by the 200-odd members

of the long-ago disbanded West Jersey Game Protection Society. On one momentous tide, members were reported to have downed 21,000 birds — 365 felled by a single gun.

“But this blend of innocence and slaughter died with the opulent century that spawned such excesses. As recorded in the ledgers of Ken Camp, an environmentally tempered 1,500 birds a year are currently killed by gunners, an average of ten birds per boat. While this may sound generous in an age where a single black duck constitutes the legal limit and canvasback may not be hunted at all, Ken Camp allows that the number of birds killed is consistent year to year. The host of birds and the harvest has fallen into harmony.

“In all of North America, there are but a handful of coastal reaches where rails are still hunted in the traditional fashion. In New Jersey, only one. Here. Along the banks of the Maurice River . . .”

### ■ Background

#### Hints for Using Simulated Field Trips

The following is reprinted from Project WILD, pages 348-349

*Western Regional Environmental Education Council, 1992.*

A simulated field trip is a powerful way for students to create vivid experiences in their mind’s eye. Many older people remember when the major form of entertainment was radio. With radio and its absence of visual images, many listeners were forced to create mental



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pictures of the way various characters looked and acted. It was common for listeners to see landscapes, cities, and any number of exotic settings. Often one hears teachers and parents claim that radio helped make students more creative as it required the listeners to stretch their imaginations. Many neuroscientists concur.

Research has shown that, with their eyes closed, people activate parts of their brain-mind systems that are often left unstimulated. When we picture things in our minds, we call parts of our brains into activity that are unused in reading or writing. Studies show skill in picturing things in our minds enhances our ability to enrich reading and to increase skill and imagination in writing. The capacity to remember concepts, words, names and ideas is enhanced. Dramatic results have been achieved when these approaches

are combined with medicine. In many instances, life-threatening illnesses have been reversed and overcome.

The use of simulated field trips for instructional purposes is promising to become one of the most effective educational strategies of the past two decades. The following guidelines provide a basic, useful approach to the use of simulated field trips as a teaching tool.

1. Ask students to lay aside all pens, pencils, books, etc.
2. Instruct the students to sit in a comfortable and relaxed position with their eyes closed.
3. Wait until you see a general state of relaxation before beginning.
4. Using a steady and paced reading and speaking style, begin offering students the narrative. Remember to speak

slowly and steadily. If you want students to create rich mental pictures, you must allow them time to do so. It takes about as much time to observe mental images as it does to carefully review actual physical settings.

5. Once the narrative is finished, invite the students to review all of the images they saw in their minds. Again, try to allow enough time for an adequate visual review — and remember, the review takes time.
6. After an adequate time for mental review (at least one minute and possibly two minutes), ask the students to open their eyes.
7. Begin discussing the simulated field trip in terms of the instructional purpose for its use.

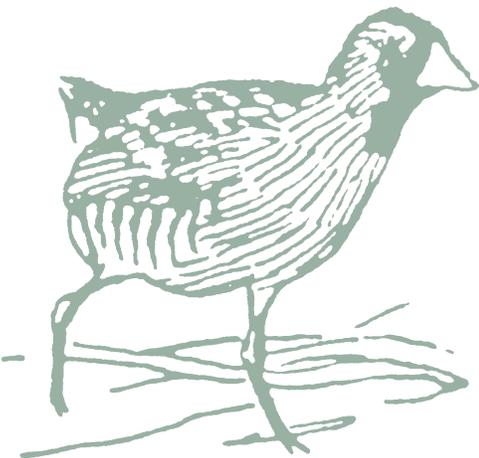


*Pushing for Rail, by Thomas Eakins*  
*The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Arthur H. Hearn Fund, 1916, (16.65)*

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In some cases, the process serves simply to provide a visual review of some of the students' past experiences. At other times, you are providing stimuli for the students to create original images. In any case, it is important to realize that there are no mistakes in mental images. What a student pictures is real. The images are data. If students create images that are inconsistent with what you expected, consider the images to represent differing perspectives rather than wrong answers. Try to honor and nourish variety as a means to add richness to the topics being explored.

In addition to serving as a powerful and effective way to explore and remember concepts, regular use of simulated field trips also tends to relax students. When relaxed, they will frequently be more productive in all academic areas — including scoring higher on standardized achievement tests.



### ■ Procedure

#### *Warm Up*

Review **Background** information on **Using Simulated Field Trips**

If desired, show the segment of the video that deals with rail bird hunting.

#### *The Activity*

1. Set the stage by preparing the students for a simulated field trip. Tell them that they will be hearing a personal account of the author's experience with rail bird hunting.
2. Read the passage about rail bird hunting by Pete Dunne included. Instruct students to create a mental image of what is being described and to include as many details as possible.
3. After the simulated field trip is completed, instruct students — either individually or in groups — to create a picture or illustration of the rail bird hunt as it was described during the simulated field trip. Students should try to include as many details as possible and work toward creating a complete picture of all components described. Things to include (but not limited to): the boat, the habitat, the river, the bird, the hunters, the scene, etc.

#### *Wrap Up*

Discuss the various drawings/murals created by the class. Critique their artistic merit and accuracy in illustrating rail bird hunting and the Maurice River ecosystem.

### *Action*

Research the history of rail bird hunting and describe its relationship and significance to the region Down Jersey.

### ■ Assessment

Participation in class discussion and creation of the mural and/or illustration.

### ■ Extensions

Have students do other creative projects using the topic of rail bird hunting as a focus: poetry and stories. Students could make a mobile which includes all of the components of a rail bird hunt. Also, students could investigate and compare/contrast the other bird species that are (or were) regularly hunted along the tidal tributaries of the Delaware Estuary.

Utilize rail bird hunting as a focus for interviewing people that have been rail bird hunting before. See **Activity: Saving Local History**.

### ■ Resources

*Charting a Course for the Delaware Bay Watershed, Honigfeld, Harriet B.*

*Published by the New Jersey Conservation Foundation  
Bamboo Brook  
170 Longview Road  
Far Hills, NJ 07931-2623  
(908) 234-1225.  
Copyright 1997.*

*Other books related to waterfowl hunting.  
See especially,  
Shorebird Decoy Activity.*



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From the Introduction to *Charting a Course for the Delaware Bay Watershed*,  
by Harriet B. Honigfeld, published by the New Jersey Conservation Foundation, 1997

## Tide and Time

by Pete Dunne, Director of New Jersey Audubon Society's Cape May Bird Observatory

Labor Day traffic was already building on Route 47 — the old north-south highway whose course follows the contours of New Jersey's Delaware Bay. Summer 1994 was over, history. The sound of cars ferrying people from short-lived vacations in Cape May back to the work weeks ahead reached the river like an ugly rumor.

*"Hello," I said to the figure bending over by the row boats lining the riverbank.*

"Hul'o," he said, rising, showing me his face. "Goin' with us today?"

"Yes," I said.

He was short and sixtyish, dressed in the standard garb of a Delaware bayman — generic trousers that might have been black beneath their layer of dust, unembellished T-shirt stained with sweat, running shoes whose fabric was permanently impregnated with mud.

He wore an orange hunting cap bearing the legend of a local gun shop, a gold neck chain, and a grin that exuded puckish good humor.

In his left hand he carried the fifteen-foot pole with the three-prong end that he would use to propel his boat and his client through the riverside marsh.

Neither the boat nor the pole has changed design for a hundred years, and there is a reason for this. They work just fine the way they are.

"Pete Dunne," I said reaching for the free hand.

"Walter Camp," he said taking it.

"Ken's brother?" I asked.

He responded with a nod and a grin so wide it seemed to bisect his face. "Water's comin' up fine," he said, anticipating my next question, nodding toward the river bank. "I put that stick in when I arrived, and it's already come up that far."

"That far," measured horizontally, was about a foot and a half of rising water. In terms of depth, it was maybe an inch, which might not sound like much, but when it comes to pushing gunners through the fibrous stands of wild rice that line the river, every inch of buoyancy helps.

"Been rail birdin' before?"

"Yes," I affirmed, not at all miffed that Walter didn't recall. After all, one hundred and fifty clients a year seek the services of the Camps, and it had been three years since I'd last gone "rail birdin'" — in 1991 to be



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exact, the year my wife and I moved from Hunterdon County, New Jersey, farm and bought a home in a town two miles down river. And I'd been poled not by Walter Camp but Rich Camp, Walter's nephew and Ken's son, the inheritor of a tradition that vaults a century and is virtually endemic to the region.

Soon the others began to arrive at the landing — both the sportsmen who had enlisted the services of the Camps and the men who would pole the boats. In short order acquaintances were made or renewed, inquiries relating to health made, and snide observations relating to weight and age bandied and denied.

Then the waiting began, which is as much a part of the ritual as the hunt. It is said that tide and time wait for no man but on this river; tide and time are one. Here, for generations, life and movement have been governed by the tide and as men are forced to wait for the water to come up; they fall into the natural pattern of the river. You can see the change if you take time to watch.

Men, whose movements were quick and nervous when they arrived, steady. Darting eyes grow thoughtful and fixed. Laughter, after the river has worked its spell, swells from the belly, not the brain, and stories take the place of the quips and anecdotes that dominated early conversation.

Given enough time it is possible that those who come to draw a measure of the river's magic may even find their speech patterns changing to match the twangy, syllable-eating flow that characterizes the South Jersey dialect — a brand of English that transforms meadows into "medahs," muskrat into "m'shra" and boats into items of apparel that other English speakers slip over their feet.

"Let's go," Ken commands, quietly, and one by one the gunners take their positions in the bow, one gunner to a boat. The boatmen heft their poles, testing the balance and the weight, then push off from the bank, turning into the tide.

Overhead, clouds that look like they were put there with a putty knife add character to a cobalt sky. Over the stands of Phragmites, a startled flock of blue-winged teal takes flight, weaving a tight, turning pattern that carries them from view.

I look back at Walter who smiles and nods. "There nevah use to be phagmahte heah befo' tha hurricane," he observed.

Phragmites, also called foxtail or plume grass, have been in New Jersey a long time, and I wondered which coastal storm Walter might be referring to — perhaps the great storm of 1870 that breached the protective dikes that stood between the farms and the river. It was the inundation of these diked farms that gave rise to the rice marshes we'd be hunting today and,

according to Walter, was the source of the sora's colloquial name "rail bird." As Walter explains it, during flood tides the birds would collect on the floating fence planking, or rails. Gunners hoping to economize on powder and shot would line their fowling pieces up along the linear assemblage and reap a harvest of "rail birds."

But 1870 was a long time ago even by the reckoning of Bayshore residents. Walter's reference to a hurricane probably related to a more recent storm, one falling upon the region in living memory of my guide.

"How old are you, Walter?" I inquired.

"Sixty-six," he said through his trademark grin. "Bin polin' sin's I was 18. In this boot," he added without being asked.

I looked down at the sleek sliver of hand crafted cedar — a craft that bears a likeness to a kayak and utilitarian ties to a gondola. Most of the ribs have been replaced, some twice. The bottom, too, looked to have been replanked during one of the more recent decades. The color was neutral. It was a simple boat, the simple fusion of purpose and design, and it was beautiful.

"Where do you live?" I asked my guide.

"Dorchester," he said, compressing the name into two impossible-to-render syllables. "Same place the boat was built."



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Our boats rounded a point of land, and I could see the bridge and steeple of the Mauricetown Methodist Church poking over the trees. It pleased me that the stands of rice we'd been hunting would lie in the shadow of my town.

"This heah was diked when I was a kid," Walter said, nodding toward the shore. "W'used t' swim 'cross to git watermel'ns an swim back wi'em."

I didn't ask whether they were purchased watermelons or found watermelons — not that it mattered. After all, Walter had been a riverside kid and this offers a special brand of protective immunity (so long as you don't get caught). If the number of ropes dangling from limbs overhanging the river are any measure, kids and the

Maurice still enjoy a special relationship. The river's recent designation "Wild and Scenic" may even assure that this timeless association endures.

Our boats were approaching the stands of rice, now. The seed heads were bowed with the weight of their bounty but hung motionless in the windless air. Overhead, a monarch butterfly fluttered with movements that hesitated between effort and ease. Above it was another... And another... more! Perfect flying conditions for migrating monarchs. Seeing them called to mind one of the great local roost areas where insects spend the night, roosts as festooned with folded winged insects as the celebrated sites on California's Central Coast.

"Been out to see the trees where the monarchs roost?" I asked, not naming the place, certain Walter would know where it was.

"Oh yeah," he affirmed.

"Went out thar th'other night. Not much happenin'."

"Be different tonight I'll bet."

"I'll bet," he agreed. "Better get ready to stand up," he warned. "We're getting into position."

I stood up in the bow, hooking my left foot beneath the planking for balance. Thousands of gunners had assumed this exact stance before me, on this river, in this boat, guided by the skills of the man behind me. Now, it was my turn to place my feet in their footprints.



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A shadow out of the corner of my eye distracted me momentarily. I turned, looking up and back in time to make out the silhouette of a soaring eagle before the boat and then the world spun out of control. Only Walter's counterbalancing efforts in the stern kept me from being pitched into the river.

"Ste'dy," Walter counseled. "Be a sham t'lose 'er now."

"Load up," Ken commanded, quietly, but his voice carried down the line. From other boats I heard the latch-soft snap of doubles being closed. Through the floor plate of auto-load I slipped a shell and was rewarded by the ringing sound of metal on metal.

We entered the rice in a line. The stalks closed in around us and the world disappeared. The standing forms of my companions were reduced to disembodied orange caps. Beneath their brims, faces were turning intently ahead.

In the stern, Walter leaned into his pole, and the boat moved forward, passing through the reed the way truth cuts through doubt. Red-winged blackbirds exploded from the reeds, protesting loudly, and from assorted boats polers checked their client's half-raised guns with commands to "Hold, hold," preventing any unfortunate mistakes.

"Be read'h when we near the edge," Walter counseled. "The birds'll most likely jump when we git to the edge."

I could not see edge. I could see nothing but reed. But Walter, who has lived on these marshes for 66 years and poled clients for 48 of them knows each ditch and dike, knows them because he was born to them. I put my faith in him.

One push pole length... two ... and brightness intruded upon reed in front of us. Another push and I could see open water, the edge, just one push pole length away.

"Be read'h when we git to the edge," I repeated in my mind and felt the thought crystallize into anticipation.

Through the planking, through my feet, I could feel Walter steadying himself for the final effort. I knew when he moved his pole forward. Felt when the pole found footing on the bottom. Held my breath as he lay into the pole and threw his weight into it.

There is a moment's hesitation between the time when a poler leans into his pole and when a boat moves forward. Maybe it's the friction of the reeds. Maybe it's because at this junction between the lives of living things, time becomes frozen and actions that seem momentary at other times are detached and eternal, now.

But in this frozen moment that lies between anticipation and action, between what is and what may be, there is time to reflect.

Upon who you are. Upon what you are doing. Upon what an incredible privilege it is...

To live in this age. On the banks of this river. And to know kinship with presidents, painters and the Delaware baymen whose lives were moored in the past.

Later, when the tide had turned, when the day's hunt was over, when the birds were laid in the bow of the boats, and the day's events were rendered into stories that would gain stature with every telling, one of Ken's clients made an observation that struck home.

Said this man of our day on the river, "It's like history's come back again," which is wonderfully frank, and almost accurate, flawed only in this one respect. Here, on the tidal tributaries of Delaware Bay, there is no need for history to come back again. Here along the watercourses of Gloucester, Salem, Cumberland and Cape May counties, it never left.

Perhaps in other places, history is linear and easily fragmented. But here, along the watercourses of Delaware Bay, history is geometric. It expands and does not diminish. Each generation draws from its depths and adds to its dimensions.





RAIL BIRD BOAT

## Maurice River Railbird Boat

Sides are made from white cedar, 1/2" thick.

Bottom is made from 3 pieces of 3/4" white cedar, tongue and groove.

Stem, stern, ribs and braces are made of sassafras.

Decks and gunwales are made of 1/2" white cedar.

Battens are made of white cedar, 3/4" x 1 3/4" stock.

Brass screws are used throughout.

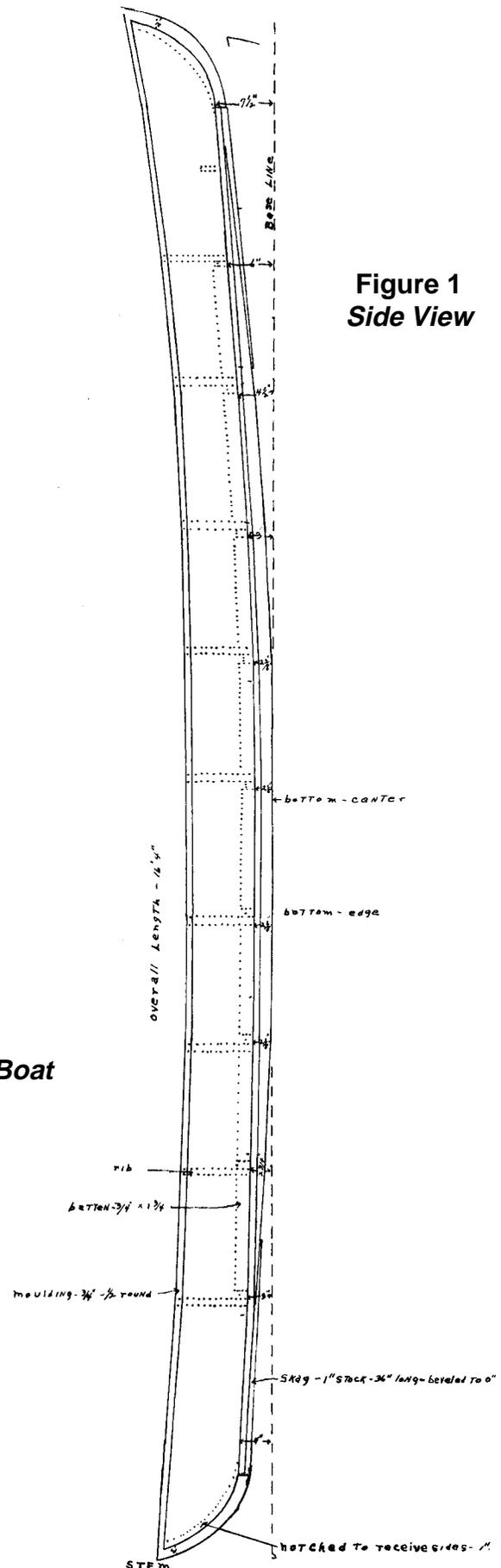
Cut out sides using paper template. Bend sides over a form constructed according to top and bottom measurements shown in Figure 2. The raise at the stem and stern and intermediate points should coincide with the measurements between bottom of side and base line shown in Figure 1.

Construct ribs using paper templates and rib length and bend data given in Figures 2 and 4. Plank lengthwise. Battens are placed between each rib section. Deck stern as shown in Figure 3. Cleats may be added along edges of deck as a brace for pusher's feet. Deck bow to first rib. Use a 3/4" cypress moulding on outer edge of gunwale.

Install a removable false bottom using 3/8" x 1" stock.

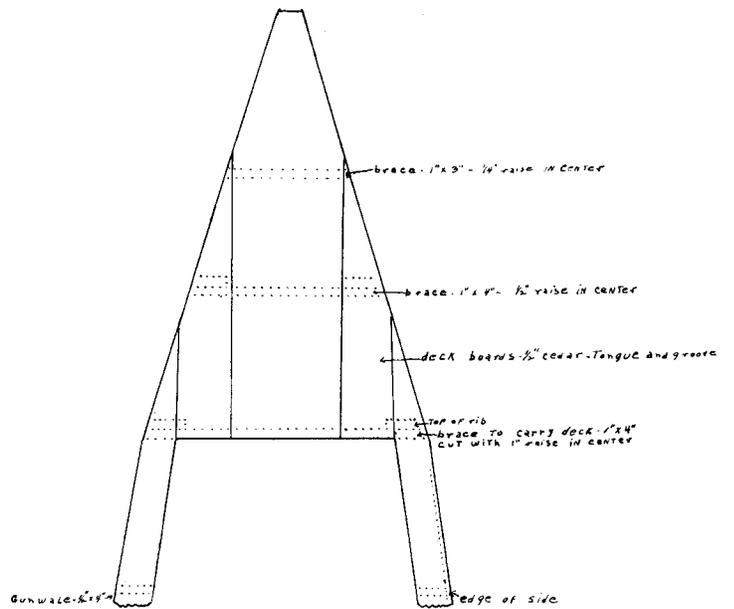
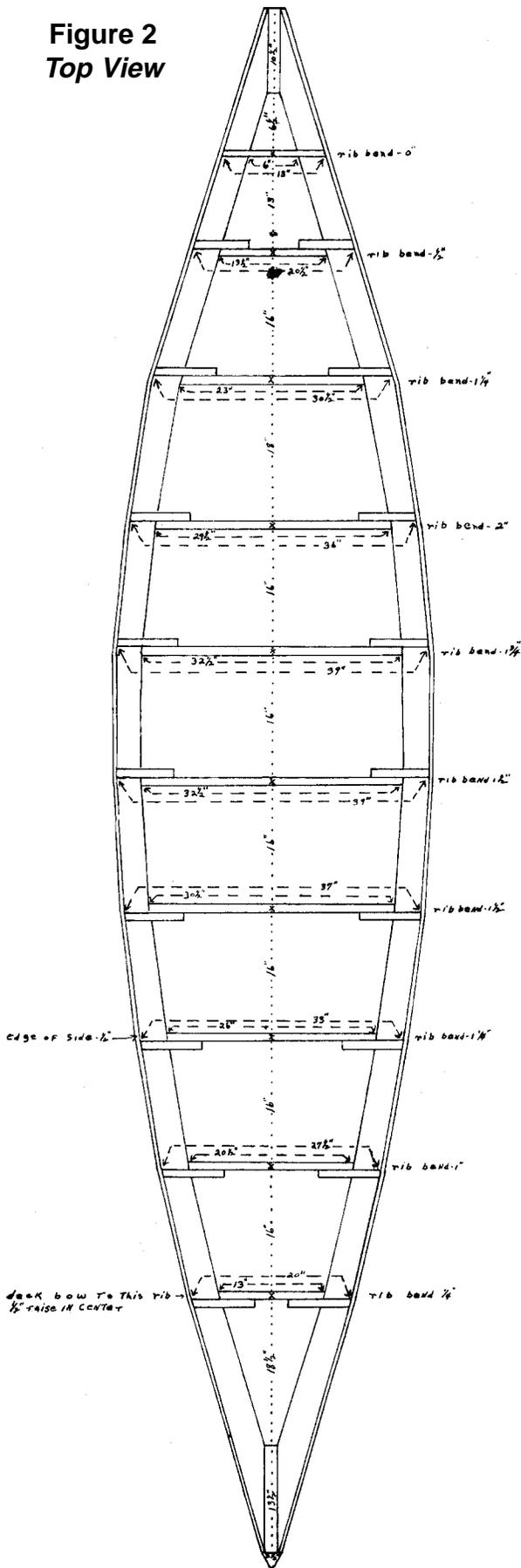
Boat is propelled with a 16' cedar push pole equipped with three legs at the bottom.

**Maurice River Railbird Boat**  
Scale: 1" = 10'



**Figure 1**  
**Side View**

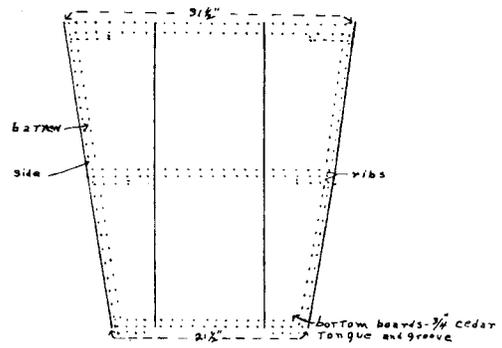
**Figure 2  
Top View**



**Figure 3  
Top View of Deck**



**Figure 4  
Typical Rib Section**



**Figure 5  
Section of Bottom**