St. Joseph River: Highway of the Past

The St. Joseph River was vital for transportation for hundreds of years. Learn about the types of boats and ships that were used to travel the river and how they compare to automobiles that travel modern highways. And, make a miniature canoe using some household items.

**Ages** 6 & above; children will need adult assistance with craft (use of hot glue gun)

### Materials Needed
- hot glue gun (and an adult to help)
- thin cardboard (example: cereal box)
- scissors
- paint
- marker
- toothpicks
- sticky address labels (or masking tape)
- printed copy of template (see last page)

### Background Info/Quick Facts
Imagine if we did not have railroads or highways. How would people travel to far away cities? How would delivery drivers drop off packages to your home? How would businesses ship supplies to factories? Today we rely on roads and railroads, but for a long time, waterways - our rivers and lakes - served as a main network for transportation.

Native, European, and American groups used the St. Joseph River like our modern-day roads, to travel from place to place, to trade, and to do business. Many different types of boats and ships used the river much like cars, vans, and trucks use our highway system today. Much like the various automobiles that move up and down the highways today, there were many different types of boats that traveled the St. Joseph River. How they looked, their size, what they were used for all depended on the culture that created them and the type of service they were used for. Whether they be small for personal travel, or large for moving goods, boats served the same purpose as our cars today, and the St. Joseph River was a major river in our area that took people where they needed to go. Some of the earliest boats to travel the river were dugout and bark canoes built by Native Americans.

### Instructions: Build a Miniature Cardboard Canoe

**Print** out the template page (see below) and cut out the parts) with scissors. Trace those shapes onto your cardboard. Then cut them out.

**Hot glue** the cardboard sides to the bottom and let cool. Then hot glue the ends of the sides together and let cool. Have an adult help you with this step. It will be easier to color your canoe if the un-colored sides are facing out.
Make the paddles while the glue dries. Wrap a sticky mailing label (or a piece of masking tape), around one end of each of the toothpicks. You can use the scissors to cut the sides so the label or tape looks a triangle.

Paint or color the sides of your canoe when the glue is dry. We used markers in the example, but crayons and paint can work as well.

Your canoe is finished!

Option After you admire your finished canoe, you can try to float it in the sink, bathtub or a large bowl of water. Because it is made from cardboard it will eventually break apart. How long does your canoe hold together?

Want to Learn More?

Here are some types of historical ships and boats that traveled the St. Joseph River

Dugout Canoe The first type of canoe used in this area by Native cultures, these canoes were at the simplest form, a hollowed-out tree. After the tree was cut down, canoe builders used fire to char the inside, and the burnt wood was scraped out. These canoes varied in size depending on the size of the tree. These canoes would have been very heavy.

Bark Canoe An improvement on dugout canoes, early bark canoes were mostly made from elm in the Northern Indiana, South Michigan region. They were lighter than dugouts and used for “portage,” where they were carried over land when waterways did not meet. Their light weight also made them easy to steer and maneuver.
**Log Raft**  A simple craft with sides and sometimes a canvas roof. They were made by tying logs together. On average, the rafts that traveled on the St. Joseph River measured 16 feet wide and 50 feet long.

**Keelboats**  A long cigar-shaped boat used mostly for transporting cargo. These boats were steered by men using oars or long poles. These boats first traveled the St. Joseph River in 1831 and were used to move goods like pork, flour, and corn.

**Steamboats**  Boats powered by steam used propellers or a paddlewheel to move through the water. The first steamboat traveled from Lake Michigan to Berrien Springs, Michigan in 1832. By the mid-1880s, trains completely replaced the steamboats that traveled the St. Joseph River.

See next page for canoe template.

Activity provided by:

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#CelebrateTheStJoe
Canoe Template  Print out, then cut out shapes. Trace shapes onto cardboard and cut out.