A passion for making beautiful canoes

MARK JONES Staff Reporter

BANCROFT - "I built my first canoe in Grade 6."

That's what Will Ruch said when asked about his career making beautiful cedar canvas canoes at his home on Musclow Greenview Road, Bancroft.

That first canoe building experience changed Ruch's life. It also saved him from his regular classes. In the seventies, the school in Port Carling that Ruch attended was designed around the open classroom concept. There were 74 children and two teachers in the classroom.

"It was wild. I'm dyslexic and had trouble with the noise and couldn't concentrate."

The instructor running the canoe program would fetch Ruch from his class. Ruch enjoyed working with wood and had the advantage that both his parents earned their living as artists carving birds from wood, and had learned some skills at home.

In fact, when he first started to earn his own living, Ruch was also a bird carver, but it never really held his interest. He tried other things, working for a log builder, a furniture maker and a contractor.

It was canoeing, though, that held his fascination.

"I just liked canoes. There is something fascinating about them. Their form and design is so old and yet they work so perfectly. They don't need gasoline. They don't need electricity."

Canoes, especially cedar canvass canoes, hold a special place in Ruch's heart.

"You look into the boat and you see those curves, it is very visually pleasing and wood boats, I just like them."

For Ruch, cedar canvass straddles two different traditions in canoe building.

"Cedar canvass is a mix between the traditional birch bark canoe, which is the original, and then you had the Europeans coming over and seeing that and applying their boat-building techniques. Milled material built over a form as opposed to being built inside-out essentially as a birch bark canoe is. You can see the direct influence of one on the other. It's a melding of Native technology and design with European techniques. It is a kind of Métis boat. It's a mixture of the cultures."

The canoe is an amazing craft, of which Ruch lives in awe.

"The canoe really is perfect. Ten thousand years, it still does all that it did," Ruch said.

It was in 1984 when Ruch had a big break. Mike Schumacher of Sundance Canoes called him to finish the spring repairs, which gave him a chance to learn more about canoes.

"The more you do, the better you get. You become more skilled. Some things you can learn very quickly and you hit the plateau, whereas with canoe building, you get better and better, smoother and smoother."

He likens making canoes to paddling them. The experienced paddler appears to make few apparently







Will Ruch with a sample of the cedar canvass canoes he makes in his workshop near Bancroft.

effortless motions as opposed to the splashy energy of the novice.

There is a lot of finesse to paddling.

"When you get a little more experience, you don't think about the motions, it's like walking, nobody thinks about walking. You just move on the water."

When Ruch first apprenticed with Schumacher, he was making strippers, canoes comprised of narrow cedar strips, with layers of fiberglass on either side. There was a lot of grinding and glass work but Ruch was able to learn to use new tools and to learn sanding techniques that he uses to this day.

Ruch has always preferred the cedar canvas construction method. He likes steam bending the ribs, fitting the planking and nailing. There is no smell of fibreglass resin.

He buys his materials from local wood mills and makes practically everything from that raw material.

Ruch is also fascinated by steam bending wood.

"As soon as I bent my first piece of wood, it's so cool I was fascinated," Ruch says with enthusiasm.

He uses a propane burner and a Dutch oven to create the steam. The steam softens the wood so that it can be bent but it takes time to learn the subtle art.

"There's some physics too. The inside is under compression, the outside under tension, which pulls the fibres and it breaks. But if you put a metal band around it, a bending strap, now you are putting compression on the outside and it bends."

That was a trick that Ruch learned from Walter Walker, in Lakefield, another of the old wooden boat builders. Now, Ruch does not need to make additional pieces to allow for breakage, because they don't break with the bending strap. Repairing canoes was tremendous training. Ruch was taking apart canoes from different manufacturers, seeing how they were made. He learned the techniques of a variety of canoe makers. Ruch also filed away what he learned about where canoes fail.

A 26 ft North Canoe that weighs 200lbs Ruch is in the

process of making now.

"Where the inwhales and outwhales come together, that's where they always rot. So, then you start thinking, how can I do this better."

In most canoe making the woodworking is done first, then sent to the finishing area, nothing was pre-varnished.

Ruch bends his canoe ribs and then varnishes them. The planking is book matched so it is a mirror image. He numbers each part of the boat and sands off the mill glazing so the wood better absorbs the varnish. All the parts are pre-varnished.

'It gets pre-varnished. The inside of the gunnels, they are all done, even seats and thwarts. I fit them, take it all apart and varnish it."

This careful preparation helps prevent water being absorbed by the wood, increasing the weight of the canoe. The weakness of cedar canvas boats is improper

storage. "People leave them lying around, they get wet, they

cook in the sun. The sun is a lot harder on the finish than it ever was years ago."

However, a properly cared-for canoe will outlast its original owner and be passed on.

"Everybody now is so accustomed to throw away mass-produced electronics. You know, who tells you they have a 20 year old cell phone? They were huge, like a brick."

Whereas with cedar canvass canoes, they can last for

Ruch described his passion for wooden canoes, "You look into the boat and you see those curves, it is very visually pleasing, and wood boats, I just like them."

Ruch is thankful to the Muskoka boat builders who over the years shared their knowledge with him.

"Over the years being able to talk to older boat builders in Muskoka, you learn little things. Sometimes they are a bit cryptic," Ruch said with a smile.

"Sometimes they say, 'you could do that,' which means only an idiot would."

When he was an apprentice canoe builder he got his first glimpse into what he describes as mass production. There were up to eight people making canoes.

"If you are just making parts you are not seeing how it is put into the product and really it gets to the point where you don't care. You're paid, you get it done. You are just trying to get it done on Friday so you can go home."

From 1988 when he went out in business by himself he has made each canoe by himself. "Suddenly, it's all me... you want to make it perfect, that's my goal."

In his first few years he primarily worked on repairs. "That was the bread and butter, people had their canoe,

you get them in the fall, you do them over the winter, that sort of keeps the wheels turning." generations.

"Now we're starting to realize, just consumption and replacing things, you can't do that forever. The world just can't support that."

Ruch advocates a different approach.

"Rather than buying five things over the years that are poorly made and come from somewhere else, buy something handcrafted that is made in your area. It's well made and you take care of it and pass it on to your children. It's a different way of thinking and looking at it."

Ruch takes pride in his work.

"It starts off as raw material from a mill. You make every part, I buy the paint and varnish, canvass and fasteners, but you put it all together."

He remarks how rare that is today that a person makes a whole product.

When asked how long it takes to create a canoe, Ruch answers he does not really keep track but estimates around 200 hours for his smaller models. That includes

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A life-changing experience propels career

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the time wetting down the walls of the varnish room, before he starts applying the varnish.

When asked how he sells his canoes, Ruch answers that it is mainly through word of mouth on a customer base that he has built up over thirty years building wonderful canoes.

"I've been doing it long enough, you get a name. People find me."

He does have a simple website.

For Ruch, selling canoes is based upon relationships. "You meet the people and there's a dual interview process goes on. They are asking me about the canoe and

I'm asking about them, their expectations and lifestyle." He wants to know what kind of paddling his customers wish to do.

"One canoe will not do everything well...it's always a compromise."

He prefers to meet in person to better understand his customers' needs.

He recommends people start off canoeing with easy, short adventures, preferably with experienced paddlers.

He builds his boats out of a combination of woods: curly maple, bird's eye maple, sitka spruce, ash and white cedar. The design is based on an early Peterborough design, a little finer and slender than the chestnuts of New Brunswick.

The home he built with his wife Ellie, is made of straw bales and is completely off the grid. The couple have an extensive garden on the south-facing slope below the house and workshop.

Ruch laments that some people are becoming increasingly detached from nature. He is confounded that people visit local hobby farms and then stay indoors playing virtual farming games instead of being outside, feeding actual food to real chickens and so forth.

Having the house and workshop run exclusively by solar power, relies on the sun. When clouds descend, you just don't do the laundry that day.

"Years ago we worked with nature. We worked with the seasons. In the winter time, people did less because it was dark. Then as the days get longer, so you do more. I think we have lost that, doing whatever we want, whenever we want. Electric lights have changed a lot."

At the moment Ruch is working on a special project



Ruch and his wife live in a straw bale house with solar panels and ample gardens on a south facing slope.

for a customer. He had previously made this customer a 16-footer.

"We liked each other; he liked my work and respected it."

He phoned up Ruch to ask him to make a 26-foot North Canoe, which can carry up to 10 paddlers and weighs about 200 lbs. Ruch obtained a design from a friend and set about building it. It was a different type of construction and being that much longer each stage took more time.

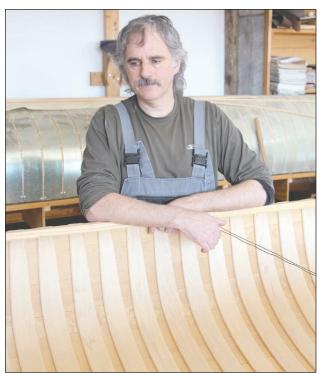
He likes to think that the North Canoe will allow more people to try canoeing.

He said one small experience can have the potential to change someone's life, just as his life was changed by that canoe building class in school many years ago.

There was a nice ending to that first canoe building class that Ruch attended in grade 6. The canoe building instructor, Ron Purchase, now in his 80s gave Ruch a call last year and offered him the canoe.

"He gave me the canoe...That's kind of cool to get the canoe back."

He sums up his goals this way, "It's just wanting to introduce people [to canoes]. I think it is better for us, better for the planet. We're healthier and doing things instead of being propelled around."



Ruch examines the sanding on the inside of the North Canoe. Photos Mark Jones

CROSSWORD



CLUES ACROSS

- 1. Currency of Guinea
- 5. Avert something bad
- 10. Sounds
- 12. Immediate dangers
- 14. Legendary Tar Heels coach 16. Californium
- 18. Work standards government
 - dept. (abbr.)
- 19. Coastal Scottish town
- 20. Triangular lower back bones
- 22. Trouble
- 23. A way to smile
- 25. Something that is not what it
 - seems
- 26. Of she

- 27. Temporary living quarters 28. Bag-like structure in a plant

- 35. Philippine island 37. No longer fashionable
- 38. Peaks
- 40. Alabama football team
- _ King Cole 41.
- 42. Digital audiotape
- 44. Open trough
- 45 The woman
- 48. Cools down 50. Turkic language
- 52. Body part
- 53. Pulse steadily
- 55. Embedded computer hardware
- company 56. Indicates shape
- 57. Thou (plural)
- 58. Odd and remarkable

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or animal	63. An evening party
30. Indicates near	65. National capital of Zambia
 Spiritual leader 	66. Tantalizes
33. Soup dish	67. Dark brown or black

CLUES DOWN

 Not naturally outgoing Exclamation of pain Polynesian garland of flowers Surrounded by water Church towers Hot beverage Body parts Travel documents Railway Gradually wear away Measuring instrument Minor dust-ups Strongly alkaline solution Extreme scarcity of food Dash Philly culinary specialty 	 29. Greek god of desire 32. Take to the limit 34. Cool! 35. Sound mental health 36. Native American group 39. Test for high schoolers 40. Rocky peak 43. Preferences 44. Bother 46. Call attention to (slang) 47. Snake-like fish 49. Bulgarian capital 51. Don't know when yet 54. Italian Seaport 59. Brooklyn hoopster 60. Where to bathe
	P 1
23. Popular lager Adams 24. Snitch 27. Trimmed	61. Equal, prefix62. Beverage container64. Denotes openness

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