

# A passion for making beautiful canoes

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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 canvas 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 canvas straddles two different traditions in canoe building.

"Cedar canvas 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 canvas canoes he makes in his workshop near Bancroft.



A 26 ft North Canoe that weighs 200lbs Ruch is in the process of making now.

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 fiberglass 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.

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."

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.

"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 canvas canoes, they can last for 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, canvas 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



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."

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