

Boats with Stories to Tell, Rescued From Obscurity

By DAVID STABA

Published: August 14, 2007

BUFFALO, Aug. 13 — Todd Parmington was finishing a restoration of a guide boat built about 1888 that ferried campers to church services in the Adirondack Mountains when he got an e-mail message in May from a teacher in Vancouver, Wash., researching her family's genealogy.



Wendy Valint working in Buffalo on a guide boat built about 1888. "Sanding has to be a Zen experience for you," she said.



A restored Caleb Chase vessel was built in the 1870s.

The teacher, Beth Kuter Pfenning, in reading the journals of her great-great-grandfather, a 19th-century farmer and business owner in the Adirondacks, saw that her forebear had bought oarlocks, hinting that he had perhaps been a boatbuilder as well. A light went on when she looked at the works in progress on the Web site for Mr. Parmington's boat-restoration business, vintagecanoeworks.com: "Is your E. G. Ricketson my Elbridge Gerry Ricketson?" Mrs. Kuter Pfenning wrote.

They confirmed they were talking about the same man; then Mrs. Kuter Pfenning sent Mr. Parmington a copy of the journal, which detailed the materials Ricketson used in his boats and who bought them.

The restored guide boat, one of three still in existence with documentation showing Mr. Ricketson built it, won first place last week at the Adirondack Boat Museum's annual show in Clayton.

"These are wonderful old objects, and they appreciate both how they look and what they mean," Rod Taylor, a retired teacher and school administrator who served as a judge at this year's show, said of Mr. Parmington and his partner, Wendy Valint. They also won the contest's award for best canoe in 2006. "The best canoes and guide boats are the marriage of form and function that result in beauty, and they understand that," Mr. Taylor said.

Mr. Parmington and Ms. Valint came to canoe and boat restoration on something of a whim. In 2004, after selling his company, which produced instructional material for math students, Mr. Parmington decided to unwind with a working vacation at Hickok's Boat Livery near Saranac Lake, where he had toiled as a teenager 30 years earlier.

When Mr. Parmington asked about a 20-foot blue vessel built by the Chestnut Canoe Company that he and his wife and four children had used on past visits, the owner cautioned that it was not in seafaring shape.

"So I went out to the large storage shed where it was stored and looked up in the rafters," recalled Mr. Parmington, who is now 50. "I saw about 15 units up there. I knew I'd have to restore the big one, and I thought, 'Perhaps there's some opportunity here.' "

Mr. Parmington bought the lot of vessels, rented space in the basement of the former Mentholatum factory in an industrial section of Buffalo and, with Ms. Valint, who had worked for him at his old company, founded Vintage Canoeworks.

Neither had extensive experience in carpentry or boat repair, but they quickly mastered their craft, buttressing handiwork with meticulous research on the history of their vessels.

An Old Town canoe, which sold for \$8,000 this spring, was originally custom-built and delivered to a camp owned by Percy Rockefeller, cousin of Governor

[Nelson A. Rockefeller](#) of New York, in 1916, according to documents Mr. Parmington obtained.

Awaiting restoration is a square-sterned canoe built about 1924, also by Old Town. It once hung on display in the Madison Avenue store Von Lengerke and Detmold, an outdoor outfitter bought out by Abercrombie and Fitch four years later.

While canoes remain common vessels on waterways around the world, Adirondack guide boats were unique to the region, according to Mr. Taylor, the contest judge. Among their special qualities, he said, is the combination of weight, strength and speed required to traverse the expansive waterways when boats were the primary mode of transportation in the area, which was sometimes called the Venice of the North.

“They’re the most magical things to row once you get into them,” Mr. Taylor said. “They’re so light, so fast, so responsive — it’s almost a mystical experience.”

The Ricketson boat, for example, weighs 74 pounds but can carry 1,000, fulfilling the need to be both light enough for one person to carry along the portages connecting the lakes, ponds and tributaries of the Adirondacks and sturdy enough for passengers and supplies.

Most canoes of the period achieved that balance through canvas stretched over a wood frame, while guide boats were built from thinly planed cedar or pine reinforced by spruce ribs less than half an inch in diameter, cut from the tree’s stump and roots along their natural grain and curved to maximize their strength.

The labor required to return these watercraft to a condition as close to the original as possible is exhausting, Mr. Parmington said.

When beginning a restoration, he and Ms. Valint make any necessary carpentry repairs, treat the ribs and other wood with a near-boiling mixture of linseed oil and turpentine to restore flexibility, replace the canvas on the canoes and spend hour after hour with sandpaper in hand, removing any irregularities, and often, many layers of paint. “Sanding has to be a Zen experience for you,” Ms. Valint said.

Work on the Ricketson boat took more than 300 hours, which, Mr. Parmington said, made it “a struggle to decide whether it should even go to market.”

The results are pricey: a guide boat built about 1892 by J. H. Rushton is listed at \$18,000 on the Vintage Canoeworks site. But Mr. Parmington said the cost often amounts to about \$20 or \$25 an hour, adding, “We do this for the love of it, and the satisfaction.”

Mr. Parmington and Ms. Valint also run a printing business and are partners in a popular smokehouse in Buffalo, so they can be choosy about which boats they acquire. Last year, Mr. Parmington picked up a guide boat built about 1902 by Henry K. Martin. The owner had stored it in a chicken coop in Petaluma, Calif.

“It looks ugly and dirty, but everything is intact,” he said of the vessel, one of several he has in storage awaiting restoration. “You don’t find them like this very often.”