

## These canoes have a past

**By restoring old boats, they keep alive the great traditions in canoe-building**

**BY ERIC SHARP**  
FREE PRESS OUTDOORS WRITER

*March 9, 2006*

EAST LANSING -- Chances are you might have one hanging in the rafters of your garage. Or maybe tucked away in the barn loft at the old family homestead. Or Uncle Charley might have stuffed one under the porch at the cottage Up North, where it has moldered since 1957.

Guy Younglove has one -- a 1916 Morris wood-and-canvas canoe, which was given to him. He plans to restore it at his Paddlecraft Boatworks in Flat Rock, where he mostly works on modern fiberglass canoes and kayaks.

"I was able to trace it from the serial number on the brass plate," said Younglove, who had come to the Quiet Water Symposium at Michigan State University to get advice from some of the top restorers in the country. "It came out of the old canoe rental place on Belle Isle."

Skip Gibson's eyes light up at the thought of craft like Younglove's old Morris. Someone gave Gibson a wood-and-canvas canoe 17 years ago, and since then he has restored 250-300 of them, including one that hung from the rafters of a barn for 38 years.

Gibson, a Grosse Pointe Farms resident, is one of about 40 active members in the Michigan chapter of the Wooden Canoe Heritage Association, a group dedicated to keeping alive the great canoe-building traditions of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

"I buy them, restore them and sell them," said Gibson, who now is restoring a 16-foot, 1940 Peterborough canoe. "The ones I sell pay for the next ones I buy."

Gilbert Cramer, one of the country's best-known restorers, was demonstrating his craft by putting a new canvas cover on a wooden duck boat from Saginaw Bay, which probably was built about 1930. Cramer owns the Wooden Canoe Shop in Bryan, Ohio,

"People always ask how much it costs to completely restore an old canoe, and I always tell them about \$3,000," he said. "If I have to replace a lot of ribs or the gunwales, it will cost a bit more. If I don't have to do much wood work, it will cost a bit less.



Gilbert Cramer restores boats at the Wooden Canoe Shop in Ohio. The typical restoration costs about \$3,000. (Special to the Free Press)

### Want an old canoe?

Some examples of antique canoe prices from Internet Web sites:

- Restored 1920 Old Squaw 17-footer: \$5,200.
- Restored 1916 Old Town Otca: \$3,200.
- Circa 1900 Abnaki Indian birch bark canoe, 14-feet-6: \$4,500.
- Unrestored 1890 Henry Hosmer 17-footer: \$4,250.

"Then they want to know what the finished canoe would be worth, and I tell them about half as much as it costs them to redo it. But people don't do this for the money. They do it because it was their mother's or father's or grandfather's canoe, and they want the memories."

Some boats are straight wood-planked, but most of those Cramer works on have cedar-strip hulls covered with heavy canvas cloth. After repairing and replacing the wooden parts of the hull, he stretches the canvas tightly over it, tacks it in place and then impregnates the material with a thick paint that takes about three months to dry.

After sanding, the hull gets several layers of finishing paint, which makes it look as smooth as modern fiberglass.

Old canoes can be picked up in rough shape for a few hundred dollars, Cramer said, but collectors are always looking for something like the 1916 Morris or 19th Century craft built by masters like J. Henry Rushton and Henry Hosmer. Boats from their shops can command more than \$4,000.

Ralph Cohn of Flint has taken the canoe-building heritage a step beyond restoration. He spent a month last summer near Sudbury, Ontario, building a 14-foot birch bark canoe by traditional Indian methods under the tutelage of Tom Byers, one of the few people keeping the traditions alive.

Cohn cut down a cedar tree to form the ribs and stems, stripped a birch tree of its bark for the skin and pulled up sinewy jack pine roots to make the twine to bind the ribs and sew the birch bark pieces together. He boiled spruce gum with bear fat to make the pitch that sealed the seams.

"I'm going to use it to fish the North Branch of the Au Sable River," Cohn said. "I've been going there since I was an embryo, and I've wanted one of those canoes since I was a kid."

- Restored decked 1880s sailing canoe, all cedar: \$8,500.

- Restored 1916 Old Town canoe built for Percy Rockefeller: \$8,200.

**Copyright © 2006 Detroit Free Press Inc.**