

TIM BUTSON:

*a legacy
of boat building*

The Butson family has worked on many boats including the Minett Norwood II (above) and the Minett-Shields Norwood III.



Now retired, Ron Butson spent his entire life working in the boat building industry (above). Marie, a Minett from the teens is a dramatic displacement boat (right).



**Article and photographs
by Tim Du Vernet**

The numbers are shrinking – those of the men with a direct connection to the early generation of Muskoka's boat builders.

At one time, the men of the villages of Muskoka were relied upon to keep the boat shops humming. The list of those employed by the boat-building shops connected with nearly every extended family in town.

The Butson family is one of the few that connects directly with that earlier era and beyond. Ron and Tim Butson are fixtures of the boat-building community and their skills are well respected. Many a current workman got his first taste of the trade through the Butsons.

When visitors to the shop see Ron, who will soon engage in conversation, and Tim at work, consider there is a history here of wooden boat building that includes both sides of the family and extends well beyond the first days of boat-building in Muskoka.

The Butson family started building schooners and brigantine ships in the 1800s in Fowey, Cornwall, England. One schooner built by the Butsons in 1869 was the 130 ton *Rippling Wave*.

Cecil Butson, Ron's father and Tim's grandfather, emigrated to Canada in 1905 at the age of 21. Cecil Butson had five sons, three of whom went into the boatbuilding business.

Wooden boatbuilding is the only career Ron



The cabin launch *Heather Belle*, built in 1902, is one of the oldest boats maintained by the Butson family. Tim Butson is the third generation to work in boatbuilding.

Butson has ever known except for four years overseas during the Second World War. He started when he was 16 and retired in his late seventies. He worked in Midland, Penetanguishene, Barrie and came to Muskoka in 1960 to work at Duke Boat Works. Tim Butson, Ron's only son,

is the sixth generation of boat builders in the Butson family.

In the later years of Duke Boats, when fiberglass boats were starting to encroach on the wooden boat market, Ron Butson became one of the most important builders at Duke's. He

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Tim and Ron Butson are known for their amazing varnish finish. Marie is a 26-foot 1917 Minett that shows well. Tim was the plant manager at Greavette's in the 1970s.

was responsible for the design and construction of the framed versions of the longer Duke utilities that were powered by V8 engines.

Tim Butson, who once again operates his own shop in Bracebridge, first trained to be a civil engineer. But he was drawn back to the

boat business and eventually to Greavette Boats in 1975, where he became plant manager and helped oversee the move of that company to Port Carling.

Ron joined him for the last two or three years at Greavette Boats. When Greavette Boats ceased

operating in 1981, Butson Boats Ltd. opened their doors in the Port Carling shop. One of the first boats to come through was the *Kittyhawk*, a Gidley once owned by Orville Wright.

In the time that Ron and Tim have been building and repairing wooden boats, it wouldn't be a far stretch to say that their hands, in one way or another, have touched nearly half of those still afloat.

Curiously, what was once considered a "repair" is now described as a "restoration." When Duke Marine Services was closing its doors for the last hurrah, the two old salts of Muskoka boatbuilding, Ron Butson and Ed Skinner, pulled out their little record books to reflect on the many boats they have worked on over the years.

Among these boats are *Curlew*, *Marie*, *Margenja*, *Lady Elgin*, *Robinbrook*, *Mineta*, *Norwood II* and *III*. Ron and Tim have established a very loyal client base that respects their traditional craftsmanship.

Heather Belle, a 1902 Marine Engine & Machine Company 36-foot cabin launch, is probably the oldest boat the Butsons have worked on and taken care of for more than 30 years. A unique addition to the restoration they did on her was changing her gas engine over to an electric power system with an unbelievable bank of batteries. *Heather Belle's* owner, Graeme Ferguson, has written a book about her history and the naphtha engine power system of the original engine.

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Lady Elgin, a 36-foot 1929 Ditchburn, was built to be a livery boat for Lake Rosseau hotels. She still sees service ferrying passengers during weddings, boathouse, cottage and garden tours.

Ron once described how he would show a new recruit how to make a perfect shaving, more than a metre long, using a hand plane. It all came down to having properly sharpened tools, he explained. The skill of a wooden boat builder is being able to judge the shape and fit of pieces to be positioned so that few if any adjustments are needed. This is not only more efficient, but makes for a better built boat.

The Butson's shop has moved around over the years, from Port Carling, to Minett, Bala and Bracebridge, but the philosophy has always been the same.

Much of the work today is restoring and repairing boats, but Tim continues to build new models as well. They are hybrid designs that combine features he likes most about the boats from the 20s and 30s with updated hull and deck features.


Tim and Ron believe in the traditional construction methods. "Some of the boats we have repaired hadn't seen any major work in the first 50 years of their lives, so it is pretty difficult to fault the method."

The handiwork of the Butsons is a feature of competition at the annual Muskoka Lakes Association Regatta. Commissioned to build the fastest rowboat according to specific race regulations, Tim came up with a design that has been a consistent race winner. It does stray from plank and ribs construction, using epoxy to get the job done. About 30 of these rowboats were built. They've constructed a few kayaks using the cedar strip and epoxy method as well.

In the mid 1990s they began their building program, starting with hard chine boats like their 19-foot and 22-foot sport runabouts and luxury launches. In 2005, a 32-foot displacement launch was added to the line up. Ron designed these hulls the old fashioned way of hand carving a half hull and lofting it to paper design plans. Since they are custom built boats, after the hulls were built, Tim would stain these boats to a customer's preference and apply a deep gleaming finish.

The Butson family "coat of arms" so to speak is emblematic of the tradition and values of boat building. It consists of three of Cecil Butson's boatbuilding tools that he had brought from England: a hand plane, a caulking (corking) mallet and iron.

The Butson legacy has come to include more than wooden boatbuilding, just as the coming of spring brings more than the break up of ice and the rise of daffodils. It means another chance to sample the famous Butson butter tarts. They have become a fixture of the annual ACBS-Toronto spring tour. Nearing a record for butter tart production, more than 80 dozen butter tarts are family baked for the event. It takes two weeks of work to prepare them.

Enjoying the delights of wooden boats was never so sweet! 

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