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Springtime tour ignites the boating season in Muskoka

BY C.E. LODGE

Each April the Spring Tour of the restoration boatwork shops marks the beginning of the boating season in Muskoka. It is fitting that this event takes place in a region which boasts such a rich boating history.

Here is where some of the finest boats ever designed were built. Included in this mix and to name only a few are: Ditchburn, Minett, Greavette, W.J. Johnston (Dispro/Dippy – Disappearing Propellor), Duke Boats, Matheson. Many of the rarest and most coveted Antique and Classic vessels were either built here or are being rebuilt/restored here and the annual spring tour exemplifies that this passion remains alive and is still thriving in Muskoka. Saturday, April 26 marked the 33rd Spring Tour of the Muskoka boatshops. Each April this annual event is hosted by ACBS Toronto (www.acbs.ca) and you don't have to be a member to attend. For a fee of \$35 (non-members pay \$40) to the organizers, the boat restorers open up their doors for attendees to get a rare glimpse into their shops and the many interesting projects in their varied stages of build, rebuild or restoration.

The spring tour is always an exciting event and this year was no exception. The 13 hosts along the tour generously opened their doors welcoming over 250 attendees. Many travel a distance to attend this event, some from the U.S. (New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania), across Ontario and even across Canada (Calgary). The boat shop owners showcase their projects while providing a plethora of treats like Butson's famous fresh baked Butter Tarts, (they baked 80 dozen tarts for this event). There were delicious pastries (i.e. the cinnamon buns at Brackley's), hot deli-



YOSEMITE SAM. Tim and Sharon Butson of Tim Butson Wooden Boat Builder in Bracebridge stand in front of the Yosemite Sam a boat being restored in the shop. (Photo by Bev McMullen)

cious soup (courtesy of Matt Fairbrass) and hot cider at Stan Hunter's for a cold, chilly day. All hosts provided coffee, tea and soft-drinks as well. As if all of the fabulous treats

along the route weren't enough, included on the tour was a delicious lunch at the Port Carling Community Centre (catered by Morandin Fine Foods & Catering).

The workshops along the tour route included: Windsor Boat Works – host Mike Windsor; Clark Wooden Boats – host Gary Clark; Brackley Boats – host Paul Brackley; Grace & Speed Muskoka Boat & Heritage Centre – host Ann Curley (all of Gravenhurst).

On to Bracebridge we went to Butson's Boat Shop Ltd. – hosts Sharon and Tim Butson. Welcoming us into Port Carling was Duke Boats Ltd. – hosts K. McCarthy and J. Fowler; Tom Adams Muskoka Boats – host Tom Adams; Whiteside Mechanical Services – host Matt Fairbrass; Stan Hunter Boat Builder – host Stan Hunter; Curtis Hillman Boat Builder – host Curt Hillman, of Milford Bay. Shops further along on the tour included Peter Breen Classic Boat Company (Rockwood) – host Peter Breen; Blackbird Boat Works Ltd – host Paul Hunter (Utterson) and Harwood Water Craft – host Mark and Karen Harwood (Port Sydney).

Many incredible boats can be seen on this tour and there are so many highlights to mention. At Breens there is the very rare *Johnny Johnson IV*, and a 33' Baby Gar (built for William Randolph Hearst). The historic *Miss Canada IV* was seen at Tom Adams Muskoka Boats. There is the 37' family racer Ditchburn replica at Gary Clark's. *Bimbi*, an early Minett Launch is a Mike Windsor project. One in particular which drew a lot of interest was Yosemite Sam at Butson's. There's a family history tied to this boat. Highlights of her story, including pictures from the '70s and the '80s are posted on a

storyboard on her starboard side. Yosemite Sam was built by father-son team Ron and Tim Butson. Completed in 1975, she is a 24' Butson-built family launch. The boat was once owned by Sir John Black Aird, (23rd Lieutenant Governor of Ontario, Canada, from 1980 to 1985). Under his ownership she was used by the CNIB, the sight-impaired camp which is located on Lake Joseph. She then came under the ownership of Camp Oochigeas – a 'children with cancer' camp on Lake Rosseau. She moved around on the lakes for a number of years. She has now come full circle and has returned home to the Butson family where we'll stay tuned to see what is now in her future.

After the past brutally cold winter which we have all somehow come through, it is great to finally turn our thoughts to time out on our pristine and beautiful lakes this coming spring, summer and fall, so bring the boating season on! As a testament to how severe this winter really was, one of the regular tour attendees mentioned that this year was the first time in 17 years that he could not boat to the spring tour event, due to the fact that the lake was still mostly frozen.

The unique day of the spring tour is best articulated in a quote from Wind in the Willows by K. Grahame: "There is nothing – absolutely nothing half so much worth doing as simply messing about in old boats."

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ABOUT THE COVER. Mike Johnson, owner of Hamer Bay Marine Ltd., MacTier poses with his four-year-old St. Bernard named Dolby, who greets visitors to Muskoka with a friendly smile and a wagging tail. Photo by Bev McMullen

Cottage Daze: waiting on spring to arrive —

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Now, we run into our first long weekend of the cottage season, when cottagers return in droves to open up their summer escapes, meandering up the busy highways hauling boats or utility trailers packed high with supplies.

They arrive, set out the patio or dock furniture, fire up the barbecues, and work at emptying out their coolers. The towns of Muskoka become bustling hives of activity, lively and vibrant once again.

My middle daughter wonders why the long weekend is falling early this year.

"Isn't it called the May two-four weekend, after-all?" she asks. To which my oldest and wisest daughter responds, "That's not for the

date, you dummy – that's because everybody celebrates by buying 2-4's of beer!"

Oh, what they learn in college. Bless her heart.

Goodbye winter and hello spring ... with summer just on the horizon.

For my Cottage Daze Quiz and some interesting Victoria Day facts, go to muskokan.com.

Welcome back to the Cottage Daze!

James Ross is the author of the books *Cottage Daze* and *Still in a Daze* at the Cottage (Dundurn Press) available in your favourite bookstore. The books feature the best of his cottage stories. Visit www.cottagedaze.ca, email cottagedaze@vianet.ca, or follow @cottagedaze."

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