

Boat Builder on a Quest to Craft the Perfect Canoe

BY HOLLY HENRY



Boat builder Alex Comb instructs student Scott Haugen on the finer points of building his own canoe at Comb's Stewart River Boatworks on the North Shore.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFF FRANCIS

What will eventually become a 17-foot wood and canvas canoe sits upside down in Alex Comb's workshop. It is the centerpiece of the room and the focus of thoughtful discussion between Comb and a student who is learning to build his own wooden canoe.

The canoe looks remarkably like the picked-over rib cage of a deer carcass, and its creator is quick to point out that the bent white cedar strips that hold it together are indeed called ribs.

The work in progress, he explains, is a European adaptation of a birch bark canoe. Comb has named his version of the design Emily and describes the finished product as "delicate and pretty."

It is odd to hear such poetic words flow from the mouth of the sawdust covered owner of Stewart River Boatworks, a Knife River company that builds wood and canvas canoes, wooden kayaks and classic wooden rowboats. But Comb acknowledges that his boats are both useful crafts and works of art.

He spotted his first wood and canvas canoe in the Boundary Waters in the mid-1960s and fell in love. "I had that image in my

head until I built my first canoe in 1972," he says. "To me it was a reminder of the importance of a simple life, and I wanted to create one myself."

In 1979 he started building "perpetually" and Stewart River Boatworks, inspired by the Stewart River near Two Harbors, was born. While Comb began with only one design, a 14-foot tandem canoe, today he crafts 11 different models.

"I didn't want to re-invent what was already out there, but I also recognized what was good about them, so I borrowed some designs that were available and modified," he explains.

Many of the boats are pragmatic, wilderness designs intended for use in the backwoods, Comb says, adding that most American companies design canoes for leisurely paddling.

"I'm not that interested in the Sunday paddling canoes, but I did bring the Emily into the line for that purpose," he says. "It's a beautiful canoe, but it's also adept at fishing, even in Northeastern Minnesota." No matter what the design, he wants all of his boats to look traditional. "To me a canoe is made out of wood," he said. "I

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grew up with an aluminum canoe, but always knew it was a cheap imitation of the real thing. I started my quest for the real thing while in college and built a wood-strip/fiberglass canoe, but it brought only momentary satisfaction."

The idea of building a wood and canvas or an all-wood canoe festered with Comb for several years, until he finally attempted a few designs. "The first three forms were burned or given away," he laughs. He went on to build all-wood cedar lapstrake and smooth-lap cedar canoes which he later decided were beyond what his market was interested in. "So I just concentrated on wood and canvas," Comb says.

That same traditional view applies to his kayak designs, which are based on the Southwestern Greenland styles.

While Stewart River boats fetch between \$3,000 and \$4,000, Comb has also learned that there are people who don't just want to own one, they want to build it themselves. Thus he designed a one-on-one class where students are allowed to create their own boat under Comb's fine tutelage. On this particular day Scott Haugen, of Minneapolis, is working on an Emily, which he will own after eight days in the Stewart River workshop.

"It's an amazing opportunity to work with Alex," Haugen says. "I'm doing the work and creating something for myself, but I have Alex here to guide me into creating a quality product."

Comb indicates that he is mostly "hands off" when it comes to instructing his students. "I certainly don't build the boat for them, but they have the use of my workshop and I am there to offer guidance and demonstrate the steps needed to complete the project. It's rewarding for them and for me."

Perhaps the most rewarding project Comb has overseen however, was building a boat with engineer Harold "Olli" Olila for the Salolomp Finnish Language Village near Bemidji. The school had a boat which was originally built in Savo, Finland. Because the boat was frequently used and improperly stored, it had deteriorated significantly.

Comb was commissioned to recreate the boat, using cedar planks and oak ribs. When finished it was an exact replica of the original. "That was my favorite boat," he confirms. "But I think the best part was working with Olli. He was just this very funny, incredible guy, and we built a great boat."

But as happy as he was with that creation and most of his others, Comb is on a quest to build the perfect canoe.

"There is a symmetrical, primitive design that has hung in my head since I was a boy and I keep trying to create the perfect rendition of this image. I know I never will, but I am enjoying the effort."

For more information on Stewart River Boatworks visit www.stewardriver.com.



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