

Continuing The Chestnut (Canoe) Tradition

By Stephen Branch



DURING THE EIGHTY years Chestnut canoes were built in New Brunswick, they earned an international reputation for quality workmanship, reliability and superior performance. There were Chestnut models for pleasure, for fishing, for exploration, for freighting.

For a variety of reasons, the operation which William and Harry Chestnut founded in Fredericton in 1897 was liquidated in 1979 and 1980. Incorporation as the Chestnut Canoe Company Limited took place eighty-one years ago this year — in 1907.

Quality and nostalgia were not enough to keep Chestnut afloat; neither were new owners with a peerless track record who acquired the company in December, 1977.

Danger signals were flying in 1974 when operations were moved from an old multi-storey plant in Fredericton to a huge new (72,000-square-foot) single-storey plant in Oromocto — twenty kilometres away. To keep overhead per canoe made to a manageable figure, production in the new plant had to be substantially increased and scheduled virtually non-stop without bottlenecks.

But, Chestnut's distributorships were inadequate and sales were declining. The higher the production, the higher the

(unsold) finished goods inventory. Even at peak, production volume never approached plant capacity.

Ten years ago this fall, the Chestnut Canoe Company announced a drastic production cut and the news was that the company was for sale as a going concern. The announcements took outsiders and most employees by surprise. In the spring of 1978, as many as sixty men and women were engaged in production at the Oromocto plant.

Chestnut management soon announced, that if no buyer were found, assets would be disposed of piecemeal. That meant inventories, the plant, trade name and molds (used to build the different models of wood canvas canoes) would be sold separately. The deadline for finding a buyer passed at the end of 1978; negotiations were on again, off again, during the first half of 1979. The end came that year and, except for the plant, the assets of Chestnut Canoe were sold.

Even during the darkest days of 1978-79, there was never any doubt that a market, albeit a limited market, existed

for the kind of wood canvas canoes Chestnut made famous for eighty years. Chestnut built the "Cadillac" of canoes which people who made their living with canoes needed. The market consists of paddlers who know canoes and know how to look after them.

If proof is needed that Chestnut products are superior and are still sought after, imagine the forty different wood canvas models Chestnut built being paddled in lakes and rivers all over North America — from the Arctic to the deep south and from the Pacific to the Atlantic. How many survive is impossible to know but the few shops that repair Chestnuts see a constant parade of ailing craft in need of restoration.

In 1979 and 1980, a handful of individuals and groups in Canada purchased Chestnut molds when they were offered for sale. Some then advertised by word of mouth or flier that they built "genuine" Chestnut wood canvas canoes. Hardly any of the "originals" operating canoe building as a cottage industry remain in business today. Exceptions are



Carl Jones takes his Cedarwood canoes to boat shows but not to small local ones. Shows are Cedarwood's principal form of promotion.



Steven Jones mounts a yoke thwart in a nearly finished sixteen-foot Prospector.

a New Brunswick firm started by a longtime production employee at Chestnut Canoe and a one-man shop, also in New Brunswick, operated by a former sales manager at Chestnut. Both own and build on Chestnut molds but neither will ever become a "large scale" volume builder of wood canvas craft. Unlike Chestnut Canoe in the 1970s, neither operation will likely ever find demand for canoes lagging behind supply.

Carl Jones of Fredericton worked twenty-eight years at Chestnut Canoe and was plant superintendent when the Oromocto plant finally closed in April, 1979. His son, Steven, worked six years for Chestnut. In the fall of 1979, Carl purchased six (wooden and metal) canoe molds from Chestnut and soon afterward acquired two more. With the backing of two silent partners, he began building wood canvas canoes to order in leased premises. That was in the spring of 1980. The first canoes off the floor and out the door carried the name Chestwood. A telephone call from Chestnut Canoe's owners advised Jones not to use the Chestwood name. To avoid litigation Carl quickly substituted Cedarwood and the name and a logo became permanent.

Cedarwood Canoes is now eight years old and has moved thirty-seven kilometres

out of Fredericton. The company has also become a family affair and the original partners bowed out and cashed in their chips.

Cedarwood bought an existing quonset-type warehouse on Route 105, eleven kilometres upriver from the Mactaquac Provincial Park gates and moved in October, 1985. Two years later, a frame addition (varnish / paint room, storage) was completed at the front of the quonset. The address of the enlarged Cedarwood "complex" is RR 1, Mouth of Keswick, N.B. E0H 1N0.

Carl Jones says there is space enough to increase annual output of new Cedarwood canoes well beyond 100 — perhaps to 250. The numbers are in addition to the company's booming repair business which now accounts for fifteen to twenty per cent of the annual total. To double canoe production, Steven Jones says two or perhaps three more skilled canoe builders would have to be employed. That would make six on the Cedarwood production payroll including Carl Jones, wife Marie and son Steven. Carl says that ideally he would like to hire employees who worked at Chestnut "where they learned the skills we depend on." He says it is difficult to build canoes and train workers at the same

time. "There is a good living for the right people."

Cedarwood builds twenty-three canoe models in lengths from fifteen to twenty-six feet overall — each with a prescribed shape, width and weight. All are built with hand-shaped ribs and planks of local cedar, stem and other components of ash or oak. All are painstakingly fabricated on, or over, Chestnut Canoe molds.

Each step in the fabrication follows the Chestnut Canoe tradition. There is no assembly line at Cedarwood; each canoe is treated like a special creation — a canoe with a personality and a history.

All Cedarwood models are available in canvas (canvas over cedar) but the larger canoes, such as the Ogilvys (used principally by salmon fishermen), can be ordered with a fibreglass over cedar finish. An associated company, C & S Boats Ltd., processes the fibreglass craft using shells from Cedarwood.

A fourth member of the Jones family is company bookkeeper; youngest daughter Kerry Ann works at home and is only rarely at the Cedarwood plant.

When the telephone rings in the plant someone has to drop tools and work to answer. Cedarwood has no receptionist. There are not a lot of incoming calls but, on a typical morning, there may be half a



Carl Jones inspects the ribbing of a new canoe; the next step is planking.



Carl Jones inspects an old eighteen-foot Ogilvy being fibreglassed at Cedarwood.

dozen. Some are long distance with the caller asking where and how to ship a Chestnut canoe for repair. Telephone orders can come from as far away as western Canada and from as close as the Gaspé, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Individuals as well as clubs and camps can call to ask how long it will take to have an Ogilvy — a twenty-two-foot model.

Most callers don't seem to know Cedarwood Canoes has a distributor serving Ontario and another based in Nova Scotia. When a canoe is ready to leave the plant, it is usually picked up rather than shipped. Carl Jones says this is the surest way to avoid damage. In the "olden days" when Chestnut was busy entire boxcars would be stacked with burlap and straw-wrapped canoes on their way somewhere by rail. "We wrap but that's no guarantee of safe arrival."

In recent years Carl Jones has been exhibiting Cedarwood wood canvas canoes painted red, green and Chestnut gray in major recreation and boat shows in Toronto (January and March) and in Halifax (February). All the company's wood canvas canoes carry the distinctive black and white Cedarwood decal and logo.

*"I have no reluctance
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Chestnut canoes."*

"I have no reluctance boasting that Cedarwood is the only company in the world building original Chestnut canoes the traditional way," Carl Jones declares. "Not only the molds and materials are the same but Steven and I mastered our craft working at Chestnut."

He explains that essential processes are time consuming and cannot be rushed. Cedar ribs and planks are individually shaped; ribs are steamed before bending; filler applied to the stretched canvas takes from three to four weeks to set — to dry. Varnishing and painting are slow.

Carl Jones says there is more to a canoe than a name and a mold. "The builder's skill and the materials used count for a lot. We claim all the canoes we build are examples of handcrafted excellence. We had a hand in creating each one."

When Carl and Marie Jones retire, perhaps in the next half dozen years or so Steven, now thirty-two, will have the responsibility of continuing the Chestnut canoe tradition. He seems both willing and able to do just that by building the best wood canvas canoes ever. □

Cedarwood Canoes



Specifications

Model	Length	Beam	Depth	Rib Space	Stern Design	Load Capacity	Net Weight
Bob Special	15'	37"	12"	1½"	Point	625 lbs.	63 lbs.
Pleasure	15'	34"	12½"	2"	Point	600 lbs.	68 lbs.
	16'	36½"	12½"	2½"	Point	650 lbs.	72 lbs.
	16'	33½"	12½"	2½"	Point	625 lbs.	68 lbs.
	17'	36½"	12½"	2½"	Point	700 lbs.	76 lbs.
	17'	34"	13"	2½"	Point	750 lbs.	76 lbs.
	18'	36½"	12½"	2½"	Point	750 lbs.	80 lbs.
Prospector	16'	36½"	14½"	2½"	Point	800 lbs.	74 lbs.
	17'	37½"	14½"	2½"	Point	925 lbs.	76 lbs.
Indian Style	16'	33½"	12½"	1½"	Point	625 lbs.	72 lbs.
Fisherman	16'	41½"	14½"	½"	Flat	1,000 lbs.	95 lbs.
	18'	41½"	14½"	½"	Flat	1,250 lbs.	110 lbs.
	20'	41½"	14½"	½"	Flat	1,500 lbs.	125 lbs.
Ogilvy	16'	36½"	13½"	½"	Point	800 lbs.	85 lbs.
	16'	36½"	13½"	½"	Vee	800 lbs.	95 lbs.
	18'	36½"	13½"	½"	Point	1,000 lbs.	96 lbs.
	18'	36½"	14½"	½"	Vee	1,000 lbs.	106 lbs.
	20'	37½"	14½"	½"	Point	1,300 lbs.	108 lbs.
	20'	37½"	14½"	½"	Vee	1,300 lbs.	118 lbs.
	22'	38½"	14½"	½"	Point	1,500 lbs.	130 lbs.
	22'	39½"	14½"	½"	Vee	1,500 lbs.	160 lbs.
	24'	41½"	14½"	½"	Vee	1,750 lbs.	195 lbs.
	26'	41½"	14½"	½"	Vee	2,000 lbs.	230 lbs.

We would be pleased to customize the depth of one of our new canoes for you, if you discuss it with us at the time you place your order.



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