

Steering TOWARDS THE FUTURE

MARC RUSSELL NEVER WANTED A NORMAL LIFE. SO HE OPENED A WORKSHOP IN TORONTO, WHERE HE BUILDS KAYAKS AND CANOES. IN ONTARIO, ONLY 10 BUILDERS PRESERVE THIS ANCIENT TRADITION. AND RUSSELL IS THE YOUNGEST

by *Giovanna Marchello*

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Vocation and ideals: this is what Marc Russell's out-of-the-ordinary life is constructed on. Russell builds and restores canoes and kayaks in Toronto, Ontario. He named his business Gull Lake Boat Works, after the lake where Kilcoo Camp rises, a summer camp that has influenced his life and triggered off his profession as a builder.

GIOVANNA MARCHELLO. What part did Kilcoo Camp play in your outlook on life and work?

MARC RUSSELL. Kilcoo Camp has been a very meaningful place for me and for thousands of people who have been there in the more than 80 years since its foundation. I spent my first summer at Kilcoo when I was 11. I found things there that were very much lacking in my own existence. It was the best place in the world for me: it was great fun, and the natural environment was fantastic. There is definitely something more profound and spiritual about being out in nature. Kilcoo Camp's strength is in providing growth experiences through a variety of activities and pro-

grammes. It is a place where young people can explore their interests and be challenged in a safe and constructive manner. A lot of guys stick around Kilcoo through university and adulthood, passing their summers working at the camp, mentoring the new generations. We love the place and it is not at all strange to stay that long. I was selected as Staff in 1997, and I decided to frame my life around it. So during and after completing my MA in English, I continued to work at Kilcoo. I wanted something else, and to get to it I had to make some sacrifices, abdicating certain aspects of the world and of common thought. It is probably easier to live a "normal" life, with an average job and a suburban home. But this choice was more honest towards who I am and what I want.

G.M. How did you start making canoes?

M.R. David Latimer, Kilcoo's Director for 25 years, was concerned that our fleet of vintage canoes was running down. Originally the camp had about 80 boats, but the 20 remaining were literally held to-

Opposite page, a view of Gull Lake from the stern of a Kilcoo 15'7" canoe. "A market for beautiful hand-made products will always exist, as long as someone is willing to take up the craft," explains Marc Russell.

gether with tape and varnish. The first idea was to restore them but, unfortunately, this option would have been uneconomical. So we decided to rebuild the fleet from scratch with master builder Ron Frenette, the retired founder of Canadian Canoes. David and Ron involved me because I have a natural talent for building, an eye for detail and a vast set of skills. And certainly for my loyalty and dedication to Kilcoo Camp. Kilcoo funded the entire project and an eight-month training course for me with Ron. As soon as I started working with Ron I just picked it up very quickly and after a few months I didn't look back. I created Gull Lake Boat Works, where I am responsible for administering the reconstruction of Kilcoo's fleet and also act independently on other building and restoration works.

G.M. What is the story of Kilcoo Camp's fleet?

M.R. Besides a few Chestnuts and Peterboroughs, until the 1980s our fleet was made of "Mintos", a fairly unique model that was built exclusively by the Minto family, who ran the local marina in the nearby town of Minden. Both Minto daughters were builders and after May Minto died, no more Mintos were ever produced. What is unique about the Minto is its relative scarcity being made locally and not in a factory. Design-wise, it lies somewhere between a 15' Ranger and a 16' Prospector, beguilingly less deep than both. It has a good straight-line and turning response, and easy to solo and carry, making it an excellent all-around boat that works well in most environments and conditions. It's a canoe with a great pedigree and attractive looks.

G.M. How did you go about creating the new model, the Kilcoo 15'7"?

M.R. Basically we brought the Minto back to life and back on the water. Scott Walker, a former Kilcoo sailing instructor in the early 1980s and progenitor of the "Kilcoo Canoe Project", made contact with the now reclusive Minto family and did some incredible detective work to find the mould, but to no avail. So we used a near-perfect Minto that belonged to another alumnus and took it to the Canadian Canoe Museum in Peterborough, where they have a triple-axis scanning machine. With that data, marine architect Steve Killing re-designed the boat. This is a multi-faceted achievement, which goes beyond me and my little company or Kilcoo Camp. We are preserving a culture and this is very important. Ron is 70 years old and his colleagues are in their fifties and sixties. I think I am the youngest person doing this in Ontario, at a professional level. We are talking about maybe 10 people. It is a dying art, and it is dying mainly for economic reasons.

G.M. How important is tradition?



M.R. Very important, and I think we have to preserve what tradition and culture we have in North America. Contrary to Europe, in Canada it is probably based more around our ties to the natural environment. It can be very problematic to work traditionally, because the economics are not great. It takes me 3 or 4 months to make a custom canoe, and I cannot really charge what would be fair. It can be difficult for consumers to understand the amount of work and skills involved. That it is often painstaking and difficult, and that you have to put your soul in it.

G.M. Is working on your own a limit or an opportunity?

M.R. It is very hard, because I am almost like a single mum with a job and three kids! I have to take care of the website, banking, building, cutting, cleaning... I really like working by myself, and there is a certain level of control, of course, that I would have to relinquish in order to work with someone else. But I do love working alongside other people. If you know what to do and how to do it right, working together is like a ballet. And it allows you to increase your productivity. The problem is the lack of people who have all the skills to actually be useful to my enterprise, because I cannot afford to train someone.

G.M. What do you think, or hope, will be the future of craftsmanship?

M.R. For myself I hope that I can sustain the business and keep building good boats, creating small innovations and developing my abilities. You have to keep it traditional, but there is nothing wrong in growing, in making things faster and better. If not we would still be using dugout or birch bark canoes. Today I use composites and modern equipment. The point is that the spirit of craftsmanship is in it. The Internet is a great opportunity to get your product out there. That spreads the craftsmanship around. But, again, it all comes down to whether people are willing to spend their money on a custom-made boat rather than on another common luxury, which they can use every day. A market for beautiful hand-made products will always exist, as long as someone is also willing to take up the craft.

G.M. So perhaps you won't be making canoes all your life?

M.R. Life is long and you have to be ready for change. I think we have to be multifaceted and adaptable, especially if we want to exist on our own terms. As far as I'm concerned, I am living in a very precarious spot and I am taking this opportunity as far as I can go with it. To build an enriching and positive life experience and leave behind a testament of my own existence (www.glbw.ca).

Above, Marc Russell. Opposite page, below, Kilcoo Camp's fleet, rebuilt by Marc Russell. Above, Tropical Mahogany outer gunwales clamped and ready for attachment to the canoe hull.

