

One man's journey knocking on wood



THE SCOOP

MABLE HASTINGS

*"I will sail my vessel
Till the river runs dry
Like a bird upon the wind
These waters are my sky
I'll never reach my destination
If I never try
So I will sail my vessel
Till the river runs dry"*
-Garth Brooks

If you believe that people come into this world with their purpose and destination planned as they sail their vessel through life then Lorne Whitehead was put on this earth to be a woodworking artist. Woodworking has always come natural to Lorne and taking what the land offers and turning it into something functional has always been Lorne's mission. Lorne refers to his gift as his creating "functional art."

The first item that Whitehead made was a chair that was constructed from

an old barrel. Whitehead who now lives in an apartment in Mansonville but anyone who knows him is reminded of his former home in Bolton-Est where he built his mailbox, front door and most of the interior of his home including the counters that were made of hundreds of pieces of hardwood glued together.

"The entire place was a labour of love," said Whitehead of his former home. "I referred to it as abstract functional art due to the fact that nothing was cut square but rather natural edges were formed and sanded as the beauty of the wood came to life in my hands."

The bandsaw has become Whitehead's instrument and scrap wood under the masterful hands and fingers of the artist become beautiful works of art. From planters, bowls, birdhouses and small items to furniture, in his 75+ years, Whitehead has used the talent bestowed upon him by a greater power to leave behind treasures that will likely long be admired for generations to come.

"I just got out of the hospital after being diagnosed with a terminal illness," Whitehead shared. "I then contracted Covid and the duration of my stay extended to forty long days," he said. "Gives a person along time to reflect on life," he added.

Whitehead has long been a fish out of water so to speak as the dollar and cents world is a foreign concept for him to understand and accept. He



often over the years has bartered with others exchanging wood for items he has made.

"I'm a simple man," he said. "I hope to leave the world a little better than I found it and that I have been able to breathe new life into the wood with which I worked giving it purpose and longevity to be shared long after my days here are done."

Whitehead embraces life and is thankful for the talents he was given.

If sawdust were aftershave, when entering Lorne's apartment, the soft sweet smell of wood dances through the air like an everlasting scent of being in the forest.

"I've sailed the vessel I was given the best way I could," said Whitehead. "My time left on this earth lies in the hands of something greater than myself but my hands remain an instrument devoted to the song embedded in the trees."

Happier times

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Not many folks can remember a time when instant coffee and tea bags weren't invented, Kleenex didn't 'pop up and actually plastic in its many forms was barely starting to appear, used for table coverings and kitchen chair seats and backs. From my vantage point at the bedroom window, I could watch city crews managing a wagon loaded with a steamer used to thaw out street drains and, later, probably in late January and February, I had a bird's-eye view of city workers cutting ice blocks on the Magog River.

But the first and most important event was always beginning preparations for Christmas and New Year's. Going back to the home farm

near here was never a given. It meant waking up in the dark, mom packing the warmest clothes, pulling on that cursed suit and overshoes and getting to the bus stop in time for the first bus downtown to the train station. These were the days of steam engines and steam heat. This was the morning train that would stop at every tiny station to pick up the milk. Local producers would be standing by their horses head, a calming hand on bridles and reins and the thunder of the steam engine rumbled past them as they waited for the squealing sound of brakes and the hiss of steam.

For me, still bundled in my winter clothes, my attention would be riveted

on horses and sleighs, my love of all animals and especially horses kept my nose pressed on the window until a sudden jerk or two meant filled cans were loaded and the empties handed out to the men near the sleighs.

If the trip to the farm to spend Christmas with my grandma was scheduled, it meant Christmas at home in Sherbrooke would unfold early and 'Ma' would be rescheduling Christmas at the farm for the 26th.

Memories are filled with a city-style Christmas with Christmas lights and coloured and patterned wrapping paper, a tree with perhaps 'bubble' lights along with spirals of those larger Christmas light bulbs, the kind that needed careful checking and often new bulbs as just one burned out bulb would shut the whole string off.

In the country, there was no hydro, no Christmas lights and only solid coloured tissue paper for wrapping. Ribbons were saved from year to year as well as the tissue paper, carefully pressed flat and folded to be put away until the next year. The country road was maintained with large wooden rollers, a system which did little to diminish snow drifts giving anyone brave enough to face the wind a bumpy ride

But for all the differences between town and country Christmases, the wonderful aromas of roasting turkey, mincemeat pie and Christmas pudding were the same. My stocking would be lumpy with an orange, (a rare treat in the 40s), an apple, old fashioned ribbon

candy and perhaps a colouring book or a package of wax crayons. In the city we would go to Mass and listen to music often sung in Latin but at the farm when dishes were done the coal-oil lamp would be carried into the parlor and Mom would play the piano or the old pump organ and favorite carols would accompany our tiny group singing and trying to remember the words.

Christmas was always on the quiet side, a bit solemn as we listened to the Christmas story read from the family bible Christmas eve. Partying was reserved for New Year's at our house where two cultures lived in harmony. Then there would be 'round' songs in French, recitations and a mini recital on the piano as grandchildren showed off their talents a bit. The final event was my grandfather's blessing, always an emotional moment for the gathered family. Oh yes, these were special days well-remembered and dusted over once a year. Memories should have a special place this year as we face the possibility of spending these usually festive days alone or with fewer loved ones. My memories are like a guardian, convincing me there will be better times 'a comin', new memories will be made and happier, healthier times will return. In the meantime, find a way to dust memory corners and re-live the days that are so precious. A merry festive season recalled and emailed to a friend will stir up a bit of joy in both directions and after all, that's what Christmas is all about.

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