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Alex Comb of Stewart River Boatworks

Working with His Hands, Head, and Heart

by Mary Beth Frost
photos by David Ballard



Sunlight reflects off the gleaming surface of a canoe as it slips across a lake. The sleek vessel responds quickly each time Alex Comb, owner of Stewart River Boatworks, strokes his hand-crafted wooden paddle through the water. The canoe's beautiful white cedar interior blends with the natural surroundings and the water makes a soft, mellow sound as it splashes against the hull.

"A wooden canoe has a different sound and feel in the water," Alex notes. "Wood is warm and made out of something that is living. I think we can relate to wood better than we can relate to plastic."

Since he opened his business in 1979, Alex has been designing, building, and repairing these elegant wood-and-canvas canoes. Although many people admire their beauty, Alex is dedicated to creating practical, durable boats. "The real value is how they perform," he states. "These canoes are not expensive window dressings; they are viable, useful boats."

For 35 years, Alex has paddled his boats in a variety of settings, constantly tweaking traditional hull designs and discontinuing old models with the goal of improving his product and meeting a variety of consumer needs. "Creating a new design is a lot of work," he says. "My goal is to give people what they want and then some. That's what drives me. I don't think I have exceptional talents – I have perseverance."

EARLY YEARS

Alex's love for water and boating began during his childhood, when he spent summers water skiing on the lake at his grandma's cabin and playing in the Minnehaha Creek near his Minneapolis home.

With three generations of his family in the construction business, woodworking was a natural skill for Alex at an early age. His family didn't own a canoe, but young Alex, who was determined to explore the creek and surrounding lakes, built a boat out of plywood. When he received an aluminum canoe from his father and joined the Boy Scouts at the age of 11, it marked the beginning of his lifelong passion for canoeing and camping.

While he was in college, Alex built his first wood-strip canoe. Although this fiberglass boat "looked pretty," Alex quickly discovered that the soft wood gouged easily and the boat was difficult to repair. He then turned to the almost-lost art of building the stronger, more repairable wood-canvas canoes.

A CALLING

In 2000, Alex relocated from his homestead on the Stewart River to a home and workshop he built in Knife River, Minnesota. He can often be found there, laboring alone in a cloud of sawdust, surrounded by boats in various stages of repair and completion.

Although Alex enjoys working with others, his employees and apprentices quickly lose interest when they are assigned menial tasks, such as sanding. "It's boring, tedious work," Alex admits. "You have to see the bigger picture, and you have to love it."

Since graduating from college with a bachelor's degree in social work, Alex has attempted various roles, but has never found a job that matched his skills and interests as well as this challenging craft. "If you have a calling, you might try to run from it, but if it is your calling, you're not going to get very far," he notes.

AN ART

Alex makes deliberate efforts to combine his creative, artistic energies with practical business sense, but it's clear that his motivation is not financial. "I don't want to be concerned with just making money," Alex says. "What's important to me is the craft – cre-

day, whether he's working one-on-one with a student in his shop, teaching a class, speaking in front of hundreds of people, or launching a new design, Alex continues to push himself, while appreciating and enjoying the simple pleasures in the world around him.

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Alex Comb works on a wood and canvas canoe in his homestead workshop in Knife River. He can often be found there, laboring alone in a cloud of sawdust, surrounded by boats in various stages of repair and completion.

ating something each day and doing something that is of value. I'm not a Rembrandt or a Mozart, but this is my creative outlet."

Over the years, Alex has generously shared his knowledge and skills with others rather than closely guarding his trade secrets. For the past 25 years, he has successfully taught local boat and paddle-making classes to students from coast to coast and around the world.

Alex has worked hard to improve his teaching and public speaking skills. To-

"I think it's important to be a whole person – the best person I can be," he states. "If all we are interested in is doing the easy thing, it would be a pretty boring life. You have to set some challenging goals and then rise to meet them."

At 65, Alex is raising his young daughter Fiona, and has no plans to retire. "I'm making a living doing something I love," he says. "Life is good."

For more information about Stewart River Boatworks, visit stewartriver.com. —DSL