



D.L. Bier

## The Light Touch of Power

*A boat? Indeed. But to Paul Brackley it's floating art.*

**P**aul Brackley is six feet, two inches tall and weighs more than 225 pounds. And while he may have no aspirations to dance on stage, he moves around a boat in dry-dock like Nureyev in *Prodigal Son*. Some people have “a touch” that places them among the industry’s best and this boat builder from Gravenhurst is such a person.

To make certain that all his customers can familiarize themselves with his work, he keeps a photo album in his shop on Progress Road. The stunning beauty found between the pages of this remarkable album is not lost on anyone. Nor is its appreciation limited to other builders and boat owners. Regardless of who picks up the collection of photos, after turning just two or three pages they’re looking for a place to sit.

Through the internet, Brackley has satisfied

and thrilled people from as far away as England, Washington, New Jersey, Minnesota, South Carolina and from here in his own backyard. He claims that these days, about 95% of his work comes from the world wide web. “I thought that I was fairly

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busy before I got the website,” he says, “but now I know what busy really means.”

But it’s more than the internet that keeps him busy. It’s his reputation and the quality of workmanship. Both speak so loudly that the internet is only a matter of direction.

Brackley builds cedar strip canoes, cedar strip boats, yacht tenders, cedar strip kayaks,

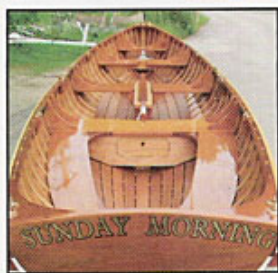
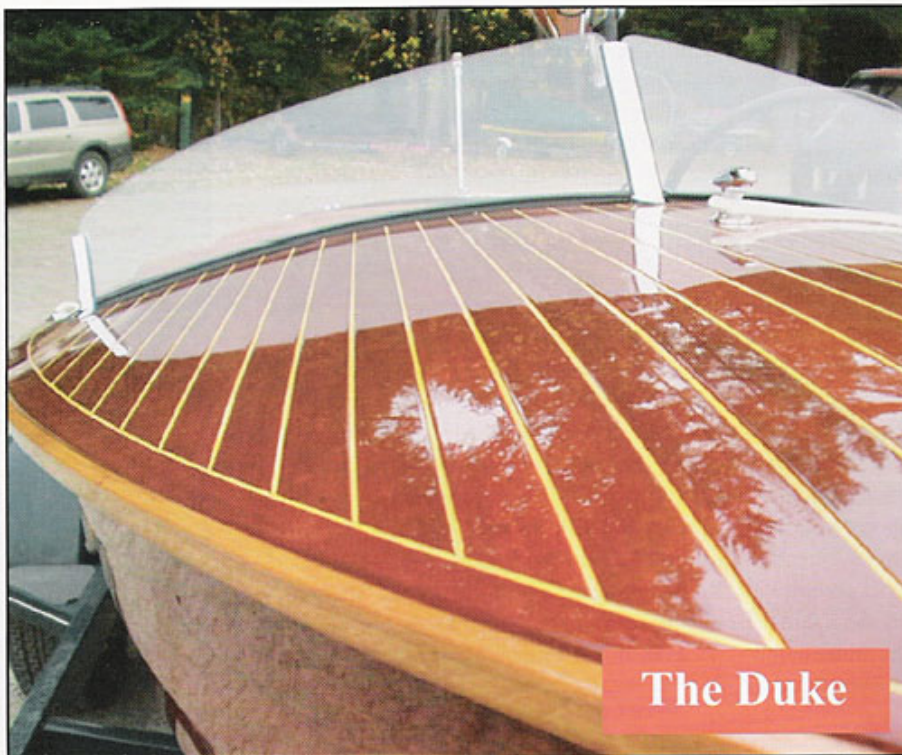
traditional plank on frame boats, carvel, lapstrake, plywood and cold moulded boats. Antique and classic wooden runabouts and Muskoka launches, however, really get his creative juices flowing. “There are three things that make a good boat builder,” he says, “and they are fit, finish and attention to detail.”

Brackley’s ability to see the finished product long before he even lays a hand on the boat is certainly an area of expertise. “A very big part of what I do,” he says, “comes from knowing what the customer wants even when he or she doesn’t. I know what the boat looked like when they first purchased it, regardless of how long ago that might be, so I get a pretty good idea of the customer’s needs. And if I’m wrong, I’ll do it again until I get it right. No one leaves here only partially satisfied.”

Unique to the industry is the method of communications that Brackley maintains with his customers. He takes digital pictures of boats and e-mails them to their respective customers at night. He says that this method of keeping his clients updated on the progress of their boat is a hit. Given the distance that many of his customers would have to travel to look in on their boats, this alternative has kept a lot of people well within their comfort zone. Further, taking area-specific photos also allows Brackley to explain some of the more complicated procedures involved in creating a finished product. And although his customers are not boat-builders themselves, they tend to appreciate Brackley's straightforward form of communication.

Brackley first developed an interest in boats and the systemic learning curve involved in their restoration while employed by other boat builders in Muskoka. Today he is in his forties and has restored countless individual dreams. "To many," he says, "the cottage boat is like an extended member of the family. It often represents the bygone years of traditional travel when how you got where you were going on the water was far more important than where you were going." For someone of his age, Brackley has a surprisingly easy time in imaging the 1930's, '40s and '50s when one's status on the water was reflected in the style and workmanship of the craft they were navigating. "These days," he says, "it seems to be all about the speed and agility of vee-hull fibreglass boats - or, as they're called in the wooden boat business, tupperware boats".

From the schedule fastened to a board in Brackley's shop, one wouldn't know that the days of tradition and alluring aesthetics were long over. It becomes obvious that there are many people out there hanging on to bygone days. "It would be nice to see a more sophisticated form of watercraft return to Muskoka's waters," says Brackley, as he lowers his eyes to hull-level to survey the progress of his work, "but I wouldn't count on it. In fact," he says with a grin, "I don't." Brackley drops his sandpaper for a new piece and wonders out loud about the quality of boats on the water today. "There's just something about today's boats, even the wooden ones, that probably won't produce many restoration jobs in the future. I can't



really see speeds boats and huge chunks of moulded fibreglass being handed down over the years. Mass production does that to a product - takes away much of the nobility found in boats like this one and in the people who built them."

In keeping with the times though, Brackley is dedicating more and more time to building new boats; new boats, however, that reflect his love of watercraft rather than mass-production. "Quite obviously, there's a market for new boats out there," he says, "but that market also includes boats of originality and boats that are one-of-a-kind." Brackley doesn't believe that everyone has or is looking for a Muskoka Launch or a boat like the Duke (pictured above), but he does believe that many people still demand quality in their watercraft. "It doesn't matter whether it's diesel-powered, gas-powered, electrically-powered or man-powered, what's outside is just as important as what

makes it move."

Boats have always been a very big part of Muskoka's history; from the early days when Alexander P. Cockburn's Muskoka Navigation Company - the largest of its kind at the time of his death in 1905, brought Muskoka closer together with the Wenonah steamship, to more modern times when every conceivable form of watercraft can be seen on any one of Muskoka's 1600 lakes. Somewhere in the middle of it all water transportation that was once necessary to survival in the district slid unnoticed into a more placid time of recreational means and objectives meant to reflect the status and deportment of one's position on the totem of success. Regardless of ever-changing cultural considerations, however, Muskoka and her summertime visitors will always remain extremely focussed on water transportation. Just as automobile dealerships put their best foot forward in promoting everything

from the extravagant to the economical in land travel, so will our local boat builders offer a multitude of means by which the distance between points 'A' and 'B' can be travelled in Muskoka waters. And given the near exponential growth in the summertime population, it's no wonder that people like Paul Brackley are in demand - although from the point of view of trends that affect the market, he's a lucky man. Nothing ever becomes passé or dated on the water and vessels that served their owner well for countless years are rarely discarded, but meticulously refurbished instead. According to the testimonials found on his website, Brackley is likely one of the best in his trade. And if you ask him, he'd be the first to say that success in this business begins with knowing what the customer wants. The slogan for his company is "Bring Us Your Dream".

The next time your eye happens to catch the 'unusual' chugging, speeding, being blown or being paddled from one shore to another, stop and take a closer look. Chances are that somewhere in its wake can be found its precursor - a forerunner to its current state. Re-inventing the wheel may not be what it's all about, but there always seems to be something new to entice the water enthusiast - even if that something new turns out to be something old.

*TMV*