

Al's Travels

For decades science fiction writers have enticed us with the thought of time travel. Wouldn't it be great to step into a box and instantly arrive in an earlier time to see how things really were so many years ago. I took a time travel of sorts today as I stepped in the door at Giesler boats in Powassan, Ontario and all of a sudden it was the 1940's again!

I have been trying to make this trip for the past few weeks but the weather and family obligations have gotten in the way but today everything came together. My son Myles, my friend Richard Paquette joined me for the trip and Bob Bushie from North Bay met us in Powassan. We arrived at the shop around 10am and were greeted by Gerry Giesler and the great smell of fresh cedar.

The Giesler family, have been building cedar strip boats in Powassan since 1921 when Gerry's grandfather Barney founded the company after a career as a blacksmith in the town. He had built a fishing boat for himself but on his first outing in it someone offered to buy it, Barney agreed to sell then he started to make another and before it was done he had orders for several more, Barney was in the boat business! The shop I visited was originally built in 1946, additions were constructed as needed until 1950 and not much has changed since then. This is truly a family business with three of Barney's son's still working at shop. Gerry's cousin Tim also works there. Pete Giesler is 79, Carl is 77, and Joe is 81. Another son Willie is only 71, and he owns the marina where a motor can be purchased for your new boat (he also sells aluminum and fiberglass boats). The cedar strips are all sold at the factory and there are no dealers or advertising (other than boat shows, word of mouth, and the website www.gieslerboats.ca) since being too busy would cut into the staff's fishing and hunting time. In addition to the 5 family members there are 4 other employees. I asked Gerry if it was hard to find people to work in the shop and he said it was no problem in fact 4 to 5 people a year offer to work for free just to get the experience! The Giesler factory is a popular stop for people visiting the town. Gerry told me that they open the shop during the Maple syrup festival and have even entertained bus tours that came to town (several boats were sold shortly afterwards). While I was there a friend of Gerry's was making his dream come true, not only was Terry Lange getting his boat, a Restoule canoe, but he was in the shop helping to build it. I don't think you could've beaten the smile off his face with a strip of cedar.

The Giesler brochure (boats on the cover have 50's Johnson motors on them) lists 8 regular production motorboats ranging from a 7.5hp rated 12' cartopper to an 18' Georgian Bay rated at 80hp. 3 models of canoes, 3 rowboats, and an 11' tender round out the line. Other special order models include 20 and 22' freighter canoes (a 22' was in the shop, and is it ever big, power is up to 40hp) a 20' pointed canoe, 2 racing canoes (the jig for a 30' YES 30' war canoe was hanging in the shop) A 20' cruiser with available stern drive is mentioned but I didn't see one or ask about it. Base models of the motor boats have a varnish finish, tiller steering, and bench seats. Center and rear decks, seat backs, splash wells, extra depth, steering, windshields, fiberglass coated bottoms, and convertible tops are all available on the options list. Pricing for 2006 runs from \$1500.00 for the cartopper including standard fiberglass covering (which replaced the

original canvas) up to \$4000.00 for the 18' Georgian Bay standard. These prices amaze me since you are buying a completely handcrafted boat.

Today most wood boat builders are making replicas of other manufactures boats or restoring boats to show stopping standards. At the Giesler shop they build their own boats just like they always have and these boats are meant to be used. The Giesler customer gets a very sturdy (but amazingly light weight) boat with a fine shape, quality materials, and a nice finish. While I was standing in the shop looking at a fairly complete French River model you could almost hear it begging to be taken to your favorite fishing hole! Hunting and fishing lodges have used these boats for decades and they still represent the largest customer base. Upstairs in the storage area about 20 boats (mostly 18' models) were stacked up, all with tags showing which lodge they were destined for. I noticed that many had fiberglass on the bottom so they can be put in the water and used without having to soak up for a day or so first. As a motor collector I couldn't help but notice a bunch of old motors leaning up against one wall. Apparently these all belong to Willie since he is the "motor" guy. I asked Tim what lifespan a person could expect from a new cedar boat and he told me that with good care they should last as long, or longer than aluminum or fiberglass boats. Keeping the sun off the boat with a mooring cover while it is in the water will help to preserve the finish and prevent the wood from darkening. Maintenance is fairly simple just requiring a good cleaning before winter storage and a re-varnishing every few years as needed (of course the Giesler shop will do this for you if you want).

Construction of a standard boat takes approximately 70 man hours from mounting the ribs on the jig until it has varnish and is ready to go. Before it gets to this stage a lot of preparation has already happened. In the milling room the lumber is prepared to be turned into a boat. The strips of cedar and the oak ribs are cut to size, passed through a planer, sanded and cut to the approximate length for the boat being built. The cedar planking is then passed through a molding cutter so a notch which allows the boards to interlock is cut on the top and bottom edge of each board simultaneously. Tim explained to me that the blades that cut the profiles have to be individually installed and that the top and bottom are slightly different to allow for the curve of the hull. Apparently it is quite a trick to get the blades just right. After the lumber is ready it is moved (carried by hand actually) to the production area. While I was there they were building French River standard models so I will describe the process for that model. The boat is basically built upside down on a form that supports all the ribs and structure as the boat is being assembled. The transom is attached to the end of the form, the center keel and horizontal ribs are set into notches these components are fastened together to form the backbone of the boat. Oak ribs are then bent over the form and attached to the underlying structure. Now in order to bend oak it has to be softened and this is a two step process. Firstly the ribs are set in a soaking trough and remain there overnight then they are put into the steaming box and steamed until they are pliable enough to be bent without breaking. After all the ribs are in place the planking is applied to the boat starting in the center of the bottom and working out from there, it is attached with copper nails. The nailing is Gerry's specialty it requires a knack and some people get it and others just don't. Once planking is about 90% of the way to the gunwales the boat is flipped over off the frame and moved by hand to the next work station. Here the remaining planking is attached, the nails are clinched, decks, and seats, are installed. The boat is then sanded and sent

to the paint shop to be varnished, fiberglassed, or painted depending on the customers order. Once this is done the splashrails are attached, steering, windshields, hardware, and other customer options are installed. The shop produces about 150 to 200 new boats during the build season which runs from before Christmas until mid August when the repair work starts to come in. Pete told me that they had about 100 boats on site right now but that only 6 or so are not sold!

I asked Gerry if they do custom orders and of course they will. He mentioned that to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the town of Powassan they had built a custom boat based on the French river hull. It featured a long, 7', front deck, single bench seat with 2 jump seats behind, longer rear deck with enclosed splashwell, and extra varnish for a nicer finish. He said if I wanted to see "Miss Powassan" that it was on display at Willie's marina in the show room. I thanked Gerry for his hospitality and the tour of the shop and told him I would send a copy of this article to him and that I hoped it might help sell a few boats to members of our club.

Myles, Richard and I then made our way over to the marina which is quite large. We entered the showroom and were greeted by a nice display of snowmobiles and some new outboards but no boat! I found Willie in the office and introduced myself explaining the reason for our visit. He said that the boat had been moved to his home garage but that he would have his son go up with us so we could see it. I thanked him and passed him one of my cards to let him know that I just might be interested in the old motors if he ever decided to sell them. We made our way to his house and were able to see and photograph this 1 of a kind boat. The boat is powered with a 60 hp E-Tech Evinrude and is sitting on a new trailer. If you would like to own this rig it can be yours for around \$17,500. plus taxes.

As I was driving home I was thinking of which Giesler boat would best suit my needs as a vintage motor collector and I came to the following conclusion. A Cartopper for the little motors, a West Arm for tiller motors up to 35hp, a French River built with a dual cockpit set up for the 56 Javelin, and an 18' Georgian Bay for the big lakes to mount my 60hp Gale on! I then realized I could have all these boats with trailers for less than the price of a quality 18' fiberglass bowrider that would surely not be admired nearly as much at the local boat launch. Now that is what I call outstanding value!

Al Lockhart

Update;

Since writing this article in Feb 2006 I have purchased a 1989 Giesler West Arm 14' and with Richard's help it is going to being ready for the water this spring. I am also working on a deal to get an early 60's French River dual cockpit model.

Photos



1) Soaking trough



2)Steam Box



3)French River under construction



4)Pete Giesler



5)Gerry Giesler



6) Boat further along the line



7)Freighter canoe (rated for a 40hp long shaft)



8)Cartopper



9)Tim Giesler



10&11)Boats ready to go



12)Gerry at work



13)Miss Powassan



14)The shop



15)The shop