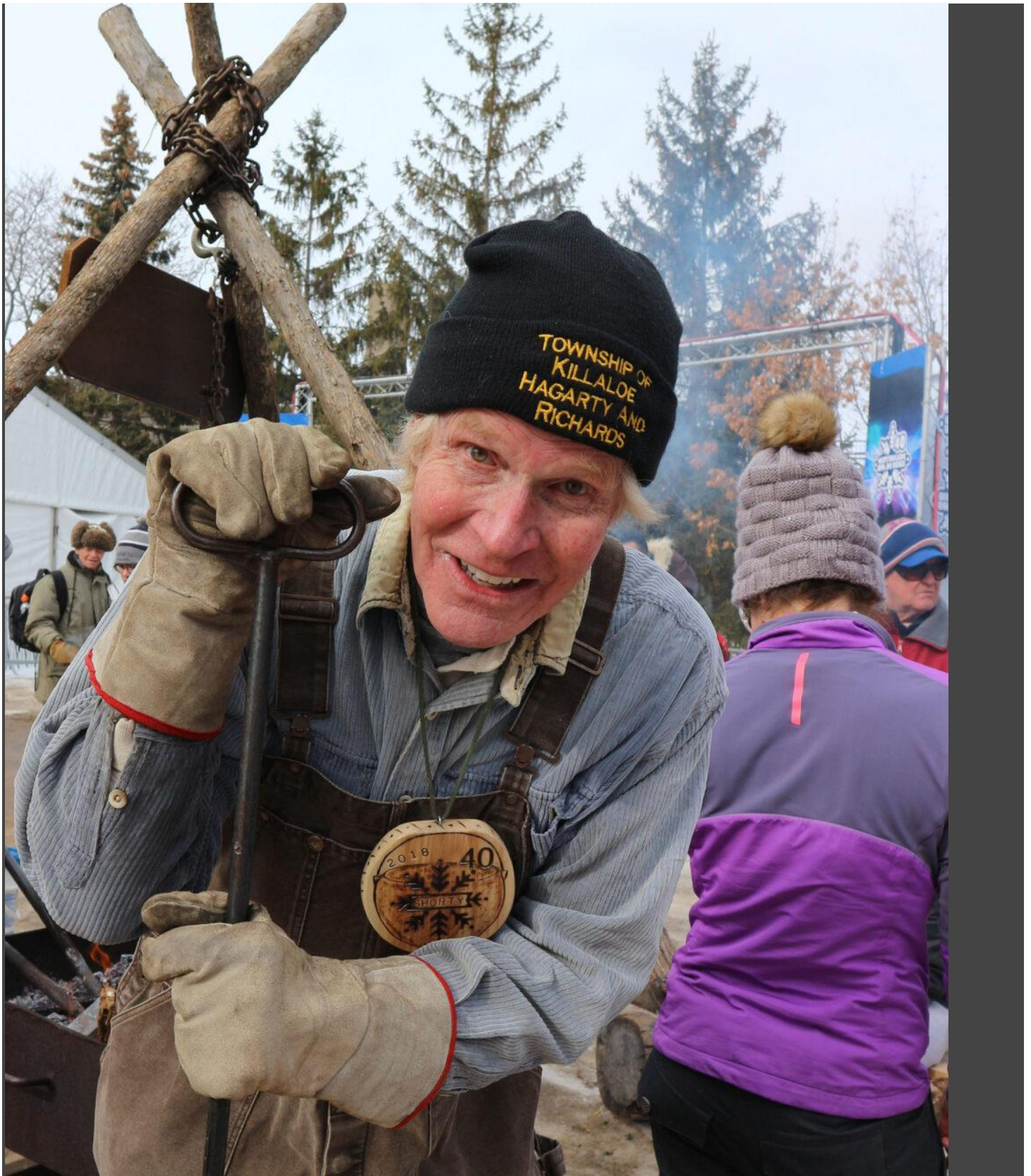


The Eganville Leader



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Valley loses another local iconic figure

By **Terry Fleurie** April 25, 2023

Tom Stephenson was 86 years old

Pembroke – A man who made a reputation for himself as an educator, lover of the forests and for his desire to share the knowledge and skills he possessed with others, is being remembered for his contributions to many projects in the Ottawa Valley.

Tom Stephenson passed away on March 26 at the age of 86 and his friends remember him as a true icon, someone larger than life, and one of the best friends you could ever have.

Mr. Stephenson taught in the Forest Technician Program at Algonquin College for many years where he shared his passion for the forests and the many skills he possessed. He was also heavily involved in many community projects where he displayed those skills to the public.

Always humble, perhaps one of his greatest accomplishments was the building of the timber crib for the 180th anniversary of the founding of the City of Pembroke and the 100th anniversary of the last crib voyage down the Ottawa River in 2008.

Dana Shaw, the Vice President of Herb Shaw and Son in Pembroke, knew Mr. Stephenson a long time, and they became really close when they worked on the huge timber crib that was sailed down the Ottawa River in 2008

“Tom was a guy that was always in a good mood,” he said. “With the timber crib, he was with us every inch of the way and he was very helpful with his knowledge from the past.

“He had so much knowledge, experience and historical background,” he added. “He was a legend.”

He described Mr. Stephenson as the engineer who had so many of the tools needed to put the crib together

“He was invaluable,” he commented.

Mr. Shaw said the raft was assembled at the company's pole yard in Petawawa and then moved from location to location where it was re-assembled before its voyages.

"It was all new to us, but everything went off so well," he said of the project.

Mr. Shaw said Mr. Stephenson relied on a book, "*A Hundred Years A-Fellin*" by the late Charlotte Whitton, for the design of the craft. The huge white pine logs were in their pole yard that spring, so the raw materials for the raft were there. The craft was bound together by wooden dowels made from ironwood.

"We followed the plans from years ago. The bottom section of the timbers, you drive in hardwood wedges to push them out. That's what held it together."

"Tom was so proud of the raft and he was the captain," Mr. Shaw noted.

The raft had no motor and was steered by a rudder.

"We put in where the Bonnechere River comes into the Ottawa, just above Renfrew," he explained of the maiden voyage. "That's where we put it together for the first time.

"Then we took it down to Braeside, and then we took it apart and took it over to Quyon where we re-assembled it.

"We had it on a static display at the Waterfall courtyard at what was then the Museum of Civilization," he said. "The timber crib was on land for the week that had Canada Day in it.

"It was funny, because you'd have people that came and say the wood didn't look 100 years old," he added. "They couldn't fathom there was wood left like that. When you cut in a sustainable way, there's wood that's available to still make a timber crib."

The City of Pembroke was celebrating its 180th anniversary and they wanted to commemorate 100 years since the last timber crib of the J.R. Booth era went down the river.

They also took the raft to Petawawa and sailed it back to Pembroke. They were accompanied by a replica of a pointer boat and other crafts that made up a flotilla down the river.

Mr. Shaw noted how Mr. Stephenson also had a very big part in many of the special events at the Shaw Woods Outdoor Education Centre, displaying a machine he had for braiding rope or branding the numerous Shaw Lumber logos on pieces of wood for souvenirs for the visitors.

“He’d heat up an iron we had made up and he’d brand the pine boards with different logos,” he recalled.

He noted his late friend also had quite the collection of wooden puppets he had made that depicted different characters.

“He handmade and painted them, and he always had a story to go along with them,” he recalled. “He had Trudeau and Donald Trump – he’d make up all different kinds of caricatures to make people laugh.”

Mr. Shaw said Mr. Stephenson was proud of his lumbering heritage and could usually be found attired in his trademark coveralls, plaid shirt, and floppy felt hat.

“And he had the Bean boots. He was one of a kind,” he added.



Taught Valuable Lesson

John Shaw, the president of Herb Shaw and Son, also knew Mr. Stephenson well and he credits him for teaching him a valuable life lesson at an early age that had nothing to do with the forest industry.

When Mr. Stephenson was a younger man, he lived just around the corner from where Mr. Shaw grew up. He recalled when he was a child growing up in the east end of Pembroke, he and some friends got into some mischief that resulted in him meeting Mr. Stephenson.

"Tom lived in the apartments right at the water tower, and our crew, for whatever reason . . . I ended up being one of the younger ones in the crew, and we decided we were going to soap the windows of the cars in that parking lot.

"I was the last one out of the blocks, and when Tom came out of that apartment, I guess I didn't here the door click," he added. "And he gave me a kick in the pants that I remember to this day, and that was 55 years ago."

In later years, Mr. Shaw said they would hire Mr. Stephenson for different projects.

"After he left the college, he seemed to be able to always make time for you. One time the Ministry (MNR) got stuck down on Kelly's Road (between Dacre and Griffith) and they needed a bunch of trees planted.

"I called Tom and he gathered up a big crew of young people, eight or 10 guys, and I think they planted 60,000 or 70,000 trees that spring," he added.

He said what made Mr. Stephenson so special was that he was a "throwback" to the heyday of the logging industry.

"He was from another generation basically," he noted. "And he never cared to travel home. He always wanted you to find him a camp, even though he was only an hour and twenty minutes from home.

"He loved to set up a camp and he'd keep all those young people and give them all a chore," he continued. "They'd stay in the camp, then Tom would be able to entertain them with stories all evening."

Mr. Shaw said Mr. Stephenson was incredibly knowledgeable in so many aspects of the forest industry.

"He'd come and cruise for us and his cruise was gospel. If he told you there was 100,000 feet in that stand, he wouldn't be out two or three percent plus or minus. You could take it to the bank.

"And he would share his knowledge," Mr. Shaw added. "So many people, when they're really good at something, they'll only share a portion of it with you, but Tom wanted you to be as good as him."

He said he had a great appreciation for the old tools of the forest industry.

"And he knew how to use them," he remarked.

He said every one of his former students at the Outdoor Education Program at Algonquin College in Pembroke would say Mr. Stephenson was a great educator as well.

He said Mr. Stephenson will be remembered as one of the true greats of the industry and was a very valuable asset to his company.

"He would cruise for us, he would mark timber for us, and he planted for us. And he was always there to share his knowledge.

"He was old school. He didn't need a computer to make a harvest plan," he added. "All he needed was a pair of boots and a map."

A Special Individual

Journalist Ron Corbett first met Mr. Stephenson at Shaw's pole yard in the spring of 2008 when he was starting to work on the timber crib with two students from Algonquin College.

"After the Shaws decided to actually go ahead with the crib, they realized they needed somebody to put it together, and Tom Stephenson was the only person they could think of that might be able to put it together. And I learned the Shaws were absolutely right. He probably was the only person that could build that darn thing.

"I was just impressed from the word go," he added. "I think it says a lot about Tom, when you think of all the bushmen that you have in the area. Right away, I realized he was special."

Mr. Corbett noted how Mr. Stephenson used the design plans from Charlotte Whitton's book for the crib, adding the craft was built entirely without any hardware on it.

"There's no nails, no screws, yet it all had to hold together. They basically gave Tom Charlotte Whitton's book and said can you build this.

"And he did," he added. "He was the real deal."

Mr. Corbett believes without Mr. Stephenson, the crib project simply would not have happened, noting once it was assembled they realized there were dams on the river then that had not been there 100 years ago.

“So that thing had to be broken apart and re-assembled at the other side of every dam, and Tom was there for all of that. He was the absolute bushman, the absolute real deal.”

Mr. Corbett said he accompanied Mr. Stevenson on all the voyages, noting they did two radio shows from the crib. He said on the maiden voyage, no one was really sure just how seaworthy the craft would be.

“Nobody was all that sure,” he said laughing. “It was completely fly by the seat of your pants.”

He said the Shaws were the only ones who could make the project the success it was, because the crib had to be taken apart and transported and they had the equipment to do that.

“It is one of my favourite stories, and Tom Stephenson helped make it,” he remarked.

Aside from their time on the crib, some of his other fond memories are from *Winterlude* celebrations in Ottawa, where Mr. Stephenson and some friends, known as “*The Kettle Boys*” did presentations on the making of maple syrup. Tom and some friends used to help with the syrup season at Fortune Farms and matriarch, Ruth Fortune, gave them that moniker. Her son, Jamie, had been a student of Tom’s forest technician program at Algonquin and appreciated his stressing the need for human relationships, and for his attention to detail and pragmatism.

“*The Kettle Boys* had a big display as part of *Winterlude* at Confederation Park and we’d stop by every winter to see them. Talk about having fun – he was a kid himself – he’d dance with the kids and he was just thrilled to show them how maple syrup worked and how logging worked.”

Mr. Corbett said he was the main draws of *Winterlude*, recalling how Mr. Stephenson and *The Kettle Boys* were letting guests put syrup from the spoils in their coffee. However, they reserved one spoil for themselves which Mr. Corbett found out was distributing pure vodka.

“There’s bushmen up there, but I don’t know how many that had a university degree. He was so many things – he taught at the college, he was the only guy that could have built the

raft, and he was the only guy that would have ever thought of vodka in a spoil at *Winterlude*."

Mr. Corbett said although the crib adventure was in 2008, Mr. Stephenson kept in touch with him and his wife, calling regularly on special occasions, or stopping by to visit him.

"He was a true gentleman," he concluded.

"Valley Lost An Icon

Dave Lemkay of Douglas, worked with Mr. Stephenson on many forest-related and community projects and was proud to call him a true friend.

"Tom was larger than life in some respects," he said.

His memories include a multitude of events, from parades, to forestry events, visits to Shaw Woods, to Renfrew County Expo 150 (in 2011), and of course the timber crib (in 2008).

"Tom basically masterminded that whole project with the actual physical building of it. More than that, the actual voyage, when we navigated that crib from the Bonnechere River down to Britannia; undoubtedly, he was the captain.

"Larger than life, in period costume, and he just fit the role perfectly," he added.

He said Mr. Stephenson was a boots-on-the-ground type of guy, a doer and someone who understood how things happen and how things work, and how to make things work.

"And he was a worker."

Mr. Lemkay said everywhere he went, his late friend had the audience in his hand, be it young or old people, as he shared the forest lore he knew so well and was passionate about sharing.

"That was probably his forte," he said. "He was a teacher who shared his knowledge of the forest, nature and the environment that he lived by."

"We've lost an icon," he said.

Fishing Buddies

Retired Pembroke businessman, Milton Borenstein, said he was to consider Mr. Stephenson a true friend.

"I could never erase the memories of the many days we spent fishing and the fun we had in the evenings bragging to others about the size of the fish we released," he recalled. "Besides the fishing it was the things I learned from Tom about his experiences as an expert woodsman — not to mention the humorous tales he would relate"

He said Mr. Stephenson was a good man who was always available to help those in need and would support any worthy cause.

"He loved to help young people and to teach them right from wrong."

"I shall miss you Tom — your humour — your knowledge — your good deeds and the good times out on the lake," he remarked. "Thanks for being my friend."

Fred Blackstein, who is well-known as the chair of the 1994 International Plowing Match held in Renfrew County and for his involvement in Expo 150 and as former chair of the Shaw Woods Outdoor Education Centre, first met Mr. Stephenson during a canoe trip in the mid-1960s. At the time, Mr. Stephenson was working for the Ottawa River Forest Protection Association Limited and Mr. Blackstein was a "young canoe tripper".

"I first met Tom when he stomped through the door of an old fire-ranger cabin where I'd taken refuge from a fierce storm," he recalled. "After he tossed my packsack and canoe paddle from his bunk, I was allowed to spend the night on the cabin floor.

"Tom has been a hardworking volunteer on every project I've ever been part of, bringing his constant good humour and infectious enthusiasm to help the team succeed," he added. "He left his mark at the 1994 International Plowing Match, 1998 Ice Storm, 2000 Pembroke Waterfront Park, 2011 Renfrew County Expo and spent a dozen years helping at the Shaw Woods Outdoor Education Centre.

A Great Mentor

Dan Hewitt, of Rankin, was a friend of the late Mr. Stephenson and he said his late friend was someone you could learn many important lessons from.

"Tom was an extremely smart individual that was knowledgeable in so many different subjects, especially in the great outdoors," Mr. Hewitt noted. "One would learn a lot listening to his stories and watching him in action.

"But moreover, you would learn how to be a great human being," he added. "He had a special talent in making everyone's day.

Mr. Hewitt said whether his friend was pulling into his yard for a visit or taking part in a community event, you knew it was going to be a good time.

Mr. Hewitt recalled one of his favourite events with Mr. Stephenson.. It was a Canada Day parade in Killaloe and Mr. Stephenson accompanied Mr. Hewitt and Donnie Stressman, who portrayed the legendary Mike and Ike characters, pulling their antique car.

"Our handle was Ike, Mike and Spike," he noted.

He said Mr. Stephenson's funeral/celebrations of life this past Saturday was one of the best ones he had ever attended.

"It was done Tom's style, a good time," he remarked.