

Wooden Dinosaurs

One man's passion for restoring snowmobiles By: Susan Peters Take Route 10 out of The Pas, Manitoba. Drive north, passing through jack pine and spruce, lakes granite outcroppings and muskeg. Keep going until you reach the small town of Cranberry Portage, past the sign that proclaims "Bombardier Capital". On the edge of Lake Athapapuskow, you will see a house with a garage workshop, where, out front, a large wooden structure on treads is being varnished.

This is a wooden Bombardier snowmobile that rolled out of the factory some 50 years ago. The white-haired fellow working on it is Cameron McLean, who restores the snowmobiles to their vintage glory. Now 70 years old, McLean used to build houses, until arthritis forced him to stop. That's when this self-taught craftsman turned to woodworking-building everything from curio cabinets to dining room tables and chairs, blanket boxes, entertainment centres, coffee tables and even china cabinets. He restored his first Bombardier in 1985, but was too busy running his grocery store to take on more until he retired. He has completed 13 since then. "A person gets to be quite proud when you've built the machine and then you're driving it down to the lake," says McLean.

Belly of the Beast The steps required to rebuild an old Bombardier depend on the shape it starts out in, but it's safe to say the wood must all be replaced. First, McLean strips the old snowmobile down to just the metal frame on the bottom, which he calls the "tub" or "belly". With his planer, McLean dimensions maple to the correct measurements for the wooden frame. "The framing is not a standard size. It's all 1" thick, instead of 3/4", he says. Next comes the machine's motor, transmission and driveshaft. If the originals are missing, McLean checks a wrecking yard for a car or combine part to salvage. "For the narrow-gauge Bombardiers, we use a six-cylinder. For the wide gauge, we use a V8. Originally, the wooden ones had a 251 Chrysler industrial six-cylinder with standard transmission." Any missing steel parts are made by McLean or custom-made at a machine shop. He also wires the Bombardier for headlights, tail lights and gauges. Next, McLean frames the seven-foot-long benches in maple with mahogany-backed plywood on top. Then, using templates, he cuts 1/4" birch plywood to make the sides and top of the Bombardier's body and applies three coats of spar varnish with ultraviolet protection. He cuts out the windows and makes the doors. A glass cutter cuts the windows and McLean's daughter sews upholstery for the benches and interior. "After that, she's pretty well ready to drive. On the lake, the skis make it easy to drive. On the portages, it's a little tougher to turn the tight corners because of the skis," says McLean.

Original Pride McLean takes pride in making each Bombardier as authentic as possible. The maple that was available in Quebec for the originals isn't native to Manitoba, so he imports it. "Any changes that we've made have been for the better, but it's all the original design otherwise," he says. He has experimented with different woods for the dashboard, which were originally metal. One is bird's-eye maple. "I did all the exposed framing with bird's-eye maple, and then I did the dash in bird's-eye maple. It was beautiful, just gorgeous," says McLean. McLean's friends are proud of his achievements and give him a hand. "Some of us have helped with some parts, like the mechanical work, wiring and installing glass. But he does the woodwork himself and the finishing. They're every bit as good as when they came off the factory line in Quebec. In fact, they're probably better, because he has access to better finishes than they probably had then," says friend Bob Huck. These machines were produced by the L'Auto-Neige Bombardier Limitée in Valcourt, Que., from 1937 to 1958. The wooden ones McLean restores date from the late 1940s and can carry up to 10 people comfortably inside a warm, heated cabin. Later models were made out of metal. "We haven't been able to find anyone else who rebuilds them. As far as anyone knows, I'm the only person who's rebuilding them back to the original state," says McLean.

Into the Woods The Bombardiers were used by trappers, loggers, fishermen and the RCMP, as well as to haul children to school. The restored wooden models are typically reserved for leisure activities such as ice fishing, a trip to the cabin or just a drive in the woods. Finding old Bombardiers to restore isn't easy. Their working days past, many were abandoned in the bush and left to rot. To locate them, McLean relies on a network of friends and family. "I've got the word of mouth out in the various communities in the North. The problem is the Bombardiers are getting pretty scarce. If the guys have just dropped them in the bush and the trees are growing around them, they've forgotten where they were," explains McLean. The rebuilt Bombardiers are now found in communities in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Minnesota. But every year, on the last weekend in March, many of their owners bring them back to Cranberry Portage for a rally that involves some 120 people and 35 Bombardiers both metal and wood. The enthusiasts spend the day telling tales and swapping parts. "Then we'll go for a ride to some place. The past two years we've gone round-trip about 50 or 60 miles. We'll stop by an island and have a big fire," says McLean. As you might imagine, cold weather never intrudes on the event, since everyone is perfectly warm inside their Bombardiers. ---Submitted by Canadian Home Workshop Magazine March, 2006