



## HARVEY GEORGE MASTER FISHBOAT CARVER

STORY & PHOTOS BY MARIANNE SCOTT

**A**t the end of Cowichan Bay Maritime Centre's long pier, the "BC Supercargo Pavilion" features 11 colourful and precise carvings of traditional BC fishboats. Most of these fishboat styles no longer ply our waters, but their precise and built-to-scale models offer a remarkable introduction to a once abundant profession and resource on our coast. Plaques scattered among the boats reveal the carver has won several awards for his depiction of these historic vessels.

I was so taken by the meticulously crafted fishboat models, I tracked down the artist, T'Sou-ke member Harvey George. We met in the pavilion where Harvey spends a good bit of his

time talking to the museum's visitors from Canada and abroad. Harvey lost his wife last year and the museum's visitors, admiring his models, fill some of his lonely hours.

A mop of curly salt-and-pepper hair tops Harvey's broad, lined face—although his eyebrows remain black. He wears a somewhat flashy woollen jacket with Indigenous motifs. "I bought it in Duncan at the Native store," he says.

I'm impressed by the bling he wears. Six silver rings embellish his fingers; lustrous bracelets encircle each wrist. Each earlobe carries

individual diamond and ruby studs. Two circular handcrafted silver pins are fastened to his jacket and shirt. "One was given to me by my wife, the other by my mother," he says. "I wear them in their memory. I like jewelry."

**"I STARTED CARVING** when I was eight years old," says Harvey, who has reached the venerable age of 79. He vividly remembers his uncle Frank who would cross Juan de Fuca Strait from Neah Bay

to visit the T'Sou-ke Nation members living around Sooke Basin. "Unc carved me a little tugboat," he says. "I asked him to teach me how to whittle boats. So he showed me the basics and then told me to start carving on my own. Ever since, I've loved making fishboat models."

In his teens, Harvey hung around the Sooke docks, talking with the fishermen, learning about the trade. When he reached age 19, he started working as a fishboat deckhand, taking various jobs as the seasons dictated, fishing, hauling and cleaning halibut and salmon. "We'd buy ice and go out for days," he says. "The catch was delivered to the BC Packers Cannery at Ogden Point in Victoria. I worked on gillnetters, a fish packer and table seiners."

"What's a table seiner?" I ask. Harvey jumps up and shows me the model he's carved. It has a large wooden platform on the boat's stern that pivots and rolls out nets; the nets were hauled in by a capstan or winch. If you have an old five-dollar bill, you'll find the image of a BC Packers' table seiner (BCP 45) on the back. The table seiner, popular in the 1970s, has been replaced by boats using a net drum.

After six years of commercial fishing, Harvey, acknowledging fishing was seasonal and provided little job security, found work in the logging industry, with its year-round employment and a pension plan. "I went to the logging sites in the Jordan and Sooke river areas," he says. "Later I worked north of Port Alberni. I worked for MacMillan-Bloedel for 26 years. Not felling. I worked with the steel tower. That's what we called it, 'the steel tower.' I'd choke a log, lift it and stack it with other timber at a landing. Trucks would carry away the logs."

**IT WAS HARD** work. He worked in remote places; a "crummy" bus would pick him and his co-workers up at 04:00, bring them to the work-site and return them after 19:00. "Long days," he says.

But he enjoyed the logging. "The guys you work with are like brothers. They're the loaders, the chasers, the

grapplers. You're together five days a week for years. They're your buddies, your family."

Although he wasn't cutting down trees, he was injured twice during the dangerous work. He always recovered eventually. "I had PTSD after one serious accident when a 'reach' squeezed me against a log and I felt my bones

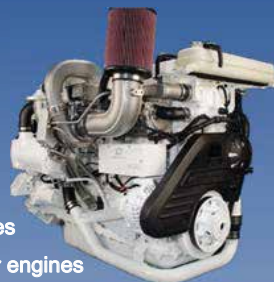
crack," he recalls. "My hard hat saved my life. They took me to hospital in a helicopter. I went back to work after physical therapy, counselling and meditating."

While rehabilitating, or whenever he was temporarily laid off, he'd carve fishboats.

"Did you ever sculpt wood using more traditional

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Harvey's models are all carved by hand with no blueprints or measurements.

Indigenous motifs?" I ask. "I tried masks, and later totem poles," Harvey responds. "I just had no feeling for it. I wasn't that interested. But when it comes to fishboats, now that's a different story." When Weyerhaeuser bought MacMillan Bloedel, things took a negative turn. "MacBlo treated its employees well," says Harvey, "but Weyerhaeuser wasn't very nice. I was going to work until 65 to get my full pension, but they laid me off two years before that."

**SINCE THEN, HE'S** returned to his art. It takes a year to complete a smaller model—the largest, the nearly two-metre *Laura Bell*, named after his stepmother, took two years. To start, he finds a block

of old growth redcedar—yellow cedar is too hard. He picks up his mallet and chisel and starts carving. "I don't measure nothing," he says. "I do it all by eye. No blueprints or drawings. I do use a rasp and sandpaper until the wood is smooth. The same routine every time." He first carves the port side of the boat, then copies the design on the starboard side. He shapes the keel. "When the hull is hollowed out, I install crossbars to support the plywood deck," he explains. He glues in the deck and attaches the caprail to the bulwarks. He fashions the wheelhouse with its rigid plastic windows that are shaped to fit. Blocks of wood support the

masts and the outriggers. Standing and running rigging hold everything in place. Small black rubber rings resemble the car tires adapted as fenders often spotted on fishing vessels. Tiny brass fittings, turnbuckles, lights, pulleys, hooks, life rings, fishnet floats, net drums, dinghies, life rafts, propellers, chains and anchors have been positioned aboard each vessel. Some wheelhouses are furnished with minuscule tables and chairs. Meticulous details made me think of a well-appointed, carefully decorated dollhouse, but one painstakingly installed on a fishboat. In the past, Harvey offered his carvings to the Maritime Museum of British Columbia and to the Sooke Museum.

Pleading lack of space, they refused his gift. Three of his boats are on view at the Sooke Salmon Enhancement Centre. Then the Cowichan Bay Maritime Centre, aware of the importance of documenting the great contributions the fishing industry has made to British Columbia, remodelled the pavilion to display the larger collection. Harvey started a new carving recently for a retired fisherman, who fished from a tuna boat. "I'm doing it from the photos he's given me," he says. "But I have to stop for a while until I have my cataract operation. But I'll go back to carving. It's in me, I guess. It's my joy. I love fishboats. They're part of my life. They're my children." 