

Prince's Butternut steed takes shape at CNE

By BILL DZUGAN

Tucked inconspicuously at the corner of the Ontario Crafts Council's CNE exhibit, Gerard Boileau chips his way cautiously into the hearts of many Canadians.

The Mississauga woodcarver quietly shapes the stylish rocking horse destined to be ridden by Prince William, the latest addition to English monarchy.

With his effort, Boileau's galloping creation joins a lengthy tradition of presents bestowed upon the royal families by their subjects in the new world. "There's a long-standing tradition for Canadians to send a gift to princes," claims Garry Toffoli, chairman of the Toronto branch of the Monarchist League, which co-ordinates the current venture.

Since 1638, Toffoli says the birth of princes has been decorated with a show of colonial affection. The first gift, an Indian child's outfit, travelled from New France to the bedside of Louis XIV, the eventual King of France.

The Toronto branch of the Monarchist League contemplated a present for the prince from the day he was born. By early August, the executive met to discuss possibilities. Toffoli explains a lady, familiar with the work of Boileau, called to suggest a rocking horse in its finest Victorian style as the appropriate donation.

Given the Royal Family's tremendous affection for horses, the executive, representing about 1,800 members, jumped at the idea. "But we couldn't afford it ourself," said Toffoli, about the \$1,000 price tag.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Following a brief radio interview on CBC's Metro Morning, Toffoli received numerous calls offering financial support for their rocking idea. "The phones just started ringing, the people liked the idea so much," he said. "Whatever people could afford, they contributed."

When Boileau completes the sculpting sometime in late September, Toffoli will be sending a large birthday card with the list of 150 contributors. "The impetus really came from the people, so the gift is really from them," he said. "They deserve the credit."

Now that they've commissioned Boileau, the Monarchists claim the rest of the artistry is up to him. "As the artist," said Toffoli, "he explained why he wanted to do what and we left it at that."

An impressive stable of creations sold the Monarchists on Boileau and his work. From his Port Credit home, the regal gentleman, now 65, forms the gallant-looking steeds as a retirement

hobby. Demonstrating they're more toys than art, though, he climbs aboard showing how easily even an adult can ride. The horses can carry up to 200 pounds and handle a houseload of loving hugs.

"A child sitting on that doesn't see a toy, he sees himself on a real horse rocking and rocking like a dream," says Boileau. At a previous craft show, Boileau remembers how one youngster just wouldn't dismount. "He cried and cried so I told his mother to leave him there. He stayed for a long time."

Seeing a child in the saddle makes the work worthwhile for Boileau. "At the shows people seem to fall in love with it," he claims. "If people admire what you do, it's a great satisfaction."

HORSE HAIR

The sleek basswood or butternut chargers with real horse-hair manes sit authentically upon a maple or birch rocker. Privately at 278-1795, Boileau sells his creations for \$650. Working almost all day for about a week and a half, the former importer estimates he makes \$5 an hour for his work.

But the more ambitious undertaking for Prince William requires maximum care and concern. "It has to be finished like a Rolls-Royce," he said. "They don't drive Jeeps, these people." For the body, he's using the finest butternut, a Canadian wood. For the rocker, he'll be laminating red oak strips together for greater strength. In addition, the color of the wood will also more closely resemble the golden hue of butternut.

"There's nothing exactly special about this horse, but I'll take one week to polish it instead of the usual three days," says Boileau. "It will have to be polished to perfection because it may sit beside some of the finest furniture in Buckingham Palace."

In his second year at the Ontario Crafts Council Exhibit in the Arts, Crafts and Hobbies Building just inside the Dufferin Gate at the CNE, Boileau claims, "It's nearly impossible to work." The media coverage has been extensive, even an ABC television crew from New York considers a conversation with Boileau.

In his patient manner, he handles the attention even though he says: "This commission is the most important of my life and I never would have dreamed of it."

As Boileau chips away periodically at his CNE booth, people come by to admire his stallions and scoop souvenir wood chips of the