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A master boat builder's last work

White Bear man donates Amundson duck boat

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WHITE BEAR LAKE — Scott Wilson hauled around a piece of city history every time he went duck hunting.

It was a wood boat. A gray, flat-bottom boat slightly bigger than a twin mattress. Hunters call them duck boats.

Duck boats are typically very simple and functional, designed to float over shallow, weedy marshes and provide a stable foundation to aim and shoot.

But the duck boat Wilson had custom made in 1967 was something special.

This duck boat was the last boat ever built by Adolph Amundson.

And who is Adolph Amundson?

Adolph Amundson was the last surviving boat builder from the Amundson family; the family that helped establish White Bear Lake as a world-renowned boat-building Mecca in the late 19th Century.

Wilson recently donated his duck boat to the White Bear Lake Historical Society. The boat is now the second in a collection of small wooden boats made by the craftsmen who built famous sailboats and other vessels in the shops on White Bear Lake's southwestern shore.

"This is it," said Wilson, referring to the 11-foot-long, 40-pound boat strapped to the top of his sports utility vehicle. He was delivering the boat to White Bear Historical Society offices. "It's the last one he ever made."

Wilson grew up on Hinckley Street just around the corner from Amundson. When he was 14, he approached the retired boat builder and asked him about making a duck boat.

Amundson, who was well into his 80s, said the teenager couldn't afford his price.

"What he didn't know was that I had a paper route and made about \$700 a year," said Wilson. "I asked him how much he would charge."

The two neighbors agreed on \$40.

"Then things got a little strange in my mind," said Wilson.

The old boat builder started asking Wilson about his weight, how tall he was, would he go hunting alone or with friends? What does that have to do with a duck boat?



"Twenty years later I figured it out," said Wilson. "He was actually calculating the boat design to my specifications."

Amundson died shortly after delivering the boat prior to the 1967 hunting season.

Because Amundson custom-built the duck boat to his body size, Wilson was able to float higher in the water, skim over muddy swamps and sit more comfortably on its floor and deck. That meant better hunting.

Wilson used the boat to hunt around Oneka Lake in Hugo and in the Carlos Avery Wildlife Management Area near Forest Lake. He hunted with it during his college years in Mankato; and it made an occasional cross-country trip while he served in the Army as a topographical engineer.

The boat never once sprang a leak.

Wilson and his wife, Norma, had three children and hunting was tabled sometime back in the 1980s. The boat sat in his parents' backyard for years, serving as a home to birds, until Wilson learned a handmade, wooden duck boat could fetch close to \$1,000 from collectors.

"It's the work of a master craftsman," said Wilson. "I mean, he didn't even use glue."

White Bear Lake Historical Society Executive Director Sara Markoe Hanson said the Historical Society was eager to secure the boat in its collection.

"We're thrilled," she said. "White Bear Lake has a wonderful history of boat building and now people will be able to see it and appreciate what it's all about. People who know boat building will be in awe of it."

Markoe Hanson said the Historical Society is building its boat collection and hopes to eventually display it at a White Bear Boat Works location.

Wilson, who teaches science at Fridley Middle School, said he's glad the boat will be preserved and eventually showed to the public.

"It makes me feel good, knowing that it will have a final resting place," he said. "I can't think of a better place for it."