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The “Art” of fiddle making

With fiddles hanging on the walls, tools of the trade decorating the workbench, and pieces of hardwood awaiting their end design, a little workshop is all prepared for its next creation - another unique, beautiful-sounding fiddle!

North of Kentville, in Centreville, Kings County, is the home and workshop of fiddle maker - and fiddler - Art Knowlton. For nearly 30 years, he has been making and playing fiddles for his own pleasure, and for the enjoyment of many musicians and listeners.

“We used to have house parties and I loved those fiddles,” says Art, retired from the Department of Agriculture. “So I bought

one, but I couldn’t make peace with it. It just didn’t make a good sound.” So, in 1976, he sent away for a kit to make his own fiddle.

Soon, Art was buying the materials himself. He uses hardwoods - different spruces and maples that he gets from British Columbia (BC) and locally from The Forties, next to New Ross. The BC wood eventually becomes the fiddle tops, and the Nova Scotia wood becomes the backs. “There’s wood from one end of the country to the other.”

When Art receives the wood, it is pre-cut in wedges. With a pattern, he cuts the initial forms. Gouges and finger planes are used for shaping, with different scrapers for creating

a superior finish. The fronts and backs of each instrument are shaped to very specific measurements to create the desired sound.

Each side is attached to a rib assembly with clamps to keep it in place while being glued together. Then the instrument encounters the “purfling” process, where a decorative white, flexible wood bordered by two strips of black wood edges the fiddle to protect it from environmental influences that cause cracking.

At the end of the process, Art applies colored varnish to add tone to the finish while highlighting the wood’s grain. He will use “rotten stone (a powder) and water” to create the desired mirror finish.

Through Pennsylvania-based violin workshops in 1989 and 2000, Art has continued to refine his craft. But when it comes to the sound of the fiddle, he has learned the best thing is age. “With fiddles, the older it is, the better it sounds.”

When Art sells a fiddle, he guarantees it for

a lifetime. All his sales are word-of-mouth, and mainly local. “I simply like to make fiddles. That’s why I don’t emphasize the selling. I can get attached to them, and the business part takes the fun out of it.”

And Art loves to make music with his fiddles, playing regularly with local groups The Kings Fiddlers and Third Generation. On Monday nights, he can be found playing in Port George and, outside of the summer season, in Windemere’s community hall on Tuesday evenings. He even writes some of his own music!

“I wrote a little song called My Grandfather’s Fiddle. I’ve written waltzes for most of my family members as well.”

For all his accomplishments, Art says his only claim to fame is growing up with Springhill singer Anne Murray. “I went to school with her, and I see her at school reunions. I even played on the same stage with her!”

Story and photo by Marlene Huntley



Art Knowlton plays a tune on one of his fiddles.



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