

Shipshape Elder

Gary Lewis keeps busy making miniature swashbuckling vessels

By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

His grandfather, Frank Lewis, worked in bone — elk, deer antlers, “whatever he could get.”

His father, Delbert Lewis, married to Norma Mercier, an Elder of the Tribe who passed almost three years ago, was a sign painter who also worked in pen and ink.

An uncle, Frank Forster, whose wife was Marion Mercier, an Elder of the Tribe and mother to Tribal Elder Sharon Hanson, had a workshop in Rickreall where he made things as diverse as arrowheads and tables.

“He was a real craftsman,” says Gary Lewis, an Elder of the Tribe himself. “When you grow up around artists, you pick it up.”

Since he was 8, maybe 9, Gary has been making things just to play with. He grew up in a Sheridan still deep into the timber business.

“I loved to make logging trucks,” he says.

Today, his home in Salem is alternately showcase and work space for his talents. In the living room are large windows, the doorway and white crown molding all around the room that is his work. In a hobby room off the living room, table-sized ships share space with hundreds of collector cars reminiscent of his hot rod days half a century ago.

At 15, Lewis turned his first car into a hot rod.

It is here where his grandchildren, Tribal members Inatye, 7, and Saghaley, 9, could go wild. (Lewis tries to be protective of both the children and the models.)

In the garage is a jeep that Lewis picked up a year ago without doors or refinements like a paint job. Kathi, his wife, came home from the casino one night, saw it and said, “Uh oh.”

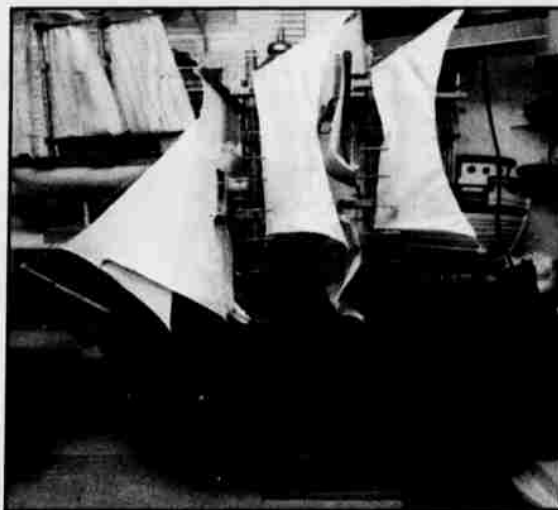
Today, it is a full restoration.

In a workshop at the back of the house, and inside a room maybe 6 feet square, are the tools of his



Tribal Elder Gary Lewis sands a railing on a wooden boat that he's building in a wood shop at his Salem home. One of Lewis' hobbies is wood working, which he has used to build a number of small replica ships.

This is just one of the small ships that Tribal Elder Gary Lewis has built in the wood shop of his Salem home.



trade. Two old lathes, one from the 1930s and a band saw among them, and centered is a work table with the latest ship to emerge from Lewis's imagination.

Asked where his design ideas come from, he said, “Are you old enough to remember Errol Flynn?” He takes them from the swashbuckling adventures of one of America's great early actors.

The talent, he says, is “just hard work.” He points to his index finger that has endured almost 20 individual scars over the years.

He makes the boats out of half-inch strips of wood glued together, then covered with Fiberglass. He built a full-sized canoe entirely of Fiberglass 25 years ago. Out in the back yard today is a 16-foot strip canoe, the second full-sized canoe he has made.

“Don't forget to ask him to see the carousel,” says his son, Tribal member David Lewis who also is manager of the Tribe's Cultural Resources Department. Gary used a music-box mechanism for the music and the rotation.

After Gary and Kathi married in the late 1980s, he started making carousels and he matched a Ferris wheel to one of them; both black walnut. The third piece was a matching wagon carrying animals.

“I talked him into entering them into a contest at the State Fair,” says Kathi. They won the blue ribbon.

“Let them know that it's all for sale,” says Kathi. The money is one

thing, but the reason the Lewises mention it is because they need the room for new projects. Not so long ago, he had to sell 100 to 150 of his model hot rods to make room for others.

All this is strictly hobby work for Lewis. He puts in as much as 30 hours a week — “as much as I can,” he says — on these projects. He also gives plenty away.

Not so long ago, their neighbor, Oscar, came across the street to help them replace a retaining wall of railroad ties with a rock wall.

“He did most of the work,” says Kathi. “His son, Brandon, would come with him and every day he would ask Gary, ‘Will you build me a boat?’” Or to Kathi, he would ask, “Is he making it, yet?”

Gary put in three weeks work and then it was done.

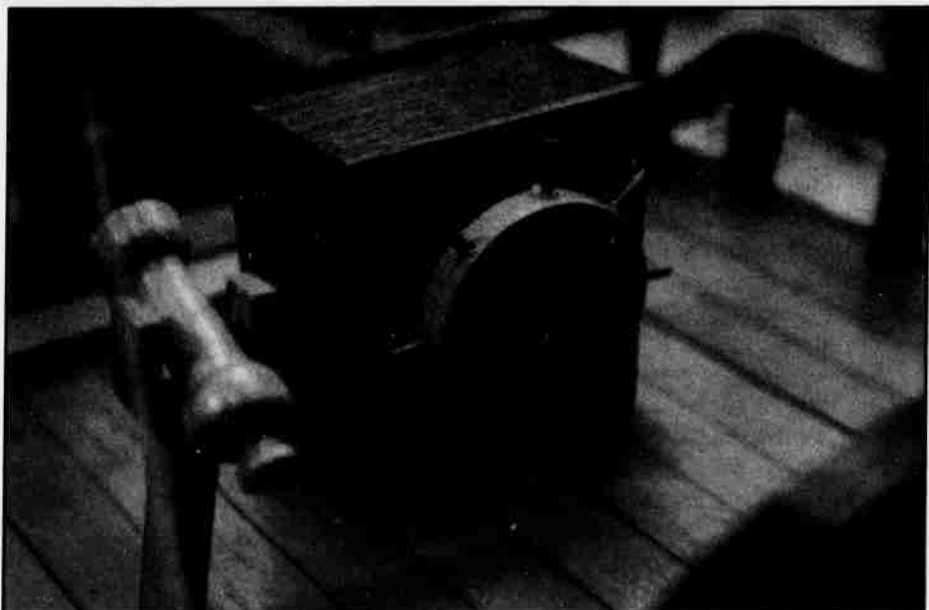
“His eyes got huge when he saw it!” Kathi says. “He raced to Gary and threw his arms around him. He said, ‘I love you, Gary!’”

Now five years retired, Lewis has made a living mainly as an electronics technician, for many years at the service of casinos. He kept slots working at Chinook Winds Casino for a decade and worked at Spirit Mountain Casino as well.

He learned electronics while serving 10 years — 1962-72 — in the Army. He served in Germany and Italy before Vietnam in 1967-68 with the 41st Signal Battalion.

He started his working career as one of the few folks who saw an upside to the 1962 Labor Day storm. He was working in the roofing department of Montgomery Ward in those days, and it seemed like every house in the valley had lost its roof during the storm.

His dream project, he said, is “a real boat, a sailing ship.” ■



A tiny wheel on a miniature ship that Tribal Elder Gary Lewis built.