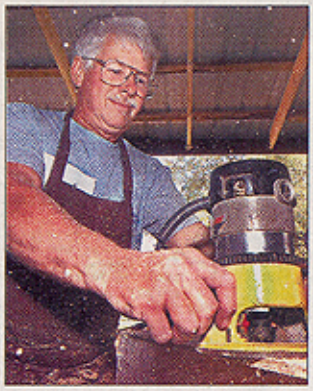
Build a boat in a day

Photos by Jim Roshan, Special to The Courier-Journal

Students worked on building their wooden boats at the Tennessee Boat School in Big Sandy, Tenn. Major parts of the boats are pre-cut from plywood and oak.

Our intrepid writer finds that a Tennessee school's claim really holds water

▲ Marty Rosen, who hadn't voluntarily wielded a saw for 10 or 15 years, cut excess wood from his boat.



► Instructor Karl Weinert used a router to finish the edges of a boat.

By Marty Rosen
Special to The Courier-Journal

Believe me, my young friend, there is nothing — absolute nothing — half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats.
— Kenneth Grahame, "The Wind in the Willows"

I built a boat in a day.

OK, so it was quite a long day — about 10 hours.

And my wife, Mary, did at least half the work, if not more.

So it wasn't just me.

Nevertheless, we built and launched a 15-foot, 3-inch pirogue in just one day, with no prior boatbuilding experience — in fact, truth to tell, with little or no carpentry or woodworking experience.

It's something of a joke around my house that when it comes time to exchange gifts, Mary asks for cordless drills; I'm the one who receives food processors. But neither of us had built anything more complex than a set of department store bookshelves.

Though Mary is pretty handy, before enrolling at the Tennessee Boat School, I hadn't voluntarily wielded a hammer or saw for 10 or 15 years.

But, suddenly, last summer, I felt an uncontrollable urge to follow the lead of Kenneth Grahame's fictional Water Rat and begin messing about in boats.

It's been nearly 100 years since "The Wind in the Willows" was published. Back then, small craft were built of wood (or canvas, or bark) and were powered by oars, paddles or sails.

American waterways teemed with peapods and prams, dories and duckboats, skiffs and sneakboxes, each carefully designed for the conditions found on specific bodies of water. Amateur boatbuilding was a backyard passion, and rowing and sailing were wildly popular in maritime areas.

By mid-century, the era of wooden boats had largely passed, and wooden boatbuilding had nearly disappeared, supplanted by cheaper, easier fabrication techniques.

But just as electric guitars have never quite extinguished the appeal of a finely crafted acoustic instrument, so hulls of fiberglass and steel can't quite erase the lure of a finely crafted wooden hull on water.

In one day, students can build a pirogue, a narrow, flat-bottomed boat.

In the last few decades, wooden boatbuilding has experienced the same kind of revival that folk music experienced during the 1950s and '60s. Courses in wooden boatbuilding flourish in New England, the Great Lakes and the Pacific Northwest, and in pockets throughout the country.

Many of those classes are geared toward vocational training for aspiring professionals; even the classes geared toward amateurs often last a couple of weeks and cost thousands of dollars — and since a large class is usually working on a single boat, the student usually doesn't wind up owning a boat at the end of the class.

That kind of commitment and investment seemed a bit risky to me, unsure as I was that my whimsical urge to build a boat would persist. What I needed was a way to find out, quickly and inexpensively, whether boatbuilding was something I'd enjoy.

And for that, the Tennessee Boat School was the perfect choice.

Operated by Karl and Debi Weinert in Big Sandy, Tenn., the school's curriculum consists of two boats. In one day, students can build a pirogue, a narrow, flat-bottomed boat modeled after the canoe-like vessels Cajuns developed for paddling around the bayous of Louisiana.

Students interested in a two-day experience can build a more complex Bevins skiff, a wide, flat-bottomed rowboat with more carrying capacity.

We were attracted by the simplicity (and relative cheapness) of the pirogue and signed up for a Saturday class during the long Labor Day weekend.

A typical class, we were told, might include four or five teams