

Under an open-air barn on a picturesque farm in West Tennessee, novice woodworkers can while away a weekend, bending long planks of yellow pine around a boat-shaped frame and hammering nails four inches apart along the gentle curves.

Using saws, clamps, planes and other hand tools, students of the Tennessee Boat School can build boats – and memories – while keeping alive an appreciation for the craftsmanship that goes into a well-hewn wooden hull.

"Wood is something that's all around us. It's got a good feel to it," says Karl Weinert, 61, a master boat builder who owns and operates the unusual school on his farm in Big Sandy.

"Fiberglass and aluminum boats are cold to the touch. They clang when the waves hit it. But wood sounds natural when the waves hit it – like a floating log – so you don't scare the fish."

With his wife, Debi, Weinert opened the school in April 2004, inviting families, friends and co-workers to come to their 185-acre farm and build a boat in a day under the instruction of a seasoned boatwright. Karl Weinert made his first boat at age 12 and hasn't stopped since. He was a master boat builder in south Florida for 25 years before moving to West Tennessee in 2002, trading ocean and sandy beaches for rolling farmland and rivers.

With the motto "building memories and keeping them afloat," the venture has drawn an interesting mix of students and produced 30 boats.

"For every person, it's like a different pilgrimage," says Debi Weinert. "Some people are reaching back to something their dad or grandfather did – working with wood, using hand tools. For families, it's a bonding experience. We've had three generations working to build a boat together. We've had a father wanting to grab one more weekend with his son before the son left for college. It's making memories together and having a tangible product to show for it at the end."

For Pratt and Ed Hubbard, a father and grown son from McKenzie, it's a chance to

work side by side to build a useable keepsake without the distractions of telephones, work or family responsibilities.

"We don't get to do a lot of projects together. His schedule is different than mine," says the elder Hubbard, 69. "This is a good opportunity to spend a day together."

At a cost of \$675 plus tax, a group of two or more can build a pirogue, a two-man, flat-bottomed canoe that they get to float in the water and haul away at the end of the day. To build a sturdier, 12-foot rowing skiff in two days, tuition is \$975 plus tax. No experience is required, but young children are discouraged because of safety concerns and the level of concentration required.

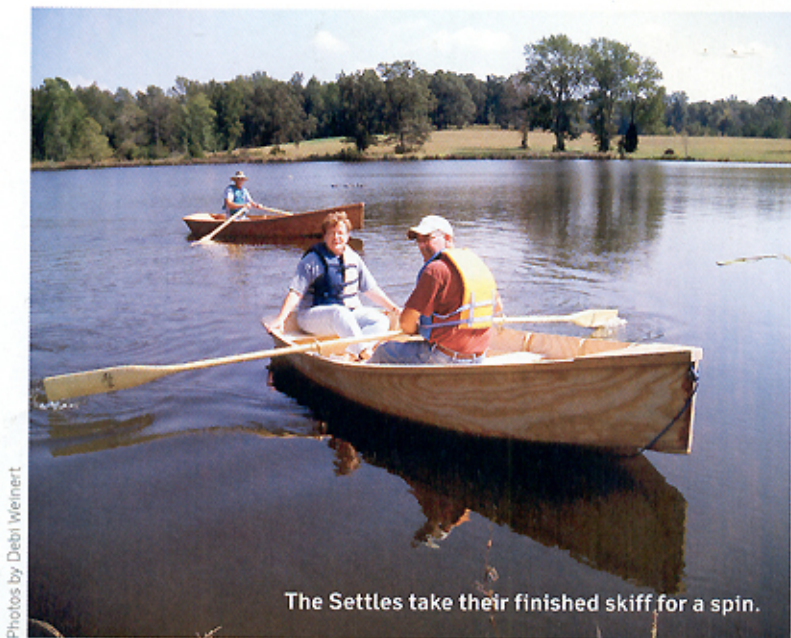
Students start with a pile of pre-cut wood and use only hand tools to fashion their boats, held together with nails and polyethylene glue. Weinert teaches them to bend and mold the wood. He teaches them how to "throw a hammer" and recognize the sound of a perfectly seated nail. And for those unfamiliar with a bevel gauge – used to mark angles – the simple-looking tool becomes a trusted friend.

"Karl is a renowned boat builder and a great teacher," says Ed Hubbard, 25, a construction worker. "You hang around him long enough, you can learn a lot." **FB**



Make Your Own Memory

To learn more about the Tennessee Boat School, call 731-584-2103 or visit www.tennesseeboatschool.com. Workshops in 2006 are scheduled beginning in April and continuing through October.



The Settles take their finished skiff for a spin.

Photos by Debi Weinert