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Building memories that float

Tennessee Boat School offers hands-on courses in building your own boat



Photos by ERIKA ALEXANDER/The Jackson Sun
Karen and Bob Yakel learn how to build a boat with the help of instructors Debi and Karl Weinert on Dec. 18.



ABOVE: Debi and Karl Weinert have established a Tennessee Boat School in Big Sandy. BOTTOM LEFT: Karl, left, and Bob Yakel measure the amount of wood he will need to build his boat on Dec. 18. BOTTOM RIGHT: A small boat coffee table that Karl built sits next to a boat clients are working on.

By DENNIS SEID
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BIG SANDY —

Tucked away in the rolling hills of Benton County is Karl and Debi Weinert's 185-acre farm that they have appropriately named "Grand View."

From the house is a commanding view of a lake, surrounded by towering hardwoods and pines that have strewn their leaves and needles and wrapped their limbs around the place and as if to whisper "welcome."

Down a gravel path flanked by a handful of chickens, a stone's throw away from the main house looms a 60-foot-by-40-foot barn, where the Weinerts have designed their own agri-tourism business.

Agri-tourism is the new buzzword being promoted by the state Department of Tourism, which hopes that farmers will "think outside the box" when it comes to keeping profits on the family farm.

Consider the Weinerts on the

Tennessee Boat School

■ Build a boat and float it in two days, regardless of skill. Or try your hand at building a smaller, pirogue, a canoe-like boat, within a day.

■ For more information and directions, call (731) 584-2103.

■ The Tennessee Boat School, sponsored by Sandra Lynn Boat Works, is located at 1327 Prince Road in Big Sandy.

leading edge of that thinking.

In the massive barn, with a fully restored Ford Model A (complete with rumble seat) parked in the back, and insulated from the winter chill thanks to a double-barreled stove fashioned by Karl, hands will be measuring, bending, molding, splicing, gluing and hammering pieces of wood for a boat.

The boats can be finished in a matter of hours, put in the lake for testing and taken home by a family and/or friends who have experienced building a boat by hand. Other boats will take a couple of days.

The Tennessee Boat School has its first session scheduled for Monday and Tuesday, and sessions are also planned through July.

Building a 12-foot Bevins skiff in two days and taking it home costs \$895. If you just want the building kit, it costs \$795. Building a pirogue in one day and taking it home costs \$300.

So how did this Florida couple find their way to rural West Tennessee?

"We were living on a farm in Gainesville about five years ago, learning about the country life," Debi said. "We were taking care of cows, goats, chickens, even a donkey. We even learned how to hay and build fences."

In between building boats, the Weinerts still have their hands full with a small herd of cows to tend on their Big Sandy farm. And plenty of fence building.

The Weinerts moved to North Florida after Karl had spent more than two decades as a master boat builder in South Florida. There he hand-built everything from multi-million dollar yachts to small skiffs

and everything in between.

But taking life a little bit slower, a little bit easier was more appealing for the couple. And after building boats and other wooden projects on the Gainesville farm, they decided to find a farm in an area that had seasonal changes and water close by.

"We looked at more than 100 farms, and when we drove up to this place, we thought it was the most beautiful farm we'd ever seen," Karl said. "And when it snows — it's just beautiful."

Given that Debi is originally from Syracuse, N.Y., and Karl is from Pennsylvania, snow is indeed a beautiful thing. You just don't see much of the white stuff in sunny Florida.

So the Weinerts built a barn for the express purpose of introducing people to the art of boat building. They've called it the Tennessee Boat School.

The tools of the trade? Hand

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