## U-Rent-Em Canoe remains a family business after 42 years

While U-Rent-Em Canoe in Hastings is under new ownership, patrons can anticipate the same friendly, family service they have come to expect.

In July, 42 years after he founded the livery, Mike "The Canoe Man" Hawthorne sold the livery to family members. The new owners are his daughter, Julie, and her husband Jim Fox, and his son, Steve Hawthorne. The staff includes his granddaughter Kelly Hawthorne, grandson Blake Fox and family friends Cindy Miller and Vern Smithers.

'There are so many peo-

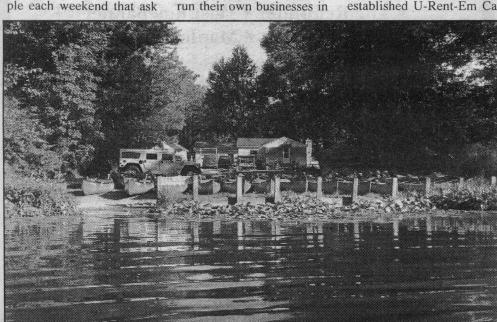
about my dad," said Julie. "They generally want to tell me a story about Dad or let me know about an act of kindness. Although Dad has a neurological disorder that affects his speech and movement, his health is good. He loves to ride around Barry County and revisit old memories. He loves to tell us how to run the canoe livery and remind us of how he used to do it all himself. We live in Chicago but

we're building a cottage on Middle Lake so we could spend more time with my dad, so we come up here every weekend," said Julie. Both Steve and Julie, who

addition to U-Rent-Em Canoe, attribute their success to what they learned from their father. Julie said that in the win-

ter of 1966, Mike and his family attended the West Michigan Boat Show in downtown Grand Rapids at the old Civic Auditorium. An avid power boat and water ski enthusiast, Mike agreed to purchase eight fiberglass canoes, all in different pastel colors, from Michigan manufacturer, Marquette, and towed them home behind a green 1966 Mustang.

In the spring of 1966, Mike and his wife, Lorraine, established U-Rent-Em Ca-



Watercraft from U-Rent-Em Canoe stands at the ready at the Charlton Park livery. "By the second year,

noe Livery, just east of Michigan Avenue on Green Street directly across from Hastings Aluminum Products on the grounds of the old Hastings Ice and Fuel Company. Julie said Mike believed

the beauty of the Thornapple

River experienced by canoe would provide local residents with economical fun and attract new visitors to the community. U-Rent-Em Canoe was the first canoe livery to open for business in West Michi-

gan, and remains the region's oldest and largest livery, with over 125 water craft, according to Julie. Until the establishment of U-Rent-Em Canoe, the Thornapple River was seldom navigated and most often enjoyed by locals fishing from the river's bank," noted Julie. "Word spread quickly

before the first summer was over, four more canoes were purchased and eight more for the next year."

around Barry County and

In 1966, the rates were \$6 for half-day trips and \$8 for all-day trips. Most outings started at the Charlton Park Bridge and ended at Tyden Park, Airport Road or the Irving Dam.

1967, people were driving from Battle Creek, Kalamazoo and Grand Rapids to enjoy Hastings and the Thornapple. Today, people from all over the country come to experience the Thornapple. Some, make the trek multiple times per summer and many have been canoeing with us for decades," she said. "In the early years, John and Dave Leary, owners of Leary's Sporting Goods of downtown Hastings, were called upon to outfit the canoes with wood paddles and life jackets. 'In the mid-80s U-Rent-Em Canoe purchased property and moved to the cur-

rent location on Apple St. During that same time period, a launch site was also purchased on the river, just below Charlton Park and is still used today as our most popular starting point," she "The longest trip was in the early 70s when a small band of Boy Scouts rented eight canoes, started in

ple to the Grand River and eventually made it to Lake Michigan," said Steve.

Nashville, took the Thornap-

enjoyed reliving part of our childhood being involved with the canoe livery again," said Julie. "We both own wonderful businesses, Steve's in Texas and mine in Chicago, and this is the place where we found our entrepreneurial spirit. Currently U-Rent-Em Canoe, located at 805 W. Ap-

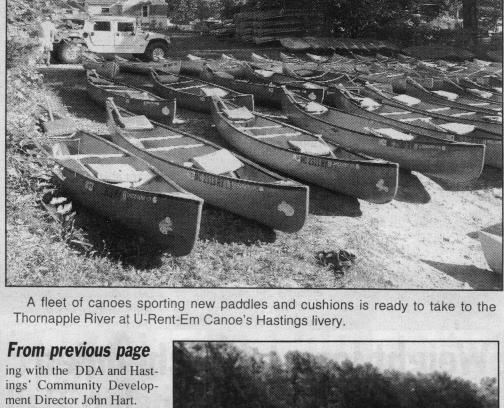
"Steve and I have both

ple St. in Hastings has 86 canoes and 25 kayaks available for rent from 9 a.m. to closing Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays and weekdays by appointment. "Next year, we plan to invest in additional canoes and

kayaks and completely re-do

the starting point on Apple Street, putting a facade on the trailer and creating a beautiful park-like setting to improve the curb appeal of the business," said Julie, adding that she and her husband are working closely with the City of Hastings and the Downtown development Authority (DDA). "This year, our focus has just been on shaking things out, buying new paddles and cushions and some water-

craft," said Jim. "We hope to have the new facade by the '09 season. We're work-



"We've submitted information about the new facade for the trailer which will in-

it look like a lodge and a deck where customers can register and assemble before we transport them to the liv-

ery near Charlton Park.

clude a roof, siding to make

We're going to use the lodge theme and look at both livery areas including fencing and entrance ways and signage. In addition to aesthetically improving the livery's presence on Apple Street, Jim said that U-Rent-Em-Canoe also wants to partner

with the community to es-

tablish canoe races, fishing

tournaments and photo contests in conjunction with canoe rentals, with proceeds going to local charities. "We want to be more involved in Summerfest and those types of things. We also want to participate in the annual river clean-up (slated for Saturday, Sept. 27, this year) and we're in the process of developing seasonal passes and a 'Frequent Floater program where you rent from us so many times then you get a

rental free," he added. "We

are also reaching out to large

groups — camps, youth groups, scouting organiza-

tions, schools and promoting

outings such as family reun-

ions."

A group of canoers enjoy an outing on the Thornapple River. "The Thornapple is re-"We're really excited about being a part of 'Hasgarded as one of the best bass fishing rivers in West tings on the Thornapple," said Julie. "Over 60 percent Michigan," said Julie. of our business comes from 'And there's still plenty out of town. We have people of time to rent a canoe; fall come to us from Lansing, is the most scenic time of Battle Creek, Rockford, the year," said Jim.

Ionia and Kalamazoo. The couple have also started to approach some local business owners about joint marketing programs

such as "Paddle and Pizza" or "Canoe and Camp." "People park at our downtown facility on Apple Street, and we transport them to Charlton Park and they paddle back or they ther down the river to Airport Road," said Jim. "We

as three times a month and

we have a lot of return cus-

tomers. We tout, 'all-day fun

also have fishermen who rent from us on a regular basis. Some rent from us as often

for one flat fee.'

All-day rental rates are: Canoes \$25, one-man kayaks \$25, two-man kayaks \$20, and tubes \$7. Special discounts for large groups

are available.

"Julie said we were buying a cabin on Middle Lake and now we've turned into river rats and we really enjoy it," said Jim

born, raised and lived in Hastings his entire life. For more information about U-Rent-Em Canoe or reservation log on to http// urentemcanoe.com or call

269-945-3191.