

# 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 people each weekend that ask

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 run their own businesses in

addition to U-Rent-Em Canoe, attribute their success to what they learned from their father.

Julie said that in the winter 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.

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 Michigan, and remains the region's oldest and largest livery, with over 125 watercraft, 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 around Barry County and before the first summer was over, four more canoes were purchased and eight more for the next year."

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.

"By the second year, 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 current 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 added.

"The longest trip was in the early 70s when a small band of Boy Scouts rented eight canoes, started in Nashville, took the Thornapple to the Grand River and eventually made it to Lake Michigan," said Steve.

"Steve and I have both 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. Apple 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 watercraft," said Jim. "We hope to have the new facade by the '09 season. We're work-



A fleet of canoes sporting new paddles and cushions is ready to take to the Thornapple River at U-Rent-Em Canoe's Hastings livery.

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ing with the DDA and Hastings' Community Development Director John Hart.

"We've submitted information about the new facade for the trailer which will include a roof, siding to make it look like a lodge and a deck where customers can register and assemble before we transport them to the livery near Charlton Park. 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 establish 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 organizations, schools and promoting outings such as family reunions."



A group of canoers enjoy an outing on the Thornapple River.

"We're really excited about being a part of 'Hastings on the Thornapple,'" said Julie. "Over 60 percent of our business comes from out of town. We have people come to us from Lansing, Battle Creek, Rockford, 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 can go further down the river to Airport Road," said Jim. "We also have fishermen who rent from us on a regular basis. Some rent from us as often as three times a month and we have a lot of return customers. We tout, 'all-day fun for one flat fee.'"

"The Thornapple is regarded as one of the best bass fishing rivers in West Michigan," said Julie.

"And there's still plenty of time to rent a canoe; fall is the most scenic time of the year," said Jim.

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.

Mike Hawthorne was 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.