

BARGE RIGHT IN

When it's your business to haul big stuff from shore to shore, why let a little water get in the way?

BY TOM CARPENTER // Photography by Wolf Kutnahorsky



LARGE AND IN CHARGE: Gerry White (left) and son Trevor have barged everything from sand and timber to completely assembled cottages.



ROLLIN' ON THE RIVER: Two years younger than the *Sandman*, Pete Corbiere guides the beast with a veteran's precision.

TWO PILES OF SAND, A PILE OF TOPSOIL, AND A BOBCAT LOADER, 70 TONS IN ALL, WEIGH DOWN THE DECK OF THE 60-FOOT *SANDMAN* BARGE OWNED BY WHITE CONTRACTING AND BARGING OF HONEY HARBOUR.

The 110-hp Perkins diesel roaring beneath our feet is pushing us along at only 6 km/h, but it feels as if nothing short of running into an island could check our progress. Waves striking the bow produce only a dull vibration, as if someone were banging on the hull with a mattress.

In the wheelhouse, Pete Corbiere sits in a worn-out dining room chair and steers north for Go Home Bay. At 23, he's two years younger than the *Sandman* itself, and yet he already seems to possess the patience and unflappable air you want in a guy who earns his living driving on the public waterways in a boat the size and shape of a parking lot.

This is the barge I've watched so many times over the years, crawling past our cottage, often loaded so low that all you see is the pile of dirt. *Sandman* and White's other big self-propelled unit, the 60-foot *Barge Too*, ply constantly between their

loading yard on Lily Pond Road in Honey Harbour and the dozens of cottages they serve each year. They are a familiar sight, and in a very short time I'm equally familiar with the inside of the wheelhouse.

I should be taking notes, but the truth is there isn't much to report besides a steering wheel, some safety gear, a bench down one side, the old chair, and Pete, who is watching me look around. He laughs. We're only a few minutes into our trip, but we're passing the channel that leads to my cottage. "Maybe you want me to drop you off," he suggests. "I think you've seen everything already."

On the one hand, he's right; the *Sandman* is little more than a large tin box. It has a flat bottom and parallel, squared-off sides. The only concession to hydrodynamics is an upward slope to the bow that angles at about the same pitch as the front of a snow ski and ends in a ramp

that lowers for loading. Welded together from ¼" steel plates, the barge withstands a daily assault as machinery is loaded on and driven off, and as tons of sand or gravel are piled up and scraped away again. Every 15–20 years or so, the decking on boats such as this has to be replaced because it sags into low spots between the bulkheads that divide the hull into separate compartments.

On the other hand, a barge is far more than a slow-moving platform. For water-access cottagers it changes the world; it is the bridge, the essential unfixed link over which passes everything larger than a runabout-sized load of lumber. And as it turns out, it was a good thing I stayed onboard since even our unexceptional barge ride had its moment of excitement.

The yard at White's is a bustling place on a workday morning as Gerry White, 65, and his son Trevor, 35, oversee 30 or more workers heading out to scattered job sites. They are both the kind of solid, competent men you always find running successful construction companies. Neither of them misses a trick in all the

commotion. They hand out a dozen decisions each in the space of 10 minutes as the docks clear and the boats disperse.

The company began with Gerry's father, Art, in 1946. "It was just a couple of guys with an outboard and some tools," says Gerry, who took over the business in 1963. "We got the first barge in 1970." The original vessel, dubbed simply *The Barge*, was built locally by Gerry Stahn and was eventually sold to Dennison Mines in Elliot Lake where the Whites had gone to start a contract – instead of the work they simply sold them the barge.

In the meantime, they acquired *Barge Too* and later added *Sandman*. These two, the workhorses of the White fleet, are each propelled by a \$90,000 Harbor-master drive unit – a diesel inboard/outboard-style motor originally developed for landing craft in WWII. They run for at least 8½ months every year, and standing on the dock on a warm July morning, Gerry points up the narrow channel. "Some days we break ice to get out of here in the morning. Then we break ice to get back in at the end of the day."

In 2003 they didn't shut down barging operations until December 12.

The barges regularly travel up the Georgian Bay shore as far as San Souci, nearly 50 km to the north, and out to Beckwith Island and beyond. In 2000, the Whites provided the barge that Ontario Hydro used to lay an 11-ton underwater cable from Cedar Point to Christian Island; Hydro mounted a powerful braking device onto the deck to avoid accidentally uncoiling the whole spool onto the lakebed. Trevor steered with his head down the whole way, eyes glued to a GPS monitor because there was no extra cable and the line had to fall precisely on course.

"We've also worked on Lake Simcoe," says Trevor. It's 60 km overland to the east, but the barges just fit through the Severn River portion of the Trent-Severn Waterway that links the lake to Georgian Bay. To make the trip, they contact the lockmasters who pass warnings along the way.

In addition to their big barges, the Whites own an assortment of smaller workboats, and a couple of impressive

aluminum craft built by Stanley Custom Boats in Parry Sound. One is a push boat with vertical padded bars mounted at the bow and a powerful stern drive; the other looks like a Navy landing craft and is outfitted with a 200-hp Yamaha outboard. Either of these vessels can load up with a couple of tons of materials and workers and head out onto the bay at up to 60 km/h. And either would be the envy of anyone who has tried to haul stuff in a regular cottage boat.

Yet on this morning, first Trevor White, and then minutes later, his father, turn their backs on the high-flying aluminum beauties. "Ah, they're the Cadillacs," says Gerry with a dismissive wave of the hand. Instead, the Whites draw my attention to a homely looking push barge hauled half onto the beach. A welder is lying on his side on the sandy shore finishing up repairs to the waterline.

"That barge," says Trevor, "we just cut down so it can be loaded onto a truck. And that means we can get inland now; to places like Six Mile Lake." The Whites are in the business of moving stuff around,

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and while luxury is nice, it doesn't carry much freight. The new truckable barge extends their range.

The Whites' vessels have done it all. They have hauled road-builders' portable rock-crushing plants – 52 tons each – out to Christian Island, and transported Ready Mix cement trucks. In 1985, Trevor delivered a full-sized transport trailer containing an entire log house; the load was so high that he couldn't see over the top and had to spin the drive system 180 degrees and back the barge through the narrow confines of the local channels. When a septic pumper truck carrying 6,800 litres of sewage fell off a barge – “Some other guy's barge, not ours,” Gerry hastens to say – into Gloucester Pool, *Sandman* was used to haul it out.

Ask the Whites for their favourite stories and they both start talking about The Frog, a cottage they built years ago. Designed by the owner, The Frog had a long sloping back roof and a shorter, steeper roof on the front. At the sides,

it had a couple of decorative bits that looked – albeit unintentionally – like the hips of a squatting bullfrog. First erected on Lambert Island, once owned by Orville Wright, The Frog had to be moved in 1988 to Stocking Island, 6½ km away in Cognashene. The Whites floated it there across the water.

The Frog was so tall they worried it would tip over into the bay, so they chained the two big barges side by side and The Frog straddled them. “The way it worked out,” remembers Trevor, “the front door and the back door lined up perfectly with the pilot house and that's how I drove, looking all the way through the building.”

The bottom line is, if you want it delivered, the Whites can get it there; in the end, cost is the only limiting factor. A barge delivery can range from as little as \$250–\$300 for a small single load and up to \$15,000–\$20,000 for a construction job that might be stretched out over several months. But the stock-in-trade of barges serving the kind of water access cottages you find around Honey Harbour is septic systems.

Every fall, *Barge Too* spends six weeks travelling back and forth between cottages and the Whites' yard, emptying tanks and off-loading into pumper trucks at an average cost of around \$450 per cottage. In fact, at first glance, *Barge Too* appears to be named Sewage Waste. The label in 15-cm letters down the side of the hull is a condition of the licence they require for such work. Hidden in the hull is a 22,700-litre epoxy-lined tank. The Whites average 530,000–570,000 litres of sewage per year.

Through the summer, when they aren't pumping tanks they're installing them and hauling the sand, drainage stone, and topsoil required for the task. Some 350 tons of material goes into a typical filter bed. That's five trips, each with *Sandman* loaded to the gunwales, just as it is this morning as Pete and I continue grinding north.

We are, in fact, loaded so deep that waves break over the bow and water sluices constantly alongside the piles to the scuppers at the stern.

Clearing the point, we meet the bigger waters of Georgian Bay and the flow of water over the deck increases. Our load





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is slowly washing away. The wind, too, is blowing sand from the piles straight into the wheelhouse. "At this rate," laughs Pete, rubbing his eyes, "we'll be empty before we get there."

Fifteen minutes later, out in the open gap where there is absolutely nothing to run into, Pete offers me the wheel and sets about making himself lunch so that I can learn for myself that piloting a barge is not the simple matter it appears. I cannot, it turns out, steer a straight line to save my life. All that momentum is deceptive. I over-correct with every turn of the wheel.

The drive systems on the White barges are designed to turn through 360 degrees, making them extraordinarily manoeuvrable. In order to keep track of exactly where the drive is pointed, there is a round brass gauge in the wheelhouse with an arrow that indicates which direction the propeller is driving the stern of the barge. "You really need that when you're trying to get into a tight spot," says Pete. But it doesn't help me a bit. I can picture the view from above of my palsied course.

None too soon, Pete takes over again, but my brief stint at the wheel leaves me with a keen appreciation for what follows soon after. Just as we finally turn into the small bay toward the cottage where all this sand and topsoil are headed, a stiff breeze picks up. The wheelhouse and those big piles of dirt become sails catching more and more wind as we approach the narrow slot into which Pete must fit *Sandman*.

On a calm day, this would be a simple matter. He would stop, then spin 90 degrees and drive straight in. Today, however, as his 70-ton craft blows along parallel to the shore, he'll have to quarter it precisely into position, a single curve to carry us onto a landing that offers only about a metre clearance between the dock on one side and a rock on the other.

His co-workers, Bruce, Chris, and Pat, hear us approach and hurry down to the shore. Looking out at the choppy water, Pat hops into an outboard and shoves off. "Maybe I'll give you a push," he calls, meaning that, if necessary, he'll try to help control the stern as it swings around across the wind. Bruce and Chris lay out the rope they'll need to snub the barge into place, and although everyone is still

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more or less relaxed, they are looking rather expectantly at Pete. And then the critical moment is upon us, and past, and the bow is ashore and secure.

Pat nods his head once approvingly, but that's about it. To me, however, this casual feat is as impressive as driving a truck into a small parking spot at full speed – while the road is moving sideways beneath you. But for the others, it's part of the day. Before long, *Sandman* is unloaded and tied up for the night. They'll return to make the long journey in the morning.

Later, heading home in the workboat, the wind has picked up for real and we take the inside channel where the barges don't fit. Bruce and I stay dry; only Pete in the stern is getting wet. After the slow journey north, the quick trip south again feels a bit like the run back down the ski hill. Clouds are scudding by, the sun is slanting across the waves and the low rocks of Georgian Bay. I'm thinking the whole thing feels like a pretty good job bonus.

Perhaps Pete has been reading my thoughts. "So, shall we pick you up again in the morning?" he asks as I climb out onto the dock. Even as I'm laughing and shaking my head no, I'm figuring a wiser man than I would probably take him up on that offer. 🐾

Tom Carpenter has been hauling himself around Georgian Bay for more than 40 years.

Source Guide

Relics Reborn Page 35: Balleycanoec & Co., 150 Rockfield Rd., Mallorytown, Ont., K0E 1R0, (613) 659-3874, www.balleycanoeco.com

Happily Ever After Page 46: Willow bed and matching bedside tables made by Pickle Ridge Rustic Carpentry, Duncan, B.C., (250) 748-0763, www.pickleridge.com

Sugar Shack Page 60: Sap buckets and candy thermometers from Atkinson Maple Syrup Supplies, Oro Station, Ont., (705) 487-3331. Custom-made syrup pan from Lovelace Welding, P.O. Box 251, Little Current, Ont., P0P 1K0, (705) 368-3112.

REAL ESTATE GUIDE

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still felt centuries later in the historical architecture and many antique shops. PEC, known colloquially as "the County," was originally a 1,000-sq.-km peninsula until it was severed from the mainland with the completion of the Murray Canal in the late 1800s. The rich soil and warm summer climate make it ideal for farming, grape growing, and apple orchards, which means there are plenty of roadside stops for produce and wine en route to the cottage.

Buyers can choose from the shelter of the Bay of Quinte or West Lake, the sand beaches on the west end, or the limestone bluffs of the east. Fishing for salmon in Lake Ontario or walleye in the Bay of Quinte is a favourite pastime, as is sailing. Far from the pollution sources at the lake's west end, the water is surprisingly clean and clear.

Two of the region's most scenic provincial parks are Sandbanks and Presqu'île. The former has some of the largest freshwater sand dunes in the world and the latter, with its mix of beach, bluffs, marsh, and forest, is a major migration staging area for birds and monarch butterflies.

TYPICAL LISTINGS

- **\$159,000** 2,000-sq.-ft., three-bedroom cottage on Bay of Quinte. Security system, hardwood floors. Drilled well, oil furnace.
- **\$279,000** Three-bedroom, 1,800-sq.-ft. cottage on Smith's Bay. Screened porch, workshop. Pebble shore.

21. Land O' Lakes

BOAT ACCESS: \$60,000-\$200,000

ROAD ACCESS: \$80,000-\$350,000

VACANT LOTS: \$40,000-\$125,000

The term "Land O' Lakes" first appears on a railway map from the 1930s and, although none of our sources could verify that the area has a higher percentage of lakes than other districts in Ontario, the name is now permanently affixed to this sparsely populated area that runs north of Hwy. 401, roughly between Belleville and Kingston. The lower portion of the region is mainly rural farmland. Napanee, about halfway between Toronto and Ottawa, is the largest municipality in the region and home to its only hospital.

As you head north, you move into elevated Canadian Shield country. Just above Hwy. 7, off Hwy. 41, lies Mazinaw Lake, one of the largest in the area and, at an average of 41 metres, one of the deepest lakes in the province. Bon Echo Provincial Park lies on the sand beaches at the narrows between the upper and lower bowls of Mazinaw. Bass, northern pike, and walleye are all found in this and many other area lakes.

With few urban centres and limited industry, much of the Land O' Lakes region is economically depressed. But the isolation and resulting low prices are big attractions for cottagers.

TYPICAL LISTINGS

- **\$144,900** Three-bedroom, 750-sq.-ft. cottage on Bob's Lake. 150' sand beach. Septic system, lake water, hydro, telephone. Includes bunkie.
- **\$129,000** 970 sq.-ft., three-bedroom property on Mazinaw Lake. Electric heat. Septic system.

22. Rideau Lakes

BOAT ACCESS: \$100,000-\$400,000

ROAD ACCESS: \$125,000-\$750,000

VACANT LOTS: \$90,000-\$200,000

Most of the lakes in this region are linked by the 202-km-long Rideau Canal connecting Ottawa and Kingston. While it never served its intended purpose as a military transport route to fend off the threat of a U.S. invasion, the canal was eventually taken over by pleasure boaters, Canadian and American alike. Some 80,000 vessels a year pass through the 45 locks to tour the numerous lakes and scenic towns in the area. Most locks are still manually operated, as they were when the canal first opened in 1832. The town of Westport, on Upper Rideau Lake, lies at the summit of the Rideau Canal – from here you lock down, southwest to Kingston, or northeast to Ottawa – and is the heart of the Rideau cottage community. Two locks on the Tay Canal connect historic Perth to the system.

Lakefront lots were first severed in the late 1800s, and some cottages from that time still stand. Today, the shorelines are a mix of docks, rocks, and woods, with some farmland butting the water. The majority of buyers come from nearby Ottawa, with the highest demand, and therefore highest prices, on Big Rideau Lake. >>