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By Darlene Wroe with photos by Cody Storm Cooper

More than eight thousand years ago, in the primeval forest of Muskoka, a pine seedling began its life. It was to be a remarkable journey which would take it into the 21st century. For 261 years the white pine tree grew undisturbed near what is now Bracebridge. But the climate was changing. The Glacial Lake Algonquin was receding, and land masses were being altered. In one cataclysmic event, a great flood swept through the area, knocking down everything in its path. The large tree fell to the earth, engulfed in a lime-dust silt where it rested, forgotten and undisturbed for many centuries. Protected by the lime-dust silt from the acidic soil of the area, the tree remained preserved for more than eight centuries until it was discovered in September, 2005, under 16 feet of earth.

During the preparations for the construction of a basement on the property of Max Beaumont, the old white pine log was returned to the light of day.

Mr. Beaumont gave the pine to Don Thur, an artisan who turns bowls and lives near Utterson. Mr. Thur who works with recovered old-growth wood as well as other wood, had a suspicion about the wood. He knew that the Beaumont property had been cleared long ago. Forestry expert John Duncan was asked to examine the tree and found that it was 261 years old at the time it was felled. But Mr. Thur found that this piece of wood was different from other old-growth wood with which he had worked. For one thing, it was very fragile.

A decision was made to send a piece of the wood to the IsoTrace Radiocarbon Laboratory at the University of Toronto. "At the time, I didn't know it was old," says Mr. Thur.

It was only as a result of taking a chance and having it carbon-dated that he discovered that the pine dated back over eight centuries to the area's ancient past.

"It was definitely different," he remarks. "It was very fragile because of all those years of being underground. There were no natural saps or resins in it."

Mr. Thur says that when he first discussed having the tree tested for its age, he was advised to save his money because it was unlikely the tree was very old. But when the truth was revealed, those who had carried out the testing were amazed.

"They were shocked – and elated," he says.

Prior to this, the oldest tree which had been found in the Muskoka area dated back to 1602. Mr. Thur has also created bowls from that tree, and one of those bowls is now in the possession of the District of Muskoka. The District officials now also have a bowl from the most ancient pine discovered on Mr. Beaumont's property.

Ten pieces from that tree remain available for sale. These pieces comprise what is now called "The Alport Collection," so named after Mr. Beaumont's property which was originally called the Alport Estate after its first owner.

It was a lifetime experience for Mr. Thur to have that wood come into his hands. But his bowls from other trees had become cherished by owners around the world. In fact, some of his pieces have made their way into the possession of United States President George Bush, and to Buckingham Palace. During their visit to Muskoka, King Harald and Queen Sonja of Norway were presented with one of Mr. Thur's bowls.

The quality of Mr. Thur's bowls comes from the fact that he seeks to expose the pattern in the wood. Carefully, he crafts his bowls to retain the pattern of the wood, making them shimmer with their own inner life.

"It's all about the pattern," he says.

Mr. Thur began to pursue his craft in 1996, before retiring from a career in the corrections service. He wanted to have something to keep himself occupied once he eventually retired in 1999.

Although now, after ten years immersed in bowl turning, he has had such success, that he has decided to take up golfing, to get him away from his studio.

Mr. Thur expresses a deep love for his craft, and especially for the wood.

"I was always intrigued by what was inside the wood," he says.

Most of the bowls are made from burls, and it is in these burls that the most intricate patterns are likely to be discovered.

"A burl is a disruption in the tree's growth and it can be caused by insects or it could be an animal knocked the limb off," explains Mr. Thur.

As a demonstration in his studio, he takes one piece from a pile of what appear to be small bowls set upside down on a work bench. They are actually the centres from larger bowls which Mr. Thur has previously created. These centres have been removed from larger pieces of wood with the use of a knife.

He takes the small piece of wood and begins to turn it on the wood lathe. The wood is held in a vertical position firmly grasped by a metal bar on the machine, where Mr. Thur uses a tool to cut into the wood as it rapidly spins.

"Every piece is an exploration and discovery," he says. "I might have an expectation that it will be really spectacular and it will be plain. I might expect another will be plain and it will be an awesome piece of wood."

It is only through turning the bowl that the inner bowl is exposed.