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In Shelburne, the townsfolk tilt at whirligigs

By PETER DUFFY

Tue, Sep 9 - 6:03 AM



THESE CONTRAPTIONS really are most ingenious.

Everywhere I turn this morning, here they are, twisting and spinning as the wind catches them.

Are they playthings? Are they decorations? Are they to scare the birds?

Just what are whirligigs?

"They're toys," Herschel Specter declares.

And he should know.

Welcome to Shelburne, home of Canada's only whirligig and weather vane festival, set for the weekend of Sept. 20 and 21.

Herschel is one of the people organizing this unusual annual event, along with Wayne Blinkhorn and Dale Clark.

The three are giving me the tour of the town's waterfront, where many of these novel creations are situated.

Wayne tells me there is only one other whirligig festival in North America, down in North Carolina.

"You get mesmerized when you see how they work," he says. "They're so simple yet so complicated."

And he's right. On closer inspection, I see that these colourful whirligigs are actually pieces of folk art, but with a difference.

They all have moving parts linked together by bits of wire and to a propeller. The wind spins

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the propeller, which turns the wire, which makes something move.

Over here, for example, is a little man sawing wood. The more the wind blows, the faster he cuts.

Further along, two gravediggers are busy with their shovels, going at it with gusto.

Another creation even blows bubbles!

And just over there, dominating the waterfront, a large moose named Bruce has more moving parts than the real thing.

It's all about creativity, says Herschel, all about being whimsical and historical.

"One of the reasons people come to the whirligig festival," he observes, "is because they're sick and tired of the phoney stuff they see on TV."

The three men are members of a non-profit volunteer organization called the Shelburne Area Whirligig Society.

"There are all kinds of whirligigs," Dale says when I ask about the origins of these fascinating gadgets.

He tells me they have a long history in Canada and New England, as well as Europe.

The word, not surprisingly, comes from the verb "to whirl" and has been applied to toys dating back centuries. There's even mention of a whirligig affixed to a London tavern back in the 11th century.

Unfortunately, the word has a darker connotation, too.

At one time, says Dale, a whirligig was a punishment device. Miscreants were put in suspended cages and spun around until they were sufficiently contrite or gave up their secrets.

Happily, you won't see recreations of that particular antecedent at this, the second independent festival.

Previously, local whirligiggers were part of Shelburne's Founders' Day celebration, but last year, enthusiasts branched out on their own.

It was a decision whose time had come. The fledgling society's effort attracted more than 80 entries and was voted Best Community Event of 2007 by the Tourism Association of Nova Scotia.

The volunteers are still quietly basking in the glow of that notable achievement.

Herschel, who's a retired engineer, is an American who summers here in Shelburne with his wife. Dale's retired from the Canadian Forces, and Wayne's a retired teacher.

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Of the three, it's Dale who's the actual whirligig whiz. He's fashioned dozens of them out of whatever material might be at hand, including pieces of pine, vinyl siding, even scraps of kindling. His basement is full of his creations.

"They're fascinating," he remarks. "It's a challenge. I've never (made) two the same."

Interestingly, not all whirligigs are created equal. The Shelburne enthusiasts have heard of some measuring five metres and, in the U.S., of one more than 13 metres tall.

"It's truly open-ended," Herschel observes.

The upcoming festival in Shelburne, which includes workshops for young and old alike, is expected to attract more than 1,500 fans from as far away as New York City. In fact, says Wayne, the event is already so popular that some visitors actually plan their vacation around it.

Not only is the event good for the local economy, say the three men, it also helps showcase Shelburne's rich tradition of crafts and also provides a great deal of fun for families.

Herschel sums it all up in one word: "Joyous !"

After what I've just seen, absolutely no argument from me.

Let the whirligigging commence !

Postscript: For more information on the upcoming event, go to WhirligigFestival.com or call 1-902-875-3205.

(pduffy@herald.ca)

Peter Duffy appears Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday.

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