

# Sitting for an artist

## Local artisan brings "Muskoka" to Halton

By BREN CHRISHOLM

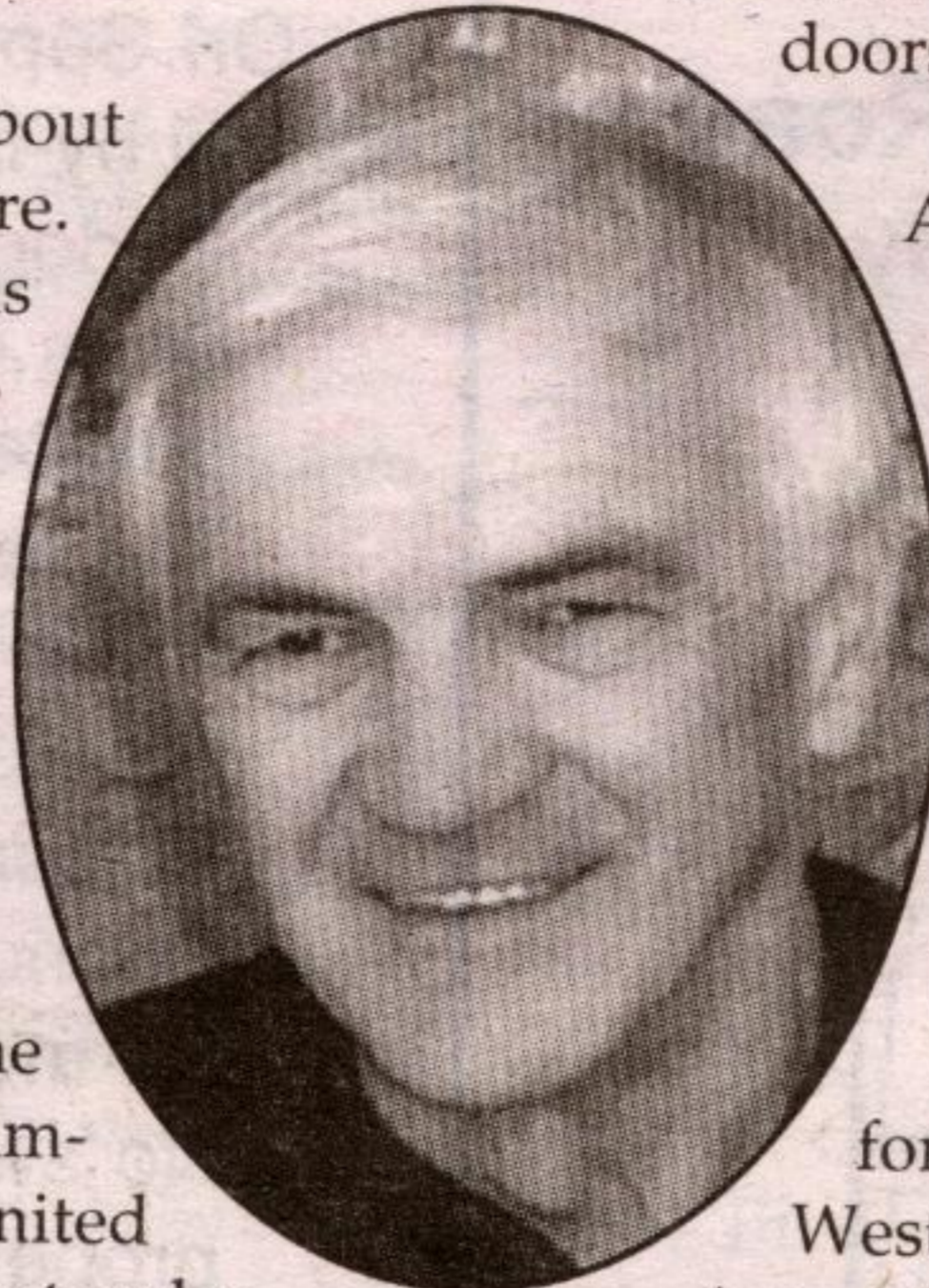
The Adirondack and Muskoka chairs are frequently confused with one another. And it's no wonder since both are wooden in construction; and both symbolize relaxation and the great outdoors.

Ken Keates is an artisan of Muskoka chairs and is passionate about the detailed craftsmanship of these historical pieces of furniture. Woodworking has been part of his life for many years and he has managed to bring this love into something people can use and enjoy.

He knew at a young age that he wanted to get involved in wood working to some capacity so he took the obligatory shop classes offered in late grade school and high school.

By the mid-1970's, he had built his first cottage on Wolf Lake near Midland, Ontario, but it wasn't until just a few years ago that he began building Muskoka chairs, which he liked presenting to friends and family who were about to get married.

Although he dabbled in other projects, his specialty became Muskoka chairs and with it, a certain amount of respect for their humble beginnings. In 1904, they were known as the "Westport" in the United States and were soon dubbed the "Adirondack" by tuberculosis patients who



# the antiquarian

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were being sent in those days to sanatoriums in upstate New York, sitting outdoors for hours in the chairs as part of their "wilderness cure".

Two generations passed and the chair's popularity spread across the Adirondack region with a few changes made along the way.

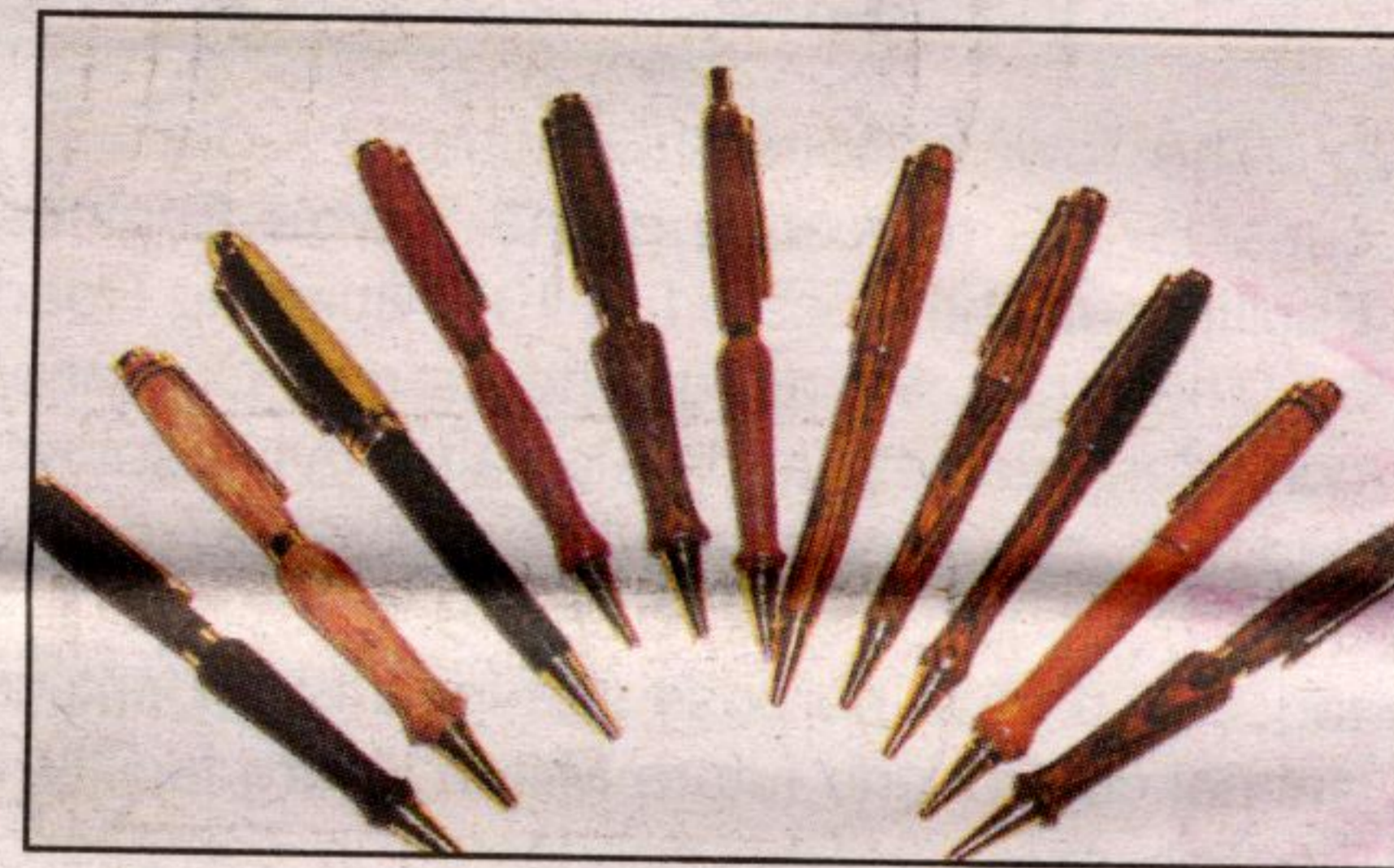
Soon, the chairs crossed the border into Ontario's cottage country, particularly the Muskokas, and the major lakes, servicing the well-to-do that vacationed there. They therefore became known as Muskoka chairs, which evolved into a less square and boxy design than their predecessor, the Adirondack.

"The Muskoka," Ken admits, "is really an improvement on the Adirondack". His chairs virtually sell themselves through word of mouth although requests for his designs do come to him over the Internet.

Ken has lived in an 1863 schoolhouse for 18 years and has transformed his double-garage into a serviceable workshop. Most of the Western Canadian Red Cedar he uses is bought at Leathertown Lumber in Acton. The wood is usually hand-rubbed with tung oil for a luxurious natural weather-resistant finish.

In the last four years, Ken has expanded his repertoire by making "Windsor" Chairs. These are authentic reproductions that were originally made in the 1790's and 1820's. "Compared to the Muskokas," admits Ken, "Windsors are opposite ends of the spectrum because a Muskoka can be made quickly but when you get into the Windsors, you're looking at 10 or 12 days."

Most of his Windsor chairs are sold through people that he knows; because they've seen the chairs and are willing to wait for the fine craftsmanship Ken provides. "The chairs I make are made the same way as 200 years ago with three different kinds of wood-cherry for the legs; pine or basswood for the seats; and red oak for the arms and spindles and bows."



To keep his interest in wood in perpetual high-mode, Ken spends three days a week working at Lee Valley in Burlington, Ontario (a woodworking and gardening tools store). There, he can offer his recommendations as to what oils work best for what woods. "Usually, I suggest 'Cetol' or an exterior Danish oil called 'Deftoil' that we offer here at Lee."

In addition to an already busy schedule, Ken serves as Chair of Heritage Milton, an advisory committee to Town Council on heritage issues. He is also a member of the Town of Milton's Community Services Advisory Committee (CSAC); The Historic Lighting Society of Canada; and, The Tool Group of Canada (preservation of tools and crafts in early Canada).

At age 63, Ken has no intention of slowing down. "I get a great deal of satisfaction using my hands and head."

Ken's handcrafted Muskoka and Windsor Chairs as well as some wooden pens turned from exotic woods will be on display and sale at the E.C. Drury High School (215 Ontario St. South - tel. 905-878-0578) at the Milton Fall Craft Sale on November 20 and 21, 2004.

The Huttonville Lions Club Antique and Craft Show in Brampton, Ontario (e-mail lions@huttonville.com for further information) will also play host to Ken's work on November 27 and 28, 2004.

You can reach Ken at (519) 856-2432 or through his website [www.chairs.ca](http://www.chairs.ca)

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