

Acton's Holy Cow Canoe Company known for producing quality product

By JENNIFER ENRIGHT

Driving north or south along Highway 25 near Acton you'll find a large sign with a stylized cow on it. It might look like some distinctive zany logo for a milk producer, but it's boat production not milk production that's the mainstay of business at the Holy Cow Canoe Company.

The company is hidden away at the end

of a laneway off Highway 25, but it doesn't suffer from a visibility problem, according to Gulam Baloch, Holy Cow's general manager. Canoe and kayak enthusiasts, people who are serious boaters that race regularly, families and recreational boaters, have come to know this company for its well-designed canoes and kayaks and its quality craftsmanship.

What sets the company apart is the careful consideration to detail that goes into the making of each boat, says Baloch, who notes that Holy Cow is known primarily for building lightweight sturdy canoes. As far as boat manufacturers go, the company is relatively small employing six people, but it manages to produce approximately 700 boats a year since boat building continues 12 months of the year. It's different from other boat manufacturers that typically churn out a larger quantity of boats annually. "A lot of companies do mass produce their canoes and they also use various types of machinery to produce them faster," explains Baloch. "On our end, we don't believe in that approach. If you are going to mass produce you're going to cut corners on certain things."

Each canoe, which takes about three days to build, is made out of a variety of materials including Kevlar, a synthetic product manufactured by Dupont that's highly impact resistant as well as being strong and lightweight. Used to make bullet-proof vests as well as heat shields on spacecraft such as the shuttle, Kevlar is widely known as one of the best materials for building canoes. Baloch estimates that about 75 to 80 per cent of the boats made at Holy Cow are constructed out of Kevlar. But it's pricey, so Holy Cow also makes boats out of ultra glass, a less expensive alternative to Kevlar that Baloch describes as an "upgraded version of fibreglass."

The boats are different from the ones that Holy Cow originally produced when the company first opened its doors back in 1978. In those early days Holy Cow was known as Trent Canoe and Kayak. Based in the Kingston area, Trent Canoe and Kayak similar to Holy Cow produced handmade canoes and kayaks, except these vessels were constructed out of cedar strip as opposed to Kevlar or ultra glass.

Over the years, however, as boat builders experimented with new materials the company would move away from wood as the material of choice in favour of fibreglass and finally Kevlar and ultra glass. "There was such a demand for lighter weight materials and better materials that we started making fibreglass boats and then we moved into even lighter weight Kevlar boats."

In the 1990s, partly as a result of the change in materials, the company was rechristened Holy Cow. Customers who were accustomed to lifting heavier fibreglass

canoes found to their delight that Kevlar canoes were considerably lighter. "The first words that people would say when they actually lifted the boats were Holy Cow and sometimes something else, but we really couldn't use that."

Changes also occurred in other aspects of the business as well. The company relocated a number of times first from Kingston to Mississauga and then to Halton Region, where it opened an office in Milton and finally two years ago at its present location in Acton. Baloch says Halton was considered a more cost effective location to run a business. But there have been other benefits as well. He admits that you'll find the odd aggressive driver even in north Halton, but for the most part the pace is more leisurely, a welcome change from the frenetic lifestyle in the city. When people find their way to the Holy Cow Canoe Company they're usually more relaxed, says Baloch, who notes that Holy Cow's business often comes from referrals. People hear about the company from a friend or relative and they decide to pay a visit.

The Holy Cow Canoe Company is located just south of Acton at 12590 Hwy 25 next to the Khalsa service station. People can contact the company at 519-853-9729 or at info@holycowcanoe.com. Information about Holy Cow is also available at the company website www.holycowcanoe.com.



PHOTO BY JENNIFER ENRIGHT

Holy Cow Canoe company employees Gulam Baloch (left) and Kalan Maine display one of the canoes under construction at Holy Cow's offices in Acton.

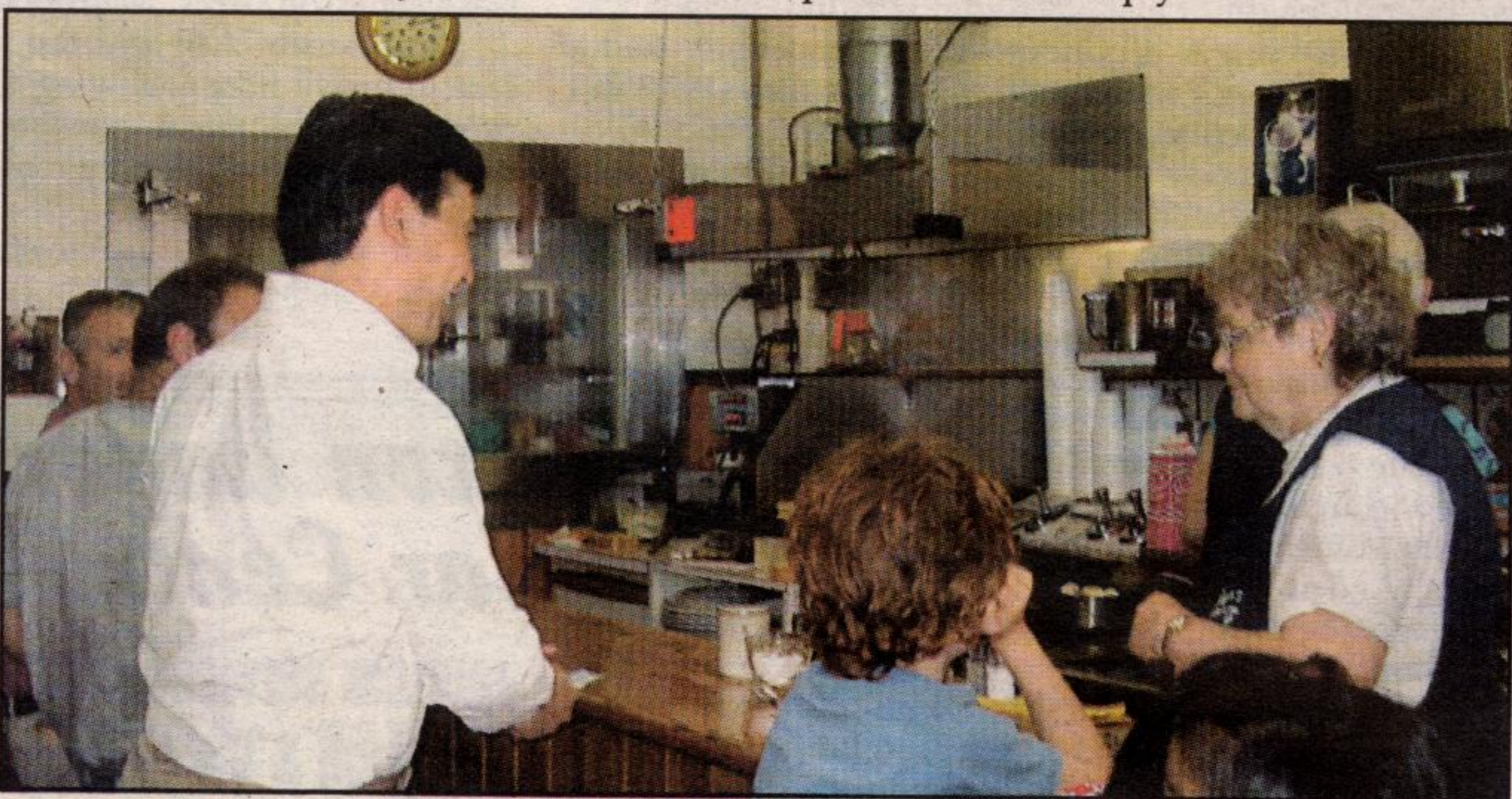
Mike Chong, his rookie year

STORY AND PHOTO BY STEPHEN BAKER

It's hot and muggy on Erin's Main Street and just gone noon when I catch up with MP Mike Chong at Steen's Dairy. For those of us numbed by the plastic-bright décor of the fast food chains, Steen's is a time warp back to the fifties; it's monochrome to MacFastfoods neon yellow. There's a comfort to perching on stools that have seen better days, as if the scarred leather links us through the polishing of previous patrons to the days of our boyhood. This is one of Mike's regular lunchtime haunts, and the steady stream of customers keep up an easy banter with the Fergus born MP. Cheeseburgers are the order of the day and we watch as Marie Maltby cooks them in way she's always done for the last 30 years.

A lot has happened to Mike over the last year, his rookie year in politics. He served on the Industry Committee, which has worked on four major pieces of legislation, Bill C37 Changes to Competition Act, Bill C21 that governs the framework of not-for-profits, and Bill S18 that will allow the release of census data after 92 years to enable researchers to study anthropological trends. As well the committee has produced legislation to restrict annoying telephone marketing, referred to as the 'Do not call list'. Add constituency business each weekend, French immersion classes, and a newborn son and you get a feel for the workload.

Mike's face lights up when he talks about his family, and you can see what is important in his life. His father, a physician, came to Canada from Hong Kong in 1952 and attended the University of Manitoba. Classes by day, washing dishes by night and sleeping in his car was the order of the day. Dr Chong met and married Mike's mother, a Dutch born nurse, in Kingston in 1966. Mike lost his mother in a car accident in 1978 when he was just five. Hauntingly his father died twenty years later in a car crash at the exact same intersection on Highway 6. Asked what his parents would have thought of his move into politics, Mike is quiet for a moment. "My Dad would have been proud" came the reply.



Mike Chong settling up his lunch bill with Marie Maltby at Steen's Dairy in Erin.

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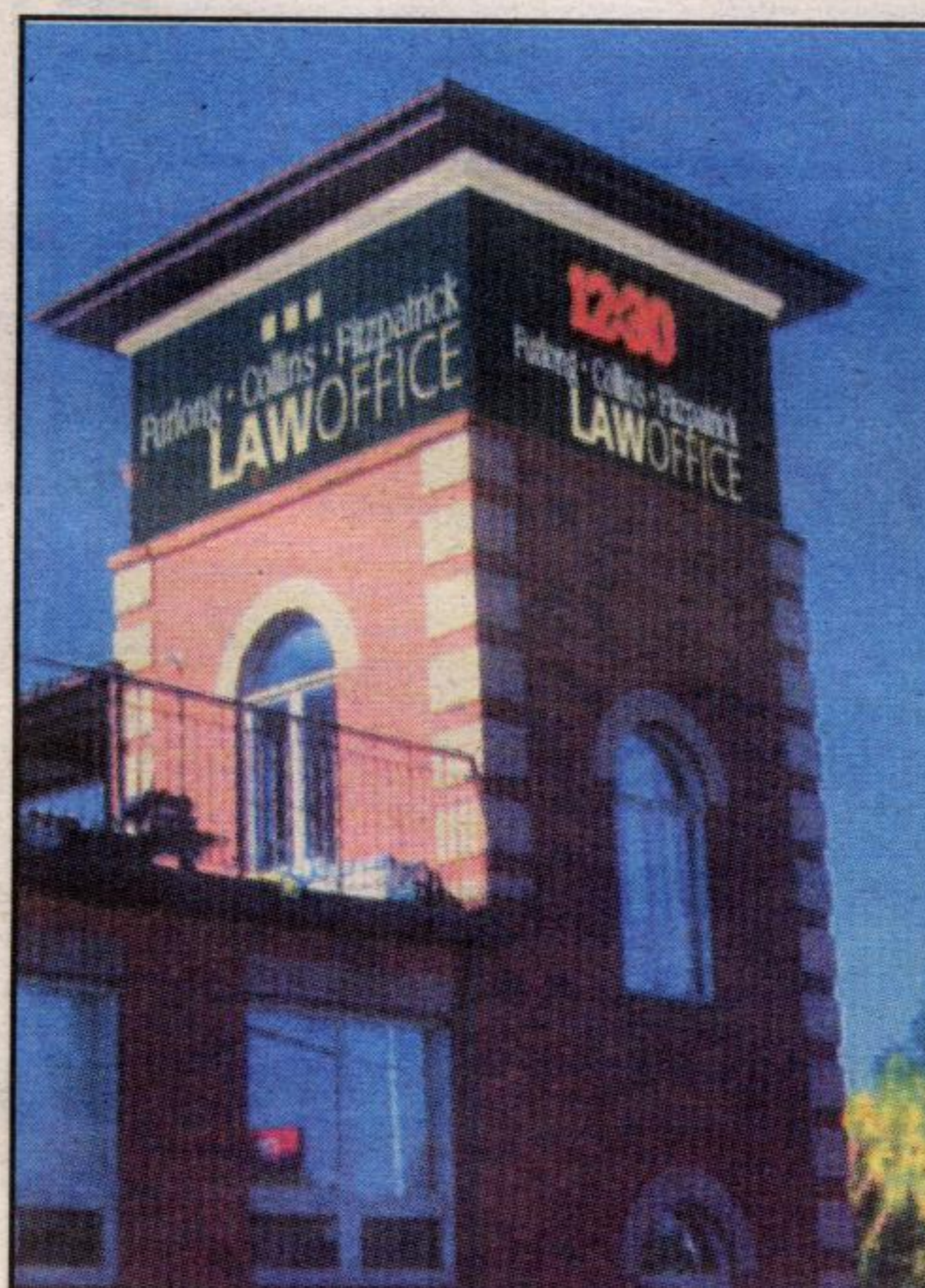
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