

Saddlemaker keeps old art alive in Hill

By Denise Romberg

RICHMOND HILL—Saddle making is one of those old, almost lost arts that left with the cowboys.

But Bruce Bird, a Richmond Hill saddlemaker, thinks he's more or less got the market cornered on Western saddle wear. In York region, an area with more horses per square mile than people, that amounts to quite a market.

He's had several propositions for joint business ventures, but the tall, slim, 23-year-old man wanted a business of his own.

According to Bird, saddle making is quite a complicated art involving some 60 major steps and 20 minor ones, beginning with cutting the leather from a pattern and shaping the stirrup leathers.

Oddly enough, the modern saddlemaker has to be fashion-conscious too.

"The use to which the saddle is put, determines the style," Bird explained. "Since we've passed the day of the long all-day, everyday ride, and most of our horses probably wouldn't stand up during such an excursion, the modern saddle customer is looking for comfort and a little something extra to impress the judges in a show ring."

But there are limits to how fancy Bird will make his saddles. He recounts a story about a woman who wanted to order a saddle with ornate silver trimming all over the seat and skirt.

"No way", says Bird, "that I'll do that. It looks awful. A saddle has to look right."

Two-week task

Looking right and wearing well are exactly his priorities in building new saddles, a task that takes him at least 14 working days but often ends up as more when customers ask for belts and chaps (leg leathers pronounced shaps) as well.

Bird, a native of Alberta, has spent most of his life in Ontario. Two years ago he took off for Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania where the craft of saddle-making is taught at none other than, The Saddle School.

A year later he came back to Richmond Hill to open a Yonge Street shop that smells a lot like a fine leather boutique. The hides, rolled in bales at the front of his second storey workshop,



Bruce Bird ...skilled, fashion conscious craftsman

immediately attract your sensory functions. Perched on a makeshift horse at the back is a newly-crafted Murray-carved, Mother Hubbard — that's the saddle.

Bird swears by his saddles but they still don't hold a candle to Bird's own saddle, a weather beaten show piece that he says was made in early 1920s.

His business has had its problems too. One of the major difficulties is buying his supplies which to now, he has been purchasing on monthly trips to the

eastern United States.

"Most of the foundries in Canada make supplies for shoes and harness, Bird explains, "but not for saddles."

Each saddle takes one cowhide of leather and can sell anywhere from \$500 to \$1,500 depending on the customized additions.

"One problem with using that much leather, is trying to keep the weight down."

"I guess you might say I'm a weight-watcher", he added.

Sale of fairground legality questioned

MARKHAM—The save-the-fairgrounds group is still checking into the legality of the sale of the Markham fairgrounds.

Dr. Jack Luftman, head of the citizens' group, said he was to meet late Tuesday with the group's lawyer.

"I do not know if I will be saying anything afterwards. We are not playing all our cards."

The 33 acre fairground site was sold by the Markham and East York agricultural society for \$2.1 million because it is no longer large enough to handle the annual Markham fair.

Permission for the sale had to be obtained from the provincial government. The group is still checking to see if permission was obtained in the proper form.

In the town staff report on the

fairgrounds issue, Markham Solicitor Ronald King said he discussed the matter with Donald Hindson, the fair board's lawyer, "and he advises that consent from the ministry was obtained in accordance with statutory requirements."

King did not think the town had the power to check into the matter itself, even though the town later bought 3.34 acres of the same property for \$275,000, and obtained a deed for an additional 2.56 acres.

The town also paid for a \$50,000 extension to the original building.

Rounded out holdings

The town purchased an additional acre from Empire Lathing for \$125,000

at the corner from Empire Lathing to round out its holdings.

Luftman thinks this price was ridiculous, because the location, contour and lack of access to the land made it useless. He is hoping the group will have enough good arguments without resorting to legal ones.

The group has a meeting scheduled later this week with the town planning committee.

He feels the town has no obligation to make a zoning change but only to give one due consideration. The developer, Ira Young and Associates, wants to put housing on the site.

Luftman says this use is of no use to the town.

At the same time, he says it is a wrong impression that his group wants the whole of the fairgrounds to remain open space. Some commercial, some residential, and some open space might be planned, he said.

"The issue is still the same. If it is rezoned it should be of some use to the town."

Councillor Peter Grosskurth felt the town had an obligation to rezone, going back to the time in 1973 that the fair-board asked it to entertain an amendment that would allow development.

Increase in value
The board needed the money from the sale to rebuild on a larger site elsewhere and the rezoning would make the land more valuable.

Grosskurth was the only councillor to vote against the purchase of part of the property from the developer.

"Not because I was against it, but I thought we could have made a better deal," he said.

"We were like the middle card in a deck; without us, the whole thing would have fallen apart."

Hill firemen learn advanced first aid

RICHMOND HILL — The 14-man Richmond Hill fire department has become the second in the province to complete an advanced first aid course offered by St. John's Ambulance.

Following the lead of the Aurora firefighters, Richmond Hill's squad took the 20-hour course to become more adept at handling all types of emergencies.

Harry Hammond, Central Ontario regional manager of St. John's

Ambulance, said the firemen were trained in "everything from oxygen therapy to use of hospital sterile redressing trays."

"They got everything, and a little more than, the regular ambulance attendants get."

The advanced course is offered to those who have already completed the standard first aid program.

The local firemen will receive certificates in a ceremony at the fire department next Tuesday at 7:30 p.m.

Construction of pool starts

BUTTONVILLE — Construction will start immediately on the swimming pool and fitness centre at Markham Centennial Arena.

The contract for \$1,530,800 was signed Thursday by the town and Newtown Construction Ltd., Mayor Tony Roman announced.

The project is being financed through Wintario, public subscriptions, provincial grants and the town.

It will be an addition to the existing building on Conc. 7 at the edge of the old town of Markham.

The project includes an addition to the existing arena lobby and second floor community hall, an indoor pool, as well as a fitness centre with an exercise room, sauna and whirlpool facilities and three squash courts.

A special grant from the province of Ontario will provide \$45,000 for the installation of an elevator, to help handicapped people get to the second floor.

Grant to library

History files expanded

RICHMOND HILL — The local history collection at Richmond Hill public library is soon to be expanded, thanks to a \$1,383 Wintario grant recently awarded by the ministry of culture and recreation.

The grant will be used for reproduction of historical records and microfilm copies of The Liberal, The Banner, York Herald and Newmarket Era.

The library also received \$2,715 in Wintario funds toward the purchase of a microfilm reader printer. The library will bear the remaining cost of the

equipment on a 50-50 basis.

At present, the library has a small microfilm reader but it is of limited use without print-out facilities. The new machine will enable patrons not only to scan microfilm but also to print copies of the original.

The reader-printer is expected to be available for use by the latter part of the month, and there will be a small service charge for copying privileges.

The grant for expansion of the history collection comes in recognition of an increasing desire among many to learn

more about the past life of our community.

Local newspapers, in addition to the reproduction of diaries, scrapbooks, school minutes and registers, will allow many more patrons ready access to these records of our heritage.

The Richmond Hill history program was planned in co-operation with the Markham public library, which received a Wintario grant for similar purposes.

Land division committee rejects agriculture code

NEWMARKET—A provincial agricultural code, which attempts to sort out conflicts between farm and non-farm use in matters of land severances, was turned down by York regional land division committee when the code was presented last week.

Ministry of agriculture representative, Allen Wall, told the committee the code could become law if municipalities included it in their

bylaws. He said the code tried to prevent air and water pollution by prohibiting their growth past the land's ability to take in manure produced by the farm.

The planning committee, which referred the code to York region staff for study, told Wall farmers who suddenly found a subdivision near them would suffer, as they wouldn't be able to enlarge their farms.

'Stolen' cheques turn up

RICHMOND HILL—It turns out \$36,000 in cheques reported stolen from a mailbox last week weren't stolen at all.

Oskar Kinzler, president of Professional Bowling Ltd., 360 Enford Rd., says all the cheques arrived safely at their destinations.

York Regional Police had the company stop payment on the cheques when a public mailbox at Industrial and Enford Roads was found open and the letters scattered around.

The cheques must have earlier been safely cleared from the mailbox and taken to the post office, Kinzler said.

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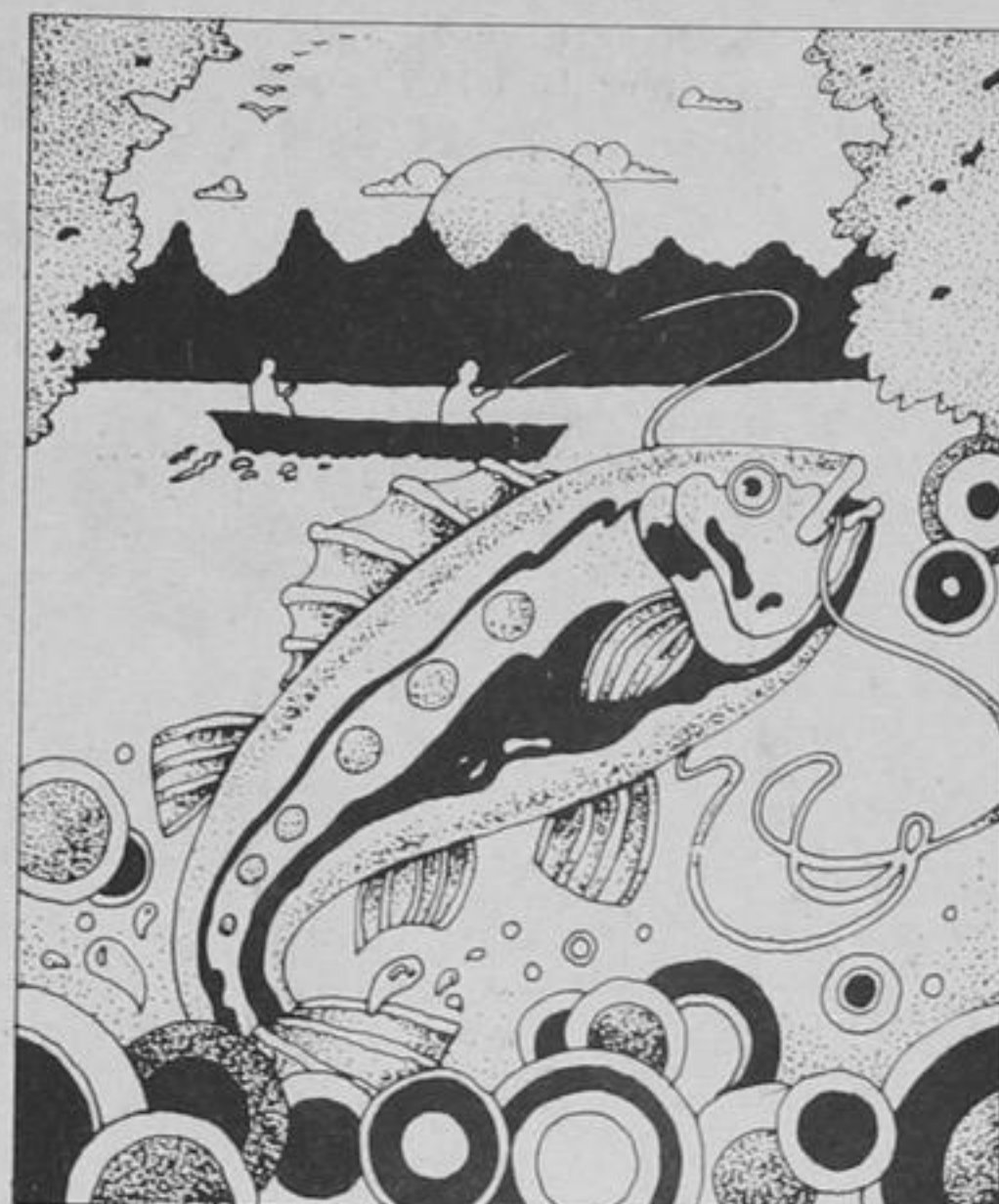
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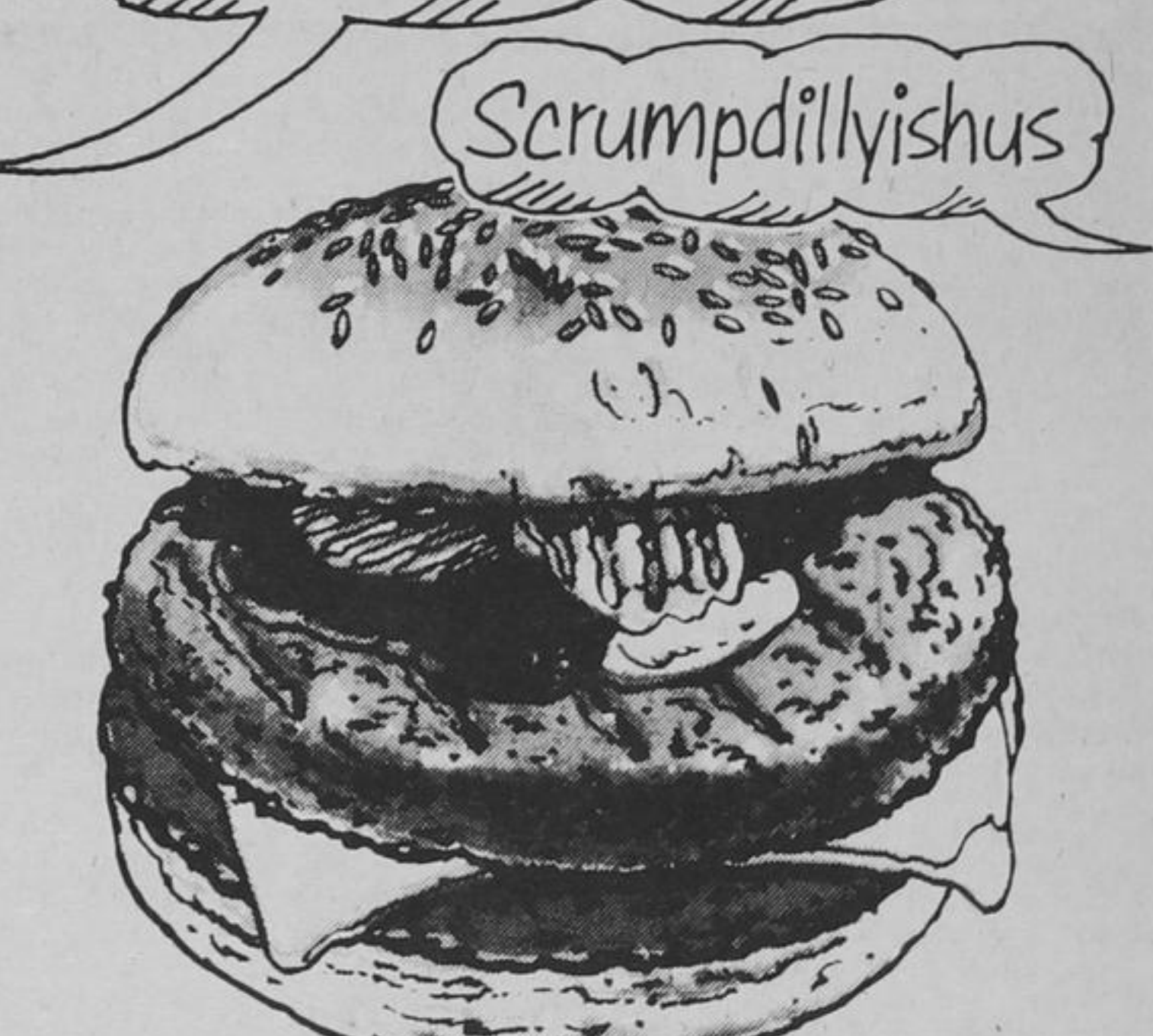
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