

Ski builds a surfing canoe  
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North Hawaii News - June 2007

Little by little, the huge log under the canoe shed at Mauna Lani Resort beach takes the shape of a *wa'a* [canoe]. The koa log, weighing over 300 pounds was brought to the current site in May to be made into a 27-foot canoe that seats four.

Every Tuesday and Thursday from 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m., canoe-builder Ski Kwiatkowski slowly chips away at the canoe using only hand tools that he himself has crafted. "If ancient Hawaiians had chainsaws, there would be a lot more canoes around today," Ski said laughing.

Ski helped to refurbish the canoe shed he works under, re-thatching the *hale* at Keawanui Landing to house the current project. At one time, it is said that King Kamehameha I had a canoe landing and small landing at Keawanui Bay. With a view of the ocean on both ends of the *hale* and tradewinds blowing through it, Ski said, "This is the best office in the world, but don't tell anybody."

Starting with a preliminary shape, Ski said the log will get cut down. The underside of the canoe will take six months to shape; the inside will take about a year. Lines are drawn where rounding off the bottom occurs, and much of this is done by instinct, or at the very least, by guessing as Ski put it. "We guess where the water line is, about a third of the canoe down, and then we begin to sculpt the bottom for shape."

Ski predicts the canoe will take about two and a half years to complete. "Many of my visitors can't comprehend spending that amount of time on a project like this," Ski said of the tourists and locals alike who stop by to talk story. Handing his visitors an adze, he gives everyone a chance to chip at the log, just to get a feel of what it's like. "They get to see how easily the tool cuts, but they still think two years is a long time. I say, 'Sit down, relax, this is Hawaii...'"

Part of the reason for the length of time is that with each chip of wood, the canoe dries slowly. If a canoe is carved too quickly, said Ski, it can dry into an odd shape. After it is finished, the canoe should weigh in at 270 pounds. "This canoe is going to be perfect for playing and surfing the waves," Ski said, "Even more fun than actual surfing, you can ride the curl with the *okole* [end of the canoe] and you can get going pretty fast." He added that it will not be a racing canoe.

Working on the canoe with only hand tools (vs. power tools like chain saws and sanders,) has its advantages, Ski said. One is that there's less likelihood of making a mistake in the wood as can easily happen when using a chainsaw. As Ski explained, "It's easy to cut *pukas* in the log with a chainsaw, then you probably have to fix it using glue and more wood." Another advantage is that chipping away slowly at the canoe with hand tools is much quieter and more peaceful. "With every chip that comes off the canoe, I understand the process," Ski said, "I'll have a deep understanding when I'm done."

By developing a kind of rhythm to his work, Ski said he can “get a feel” for what the wood is doing. The grain in koa is *kapakahi* or unpredictable, and he pointed to certain large knots in the wood that need to be chipped at in a vertical fashion as opposed to a horizontal one. “A chainsaw cannot go with the grain,” Ski said. Working the wood this way “gives me an idea of what the ancients had to work with, and I become more introspective,” Ski added.

The tools Ski works with are made from recycled products he created himself. One of his many interests (which include the study of petroglyphs, turning wood bowls, making canoe paddles and sculpting furniture,) has been the recreation of ancient Hawaiian weapons. Using that knowledge, Ski carved the adze handles of discarded wood to fit his hand and grip perfectly, some of the handles showing signs of having been driftwood at one time. The blades are very sharp, crafted of “spring steel” from the springs of cars. Using sennit to attach the blade to the handle, the tool proves to be strong and sturdy. At the end of his day’s work, Ski stores each adze blade carefully into cardboard covers.

Ski considers himself lucky to have been at the right place at the time. He learned to carve canoes by working and talking with some of the master canoe builders, both here in Hawaii and also in Tahiti and Rarotonga. “Every time I came in contact with a canoe maker, I would talk story,” he said, “and every time, I came away learning something.” Ski spent six months refurbishing the canoe that sits at the Mauna Lani Resort atrium, saying it used to hang from the ceiling and visitors could only see the underside of it.

Building a *halau* to house the canoe on the floor of the atrium Ski said, “Now they can appreciate the inside of it as well.” By refurbishing the 17-foot, 200 pound canoe, made by Wrighto Bowman at Bishop Museum in Honolulu, Ski said he came to understand what the builder had done. “I got kind of attached to that canoe, whether psychological or physical, I got attached.”

He names Manny Vincent as someone he’s learned a lot about canoe carving from, as well as John Manu of Kona, who showed him how to shape a canoe and how it functions. “He [John Manu] showed me how to understand water displacement, and how a cross section should look like an *ipu* [gourd],” Ski said. “A canoe with straight sides, you can push down too easy.” He will eventually use calipers to measure the thickness of the sides, carving the top of the canoe to a half-inch thick, while the bottom will be over an inch thick. Twelve *pepeiao* [comb cleats for canoe seats] will be carved into the insides, each at the same height, so that when people are in it, they sit evenly. “These all add to the elements of the canoe design that I have to work around,” Ski said.

Ski wants the building of this *wa’a* to be a learning experience for everyone, not just tourists. He has put the word out to the local schools to bring their students down to the site when he is working and he is anxious to share his knowledge. “Anybody who has an opportunity to make a canoe should go for it,” Ski said.

