

# Craftsman finds beauty in knots, burls

By HARVEY CURRELL  
Special to The Sun

King Harald and Queen Sonja of Norway came to Muskoka early this year to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the founding of Little Norway, where young Norwegians escapees trained as aircrew to fight the Nazis in World War II.

When Muskoka Regional Government officials met to decide who should create a unique souvenir gift for the Royal couple, somebody suggested Don Thur, of Utterson.

On his wood lathe, Thur, a bearded jovial giant, makes one-of-a-kind bowls from burls cut from hardwood logs that have been submerged in deep ice-cold lakes and rivers for more than 100 years.

Divers for a firm called the Antique Timber Company search for the long-lost sunken logs, and raise and dry them to be sawn into flooring and furniture hardwood. When they find logs with big burls or lumps on them, they cut these out and send them to Thur.

From one such yellow-birch log, slowly and carefully dried, Thur made a lovely close-grained bowl and had the pleasure of presenting it personally to the Norwegian King and Queen with a written history of the tree and log from which it was derived.

If you go to visit Thur, his wife, Mary and their dog, Burl, at their home and gallery on Old Muskoka



— Mary Thur photo

**DON THUR with a yellow-birch burl harvested in the Muskoka area.**

Rd. near Bracebridge, you'll see piles of burls, some fascinating wood creations and learn a lot about trees and early lumbermen.

Most of the salvaged hardwood trees from which Thur makes his bowls, started growing before Samuel de Champlain arrived in

the 1600s following a catastrophic forest fire. Because they crowded closely together, competing for sunlight, the trees that took root after the fire grew very slowly, producing tightly grained wood.

Three hundred years later, beginning in the 1860s, pioneer lum-

bermen cut the mature old-growth trees. Hardwood logs were highly prized but difficult to move down rivers because they're too heavy to float. Unless dried for a year, they had to be supported on rafts and up to 40% were lost and sank in rapids or lake storms.

Preserved for a century and more in cold water, they're now being recovered and made into beautifully grained furniture, flooring — and Don Thur bowls.

Born to a fourth-generation Canadian lumbering family, Thur grew up at Pembroke, in the Ottawa Valley, and attended the old Ontario Forest Ranger School at Dorset. In 1971 he joined the Canadian Penitentiary Service, not as a prison guard but a forestry technician.

He worked for 31 years at Beaver Creek Correctional Camp in Muskoka as a forestry and community service officer, organizing and supervising forestry work projects for prisoners. He retired in 2001.

His hobby was woodworking. In 1995 he bought a second-hand wood lathe for \$150, taught himself to use it, developed wood-turning skills and finally ended up with a professional-grade lathe in 1999.

His bowls have since become prized through Muskoka and are sold and displayed at five galleries. The most expensive are those made from salvaged sunken logs but he also produces 40% from burls on recently cut hardwoods.

Burls are lumps or irregular

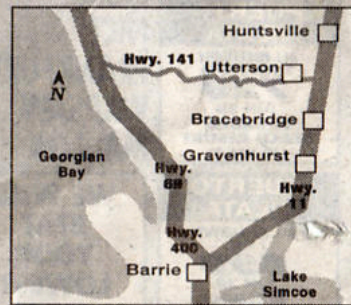
growths on trees, with curious twisted grains; they're something like warts or benign tumours.

With each salvaged-log bowl, Thur provides a biography sheet. Recovered sunken logs usually bear lumber-company brands or ownership marks. Old books depict the marks and give names and histories of the companies.

Bowls in the Knots and Burls to Bowls Gallery go from \$75 to \$1,500 for really big spectacular items.

You can visit Don almost any summer day but call first (705-365-3454) to make sure he's there. For more information, log onto [www.knotsburls.com](http://www.knotsburls.com).

## UTTERSON



To get there, take Hwy. 11 north past Gravenhurst and Bracebridge to Stephenson Rd., Muskoka Road 4. Go left (west) 1 km to Old Muskoka Rd. and go left (south) on this road to No. 3077 on the left.