

Napoleon Sanford - **Master Boat Builder** **in the** **Carib Territory**

His real name is Emmanuel Sanford, but he is more popularly known as Napoleon. Some people also call him “Betto.”

Apart from being a master canoe builder, he is also a farmer and a fisherman. He grows passion fruit, dasheen and plantain, among other crops. He was a banana farmer for many years.

He lives in Salybia in the Carib Territory, close to the Carib Council Office, with his wife and three children.

Napoleon Sanford describes canoe building as very hard work. He says you need guts to be able to make a boat. He adds that when you cut a tree, you wonder how you’re going to get a boat out of it. Basically, he says, it’s a tough job.

Sanford started building boats in 1979. He says he learnt from his father at the age of nine, and it was mainly through observation. His father died in 1974. Sanford says that there are over thirty boat-builders in the Carib Territory.

He describes the steps involved in canoe

making as follows:

- (i.) logging of the tree, (ii.) removal of the “stomach” of the tree, (iii.) drawing of the boat, (iv.) digging out of the boat, (v.) shaping the outside of the boat, (vi.) dressing the inside of the boat, (vii.) hauling of the boat from the “bush” to the Carib Territory, (viii.) firing and opening of the boat and (ix.) placing the ribs of the boat.

The tools and equipment involved in the boat-making process are chain-saw, axe, adze, hatchet, hammer, square, black line and nails.

Sanford says that it takes about three months to build a boat. On an average, he goes into the bush to work on the boat about two to three times a week. Sometimes he might go only



once a week. He adds that you cannot make a boat under rain, so he usually waits for the dry weather.

In setting out to the mountains or the “bush” to build a boat, he leaves early in the morning. He says that you have to go for the large trees. You can sometimes get three boats out of one tree, but usually you get two from a tree.

Sanford says that he usually looks for a tall round tree with a thick trunk from which you can get at least two boats. He says that you have to try to make sure that the tree is not hollow. He usually knocks the tree to see whether it is hollow or not. When the roots of the tree are very spread out, there is a strong possibility that the tree could be hollow.

According to Sanford, the gommier is the best wood to make boats. Not only is the wood buoyant, but it is also wet, green and dry all at the same time.

Long ago, Sanford says, the Caribs would use an axe to cut the tree. Nowadays, however, he uses a chainsaw. He logs the tree – cuts it to the length he wants – and then splits the log in two. He then begins to dig out the “stomach” of the tree. In digging out the boat from the tree trunk, the excess wood is put aside to make posts and boards. He says that digging out the stomach of the tree has to be done proportionately, so that the boat will be well-balanced. He uses the adze to clean out the inside of the boat.

The sides of the boat can be either $\frac{1}{2}$ inch, $\frac{3}{8}$ inch or 1 inch thick. The kiln, or bottom of the boat, should be at least $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches wide. The lengths of boats can vary from 10 feet to 60 feet; the longest boat that Sanford has made is 27 feet long.

After he has cleaned out the stomach of the boat, Sanford then shapes the outside. He makes holes at both ends of the boat in order to haul the boat from the bush to the Carib Territory itself. He says that it takes nine to



thirteen men to haul the boat to the Territory, and that the hauling takes about a day. Once the boat is brought to the Carib Territory, he does some finishing work on both the inside and outside of the boat.

The next phase toward the boat's completion is a process to open it out. Sanford places the boat on two stones so that it is held up off the ground. He places sticks on either side of the boat to hold it up, and then packs the inside with stones. Finally, he pours water inside the boat.

For one or two weeks after that, he will continue to wet the boat every morning. After that period, he places wood on either side of the boat and lights a fire on both sides. Sanford says that it is important during the "firing" of the boat that the wood is kept wet, so that the boat itself does not catch fire. As a result of this process, the boat opens up about four to five inches wider.

Following the firing process, Sanford adds the ribs on the inside of the boat. The ribs are made out of white cedar, or bwa tan, or the roots from the bwa wiviere. He also attaches the oar holders and makes the oars for the boat.

Sanford says that most of the boats made in the Carib Territory are sold locally to persons who use them for fishing. He says now and then boats are sold for exhibitions, and as museum pieces. He has sold boats that were taken to St. Martin, Martinique, Antigua, Canada and Europe. He normally sells one boat per year, but sometimes sells as many as three in a year.

