

'He went out on top;' Woodworking museum founder had love for music

April 17, 2008 By Jennifer Pritchett Whig-Standard Staff Writer Few people get to leave this world while doing an activity they truly love. But the family of Alexander (Sandy) MacLachlan can take comfort in the knowledge that the former Kingston businessman and founder of the MacLachlan Woodworking Museum spent his last conscious moments on earth playing his favourite instrument, the bagpipe. At 83, MacLachlan died on Tuesday, three weeks after he suffered a stroke while practising the bagpipe just moments before he was to play at a funeral in Toronto. “He did not get to play, but he died doing what he wanted to do – he went out on top,” said his son Ross MacLachlan. But his love of the bagpipe was but one of the many passions MacLachlan, a man described as having a great zest for life, enjoyed throughout his long and happy life. A man of accomplishment and local fame, MacLachlan is perhaps best known for founding the MacLachlan Woodworking Museum, located at the City of Kingston’s Grass Creek Park on Highway 2. The museum is situated inside an old log house from the Ottawa Valley area that MacLachlan saved from demolition in the 1960s. He bought the lumber for the house and reconstructed it on his family-business property, MacLachlan Lumber, when it was located on Princess Street near Portsmouth Avenue. He then turned the log house into a museum that displayed pioneering tools related to woodworking and offered free tours to local schools. When MacLachlan Lumber went out of business in 1981, MacLachlan set about to save the museum. That year, the former Pittsburgh Township took ownership of the log house and moved it out to Grass Creek Park. The following year, the MacLachlan Woodworking Museum opened. Twenty-six years later, the museum continues to attract as many as 12,000 visitors each year. It’s the only museum of its kind in Canada and has one of the largest collections of wood plane tools in North America. Local historian Jennifer McKendry said MacLachlan is responsible for preserving a vital part of the this area’s craftsman heritage. “I think its importance lies in emphasizing the link between heritage and hands-on skill so that you have a tribute to the craftsmen who built the buildings,” she said. “There’s always a fair amount of prestige offered to the architect or the engineer, but they in effect, did not build the building. It was the woodworker, the stone mason, the carpenter who worked with his hands.” The museum also offers a tangible way to teach the younger generations about the significance of this heritage, she said. “It means more to them and to see how it’s used in a way they can handle and feel, as opposed to being told things like ‘heritage is good,’” she said. McKendry also served with MacLachlan on the City of Kingston’s former municipal heritage committee. “He was quite knowledgeable about early buildings and he was part of the Frontenac Heritage Foundation,” said McKendry. “He was also a very kind, supportive. He was a nice person to know. I really liked him.” MacLachlan’s younger brother, Francis, describes him as an avid outdoorsman who enjoyed their summers at the family cottage, which was located on the property where MacLachlan built his retirement home along Highway 2, roughly two kilometres from Grass Creek Park. Sandy MacLachlan enjoyed sailing, canoeing, camping and hiking, as well as photography. The MacLachlan brothers and their younger sister, Katharine, spent the bulk of their childhood years in Kingston with the exception of six years in Ottawa. The two brothers were close. The elder MacLachlan had a pet name for his younger sibling, Francis, calling him “sap.” Francis MacLachlan describes his brother as “a great joiner of things.” “In Ottawa, he had four different uniforms for four different nights of the week – Boy

Scouts, Army Cadets, Sea Cadets and he was in the Reserve Army in the Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders, which is where he learned to play the bagpipes," he said. During the Second World War, MacLachlan was just old enough to work as a radar officer aboard the Tribal-class destroyer H.M.C.S. Huron on the North Atlantic convoys, including one to Russia. After the war, he attended Queen's University, where he graduated with a degree in electrical engineering. One of his first jobs was a stint in Northern Ontario for Ontario Hydro, during which time he met his wife, Ruth, in North Bay. The two married and had three children, Nancy, Jim and Ross. MacLachlan's main occupation was a lumber dealer. He took over the family business, MacLachlan Lumber, from his father. He had an interest in the reconstruction of a number of old log houses, of which one became the MacLachlan Woodworking Museum and another became a cabin for the Boy Scouts of Canada at their former site at Rock Dunder on the Rideau Canal system. In 1981, MacLachlan and his wife, Ruth, set up a bed-and-breakfast network for Kingston and continued to accept visitors until two or three years ago. In 1995, he completed a beautiful log home and coachhouse, where he spent his retirement years. He also taught part time at Queen's, where he instructed first-year engineering students and helped organize high school visits to the university. "He was a hard worker and I know one says that about a lot of people, but it's particularly true in that everything he did, he did with vigour and with thoroughness," said Francis MacLachlan. "He'd sink his teeth into things and wouldn't let go." He also described his brother as someone who had a good sense of humour. "He liked to tell you rather corny jokes that he had picked up somewhere," he said. He was an active member of St. Margaret's United Church, a member of the H.M.C.S. Huron Association, the H.M.C.S. Cataraqui Association and the Clan Lachlan Society. He also remained an active member of the MacLachlan Woodworking Museum committee as its vice-chairman until the day he died. Edward Grenda, chairman of the committee, said MacLachlan's passing will leave a large gap in the expertise at the museum. "He was a delight to work with ... he had a perspective on wood and woodworking which I think was second to none, as far as I was concerned, with regard to his expertise and familiarity with the way wood can be and had been used," he said. "His contributions were always valuable. He had a perceptive take on the matters that cropped up as we dealt with the operations of the museum." Grenda said it's unfortunate that MacLachlan won't be able to see an intricate new floor made from various different types of wood in the museum. MacLachlan is survived by his wife, Ruth, his children Nancy, Jim and Ross, as well as his grandchildren, Robert, Colin, Fiona, Laura and Elspeth. Funeral arrangements, which have not yet been announced, are expected to be held next week at St. Margaret's United Church in Kingston. jpritchett@thewhig.com