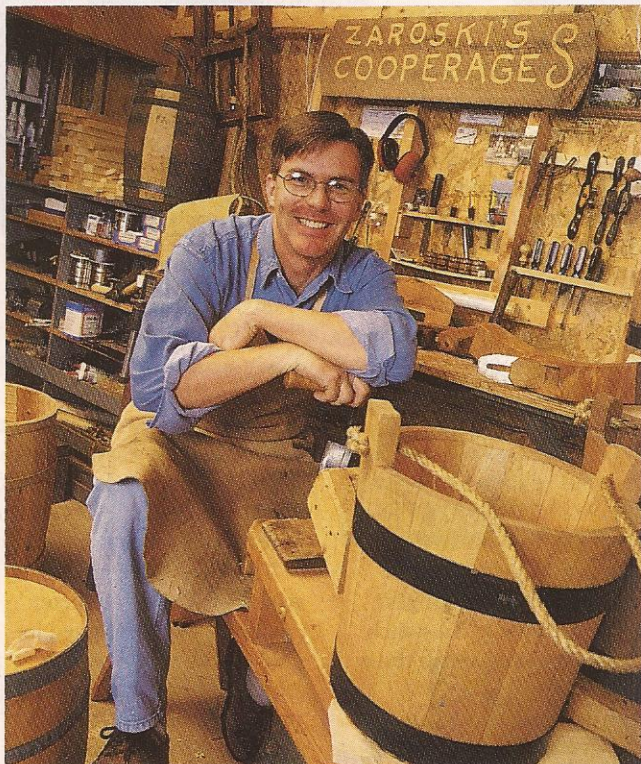


The Cooper

Rolling out the barrels, one at a time BY PAUL JAY



IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY WILL FILM: Maple, Ont., cooper Dan Zaroski's buckets will soon appear in an Antonio Banderas movie

WHEN THE ANTONIO Banderas film *The 13th Warrior* comes out in theatres in January, you can be sure high school teacher and cooper Dan Zaroski will be one of the first in line. It's not that he's a big Banderas fan, or that he's anxious to see the storyline of 10th century Vikings. The high school teacher and part-time cooper will be looking at the buckets in the background. His buckets.

Zaroski has been coopering for 18 years, impressive given he is only 34 years old. But his big break came in April of 1997 when Hollywood called. They needed 20 buckets and tubs constructed as props.

"The buckets they wanted were very unusual—they had a 16" bottom and 14" top, and they couldn't find anybody to custom make these," he says. Since most large cooperages are done by machine, such a small order was impossible. And the authentic touches they wanted (for example, using rusty hoops) made the order unenticing for purists. When a coopering acquaintance in the U.S. received a call from the set designers, he recommended Zaroski for the job.

It was an unusual experience for Zaroski to produce aesthetically pleasing but ultimately inferior buckets in a rush job for a film, because

if any profession calls for quality, patience and perfection, it is coopering.

Zaroski first learned the craft in Grade 10 while working at Old Fort William near Thunder Bay, Ont. He dressed in costume at the cooperage and instructed tourists while the cooper-in-residence plied his trade. After seven summers at the fort, Zaroski had a new hobby, and set about collecting the tools of the trade.

He needed draw knives and a jointer (to shape the wooden staves to the curve of the barrel), truss hoops (to hold the staves in place while a dry fire makes the wood malleable), a windlass (a rope device used to pull the hoopless end of a barrel in so the other hoop can be added) and a jigger knife and croze cutter (to smooth the insides of the barrel and add grooves so the top and bottom can be fitted).

Construction materials depend on the purpose of the piece. Oak is the wood of choice, especially for storing of liquids. White pine is good for dry goods or butter churns. Iron hoops are sturdier than wooden ones, but some customers prefer wood for its look and old-style feel.

"Wood hoops require a lot more maintenance, and I discourage their use outdoors. They are not really friends of mine," he says.

Since his brush with movie fame Zaroski found a new demand for his work, handling several orders of oval tubs later that fall. But one area of coopering Zaroski has not been able to work

in is wine barrel making.

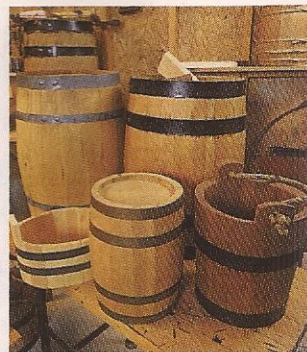
"The toasting of a wine barrel is wrapped up in mystique, and wine coopers are very leery of sharing their secrets," he says. Zaroski has offered to volunteer his services to a number of coopers in an effort to learn the craft, but has been repeatedly turned down. Although he understands their motive—the amount of work for hand coopers is limited—Zaroski laments the loss of knowledge in a dying profession.

"The profession can be secretive, so it's very difficult to keep it alive," he says.

Much of Zaroski's work has been in the area of demonstrations at living museums like Todmorden Mills in Toronto. Fortunately, the cooper is portable, so even if a museum doesn't have the tools, it is easy to set up shop for a demonstration.

Still, Zaroski would like to find a more permanent place to work outside of his home.

"It would be nice if I could become associated with a museum and open up a cooperage and have all the tools there," he says. ☛



ZAROSKI'S HAND-COOPERED buckets, casks and barrels