

Wooden Boats-Just One More Time...

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I started sailing back in 1967 so I guess I'm getting to be an old timer now. I started my sailing career at age 15 aboard a friend's 19 foot Lightning sloop based in Pultneyville. In those days Fred Cornwall's little harbor was a quiet weedy backwater, homeport to a collection of small outboards and tired wooden power cruisers with names like "Phartzzy" and "Whattawoodie". There were perhaps a half dozen sailboats. One I recall was a sweet lined little Cape Cod knockabout that lay peacefully in the mud at her slip. A dinner plate sized snapping turtle often basked on her after deck and would slip down into the murky water filling her cockpit when you walked by. Two or three times a summer her people came down, bailed the slimy water out, and took her for a sail brown scum dried topsides and all. She didn't come back the next summer.

By 1967 fiberglass had pretty well taken over the sailing scene. The little collection of tired 30 plus year old cedar and mahogany hulled Lightnings at Pultneyville that included our own number 878 were the exception. I recall that the "big" boats there as PYC underwent it's second coming included a 24 foot Yankee Dolphin, a 27 foot Cheoy Lee, Lou Rohr's Bristol and Earl O Laughlin's 23 foot True Rocket, a wooden center boarder that had been to Florida and Maine and all over Lake Ontario with her master mariner skipper.

I went shopping for my first cruiser at a time when a 25 footer was considered a perfectly respectable sized boat for a couple to take to Canada for a week or two and the only boats my budget could accommodate then were wooden ones. In 1979 as I sought my first "big" boat, there were still a few fixer uppers out there though by then, the wooden cruising sloop had pretty well been pushed to the back of the boat yard and most of them had been uncovered and neglected for several years. Today even the old rotten hulks are a rare sight in a marina. They've been composted.

I converted to the age of plastics in 1996 when three of us went in together to purchase a class old S&S designed Chris Craft sloop built in 1968. I loved her easy sheer line and graceful hull and told people that I was attracted to her because “she looked like a wooden boat.” But she had nary a seam to caulk, no dry rot and didn’t ever need her bilge sashed with Cupernol. I was delighted by her mannerly sailing and her homogenized one piece plastic hull. I canceled my Wooden Boat magazine subscription, misplaced my seam reefing tool, and went sailing.

A year ago my spouse initiated a new boat association-that with a 38 foot Tancook schooner. I went along with it maybe as a sort of last fling or some sort of nostalgia for the good old days of biodegradable boats. Or maybe after 36 years of sailing marconi sloops my curiosity just got the better of me. What was it like dealing with all those throats and peaks and crotch tackles and deadeyes of a schooner rig? Looking back on the decision to go in on one last wooden boat, I think the main attraction was the vessel herself. She wasn’t just a wooden boat. She was a Wooden Boat-more like a museum piece- with her lignum vitae blocks and hand forged ironwork. Her basic hull design was a virtually perfect reincarnation of the small inshore working fishing craft that were in use in Nova Scotia’s Mahone Bay area up until the 1930’s designed by a man who had fished and freighted on such little schooners twenty years before he oversaw her construction in an apprentice training program. Unlike my humble little homebuilt woodie Ariel that I had sailed around the lake for nearly two decades, the Sara B had brand presence.

Today large wooden sailing boats like Sara B on our local waters are not a common sight. When you do sail around in one it’s not unusual to hear a boater ask “Is that whole thing actually made of wood?” Yet old woodies do have an undeniable charm. Some of it is their design. Some of it is more indefinable, a

sort of romance or aura or personality that the old veterans and survivors acquire. Older boats, like 19th century houses, have a life of their own as their histories accumulate. Anecdotes, events, big fish landed, moonlight rides taken and other happy moments seem to permeate their structure. (And sometimes leave a permanent mark on them too!) Some wooden boats like our Sara B seem to have a definite presence that even non boaters' sense. You feel comfortable sitting in the cockpit, surrounded by the warm glow of varnished wood as the boat finds her surefooted sea kindly way through the waves on a rough day. And the wooden boat surrounds you with the craft and skill and patience and pride of those who built her. She carries with her a small part of that creator's soul wherever she goes.



Sara B