

The Wooden Boat Outreach Program

by Paul Ferris Smith

The board of directors of the Woods Hole Historical Collection created an outreach program in 1999 to preserve not only documents, images and artifacts but also skills. Activities to date include craft workshops in knot tying, chair caning, basket making and knitting as well as the focus of this article, wooden boat restoration.

Frank and Janet Nickerson's donation of their family's Beetle Cat to the WHHC in 1998 gave a crucial initial impetus to the wooden boat program. The boat had been well loved and well used in the past but now needed serious restoration. This project provided a perfect learning experience for those who would attend the regular, year-round, rain-shine-or-snow Saturday morning sessions. Everything had to be rebuilt. Fortunately, the tools and the boatbuilding skills to use them were available.

Board members Al Lunn and Lou Larrey built a bent-arch plastic-covered structure to house the wooden boat program. It has been added to twice, given a wood floor and equipped with most, if not

all, of the tools needed for boat restoration, including a band saw, table saw, drill press, forge, steam box, disc sander, and a wide range of hand and power tools. A tool box, shelves, racks, lighting, and wiring have also been added over the years. These improvements are ongoing, depending in large measure on the generosity of participants, museum members and friends.

Charlie York kicked off the program with a well-attended talk at the Woods Hole Library in February, 2000. He was then owner and operator of Beetle Inc., in South Dartmouth, Massachusetts. Participants learned about the construction and reconstruction of the popular Beetle Cat, a small catboat that may be the only wooden boat still in production.

Charlie York said there was a need for this kind of program and that it would create an extended family of like-minded people genuinely interested in

wooden boat construction and restoration. This has happened.



Lou Larrey, Browne Littell and Al Lunn picking up Beetle Cat (September, 1998) at Frank and Janet Nickerson's. Photo by Paul Ferris Smith.

The group experienced communal grief when an elder member, Ted Gullicksen, passed away, and heartfelt enthusiasm when the youngest member, Schuyler Hemminger, made the varsity sailing team (New England champions) at Tabor Academy. Schuyler's parents even credited skills he acquired in the Outreach Program for his making the varsity as a sophomore.

Taking off from this fine introduction, Bill Cooper and Al Lunn, two museum volunteers with unique backgrounds in wooden boat building, began meeting with whoever showed up. And people did show up. And they were fortunate.

Bill Cooper had worked in Mineford (on City Island, NY), Luders, and Cape Cod yacht yards with men whose experience went back as far as the early 1900s. One man Bill worked with was the last foreman at Nivens yard. Another had worked at the Herreshoff yard in Bristol, RI, from 1925 to 1938. Bill has a great memory and knew enough to ask the right questions so he can pass on abundant details of how wooden boats were designed and built. He is writing a book about an imaginary Cape Cod yacht



Lou Larrey works on constructing the first Outreach building, January, 1999. Photo by Paul Ferris Smith.

yard building a schooner yacht for a fictitious Boston Brahmin. Using this narrative device, Bill explains and illustrates all the steps in design and construction. He shares boatbuilding stories and technical information every Saturday morning.



Outreach building interior, January, 2005, showing Dick Legg and Al Lunn at work. Photo by Paul Ferris Smith.

Al Lunn, the other leader in the outreach program, is a Woods Hole native who grew up using hand tools to build boats of local wood, among other things. One of these boats is a Chamberlain Dory built of cedar downed by a hurri-



Al Lunn, Bob Sparth, Ted Tavares and Bill Ohnemus lift Beetle Cat as its restoration nears completion.



Interior view of enlarged building with Catboat and canoe and participants, "Phil" Phillips, Al Lunn, Dick Hayes and a newcomer. Photos by Paul Ferris Smith.

cane. It is named *Swamp Fox*, honoring the source of the wood. After many years of use by Al's family, it has been completely refurbished and is now on display in the Small Boat Museum. Al readily passes on his experience to guide participants tackling everything from complete wood canoe rebuilding to museum-quality ship-model construction.

All ages participate: a high school student, a woman lawyer, a WWII veteran and barge operator, a Cape Cod contractor, various retired men, etc. There is no established program, just a wooden boat that needs everything from stem to stern and knowledgeable mentors. The Beetle Cat now has a new carved stem and a new transom, a number of new steam-bent ribs, hull and deck planking and a section of the port garboard. Shaping the garboard plank could have been a problem. Fortunately there is a 100-year-old wooden jig in the museum collection to steam the needed twist in the forward end of the plank.

This jig had been devised (fortunately for a port-side plank) by Woods Hole boat builder and ship chandler E.E. Swift of School Street, who died in 1964 at the age of 102.

The program attendees vary from week-to-week but there is a regular core group. Activities also vary and are not solely devoted to restoring the Beetle Cat. Marlinspike seamanship is taught. Ditty bags are made. A number of sessions were devoted to what spiling means and how it is done.

Students also learned how to make half-models and the role they played in boat design.

Charlie York's advice in his kickoff talk was specific yet applicable to all wooden boat building and repair. It is worth noting a few items here. He said there are skills particular to boatbuilding in addition to the usual woodworking skills. For example, learning how to use a rabbit plane, a spokeshave and a caulking wheel makes boat building much more pleasant. An inexpensive pencil divider (compass) and an awl, he noted, are two fundamental tools of boat building and repair.

As the Beetle Cat nears completion and the canoe is about to be launched, members are discussing various options. A Woods Hole Sprintsail Boat needs restoration and a Cape Cod Knockabout needs some incidental attention. This might be the time to build



Interior views, 23 July 2005: Bob Leary, Ted Tavares, Bill Ohnemus, Dick Legg and Bill Cooper. Photo by Paul Ferris Smith.

a boat. There is another Beetle Cat ready to be rebuilt but perhaps something different in the world of wooden boats will win out. In any case, the WHHC Outreach Program is certain to continue to entertain and educate a diverse and outstanding group of participants.

Paul Ferris Smith first came to Woods Hole during WWII in 1943 to work at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution doing research for the U.S. Navy. Subsequently, the Navy appointed him Naval Liaison officer to the laboratory. After the war and graduate school, he worked at the Oceanographic and the Marine Biological Laboratory and later in the marine instrumentation field. He was among the founders of the Woods Hole Historical Collection, participated in museum exhibit preparation, publications, and as a board member and officer. He is married to Mary Lou Smith, editor of this journal and a number of prize-winning publications of the Collection. The Outreach Program was his idea. His color photograph-illustrated children's book, *Has Anyone Seen the Glee?*, has just been published by the Collection.