

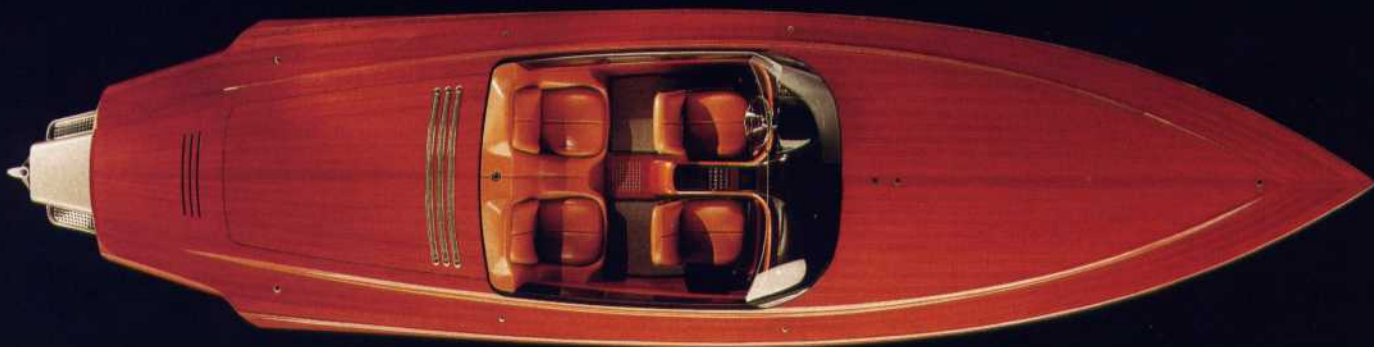
WOODEN BOATS

AN AMERICAN TRADITION



For centuries, wooden boats have captured the hearts of yachtsmen and have been treasured by collectors around the world. Indeed, some firmly believe that wood is the perfect building material.

BY MARK MASCIAROTTE



THE BOAT SHOP IS CRAMPED and cluttered, its ancient wood stove laboring to ward off the winter chill. Outside, through windows rimmed in delicate white crystals, the cold has frozen the seawater at the edge of the bay and twisted the old docks in their pilings to resemble a thrill ride at Coney Island. Here, in the yellow light of oil lamps, hand tools hang along the walls in precise order, their steel parts oiled and shining, their handles glowing with the patina that only years of use can imbue. Everywhere, the fragrance of wood, as sweet and seductive as fine perfume, stirs the senses, as quiet voices make small talk, barely audible over the tap of mallets, the crunch of augers, and the rasp of sandpaper.

Not more than 60 years ago, the sea-coasts of the world were lined with shops like this one—boatbuilding establishments that in aggregate turned out thousands of commercial, recreational, and military craft for generations of mariners. Today, only a relative handful of such shops remain, operated by a special breed of craftsmen. In these places, special boats are built for special customers to be used for special purposes; the craft are as complex as a watch by Breguet or as alluring as a box by Fabergé. And while some builders adhere to the traditions laid down by their forebears, others are developing traditions of their own.

In this day of fiberglass- and metal-boat building, wooden yachts are hardly run of the mill: In any given year, barely a dozen are constructed worldwide. Detractors call them anachronisms, but nothing could be further from the truth. The well-informed yachtsman sees a wooden boat as the perfect vessel, one built of a renewable material whose attributes include beauty, an impressive strength-to-weight ratio, and natural insulating properties that attenuate noise and slow the transfer of heat or cold. When combined with modern epoxies in what is known as the cold-mold process, the resultant structures are light, rugged, and impervious to rot and worm damage. Unfortunately for the masses, they are also expensive. Nevertheless, wood continues to be the material of choice among the cognoscenti.

Ted Fontaine, who has been designing boats for more than two decades, explains, "There is simply something unique about wooden boats, the craftsman who build them, and the quality of the finished product. Simply put, wood is a very nice [clean] material to work with. The hulls are very stiff and quiet. They are beautiful to look at and blend well with the romantic aspect of building a beautiful sailing yacht."

But beyond the aesthetics are financial incentives, Fontaine says. "There are some significant advantages in working with cold-molded wood as a boatbuilding medium. First of all, when building either a strip-planked or a double-diagonally planked hull, the building process goes fairly quickly and therefore is less labor-intensive than cutting up a bunch of aluminum and welding it back together, bending



(This page and opposite) Designed by Michael Peters and built by Van Dam Wood Craft, *Alpha Z* defines custom boatbuilding. All components, including the engine, were made to order. The boat, which has won national awards for design, can reach nearly 100 miles per hour. PHOTOS COURTESY OF JORGE ALVAREZ



each plate or frame or laminating a bunch of thin layers of glass together," he notes. "The building process of strip-planking or double-diagonal planking actually creates a much smoother hull form. The materials actually are somewhat self-fairing, so the finished product requires less hand-sanding, fairing, and long-boarding, which also saves time and money."

These attributes attract the sophisticated clients who seek out custom builders, including, says Jay Coyle, a yacht designer and columnist for *Yachting* magazine, the lesser-known boutique builders that have sprung up in Florida and elsewhere over the last decade. These companies, Coyle explains, are being run by a new generation of builders, many of whom cut their teeth at the better-known yards. And although quality is the name of the game here, he notes, it is the mystique of the wood itself that makes the rules.

Many anglers believe the properties that make wooden boats so comfortable also make them less obtrusive to sea creatures, including billfish. Tales abound of two or three boats fishing the Gulf Stream, running parallel courses in the same depth of water and separated by only 50 or 60 yards. As the stories go, the wooden boats consistently raise fish, while the others, built of fiberglass or aluminum, get nary a look. Truth? Hard to say, but the body of evidence is impressive, as is the amount of money people are willing to pay for sport-fishing boats from such companies as American Custom Yachts, Ryco Marine, and Whiticar Boat Works.

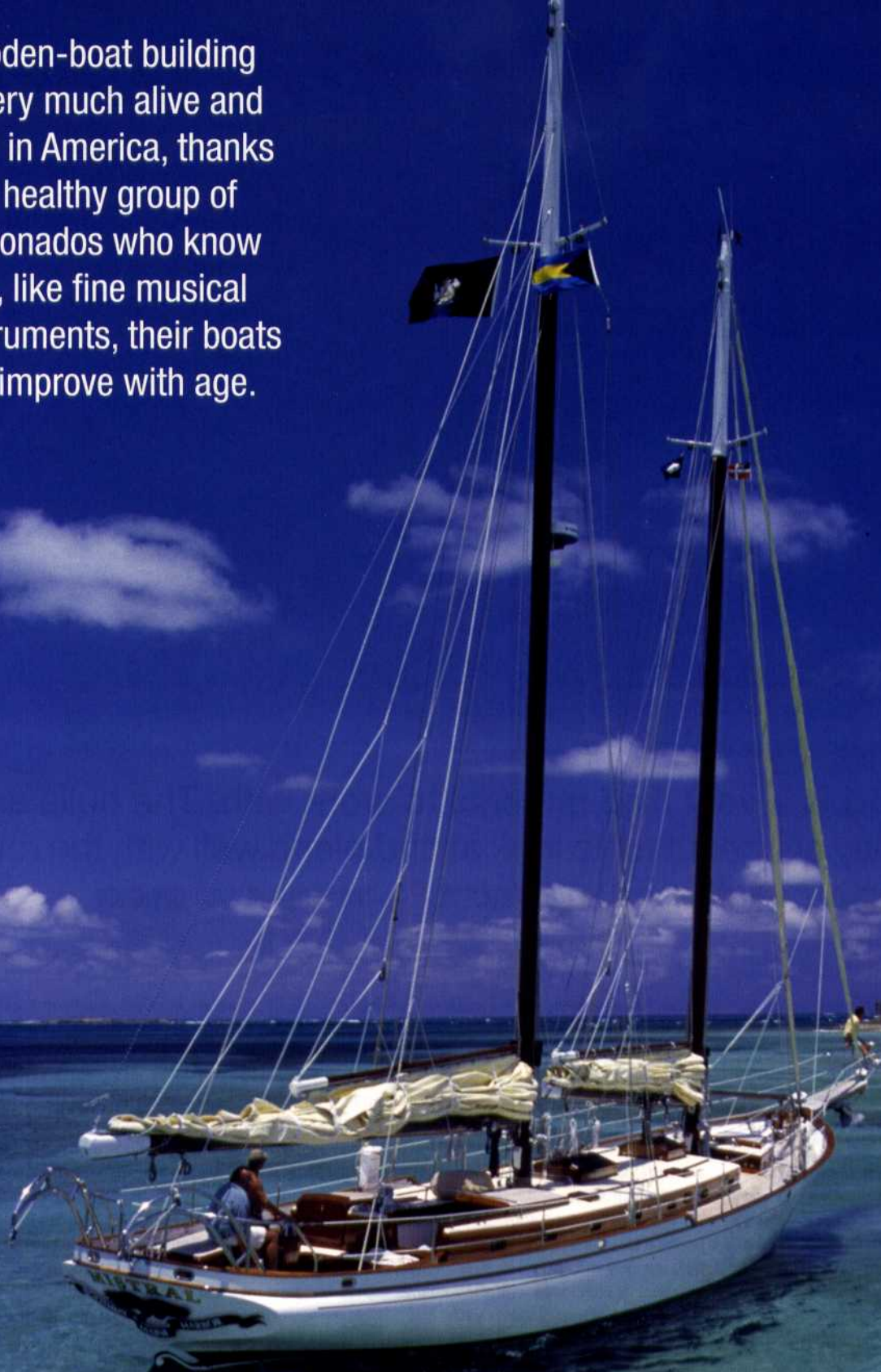
What may come as a surprise to the novice yachtsman is that beyond the sport-fishing market, wooden-boat building is very much alive and well in America thanks to a healthy (albeit small and well-heeled) group of aficionados who know that, like fine musical instruments, their boats will improve with age. Smallcraft such as skiffs, catboats, canoes, and dories are still built in relatively significant numbers by specialty shops across the country. Some, like Ralph Stanley's yard in Southwest Harbor, Maine, carry on long-standing traditions by building regional designs—Friendship sloops, for example—that have been employed for commercial and recreational use for generations.

Other builders, located primarily in the Great Lakes and regions such as the Adirondacks and Lake Tahoe, continue to produce lovely boats that either reflect popular models of the past—Hackers and Chris-Crafts, for example—or define a totally new perspective on traditional designs. Van Dam Wood Craft of Boyne City, Michigan, is such an outfit, having produced the award-winning *Alpha Z*, which was featured in a previous issue of *Private Air*. In Washougal, Washington, Legendary Yachts produces classic vessels from drawings by L. Francis Herreshoff, George Watson, and Olin Stephens.

By far, though, the most impressive examples of modern American boatbuilding come from Hodgdon Yachts in East Boothbay, Maine. For the past 189 years, this company has produced

Whiticar's new 76-foot sportfishing yacht in various stages of completion: (Top left) The keel plate consists of epoxy-laminated mahogany planking that runs the full length of the boat. The individual planks are clamped and glued together on the hull jig and become a continuous backbone for the vessel. (Top right) One layer of diagonally planked mahogany used on the hull sides. The next two layers of planking will be installed in the opposite angles, creating a hull side with strength in multiple directions. (Center) Rendering of the completed yacht. (Bottom left) The hull is constructed upside down over a removable computer-routed jig. When the basic hull is completed, the jig is removed and the boat is rolled outside and flipped over. Many of the deck beams and structural components can be installed inside the boat prior to flipping over. (Bottom right) Breaking tradition on the new 76 model, Whiticar has switched over from a deckhouse constructed completely out of wood to a modern fiberglass-and-foam composite structure. A composite house yields a stronger and lighter part and also allows improved stylings, which are more difficult to create out of wood. PHOTOS COURTESY OF WHITICAR CUSTOM BOATS

Wooden-boat building is very much alive and well in America, thanks to a healthy group of aficionados who know that, like fine musical instruments, their boats will improve with age.



Traditional lines and aesthetic beauty are mainstays of the sailboats built by Legendary Yachts. The Herreshoff-designed schooner *Mistral*, seen here working close to shore in the Bahamas, is an example of the company's fine work. PHOTO BY AEL PARRY WITZ



Some American boatbuilders are known for their versatility. *Geronimo*, designed by Michel Berryer and built by Steve Van Dam, illustrates the melding of a traditional torpedo-sterned launch with modern details. PHOTO: SING, FRANK L. GROSS/COURTESY OF VAN DAM WOOD CRAFT

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some of the largest and most luxurious yachts in the world, each one made of wood. These boats truly are masterpieces, and many have received international acclaim for not only their outstanding performance but for their remarkable beauty.

Interestingly, what has been built for the luxury-yacht market over the last 20 years has been the work of a handful of American designers. Successful race-boat designer Bruce King received international recognition for *Whitehawk*, *Hetairos*, and others, and then went on to design several showstoppers for Hodgdon Yachts, including the 124-foot *Antonisia*, the 155-foot *Scheherazade*, and the retro-styled 80-foot commuter *Liberty*. Michael Peters’s works include the award-winning 75-foot motoryacht *Plumduff* and the *Alpha Z*. Most recently, Ted Fontaine has two projects in build at Hodgdon: a 98-foot sloop and a 105-foot ketch.

Each of these men has a wealth of experience with other boatbuilding materials. (Indeed, Peters has designed some of the fastest boats on the water, using aluminum and advanced carbon fiber-epoxy structures.) Nevertheless, they share an abiding love for wood and respect for its capabilities.

“The laminated wooden hull tends to be

much thicker-skinned than a metal or composite hull and [therefore] needs less insulation both for temperature and noise,” Fontaine notes. “The finished interior hull is beautiful to look at, so you do not have to invest as many man-hours covering up the metal hull with insulation and a complete timber façade; you simply expose the structure and reap the benefits of the beautiful wood construction.

“Simply put,” he adds, “wood is a very nice material to work with. It is clean to work with; the hulls are very stiff and quiet; they are beautiful to look at and blend well with the romantic aspect of building a beautiful sailing yacht.”

The benefit of all this is the same as that of purchasing a top-of-the-line business jet or automobile: rock-solid resale value. For example, sport-fishing craft built by the firm of Rybovich and Merritt command impressive prices even when the boats are more than 40 years old (a pristine 30-foot Rybovich built in 1960 brings nearly \$400,000 today on the used market).

Fortunately, for those yachtsmen who desire the warmth, beauty, and performance of wood, and are willing to pay the price and endure the

wait, there are builders who have the means to fulfill an order. Equally important, boatbuilding programs from coast to coast are teaching the requisite skills to a new generation of craftsmen. Some of the best-known facilities include The Landing School in Arundel, Maine; the boatbuilding school at Mystic Seaport in Connecticut; the Northwest School of Wooden Boatbuilding in Port Hadlock, Washington; and the Center for Wooden Boats in Seattle. These institutions provide a stream of workers to builders who have opted to carry on this centuries-old occupation.

Fontaine sums his affinity for the medium this way: “Wood is a peaceful material, one synonymous with traditional yacht-building. I love the stuff and would most likely build my own boat of cold-molded wood—if I had the time or money.”

In addition to his duties as Private Air’s Editor-at-Large, Mark Masciarotte is the principal of a highly respected marine-industry consultancy that specializes in the construction of custom yachts.