



The Love of *Miss Ellen*

The unique V-bottom hull design of the Potomac River dory boat is believed to have evolved from a type of flat-bottomed boat called a “nancy.” The nancies were open boats with flat bottoms ranging in size between 18’ and 27’ in length. A single plank was used to fabricate each side fore and aft. Smaller versions were crossed planked or a combination of both. They were sailing vessels with a two-masted leg-o’-mutton rig. The stern was square and there were catwalks on washboards running the full length of the boat. Many of the small nancies were painted with tar made from the pitch of pine trees giving them a black brown color, hence the nickname “black nancies.”

The traditional sailing Potomac River dory boat began to appear about 1875, mostly around St. Mary’s County, Maryland. It is believed by some that Grason Thompson and Charles G. Huseman of St. Patrick’s Creek were the first boat builders to construct that type of boat back in 1875. Other accounts credit James T. Marsh of Solomons and Captain Kelly Cheseldine of Whites Neck with building the first one in the 1880s.

The traditional deadrise eclipsed the Potomac River dory boat in popularity. However, like the deadrise, the dory boat was built without plans by boat builders who were self-taught or learned how to build boats by watching a friend, a relative or as an apprentice to a master boat builder. The bottom planks had to be steamed into shape on the dory boat which accounted for the shape of the unique hull design. The gunwales were low to the water, ideal for watermen. The same design hull evolved when the boats were designed to accommodate engines.

Miss Ellen is a 33-foot long, 9-foot beam Potomac River dory boat. Her hull is white pine, the frame is white oak, the decks are teak and the interior is mahogany. Not much is known of the early history of the *Miss Ellen* from her construction in 1938. It is known that the original name was *Miss Ellen*, and then it was changed to *Barbara Ellen* and later back to the earlier “*Miss*.”

Prior to 1989 it is believed the *Miss Ellen* was used for clamming, oystering, and possibly for crabbing and fishing. It might have rotted away long ago were it not for the inter-

vention of Peter and Lynn Domas in 1989. The couple owned the Yeocomico Marina and the Mooring Restaurant at Port Kinsale on the Yeocomico River. Peter Domas joined forces with boat building legend, Tiffany Cockrell, to lovingly design a restructure of the old boat into what is described as a cocktail cruising yacht. The pocket windows suggest the expert influence of Cockrell, who is known for that feature on the boats he has built. Shipwright Dave Peresluha (Calico Jack Trading Co., 804.464.3155), an accomplished and well respected ship’s carpenter and boat builder, worked on building the cabin and repairing the boat.

The *Miss Ellen*, at that time renamed the *Miss Lynn*, eventually was donated to the Chesapeake Wildlife Sanctuary Foundation in Silver Spring, Maryland, with a plan that it would be used to entertain guests of the museum. The plan did not materialize and the boat was put up for sale. At this point a wooden boat lover named Sparky Lewis enters the story.

Sparky Lewis developed a love of wooden boats at an early age, while summering with



The craftsmen at Chesapeake Marine Railway replaced planks, supports, fittings and any water-damaged wood they could find. Above right, Sparky Lewis with Dave Peresluha inspecting the hull. Above, Sparky and good friend Ben Jones share a laugh.

his family and sailing in Connecticut. He has owned several wooden boats of varying size and type, one of which was a 42-foot wooden Grand Banks Trawler.

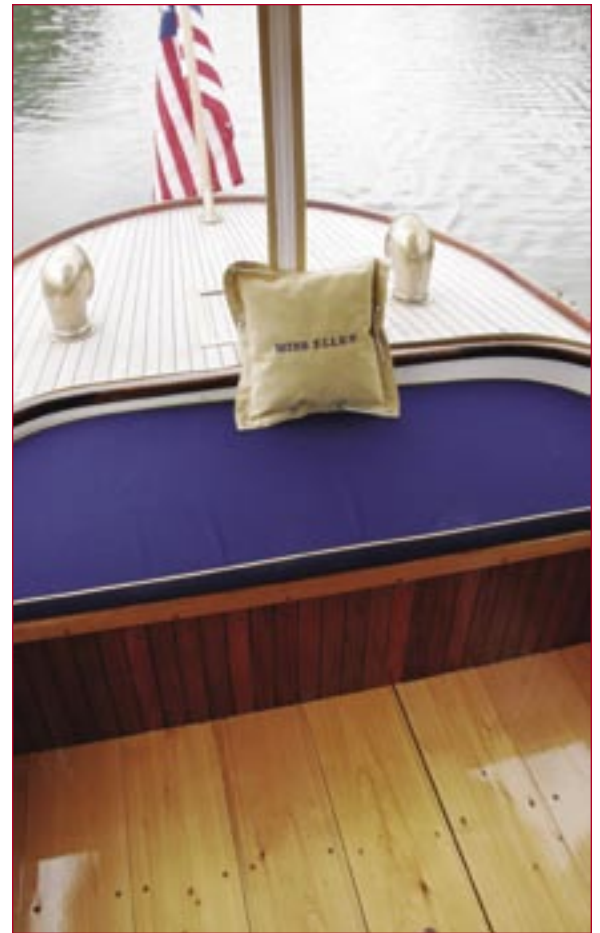
It was love at first sight for Sparky back in February of 2007 when he first looked at the *Miss Ellen*. He knew from the very first time that he had fallen in love, despite the fact that she was stored on the hard and uncovered for three years.

To make matters worse, the boat was on blocks in a pine tree grove where little pine cones blanketed the cockpit floor. The accumulated pine cones acted as sponges, holding rain water and destroying the grating and the floor. Sparky explained that had the boat been covered it would have been much easier to restore. It was not, however, and Sparky was fully aware of what he was getting into to bring the *Miss Ellen* back to a condition of which he would approve. He said, "I knew it would be a significant undertaking. I took a bunch of photographs then went home and contemplated for a while."

Sparky knew he would need the help of professionals when it came to hauling and

major repairs. He had the boat transported to the Chesapeake Marine Railway (sometimes known as the old Deagle's Boat Yard) at Fishing Bay Harbor. The yard is now operated by Rick and Jon Farinholt. Before any work was begun Sparky had marine surveyor Don McCann of Tranquil Waters Marine Services (5570 Windmill Point, White Stone, VA 22578, 804.435.6942) do a full survey. Sparky said he anxiously awaited the results and was thrilled to hear these words from McCann, "Sparky, you are one of the lucky ones." The survey came up showing nothing more than the need for cosmetic restoration, cleaning, replacing a garboard plank and the stern post. The latter was a little complicated by the fact the propeller shaft had to go through the stern post, which meant removing the propeller shaft to install the new post.

Sparky Lewis has a home in Warrenton, Virginia, and a river home on Antipoison Creek, White Stone, and is actively involved in a concrete contracting business. (He co-owns ConCor of Virginia). Lewis arranged for Dave Peresluha to be his eyes and ears in Deltaville to watch over the restoration. Sparky felt that since Dave had been part of the original restoration back in 1989, he would be the one to oversee the work and to



make sure the restored boat conformed to all of the modern day American Boat and Yacht Council standards. Peresluha also teaches his craft at ABYC classes at Rappahannock Community College.

Work began in February 2007. The aft keel support post proved to be the hardest part but master carpenters at Chesapeake Marine Railway were up to the work.

A visitor to Chesapeake Marine Railway is liable to see some of the most amazing vessels on the rails. Sharing yard space with the *Miss Ellen* were the sailing vessel *Godspeed* on the ways, the *F.D. Crockett* buyboat further up being restored, and John F. Kennedy's sailboat *Manitou* at the dock. It is a fascinating place with a long history of wooden boat repair that has been reborn under the direction of the Farinholt brothers who have brought renewed enthusiasm, skill, and spirit to the place. The yard dates back to 1910 and has built, hauled, or repaired every kind of boat imaginable, ranging from the yacht *Miss Ann* of the Tides Inn to WWII PT boats. From massive sailing vessels to powerful luxury motor yachts, Rick and Jon handle them all.

Rick described the unusual hull design of Sparky's boat. The boat is planked fore and



aft for the first third of the hull, then cross planked for the rest. This required steam bending and creating laminated planks to replace the originals that were hand carved. Master carpenter Billy Earman, who has worked at the yard for 56 years, and David Bohnhoff were tasked with the job of repairing the hull.

Lewis likes to tell the story of how the former owner of Deagle's, octogenarian Mr. Edward Deagle, looked over the boat one day and said to him, "Son, is that your boat?" When Sparky replied that it was, Mr. Deagle said, "I have been building boats for sixty years and you have got yourself a boat. As a matter of fact, I might take it off your hands



Sparky plans to keep the boat near White Stone and use it to share his love of boats and the water with friends and their youngsters. RIGHT: the butterfly hatch.



for the right price.” Sparky was thrilled and fired up to continue the restoration.

The craftsmen at Chesapeake Marine Railway replaced planks, supports, fittings and any water-damaged wood they could find. Sparky, meanwhile, worked on the job of polishing and coating the bronze fittings and lights. Sparky said: “The boat was pretty much stripped to the bare wood. The teak and mahogany were restored with a minimum of six coats of varnish. The boat was fully repainted with authentic colors of the period. The engine was in good shape, having been installed in 1989 to replace the original unknown make.” It now has a 33 HP Westerbeke four cylin-

der diesel engine that, according to Sparky, runs like a top.

Sparky is particularly proud of the way he and Wendy Price at Wendy’s Custom Yacht Canvas (16273 General Puller Highway, Deltaville VA, 804.776.0422) solved the problem of restoring the canvas and Plexiglas curtains that surround the boat. Marine Fabricators in Topping, Virginia (809.535.9028) created a frame for the canvas curtains which eventually Sparky covered with brass tubing to simulate the materials used in the 1930s.

The writer fell in love with the mahogany centerline butterfly hatch with bronze hardware. Traditionally, in the glory days of wooden boat building, the ultimate test of a master boat carpenter was that he could build a quality butterfly hatch that didn’t leak.

Sparky plans to keep the boat near White Stone and use it to share his love of boats and the water with friends and their youngsters. Sparky told me a story of how one day he took a friend and his 10-year-old son

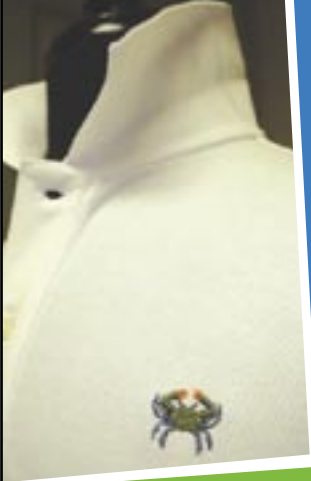
fishing. Sparky said, “The boy looked up at me and said ‘this is my first boat ride.’ At some point I am going to figure out how to get young people involved by taking them for a boat ride and taking them fishing. I know there will be a lot of people who will want to take a ride on the old *Miss Ellen*.” It is entirely possible the *Miss Ellen* is one of the last operating Potomac River dory boats.

Larry S. Chowning, well-known author and historian of wood boats of the Chesapeake Bay, said in his book *Deadrise and Cross-planked* (Tidewater Publishers, Centreville, MD, 21617, www.cmptp.com) of the Potomac River dories, “As is often the case there are questions as to who actually built and designed the first dory.” Chowning further observed: “One of the things that is interesting about the boat builders of St. Mary’s County, Maryland is that so many fathers and sons were in the business. This seems to be the main ingredient of the successful boat building community throughout the bay ... For Maryland’s Potomac River watermen, the dory boat was a symbol of life on their side of the river. It was their river and their boat and as far as they were concerned the dory provided the best working platform on the bay.”

Obviously Sparky is a people-person and is eager to share his love of the *Miss Ellen*, wooden boats, the water, fishing, and life in general with a great many people, young and old, a love this writer shares. To the long list of lyrics for the often varied old folk tune “*Barbara Ellen*,” allow this writer to add:

*In old Virgini’ where I have been
There is a fair maid a dwellin’
Her teak and bronze a shinin’ bright
Her hull of blue a glisenin’
She be breakin’ hearts no tellin’
Old Captain Sparky now a beamin’
Her fair name is Miss Ellen.*

The *Miss Ellen* is young once again and about to enter a fitting new chapter in her life on the Chesapeake, thanks to Sparky Lewis and his love for his boat. She is a fickle beauty, good old *Miss Ellen*. ■



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