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Reprint from Volume 22 Number 17

Sept 16, 2010

Bob's Boat - *Graham Brazier; Photos Dennis Forsyth*



Better than I dreamed, beamed a buoyant Bob Parsons as *Norma May* nudged the pebbled shores of Fillongley Beach, Denman Island. It was early in the evening of August 22 and Bob's 14-foot, clinker-built boat, named for his mother, had just completed her first sea-trial in Lambert Channel to much applause and hooting from the sixty or so witnesses lining the shore. The

meticulously handcrafted product of a year-and-a-half of steadfast devotion got a vigorous 'two thumbs up' from Bob as he rested on the oars, grinning broadly.

Bob's project had lived in his head for more than twenty years while he and his wife, Velda, grew vegetables and flowers for the Denman Island Farmer's Market on their Windy Marsh Farm property.

His collection of building materials for the small sailing boat began at Genoa Bay where he lived on the water and worked repairing boats. It was there, on the beach, more than twenty years ago that he found the red cedar log that would eventually contribute more than 60% of the close-grained material Bob used to fashion the eighteen planks required for the hull.

Over the years on Denman Island, Bob's semi-annual visits to the beach in search of seaweed, a task familiar to many gardeners, augmented his collection of found building materials—as did a chance encounter with a local sculptor when a deal was struck to trade fresh vegetables

for a particularly fine piece of cedar. Bob figures that, in the end, found and bartered materials account for about 85% of *Norma May's* component parts.

As important as a good collection of quality materials is to such a project, it couldn't move ahead without a huge investment of time, which simply wasn't available to Bob until the Government of Canada decided that he was old enough to manage a monthly allowance.

Appreciative that his maturity had been formally recognized by the folks in Ottawa, Bob got right down to work. First he built a workshop attached to a greenhouse, so that he could share the heat with the plants, then, once he tracked down a copy of *Traditional Boatbuilding Made Easy: Building Catherine: A 14-Foot Pulling Boat In The Whitehall Tradition* by Richard Kolin, he got started transforming the cedar beams he had cut from the raw logs into planks for the clinker-built boat.



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This article was published (Sept 16, 2010) in 'Island Tides'. 'Island Tides' is an independent, regional newspaper distributing 18,000 print copies throughout the Gulf Islands and Vancouver Island from Victoria to Campbell River.

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As you might imagine, Bob's copy of the 97-page manual looks much handled, though there's nothing to suggest that the handling wasn't respectful: a few marginal calculations, a sketch or two, a few unidentifiable smudges, but no discernable blood stains.

Indeed Bob had great respect for the manual, but, he didn't follow it blindly. He made two significant modifications to his boat. Instinctively, he thought the suggested placement of the hull ribs at 8 inches apart wouldn't offer sufficient strength and reduced it to 6 inches.

The origin of the other modification was more complex. When it came time to make and install the centerboard—the retractable keel essential for sailing—Bob approached the task deliberately and cautiously, as he approached all steps necessary to the completion of his project. He selected the appropriate size bit, tightened it into the drill with his key, and poised, drill in hand, ready to create a hole in the hull of his boat. Unable to squeeze the trigger, Bob thought, 'Maybe there's an alternative to drilling a hole in the bottom of my brand new boat.'

And, indeed there was: they are called 'leeboards' and though Bob determined that two were required—one for each side of the boat—neither one required that he pierce the hull of his boat. Hence, Bob chose to make two oak leeboards rather than one centerboard.

On the beach, having given two thumbs up to the first sea-trial, Bob was now keen for a second which would assess *Norma May's* sailing capabilities. This second sea trial however was delayed by much exaltation, not to mention, cake and punch and other gestures of congratulations. However, as we exalted, the waters of Lambert Channel also exalted and grew a tad choppy. 'Would he? or wouldn't he?' became the buzz on the beach. The sail, the mast, the boom, the leeboards and the rudder all awaited deployment and a crew stood by at the ready until the words came from Bob, 'Let's Go.' With a minimum of fumbling among the novice crew, the second sea-trial got underway and together, Bob and *Norma May* were halfway to Hornby Island before they turned in a grand arc and it became evident to all on shore that they were a perfectly well-matched duo. ☺



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