

Remembering: David Corcoran “1961-2007”



Dave Corcoran, wooden boat builder, master craftsman and long-time resident of Arundel, Maine passed away shortly after last year’s Maine Boat Builders Show. He founded Bullhouse Boatworks in 1990, specializing in replicas of classic Herreshoff Manufacturing Company designs. A gifted teacher, he also taught lofting and boatbuilding at the Landing School, M.I.T. and at the Lake Champlain Maritime museum.

By Alex Corcoran

If you ever had a chance to meet my brother Dave, you’d remember the occasion. He was a sight to behold in his standard garb – red and green high tops, epoxy covered jeans that crackled when he walked and a red union suit top. Whether he was correcting your grammar, arguing the holding strength of bronze screws, disputing your political thoughts or telling the latest jokes, his presence was always felt. Graced with a brilliant mind and gifted hands, Dave lived life on his own terms. Despite his untimely death

he was fortunate to find his true calling – building superb replica wooden boats from some of the world’s premiere naval architects.

During his childhood, Dave learned to sail, race and appreciate a variety of boats during summers spent sailing on the Great South Bay. His sixth grade shop teacher peaked his interest. By the age of fourteen he was a handy woodworker and by age sixteen an apprentice cabinet-maker. These childhood interests would come together to guide his life’s work.

After graduating from the University of Vermont in 1984, Dave enrolled at the Landing Boat School in Kennebunkport, Maine keenly interested in learning how to build wooden boats. Over the next few years he continued to hone his skills by teaching boatbuilding, doing freelance repairs and by working stints at several New England boat yards. In 1990, he set out on his own and founded Bullhouse Boatworks, whose name-sake is derived from the purpose of the building where his first shop was located and explains the origin of his slogan “Better boats less bullshit.”

Dave’s big break came in 1991 when he initiated discussions with Kurt Hasselbach, the then new curator for M.I.T.’s Hart Nautical Collection in hopes of securing the rights to build a N.G. Herreshoff designed Buzzards Bay 15. As a young sailor, he recalled his first sighting of this classic design. Its beauty and form left a lasting impression on him. As his fortune would have it, he was given the nod. He built the boat Cheyla on spec true to the original 1889 design - complete with gaff rig, and sold her at the South West Harbor, Maine boat show in 1992. The Cheyla was the first Herreshoff’s plank-on-frame E-Class to appear since 1927. This led to his next commission, a Buzzards Bay 15 E-Class with marconi rig and he never lacked for boat work thereafter.

Dave was a self-proclaimed perfection-



Dave Corcoran sailing his Coquina off Cape Porpoise Harbor in 2005.

Photograph: Benjamin Mendlowitz

ist. He was obsessed with efficiency, performance and quality at every stage of the building process. Before he built or repaired any boat, he did his homework to fully understand the engineering. This process entailed a meticulous study of the original plans and a lot of field work inspecting surviving original boats. He often uncovered design or material weak spots and discussed modifications with naval architects and other boat builders to improve the performance and longevity of his replicas. Dave was fully immersed in all the myriad skills of boat building and sailing. When he was 14, he windsurfed around Long Island and enjoyed high performance sailing all his life. In his later years he studied and practiced the wide range of metal working skills required for boat building and contracted some of these skills. To ensure quality, he went as far as hand-picking trees for planking, hand-fashioning hardware and making some of his own tools.

Over the years, Dave’s access to M.I.T.’s Hart Nautical Collection allowed him to build classic reproductions from a range of other premier naval architects, including R.O. Davis and William Hand and Frank Paine. However, David’s true passion was in recreating historically accurate N.G. Herreshoff replica designs. He built at least 7 Buzzard

Bay 15 footers (all but one of these were E-Boats) and kept one, Orphan, for his own enjoyment.

He reintroduced the original Herreshoff Fish Class as well, originally designed by Herreshoff for the Seawanhaka Corinthian Yacht Club in 1936, and later worked with C.W. Paine to design a larger 25’ “Big Fish.” Dave was fortunate to build two of N.G. Herreshoff’s personal sailboats as well: The Alerion – N.G.’s 26’ sloop and the Coquina – his 17’ cat-ketch daysailer. Dave’s Coquina reproduction graced the cover of Wooden Boat Magazine (November/December 2005) and is on display here at the MBBS (at the Bullhouse Boatworks set-up in Building 3) in honor of Dave’s life work.

M.I.T.’s Kurt Hasselbach noted “I am not aware of any other builder who has built more N.G. Herreshoff plank-on-frame designs than Dave Corcoran since Herreshoff himself.” While this is noteworthy, Dave’s boatbuilding legacy will also be defined by his uncompromising attention to efficiency of construction, performance, quality and lasting value of his reproductions. It is comforting to know that each one will be admired, sailed and enjoyed for generations to come.

Visit www.bullhouseboatworks.com for more on David Corcoran and his handiwork.

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