

Earl McMillen: Torchbearer for Classic Yachting

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Earl McMillan III is on a mission to restore more yachts like *High Spirits* (ex-*Maemere*), a 110' Trumpy Those who combine their avocation with their vocation and fund it with a savvy business plan are among the most fortunate in the world. Such is the life of Earl McMillen, III, the dyed-in-the-wool southerner who founded McMillen Yachts in 1995 with a single aim—to restore classic wooden yachts. In an age of carbon fiber, digital technology, and megayacht one-upsmanship, McMillen has taken a love of history and beautiful boats, and built a classic yacht empire in Portsmouth, R.I.

“Growing up, I spent time on a mountain lake in northern Georgia, Lake Rabun, from the mid-70’s onward,” says the 57-year-old McMillen. “There were Chris-Crafts running all about the lake. It was my first introduction to varnish and mahogany, and I would get splinters in my bare feet running around the boathouses. Wooden boats are infectious and it all left an indelible mark.”

McMillen’s family owned a 68-foot Densmore yacht named *Mahogany Lady* for a brief period, but it wasn’t until McMillen undertook his first restoration project, in his early 20s, that his love affair with classic wooden yachts became stained into the fabric of his life.

That was when he and his father set about restoring a 1939 Elco Cruisette, a 39-foot Irwin Chase design renowned for its efficiency. The restoration of *Nifty III* took two years and was completed with the help of construction crews from his father's real-estate development business in Atlanta.

In the summer of '88, when the project was complete, McMillen decided to take the boat to the Wooden Boat Show in Maine. Setting off from St. Simon's Island in Georgia with a group of friends, the skipper and crew stopped in Newport, R.I., for a respite before the final push to Maine. But as so often happens to first-time visitors of the "City by the Sea," McMillen never left.



[1913 60' Grace \(ex. Zapala / Sispud II\)](#)

McMillen, who once thought it bad form for a southerner to cross the Mason Dixon Line, instantly fell in love with Newport and its rich history. He also easily fell in with kindred spirits and classic yacht enthusiasts, including Elizabeth Meyer, who immaculately restored the J Class yacht *Endeavour*; David Ray, owner of the classic Alden yawl *Nirvana*; and the late Bob Tiedemann, who owned and restored five vintage sail and power yachts over 60 feet.

Tiedemann was known to say, "I look upon period yachts as artistic pieces, a form of functional sculpture. Just as a painting has its artistic style, so each classic yacht has its pedigree."

"Bob and I became very good friends. He was something of a mentor to me," says McMillen, who at the time was taking a few years off from college and working for his father. "I'd been working for my dad's real estate company in Atlanta, but much preferred spending time in

Newport where the history is embraced and loved. History is bountiful in Newport, and the architecture spoke to me as a 24-year-old,” says McMillen, who later graduated with a history degree from Columbia University in 1993.

After that introduction in 1988, McMillen spent the next few years bouncing between his home in Atlanta, university in New York City, and summers in Newport. While rummaging through the back lots of local boatyards, he found classics rotting away, destined for a chainsaw if not claimed.



Beginning with the 39' Elco Cruisette and the 60' Sispud II, McMillen has not been shy about taking on big projects. Freedom, the 104' Trumpy/Mathis was a near total rebuild. In the early 1990s, McMillen was approached by the Cloister Hotel on Sea Island, which wanted a classic yacht to ferry passengers for cruises along Georgia's barrier islands and to a hunting lodge to the south. At the time, McMillen owned the 60-footer *Sispud II*, built in 1913 by the New York Yacht, Launch & Engine Company. He had found it lying in a marina in Rock Hall, Md., and after paying \$2,000 for the yacht, had trucked it to Fairhaven, Mass., where it sat for a few years before the Cloister Hotel came calling and a two-year refit was undertaken.

Renamed *Zapala*, the American Indian name for Sapelo Island just north of Sea Island, the yacht was presented to the Cloister Hotel in 1996. The project was mostly funded by a group of

McMillen's friends who lived on Sea Island, and that experience led him to develop the business model of "fractional ownership," similar to what NetJets promotes to businesses for shares in private jets. Investors in a project gain equity ownership by purchasing at least a 5-percent share in the restoration of a yacht. An investor's commitment to the yacht affords them use of it for a period based on their investment, e.g. a 5-percent share allows the investor at least eight days aboard.

"We've had a number of partners since the first boat syndicate in '95," says McMillen. "It speaks highly enough of the program's success."



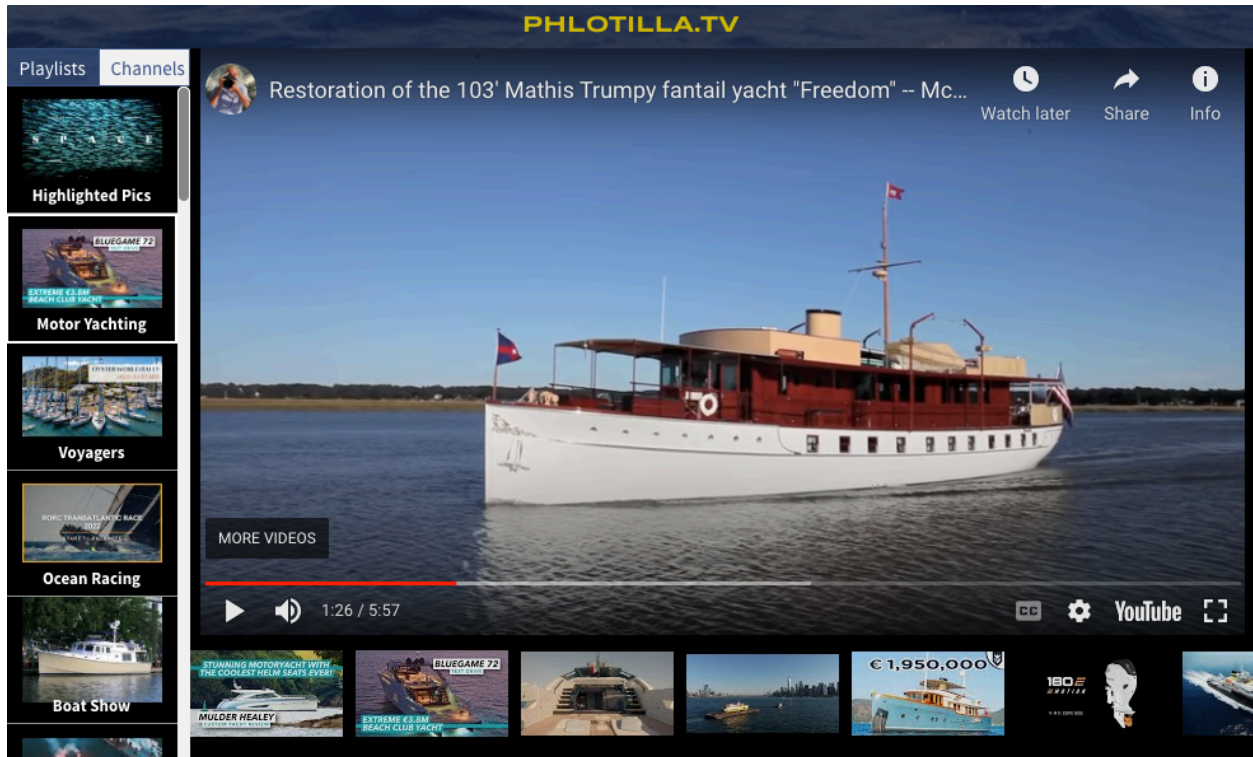
[1928 Starling Burgess / Abeking & Rasmussen 12 Meter Onawa](#)

McMillen works with his wife Elizabeth, who does the interior design and manages the yacht crews; his son Nelson, when he's not at college or playing in a band; and lead shipwright Clark Poston, who ran the [International Yacht and Restoration School](#) for 18 years, plus a host of others. They have restored dozens of yachts including the *Sispud II/Zapala* project, and the company manages six of the boats under fractional ownership.



[Miss Asia](#)

The projects are never straightforward. Rarely do original lines plans exist, usually lost to a fire or discarded in the belief that they are no longer of use. McMillen often circumvents that problem with the help of the Mystic Seaport's extensive [Rosenfeld Collection](#) of photos, which document the sheer lines. "It's a bit of reverse engineering and is sometimes limited," he says, "but it works."



McMillen's most prominent project was the restoration of *Freedom*, a 104-foot fantail motor yacht designed by Norwegian-born naval architect John Trumpy and built in 1926 by the Mathis Yacht Building Co. *Freedom* was so named because it was built on the 150th anniversary of U.S. independence.



Freedom's original fantail



The fantail before restoration



The fantail restored

The \$6.5 million project took nearly five years and had anywhere from 12 to 20 people working on it simultaneously.

“We had no idea how extensive the project would be,” says McMillen. “We had to jack her into place and then replace the keel and frames and re-plank her. We also added a new mahogany deckhouse. It was almost a full rebuild.”



Freedom's restored wheelhouseThe effort was worthwhile, however. In 2010, McMillen Yachts was awarded the coveted World Superyacht Award for the restoration, and now *Freedom* is the flagship of the [McMillen fleet](#), which includes *Enticer*, an 85-foot fantail John Trumpy motoryacht (1935), and *Onawa*, a Starling Burgess-designed 12-Meter sailing yacht (1928).



December fire adjacent to the McMillen Yachts facility at the Hinckley Yard in Portsmouth, RI. The white McMillen sheds containing boats undergoing restoration and several of the fleet's vessels under winter covers can be seen immediately to the left of the blaze.

Last December, Earl McMillen had the fright of his life. A fire broke out aboard a yacht under repair at Hinckley Yachts in Portsmouth, immediately adjacent to the McMillen Yachts compound. At the time, McMillen Yachts was restoring the 1928 72-footer *Coastal Queen*, previously owned by the late James D. "Jim" Bishop, among other yachts.

The nine-alarm fire saw departments from towns around Narragansett Bay, including the Naval Fire Department, respond and was under control within about 60 minutes of igniting. Although the fire never spread to McMillen's compound, the firefighters did douse some of the boats and several tents to prevent the fire from spreading.



Miss Asia, inside one of the McMillen Yachts sheds.

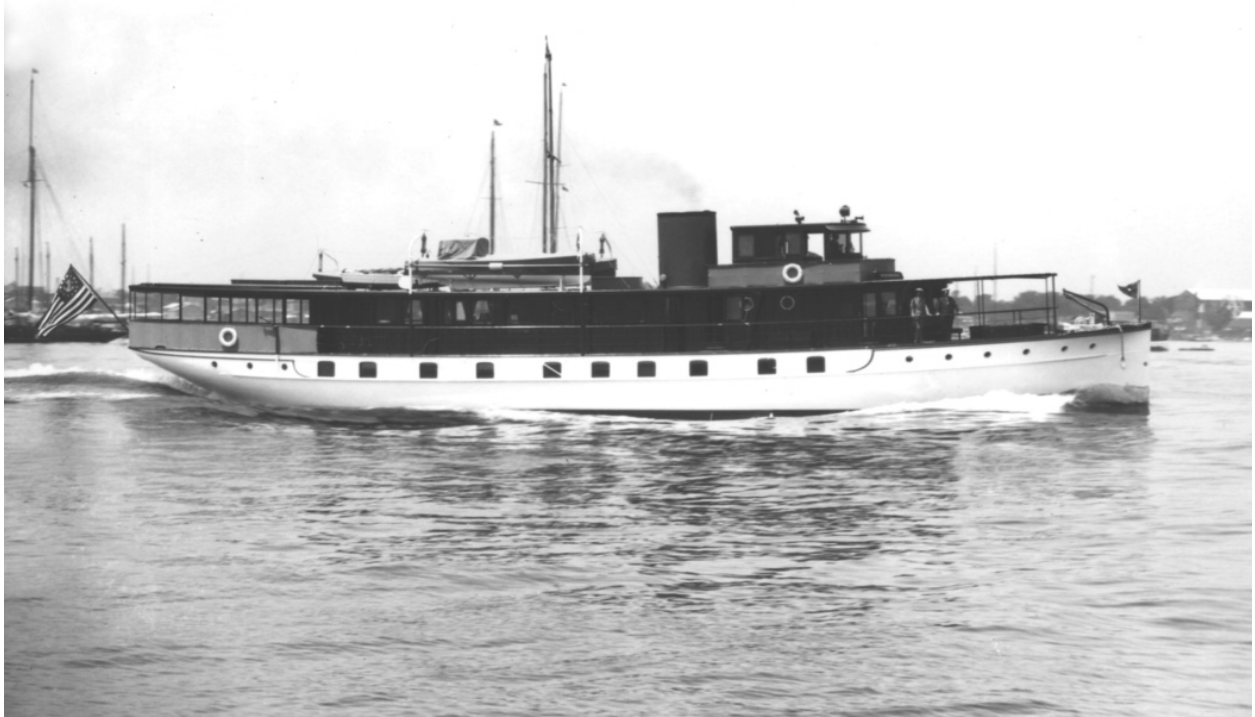
“Thankfully the wind wasn’t blowing out of the southwest that day, so the flames weren’t jumping over to our boats,” says a grateful McMillen. “I was anxious, but had faith in the fire departments. It was a few short minutes before they were on scene and quickly had the fire under control. It could’ve been a tremendous nightmare. Besides *Coastal Queen*, we also had in the shed *Miss Asia*, a 1923 Consolidated commuter yacht, and *Goddess*, a 1947 60-footer. To the north of that was another tent and more yachts inside and out. There were no fewer than six important classic yachts that would’ve gone up in flames if the fire spread. It would’ve been an absolute disaster.”



In addition to managing McMillen Yachts, Earl McMillen has served on the boards of Newport's Redwood Library & Athenaeum and the International Yacht Restoration School

McMillen's next prominent project may be his most ambitious. Last fall, he learned that a 110-footer, *Maemere* (a.k.a. *High Spirits*), was headed to the chainsaw because the boatyard in which she sat was about to be sold. Built in 1929, *Maemere* is one of the last surviving yachts of the Trumpy-Mathis collaboration.

“I got the call on a Tuesday in October and by Friday I was on a plane to San Diego,” says McMillen. “*Maemere* was exactly as I remembered her, a perfect restoration piece. I asked the yard to give me the weekend and reached out to a Newport investor with the story. He replied within seven minutes.”



Maemere, the 110' Trumpy-Mathis

Maemere was loaded onto a barge for a couple months so some of the hull could be re-planked, and she has now been relaunched. Next spring, she'll be towed to Mexico and placed on a barge for the trip to Newport.

“I don't think this restoration will be as comprehensive as *Freedom*,” says McMillen. “We'll have to replace the keel and some frames, and re-plank below the waterline, but hopefully we can keep the topside planking and the joinery on the deckhouse.”



McMillen hopes to preserve much of the topsides planking and deckhouse joinery on *Maemere*.

McMillen already has two sheds of stored boats ready for restoration, including his family's *Mahogany Lady*. And as with his mentor Tiedemann, it's the aesthetics and desire to keep a piece of history floating that keeps him doing what he loves.

"It's a visceral reaction. They really do speak to you," says McMillen. "There were so many interesting characters involved with these yachts, from the designers to the owners. My dad loved the classics and I say to my son I hope he's as fortunate as me and finds something he loves."