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Keeping Old Boats Out of the Woodpile



BY KENNY WOOTON
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Where I live in Connecticut, a cord of firewood costs about \$160. A cord is a tight stack roughly 4 feet by 4 feet by 8. There are numerous stories of people paying less for larger piles that contain the fragmented remains of once-beautiful, once-functional sailing boats and motor-yachts that carried families up bays and out to islands for memorable picnics and wonderful weekend adventures. Some carried young men and women on courses across oceans that changed their lives and off to races that made them famous. Others served as intimate platforms for decisions and discussions that changed the world.

Yachts are now made of materials that are generally stronger and easier to maintain. But who with a heart and an appreciation of beauty and fine craftsmanship isn't sad when he sees a tangled pile of wood that was once a boat? Who doesn't appreciate the intellectual labors of talented designers who created yachts as objects of beauty, pencil line by pencil line on the drawing board, and the physical labors of craftsmen who executed the visions with careful strokes of a plane? Those yachts were more than simple platforms for recreation.

For me, the thrill of reporting the "Keepers of the Flame" story in this issue was experiencing the profound passion the three people in the piece share for preserving and restoring our shared legacy. Each of the subjects, Bob Tiedemann, Elizabeth Meyer and Earl McMillen III, cited the horror of seeing those ugly woodpiles in boat yards as significant motivation for committing their careers to classic yacht preservation. Each has found a way to make a viable business out of the passion, and each is responsible for many classic

yacht restorations. More important still, perhaps, is that many of the boats they've restored are available for use by anyone willing to put up the charter fee.

I've benefited personally from their labors. I've witnessed two products of Meyer's restoration efforts, the J-Class yachts *Endeavour* and *Shamrock V*, cross tacks in the Caribbean trade winds. I've seen Tiedemann's vintage 12-Meters, *Gleam* and *Northern Light*, sail out of Newport for a day of America's Cup-style dicing on Rhode Island Sound. I've cruised up the Intracoastal Waterway on McMillen's *Belle* and raced aboard his 12-Meter *Onawa* in the America's Cup Jubilee. For these experiences, I am deeply grateful.

Meyer, Tiedemann and McMillen are based in one New England city: Newport, Rhode Island. But they're just a few of hundreds—perhaps more—committed enthusiasts worldwide whose sawing, planing, fastening, sanding, varnishing and painting give new life to wooden yachts of all sizes and types. Some are professionals who do restorations for a living, others are volunteers donating time in museums and still others are midway through decade-long projects in their garages and basements.

On a personal level, each is producing something of great value—something he someday may be able to sail or drive or show off to friends. But the collective efforts have greater implications. By preserving old boats, these people are sustaining the legacy all of us have inherited from the community of enthusiasts that preceded us. All yachtsmen owe these people a debt of gratitude. Thanks to them, our grandchildren may someday be boating on a bay and be treated to a sight that will feed their eyes and stir their souls.

If you get the chance to meet any of these people, shake their hands or, if it's appropriate, write them a check. They deserve it. Classic yachts always look better on a mooring coated in sparkling varnish than in a pile next to the fireplace.



Keepers of the Flame

By Kenny Wooton



Anyone with a passion for yachts and yachting owes these three residents of Newport, Rhode Island, a debt of gratitude. Their commitment to rescuing, restoring and preserving classic yachts is keeping alive the legacy we all share

Earl McMillen III



Rotting wood and varnish have always been elixirs to Earl McMillen III. Growing up in Georgia, his family owned a 68-foot, 1927

Densmore-built cruiser named *Mahogany Lady*, which they kept in the Florida Keys and used for vacations and on weekends. Later, they had a house on a mountain lake with a large concentration of classic runabouts. He'd hang out at the boathouse where many of the old-timers were restored and watch the craftsmen. In the mid-1980s, McMillen and his father restored a 39-foot, 1939 Elco as a project following the death of his little brother in a car accident. As he moved into his 30s, the experiences congealed into a career and a deep commitment to preserving classic yachts. Today, Newport-based McMillen Yachts, Inc., restores, maintains and manages a fleet of about a half-dozen classic powerboats and sailing yachts. Through a pioneering fractional ownership program, the company acquires and operates the boats for the pleasure of its partners and the posterity of the yachting community at large.

"I've always had a fascination with history and boating, and this has just been an offshoot of that," McMillen said.

The McMillens bought the Elco in 1986 and started her restoration. The elder McMillen wanted to sell the yacht and move on to other things when the project was finished, but the younger man set out to cruise from their base in Georgia to Maine, by way of a wooden boat show in Newport. He never made it to Maine. He fell in love with the Rhode Island city and spent the summer connecting with kindred spirits.

Later, on a trip to the Chesapeake, he found a pair of old ACF motoryachts, one swamped and one movable. He salvaged the wreck and took her to Georgia, where he later sold



Scout (above) is the latest launch by McMillen Yachts, Inc. As *Olympic Scout* (left), she hosted notable guests such as Richard M. Nixon. Pam (facing page) is the latest restoration by Seascope Yacht Charters.

her to a friend who restored her. He took the other to Newport and began a casual summer charter business while he finished his undergraduate degree in history at Columbia.

Another classic charter boat came and went over several years in Newport, but the seasonal cash flow made the operation more a hobby than a viable money-making venture.

"I always thought of it as a business," he said, "but it was never one that made any sense financially. I was always having to supplement the budgets for the boats. I've always been primarily interested in the classic motoryachts of the 1920s and '30s. I was hoping to do with the powerboats something along the lines of what Bob Tiedemann was doing with the 12-Meters."

After graduation, McMillen moved back to Atlanta and decided he wanted to make a living working with classic yachts. On one of his trips to the Chesapeake in the late '80s, he paid \$2,000 for a 47-foot day boat. The yacht had been moved to Massachusetts, where she sat for five or six years. He'd made some friends in Georgia who were intrigued by what he'd done with some of the boats he had restored on his own.



McMillen restored the 1928 Starling Burgess 12-Meter *Onawa* (above and right) in time for the America's Cup Jubilee. *Freedom* (bottom) begins her journey to a new life.



Through one of those friends, representatives of the Cloister hotel on Sea Island approached him about restoring a boat for guest use. The hotel didn't want to fund a restoration, but McMillen and friends developed a plan to sell shares to raise the money. The restored yacht ended up spending several years at the Cloister under McMillen management. The group then sold the boat, called *Zapala*, to a private owner who continues to operate her out of the hotel.

"The idea of building a fleet of fractionally owned boats came later," McMillen said. "My objective, having owned that boat for five or six years, was to see her restored. Once we did that and it worked well, we realized we could go out and save more boats doing it the same way. It looked like there was more demand for boats with cruising accommodations."

Most of the original partners joined to buy and restore a larger cruising yacht, the 77-foot, 1929-vintage motoryacht *Belle* ("Fore and After," September 2000), which was restored by a McMillen crew at the International Yacht Restoration School, founded by Newporter Elizabeth Meyer.

Under McMillen's fractional ownership programs, each yacht is set up as a limited liability corporation with the primary mission being charter by the partners at a preferred rate. Most are available for one-time charters to



non-partners who may be interested in investing. Partners put up, say, \$70,000 for a 5 percent share of the latest restoration, *Scout*. Investors are then offered charters at half the standard rate. Upon availability, and after they have fulfilled their usage allotment on *Scout*, they have access to the other McMillen yachts at the preferred rate. In addition, investors receive some depreciation and the prospect of their shares increasing in value over time. The company does limited advertising, preferring to network.

"We operate it like a private club," McMillen said. "The primary selling point is the ability to participate in the restoration of these fine boats and use them in the ways they were originally intended. These are people who wouldn't necessarily have the time to devote to owning their own boats, or really wouldn't have the interest. For their investment they can enjoy the boats and be part of this restoration movement."

McMillen Yachts takes a fee for the restorations and ongoing management, and retains shares in all the boats. McMillen himself uses them as much as he can. The company employs a full-time crew of shipwrights during restorations and prefers to finish projects fast.

McMillen's current fleet includes *Belle*, *Scout*, two Starling Burgess-designed 12-Meters built at Abeking & Rasmussen in the late '20s—one restored for the America's Cup Jubilee and another awaiting restoration—and the company's most recent acquisition, a 104-foot, Trumpy-designed, Mathis-built, 1926 cruiser called *Freedom*. Next on the restoration docket, though, is *Alondra*, the former *Mahogany Lady* and McMillen family yacht, which Tiedemann helped locate.

McMillen, 38, loves what he does, but senses an urgency to the broader mission.

"We're in the very early stages of trying to grab the last of these boats and make sure they wind up in the right hands," he said. "Within the next 10 years, the classic yachts will have either been restored or lost." McMillen Yachts, Inc., (401) 846-5557; www.wood-enyachts.com.