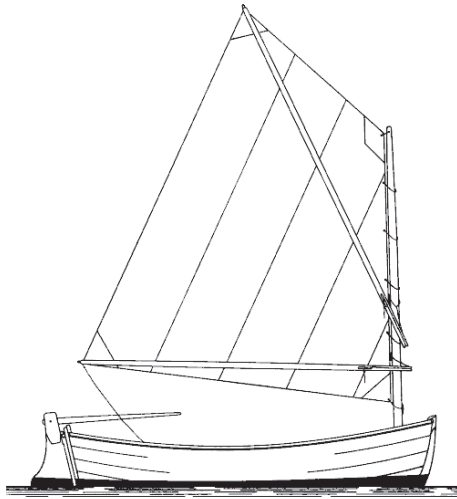


An Unlikely Voyage

2000 Miles Alone in a Small Wooden Boat

John Almberg



Unlikely Voyages
Books for the Adventurous Mind

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Sample Chapters

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For Helena, who has always said, “Just go for it”, no matter how crazy the idea.

Moreover, I, on my side, require of every writer, first or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life, and not merely what he has heard of other men's lives; some such account as he would send to his kindred from a distant land; for if he has lived sincerely, it must have been in a distant land to me.

— *Henry David Thoreau*

CHAPTER 1

I DECIDE TO BUILD A BOAT

And you, you will come too, young brother, for the days pass, and never return. Take the Adventure, heed the call, now ere the irrevocable moment passes! 'Tis but a banging of the door behind you, a blithesome step forward, and you are out of the old life and into the new! Then some day, some day long hence, jog home here if you will, when the cup has been drained and the play has been played, and sit down by your quiet river with a store of goodly memories for your company.
— Kenneth Grahame “*The Wind In the Willows*”

I could have titled this chapter ‘I decide to go to the moon’. That’s how difficult building a boat seems to me, even after forty years of sailing. More difficult than building furniture, for example. Furniture is mainly sticks joined together at right angles, but there are few right angles in a boat. Wooden boats aren’t built, they are carved—each plank bent and beveled and hollowed to fit the constantly changing shape of the hull. And unlike your average Chippendale, cosseted in a cozy bedroom, a boat needs to keep the sea out while an enraged King Neptune kicks in her ribs.

There’s another problem.

People have been telling me that I’m unhandy since I was a small boy. My brother was the handy one. He had a good eye. He was tall and strong. He looked good holding tools, and he could whip up a tree house or interplanetary space ship in no time. I was the bookish one. I preferred *reading* about people who built tree houses or interplanetary space ships. Tools felt awkward in my

hands, and I guess they looked awkward, too, because my poor old dad was forever shaking his head at me, and telling the neighbors over the fence that my brother was the handy one.

But somehow, in the middle of middle age, I've decided to build a wooden boat. It's not my fault. As in all good stories, there's a woman at the bottom of it.

The trouble started on the clearest, coldest day you can imagine. For a year, Helena and I had been shopping for a sailboat. To be more precise, I'd been shopping and Helena had been rejecting. She didn't reject the *idea* of sailing. She liked water sports. She liked me. We'd spent the last few years rowing a double scull in Huntington Harbor, and now she seemed ready to try something new and exciting. It was just that none of the boats we'd looked at had struck Helena's fancy. The many, *many* boats we'd looked at, such as the lusty ketch she'd turned thumbs-down on, back in the fall.

"What don't you like about her?" I'd asked while the salty beauty at my feet tugged impatiently at the dock lines—and my heart strings.

"I can't put my finger on it."

"It's the upholstery in the main salon, right? Who likes electric-blue suede, anyway? We could have the settees reupholstered."

"No, that's not it."

"The sail plan? A ketch is a bit different from what we've sailed before, but having a mizzen makes a lot of sense for cruising."

She'd looked at me as if I'd been speaking Japanese. "No, it's *not* the sail plan."

"Well, it would be helpful if you could give me a clue. Just a little one. Exactly what kind of boat are we looking for?"

"Don't worry," she'd said confidently. "I'll know it when I see it."

And that's how we ended up in a frozen marina on the coldest day of the year. As we approached the marina, tires crunching on frozen snow, I began to wonder why we were there at all.

"We're here because it's Sunday and you're restless," said Helena. "And because William invited us."

William, my insane friend from work. The wooden boat fanatic who'd heard we were in the market for a boat; and who, coincidentally, had one he was looking to unload.

"But I have no interest in wooden boats," I said. "I've never even been on a wooden boat. Not one that was floating, anyway."

When I was ten, my dear old dad had bought a massive raised-deck cruiser. He'd had it deposited in our yard and, as I remember it, she was larger than the house we lived in. Her paint was peeling, her seams had opened up, and my little brother—who was then deemed too young to work on boats—could poke his head between the missing planks and stick his tongue out at me as I wasted my summer scraping and sanding, sanding and scraping. That boat was a trial for me. It was a happy day when my father, three years wiser, took a chain saw to the rotting hulk.

"Seeing William's boat will be fun," said Helena. "Oh, there he is."

William stood by the marina's main gate, waving frantically, as if afraid we'd drive by. The wind, blowing off the harbor, picked up snow and whirled it around him like an ice tornado.

Reluctantly, I rolled down the window. The wind tousled the ginger hair on William's hatless head. He seemed immune to the cold.

"Just park over there, by the snow bank," he said with a big smile for Helena.

He cut the greetings short as we climbed out of our warm car.

"Much nicer on board the *Rose*!" he said. "This way! This way! Watch your step!"

He led us, Pied Piper-like, into the maze of boats. Nice, practical, fiberglass boats, hauled out of the water and wrapped in white plastic to sleep through the winter.

"Which one is yours?" I asked, trying to spot the wooden boat. All I could see ahead were bare blue bottoms.

"Not here! On the dock!"

He led us through the icy boat yard, to a long dock that floated on grey, sullen, half-frozen water. Its slips were empty, except for one boat with a wide deck, and a short but thick wooden mast.

“There she is! The *Rose!*” William pointed at her, as if we could be confused about which boat he meant. “Isn’t she beautiful? Wooden boats like to stay in the water year round, you know. Saves you money on hauling. Come along! It’s much warmer in the cabin.”

He grabbed Helena’s arm, steered her carefully down the slippery dock, and handed her onto the *Rose’s* deck. After a quick look around, they disappeared into the boat’s reputedly warmer cabin. A cheery glow spilled out of her portholes.

“Probably still uses kerosene lamps,” I said.

I lingered on the dock, studying the *Rose’s* lines. She wasn’t a large boat, maybe thirty-two feet, not including her ridiculously long bowsprit; but she was much beamier—wider—than her modern, plastic cousins, and the planks of her spacious teak deck swept from stem to stern, broken only by a cabin top and the small foot well that served as a cockpit.

Aloft, the *Rose’s* rigging was a maze of lines and blocks that reminded me of an old pirate movie.

“This isn’t a boat,” I thought, “it’s a museum.”

And yet, as I walked along her deck to the bow, I felt her solidity, her steadiness. This was a real ship, one that could take you places: to the high latitudes of Labrador, or the Faroe Islands, or down the trades to the South Pacific. Anywhere you dared to go.

A cold blast of wind brought me to my senses. Sure, she’d take you places. As long as you were handy and could keep her afloat long enough to get there. Wooden boats needed a ridiculous amount of maintenance. They demanded skills I didn’t have—skills practically no one had anymore. Crazy! I was far too sensible to fall for a white elephant like this. Plastic. That was the future. Time to get Helena out of William’s clutches. I walked back to the cockpit and opened the cabin door.

“Welcome aboard!” said William. He was sitting on the port-side settee—a kind of couch that doubles as a bunk. Helena was curled up on the starboard side. An old cast iron stove, much bespattered by ancient chowders, glowed in the galley.

“Is that a wood fire you’ve got going there?” I asked, worried.

“Coal! Much warmer,” said William. “Shut the door!”

The cabin was so warm that Helena had doffed her woolen coat. She held a steaming mug of something in her hands and looked dangerously comfortable.

“Hot cocoa?” William lifted a kettle off the stove and waved it over an empty mug. “Something stronger?”

He splashed a large amount of rum into the mug, while I perched uneasily on the settee next to Helena.

“Isn’t she beautiful?” said William, meaning the boat.

I braced myself to resist as William launched cheerfully into his sales pitch, pointing out the *Rose’s* various features, such as the mahogany drop-down table, the heavy bronze pumps in the galley (“both fresh and salt water!”), and the hand-carved bench in the forepeak that lifted up to reveal, ta-da!, the head.

Meanwhile, I sniffed. There was something odd about this *Rose*. Something was missing, but what was it? Ah, I had it. Where was the familiar, though slightly sickening, smell of diesel fuel? I looked aft, and saw nothing behind the companionway ladder but a few coils of rope and an orange life jacket.

“Doesn’t this boat have an engine?” I asked, interrupting William’s stream-of-consciousness ramble.

“Hell, no!” said William. “She doesn’t need one!”

“Isn’t that amazing?” Helena said. “No boat smell!”

I started to laugh. A boat with no engine, that was a riot. But my laugh died away when I saw the look on Helena’s face. William must have seen it too, because he suddenly leaned back on his settee with a satisfied smile.

“You know,” said Helena, looking rather pleased with herself, “this is the first boat we’ve looked at that I really like.”

“Well, yes, but...” I started to say, in my most condescending tone.

“Why aren’t we looking at wooden boats?”

* * *

A few minutes later, I maneuvered Helena back into the car. Telling the slightly disappointed-looking William that we would,

“certainly think about it!” I sped out of the marina, my tires throwing a larger spray of snow in William’s direction than politeness strictly allowed.

“So, why *aren’t* we looking at wooden boats?” Helena asked again.

Why? Wasn’t it obvious?

“For the same reason no one uses cotton sails anymore,” I said. “Or hemp lines, or dial telephones, for that matter. Time moves on. Technology improves. Civilization advances.”

But this line of reasoning didn’t seem to carry much weight with Helena. Not Helena the Brazilian who insisted we live in a ‘real’ house made of concrete; who required steam radiators that hissed and gurgled and warmed our clothes so beautifully on cold winter mornings; and who loved the impractical cast iron windows she’d lovingly restored.

“The thing is,” she said, “when you touch wood, it feels good. When you touch that powdery fiberglass stuff, it feels horrible.” She made a face.

“That’s the gelcoat,” I explained. “That only happens on older boats and you can clean it up with polish.”

“No one does, though, do they? They all have it. It’s horrible.”

Horrible. I was getting that part of the message. Pretty clearly.

“And then there’s the smell,” she said with an air of finality.

“That’s the diesel engine. Has nothing to do with whether the boat is wood or fiberglass.”

“But every fiberglass boat seems to have an engine. And they all smell.”

“But we *need* an engine.”

“That’s silly. Who would want a boat that smells?”

“But...”

“And did you notice the deck? So much space!” She smiled, as if imagining herself sunbathing on that wide, flat deck under a hot July sun. Did I mention Helena is Brazilian?

I’d heard this particular complaint from Helena many times. Even when sailing on large boats, owned by rich friends, there was never a place to sunbathe. Or to even sit comfortably. Every square

foot of your modern sailboat is covered by the cabin top, or a cleat, or a sheet track.

“Yes,” I said, conceding this minor point to female logic. “But the simple fact of the matter is, I don’t know anything about wooden boats. I have no idea how to fix them. And everyone knows that wooden boats require a huge amount of maintenance. In fact, they say you spend more time fixing a wooden boat than you do sailing her.”

I smugly rested my case, confident the argument that had satisfied two generations of American sailors would defeat even Helena.

She dismissed it with a wave of her hand. “You can learn!”

“But I’m not *handy!*” I said, suddenly feeling desperate.

“You always say that. It’s silly. Who told you that?” She waited for an answer as I floundered, not even knowing where to begin.

“Never mind,” she said. “You just need practice. And I have the perfect project for you to start on. You know that door in our bedroom?”

The door that hadn’t closed properly for fifty years? The door that generations of previous owners had struggled with—the marks of their futile efforts barely marring the edges of the fiendishly non-fitting, solid oak door? Yes, I knew it. I also knew that nothing I could say about that door would have any effect on Helena, who is rarely swayed by logic and who has a deranged but bracing confidence in my hidden (and even unsuspected) abilities.

Besides, she’d been bugging me about it for months.

“I’ll look into it,” I grumbled.

* * *

The next weekend, I confronted that balky bedroom door.

Since I’m an unhandy guy, my usual approach to hated, home-handyman jobs is to rush through them as quickly as possible, with lots of huffing, puffing, and “Where’s my dang screw driver!?” type dramatics. I inherited this approach from my father, the Huffer-and-Puffer-in-Chief of our whole family.

But for some reason—and I can’t say what it was—I took a dif-

ferent tack with this job. Maybe, with four kids still in the house, I was just motivated to have a bedroom door that closed; maybe I started off so stumped on this project (*why* didn't it close???) that rushing through it wasn't an option; or maybe I was just ready for it.

Whatever the reason, I let out a deep breath and decided to give the job as much time as it needed. Little did I know what a turning point this decision would be.

At first, the problem with the door didn't seem complicated. Our house had been built in 1929 by an Italian immigrant who'd made some money in New York City as a master mason, working on the 8th Avenue Madison Square Garden. This man had been an artist in concrete: the house was a minor Art Deco masterpiece, and I have no doubt that the door fit perfectly when he first carried his young bride into the bedroom.

Nevertheless, in the eighty years since, either the door or the door frame had changed shape. They no longer matched. The peg no longer fit the hole.

Since the shape of the door frame was literally fixed in concrete, I swiftly reasoned that I'd have to reshape the door to fit the frame. Slightly dazzled by this unexpectedly brilliant insight, I pushed the door against the frame to see where it stuck. At the top, I saw. It was a quarter inch too tall at the top. If I could take a bit off, maybe with some sort of file.

I actually had a rusty old file in my pitiful collection of hand-me-down tools. I fetched it from the basement and stood on a chair to get a better view of the problem.

The top of the door looked as if it had been chewed by a chipmunk: shallow, grooved tooth marks gnawed into eighty year old oak. The chipmunk hadn't gotten far. I compared the toothed file in my hand with the tooth marks on the door. Apparently, at least one previous owner had had similar tools. And skills.

I climbed off the chair, sat on it, and had a think. Perhaps a saw was a better tool for the job. Yes, I was sure it would be. I climbed back on the chair, measured the amount to be cut three times, then took the door off its hinges and lugged the absurdly heavy monster

down to my ‘workshop’ in the basement.

At that point, my workshop consisted of a rickety table and a handful of rusty tools. Luckily, one of the tools was an ancient handsaw I’d inherited from my grandfather. I didn’t know it at the time, but it was a Disston—a saw of noble lineage. This was luck akin to Bilbo finding *Sting* in a troll’s cave. Fate? I don’t know, but by some magic, the saw’s teeth were still sharp.

I laid the door on the table, picked up the saw, eyed the line I’d marked, and then had a moment familiar to every newbie woodworker. Was the line drawn correctly? Could I follow the line? Or, with one cut, would I ruin a beautiful—and let’s face it, valuable—piece of wood? Would I end up the hero who fixed something? Or the damn fool who destroyed it? Helena loved that door, even if it didn’t close.

It took a long time to work up the courage, but eventually I consigned my fate to the gods, and started making sawdust. Amazingly, when I rehung the door on its hinges, it closed with a satisfying *snick*. Helena applauded.

“Wow,” I said, opening and closing the door, wondering if it really had been fifty years since it last closed properly.

As that door closed, another one opened. *Time*. It was all about *time*. My grandfather—a blacksmith, raconteur, and perennial seeker of rainbows—had a stock of proverbs he loved to repeat. One of them was, “You can climb any mountain, as long as you climb it slowly enough.” He’s said it a million times, but I’d never really listened. Maybe, with enough time, I could fix or build anything.

Such is the delusional power that comes from fixing a door.

“I might even be able to fix a wooden boat,” I said, not realizing I’d spoken aloud.

“Of course you can,” said Helena, giving me a congratulatory kiss before moving on to the eighty-two other chores she accomplished that day. Such is the power of women.

“I might even be able to *build* a wooden boat,” I said, the idea taking hold. “A small boat,” I corrected myself, some remnant of common sense still clinging on. “A dinghy. We’ll need a dinghy,

anyway. If I can build a small wooden boat, I might be able to maintain a larger one.”

Palm trees waving against a blue sky. A pink beach. A gleaming white schooner floating in a turquoise lagoon. A stout dinghy pulled up on the sand. Helena and I picnicking on the beach...

And that was how all the trouble started.

CHAPTER 2

MY PLAN EVOLVES

If a man must be obsessed by something, I suppose a boat is as good as anything, perhaps a bit better than most.

— E.B. White

Unfortunately, enthusiasm, backed by hazy dreams, can only carry you so far. By the next day, skepticism had set in. Could I really learn how to build a boat? It didn't seem likely.

"You need to do some research," said the Engineer in me.

"Books!" I thought. "The answer will be in a book. Somewhere."

"No! Just dive in!" the Adventurer in me cried. "Life is short!"

"Doing your homework is the responsible thing to do," said the Engineer.

"What's responsibility got to do with it?" cried the Adventurer. "This is a boat we're talking about!"

With that, the Adventurer and Engineer set to, wrestling vigorously over the issue as if their very lives depended on it. You'd think the rough, tough Adventurer would beat the nerdy Engineer every time, but no. As usual, the Engineer won.

"He's a dirty fighter," said the Adventurer, nursing a bruised lip. The Engineer just smiled, smugly.

I drove to the library.

Normally, I found our local library a bit useless. Although the building itself was beautiful and meticulously maintained, its collection was packed with old, hopelessly out-of-date tomes such as "DOS 4 for Nitwits" and "The 1968 Ford Fairlane Repair Guide".

But this time, outdated books were just what I was after. I hoped that somewhere in that temple to old books I'd find the information I needed to get started. So, pen and notebook in hand, I walked into the Huntington Library on Main Street, and went straight to the reference desk.

"I'm looking for information on how to build a wooden boat," I said to the rather stately looking woman sitting behind a computer.

"Oh," her look seemed to say. "You're one of *them*."

"Follow me," she said.

I trailed behind her, down the aisles between tall shelves of old books, further and further from the main reading room. In the deepening silence, her skirt rustled, making it sound as though we were walking through piles of dry leaves. We turned right, then left, then right again. The flickering lights seemed to grow darker. There didn't seem to be any other patrons in this part of the library. And still we carried on, deeper and deeper into the trove of old books.

At last we entered what must have been the oldest part of the building, and the aisle came to an end. We faced a blank grey wall. The librarian stopped and motioned towards the very last shelf of books.

"You'll find them about half way down on the left," she said. Then, without waiting for any questions, she rustled off, the sound of her skirt gradually fading away, leaving me in profound silence.

I looked at the end of the shelf. A hand-written card had been inserted into a brass frame: *Stuff Nobody Reads Anymore*, it said.

"Ah-ha," I said. "Perfect."

* * *

Many years ago, when Helena and I first started looking for a house together, we agreed it would be her job to drive around with her real estate agent friend Leslie, visit a bunch of houses, and draw up a list of five or six homes that suited our tastes, needs, and budget. We would then visit them together and make our decision. Very organized and efficient.

So I was a bit surprised when Helena returned early from her first day's house-hunting with a big smile on her face.

"I found it!" she said. "It's perfect!"

"You can't have found it," I said, hardly looking up from my computer.

"It was the first house we looked at," Helena said. "Leslie wanted to show me a few others, but there was no point. We went and had coffee instead. You're going to love it!"

"Darling," I said, very patiently. "That's not how it works."

"Why?"

"Because what if there's something better out there?"

"There isn't," she said confidently. "This is it."

"We can't buy the first house you look at!"

"Why not?"

"I don't know!" I said, sputtering a bit. "It's just wrong!"

So Helena dutifully visited dozens of other houses, each time returning with a sad shake of her head. After a week, I relented, and visited that first house with her. She was right. It was perfect. We still live in it.

My hunt for a dinghy to build was something like that.

* * *

Back in the furthest corner of the library, I discovered two shelves bulging with boatbuilding books, many of them 50 or 60 or 100 years old. I scanned the faded titles, looking for a place to start. Most of them looked highly technical, with titles like *Lapstrake Boatbuilding*. What was a lapstrake? No idea.

One book looked promising: John Atkin's *Practical Small Boat Designs*. 'Practical' and 'small' sounded about right. I pulled the book off the shelf, not expecting much from the first book I looked at.

It almost fell open to a well-thumbed page. Someone in the distant past must have loved the design for the *Florence Oakland*, a twenty-two foot... *schooner*? That was odd. I didn't know much about old boats, but I knew that two-masted schooners were usually big boats. Yet a photo showed the little *Florence Oakland* tear-

ing through the water with all sails flying, looking like a miniature tall ship. You had to look closely to see she was a day sailer.

The next design was even odder: *Valgerda*, an eighteen foot Hardangersjekte? This boat looked positively Nordic, with its swooping lines and up-thrust bow. Its square-shaped sail looked straight off a Viking boat. Fascinating.

I slowly paged through the rest of the book, studying each design, each one illustrated by drawings and photographs. Not one looked like what I thought of as a ‘normal’ sailboat — i.e., a round-bottom, fin-keel, Bermuda-rigged cruiser/racer. The book was a real eye-opener.

There were also five dinghy designs in Atkin’s book. Three were prams (flat on both ends), and two were skiffs (pointy in the front). One in particular looked perfect.

The skiff was called *Cabin Boy*. He had a certain sturdy stoutness that made him look capable of sailing around the world, or at least across the emerald green lagoon of my Polynesian dream. There was something about the *Cabin Boy* design that spoke to me. As soon as I saw him, I knew I’d found my dinghy.

“No. You can’t choose the first boat you look at,” the Engineer in me said. “You need to do more homework.”

“Homework, schmoamwork,” the Adventurer said. “He’s perfect!”

“For all you know, there are a dozen better designs hidden in those old books, just waiting to be built. Go on, keep looking.”

Dutifully, I put down Mr. John Atkin’s book, and pulled the next one from the shelf. Oddly, it was by another Atkin—a Mr. William Atkin. Flipping through the first few pages, I discovered it was not so odd: William was John’s father. I skipped through the first chapter, which was about William’s boyhood, and started reading Chapter 2, which started off like this:

In the late spring of 1906, if you had by chance been walking or carriage-riding through a most delightful byway which lead from the cozy little hamlet of Cold Spring Harbor to the then pastoral village of Huntington, L.I., NY, you might have noticed two very young men driving a livery horse and buggy.

Upon reflection, I somehow feel you would have noticed this plodding equipage and its two carefree occupants. — William Atkin, Of Yachts & Men.

Huntington, NY? That's where I was that very minute. Coming from Cold Spring Harbor, they must have driven down Main Street, right past the library, over a hundred years ago. For some reason, I found that amazing. I read on.

The two young men in the buggy were William Atkin and his friend Cottrell Wheeler, and they were on their way to purchase the Red Boat Shop from Charles Sammis, a member of an old Huntington family. For the next thirty years, I read, William and Cottrell built boats in Huntington Harbor. John Atkin had been raised right in the village. How had I never heard of the Atkins? Could the whole town have forgotten them?

Seized by a sudden impulse, I checked the book out of the library and walked down Main Street, determined to find the old Atkin & Wheeler boat shop. Fate seemed to be calling me. I followed the directions printed in the story:

Reaching the intersection of Main Street and New York Avenue, turn left and proceed about one mile; the red building on the waterside will be the boatbuilding shop of Charles G. Sammis & Son.' And so it was. A new building standing on piles; some outbuildings; some boats standing on blocking in the yard; and wood smoke curling from the steam box fireplace; a delightful old-fashioned boatshop. The tide was very high with a soft breeze rippling the salt creek water which washed the little beach upon which the shop was built. — William Atkin, Of Yachts & Men.

But when I reached the spot where the old creek led into the head of the harbor, I realized the little Red Boat Shop was gone. That wasn't surprising, really. Even the creek was mostly gone, dammed and filled to within an inch of its life. I stood on the spot where the old boat shop had been and looked over Huntington Harbor, trying to see it as William had, those many years ago. I felt I almost could.

The call of Fate is strong and it's a foolish sailor who spurns her unsubtle nudges.

I made my decision on the spot: the dinghy I built would be the Atkin skiff, *Cabin Boy*.

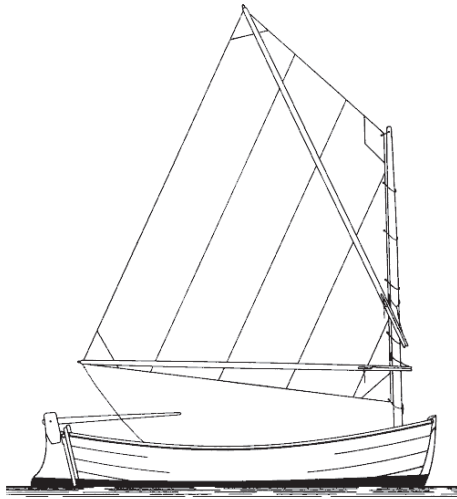
Back home, I showed *Cabin Boy's* design to Helena, and she oooh-ed and aaah-ed in all the right places. That confirmed my decision. Maybe this boatbuilding thing wouldn't be so hard, after all. I ordered the plans from Mrs. Pat Atkin, John's widow, who still carried on the family business after John's passing in 1999. She had a website, but preferred more traditional means of payment.

"How appropriate," I said. I dusted off my checkbook and my quill pen, and dispatched my order for *Cabin Boy's* plans via what used to be called the Post.

Choosing a boat design? Done.

Would it be as easy to build?

As I inventoried my collection of half-rusted, hand-me-down tools, I had my doubts.



*John Atkin's 7'6" Skiff -- Cabin Boy
Used with permission from Pat Atkin
www.atkinboatplans.com*

CHAPTER 3

I AM BITTEN

Houses are but badly built boats so firmly aground that you cannot think of moving them... The desire to build a house is the tired wish of a man content thenceforward with a single anchorage. The desire to build a boat is the desire of youth, unwilling yet to accept the idea of a final resting place.

— Arthur Ransome

“There is nothing particularly difficult about sailing,” my friend John V. mused, as we beat across Peconic Bay into a freezing breeze. “But there are an enormous number of simple skills to be mastered.”

At that particular moment, I was trying to master the skill of staying warm under the dodger, while John squinted into the wind like the Ancient Mariner, seemingly unaffected by the ferocious wind-chill.

Still, I took his point. There were the basic sailing skills, like helmsmanship and sail trimming that you learned as a child in a dink or Sun Fish. Then there were the big boat skills you learned at the knee of your father or uncle, such as knot tying, anchoring, docking, putting in a reef without getting blown off the cabin top, and crawling forward to change the headsail in the middle of a Wednesday night race.

Then, when you finally ventured out of your childhood harbor, master of your own little ship, there were the skills of weather forecasting, coastal piloting, and the granddaddy of them all, celestial navigation.

And that is forgetting the domestic skills of getting a hot meal

out of a heaving galley, or maneuvering your way into a V-berth without dislocating your hip.

Yes, John was right. Learning to be a proper sailor took longer than getting a Ph.D. So what was I doing, effectively doubling my lifetime course load, by opting for the double major of sailing *and* boatbuilding?

Trying to keep Helena happy, of course.

The night before, I'd been browsing the various boat broker websites on the Internet, and had seen a boat that seemed like the perfect big sister for *Cabin Boy*. She was a *Blue Moon Yawl*—a twenty-three foot sailboat designed by Tom Gilmer—and she was a real beauty. I just couldn't get her out of my mind, even with an ice cold spray pelting my face, but the price! The owner wanted \$20,000—even more than William had wanted for the much bigger Rose. Far too much for a small boat. I tried to put her out of my mind, but it wasn't easy.

Back on shore, in my warm study, I was quickly learning that boatbuilding, like sailing, wasn't a single skill, but a vast collection of skills, and the first skill I needed to master was lofting.

Lofting, I read, is the black art of translating the small-scale, paper plans you receive from your designer into the full-scale plans you need to build the various pieces of your boat.

In boatbuilding mythology, lofting is the eye of the needle through which all newbie boatbuilders must pass before entering boatbuilding heaven. I was determined to be among the few who succeeded.

To that end, while waiting for *Cabin Boy's* plans to arrive, I studied every lofting book I could get my hands on. It was hard going.

"It's a classic chicken-and-egg problem," I told Helena one evening. "I need experience to loft *Cabin Boy* properly, but I can't get that experience until I loft a boat."

"You've spent twenty-five years doing the most tricky, detailed work possible," Helena said, meaning computer programming.

"True. But this lofting..." I sucked my breath through pursed lips, and shook my head.

She didn't look impressed.

I tried to explain. Every boatbuilding book has a chapter that insists lofting *isn't* a black art—that any damn fool can do it. It then proceeds to demystify the supposed non-mystery with language and diagrams so impenetrably complicated that the mind—at least this mind—boggles.

Even Wikipedia, the giant online encyclopedia that explains Nuclear Fusion with enough detail to threaten national security, sputters out after a few confused sentences when trying to explain the ancient art of lofting. They throw in the towel saying: “Generally, boatbuilding books have a detailed description of the lofting process, beyond the scope of this article.”

So when the postman finally delivered the tube containing *Cabin Boy's* plans, my stomach fluttered with a combination of excitement, and fear.

“I'm not sure I can do this,” I said, as we unrolled the five sheets of paper, filled with intricate construction drawings and arcane measurements.

“Of course you can,” Helena said.

I spread each sheet on the dining room table, and weighed down their curled corners with Helena's collection of small candles. When the plans were laid out flattish, we stood back to admire them.

“Looks complicated,” I said.

I pointed to one sheet that was more abstract than the others. Instead of detailed construction drawings, the page contained a simple set of lines. Three sets, actually, encoding *Cabin Boy's* essential dimensions in three views: in profile, as seen from above, and as a series of cross sections.

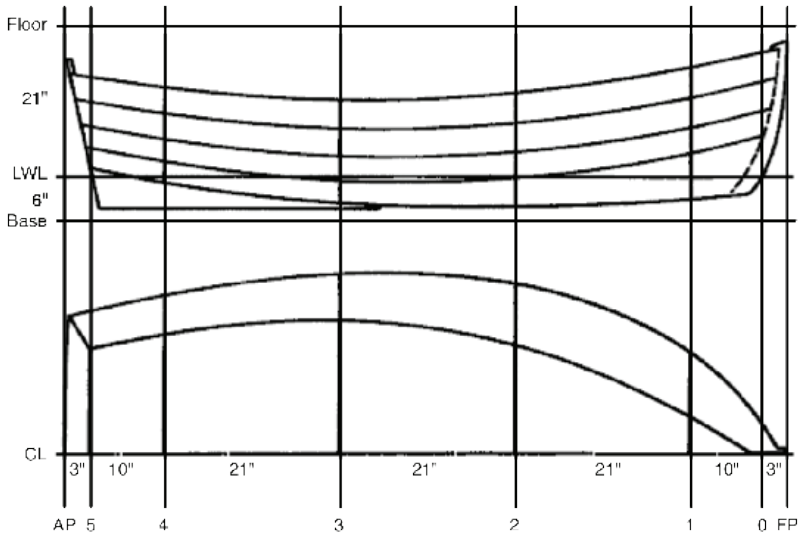
“I think these are *the lines*,” I said, parroting something I'd read in my boatbuilding books. “The lines I need to loft.”

“See? You're becoming an expert, already.”

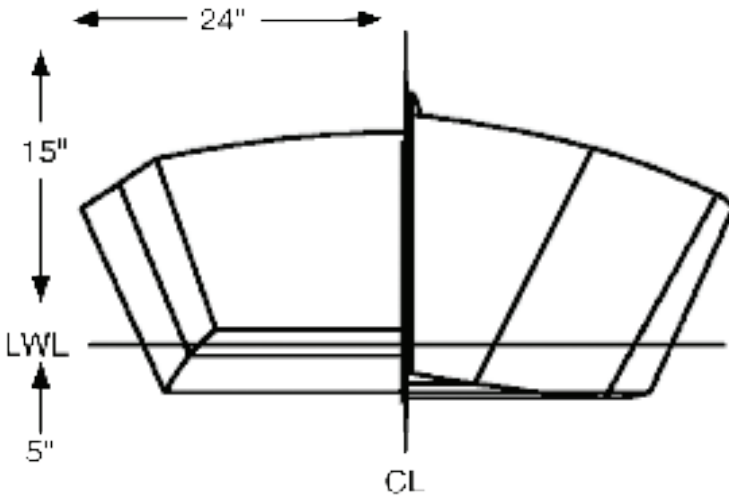
I studied them. *Cabin Boy's* lines looked simpler than those for some round-bottom boats I'd seen in books. Just one waterline and no... what were they called? Buttock lines?

“Right, I'll leave you to it!” Helena said, already seeing the tell-

Cabin Boy's Lines
 (Not the real dimensions)



Profile/Half Breadth Grid with Dimensions



Body Plan Grid with Dimensions

tale signs of a man on a mission. The single mindedness that allowed my caveman ancestors to chase after an antelope for days, until it dropped to its knees in defeat. Victory through persistence: an underrated skill bred into the male human genes. Dormant, perhaps, in me, but slowly awakening, like dawn over the savanna.

“M’mm, right. Thanks,” I muttered.

Lines, points, grids. I knew a bit about geometry. In fact, my degree was in Computer Science, but like everyone else, I suffered through high school geometry thinking, “I’m never going to use this stuff,” and I was right. For twenty-five years I toiled in the field of mathematics and never used geometry. As I labored to make sense of *Cabin Boy’s* plans, I wondered if it was finally going to come in handy.

* * *

Before I could start lofting, though, I needed a surface large enough to hold the full-size plans. Traditionally, lofting was done on the floor of the sail loft over the boat shop. The loft floor was sanded smooth and left open, so it was the perfect place for lofting the boat at the beginning of a project, and for building the sails at the end.

Unfortunately, I didn’t have a sail loft over my boat shop. In fact, I didn’t have a boat shop at all. What I had was a semi-finished room in my basement—a room half-filled with old furniture: a sofa, TV, rowing machine, and three large bookshelves crammed with books. The castoffs that had made the room cozy were now decidedly in the way.

I was particularly short of floor space. Boats, even small ones, take up a lot of room. First, I’d need room on the floor for a lofting board which, for *Cabin Boy*, would have to be the size of a four-by-eight-foot sheet of plywood. Once I had the plans lofted, I’d need more space for the skiff’s eight foot long mold. I’d also need plenty of room on both sides of the mold for bending on long planks and other space-hungry tasks. Finally, I’d need to squeeze in a work bench, tools, stacks of wood, various goops and fasteners and ropes. Not that I had any of these things, yet, but I was *anticipating*.

Unfortunately, the floor wasn't large enough to hold both a sheet of plywood and *Cabin Boy's* mold and a work bench. That was a problem.

Luckily, I'd just picked up an out-of-print book called *Building the Skiff "Cabin Boy": A Step-by-step Pictorial Guide* by Clem Kuhlig. Clem must have had the same space problem I did, because his book contained an intriguing idea: mounting the lofting board on the wall. That would save valuable floor space, and eliminate the need to crawl around on my knees while drawing the plans. As soon as I read this idea, I decided: 'Right, that's for me'.

I immediately drove down to our local Big Box hardware store and purchased the smoothest sheet of ¼ inch plywood I could find, along with a handful of concrete wall anchors. After raising a cloud of dust with an impact drill, my lofting board hung on the wall like a high school blackboard.

As I stood back to admire this sheet of plywood, mounted on the wall with twelve heavy-duty wall anchors, it occurred to me that I had just completed my second woodworking project, and it was pretty trivial.

So why did I feel so good?

Helena came up behind me, put her arm on my shoulder, and helped with the admiring process.

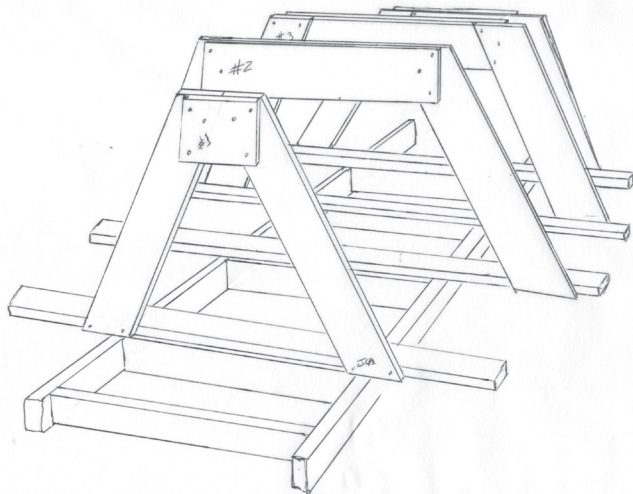
"You've started," she said.

She was right. That was it: I'd cast off the lines to the Pier of Procrastination, and was on my way.

* * *

Like supermodels, boats are mainly skin and bones. Big boats, like models and dinosaurs, carry their bones around inside them for strength and to help them keep their shape. Small boats shed most of their bones before birth to save weight.

In boatbuilding language, the bones are called molds. A mold is something like the rib of an *Apatosaurus*, only smaller. Like the *Apatosaurus's* ribs, each mold is a different size and shape. When you bend the boat's skin (planking) around the molds, the molds determine the boat's shape, in the same way that the dinosaur's



*Cabin Boy's Molds
Mounted on Ladder-like Strongback*

ribs determine its shape. When the planking is secured and reinforced, the molds are removed.

Once I'd lofted *Cabin Boy's* lines on my plywood lofting board—a tortuous job that took weeks of trial-and-error drawing, erasing, and redrawing—I was finally able to take measurements from the full-sized plans, to use them to build the molds out of cheap pine, and to mount the molds sturdily on a ladder-like structure called a strongback.

When done, the finished mold assembly looked impressive to my eyes, but it suddenly occurred to me that *none* of the wood that I'd carefully selected, measured, cut, and fastened together would actually end up in the finished boat. They were just *Cabin Boy's* bones. Eventually, I'd have to pull them out of the hull and throw them in my junk box.

In short, I hadn't even started building my boat. To do so, I needed some real wood—not construction grade lumber, but the

half-inch of knot-free planking that would someday be the only thing between my feet and the bottom of the deep blue sea, or at least the bottom of Huntington Harbor.

When John Atkin drew *Cabin Boy*, he didn't bother to draw up a lumber list. I imagine his audience of hearty, do-it-yourselfers would have been insulted if he had. So it was up to me to study the five pages of plans, to visualize every plank and chine and seat riser, to imagine the length and shape of wood it would be cut from, and to add that piece to my wood list.

Cabin Boy, as conceived by John Atkin, was a creature of oak and cedar: oak for the bones, and cedar for the skin. Other woods were used by builders in other parts of the world, but for builders on the East coast of the US—particularly the New England boatbuilders who flourished during the heyday of the wooden boat age—air dried white oak and white cedar were the woods of choice.

White oak is heavy and rugged. It holds fasteners well. When green it can easily be steam-bent into ribs and other structural components. Its cell structure is closed, which stops water from getting inside of it, making it resistant to decay and rot. It's also beautiful when varnished. A better wood for frames and other structural members would be hard to imagine.

White cedar is light, rot resistant, bends well, and shrinks hardly at all. It's the perfect wood for planking.

One problem: where to buy them? If you amble down the aisles of your local BigBox lumber store, you will find kiln-dried red oak and red cedar, which are great for building shelves and decks, but useless for boatbuilding.

To get boat-quality white oak and white cedar, you have two choices. The first choice—if you're the kind of person that thinks ahead and lays down stores for the future—would be to buy your wood green from a small mill nestled deep in the New England forest. You'd take the wet planks right off the saw, truck them home, paint the ends to reduce checking, and stack them outside, inserting stickers between each board to allow air to circulate freely through the stack. In a year or two, you'd have prime boatbuilding

wood, worth twice what you paid for it.

On the other hand, if you're like me, you probably don't have stacks of wood drying in your backyard, and don't want to wait a year or two to start building. You want your wood now! In that case, you'll need to start hunting for lumber that someone else had the foresight to cut and dry. I didn't need to fill my entire list—I wasn't that confident, yet. No, what I had in my sights were the two pieces of white oak for *Cabin Boy's* backbone—the stem and keelson—and a good-size piece of mahogany for the transom.

I hoped to find a local supplier. As romantic as it might sound to drive up to a small lumber yard in Maine, it wasn't practical to drive a thousand miles every time I needed another piece of wood. So I started the old fashioned way—with the phone book. There were two local yards that sounded promising. Both mentioned the word 'hardwoods' in their listings, which most didn't, and both were short drives away. Optimistically packing my lumber list and American Express card, I drove off through the suburban wilderness to bag my wood.

The first yard shattered my confidence almost immediately. It was nestled by the side of the railroad tracks in a space that seemed too small for a sawmill. It consisted of a main yard, surrounded by barn-like sheds on three sides. The office was in front, by the main gate, but the door was locked and no one answered the bell.

I left Helena's tiny Honda Fit out front and wandered, hesitantly, through the open gate, wondering where everyone was. The central yard was piled high with two-foot thick, uncut logs. A dusting of snow lay on the frozen ground and on the logs themselves. Somewhere, hidden in one of the barns, a saw screamed.

What to do? Follow the sound of the saw? Crack open the door and wave to a burly sawyer who was, no doubt, half-deafened by the work of slicing gigantic logs into massive planks? Get him to shut down the line so he could hear my pathetic request for a few toothpicks?

He'd either laugh me out of the shed, or strap me to a log to teach me a lesson. I started walking backwards. No... perhaps not... best not to bother him.

“Can I help you, sir?”

Rather than the tall, austere Yankee I'd expected to find, I found myself talking to a rather short, smiling Central American.

“I'm looking for a couple pieces of white oak,” I said apologetically, as if white oak was some rare, exotic wood. “Got anything like that?”

“Sure, sure,” he said, waving me in the direction of a door I hadn't seen, clearly marked ‘Hardwoods’. “How much you looking for?”

Inside the shed were shelves containing random lengths of various woods. One shelf was labeled “White Oak”.

“We don't have too much,” he confessed, as we looked at his stock, which consisted of a few rather narrow boards.

He helped me pick through the stock, looking for a piece that was wide enough for my keelson, or thick enough for the stem, but it was clear that he didn't have either. Hopes dashed.

“Red oak no good?” he asked, pointing to the next rack which was stacked high with long, thick boards.

“No good,” I said. “I'm building a boat.”

“Ah,” he said gravely, looking me up and down again, as if re-measuring me for something. “That is hard, building a boat.”

“Yes,” I said. “Yes it is.”

* * *

The next place was situated in a modern industrial park, right off the highway. Its front office had the windows, high ceilings, and open space of an auto dealership. And the chief salesman had obviously spent some time selling used cars.

“White oak?” he said in a loud voice. “Definitely. Got a few beautiful slabs. Gorgeous stuff.”

“Slabs?”

“Flitch sided, vertical grain. You said you're building a boat, right?”

“Yes,” I said. I was about to tell him it was only a seven foot boat, but talking to him was like talking back to a firehose.

“Just the thing, then. Got them in from Pennsylvania last night.

Won't last long. Name's Josh, by the way," he said, sticking out his hand. "Come and take a look!"

He led me through a half-mile of warehouse stacked high with plywood and particle board and lumber. Enough to rebuild a whole village from scratch, it looked like. Forklifts zoomed up and down the aisles and Josh kept up such a steady stream of sales patter that I couldn't squeeze in a question.

Then he stopped, waved his hand, and said, "Here they are."

I looked where he was pointing, but didn't see any boards.

"What am I looking at?" I asked.

"These, right here." He smacked his hand against a monolith that towered over my head; a slab so monumental, it could have been a stunt-double in *2001—A Space Odyssey*.

"There are three of them, as you can see. Just let me know which one you want," he said. "Take your time. I'll be in the office."

With that, he pulled out one of those push-to-talk phones, and strode off into the labyrinth of aisles, beeping and barking.

I remained, gaping at the three slabs, as he called them. They were twelve feet tall and four feet wide, sawn right through the tree, about four inches thick, with bark on both edges.

They were massive, rough sawn, and beautiful.

I'd never seen such a thing. Never imagined you could buy a hunk of wood like that on Long Island. And yet, as Josh had said, here they were. I could have them forklifted onto the roof of my Fit, and drive away with enough white oak to last a life time. Assuming the little car wasn't squashed flat, of course. I wondered if they delivered.

Like an eighteen year old virgin, I lusted after these blond beauties for a while; then, like the mature, adult male that I was, I gradually came to my senses. Sure, *Cabin Boy's* stem and keelson were hidden in those slabs, somewhere, but how to get them out? Leaving aside the impracticality of buying a three thousand pound piece of wood, I had no idea how to turn one of these monsters into usable pieces of lumber.

I was shopping for a tasty bit of steak, neatly wrapped in plastic; these were enormous sides of beef. They were out of my league.

Regretfully, I slunk away, careful not to retreat through the front office.

* * *

This went on for a couple weeks. I asked every amateur boat-builder I could find for recommendations, and got several: a company in Brooklyn that reclaimed wood from 200 year old buildings; a yard in New Jersey that sawed planks from white cedars that fell into swamps during the Jurassic period; and any number of small mills hidden away in the dark hollows of New England.

One lumberyard appeared—with positive or negative comments attached—on nearly everyone’s list. The positive comments tended towards the “they have everything” sort. The negatives focused on their outrageous prices and BMW-driving, Brie-eating, yuppie clientele.

Now, some of my best friends used to be yuppies, before the Great Recession. For that matter, I didn’t mind a tasty bit of Brie, myself. But the rumors of high prices... now that was discouraging.

Even worse, the place sounded intimidating and I was already intimidated by the whole wood buying process. I’d learned just enough from my lumber yard visits to realize I had no idea what I was doing. Oh, I’d picked up a bit of the jargon from books—enough to fool Helena, anyway—but my confident façade crumbled under the fire of one or two questions from a real lumber guy. I was a fraud, and they could smell it.

So mad butterflies clawed at the pit of my stomach as I pulled up to the so-called lumber boutique. But I carried on. I persevered. I needed that wood.

I don’t remember if bells jingled as I walked in through the front door. If they didn’t, then they should have, because the main office had that sort of old-fashioned feel. There was a long main counter, and behind the counter, several rows of desks with four or five men and women working. By then, I was used to being ignored by such people—particularly the men—so it was a pleasant surprise when one of the more senior-looking guys looked up,

smiled, and asked, “Can I help you?”

“Yes...” I said, a bit flummoxed. I really thought I’d have a few more minutes to gather my thoughts. “I’m looking for some wood.”

Well, duh, I thought, and waited for the usual wisecrack, but the man just got up and came to the desk, with a look of sincere interest on his face. I wasn’t sure what to make of it.

“Do you have a list?” he asked.

“I do, actually...”

I pulled my much creased, much marked-up list out of my pocket, and unfolded it on the counter top. He studied it with furrowed brow.

“I just need the first two pieces of white oak for now,” I said, apologetically. “Plus the mahogany for the transom.”

“Building a boat, I see,” he said.

“Yes,” I said.

“What are you building?”

“John Atkin’s *Cabin Boy*.”

“Ah,” he said, knowingly. “The little skiff. Good first boat.”

“Yes, I thought so!” I said, warming to him.

“I remember building my first boat...” He shook his head, fondly recalling those distant days. Then he studied the first three items on my list as if they were the first of ten articles etched into stone tablets. “I’m sure we can help you with these. Let me call Matt to help you.”

He picked up a phone, pressed a few buttons, spoke a few words, and put the phone back down.

“He’ll be right up.”

Right, I thought. In a half-hour or so. I sighed, prepared, stoically, to wait.

“Ah, here he is,” he said, indicating a young man who’d magically appeared at my elbow. “Matt, this gentleman is looking for some white oak and mahogany for a boat he’s building.”

He handed Matt my list. “Just the first three items, for now.”

Matt studied the list as intently as his boss had.

“No problem,” he said. “Right this way.”

Feeling as though I’d fallen into an alternate universe, I fol-

lowed Matt down some steps and into the lumber yard. The yard was small, but neatly arranged, with a number of buildings around an open courtyard. He led me into a shed in which tiers of racks held neatly stacked lumber.

Not only was the lumber neatly stacked, it was neatly labeled. Each shelf had a name written on a white sticker, so even a newbie could see that here was the Sitka Spruce, here the Ash, and there the Cherry and Walnut. The end of every piece was marked with its length, so you could tell a board was twelve feet long without pulling it out.

As I surveyed the two long tiers of shelves, packed to the rim with wood, I thought, they do have everything! At least, everything I could imagine at the moment.

“This place is amazing,” I said, sounding slightly more gushy than is strictly allowed in a lumber yard.

Matt didn’t seem to notice. Probably happened all the time.

“Here’s the white oak,” he said, stopping in front of a large shelf.

For the next ten or fifteen minutes, Matt pulled out planks for my inspection, patiently helping me find the two pieces that ‘spoke’ to me. As he patiently pulled out plank after plank, I became acutely aware that I was a very small fry. I only wanted two tiny pieces of white oak. I felt guilty for wasting Matt’s time. But he didn’t seem to mind, so...

I finally settled on two pieces that looked about right. Then it was over to the mahogany section. The choice there was simpler, because the boards were more uniform. I picked out one that had nice grain. It was just a bit thicker than I needed, but I could plane it down to the right thickness in an hour or two, probably. If I could figure out how to sharpen my new plane.

“Want me to mill that down to the right size for you?” Matt asked. “It’s just a few bucks more.”

“Sure!” I said. “Can you do that?”

He carried the board across the courtyard to another building filled with big iron—heavy duty tools that could mill lumber as fast as you could feed it through. He made some adjustments

to something called a thickness planer, ran my board through it a couple of times, and then handed it to me, exactly the size I needed.

“That will save you some work,” he said.

Just a little.

In the end, the prices were about the same as those I’d seen in other places. More importantly, Matt and his boss had gotten me over a difficult hump. Not only did they have what I needed, they’d made it accessible to a newbie like me, without a single snide remark.

My first Quest for Wood had ended successfully. I had real boat-quality lumber strapped to the roof of my car. I could start my build. I was on my way.

Maybe next time they’d serve me the Brie.

* * *

That night, I just happened to be cruising around eBay. For some reason, I searched for ‘wooden boats’, just to see what would come up.

I blinked at the first item on the list.

“Can’t be...” I muttered.

I clicked on the listing, studied the photos, read the description.

It was true. The *Blue Moon Yawl* I’d seen listed a few weeks ago on a brokerage website for \$20,000 was now listed on eBay, with no reserve, and no bids.

“Helena?” I called. “Can you come here for a minute?”



Tom Gilmer's Blue Moon Yawl

CHAPTER 4

PLAN B

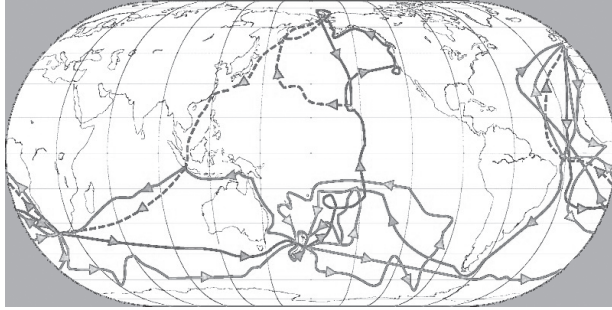
It's a dangerous business... going out of your door. You step into the Road, and if you don't keep your feet, there is no knowing where you might be swept off to. — Bilbo Baggins

I write software for a living. To write software, you think about the problem, invent a solution, and make a plan to implement that solution. This plan—call it Plan A—almost never works. Unexpected hitches develop, the problem changes, new opportunities emerge. These events, and many more, conspire to make Plan A obsolete or unattainable.

For many years, I found this frustrating. I went to the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute to study *engineering*. I graduated out of the State University of New York at Albany's *math* department. What project managers like me searched for was a better Plan A. One that you could follow like a road map: start at the beginning, keep going, and when you're done, you've got a useful new program.

This, as the software world discovered many years later, was the wrong approach. Building software is not like building a bridge. It is not an engineering process that can be managed with Gantt diagrams or PERT charts. Writing software is more like a voyage of discovery. It requires energy, resourcefulness, creativity, and a large dollop of positive thinking. In other words, for better or for worse, writing software is like life—a messy, unpredictable, and often surprising process.

You still need a plan, of course. People are hardwired to need



What a real plan looks like—Captain Cook's Voyages

a plan. It's difficult to cook dinner without one. So, whether you keep your plans in your head, or turn your computer screen into a sticky-note fringed checklist, you need a Plan A for whatever you're doing. But, life being the unpredictable mess it is, you'll also need a Plan B. Probably.

* * *

"I'm definitely going to need a Plan B," I thought a week later, as I rowed a dinghy slowly around a scruffy, bedraggled, down-at-the-heels *Blue Moon*.

She was moored in a mud-brown lagoon, on the slow-moving Steinhatchee River, in the part of Florida affectionately known as the Redneck Riviera. Her rigging drooped in a dispirited way. Her white topsides were scuffed and bruised, her peeling deck was painted acid green, and her jaunty sheer line was an inexplicable black. The effect would have been garish, if the colors hadn't faded under the harsh Florida sun.

"Isn't she beautiful?" asked Bob, the *Blue Moon's* octogenarian owner. Bob's eyes couldn't get enough of the boat as I rowed slow circles around her. He could barely keep his seat. "Look at those lines... classic. If I were twenty years younger, I'd sail her down to the islands myself. Gorgeous!"

He was right. Limp rigging and faded paint couldn't hide her beautiful lines. Her sheer swooped up like the crest of a wave. Her long bowsprit jutted out at a jaunty angle. It was easy to imagine

her with her five sails flying, heeled down to a trade wind breeze, skimming across a turquoise sea.

“Damn,” I thought. “What have I got myself into?”

* * *

A week earlier, back in New York, the eBay auction had looked like a long shot.

“She’ll never sell for a price we can afford,” I’d told Helena as we studied the *Blue Moon’s* eBay listing on my computer. “She’s still listed on that brokerage website for \$20,000. There are two other *Blue Moon’s* listed for twice that. She’s a classic. Everyone’s talking about her on the forums. The bidding’s going to be fierce. We don’t stand a chance.”

“She’s so beautiful,” said Helena. “So different. What would you pay for her?”

I considered our meager bank balance. The Great Recession had taken a toll on my computer business. Fully a third of my clients had gone belly up. The rest were hunkered down and spending as little as possible. It was insane to buy a boat in a recession. Maybe that was why the *Blue Moon* had ended up on eBay.

“The listing says she has a brand-new set of sails from Gambell and Hunter: hand-sewn, leathered grommets, all the rest. That kind of workmanship doesn’t come cheap. The sails, alone, are worth \$5,000. If we could get her for that...”

“Give it a try, then.”

“I’d have to sail her home. That could take months.”

“You’ve been talking about going on a big sailing adventure since the day we met.”

“Yes, but...”

“Business is slow. You always say you can work from anywhere. It’s the perfect time.”

She was right. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity. And if we could steal her for a crazy low price...

I shook my head. “We won’t get her, anyway. She’ll go for \$10,000, at least.”

“Give it a try,” said Helena. “What’s the worst that could hap-

pen?”

“Maybe,” I said, doubtfully.

Three days later, I again sat at my computer. Helena was cleaning up in the kitchen. The *Blue Moon’s* auction was due to end in a few minutes. For some reason, she had only attracted a few bids. The high bid was just \$2,300.

Helena came in to check on the action.

“It’s crazy,” I said. “The lead in her keel is worth more than \$2,300.”

“Still no new bids?”

“No, but that doesn’t mean anything. The smart bidders are doing the same as I am, lying low. They’ll flood in at the last minute.”

There is only one sensible way to buy something on eBay: decide in advance how much you want to pay, and then make one bid at the end of the auction, at the last possible moment. By lying low, you don’t show your interest to the other bidders, don’t bid up the item prematurely, and don’t get caught up in the emotions of bidding. If you win, you get a bargain; if you lose, you probably saved yourself a lot of money. I had decided that the *Blue Moon* would be a steal at \$5,000. But I probably wasn’t the only one.

“Someone else wants this boat,” I said. “He’s thinking there’s someone like me, who’s going to bid \$5,000, so he’s going to be smart and bid \$5,100.”

I typed my bid into the box on the screen: \$5,300.

“Why \$5,300?” asked Helena.

“Just in case he’s *extra* smart and bids \$5,200. I’d kick myself if we lost by \$100,” I said. “Not that it’s going to matter. Someone will bid \$10,000, I’m sure.”

As 10 pm approached, an onscreen timer ticked down. 50 seconds... 40 seconds...

“Don’t wait too long,” Helena said, nervously.

30 seconds... 20... 15... I clicked the ‘Confirm Bid’ button. The mouse ball twirled...

“Come on!” I said. The mouse ball just hung there, spinning. Had I waited too long?

No. The page refreshed with just seconds to spare. The new
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page said, “You are the high bidder.”

“Wow!” I said. “So far, so good. But now you’ll see the bids flood in.”

Three seconds later, the page again refreshed and flashed the words “Congratulations! You have won!”

I looked up at Helena, my eyes and mouth wide open. She looked down at me with exactly the same expression.

“We won?” she asked.

“We won,” I said. But I was thinking, “Oh, my God. Now what?”

* * *

Back in the dinghy, Bob said: “You were pretty clever with your bidding.”

Bob held the oars as I inspected a particularly rough scuff on the *Blue Moon’s* port side. He nodded at the long, black abrasion. “That’s no big deal. She dragged her anchor and went aground last summer. Laid on her side for a tide. It happens.”

I grunted at that.

“I never saw your bid coming,” he said. “Neither did the guy who bid \$5,100. I bet he’s still kicking himself. You stole it from him, bidding like that at the last second. Didn’t give him a chance to up his bid.”

I fingered the scuff. Bob was right. It was no big deal. The whole boat needed painting, anyway.

“All right,” I said. “Let’s haul her out and see what the bottom looks like.”

The *Blue Moon’s* bottom was my biggest worry. She had been moored in this brackish lagoon for a couple years, neglected and unsailed. Bob and his wife Susan were experienced blue water cruisers and lovers of wooden boats. They had roamed all over the Caribbean in their younger days, but now Bob’s hip needed replacing and the little yawl was too much for him to take care of.

Sailed boats are happy boats, and the *Blue Moon* looked exceedingly unhappy. I worried that her bottom was rotten or full of shipworms—the termites of the sea, notorious for boring into and

eventually destroying wooden ships. As Henry David Thoreau, philosopher and boatbuilder, once wrote:

*The vessel, though her masts be firm,
Beneath her copper bears a worm;
Around the cape, across the line,
Till fields of ice her course confine;
It matters not how smooth the breeze,
How shallow or how deep the seas,
Whether she bears Manilla twine,
Or in her hold Madeira wine,
Or China teas, or Spanish hides,
In port or quarantine she rides;
Far from New England's blustering shore,
New England's worm her hulk shall bore,
And sink her in the Indian seas,
Twine, wine, and hides, and China teas.*

I hoped the *Blue Moon* wasn't bored through with worms, but the sale was contingent on inspection. If her hull was rotten, the sale was off. I wasn't experienced enough to deal with serious problems like that. I just hoped I was smart enough to find any fatal flaws. There were no wooden boat surveyors left in Florida to lean on. I had to survey her myself.

Boarding the *Blue Moon*, we started the engine and threw off her mooring lines. She responded sluggishly to the throttle, as if her keel was dragging through thick mud. We didn't go far, just up the river to a small marina, with an even smaller travel lift. A travel lift is machine shaped like an inverted 'U', designed to lift boats out of the water. This was a particularly small, old, and rusty one. After we jockeyed into the lift's slings, I wondered if it was *too* small and old.

"I can't lift her all the way out," said the operator nervously, as the crane-like machine groaned under the *Blue Moon's* 8,000 pounds.

"Just lift her as high as you can," said Bob, waving his hand up.

We stood on the dock, watching, as the machine lifted the *Blue*

Moon out of the water, slowly revealing a bottom covered with a thick crust of snails, mussels, and black gunk.

“That does not look good,” I said.

“A power washer will take that all off,” said Bob. The marina operator—probably a good friend—nodded in agreement.

As the lift ground away, the *Blue Moon’s* long, full keel slowly emerged. Despite my horror at the creeping, crawling infestation, I could not help admiring her shape. That long keel would help keep her on course. I imagined skimming over Sarasota Bay, on our way home, a glass of cold beer in my hands, a clear blue sky overhead. Adventure, with a twist of lime. Ah!

The keel just lifted out of the water, and the travel lift clattered to a stop.

“That’s it,” said the operator. “I don’t dare go any higher.”

“But how can I inspect her?” I asked. She was still hanging over the mud-brown water.

“You’ll have to do it from the dinghy,” said Bob.

“Under there?” I asked. “You don’t dare lift her any higher, but you want me to go under her in a dinghy?”

“Sure, the lift will hold,” said Bob. “Probably.”

The operator nodded. “Probably.”

“Great,” I said, but there was no other way to do it.

A few minutes later, I crept under the boat’s looming, dripping hull in the dinghy. I had an awl to poke with, a putty knife to scrape with, and a hammer. I wasn’t sure what the hammer was for.

For the next hour, I scraped and poked and tapped, looking or feeling or listening for signs of rot or worm or damage. Port and starboard I searched, but surprisingly, all seemed well. The *Blue Moon* was encrusted with sea life, but under the gunk, a thin layer of bottom paint still clung to her hull. That, and perhaps her brackish berth, had protected her. In another year, she might have succumbed, but Fate had brought me to her side in time. She was still sound, and I was her new protector. I’d do right by her.

“I think she’s okay,” I said, finally. I’d already checked her insides, poking every plank and rib with my awl. “Sound as a drum.”

“I told you,” said Bob, though he clearly looked relieved. “She’s

a good little boat.”

We motored the *Blue Moon* back to the mooring, tidied her up a bit, and rowed away. My brain was already thinking about scraping and painting. It was going to be a big job.

“You going to truck her back to New York?” asked Bob.

“No, I mean to sail her home,” I said, handing Bob a large check.

“It’s a hell of a long way to New York,” he said, looking surprised.

And he was right about that.

* * *

After a busy month home, I drove back down to Florida in my old Jeep, its cargo area filled with scrapers, sanders, paint brushes, rollers, epoxy paste, bottom paint, two colors of topside paint, several suits of old clothes, dust respirator, safety goggles, 147 things I’ve forgotten, my favorite painting cap, and camping gear. At the end of the long drive, I pulled into a campground, about a mile outside of Steinhatchee.

“We don’t get many tenters down here,” said the manager as we walked through the nearly deserted RV park.

“I’m old-school, I guess. My grand parents spent every summer in a big green army tent, out at Wildwood State Park, and so did my parents. I still like it.”

“Mostly get snowbirds down here, in big RVs.”

“I’ve got a boat. Down here to fix her up.”

“Too early for the snowbirds, though.” He waved his hand at the mostly empty sites. “Too cold. You gonna be warm enough in a tent?”

“I’ll be fine,” I said, remembering some stone cold nights in the mountains of Massachusetts. This was Florida. Sure it was winter, and we were in northern Florida, but how cold could it get? “I’ve got a good sleeping bag.”

He showed me the small grassy area set aside for picnicking and the occasional tent. There were some tables and a big fire pit surrounded by short stools. Just on the other side of the fire pit

was the edge of a swamp. I was glad it was too cold for mosquitoes.

“One good thing, anyway,” the manager said, eyeing the swamp. “Too cold for ‘gators. Probably.”

The next morning, fog lay heavily on the river as Bob and I rowed out to the *Blue Moon*. We hoped to get her anchors up quickly and make an early start, but in this we were thwarted. One of the anchors had made a close acquaintance with what Bob called a redneck mooring. If you’d like to build one, here’s the recipe:

First, steal a plastic milk crate from the back of your local supermarket. One bought legitimately from Walmart will not work—it must be stolen.

Jam into this box an oversized grapnel: one of those vicious, three-pronged hooks typically thrown over walls by commandos. The prongs must be sharp and rusty, and at least two of the prongs must stick through the openings in the box, so they can grab other boats’ anchor lines.

Next, loosely fill the rest of the box with scrap metal—the type doesn’t matter, so long as it is sharp-edged and rusty.

Mix up a batch of cement and fill the plastic box to its rim. Yes, a certain amount will ooze through the large holes in the plastic box. This is not a flaw but a feature—it gives the mooring its essential character.

When the cement has set, attach a mooring line to the grapnel’s eye with a granny knot. At the other end of the mooring line, tie on several plastic bleach bottles. These make an ideal mooring ball. When ready, motor out to your favorite spot on the river, and tip the whole mess over the side. It will drag a bit at first, but as soon as the grapnel hooks onto several other people’s mooring lines, it will hold just fine.

Bob had moored the *Blue Moon* properly with two 50 lb. anchors. One of them, a plough, had become entangled with one of these redneck moorings.

Now, lifting a 50 lb. anchor by hand is no fun in the best of circumstances; lifting an anchor and a block of concrete, wrapped round and around by snagged anchor lines, bristling with twenty or thirty fish hooks, and liberally coated with foul-smelling river

mud, was a nightmare.

But somehow, after much exertion and many curses, we managed to get the anchor and mooring into the dinghy. I took great pleasure in cutting the anchor free with a sharp knife. I wanted to drop the blasted mooring back in the water, but Bob said that was bad manners, so we left it in the dinghy to dump ashore. It was nearly noon by the time we motored to the marina—not the marina with the undersized lift, but a larger one downstream with a travel lift powerful enough to haul a fifty foot schooner. The efficient marina crew made short work of pulling the *Blue Moon* out of the water. Before I could even start to fret, she was on ‘the hard’ (what sailors call dry land) and blocked up on jack stands.

After using a power washer to remove the inch-thick layer of oysters, barnacles, and thick black ooze, I slowly walked around the *Blue Moon*, finally able to give her bottom the complete inspection that had been impossible before.

“Not bad,” I said. Unlike many old fiberglass boats I’d seen, her bottom was pretty smooth.

“She should sand up nicely,” Bob agreed.

“Only thing I’m worried about are these holes.”

Bob studied the line of narrow-bore holes closely, before uttering a grave, “H’mmm. Might be worms in there. Gotta get them out, somehow.”

H’mmm, indeed. Of all the monsters in the mythology of the sea, from Jonah’s Whale, to Moby Dick, to Jules Verne’s giant squid, none are as feared by sailors as much as the lowly marine boring worm, and for good reason. It wasn’t a giant squid that sank Christopher Columbus’s fleet on his 4th voyage to the New World. It was the worm. In fact, worms plagued all the great wooden ships during the Age of Exploration, until someone discovered that covering their bottoms with sheets of copper—using the same techniques then used to make copper-sheathed roofs—would protect ships from the voracious worm.

So as we scraped and sanded our way through that long hot day, I worried about those worm holes. Were they empty? Or did foot-long worms still hide in my hull?

That night, back in my tent, I opened my laptop to do some research. The Internet teemed with shipworm horror stories and equally horrifying remedies. Some of the best cures included:

- Drilling small holes into the hull and injecting noxious mixtures guaranteed to kill shipworms. The best traditional mixtures tended to include chemicals now banned by the Geneva Conventions.

- Traveling up a fresh water river. Shipworms hate fresh water, and will abandon ship at the first taste of the stuff. Unfortunately, the fresh water reaches of the Steinhatchee weren't navigable by sailboat.

- Flushing the worms out with fire. Traditional methods of burning them out have given way to the modern propane torch. Optional equipment included welding gloves and a fire extinguisher.

The legends described holes extending as far as six feet into the planking.

"Six feet?!" I said, my stomach suddenly churning with anxiety. Perhaps the *Blue Moon's* shapely hull was riddled with worm holes, her planking more like bundles of hollow straw than solid wood. There were pictures of such things. *On the Internet!*

After the panic induced by this research subsided, I decided I didn't need to theorize about the damage. I could look at the boat tomorrow morning with my own two eyes, and see for myself how bad the damage was. There was no point fretting about it now.

With that somewhat comforting thought, I turned off my computer, and zipped myself into my sleeping bag. Tomorrow was another day.

The next morning, I found a stiff wire in my toolbox. Holding my breath, I plunged it into one of the worm holes.

The wire went in a quarter inch. I removed the wire and looked into the hole, half expecting to see two eyes (or however many eyes shipworms have) staring back at me. But no, all I saw was the back of the hole.

I poked into the other holes. All were about the same depth. All were vacant. The worms hadn't liked the taste of the *Blue Moon*,

apparently. Since they were southern worms, maybe they preferred their planking deep fried.

After all my fretting, it was a bit of a let down. I blew out my propane torch with a sigh. Other sailors have all the fun. I mixed up some epoxy paste and filled the holes.

For the next two weeks, Bob and I scraped and sanded and painted the *Blue Moon's* bottom and topsides. As we progressed, word got around. People started coming out to the marina to watch us. Some brought their lunch and sat on makeshift stools in the shade of a big power cruiser, watching, commenting, and offering advice. The funny little boat that looked like it might meet its end in this southern backwater had been given a reprieve. She was coming back to life—to youth, even—and these old people were rooting for her. The day we finished, they took pictures. We even had a little party to celebrate.

“Now that’s a good looking boat,” said one old timer. “Used to have a boat like that, back in the fifties, in Connecticut. A good New England boat. She don’t belong down here.”

“That’s why I’m sailing her home, to Long Island Sound.”

The others—all old timers, all Northerners who had somehow washed up in this backwater bayou—nodded. That was fitting. That was where she belonged.

“It’s a long way, though,” one white-haired old lady said. “I sailed down with my Harry, a long time ago. It’s a long way.”

After all the work we’d done on the *Blue Moon*, I didn’t dare leave her on a mooring for the rest of the winter. Despite Florida’s sunny reputation, winter in the state’s northwest corner was no day at the beach. Storms blew in from the Gulf of Mexico and I didn’t want her dragging across the lagoon when I wasn’t around to save her. So I arranged to leave the *Blue Moon* at a marina a few hundred yards down the river.

After the big travel lift hoisted her up and put her back in the water, Bob and I motored the *Blue Moon* down to the new berth, and tied her to the dock with a spiderweb of dock lines and fenders. I was a bit nervous about leaving my little ship on her own, but Bob waved my misgivings aside.

“She’ll keep,” he said.

* * *

Back home in New York again, the weeks sailed by. There were decisions to be made and supplies to be ordered from far-flung mail order houses that catered to the wooden boat cult.

The most urgent task was finishing *Cabin Boy*. Plan A called for building *Cabin Boy* at a leisurely pace. Now that I was preparing for a 2000 mile voyage, I needed a dinghy, and I needed one fast.

Everyone said to forget *Cabin Boy*, to just buy a cheap plastic dinghy for the trip and be done with it. But that wasn’t the plan. It wasn’t just my big adventure, it was *Cabin Boy’s*, and I wasn’t going to leave him behind.

So I worked feverishly on my little boat. Progress was slow—agonizingly slow. Mistakes were made, lessons were learned, but I would not leave until *Cabin Boy* was done.

* * *

Two months later, Helena and I drove back into Steinhatchee with the newly painted *Cabin Boy* strapped to the roof of my old Jeep. We set up headquarters in the best motel in town (which wasn’t saying much), and unloaded 1500 lb. of supplies. Just before the sun set, we ran down to the dock to check on the *Blue Moon*.

“Wow,” said Helena. “She looks great. But look at that deck!”

The *Blue Moon* floated merrily alongside the dock, her blue topsides smooth and gleaming, but her peeling deck was a reminder of how much work there was before I could set sail. I hoped the ugly green deck paint didn’t hide a bunch of problems.

“Yup. A lot to do.”

“Can we finish in time?” Helena only had a week before she had to rush back to her piano students.

“Probably,” I said.

First thing next morning, we were down at the dock with tools, old clothes, lots of sunblock, and hats.

“How much of this paint do you want to scrape off?” Helena

asked, picking at the pea-green deck paint.

“As little as possible,” I said, “But as much as we need to.”

“Gosh, what an ugly color!”

She got the scraper under the paint and peeled off a patch as large as my hand.

“It’s in really bad shape,” she said.

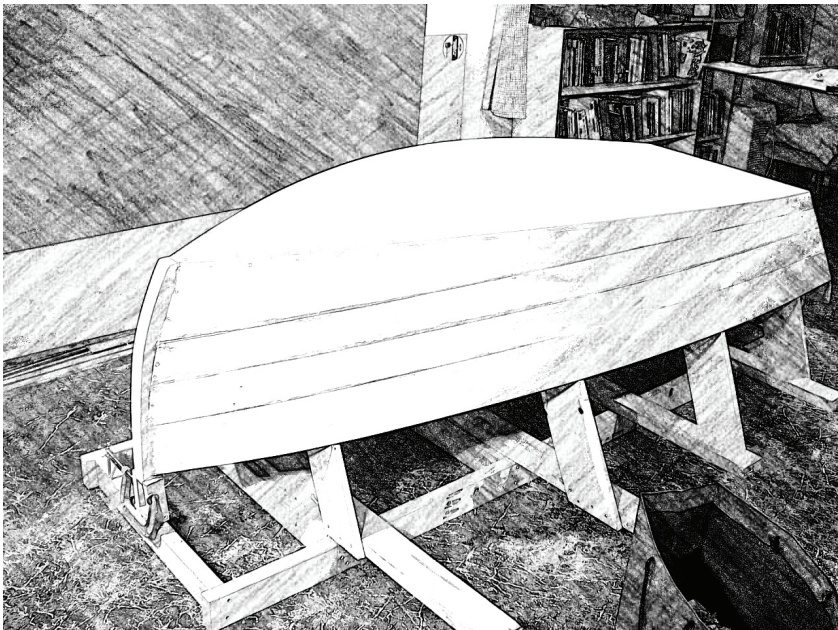
I finished the last gulp of coffee, crumpled the cup, and threw it in the trash.

“Right,” I said. “Let’s get to it.”

A few hours later, we had most of the deck paint off. At least the green layer. Under the green paint was white paint, and under that was Bristol Beige—the same paint we’d picked out for her ‘new’ color scheme.

“Looks like we’re restoring her to her original glory,” I said, after Helena showed me this archeological discovery. It was hot, dirty work, but it went fast with both of us working.

As usual, the *Blue Moon* attracted lots of dock-side interest. A



Cabin Boy under construction

steady trickle of watchers drifted down the dock and—this being the south—conversation was not only inevitable, but required for etiquette's sake.

The conversations tended to repeat themselves. They went along these lines:

“Where you from?”

“New York.”

For some reason, this always provoked a look of stunned disbelief, though practically everyone in Florida is from New York: “Really? How you going to get her back?”

“Sail her.”

“No! That’s a long way!”

I got tired of responding to that one.

“How long is it gonna take you to finish painting? A month or so?”

“No, just a few days, I hope.”

“Ha-ha. You almost had me fooled there, boy. A few days, ha-ha, that’s a good one!” The watcher would walk off, laughing, telling the next one coming down the dock, “Hey, you should talk to those guys down there, painting! They’re a riot!”

But in fact, it took exactly three days. One day to scrape, sand, and prime; and two days to give the deck two coats of paint.

When we finished, Bob—who’s bum hip was the only thing that had kept him from getting down on his hands and knees next to us—was impressed.

“She looks good,” he said, looking her up and down with a critical eye. “Real good.” He pointed up to the top of the mast. “But what are you going to do about those missing halyards?”

The next day, we rigged the bosun’s chair. That’s a broad term for a range of devices, all having the same purpose: to lift a sailor to the top of the mast and return him safely to the deck, hopefully by the end of the decade.

I’d chosen the simplest system: a bosun’s chair made from a thick plank of wood, and a block and tackle with a six-to-one mechanical advantage. People said that with a tackle like that, you could pull yourself up the mast. That seemed to break the laws of



Helena painting

physics, but I was willing to give it a try.

After reeving 200 feet of rope through two triple-blocks, I hoisted the fixed block to the masthead with the main halyard, attached my homemade bosun's chair to the moving block, clipped a safety harness around the mast, and prepared to ascend, hopefully not all the way to heaven.

"Are you sure this is safe?" Helena asked.

"Absolutely. The tackle is strong enough to hoist a small car up the mast. My weight won't even take the stretch out of the rope."

I sounded confident, but would I really be able to pull myself up the mast? That sounded unlikely. I handed the end of the rope to the person I trusted most in the world.

"You tail me," I said to Helena. "Just keep a little tension on the end of the rope. If I have to let go of it at the top of the mast, you should be able to hold me up there."

I took a deep breath, looked up the mast, and prepared to put theory to the test.

I pulled down on the tail end of the rope. My seat rose by a

couple inches. Effortlessly. Almost by magic.

“This might actually work,” I said.

I pulled some more, and away I went. Because of the six-to-one ratio, to lift myself twenty-five feet, I had to pull down 150 feet of rope. That wasn’t a problem. I wasn’t in a hurry. I’m not generally afraid of heights, but I must admit twenty-five feet seemed like a lot when swinging from the end of a rope. I kept my eyes glued to the mast in front of me.

“How’s it going?” Helena asked.

“Fine. Almost there.”

Once at the top, it was easy to thread the new halyard (the end of which I’d remembered to tie to the bosun’s chair) through the sheave at the top of the mast. First halyard done. A few minutes later, my feet touched the deck.

“Easy-peasy,” I said, hoping I didn’t sound too relieved, since I needed to go back for the second halyard.

“That looked like fun,” Helena said. “Mind if I try?”

Sweeter words of love have never been spoken.

* * *

The week sailed by and pretty soon, we were done. The *Blue Moon* was as ready as Helena and I could make her. Even *Cabin Boy* was now in the water, tied up to the dock by his big sister’s side, looking ready and eager for the adventure to come.

Helena was scrubbed free of paint, packed, and ready to drive back to New York. We stood, one last time, on the dock, admiring our work.

“Good luck, my darling,” Helena said.

“Thank you for helping. I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“Be safe. Take as long as you need, but try to be home in time for Thanksgiving, if possible.”

Thanksgiving? It was April 7th. I said, laughing, “I’ll be home *long* before that.”

“I hope so, but don’t rush; enjoy the trip.”

One last kiss, and she was gone.

I stood on the dock, alone. The world seemed quiet. The air

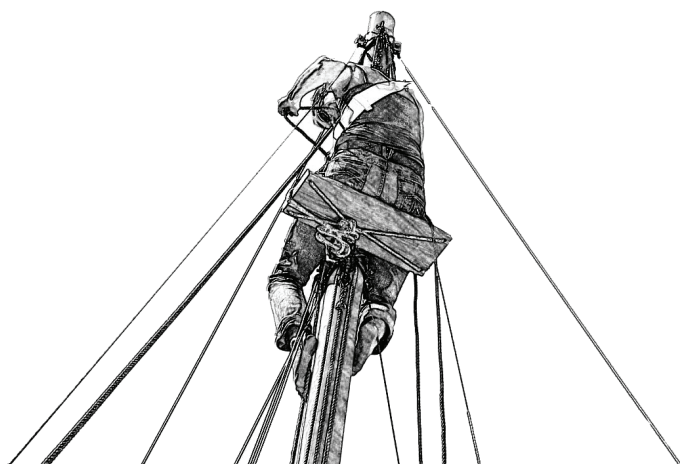
was still. The river flowed under the *Blue Moon's* keel, and down towards the sea. The same sea that flowed down the west coast of Florida, through the emerald blue Keys, and up the east coast of the United States, all the way to New York.

“Only one way home, now,” I said.

Cabin Boy tugged on his painter. “Let’s go!” he seemed to say.

“Tomorrow morning,” I said.

It was indeed a long way home.



Helena at top of mast