

Maine Boatbuilding Traditions - Interview with Wade Dow

Interviewee: Wade Dow

Interviewer: Pauleena MacDougall

Location: Brooklin, Maine

Date: March 2nd, 2004

Note: This is the transcriber's best effort to convert audio to text; the audio is the primary material.

Pauleena MacDougall: This is Pauleena MacDougall. It's March 2nd. We are down in Brooklin at Bridges Point talking with Wade Dow about boat building traditions and the town of Brooklin. Wade how long have you been building boats?

Wade Dow: We started finishing fiberglass hulls before we actually built the boats. Another fellow and I, we both fish for a living, in fact all three of us fish for a living for lobstering. Back a number of years ago I went scalloping for quite a few years too and we wanted something to do in the winter when there wasn't a chance to do anything else on the water. It was back in the infancy of fiberglass and there was only a couple of three companies making hulls along the whole coast. A lot of the fishermen were swinging over to fiberglass boats so it wasn't very hard to get a hull, to bear hull to put the engine in and all the gear, and cabin, deck, and cockpit and all that stuff. We worked on our own boats and worked in other boat yards to the point where we had a pretty good idea what to do to put one together so we started doing one or two a winter. We did that for nearly twenty years. It got to the point where it was hard to get a hull after a while because a lot of people were building them at that point. The demand was shared by so many other companies that they were not anxious to let out a hull. They started keeping all the hulls they could sell and finishing themselves to get them in. We decided, and Forest was getting out of high school at that time, we were looking for something to keep both of us busy in the winter. We came up with a sailboat, this 24-foot sailboat that we are building now and we've got a mold, build a mold for it. That's what we've been doing pretty much ever since. We've currently got well this is number 70 out here now that we've put together since 1985 I guess we started.

P.M.: Ok, 85'. I was going to ask you. So you switched over from the lobster hulls to the sailboats in the mid 80's. When you started doing the lobster boat hulls were you catering to a particular area right around here. I mean the fishermen mostly from the Brooklin area that you were making the hulls for or was it broader than that?

W.D.: Quite a lot broader than that. We got most of our early business recommendations from the people who built the hulls. Once they put ads in the fishing papers, fishermen started coming from everywhere inquiring about the boats we built. We finished off boats from, we built one in

Juno, Alaska, got one on Cape Cod, a couple in Florida, and on up to, the majority of them are around here but not from this town necessarily. We built a lot of them that went to Swan's Island. Finished off quite a few that went to Spruce Head area over around Rockland, and Deer Isle.

P.M.: Did you notice any difference in styles, in shapes or styles of lobster boats.

W.D.: Yes, they've been modified considerably.

P.M.: Are there certain areas that have a certain style of lobster boat as opposed another style

W.D.: No, no more.

P.M.: No they are pretty much the same.

W.D.: They are all built bigger and wider and faster, deeper just so they'll get a bigger propeller on them so they can go faster.

P.M.: When you guys decided to do this was it because fishing was not as lucrative or was it mostly just because you wanted winter work? [039]

W.D.: Well actually the fishing was considerably better than it is now in a lot of areas but fishing goes in cycles. I've seen it go up and I've seen it go down in my lifetime several times. If I knew that there would be a low point again, now in the scallop industry that's where it is right now. Used to be 18 boats going out of this town and now there is one and that guy is well he keeps his boat here but he lives in Blue Hill. None of these guys who always went are going anymore. It's just almost costs you more to go than you get.

P.M.: Right and I've been sort of following that in the paper that things have been tough the last few years and to put more regulations on, stuff like that.

W.D.: That and the fact that I figured by the time everything hit its lowest point I might be at an age where I wasn't too anxious to freeze to death in the wintertime on the water anyway. We put in 20 winters and I guess we paid our dues. It's cold out, miserable weather that doesn't cooperate very well. There is plenty of product there so you can make a good days pay, you kind of overlook some of those things but when it's a minimum day's pay of sometimes red ink then you look for something else. We headed to land and we've been hulling boats here for a number of years even long before we had the buildings. We started hulling our own lobster boats and a few others locally. It's kind of grown that way.

P.M.: I noticed driving in there must be 25 or 30 lobster boats out there.

W.D.: Yes they are all up through the field there too. There's more than that.

P.M.: Are there so you look after those for the wintertime?

W.D.: We just store them for them. They do their own work most of the time.

P.M.: And you just provide a place.

W.D.: Yes. I've got 18 of our sailboats that we've built and we storage them out here. We do the work on quite a few of those in the spring but most of the outdoor stuff they do their own work.

P.M.: Well tell me a little bit about the sailboats that you are making.

W.D.: Well I had a nightmare I guess you might call it that I tried to build a sailboat, we built powerboats for years. I thought there might be a market for a small sailboat. Our shop was small and fishing boats were getting bigger all the time. Everybody was having bigger boats built instead of smaller ones. I thought that it would be interesting to do something that was suited to the size of our facilities. I got a brainstorm that maybe a sailboat would be the thing to do. We might be able to sell a few of them. I contacted Joel White, he owned Brooklin Boat Yard down here, his son Steve does now. I knew he was good at designing especially sailboats and he drew one up for us and it's done pretty well. It's done I guess better than what a lot of people thought it would. It's had its highs and lows. It kind of follows the economy.

P.M.: So you were saying that Joel provided the design of the sailboat for you.

W.D.: Yes I told him what I was looking for, what I thought would sell. We had a few boats in the field that we store that, I like the looks of, I thought might sell. Joel at first tried to discourage me. He thought there was too much competition in that area too. We offered the thing several years. We offered it as a completely custom finished boat. In other words we would finish it in any configuration anybody wanted and I think that was the niche that maybe got the thing off the ground. We weren't competing. We were offering something different from what anybody else had. It's a small market and it's an expensive boat relatively expensive and a lot of hours go into it. [080]

P.M.: It is a day sailor or is it a cruiser?

W.D.: Both but most people just day sail in them even if they have all the stuff put in to cruise. They might spend a weekend down in it but it's not what you consider cruising. It's not what I consider cruising anyway. Most of them just sail in the afternoon in them.

P.M.: What is your market? Where are these folks from that buy these boats?

W.D.: All over. We've got these from Oklahoma, Louisiana, Florida, South Carolina, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, quite a few of them in Massachusetts, a couple in Rhode Island, and the rest are pretty much the state of Maine. I guess about half of them are probably here in Maine.

P.M.: Well when you started this up how did you market them?

W.D.: It wasn't easy.

P.M.: That's a hard job I know.

W.D.: Not one that any of us knew anything about either. There was a publication called Small Boat Journal that was put out on just this size boat and smaller. They sponsored a get-together of three or four of these boats that were about the same class and about the same general category of sailboat down in Newport, Rhode Island. They invited us down and we took a boat down. The first one we built and we sailed it around down there and competed with some of the other boats that same size and they gave us a pretty good write up on it and some pictures. At that same time they were having a boat show down there. They've discontinued it since. It was called the small boat show, which they had in May. They had it there for a few years. Things kind of died down in Newport Rhode Island in May except Cumberland they have the big one I guess. People walked up for miles but it wasn't very well populated that time of year and I guess the thing kind of folded because there wasn't a lot of people there but we did get some press and some exposure that we wouldn't have probably got any other way. We spent quite a lot of money, what we could afford in magazine advertising. But they didn't really start doing too much until we started getting some out and then people started seeing them and talking with people that owned them. Word of mouth got it around better than anything that I think that we've done.

P.M.: Is that right. That's very interesting. Getting a good reputation.

W.D.: We've got areas that we've sold several boats in. We've got, we might have four up to Burlington, Vermont. There's one going up there this spring. Every year we've had one go up there for the last four years.

P.M.: What do they have a big lake or something?

W.D.: Lake Chaplain so that's been a good area. There's quite a few of them out of there. If you get one in an area where there is a lot of sailing, they kind of start attracting attention.

P.M.: What is it about this boat that sets it apart from any other boats.

W.D.: Well it looks like a [?]

P.M.: It has nice lines.

W.D.: Yes that was the part that Joel put in it that I insisted on. I didn't want it to look like a production boat.

P.M.: Was it modeled after a wooden boat style?

W.D.: No.

P.M.: or pretty much unique. [115]

W.D.: I don't know what he had in mind when he drew it up but it resembles some of the Herreschoff models reasonable close. Joel had a good eye and he was, I can't say but what he probably admired the Herreschoff line of boats and I think he probably didn't try to copy one but when that something you like is in your head you're definitely going to think that's the same way. It's different than some of the Herreschoff boats most of them but yet it's alike in a lot of respects too.

P.M.: So things are going still pretty well with the boat market for now.

W.D.: There's a little dry spell right now. We are not having too much but we've got a backlog.

P.M.: So that got you through the down tern pretty much.

W.D.: Yes we've been quite busy since 96' on them. We've had enough so that's all we've had to do is build sailboats. Before we were kind of mixing in a lobster boat now and then to keep going but we've build strictly sailboats I think since 1996. One time we were two years behind and sometimes one or so for the third year but we are beginning to get caught up a little bit now. We are still one year behind but we are not getting the inquiries right now. I don't know if election year has something to do with it, the stock market or something, it maybe a little bit of both.

P.M.: Yes well people are still waiting to see if this recovery is going to go or not.

W.D.: What recovery.

P.M.: Yeah the so-called recovery. At least the stock market is doing better.

W.D.: Yes.

P.M.: Some of the wealthier people are making some money. Maybe it will trickle down to the rest of us some day.

W.D.: I don't know. I'll believe it when I see it. The real wealthy people are not the ones that buy these boats. A lot of them are just average working people who are retired and have saved up a little money and they want something to play with on their retirement.

P.M.: So what's the base price on a boat like this?

W.D.: The base price for the boat is 39,000.

P.M.: So it's kind of like a luxury car even.

Forest Dow: The average price of them going out around 55 now.

P.M.: All fitted out?

W.D.: Well they are all fitted out, they are ready to sail for the base price but it doesn't include diesel, auxiliary engine, and all of the fancy stuff that they want to put on and most of them do have the diesel. It adds another ten for the engine installed and then they start getting carried away on a lot of varnish work which is fine but for 39,000 dollar boat is already to go, includes the sails and everything but there is no power.

P.M.: And this boat is fiberglass molded over what?

W.D.: Nothing. It's all fiberglass.

P.M.: It's all fiberglass. Ok so you have some kind of a mold and you build it right on the mold.

W.D.: Yes, it's built inside of a mold. That way the inside of the mold is smooth and when you take the boat out the outside of the boat is smooth.

P.M.: I wanted to know what you do about sails. [150]

W.D.: We have the sail made. They are currently being made by a company in Massachusetts. I don't think all the sails are made there. It's a nationwide company. It's got several offices throughout the U.S. I don't really know where they did come, where was it?

F.D.: Around the Great Lakes, most of them are Maine. They've got them all on computer so they can make them anywhere.

P.M.: You mean there is a big machine, a sewing machine run by computer?

W.D.: All the lines of them.

P.M.: Oh the lines of them so they are designed on the computer.

W.D.: Yes.

P.M.: But they are handmade? Pretty much.

W.D.: Yes.

P.M.: I noticed there is sail making up here at that marine place we came by. Know anything about those folks?

W.D.: Not too much. It's changed hands in the last few years. It was a small outfit and at times it was a problem to get sails delivered when you really needed them. They would have a habit of getting behind and I wanted to deal with a company that was large enough so that they could guarantee the sails when we needed them and stand by it. Of course we've got the boat all done, it's ready to deliver then we don't want to have to wait another month to get the sails.

P.M.: I wanted to ask you a little something about the community too. I know you probably grew up here, been here throughout your life so you pretty much know everybody. Has the wooden boat school made a difference in the community?

W.D.: Oh yes.

P.M.: How has it changed things?

W.D.: It's made a lot of employment. I've got a daughter that works down there.

F.D.: Sold some boats.

P.M.: To help sell boats.

W.D.: Yes, we've sold boats. Went to the wooden boat school and heard about our boats and come up and ordered them. It's generally been good. I think it's been one of the better businesses for the neighbor people that's come in here for a long time.

P.M.: There's a lot of boat building in this town.

W.D.: There is a lot of boat building in this town.

P.M.: Yes it seems like everybody I've talked to is either building one or built one before or thinking about building one or something.

W.D.: That's right.

P.M.: Has it always been that way?

W.D.: No.

F.D.: There's always been boat yards in the town.

W.D.: Yes but I think with the advent of fiberglass.

P.M.: So fiberglass has actually helped to increase the boat building in this area?

W.D.: Yes.

P.M.: Why because it is less expensive or what would be the reason for that?

W.D.: I don't know. It's a completely different process building a fiberglass boat. If you started building fiberglass boats [192]

Amy Appleton: How do you think fiberglass and wooden boats stack up to each other performance wise or just how good of a boat they are?

W.D.: Fiberglass built boats are, I think, tend to move a little quicker in the water. I don't think they are quite as heavy, quite as steady maybe as a wooden boat due to the weight. Fiberglass boat they don't soak a lot of water but a wooden boat will get heavier right through its age until it dies. Every year it will take in a little more water and it won't dry out quite as much as it did the year before. I guess the big advantage of the fiberglass boat is that it doesn't depreciate. They cost about the same to build but it doesn't depreciate like a wooden boat. A wooden boat, even though you might take the very best of care of it, if you keep it four or five years and decide to sell it then you're up against a brick wall in that most insurance companies won't insure a wooden boat after a little age on it. If anybody wants to buy that and they can't get insurance on it then they can't borrow money on it so it completely rules out the resale value as compared to a fiberglass boat when somebody has the cash in his hand in order to buy a used one and it might be as every bit as good a boat as the fiberglass one the same age. I guess insurance company's rule in everything.

P.M.: Is the maintenance less intensive on the fiberglass?

W.D.: Considerably.

P.M.: So it's probably less expensive over the long run to care for a fiberglass boat.

W.D.: Yes, less expensive and far less time consuming.

P.M.: Do you still have to paint them every year like you do a wooden boat?

W.D.: No, you usually don't paint them at all. There is very, very little paint on them. It's a jell coat that's on the outside. The color in the surface of a fiberglass boat is sprayed on the mold.

P.M.: It's kind of cooked in the process.

W.D.: It's not paint so the bottom paint is about the only actual paint on a fiberglass boat and some of them aren't even doing that. They are just giving the bottom the color they want it and then beach and mount and clean them more often but there is very little paint on a [modern] fiberglass boat. Everything is either colored plastic, [BBC] or jell coated glass.

P.M.: Do you ever make any models of boats.

W.D.: No, not if I can help it. We built a model of a sailboat to take to the boat shows back in the beginning before we actually even had a full sized one built. That was one of the most frustrating jobs I've ever had in my life building that model. Everything was too small, couldn't see, couldn't get a hold of things. I'd rather build a full size one any day.

P.M.: Well is there anything in terms of fiberglass boats, is there anything in the process that will make it a less quality boat then say another fiberglass boat you're making. Are there times when you have problems making it not the way you want it?

W.D.: Hang on just a second.

P.M.: All right start up again there was a phone call. I was just asking you if there was any problems when you are making the fiberglass boat that you run into that makes it harder, maybe you have to start over or is it pretty well.

W.D.: There are problems in anything. [247]

P.M.: What kinds of problems do you run into?

W.D.: You battle material changes that you aren't aware of. You might have bought something for years and you got used to using it and then the distributor starts buying practically same product that looks the same off a different company and then its characteristics are different then the actual, which can throw you off. Cold weather, we don't have a shop that's heated to the way a modern place would be. We've got a wood stove here and we've got some portable heaters and we are getting warm but not like having it constant. It might be 20 above zero in the shop and you are going to lay a boat and get it warm in here but it isn't like it stays that way all night. The plot is cold and the surface of the mold is cold and the floor is cold and the hose that you spray the resin on.

F.D.: Then you have the opposite end of the extreme too.

W.D.: Yes in the summer it's just as bad because everything is too hot and the stuff will start to harden prematurely on you when you can't even get the air rolled out of it.

P.M.: So you need some optimum temperature to make it work.

W.D.: Yes 50 to 60 is where it seems to work best.

P.M.: Ok, was there anything else that you'd like to ask Wade that I didn't think of? Would it be possible for us to see what you're working on?

W.D.: Yes, there are two of them right there.

P.M.: I'll stop this now and maybe we can take a look at some. Thanks.