ACCESSION SHEET
Maine Folklife Center

Accession Number: 3295

Accession Date: 2006.06.22 **T#** **C#** **PM#** **DAT** **CD#** 0899

Collection Number: MF 157

Collection Name: Brooklin Boat Building (2003-2004) Collection **P#** **S#** **V#** 0313 **DV#** **DA#**

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Description: **3295 J. Steven White,** interviewed by Pauleena MacDougall, November 20, 2003, Brooklin, Maine. White talks about the history of Brooklin, Maine; the Brooklin Boatyard; his father and his career before boat building; the purchase of the Brooklin Boatyard by his father Joel White from Arno Day in the 1960s; boat builder and teacher Arno Day; childhood memories of his father and boat building; his college experience; skiing; being a tug boat operator in Louisiana; his full time work for his father in 1977; the designs of his father; Woodenboat magazine; yacht building; wooden boat building construction methods; customers; boat building tradition in the community; apprentices and young boat builders; administrative work; overseeing the boatyard; the costs of boat building; wooden boat building in Maine; boat builder Jim Steele and his peapod boats; wooden and fiberglass boats; wooden and fiberglass boat construction; the aesthetics of boat building; the individuality of boats.

Related Collections & Accessions Richard Lunt/Boat Builders

Restrictions none

Formats Included 17 page transcript; 1 CD recording; 1 video. .doc = original, .odt = master, .pdf = access

Notes Video sections updated by Katrina Wynn 12/19/2012.

Accessioned by Revised by Barbara Stephens 2/2013*AUDIO MIA

Date last updated 11.05.2015 by KWynn **Use Tracker** 1 **To transcriber**

Previous name(s) **Completed**

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Transcriber: Daniel Lamson
Date of interview: 20 November 2003

[Begin CD 0899]

Pauleena MacDougall: You know there were a couple of buildings here, that were here in the 1800s, could you tell me a little bit about the history of the Brooklin Boat Yard?

Steve White: Well, yeah it was in the late 1800s it was a sardine canning factory and the entire town was much bigger than it is now. The population of Brooklin now is about 800 and then it was about double that, anyway. And fishing of course was the major industry here and it was, the sardine canning factory was built almost entirely out over the water behind me in buildings on pylons and things like that. And it went through a couple of different fires and was destroyed. There was a sardine canning factory here, there was a clam factory that would shuck clams and can them. There was a baked bean factory here, as well. And that business sort of went in and out of business a couple of times. And then essentially after World War II it closed down for good and a small boatyard was started here. A guy had a railway on the beach out here and it was called Center Harbor Boatyard, I think. And...

MacDougall: A railway?

White: Yeah a railway to haul boats up with. Railroad tie that run down the beach and a cradle or a car and float the boats onto that and then pull the entire car up and out of the water. That was an easy way to move heavy boats then. And that ran for awhile and then Arno Day [sp?] bought the property and started building boats here himself and Arno was

a self taught designer and boat builder. And my father moved here to Brooklin in 1933, he was born in New York in 1930 when my grandfather decided to stop writing for the New Yorker magazine and said screw this I'm going to come to Maine and live there. They moved up here so my father grew up around here as a child and got into boats and sailing and sailed at the yacht club. And decided to pursue a career in Naval Architecture until he graduated from MIT with a degree in Naval Architecture and went to Virginia and worked there for a very short time in Newport News Shipyard which he hated. And then was in the Army and so we all moved to Germany when I was about a year and a half or something, so I learned to speak German before I learned to speak English.

MacDougall: Really?

White: Lived there for a little while and then came back here to Brooklin and he started working as a lobsterman for a little while. And then got a job here at the boatyard and became partners with Arno. And he really learned to build boats from Arno, and Arno probably learned a little bit, although I bet not that much, about designing boats from my father. And they were partners 1960 I think when Arno came to the shop one day and said well this place is getting too damn big, and I'm out of here. You want to buy my half? And just left, and there were four people working here at the time.

MacDougall: That's pretty small?

White: Yeah, my father and Arno included. So it was pretty small.

MacDougall: It was getting too big for him?

White: It was getting too big for him, Arno didn't like that. And so, that's how my father came to own the property. And, so it was, he owned it in 1960 and started, actually put up a storage shed for the first time and started storing yachts. Most of the work prior to then

had been commercial fishing boats. And not much yacht work and my father saw that there would probably be some opportunities in taking care of yachts as well, so, got into that. And continued to build for, for a good while built about one boat a year, usually a lobster boat either for commercial fishermen or for a yachtsman. And then in the 60's started building some sailboats and stuff which is where his interest really was although he liked power boats, but he liked to sail too.

MacDougall: Now they're not making lobster out of wood anymore are they?

White: Actually they are, there's a guy in Southern Maine named John Cass [sp?] who has a full order book for building wooden lobster boats. But he's the only one.

MacDougall: Yeah, most everybody else...

White: Most of the lobster boats are built out of fiberglass.

MacDougall: Yeah, and when did that really switch over?

White: 70's.

MacDougall: in the 70's?

White: Yeah, it's interesting to look back through our build schedule over the years. We record all the boats that we build every year and during the 70's we built hardly any wooden boats at all. We were finishing off fiberglass lobster boats. It was the primary work of the boatyard. Of the construction end of the boatyard. The maintenance and storage was still a very good business, and that was mostly wooden boats. But the 70's was, was a bad time for wooden boat construction.

recorder starts beeping **MacDougall**: I don't know what' going on.

White: Are the batteries going dead? Again.

MacDougall: No, it's still working.

White: No, still working.

MacDougall: It might be running out of time.

White: Oh, getting near the end of your tape maybe.

MacDougall: No, there's no tape in there. Do you know how long they go for? Alright, I was just going to ask you what you remember about...So what do you remember about Arno Day?

White: Quiet. Competent, and moody.

MacDougall: Oh yeah?

White: Yeah. He would often not, not talk for weeks at a time. Days or weeks at a time. One of the guys that works for me here now, Rick Clifton [sp?] been working here for 20-21 years, when he first moved to Maine he worked for Arno and they worked for about a year together. And Rick came into work one day and Arno wouldn't say anything. And he talked to him and he didn't think much about it and another day went by and Arno wouldn't talk to him. Three weeks went by and Arno wouldn't say anything, and it was only the two of them in the shop, it was just Rick and Arno. And Rick finally on Friday said look Arno, it's been three weeks and you haven't said a word to me. You won't talk to me; you won't tell me what's going on. If you don't have anything to say to me come Monday I'm done with you. I guess, so he came to work Monday morning and said morning Arno, how you doing? Arno just looked at him, and Rick picked up his lunch box and walked away. And, he was moody like that.

MacDougall: That's an odd trait isn't it?

White: His wife and my mother were good friends and he would do the same thing with his wife. You know, weeks or months even would go by without him saying a word. But

he was a brilliant guy, he loved to teach. When a wooden boat school got going and he was more or less retired, I mean he never really retired, but they asked him to come and teach boat building and particularly lofting. You now, the drawing the boats full size and he very good at that and loved to do it. And he always got high praise from his students as being a great teacher.

MacDougall: Yeah

White: It's interesting for somebody that didn't seem to like people that much.

MacDougall: What kind of guy was your father?

White: He was a great guy. He was quiet, as well. He lived for boats and boat building, sailing. That's what his real life was. I actually, I don't have very many memories of him as a child because he was here at the boat yard all the time. I remember when I was very young I would ride with my mother down here and she would bring him his lunch everyday. And I can remember that in the summer time. I worked here a lot of summers as a child, but usually never with him. He'd put me with somebody else and sort of move me around the yard getting to do a lot of different things. But, he and I never really got to know each other until I moved back here permanently; I went away to prep school so I was gone for four years in high school, essentially. And then college, I went to a lot of colleges. I went to Cornell for awhile and dropped out of there, and then I went to Colorado and skied for a year, and then I went to Colby and then I went to Switzerland and skied for another year, while I was going to school, and finally graduated and then went to Louisiana and worked on tug boats for awhile down there.

MacDougall: What did you take your degree in?

White: Environmental Science. I never really knew whether I wanted to be a boat builder

or not when I was in college, I knew I liked it and I knew I liked the town but I wanted to see more of other things. And it just seemed too easy, you know what I mean? All my friends in college were going I don't know what I want to do with my life, I don't want to go into the insurance business like my father, and I don't want to do this and they were struggling a lot with what they wanted to do. And I hadn't really given it that much thought, I went, well yeah, I'm going to go build boats and so that got me thinking, I said maybe I ought to go try something else. And so I got into skiing and nearly became a ski instructor as a profession. And then went into the tug boat business and didn't like that very much.

MacDougall: Driving one? Or...

White: Yeah, yeah...that's mostly, mostly total boredom punctuated by terror. Every now and then when you think you're going to die. And very weird schedules, you know four weeks on the boat and two weeks off and live on the boat for four weeks and have a bunch of money and then come back to Morgan City, which is sort of an asshole of the United States. Coming out of the Mississippi River, and so we'd go to New Orleans and spend all your money in two weeks and be broke and go out and do it again. So I didn't like that too much. So, I came back here in 1977, I think, I think this is 25 years I've been working here now full-time. And that's when I really got to know my father was at that time and it's interesting because I think about it now. When I came back in '77, he had been working here for just about 25 years full-time and he was ready to start doing something different then running the boatyard, sort of the day-to-day routine of running the boat yard and stuff was enough for him. He wanted to get into designing more, which he was trained to do but actually didn't do very much of it during the 25 years because he

was trying to run the business. So, he fairly quickly started transferring responsibility to me. And at the time I think we had seven people working here full-time and I was happy to take it on and he was happy to get rid of it and he started spending more time doing design work. And it was also the end of the ‘70's when Wooden Boat magazine started to come out and there started to be sort of a revival in the ideas of wooden boats and yachts and that stuff. So it was a good time to get started in it again. But...

MacDougall: So you and your father primarily made yachts? Did you make other kinds of boats as well?

White: Primarily yachts, nope. We did, I think I’ve only worked on maybe four commercial boats, in the production of commercial boats, other than in Louisiana. I worked, actually worked at a big steel yard there for a little while which was really terrible.

MacDougall: Yeah...and before that Arno Day, when he was running things, it was more the lobster boats?

White: It was more the lobster boat business...

MacDougall: And it kind of switched over?

White: Yeah, I think it had more to do with the period than the type of work, in other words, in there weren’t that many yachts in the area anyway in the ‘50's and ‘60's. Anything on the water was primarily commercial. And so, that who the people were available to build boats for. And then Maine started to become a destination area for yachtsmen and that part of the business started to expand. And my father was interested in that part of the business as well, particularly in yachts, so...

MacDougall: Yeah, in your work now, are you, you’re doing wooden boats primarily but

you're also doing a little bit of experimentation. How much of your work is more traditional work and how much of it is experimental? With new technologies and new materials and so on?

White: It varies from year to year, but modern wooden construction, the cold molded type of boats that we build probably amount to 70% of, or more, of the major construction we're doing. I'm discounting the boatyard now, the storage and maintenance end of it, which is really a whole different business. It's surprising that the two of them fit together, but it's very different. So, probably 70% is modern cold molded techniques and the other 30% is traditional plank on frame or restoration work. Like we're doing out there and when you say well you know we're experimenting with modern construction, we are, but we're a long ways away from being on the edge. Development comes really slowly in this industry, and I'm not saying boat building particularly, but in for cruising sailboats that we're building. Because you're essentially, you're experimenting with somebody else's money, and if you have a real failure it could put the business out, out of business. So, so we don't we don't stray too far away from what we feel comfortable is going to work. We do try to develop new techniques that will improve the boat, but marginally rather than quantum leaps.

MacDougall: Yeah, so it's a very gradual kind of change?

White: It's a fairly gradual change. Although I do think we pioneered some techniques in modern wooden boat construction that other people are emulating now, but it's nothing that anybody else I don't think would have discovered on their own doing enough of it.

MacDougall: What do you like the best about your business?

White: What part is the most fun? The people, the people and the boats. I still love to

come to work. Everyday I can't wait to get up in the morning and come down to work and at the end of the day at 3:30 when the crew leaves, I particularly enjoy being here by myself. And I'll go out and I'll get on each one of the boats and just, it'll be quiet and nobody will be interrupting me and I'll look at what's been done and stuff. I really enjoy that part. The people who have us build custom boats are very interesting people. And they've often lead very interesting lives and what they do with a boat is fun and they bring us into it more than vicariously, we spend a lot of time with them on their boats. I've been fortunate enough to sail around the world with people who will fly me to France and say come race on my boat with me, or fly me down to the Caribbean and things like that. So, using the boats, using the product when you are done is a wonderful thing. Seeing other people ooh and aah at a product that you've built, you know something that you've produced from scratch you know, just from an empty hole in a building to a completed yacht is a pretty satisfying thing.

more recorder problems

MacDougall: Well, off the record then...there is something like nine boat yards in Brooklin?

White: About that, yeah. Yeah, I haven't counted them lately.

MacDougall: And any of the other boat yards doing anything with wooden boats?

White: Oh yeah, yeah. The other big yard is Atlantic Boat, which is exclusively fiberglass construction. They build lobster hulls, commercial and pleasure use. But Doug Highland [sp?] of Benjamin River is building wooden boats, John Dunbar who was Doug's partner is, I'm not sure if he's building any wooden boats right now, but he's doing some major repair and concentrates on wooden boats. Eric Dow is all wooden

boats; Brian Reef is all wooden boats. Eric and I grew up together in school. So...

MacDougall: Yeah, it's really a strong tradition here, isn't it?

White: It's a strong tradition and it's an interesting community. I mean a lot of these guys have been working here for twenty years or more, and that's fun and interesting. And there's a lot of good people coming up, younger people, coming up now that still starting to take some real pride in being able to work with their hands and produce things that are aesthetically pleasing to them.

MacDougall: Do you have any kids?

White: I don't. Too selfish.

MacDougall: Oh, nobody to pass it onto.

White: No, no, a dog and a horse? My wife's horse.

MacDougall: Any up and coming apprentices or anything, do you take apprentices on?

White; There isn't really an apprentice program that's setup that way, but there's certainly a lot of young and smart people that are continuing to come in the business and enjoy it for what it is, and it's not...it's a business that you've really got to love, you're not going to make any money, any real money at it. But, it's satisfying for a lot of people in a lot of ways.

MacDougall: You get to build your own boats.

White: You get to build your own boats. You get to be on the water a lot, on sailboats. You get to work in a beautiful place like this, despite today's weather.

MacDougall: Yeah, that's worth a lot.

White: I don't know what's going to happen to the yard as I grow older. I've started to think about it a little bit. I can't imagine selling it, but I don't know what else to do...I'll

just, I guess I'll just die and let someone else deal with it.

MacDougall: You need to live forever.

White: Which is a really bad way to do it, I won't do that.

MacDougall: Well maybe you'll take a partner on someday, who knows.

White: Yeah, maybe.

MacDougall: When you're getting tired of it. You have to do a lot of the administrative kind of stuff though, or do you have, farm most of that out?

White: Most of the what I call administration, my wife and the secretary does. They deal with the health insurance, they deal with the regular insurance on the building, the DEP, all the federal and government agencies. And all of that stuff.

MacDougall: But you do the estimate work? And that sort of thing. Ordering the materials and things like that?

White: I do, yeah...I don't even order the materials that much anymore. I mean I'll tell, we have a guy who works in the stock room full time now and he really orders the materials. But I'll tell him, ok, now we need this and we'll produce the list, obviously, for him and then he'll order that. So, my function is to try to oversee all the projects that are going, keep them going in the right direction and make sure that they're meeting the budgets that we've outlined for the projects. Which is probably the biggest part of my job, trying to make sure that we remain profitable. Its, there are an awful lot of boatyards that have built really beautiful boats but have gone broke doing it. There is essentially three parts to it. You've got to be skilled enough to be able to build the boat, and then you've got to find a customer that will buy it, and then you've got to build it in a time that will both, you'll both be able to deal with. In other words, you have to build it fast

enough to remain profitable, and he has to, no matter how rich he is, he wants to know what it costs. And the custom boat building world is probably one of the worst...

MacDougall: Well...the labor costs are high, the material costs are high.

White: But, it's not that, it's no more difficult really than house building.

MacDougall: Really?

White: And estimating house building. I mean, it is more difficult, the actual work requires a higher degree of skill, but as a project you build a boat you build a house, they both have plumbing, they both have electricity, boats have masts and stuff, but houses have basements and things. You know, there's, it shouldn't be that hard, but the boat building world has been filled with great boat builders and lousy businessmen. And I hope I'm not either of those, I'm not a great builder, there's a lot of great builders out there that are significantly more skilled than I am at what they do. But I know enough about all of it to make sure they're going in the right direction and I can communicate with owners really well. That's one thing my father didn't do well at all. He rarely would give a price for what the boat was going to cost, the owner would have to kind of go on faith that it would cost...

MacDougall: That's asking a lot.

White: ...probably more than he thought it was, but I remember several instances with my father and customer sort of having pretty serious conversations about how much this boat was costing, how much they thought it was going to cost, and when its going to be done and things like that.

MacDougall: Well, where do you think Brooklin stands in relation to other boat building communities in Maine?

White: In Maine?

MacDougall: Yeah, is it, are there more boats being built here? Are there more wooden boats being built here, or is there something special about Brooklin?

White: There are more wooden boats being built here than any other community in Maine, I'm sure. Um, because there are more wooden boat builders here. Tim Hutchin [sp?] in Boothbay Harbor is building the biggest wooden boats. He just launched a 155 foot boat.

MacDougall: Yeah, I saw that on TV.

White: He's a good good friend and a very good boat builder. There's a strong tradition there, his family's been building boats for 130 years or more. They've been doing it for a long time. And I don't know why Brooklin has become sort of the Mecca for wooden boat building particularly, other than probably Wooden Boat Magazine was here. I think that that has...

MacDougall: But the Wooden Boat Magazine came here because there were wooden boat builders here, right?

White: Well, partly, yeah. They came here because the building they were in burned down. They were in Brooksville and all of a sudden they didn't have a home. And at the time my father and Jimmy Steele, a house builder and also a boat builder, peapods, who you should interview. He's a fascinating guy.

MacDougall: Who's this?

White: Jim Steele, S-T-E-E-L-E. As you drive into Brooklin you'll see a sign on your right hand side that says "Welcome to Brooklin, boat building capitol of the world." Jim put that sign up there and he builds wooden peapods, 14 foot rowing boats and stuff. And

he's a fascinating man.

MacDougall: Oh, ok. Yeah, we'll have to talk to him. I like to learn about small boats too.

White: He's just a genius, has developed a lot of building jigs and stuff so he can build these boats by himself incredibly fast. And beautifully done.

MacDougall: Oh, so he has nobody working for him then?

White: Nope, nobody could work for him. His son and I were good friends and I came into the shop to see Jeff one time and I walked into the shop and Jeff and his father were both down on the floor and punching the hell out of each other. Well, I said oh I didn't mean to break anything up. He said good thing you came I would have killed him.

MacDougall: Do either of you have a question you want to ask him?

??: I do. What exactly do you think constitutes a wooden boat? Cause we've heard people say its wood and nothing else and some say fiberglass.

White: Well, that's a good question. And you'll get a lot of different answers. You'll get a different answer from ???????? [43:00, video] than you will from me. Umm, I guess as a very general term I will say that the major structural component of the boat are designed and engineered to be of wood. You know, some people make an argument that fiberglass boats are often built with a balsa core. So the thickness of the hull might be two inches, and an inch and seven eights of that is balsa and then a little bit of fiberglass on either side. Well that's mostly wood, but well it isn't the structure is, its actually the fiberglass that's keeping it all together, keeping the water out, keeping the people in. We use, you know, this one boat we're designing now is going to have a foam core inside the hull for light weight, but the wood is still the structural component.

MacDougall: And that core is only on the side that would be the planking, I mean between like two layers of planking?

White: It's in the middle, that's right. There'll be planking on the inside of the hull, the foam core, and then planking on the outside.

MacDougall: And so you can use a thinner kind of plank?

White: You can use thinner planking and the foam core essentially creates an I-beam type of structure. The stiffness of an object is primarily controlled by its thickness. And if you, and boats need to be stiff to resist the loads that they have. But if you just keep stacking up thicker and thicker and thicker and thicker layers of wood, they get heavy. Even though wood is a fairly light material for its mechanical properties, it still gets heavy. So that's why fiberglass boats use foam cores, to gain strength without weight. And so we're using it for the same reasons. ??: What do you think makes wooden boats different, or I mean do you prefer them over mainly fiberglass boats?

White: I prefer them over fiberglass boats to build. I think good fiberglass boats are great too, there's nothing wrong with a good fiberglass boat, as long as I don't have to build it. It's, it's not very pleasant work. And it's particularly itchy work. I've built fiberglass boats and worked with fiberglass boats and when you're sanding it and grinding it and stuff, little bits of the glass get into your skin and you develop a rash and stuff. Not to say people aren't allergic to wood, I've got several guys here who are allergic to different species of wood and it'll make their eyes swell up and things. So...

MacDougall: How about the aesthetics of the boat?

White: Well, aesthetics are, its interesting that wooden boats are usually beautiful boats and fiberglass boats often don't seem to be particularly beautiful. But there is no reason

for that to be, it just is for some reason. I have seen some really gorgeous fiberglass boats and I've seen some really ugly wooden boats. So it's a very elusive thing. I think what makes them particularly special to me, and may make them special in their lifetime is that they, because they're custom built and individually built, there's a lot of thought and a lot of effort and a lot of sweat and tears and blood that go into building each one of these. And I wouldn't go so far as to say it imparts a personality into the boat, but it does give it a uniqueness, not that its just because it's a unique boat and there isn't anything like it, but the people that work on it put a lot of their own ideas into it and it comes through, you see it on the boats. And as I go back over boats we built twenty years ago I can remember who built that particular part of the boat and I can say "Oh, I remember Elmer built that." And I can see it just by the way the shape of things like that. And, so people do build themselves into these things in a way. And I think that's what makes them special.

MacDougall: That's interesting. The artistry part of it.

White: I think it's the artistry part of it and because they're being built specifically for one person who often has a lot of input into the design process and often comes up while we're building and looks at them, they become very involved with them and probably use the boats more than somebody might who just goes to a lot and buys one and says put it on, waiting for me next spring. They get personally attached to it and they take the boat on adventures, they go on races, and they go on cruises, they see things and boats start to develop their own name. Boats like Ticonderoga and stuff have done so many races, won so many medals, done so much cruising that people know of them all around the world. Know of that boat and they'll see it in the harbor and "oh, that's Ticonderoga." And they

develop a personality, but not all of the do, not all of them do, some don't. But a big part of the pedigree of the boat besides the designer and the builder is also the owner, how much he uses it.

MacDougall: Well thank you very much, it's been really fun. It's been great.

[End of interview] 33 min.