



Boatworks Berths Vintage-Style 'Cats

Lachlan Beaton, 81, brought boatbuilding ancestry from native Scotland with his father David. Tom, at right outside the boatworks and marina, carries on the tradition.

Beaton's *Ghost* Keeps Alive the A Class of Catboats

Sleek and graceful masters of the water, 28-foot A-cats adorned the Barnegat Bay in the late 1920s and still compete for the oldest perpetual yacht racing cup in America, the Toms River Challenge.

Twenty years ago, much of the fleet was tired and near forced retirement after 50 years of pouncing through home Barnegat Bay waters.

Its rebirth is thanks largely to one workshop, the vintage Beaton Boatworks in West Mantoloking. Not only have the Beatons restored breath to older A-cat sails, but they created the first new A Class catboat to be built in 57 years. That was the *Wasp*, built in 1980 from plans of an original A-cat.

Building big wooden boats is a dying profession. There isn't much call for them anymore, and there aren't many who know how to build them well. Where the special order can be met with ability is at Beaton's, the West Mantoloking workshop that at one time turned out three-fourths of the sailing sneakboxes on Barnegat Bay.

Today, at the head of the bay, anticipation is buzzing like a bandsaw as the Beatons are building one more cat. A labor of love drawn from the Beatons' Scottish an-

cestry is crafting the dream of a modern-day sailor.

Bill Fortenbaugh will christen his cat *Ghost* next spring when the single-masted, single-sail cedar and mahogany form glides into the water. Fortenbaugh, a summer sailor from Bay Head, is a professor of Greek philosophy at Rutgers University.

As we walked into the largest of the gray clapboard workshops, Tom Beaton's back was to us as he sawed a plank for the newest cat, to the cadence of the bay slapping the boats berthed outside. He turned around and allowed a smile to interrupt the work that he is the fourth generation to practice.

The smell of cedar mixed well with the feeling that something timeless was going on. *Ghost's* spectral skeleton has been taking life from a set of plans drawn in 1923 by well-known naval architect Charles Sweisguth; they had been lost, then were found in an old bureau drawer by someone looking in an antique store.

The size, grace and speed of the A-cats beckoned to many current owners who as boys watched them sail the bay and would have given their marble collection to own one.

Twenty-eight feet in length, with booms the same length, masts 46 feet high and 605 square feet of sail, the A-cats made a beautiful sight.

"That's one of the reasons we want to build them; you don't want to see that die," Beaton noted. "People say, 'When I was a kid we used to watch the A-cats race.' Now they can say, 'Look at that, they're still racing after 80 years or 90 years.' You think about, when they were racing, people used to drive Model A's ... everything's changed so much, and yet these remained the same."

The A-cats are very fast boats even by today's standards, Beaton said, then asked one of his fellow craftsmen for verification. "Don't you think, Russ?" Russ Manheimer answered from the outside of the hull, "Oh, yeah. You're not going to get a boat this size move much faster." That's 6 or 7 knots.

"The only problem with all cats is they can be a handful in a breeze," Beaton said, speaking from experience. He attributes that inherent attribute to "probably too much sail area."

Ghost will have a slightly taller mast than some of its predecessors, 49 feet of

Continued on page 20

Beaton's

Continued from page 18

Sitka spruce imported from Alaska. Its boom is 29½ feet.

Ghost is being built "strictly for racing." The foremost idea is preservation of the class.

"We don't want to build a boat that's going to go out and win every race" are Tom Beaton's words, spoken in the quiet voice of a man more accustomed to working than talking. He explained, "You could ruin a class with a boat like that, that's so much better than all the others. We want to build a boat that fits into the class."

"You want to build a boat," he continued, "where if he sails it well, it'll win; if he doesn't sail well, it won't."

A-Cats Recapture Style And Thrill of Racing

Sailing catboats may have entered the racing scene as early as colonial times by some experts' contention, but the A-cats were a specific style unique to Barnegat Bay.

According to Roger Allen, former curator of the Philadelphia Maritime Museum and now director of the North Carolina Maritime Museum, the catboat itself actually was developed in New Jersey and spread north and south. "Unfortunately, the New England perspective is that the catboat developed in New England and spread from there, but that's backwards."

"They were used for practically everything — charterboats, to carry cargo, mail. Those early working catboats were the first to be raced, but sometime just before the turn of the century, yacht designers got involved in it and boats that had developed traditionally at the Jersey Shore that had been competing were no longer able to compete with boats that were designed for speed alone. So those traditional types gave way to boats like the A-cats."

The A-cats first arrived on the scene in 1922, when a federal judge from Philadelphia named Charles McKeehan commissioned *Mary Ann* for the sole purpose of competing in the then open-class Toms River Yacht Club Challenge Cup. *Mary Ann* so dominated the race that she gave rise to copycats. *Bat* and *Tamwock* were built in 1923; *Spy* was added in 1924 and *Lotus* in 1925. *Foursome* and *Helen* were on the scene only briefly.

The architects were Charles Mower and Francis Sweisguth. The builder of the earliest A-cats was Morton Johnson of Bay Head, for whom David Beaton worked before launching his own boatworks, so it's little wonder that a modern-day sister cat would spring forth from the Beaton Boatworks.

Nelson Hartranft was one of those boys who longingly watched the A-cats cut through the waters near Ocean Gate. He

later owned all four of the originals and is credited with attracting investors to preserve the fleet, which by the 1960s and '70s was dying of neglect.

It was also his doing to commission the first new A-cat to join the fleet in 57 years. The Beaton Boatworks, known for thriving longevity and impeccable reputation, was the logical choice to build it.

"It is a family commitment to boat building rather than an individual commitment," Allen credited the Beatons. David Beaton "inherited the tradition" of Hubert and Morton Johnson, who "were among the finest yacht builders that ever existed in New Jersey," Allen noted. David's son Lachlan, now 81, ran the boatworks and storage grounds until recently with his brother Ted; now Lachlan's son Tom is carrying on the business.

Allen stated, "As far as I'm concerned and most people are concerned, they are the finest craftsmen in wooden boats on the Jersey Shore right now."

Across the Sea Where It All Began

Scotland's River Clyde is one of the greatest sailing waters in the world, according to Lachlan Beaton. It took only the sight of the royal yacht *Brittania* or the 140-foot *Shamrock* to determine that in a young boys' mind.

"We lived right facing the river. When you looked out the window, what you saw was a road, and then the water where you could see big liners going to Glasgow."

His father, David, was a maker of sailboats in the range of 28 and 30 feet, but Lachlan didn't help in the shop as a young boy. "I didn't think I'd be welcome in where they worked." But he did learn design through building model sailboats large enough to race, 50 inches long and with 800 square inches of sail.

"That was a great sport in Scotland, model yacht sailing. My dad won the championship in Scotland, that was 1923."

Lachlan Beaton was 15 when his family came to New Jersey in 1925. He went to work for the well-known Morton Johnson Boatworks in Bay Head before starting his own business in 1936. His specialty evolved to racing sneakboxes, due in part to the fact that everyone else was building skiffs.

At first there were no power tools at Beaton's. "Not because we didn't want them," Lachlan interjected, "but because there were no electric poles in that area. So we got an automobile engine and we made that work to run the band saw, so we were very happy when an influential customer put poles in for us."

According to Allen, the Beatons made design adaptations that set their boats apart. A 12-foot duckboat that "is distinc-

tively theirs" was one. "The 12-foot duckboat was a gunning skiff. It was adapted by Howard Perrine for racing and also adapted by Phil Clark for racing. The Beatons took the Phil Clark boat and improved it, and they did the same with the 15-foot sneakbox. The Beaton 15 is the most successful of the 15-foot racing sneakboxes."

Likewise, when the Philadelphia Maritime Museum Workshop on the Water built the new *Tamwock* (from plans of the *Mary Ann*) a lot of the improvements were actually Beaton's. "They worked on the boats for such a long period of time, they knew what the weak spots were and were able to steer us away from those," Allen said. "They would say, 'Up here in the forefoot we put in strapping because what we learned over a period of time is that the masts might push the bottom of the boats out.' " And in the stern, structural timbers called quarter-knees resist flexing and twisting, the Beatons advised Allen, "so it won't twist itself to pieces, so to speak."

Tricks of the Trade Bestow Wind into Sails

Besides berthing new cats, Beaton's has also restored old beauties. If cats do have nine lives, *Lotus* and *Spy* earned their second at Beaton's in the 1980s — "they were ready to be cut up," Tom diagnosed. *Spy* was outfitted with a new centerboard trunk, a new keel, a new deck and some ribbing — 60 percent replaced. *Lotus'* owner called his craft "a complete wreck" when he submitted it to three years of surgery squeezed in between other work at the boatyard, which in recent years concentrates on boat storage.

It would be easier to start from scratch, Tom professed, than to restore an old boat. "You're doing things in the right order when you're building a new boat." Restorations necessitate "getting them apart as much as you can and still kind of holding them together."

Building a new cat is a study in the melding of design, craftsmanship, and management of imposing pieces of timber.

Tom and a small crew first set the keel up, then put temporary molds in to guide shape, width and depth. Rib bands are set up all the way around the boat. *Ghost* has 40 ribs. Frames are bent to angles as sharp as 80 degrees. "After we bend all the frames in, we start planking them." One plank may be 19 feet long; they vary in length. Copper nails and bronze screws hold planking in place.

Beaton doesn't consider the job difficult. The trickiest part, he offered, is fitting the steam-bent cabin — a single piece of mahogany.

Five thousand man-hours later, the effort pays off in the finished work's beauty.