

Charles Hankins, Noted Boat Builder

By DON BENNETT

Renowned Jersey Shore boat builder Charles E. Hankins, who made thousands of boats prized by lifeguards and others who loved the water, passed away on Tuesday, June 24, 2003. He was 77 years old.

"He was always ready to help anyone. I knew him forever, the 50 years I've been here," said former Lavallette Mayor Ralph Gorga.

He said the borough was among those who bought the stout boats Hankins built in his shop on Grand Central Avenue for the lifeguards, as were communities up and down the East Coast.

They were descended from the boats pound fishermen launched and landed through the surf. Lifeguards treasured them for their ability to remain upright, no matter how rough the sea.

Hankins once figured he had built 4,000 wooden boats. His craftsmanship in the vanishing trade won him regional and national recognition.

The borough of Lavallette dedicated a park to the Hankins family along the bay front. Gorga said Anna Hankins, Charlie's wife, was the long-time borough clerk and a valuable asset to the community during her tenure.

The Ocean County Parks and Recreation Department awarded him its Hurley Conklin Award in 1991, recognizing those who lived in the Barnegat Bay Traditions.

In 1983, one of his Jersey Sea Skiffs was featured in a July 4 display at a mall in Washington, D.C.

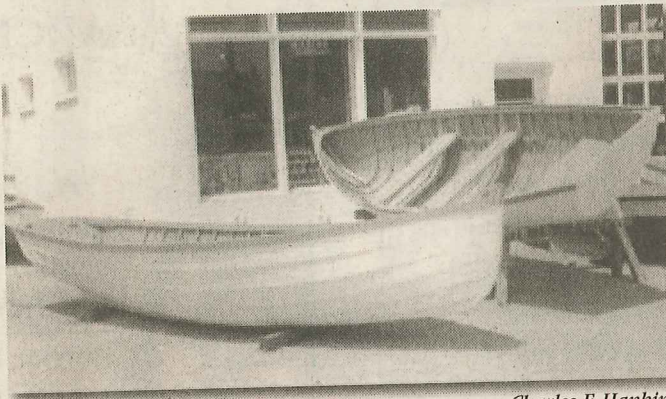
A decade later he was named a National Heritage Fellow by the National Endowment for the Arts.

New Jersey Network made a 1991 documentary film featuring Hankins as it explored "The Jersey Sea Skiff working the Jersey Shore."

Eight years ago he was named to the

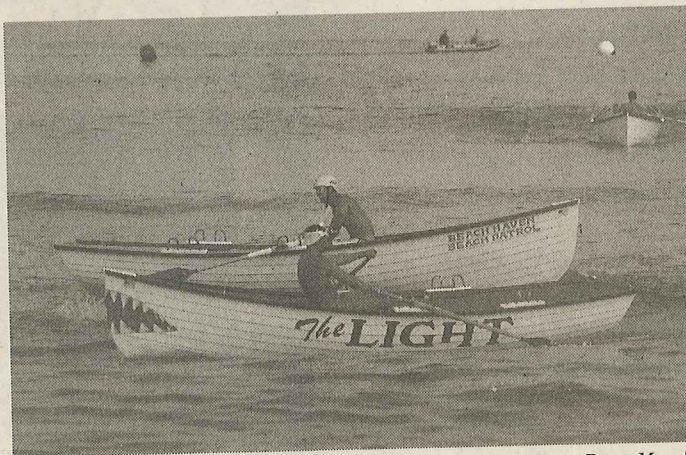
month that will be mounted on a lifeboat display each summer.

Despite the accolades, Mayor Gorga said Hankins remained anxious to help anyone who needed it. He worked on



Charles E. Hankins

Jersey Sea skiffs remain the rescue surfboats of choice for many of the state's beach patrols. Utilizing a design which harkens back to the mid-1800s, these skiffs were first adopted by pound boat fishermen who found the vessel's stable design – based on its unique slanting stern – invaluable when launching and landing in heavy seas. For the same reasons, Hankins-built skiffs are prized by today's lifeguards, not only for their toughness and reliability in lifesaving situations, but also for their sleekness and maneuverability, a trait which shines during the state's many annual lifeguard tournaments.



Ryan Morrill

Point Pleasant High School Hall of Fame. Three years ago he was inducted into the American Folklore Center, Local Legacies Collection Archive at the Library of Congress.

Lavallette borough officials dedicated a plaque in honor of him earlier this

several boats and was a Class A mechanic. Hankins also shared what he knew.

In 1993, he taught classes at the Toms River Seaport Society to those interested in the craft. He said then he would not retire "until they shut the lid on the box."

Hankin's father started Charles Hankins Boat Builders in Lavallette in 1912. Hankins took over the business after serving in the U.S. Coast Guard during World War II.

While small boats were his forte, Hankins built boats up to 40 feet long inside the shop on Grand Central Avenue.

Earlier there were two special-order boats with the Hankins brand on them. It was Prohibition, and fast boats were used by smugglers to bring booze ashore. A pair of 28-footers were the solution. One had a 500 horsepower Liberty engine, the other an equally powerful Fiat power plant. Both boats could fly across the water at 42 miles an hour.

Five people once worked in the boat works. Fiberglass replaced wood as the favored building material for boats, and the demand for boats Hankins built dwindled, yet he was reluctant to close the business. But in 1994, he said he had built his last skiff. It was displayed at the Wooden Boat Festival then held at the Toms River Yacht Club.

In his late 60s, he could turn out a 15-foot rowboat in one day. He repeatedly insisted that anyone who wanted to be a good boat builder had to be a good carpenter first.

Hankins was a 1939 graduate of the Lavallette Elementary School. Four years later, he graduated from Point Pleasant High School before he joined the Coast Guard.

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