

Paul N. Smith

as told to German Georgieff

Boat Carpenter Paul Smith is one of the few artisans left with the skills to work on wooden boats. Smith was fitting trim to the edge of a boat hull when this interview took place at Beaton Boatworks. His career at Beaton Boatworks in Mantoloking began in 1963 when he was 18 years old. He was born in New York City during World War II in 1944. His family moved to South Jersey in 1950 and he attended the Bay Head Elementary School and Point Pleasant High School where he was friends with Tom Beaton's older siblings.

He was primed to go on to college at Rutgers University but suddenly his father died and his mother fell ill, and so he started work at Beaton's in the spring of 1963. "I had a couple of other jobs and I thought all this was temporary, but one year led into another and here I am." That was sixty years ago.

"You learn the business a little bit at a time," he said. "Once I was here awhile and got into all the aspects of it I really enjoyed it," Smith said. "We built mainly small sailboats and when I started there was five or six people working on boats. Now I'm the only carpenter here. Now the marina is the dominant part of the business."

Working on wooden boats requires a jack-of-all-trades ability. "Some things are a real challenge, some things you may only do once -- things that are particular to the design. Some of the boats we made 15 or 20 years ago, the pieces were standard so it was almost a production line. But then we had class racing boats where everything had to be made to certain specifications."

"During the summer, when it's slow, marina customers come in with all kinds of requests. I've made caskets for cats, old wooden water tanks for toilets -- nothing I'd put on a resume. But if you can make something as complicated as a wooden boat you can probably handle it. Last year I made a bunch of Adirondack chairs."

The last wooden boat he made from scratch was a little 10-foot lapstrake pulling boat or dingy. "It was a replica of an early 1906 boat. They had the original in pieces that came on a trailer so I had to redraw the plans and patterns for it. It was small but very fancy."



Photo Credit: Awardee's Family

“But we don’t do too many wooden boats anymore -- we don’t have the people who can do it. Tom [Beaton] can do it but he has to do the office stuff.”

Besides the lack of skilled labor, getting wood to restore old boats is difficult. “Getting wood of all kinds is terrible and if you can find it, it’s expensive. It’s like restoring an old house, restoring a wooden boat is more work than making a new one,” he said. “I live in a house built in 1893 so I know all about that.”

At 78 years old, Smith is starting to slow down a bit, he said. “I enjoy doing it but my knees are shot. If I can stand up and not climb a ladder -- great. It’s just a function of age. If my health stays good, I’ll continue to work part-time.”

“It’s a job, there’s nothing too exciting about it. I was fortunate in growing up around here at the tail end of the traditional ways. If someone has a boat now they just roar up and down the bay with the radio going full-blast. They’re not doing what we enjoyed doing on the bay -- fishing, clamming, just being out there and seeing what’s out there. Well, times change.”