

# ENDURING WONDER OF WOODEN BOATS

The 18th annual WoodenBoat Show, in Mystic, Conn., offered up its ode to classic boatbuilding



Attendance was brisk on the docks and on the grounds of Mystic Seaport.

BY KATLYN CONKEY / PHOTOS BY CRAIG MILNER

Two men squat in front of a pile of sawdust. To their left, a freshly cut log protrudes from a bright orange portable sawmill, but it is the sawdust the men are focusing on.

One runs a hand — brown and leathered — through the sawdust, lifts it to his nose and inhales deeply. Just as a sommelier would judge a fine wine, he is appreciating the essence of the wood: rubbing the particles with his fingertips, sifting it, watching how the wind catches the dust and carries it away.

Every avocation has its own passionate experts, and expertise is never in short supply at the WoodenBoat Show, where each summer wooden-boat owners, builders and those who long to be among them flock to the gathering of the clan. At this year's 18th running of the show — produced by WoodenBoat Publications — every dock, pathway and patch of green in the historic Mystic (Conn.) Seaport village was alive with the gleam of varnished

teak and mahogany, stretching from cleat to cleat.

In-water exhibits ranged from show queen Elf — a restored 1888 Lawley Shipyard-built 38-footer — to WoodenBoat Show mainstay Richard S. Pulsifer's 22-foot Pulsifer Hampton ([www.pulsiferhampton.com](http://www.pulsiferhampton.com)), to Eulipion, a 1947 25-foot Chris-Craft Express Cruiser modernized by Pittsburgh-based YNOT Yachts ([www.ynotyachts.com](http://www.ynotyachts.com)).

Nearby, just beyond the shadow of the tall ship Amistad on the Seaport's village green, is the "I built it Myself" section. Here, hobbyist builders display their marquetry-adorned kayaks or comic-strip-covered paper canoes, eager to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the professionals.

Those who are accustomed to the faster beat of a contemporary fiberglass show encounter a different pace and feel here. Show-goers drift along the docks,



(Clockwise from top left) A selection of planes and other traditional boatbuilding tools from The Beveled Edge of Old Mystic, Conn.; remote-controlled and model sailboats show that craftsmanship is not limited to the bigger boats; traditional blocks, cleats and mast hoops for a coasting schooner were among the products featured by Pert Lowell Co. of Newbury, Mass., which also builds and restores wooden boats; 20-year-old boatbuilder Timm Schleiff (left), of West Virginia, talks with Jim Reineck of J.M. Reineck & Son of Hull, Mass., about traditional hardware that is made under license from original Herreshoff designs.

running fingertips along the mahogany and brass. People nod at one another and engage the builders face to face, forging a respect for the tradesman as well as the craft.

Craig Milner, at this year's show to sign copies of his book, "Ralph Stanley, Tales of a Maine Boatbuilder," describes the atmosphere as that of a county fair. "These people are just real enthusiastic about boats," says Milner, who was joined by 80-year-old Stanley — Maine's boatbuilder laureate — for the signing. "A very festive atmosphere." But, he notes, "They're not hobbyists. They're dedicated to building, using, sailing and maintaining boats built in wood."

On this Saturday, devotees are easily spotted among families on hand for an afternoon out. Some take a casual perusal of the boats. Others scrutinize them with a trained eye, making quick-but-detailed examinations of the woodwork, craftsmanship, make and model in one sweep.

The complexity and beauty of wooden boating is difficult to put into words. It is part intellect, part craftsmanship, part pride, part belong-

ing. To the uninitiated, the technical discussions are as indecipherable as a foreign language; to others, it's music.

"The beauty of wooden-boat building is it is an incredible art. It brings a bunch of different complex and beautiful crafts into play," says Fred Fischer, of Noank, Conn. "It differs from the world of fiberglass in that this show has a feeling for history that is non-translatable. It's a blend of the emotional and intellectual."

Fischer sits on one of the main docks, taking in the crowds from beneath his worn, salt-sprayed hat. Today is an opportunity for Fischer, who volunteers a couple times a week in the boathouse at the Seaport, to congregate with like-minded fellows.

Thanks in part to cooperative weather, crowds at this year's show, June 26-28, were on par with previous years, according to Carl Cramer, publisher of *WoodenBoat* magazine, who patrolled the show grounds in an oversized red T-shirt, floppy canvas hat and sunglasses. "I was ecstatic with the turnout," he says.

Dennis Wolfe of Wolfe Boats ([www.wolfeboats.com](http://www.wolfeboats.com)) made the trip from Marine City, Mich., because if he's going to find a buyer in this economy, it will be at this East Coast show, he says. During show hours he stands post on his Harmony 25 electric launch, extolling its battery life and cruising speeds to curious passers-by. However, once the gates close and the docks creak a bit more quietly, exhibitors like Wolfe pack away their patter and gather with fellow enthusiasts.

"At night we all sit around relaxing on our boats, talking tech," he says. "I've picked up a lot of ideas from people. We all trade rides and eat dinner together. I actually was still picking up cheese and olives before the show this morning."

No blazers and Italian loafers for exhibitors here — it's a T-shirt-and-jeans crowd. Builders pad across smooth wooden floorboards in roughened bare feet, discussing a cold-molded frame or their latest Japanese hand saw.

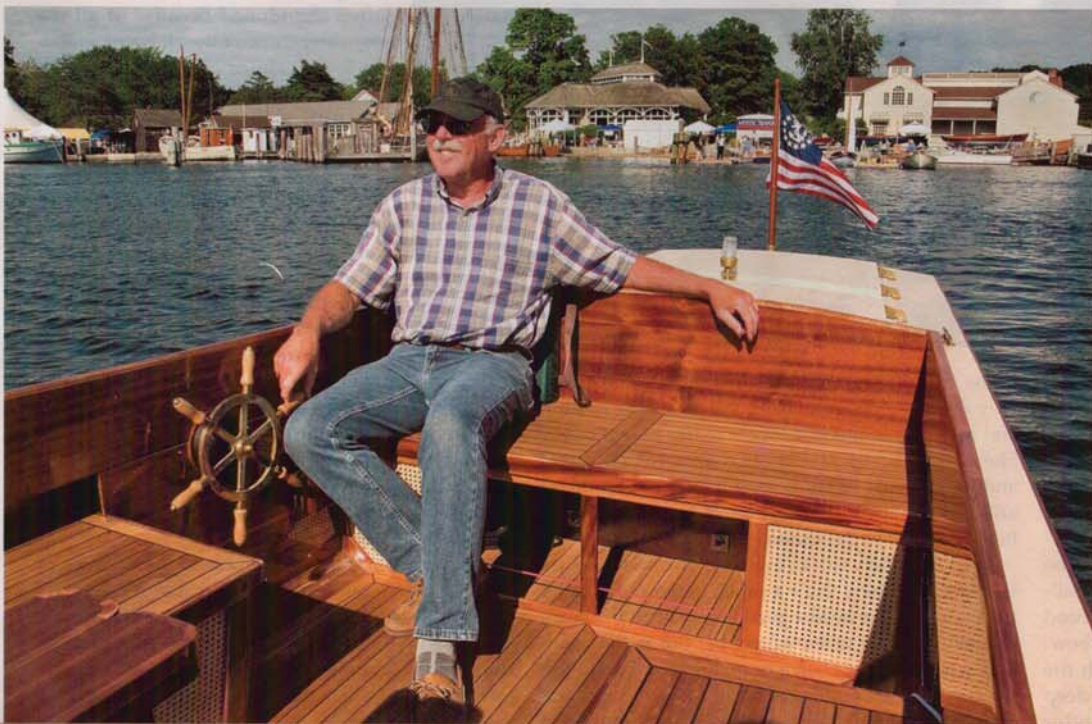
And, in the background, a small power cruiser from another era putt-putts its way across the water. Her owner cuts the engine and glides quietly into a slip. ■



(Clockwise from top) Dorries, dinghies and rowing boats of all kinds were represented, seen here against the backdrop of the Freedom Schooner Amistad; myriad canoes and kayaks were available as kits from Chesapeake Light Craft; Aisek, a 26-foot "Surf Scooter" pilothouse cruiser, was built by Peter Poanessa of Keene, N.H., based on a design by Sam Devlin of Devlin Designing Boat Builders, Olympia, Wash.



(Clockwise from left, below) Eulipion, a 1947 25-foot Chris-Craft Express Cruiser, was beautifully restored by the LeDonne brothers of YNOT Yachts, Pittsburgh; the village green was home to the many first-time builders who took part in the "I built it myself" event, sponsored by Interlux; Midnight Run, a 21-foot skiff by Rick Waters of Branford, Conn., was among several Atkin-designed boats at the show; Robert Pillsbury, of Scituate, Mass., created this strip-planked deck using western red cedar from recycled utility poles that were sawed on a friend's Wood-Mizer portable sawmill.



Dennis Wolfe takes a leisurely — and very quiet — cruise along the waterfront in his Harmony 25 electric launch, which was awarded best in show for innovation.