

Wooden Ships and Iron Magazines: The Remarkable Rise of *WoodenBoat*

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By the time it published its May/June issue in 1976, *WoodenBoat* magazine (at that time still called *The Woodenboat*) had been in existence for two years and had reached its tenth issue. Given the precariousness of magazine publishing as an enterprise and the specificity of its subject matter, merely reaching the tenth issue might be considered a victory.

That tenth issue contained an article by David Keith entitled "What Good is Wood?" in which the author discussed the rise of what he called "real wood boatbuilding." He might as well have simply said "real boatbuilding," for the feeling is strong in this article – as in early issues of the magazine – that there really is only one true and proper material for constructing boats. Keith discusses the growing interest in wood construction, apprenticeship programmes and the design and use of small and large boats based on traditional models. One by one he reviews other methods of boat construction, in turn presenting aluminum, steel, fiberglass and ferrocement. Not surprisingly, he finds them all wanting.

In some cases, most notably that of ferrocement, his comments are on the mark and his points well-taken. Widely hailed as a cheap material which required virtually no skill to use, ferrocement boatbuilding surged to prominence in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Its legacy today is thousands of partially-finished hulls, representing broken dreams, homes and marriages, littering boatyards around the country.

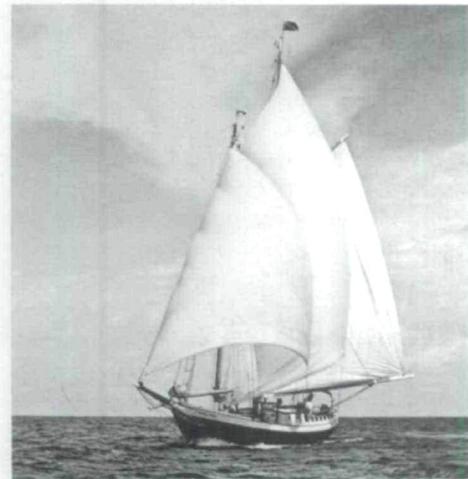
Keith's argument in favour of wood as a boatbuilding material is ultimately spiritual rather than technological. In a passage worth quoting at length, he sets out an ethos which informed the early years of both the magazine and the wooden boat renaissance:

But, when all is said and done, wood's main appeal is not to our cold logic and rational research. It is to our souls. There is a romance with wood, a link with the past; with the captains of the fishing schooners, the clipper ships, Josh [sic] Slocum and his Spray. We can

hark back in our memory and imagination to the Great Age of Sail, to the earlier captains who found and made the way. In these days when politics, television, the news and our jobs all seem to be getting worse, there is a refreshment in our recalling that it was not always so. A wooden boat, of whatever size and type, is a link with that slower, more relaxed and happy past. Long may wooden vessels grace the harbours of the world.¹

Ignoring for the moment the general tone of utopian "back-to-the-landism" so characteristic of the 1970s, the message is clear. Beyond all the practical reasons you might care to cite, wood is simply right: a wooden boat has a spirit and a soul that cannot be obtained in other materials.

The WOODENBOAT
THE MAGAZINE FOR
WOODEN BOAT OWNERS, BUILDERS AND DESIGNERS



If the magazine had persisted in this approach it might have perished along with the 1970s, another Luddite relic of a decade notable for its naive approach to the technological past. *WoodenBoat*, however, has prospered and is still going strong at issue number 105. The

story of the persistence of wood as a boat-building material is to a very large extent the story of the persistence of *WoodenBoat*.

The magazine was founded in 1974 by Jonathan Wilson, a sometime builder and repairer of wooden boats described by marine journalist Peter Spectre as a "scraggle-headed long-haired tepee-dweller" who quite literally lived in the middle of the woods, with the nearest phone half a mile away (in issue three, he included a photo of the phone attached to a tree for those who doubted him).² Spectre, who has since become one of the magazine's contributing editors, shared in the general doubt that the magazine would ever progress beyond volume one, number one. After all, the first two issues had a poem as an epigraph.

Wilson's editorial in issue one laid out the programme the magazine was to follow: "Our purpose is to help in the discovery of the ideal delicate blends of traditional craftsmanship with modern technological developments." This balance seems to have been difficult to achieve in practice, and the magazine's strongest initial appeal was to the traditionalists. By issue five, the editorial voice found it necessary to restate the mandate: "There will undoubtedly be some readers who wonder why we're featuring such boats [modern cruising designs built in wood] when they thought we'd be concentrating on traditionalists. Well - we never said that."

The magazine survived, to the occasional surprise even of its own staff, reaching a circulation of almost 20 000 by 1977. The early issues were distinguished by typographical irregularity as the magazine struggled to find a style, and by articles of great sincerity as its contributors found their voices. During those years it was similar to many other specialized journals that preached to the choir and featured breathless letters to the editor recounting the writers' conversion to the true cause of wooden boats and boatbuilding and bearing witness to the cause.

During that time it also shared many of the characteristics of the wooden boatbuilding revival then taking place in North America and for which it was partly responsible. Articles on legendary yachting figures and famous boat designs paid an almost religious reverence to the absolute pinnacles of craftsmanship. This masterpiece-oriented, connoisseurial approach was matched by a reverence for wood itself. The emphasis was on prime timber: where to find it, how to use it, and wasn't it all

better wood 100 years ago? Clear wide pine boards, natural knees and crooks and virgin stands of oak and spruce were the dreams of *WoodenBoat's* readers and writers. Voluptuous photos of varnished wood and polished bronze only added to the appeal. High production values and a commitment to luxurious photography have continued to be trademarks, leading at least one commentator to note that "everything in *WoodenBoat* looks as though it was photographed at 3 o'clock on a summer afternoon on golden pond."

The antiquarian appeal of this approach might have led to a steady, if limited market. In issue 15, however, editor Jonathan Wilson signalled a change which was to have enormous implications for the magazine's development. In the friendly, confessional style which has been a feature of the editorials throughout the magazine's life, Wilson spoke of long-term objectives and of the need to support, rather than defend, wood's use as a boatbuilding material. Identifying a crucial issue, he said:

I found my focus trained more sharply on the traditions than the emerging technologies. It was something of a shock for me to come face to face with that limited perspective... Feeling, as we do, that the most exciting material will result from the sensitive blending of the traditions of the past with the potentials of the future, we sense that the entire nature of wood and boats is changing and growing.³

With this resolve to follow wood as a subject wherever it led, rather than to concentrate on a particular vision of boats which happened to be built of wood, Wilson signalled the magazine's maturation into a journal which would have a distinct role in defining wood's continuing use as a boatbuilding material rather than documenting its use in the past.

He and the magazine have continued to wrestle with what this means, engaging in spirited debates over advertising content and editorial direction. They have sometimes run features that seem deliberate attempts to provoke a response. The cover of issue 73, winter 1986, for example, portrays not the usual elegant whitehall skiff or the poetry of frames rising from an oaken keel, but the offshore racing powerboat *Jesse James*, blasting over the waves at 160 kilometres an hour.

Not only was it a powerboat, but the most offensive kind of powerboat, and named after an outlaw at that. What redeeming features could such a boat have, even if it was made of wood? Wilson's editorial makes it clear that the

magazine's attitude towards its subject material had matured considerably since the early days of single-minded reverence for wood and certain kinds of boats. In it, he speaks of the potential of wood as an engineering material, and of how the demands of top-level competition prompt developments and improvements which otherwise might not have happened. "For a guy like me, whose more exciting moments are related to the unending discoveries of this potential," he says, "boats like this just knock me out."

The magazine's audience seems also to have matured because the letters published in the following issue were strongly in favour of the perspective expressed in the article and editorial. As one reader wrote, "After all, the name of the magazine is *WoodenBoat*, not *Old, Wooden Sailing Boat*."

In its 18 years of publication *WoodenBoat* has provided many examples of how wood persists as a boatbuilding material. In some cases this persistence is retrograde and anachronistic and the magazine has explored and documented wood construction traditions which have endured in particular places. In "The Creation of *Siola Tan*," Robert Hobman described the building of his boat by indigenous craftsmen working in an established tradition.⁴ In this instance, only the customer has changed while both the material and the methods persist.

In other cases the material has persisted within new techniques. One of the most notable, the Wood Epoxy Saturation Technique, or W.E.S.T. system, was just being developed when David Keith was writing of wooden boatbuilding and its traditions in 1976. Using this method, many thin laminations of wood are built up to replace a single, solid piece. This greatly reduces reliance on prime, first-growth timber and allows the use of quick-growing local softwoods.

In a series of three articles in the early 1980s, multihull designer Jim Brown proposed an innovative solution to the problem posed by the dwindling timber resources available for traditional boatbuilding by indigenous peoples he called the "canoe people."⁵ The dugouts they have always used depended on logs of a certain size, which were becoming scarce. Brown was wary of development aid schemes which might have provided aluminum boats and outboard motors to replace the dugouts because these would have been culturally and technologically inappropriate.

By marrying traditional dugout designs to epoxy technology which can utilize renew-

able, fast-growing local softwoods, Brown suggested that suitable boats could be made and repaired locally. As he wrote about these canoes, Brown raised an issue which has become central for the magazine: the continuing existence of wood as a resource.

Early in the magazine's history, in an article titled "Making a Choice: The Imported Woods," the issue was simply which was the most suitable for boatbuilding in terms of strength, workability and rot-resistance.⁶ Now, however, the magazine's pages are filled with discussions about rainforest depletion, sustainable harvesting, and the ethical choices involved in using tropical hardwoods. Richard Jagels' long-running column "Wood Technology" has taken an increasingly sophisticated approach to both wood as an engineering material and the environmental consequences of its use.

The nature of its subject matter has ensured that *WoodenBoat* has had a historical perspective from the outset. In addition to dealing with traditional designs and materials, the magazine has kept current with developments leading to a greater understanding of the maritime past and its material culture.

Contributing Editor Peter Spectre has written a number of significant commentaries on the politics and issues of maritime preservation from the early 1980s, raising issues that are all the more pertinent today.⁷ Is it better to save one large vessel or several small ones? Should scarce resources be devoted to preserving historic ships or to building interpretive and usable replicas? Is it worth repatriating partial wrecks of nineteenth-century sailing vessels from the Falkland Islands just to keep them as expensive relics?

WoodenBoat has existed through a period in which maritime heritage has been a growth industry; museums were founded, ships saved, waterfronts refurbished and large amounts of public money spent in pursuit of the seafaring past. The magazine's writers have chronicled less-savoury episodes in the maritime community such as the uneven progress being made in saving ships at the National Maritime Historic Park in San Francisco and the salvage of some historic ships, such as the Great Lakes schooner *Alvin Clark*, which were probably better left on the bottom. Writing of these challenges in issue 84, Spectre said:

Unfortunately, the interest of the maritime community tends toward the high-visibility projects, like preserving big ships, the "tall-ships" extravaganzas, and real-estate-driven

waterfront historical parks, and not towards the pursuit of historical scholarship. But unless we give that scholarship at least as much priority as we do the collection of antiquarian memorabilia, we will eventually reach the point where we will be surrounded by historical debris and nobody will have a notion of what it all means or even where to look for an answer.⁸

Surely this is close to the material historian's nightmare, the absurdist extreme of the value which we all place on artifacts.

Although its focus is maritime, *WoodenBoat* has much to offer the material historian. Beyond simply recording and preserving past technologies – an activity which is itself of unquestioned benefit – the magazine has existed in a fertile zone between the scholarly and popular communities, enriched by both and constrained by neither, linked to each by a common cause. Though they often lack full scholarly references, the articles have much to interest historians and often represent the distillation of considerable research. At the same time, the magazine promotes and records the use of wood as a living and evolving tradition that speaks to its adherents in a multiplicity of ways which alternately confirm and challenge its long-held precepts.

In watching over, fostering and participating in the wooden boat movement, the magazine has recorded a commentary of continuing

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vitality which has much to say to the field of material culture studies. In the words of one sailor of historic vessels, "What good is an artifact or a technology saved if it fails to teach as well as inspire."⁹ Surely that is very close to what the discipline of material culture is about.

NOTES

1. David Keith, "What Good is Wood?," *The WoodenBoat* 10 (May/June 1976): 47.
2. Peter H. Spectre, "Ten Years After," *WoodenBoat* 60 (September/October 1984): 44–51.
3. Jonathan Wilson, "Editor's Page," *The WoodenBoat* 15 (March/April 1977): 2.
4. Robert J. Hobman, "The Creation of *Siola Tan*," *The WoodenBoat* 10 (May/June 1976): 16–24.
5. Jim Brown, "Knock on Wood Part I: Plight of the Canoe People," *WoodenBoat* 40 (May/June 1981): 78–86; "Knock on Wood Part II: The Laminated Dugout Caper," *WoodenBoat* 41 (July/August 1981): 50–57; "Knock on Wood Part III: Windwagons of the Future," *WoodenBoat* 42 (September/October 1981): 66–73.
6. Jonathan Wilson, "Making a Choice, Part 2: The Imported Woods," *The WoodenBoat* 10 (May/June 1976): 35.
7. Peter H. Spectre, "The Issues of Maritime Preservation," *WoodenBoat* 38 (January/February 1981): 36–45; "The Politics of Maritime Preservation," *WoodenBoat* 44 (January/February 1982): 62–68; "Old Tyme Shyppes," *WoodenBoat* 96 (September/October 1990): 64–73. See also: various authors, "The Preservation Forum," *WoodenBoat* 41 (July/August 1981): 36–41.
8. Peter H. Spectre, "Editorial," *WoodenBoat* 84 (September/October 1988): 2.
9. Captain Armin Elsaesser III, quoted in Peter Spectre, "Old Tyme Shyppes", 71.