

One boat is an Island

BY BILL CUTLIP



How Harold Arndt builds a 113-foot schooner, in the middle of the Freeport woods, out of other people's junk

HAROLD ARNDT: a long way to go, taking his ship out of the woods and around the world.

If you've been feeling virtuous because you've been extra diligent in recycling those cat-food cans, or because you've been conserving a little energy by turning off the porch light after dinner, consider Harold Arndt. Arndt is building a 113-foot, two-masted topsail schooner, the *Island Rover*, out of recycled steel and other discarded items on his wooded Freeport property.

Arndt is building the boat with the help of the *Island Rover* Foundation in the pasture where he and his family once grazed sheep. There is a natural connection, says Arndt, between raising sheep and carving a world-class sailing vessel out of other people's garbage.

"The mindset of subsistence farming and the desire to protect the environment, and the mindset that I'm promoting with this boat and the message we're trying to put out — it's all one and the same," he says.

That message is "reduce, reuse, recycle," and we're not just talking about cat-food cans here: the *Island Rover's* hull is being cut from torpedo-grade scrap acquired from Bath Iron Works. That is, "torpedo-grade," as in, designed to repel torpedoes. Not bad for a backyard project.

Other significant bits include a galley furnished with cast-off equipment from a Friendly's restaurant; a keel ballasted with elevator weights, expended bullets, fishing sinkers, window weights, a bulldozer track, and a thousand other pieces of random junk; and recycled ship fittings from as far away as Alaska. Some of the bigger tools used in the *Island Rover's* construction have been recycled as well, such as the 12-ton crane Arndt acquired as scrap from the Chicago waterfront.

When the *Island Rover* is finally launched in 2006, she will be crewed by the people whose sweat, dedication, and expertise went into her construction. She will sleep 19, and her sails will be backed up by a pair of biodiesel engines. Arndt plans to add other alternative-energy technologies in her functional design, including wind (of course) and solar. Once in the water, she will commence a seven-year world tour to demonstrate the wisdom of recycling, and to provide a secure platform for environmental scientists — some of whom have already booked passage.

The *Island Rover* represents a fusion of Arndt's vocational and avocational interests. A waste-minimization officer at BIW for many years, Arndt retired in 1995 and began to sell his services as a waste-minimization consultant, helping Maine companies save money by cutting waste and finding good uses for their scrap piles.

Arndt had laid the keel for Island Rover the year before.

“My desire to build a boat started out relatively small,” he says. “I owned a 30-foot boat, and I wanted something bigger, so that graduated to a 50-foot boat, and then that grew to be a 65-foot boat, and that grew to be a 70-foot boat, and then an 80-foot boat. And now we’re at 113.”

Arndt’s operational plan for the Island Rover took on the same sort of transformation; what was once a genteel hobby to be pursued in the Gulf of Maine is now an international mission with hoped-for global impact.

“Once I physically started building the boat,” he says, “once I settled on this design, then my desire became to sail around the world and to spread the message that this is what you can do with other people’s unwanted stuff.”

As noted above, a fair portion of that “unwanted stuff” came from BIW, and was purchased by Arndt at a substantial discount. While Arndt’s cause has certainly been aided by his array of professional contacts up and down the state, the BIW connection has been the big help.

“The sides [of the keel] were made from a piece of HSLA,” says Arndt, “which stands for ‘high-strength, low-alloy’ steel. It lost its pedigree while being transported from the steel mill to the shipyard, so it was declared not usable by the shipyard, because the navy is very strict in its requirements for identification. You don’t want something slipped in that’s not up to spec. So this piece of steel was 40 feet long, six feet wide — and I was able to buy it at scrap price, even though the product is a very, very expensive raw material.”

Arndt also gets a lot of the best-available technical assistance from BIW, albeit on an informal basis.

“Just about any assistance I might ask for, I know it’s available over there,” he says. “I have a lot of friends over there. But officially, no, there’s no official help.”

Arndt says he encounters some raised eyebrows amongst his BIW contacts now and then, but that’s okay with him.

“When I was working there they basically didn’t believe I’d ever to do it,” says Arndt. “Now that I’m doing it, they still don’t believe I’m doing it. The general consensus is that Harold’s a half-bubble off plumb, but I laugh when I hear the stories. I don’t mind the fun.”

Lately, the buzz about Arndt’s boat has inverted the man’s work/play ratio. The consulting practice takes up about 10 percent of his waking hours; the rest is devoted to the Island Rover.

“It’s a project that the average person wouldn’t undertake because it is so massive and involving,” says Arndt, “and I’ve come to realize it’s really my life. I don’t have much of a life beyond working on the boat. I enjoy what I do and I wouldn’t change it for the world. But it is a unique lifestyle.”

And it’s a lifestyle Arndt is willing to share with those who are willing to help.

“We’re always interested in volunteers, particularly if they have some particular talent,” Arndt says, “like being able to weld. There are lots of specific projects I’d like to be able to turn over to a specific individual and give them that topic — for instance, writing the cookbook or planning the circumnavigational itinerary. There are a lot of opportunities here for volunteers.”

And if you happen to have some sea-worthy steel mixed in with the cat-food tins, send that along, too.

Bill Cutlip can be reached at bill@billcutlip.com

For more information, visit the Island Rover Foundation’s web site, www.islandrover.org.

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