

A hull of a hobby: From a dream, a boat is built Amateurs challenge themselves with backyard projects

By SETH HARKNESS Staff Writer
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Doug Jones/Staff Photographer

Below decks, the Island Rover will have plenty of space for crew and equipment when it is completed. Harold Arndt says he hopes to launch the schooner in 2009.



Doug Jones/Staff Photographer

Harold Arndt has been building a steel topsail schooner in his Freeport yard for the past 13 years.

Harold Arndt didn't know how to weld when he decided to build a schooner out of steel. Nor, for that matter, did he have money to buy materials or access to deep water where he could eventually launch the ship.

That was 15 years ago. Today, a 113-foot rust-streaked hull, constructed entirely of industrial scrap, rises up among the pine trees in an overgrown sheep pasture beside Arndt's house off Byram Avenue in Freeport.

As amateur boatbuilding projects go, this is about as ambitious as it gets. But Maine is a place where many people pursue boatbuilding dreams in their backyards. Alongside the centuries-long tradition of Maine craftsmen building boats and ships for sale, there is another tradition of amateurs, often gifted with time and vision but short on money and experience, setting out to build themselves a boat.

Whether it is a canoe, or, as in Arndt's case, a 110-ton vessel that is the largest ship built in Freeport in nearly a century, amateur-built boats often defy economic logic but make sense in terms of their owner's aspirations and enjoyment.

Harold "Dynamite" Payson, a 79-year-old designer of do-it-yourself boats from South Thomaston, said he has sold boat plans to people from all walks of life, from lobbyists to airline pilots. What they're all generally looking for, he said, is a sense of self-achievement, a challenge and a way to get out on the water.

"It's quite satisfying to take a board that's laying flat on the floor and doing nothing and then bend it around and all of a sudden there's the shape of a boat," he said.

Another wooden boatbuilder, Andrew Malcomb, has helped guide dozens of students through the process of building a West Greenland kayak during a four-week course he teaches at the Apprenticeship in Bath. Malcomb said few other hands-on projects can compare with building oneself a boat.

"It's a very personal experience," he said. "The boat is a culturally accepted symbol of freedom, of the free spirit."

In some towns on the coast of Maine, it seems almost everyone is building a boat. Or they just finished building one. Or they're planning to start.

In Freeport, for instance, a few hundred feet up Byram Avenue from Arndt's driveway, Peter Thompson is in his seventh year rebuilding a classic wooden schooner, Blackbird, under a shed beside his home.

The two men are driven by different dreams. Arndt is intent on making a statement about the world's wastefulness with his boat built out of recycled materials. He envisions the Island Rover as an educational vessel that will help students develop an awareness of Earth's limited resources.

Thompson, a past-president of the American Schooner Association, is working to preserve a piece of nautical history. He and his wife, Sandy, intend to sail into their retirement on Blackbird when the boat is finished.

But in their patient approaches to the long, complex projects they have undertaken, the two builders overlap.

"I don't view it as beginning and finishing a boat," said Arndt, who is 64. "I deal with it as individual projects that all happen to be revolving around the same structure."

Thompson, an engineer by profession, said he concentrates on each step rather than the ultimate goal of restoring the 77-year-old schooner to its original condition. "It's a progression of small projects," he said.

Thompson originally thought he was getting involved in a four-year project when he decided to replace the centerboard on his schooner in 2000. He wanted to improve the sailing performance of the 43-foot schooner and ready the boat for a voyage to St. Croix, where he and his wife plan to retire.

After jack-hammering several thousand pounds of concrete away from the boat's keel, the remnants of an earlier owner's repair, he discovered that the keel timber, a complex piece of wood between the hull and the 5-ton ballast, was rotten and needed to be replaced. To accomplish this, he would have to suspend the boat on supports, which required strengthening it by installing new frames. In order to preserve the original long-leaf pine planking, he decided to laminate new frames in place, a labor-intensive method of rebuilding a boat.

Thompson said a boatyard might charge as much as \$200,000 to do this work, so he brought the boat home to do it himself.

Seven years later, Thompson has completed the frames and is putting the finishing touches on a new keel timber. He said he expects to have the boat back in the water next year.

His motivation stems from his respect for the boat itself, one of a small number of remaining schooners designed by the legendary marine architect John Alden and built at Goudy Stevens shipyard in East Boothbay, Thompson said.

"When we bought the boat we viewed ourselves as caretakers of the boat," he said. "That leads you to some obligations which to some people might not seem financially sound."

Arndt's monumental project began with his lifelong dream of island-hopping around the world. He enrolled in a welding class and started laying the keel of the Island Rover in 1992. A few years later, he took early retirement from his job as waste-minimization officer at Bath Iron Works to devote himself full-time to building the boat.

Through contacts from his years at BIW, he bought 60 tons of steel left over from larger plates. The boat's 39-ton keel is an amalgamation of old window weights, lead fishing sinkers and other metal acquired from scrap dealers around the state. The galley kitchen, now in storage, was removed from a Friendly's Restaurant.

When it comes time to install the schooner's two masts, he said he plans to use tall light poles such as those standing beside the Maine Turnpike.

He uses the mindset of his grandfather, a Connecticut farmer who had a knack for creative mechanics: "If you've got a problem you just figure out a way to do it. You don't necessarily do it the way everybody else has done it."

For example, Arndt did not have the option of shaping torpedo-grade steel plates in a large press, as is done at BIW. Instead, he spent a couple years welding temporary brackets to the plates and pulling them into place by tightening heavy bolts.

Bill Peterson, the marine architect from South Bristol who designed the ship, said the hull Arndt has created is exceptionally even and smooth. "In marine terms, it's very fair," he said. "I think it's going to go through the water beautifully."

The original design called for a 65-foot boat, and Arndt expected to finish in five years. Over time, he enlarged the vessel by more than half, and by 2000, he said he realized his project had become larger than anything one man could accomplish. He incorporated as a non-profit to better raise funds, and what started as a quest for personal fulfillment took on a new mission as an educational organization.

Now, working on a marginally bigger budget, Arndt has the help of one paid welder and a college intern, as well as several occasional volunteers.

Arndt has taken one vacation over the last decade and a half, though he has no complaints about the all-consuming project. He said the difficulty of building the Island Rover is also its appeal.

"I'm one of these characters that need a challenge. Every time I meet a challenge -- that's my reward," he said. "The thing I don't respond well to is doing the same thing over and over and over again."

As the centerpiece of a nonprofit foundation, the Island Rover has become a demonstration of what can be achieved through industrial conservation, Arndt believes. But in order to carry out that mission, he, too, must finish his schooner.

The town of Freeport would also like to see him complete the project. After incorporating into the Island Rover Foundation, Arndt ran afoul of zoning regulations in his residential neighborhood. The town has set 2010 as a deadline for him to remove the boat and all materials. Arndt says he expects to finish by 2009 and trailer the schooner out to a tidal river, where it will be placed on a barge and shipped to Portland. There, a heavy crane will pluck the schooner off the barge and lower it into the water.

It remains to be seen whether that time frame is achievable. As it stands now, Peterson, the marine architect, estimated that the Island Rover is approximately one-third finished.

Arndt said he expects to work on the boat as long as he is able. In many ways, he said he is temperamentally better suited for building the boat than the routine of running it.

"If I pass away before the boat is finished I will consider the building of the boat as much a fulfillment, maybe even more of a fulfillment, than sailing the boat," he said.

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The Portland Public Library suggests the following reading

material related to boatbuilding:

- "Boat Book," by Gail Gibbons.
- "Boatbuilding Down East: How to Build the Maine Lobsterboat," by Royal Lowell
- "Dory Glory: Building a Boat from Stem to Stern," by Andrea Mabee
- "Ralph Stanley: Tales of a Maine Boatbuilder," by Craig S. Milner and Ralph W. Stanley
- "46 Boat Designs from the National Fisherman," by National Fisherman
- "Wooden Boat Renovation: New Life for Old Boats Using Modern Methods," by Jim Trefethen
- "Boatbuilder," by Hope Herman Wurmfeld