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February 4, 2014

FOR THE LOVE OF A BOAT

I first came to work in Thomaston in 1976 for a new marina called Anchorage Marine. I was hired as the Mercury Outboard mechanic and set up and built a shop and got to work. On the third season a classic 1963 wooden Thompson came to us on a Holsclaw trailer with some issues. It had an original 4 cylinder 110 hp Mercruiser #1 drive and we performed some engine work over the summer and then come late summer the boat had a leak which turned out to be a rotten transom. I purchased the boat with a dear friend Malcolm McKay for \$500 after charging the customer \$750 for work performed over the summer, and we were boat owners. I already had a 26-foot wooden sloop built in the 50's and numerous other wooden craft but this was a wide classic lapstrake in pristine shape minus a bad transom and I could not resist her. The boat did not have a name on her and being single I had numerous lady friends. One of my dear friends Patty said "Jeff you are always going at high Idle so name her 'High Idle'." Marianne brushed on the name with gold and black and that was that.

Well we had to pull the motor, drive and gimbal housing assembly in order for a new transom to be installed. I contracted Bruce Malone to put in a new mahogany plywood transom in her and the price was \$400. Bruce is an ace and we are still using it today. We put her back together and went boating. She was no speedster but with her deep bow and flat bottom hull aft she would plane off at slow speeds and we enjoyed her for a few years that way.

Well the 4 cylinder just did not seem enough so we opted to put in a 6 cylinder Chevy in her with 165 hp. They use the same bell housing and just added 2 cylinders and this was the 250 cu inch block with the fast crank. A new motor box was made by Darwood Smith (Smitty) and we added a new engine bed and we were hooked up. This was the first drive that Mercruiser did with a Chevy engine. It did not have power trim or tilt and you had to pick up the outdrive by hand after releasing the reverse lock! The lower unit was the same gear set up as the old 65 Merc 4 cyl outboard. It was good to know this as I kept blowing up drives, as it just could not handle the power. I would put apart old gear cases and put the drive shaft in and re shim them and get a year out of her and they she would shit the bed. Having been in the marine business since 1973 I have had the pleasure of working on the first drives made and have watched for the last 40 years the transformation of the drives and technology. Although drives can be a pain, they still when properly maintained be a sweet heart to drive and cruise with at the prop at the right angle and the power trim is sweet.

Our next step was to put a newer style gimbal housing on her with power trim and we thought that was top shelf. This allowed me to use the bigger drive, bigger prop and a tougher gear set with a proper shift. The gas tank also let go one day in some rough weather and we filled the bilge with gas. Thank god no one was smoking and we smelled it right away. So we installed twin tanks in her so we could go farther. She would do 38 MPH with the wind behind you as long as it was calm. This boat you did not want to drive hard into a SW chop in the afternoon, as she was not built to withstand that

The dash also had a foam covering; the seat tops were covered with Pleather and a rug floor. Pleather is our terminology for fake leather! She came with a top, which kept us dry in the rain but the boat never looked well with a top. The old canvas top had shrunk and while trying to fasten her down one day the windshield pulled loose from the deck. We lashed the windshield down and drove her home knowing we had some work to do.

Well it was decision time and if it was not for Malcolm and his gifted friend Don Comeau it would not of happened. They took her up to the Mountain (Kingfield) where they lived and took on the task of making a new windshield. After diving into her she also needed a new deck, sides and a mountain of other work to make her right. These mountain men were not shipwrights by any means but very good cabinetmakers and homebuilders. They went ahead and built new seats matching the original pattern and did a first class job. We then put new cushions with real sunbrella fabric in a soft green. What was so fun and rewarding was getting these guys interesting in boating and on the ocean. They now have their own boats and learned to be good men on the water.

These boats were production wooden boats and were the last to be built before the introduction to glass. They used an oak backbone as the keel and 1 ¼" X 1" ribs formed the hull. They ran two longitudinal stringers

26" on center to support the floor supports and but they were not attached to the chine's. The boat was designed to flex and move with the sea. The mahogany lap strake planks were bolted together and screwed into the ribs. They used paper-covered plywood, which reduced the amount of primer and paint needed to finish these off in a production mode. They were not built to last forever with their light construction and foam covered tops. We then the following year developed an issue of delamination of the planking below the water line. I think we had hit too many buoys and debris over the year and the plywood was chipped and had exposed the paper covering and it was starting to peel and delaminate! So that fall we dried her out and next spring we stripped it and coated the bottom with epoxy and one layer of cloth. Working upside down removing the paper and filling in and fairing is not a job I would want to do every day. In order to save the hull this to me seem the best way to keep her saved and it has held for over 20 years. If I had fiber glassed her she would not be alive today and I am a firm believer in the West system. Once we got this far we removed the foam-covered dash and installed a solid Mahogany one. Careful attention was made to reinstall the original Ride Guide Rack & Pinion Steering, chrome gauges, and original Merc Control as to keep a boat classic you need to keep as much of the original equipment as possible. A new pressure treated plywood floor was laid down along with a new rug and she has been the queen of the fleet for many years.

The 6 cylinder Mercruiser engine was used when I put her in and she was a bit tired and smokey. I had the good fortune of having one of the most gifted mechanics working for me at the time Elwin Lord. We called him the "The Lord". So we pulled her out and put the micrometer to the bore and out she went to the machine shop and we bored her out to .030" oversized, had some new performance valves put in her and freshened up the 2 barrel Rochester Carb and a new manifold and elbow. This was done over 18 years ago and still you go down and just hit the key and she purrs like these classic in-line 6's did. Nothing is mother today than this engine. Thanks Elwin. He has retired and his health has failed but he is still in our family and I see him as much as I can.

I took my honeymoon in this boat in 1983, and have had many brides want to use her since then. She has only been kept in the water for a few months a year and I do not rent her or lend her out to anyone not in the family. This year we notice some dark wood under the windshield and a few other spots were showing decay so we put her into the shop. Oh Boy. Well off came the windshield, which we saved as the rot under her was too extensive. Fresh water does a lot of damage and some of fastenings used by the mountain men were not marine and then I decided to look at the ribs and hull. Off came the tanks of which one was so thin it started to leak gas. I pulled the rug, floor and found several broken ribs and some plank damage from a submerged object / driver error? The cracked ribs were at the turn of the bilge where she flexes a lot and Larry and I studied this and we decided to sister these up either side with oak and epoxy and not use any fasteners that might weaken the ribs. We also found some fresh water damage in the bow section where the keel meets the stem as water had been trapped there from too many bottle caps and junk from over the years. Once oak starts to rot you have to cut it back and get rid of it as it is like an organism that keeps growing. We decided to cut it back till we got good wood and sister these up on both sides. We filled in the void from where the rib was (about 2") with epoxy and wood dust and we think this is the best way to fix her without tearing the hull apart

So where do you stop on a project like this. Of course the wife now wants a new rug & upholstery and my finish man Stuart Woodman if having field day painting and varnishing her to perfection. I mean you might as well strip all the varnish and put new coats of sealer on after you have stained the old mahogany to get rid of watermarks. Might as well repaint the name to original not this vinyl stuff. The rub rail is old so might as well get a new one with a black insert and the nameplates are old pot metal so lets research on the antique boat trader and get new ones or have ones custom made. I just got given a dual air horn set with a custom manual pump for the dash. The list goes on, the accountant would like to see some customer time and the service manger has just given up the bay till we are done. So this is the boat's 50th birthday as she was built in 63 and it the third or 4th major refit/overhaul. The 6 cylinder Chevy is fresh water-cooled and we have two spare engines and a manifold so hopefully she will last many more years.

So this is a salute to a fine boat, a good crew, and the love of a boat. My partner Mickey bowed out a few years ago as he got his own boat and moved to the coast, but it is still our boat as good friends never die. If I did not own my own marina I could never afford to do what we have done to her over the years. She will be relaunched this summer in time for our summer party and the champagne will be spilled over her bow!

Jeff Armstrong
Owner