

Antique Sails Celebrate 41st Anniversary

By Annalise Silivanch

One of the oldest stories of human behavior is the strangeness of collectors. In one era, items will be discarded without a thought. In a future era, these same items will be discovered, valued, restored, celebrated, and given biographies. So it is with wooden boats—or what was known as just “boats” in the decades before fiberglass boats became the rule of the day. Historically, when wooden boats had served their purpose, they would be chopped up and burned. Thanks to time and the unprecedented influence of a group of Lake Hopatcong-area residents, thousands of wooden boats have a much longer life.

Lake Hopatcong News sat down to talk with one of only two living founders of the international [Antique and Classic Boat Society](#), whose Lake Hopatcong chapter hosts an annual boat show, where approximately 50 antique boats get their day in the sun.

The lake’s chapter has the distinction of being the first in the nation; approximately 55 chapters operate both nationally and internationally. There is now a Canadian chapter, and one in France. (New Jersey includes one other chapter in the Barnegat Bay region.) In short, this group of Lake Hopatcong aficionados are directly responsible for an international movement of historical boating preservation.

Founding member Joseph Fleming spoke with modest pride about the society’s impact. “With our dedication to the preservation of boats and the history of boating, we’ve probably been indirectly responsible for thousands of antique restorations,” he said.

You can trace the club’s origins to 1974, when a group of passionate boaters noticed that the use of wooden boats was decreasing, and many were even falling into disrepair. The new group encouraged members to buy, protect, restore and even display antique boats so that people can learn and appreciate the vessels’ craftsmanship. It also tackled the less sexy work of writing by-laws and policy for the fledgling organization. The chapter’s membership hovers around 140, and most members have antique boats in active use.

Fleming served as secretary on the club’s first Board of Directors, and served as a two-term president in the late 1980s. His decades of service have included a lot more than smiles in the captain’s seat. “The whole organization has grown because of a lot of dedicated people doing the work that is not glamorous,” he said. “Our members have worked their tail off: helping to put the show together, or say, getting a booklet out. The success of the organization is based on thousands of unsung heroes working hours and hours without recognition.”

Members have earned these accolades. Care and restoration of a wooden boat—no fiberglass, please—requires annual polish, occasional varnish, regular engine inspection, and a careful attention to every inch of the hull, watching for nicks, cracks or stress. Like any boat, wooden

boats need to be protected from extreme exposure to sun or weather. Like any prize possession, they need a little babying.

When society members come together for shows they can speak a shared language: the wintertime care and fuss before what Fleming calls the “visions and dreams of spring” and its first water launch of the season. Unlike fiberglass boats, wooden boats require a year-round relationship with their owner, much to many owners’ delight.

As with cars, some top-notch rarities can sell for a windfall. Fleming recalls a friend who bought a boat in the 1960s for \$500. The same boat, in mint condition, is now valued at \$350,000. He even cites a 1920s-era mahogany race boat that was purchased in the 1960s for \$5,000 by an early aficionado of boat restoration, and sold six years ago for \$1,000,000.

Fleming himself owns a boat with quite a story of its own. His boat was originally owned by Post Cereal heiress Marjorie Merriweather Post, when it operated as a often-used utility boat for her guests to her luxury camp, known as Topridge, on St. Regis Lake in the Adirondacks.

The society has played a role in this market, too. *Boating Magazine* cites the growing fascination with vintage boats as the key driver of boat prices at auction, where scarcity and desirability make an antique boat worth what someone is willing to pay. And, as they say, what price can you truly place on nostalgia? Or the joys of craftsmanship and care?

Creating a framework and backdrop, they’ve brought boaters together to pursue a shared passion. “People are so proud of what they’re doing,” Fleming said. “Boaters tend to be more approachable as a group and as individuals. They’re casual but serious. They’re serious but smiling. Boaters are ‘Hi, how are you doing?’ kind of people.”