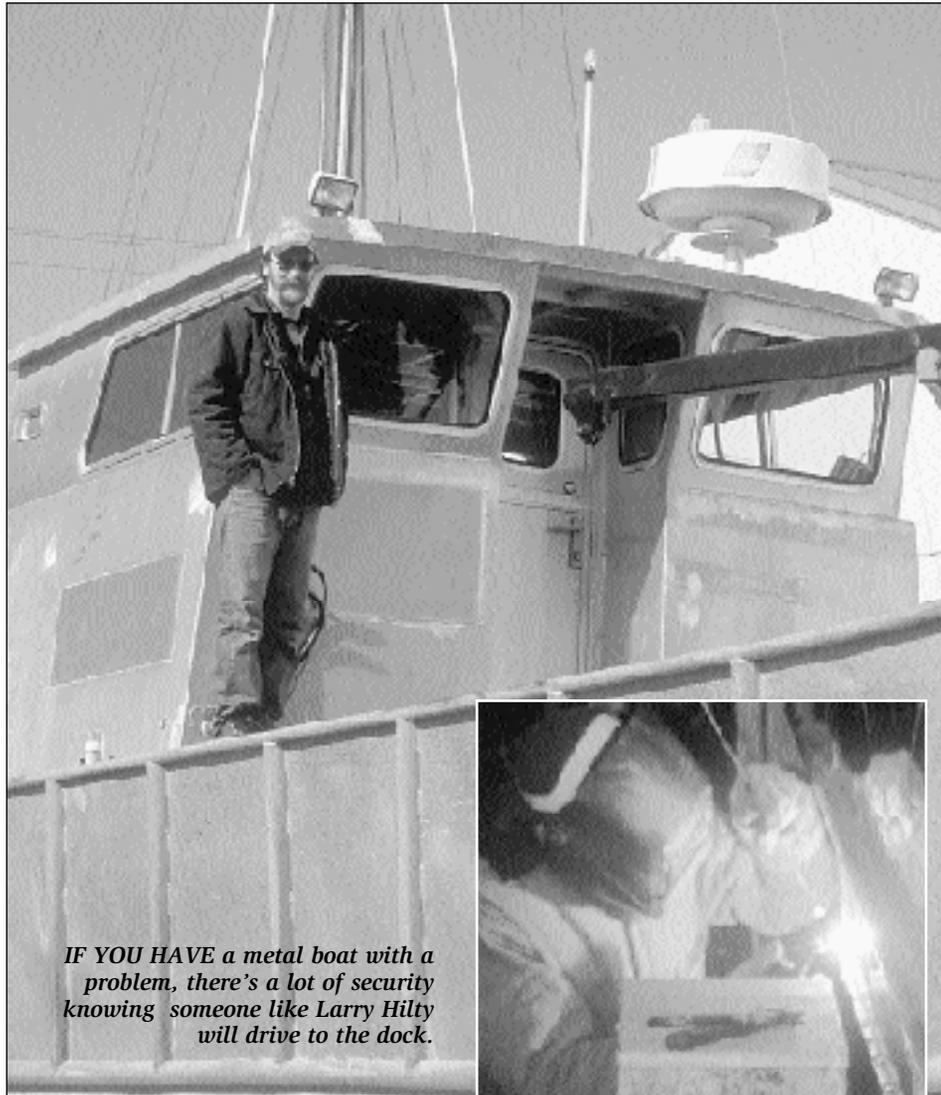
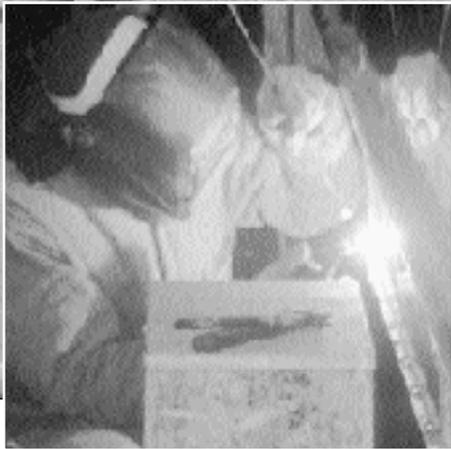


HAVE TRUCK...



IF YOU HAVE a metal boat with a problem, there's a lot of security knowing someone like Larry Hilty will drive to the dock.



JENNIFER KARUZA

BELLINGHAM, WASH.

WELDS DONE

It doesn't take a boatyard to build boats. Just a truck and Larry Hilty.

BY JENNIFER KARUZA

When the 1971 white Ford pickup makes its turn onto the Sawtooth dock at Squalicum Harbor, in Bellingham, Wash., commercial fishermen look up from their work and recognize the getup as well as they do their own boats. It's Larry Hilty, on his way to park next to someone's boat and get to work on yet another welding or fabricating project, just as he's done the past 20 years.

For Hilty — who has never advertised but has worked on 90 percent of the boats at Squalicum Harbor during his career — the old Ford is all the calling card he needs.

"I just throw my tools in the front seat of the truck, put the welding machine on the trailer and tow it down to the harbor," says Hilty, who lives less than five minutes from the port. "You've got to go down, you've got to get to know the guy. You've got to go down to his boat and see what he's got."

Hilty, a one-man mobile unit known as Dockside Machine, started working for himself in the early 1980s. He was working days at a Bellingham shipyard and moonlighting at night for fishermen

friends who would come down to the Bellingham yard and enlist his help on their boat projects.

"So after work, I'd build fishing equipment, back when salmon was big," Hilty says. "And then I started working for these fishermen when herring was big, and they all needed to change over from salmon to herring. Everybody needed equipment, herring shakers and stuff, so I started making it for them."

Hilty grew frustrated with the rate at which the boatyards he'd worked in — from Portland to Bellingham — were continually going out of business; so when the Bellingham shipyard went bankrupt, he started working full time for himself.

"There really wasn't a business, other than shipyards, that did metal projects for boats," says Hilty. "And if you know a couple fishermen who like you, word just kinda gets around. They like to talk to each other, save money, and get things done."

Hilty is an intelligent and easygoing 52-year old who understands — from his welding experience and because he fished in Alaska — what a fisherman's rough sketches are supposed to lead to, as well as the urgency to get the project done quickly and done well.

"Most of the fishermen are totally involved with their boats," Hilty says.

"Some of these guys can come up with amazing things. When you're self-motivated like a fisherman is, you can do amazing things in a short amount of time. Basically you don't tell them; they tell you what they need, and you try to make it happen for them."

Going full-time along the Sawtooth, Hilty was kept busy repairing roller davits, skiffs, nozzles and anything else that needed to be done. One popular seiner project involved replacing rotten wooden bulwarks with aluminum bulwarks, after the captain took a chain saw and cut the rotten wood down to the deck. And the harbor is full of top houses Hilty built to replace flying bridges.

He's repowered Bristol Bay gillnetters with diesel-powered water jets and put wheelhouses on stilts to allow nets to travel under the house and over the stern. Today he spends more time building bait shacks and shelter decks for crabbers, draggers, and longliners.

"There is so much work to be done," says Hilty. "There isn't one boat that couldn't have repairs done to something. Like old shafts that are worn out on equipment, places are rotting away, things that need to be strengthened,

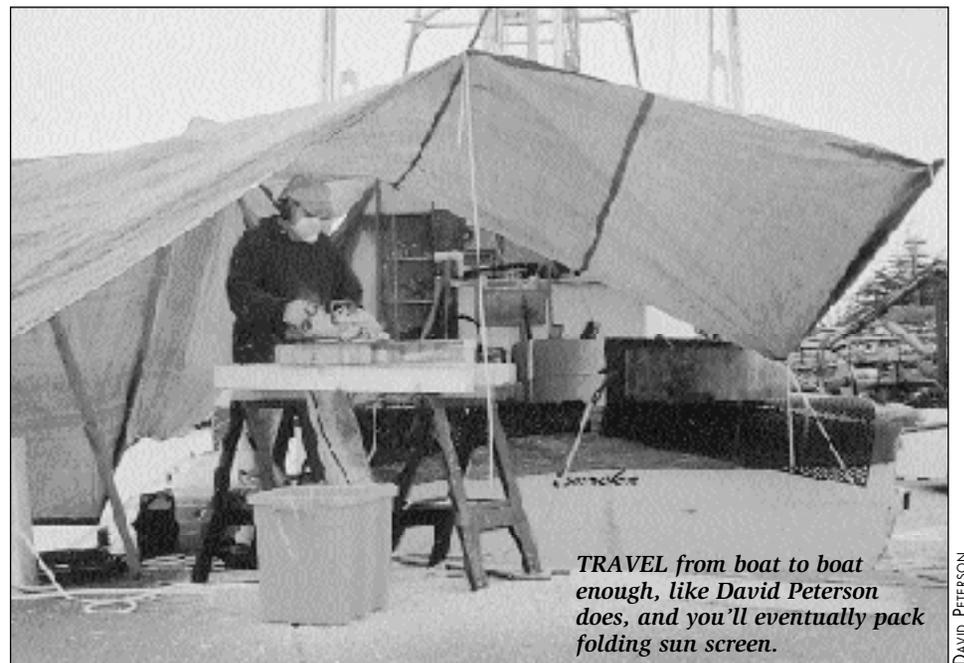
equipment that needs to be upgraded, stuff to make the boat safer. It's never-ending."

Constant pressure to be organized and working around the weather are two drawbacks to being a mobile welding unit. Hilty must get to the harbor with everything he needs so he doesn't have to stop and go buy something or run home to get a tool. And although he enjoys working outside, some welding can't be done in driving rain, and he doesn't enjoy spending hours in the rigging in a blasting wind. Fortunately, captains and crews are more than happy to help.

"You can't just halt the project because of the weather, because some of these guys are really in a hurry," he says. "So they'll build a tent or hold up pieces of plywood and help me out. Some guys tarp the whole boat, and that helps a lot. You just try to do the best you can for a guy because he's in a hurry, you know. He needs to go fishing."

Hilty is proud of his efficiency and of what can be done while a boat is still in the water, and he is pleased at the money he saves fishermen from unnecessary lay time in a yard. When he does need to gain access to buildings, cranes,

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TRAVEL from boat to boat enough, like David Peterson does, and you'll eventually pack folding sun screen.

DAVID PETERSON

EUREKA, CALIF.

FISH OR CUT PLANKS

David Peterson is a boatwright by birthright.

BY DAVID PETERSON

When I was 19 years old I did my first boat repair job. Jim Blum, owner of the 58-foot Tempest, hired me to scarf a plywood section into the starboard side of his flying bridge. The rot was limited to a small area where water had gotten into the seam.

I did the work in lieu of end-of-the-season gear work; I was fishing the last half of the 1976 crab season, crewing for Blum alongside my cousin, Carl Campbell. I was nervous, and under his watch-

ful eye the job went slowly. But we were both happy with the result.

The following two years, I fished crab and shrimp aboard the 58-foot AL W for Don Ghara, crewing alongside my father, Andrew Peterson. Fishing was good and although I didn't save much of the money, I was able to buy my own boat when I was 21.

In 1979 boat prices were high. I bought the 32-foot gillnetter A.D. for \$10,000. It was more hull than completed boat, with a Chrysler Crown gasoline engine, a funky plywood deck and a lightly built, lobster-boat-style house.

I changed her name to Mary Bea, af-

...WILL BUILD

ter my two grandmothers. My first real experience as a boatwright was rebuilding the Mary Bea for trolling. I replaced the deck, house, engine, hydraulics and electrical system.

Rebuilding the boat was more of a learning experience than I realized at the time. Born a third-generation fisherman, I thought my occupation as a commercial fisherman was certain, and I would rely on repairing boats for the lean seasons.

Grandpa Andy, on my fathers' side, was skilled at repairing boats. But, like most fishermen, he was busy enough fixing his own boat. He did whatever it took to get a boat the way he wanted. In one case, he cut a 30-foot double ender in half to add 6 feet in the middle. The Anna Mae fished many years after my grandfather sold her, until she hit a rock and sank.

Grandpa Andy ended his fishing career at the age of 90 and died four years later. Grandpa Hank Jorgensen fished part time, but he went on to work for the city of Trinidad, Calif., until his retirement. I have caulking tools from both of them that I still use.

The early 1980s ushered in regulations and El Niño, which pushed me into more part-time boat repair work and further away from fishing. In 1986 I sold my boat and by 1990 I was repairing boats full time.

Three years later, Iver Westerland, a Eureka old-timer and a lifelong boatwright who built the Al W, passed along some of his key tools to me. I was honored to accept the caulking tools, a mallet, two large C-clamps and a power planer. Westerland has since passed away.

At the time, I didn't realize that he was passing the baton to me. Indirectly, he taught me that there is little you can't do with a box of power tools and a chain saw. Though it looks crude, the chain saw is the most efficient way for me to work on a boat, whether dockside or in a shipyard.

I carry everything I need for any job in my small truck: hand tools, power tools (and some back-ups) a portable table saw, and 12 1/2-inch portable surface planer. If necessary, I throw my 14-inch band saw and 18-inch chain saw in the back. Anything the band saw can't handle the chain saw will.

Working big stock with a chain saw is the way to go, and the only way when working alone. Even a good ship's saw requires two skilled people to operate it; one feeds the stock and the other changes the angle as the saw moves through the cut. Using a chain saw, the material is stationary, and the saw moves around, cutting here and there. A power planer and sander finish the job.

The biggest advantage of working out of my truck is that all of my tools go to the boat, where they are all at my fingertips until the job is done. Efficient use of my time, which helps keep cost down, is important to the owner and me.

I allow the boat's owner or crew to work with me, which cuts cost for the owner and helps me do exactly what he wants. Obviously, if the owner is looking over my shoulder, he will understand why his boat is being torn up so much,

Continued on page 42



LARRY CHOWNING

DRIVING UP to 100 miles to work on a boat requires Alvin Sibley to carry a lot of tools in the back of his truck.

DELTAVILLE, VA.

UNSTOPPABLE

Alvin Sibley could retire, but too many wooden boats need fixing.

BY LARRY CHOWNING

Alvin Sibley married into a Deltaville, Va., boatbuilding family in 1950 and learned the wooden boat trade from some of Virginia's most noted boatbuilders.

Sibley, 74, is one of the last old-time builders in the area. He has built 95 wooden boats between 40 feet and 58-feet, owned boatyards and boatbuilding facilities at three different locations and would be building new boats today if he hadn't run up against three bouts with cancer.

Sibley had lung cancer in 1989 and after coming out ahead in that battle, he had to face down prostate cancer in 1995. He thought he had that licked, but it came back in 1998. Almost anyone else would have given up the daily repairing of wooden boats, but not Sibley.

Today, the phone rings frequently for him at his home in Saluda, Va., just like it did when he was building new boats.

Every weekday morning — bright and early — Sibley and his son, Chris, climb in a Toyota pickup truck and head down the road. Sibley repairs wooden boats for watermen, head-boat captains and recreational boaters at yards on the James, York, Rappahannock and Potomac rivers, all within a 100-mile radius of his home.

The years of experience that Sibley received working with his father-in-law, Johnny (Crab) Weston, and with well-known boatbuilders such as Lee Deagle

and Ed Norton have earned him a reputation as a man who knows wooden boats. "I started when I was 15 years old working on boats at Southside Marine in Urbanna," Va., says Sibley.

Southside Marine was one of the largest yards servicing wooden boats on the Rappahannock River in the 1940s and '50s. "I was just a boy but I must have been pretty good because I was getting paid 75 cents an hour and other boys like me working there and in sawmills and on farms were getting 45 and 50 cents an hour," he says. I think it was because I wasn't lazy and I didn't mind working."

When Sibley married, he went to work for his father-in-law, Johnny W. Weston.

Johnny Crab, as everyone in the Deltaville area knew him, had learned to build wooden, cross-planked, deadrise style boats from his uncle "Big" Johnny C. Weston and Paul Green Sr.

One of the first boats Sibley and Johnny "Crab" built was a 40-foot round-stern boat they used to dredge and patent-tong oysters in the winter. During the warm weather months they built boats. "When I was with Johnny Crab, we built deadrise workboats and the biggest one we built was a 55-foot buy boat for York River Oyster Company," he says.

In 1959, Sibley and his wife, Barbara, opened their own boatyard on Board Creek in Deltaville. He built traditional Chesapeake Bay deadrise workboats there until 1979 when he moved to a smaller facility.

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LARRY CHOWNING

SURROUNDED BY YACHTS, Alvin Sibley focuses on getting the Honey, a 42-foot oyster boat owned by a Virginia seafood company, ready for the coming season.

Continued from page 40

and forklifts, Hilty rents space at the privately owned Colony Wharf Boatyard in Bellingham.

On bigger projects, he sometimes works at the Colony yard with a group of independent locals who specialize in other areas of boatbuilding. Currently,

they're working on a 40-foot aluminum Bristol Bay tender. Hilty's portion of the project involves making tanks with covers and railings that will drop into four existing fish holds, enabling the owner to use brailer bags instead of ice and totes.

In 1990, Hilty halted smaller projects and repairs to focus on one large project: building from scratch a 58-foot steel combination boat, which included sophisticated systems such as a bow thruster and crane.

"I came up with some plans, we skipped the contract, and less than two years later I had the boat I wanted," says Jack Karuza, the boat's orig-

inal owner (and father of the author). "We launched that boat and we didn't have to clean up or change anything for almost two years, because all the systems worked. When we put the boat in the water; we just went fishing. Never came back. Never fixed anything. It was done," he says.

"He's not just welding plates on to a frame," Karuza says. "He's installing plumbing. He's installing hydraulics. He did it all. He lined it all up, put it in, installed the mains, installed the auxiliaries. It was a huge project and there were many things that we added that were new. And Larry was able to figure them all out."

Hilty installed everything with the forethought that he would be the guy called to fix it down the road, and the result of his planning is that every system in the boat can be replaced, fixed, or taken out without having to cut a hole in the side of the hull or tear out any of the other systems to do it.

"It was a good project," agrees Hilty. "Good people. It's something special building a new boat from scratch. It's quite a thing, really. You never lose that... wanting to build new boats. You end up making friends for life on a job like that.

"I love to go down to that boat," he says. "And I think I'd be upset if anyone else was working on it," he says with a chuckle.

Local shipyards have come and gone, but Hilty's place as Bellingham's ace welder is secure. He's survived in part because he lives and works as fishermen do: independently, with the mobility and the willingness to operate on short notice.

His legacy as an integral and different part of Bellingham's commercial fishing community is fixed. **N**

Jennifer Karuza is a freelance writer living in Seattle.

For contact information on companies mentioned in this article, see page 61.

"Everybody needed equipment, herring shakers and stuff, so I started making it for them."

— Larry Hilty



JENNIFER KARUZA

WHEN WORK CALLS, Larry Hilty adds a trailer with a welding machine to the back of this '71 Ford and he's in business.

Continued from page 41

and where the time was spent. Many owners will even do material runs.

Fishermen are good people to work for and many are my good friends. I often have to juggle jobs according to "what works when." I keep a constant list of those waiting to be up next, and I prioritize by the size of the job, the season the boat fishes, the weather needed to do the job, urgency, and other considerations.

Finishing a job before getting started on a lot of other jobs can be a challenge, so I carefully keep big winter jobs out of the way of busy times. Unless, it isn't a problem for a boat's owner to wait while I go off to

other jobs.

Haul-outs take priority over who is up next, even if I have started a job.

A boat that needs urgent work and is faced with an opener has priority over everything. Unorthodox scheduling perhaps, but fishermen understand and appreciate it. I know how important it is to be where I'm needed the most, first, and so do my customers.

On occasion I have to work on the weekend, but my 7- and 5-year-old girls have something to say about that, so I will swap another day of the week to spend

with them. My time with my children is never forfeited.

I take my work very seriously. I know

"The biggest advantage of working out of my truck is that all of my tools go to the boat, where they are all at my fingertips until the job is done."

—David Peterson

HOLDING UP his end of the deal: David Peterson caulked the hull and worked on the shaft log of this 1927-built seiner.

that people's lives are at stake and though I believe that I am good at what I do, I won't make the grave mistake of letting it go to my head.

I always try to overestimate the materials: thicker, more fasteners, bigger bolts and epoxy glue. I am always thinking that no matter what I do the ocean will always try to tear my work apart, weaken it or make it leak.

Besides appreciating the force of the sea, my fishing experience makes it easier to design a good layout for an owner who is rebuilding his boat.

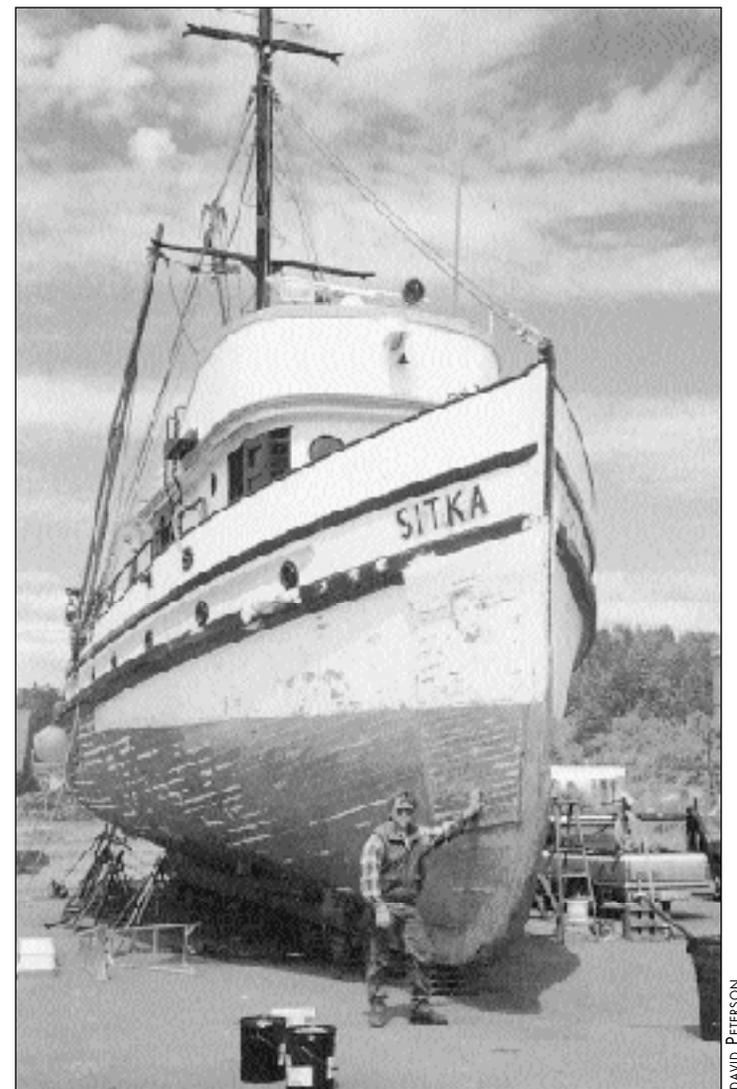
The owner's confidence in my work is the best compliment I get. He doesn't ask me if he can bolt a longline puller to the back of one of my pilohouses, or if the pilohouse will hold a mast or stays for a power block: He knows it will.

I enjoy my work and the opportunity to work on the boats. I am constantly honing my skills on the waterfront, learning and improving and never bored. My job

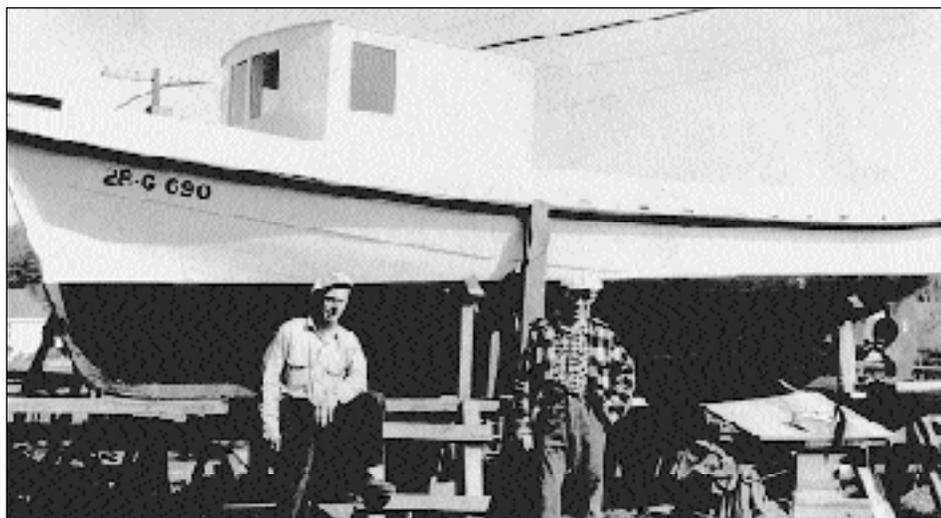
is always presenting me with new challenges to keep me interested, and I think that working on boats has kept me from missing fishing so much.

David Peterson is a boatwright working out of Eureka, Calif. He is also the author of "Tale of the Lucin."

For contact information on companies mentioned in this article, see page 61.



DAVID PETERSON



FIRST IT WAS fishing and then boatbuilding. David Peterson can trace both trades back to his grandfathers, Hank Jorgensen, left, and Andy Peterson, right, in a 1950s photo. That's Andy Peterson's Monterey Clipper.

DAVID PETERSON

Continued from page 41

"I never really stopped doing boat work, even when my lung was removed. I slowed up but when I got enough strength I went to work and worked for 15 minutes that first day. The next day I stayed for a half-hour and kept going until I could work a couple hours a day. I kept going until I was able to work a full day.

"I think that is part of the reason I'm alive today," he says. "All I've ever known all my life is hard work. There are some things you can't do anything about when you are sick, but I tried to keep my mind on positive things and boats and work have been my life."

When Sibley had the third bout with cancer in 1998, he sold his boatbuilding shop in Deltaville and moved 20 miles down the road to Saluda. "It wasn't far enough," he says. "The phone started ringing the day after I got home from hav-

ing my prostate removed and it hasn't stopped yet."

In his garage at home, Sibley keeps a 15-inch planner, 28-inch band saw, joiner and table saw. There is also a large air-compressor. In his truck, he hauls around a small portable air-compressor to operate an air hammer for driving nails and caulking. "I couldn't do the job

without my tools at home and it would take a truck the size of a wrecker to haul my band saw," he says.

Sibley doesn't build new boats anymore but every once in a while he'll get a call from someone to set a new boat up. "I got a call from a man on the Northern Neck about setting a boat up for him," Sibley says. "I wound up doing most of the woodwork and he did just enough to make it look like a corncob. Then he told everybody I built it."

Sibley works at any boatyard that will pull the boat and let him work. He has also repaired boats in the backyards of the owners. He worked on a number of boats at Port Urbanna Yachting Center last summer. Urbanna is just five miles from Saluda and Sibley has been encouraging watermen to bring their boats there. "It is close to where I live and they have plenty of room there to work on boats," he says.

He is presently working on the Honey, a 42-foot oyster boat owned by Shores and Ruark Seafood Co. of Urbanna. "We put all new top work and a new house on her," Sibley says. Sibley gets spruce pine from local lumber companies. He buys oak from Fary Brothers a firm in Gloucester, Va., which caters to boatbuilders, and he gets mahogany from a lumber company in Richmond.

In his travels, Sibley also installs engines. He is installing a \$32,000, 450-hp Cummins diesel in a 45-foot deadrise

head boat, which he built in the 1990s.

"The main difference from the way it used to be with me is that when I feel bad I stay home and no one questions it," he says. "Everybody knows I'm a lucky man

to still be here. Every day I think of how fortunate I am to be doing what I love to do.

"When I was young there were a lot of men around working on wooden boats, but there aren't many anymore," he says. "There's plenty of work and not enough good craftsman around who can do it. I guess that's good for me."

As the interview came to a close, the phone rang and Sibley took the call. It was a potential customer, and Sibley quizzed him on the problems

with his boat. Before the conversation was over, Sibley had yet another job. "Someone wants a shaft log and horn timber replaced in their boat," says Sibley, after hanging up the phone.

"I told him he's going to have to wait, because he's a recreational man. I've got a list of watermen who need their boats repaired so they can go make a living.

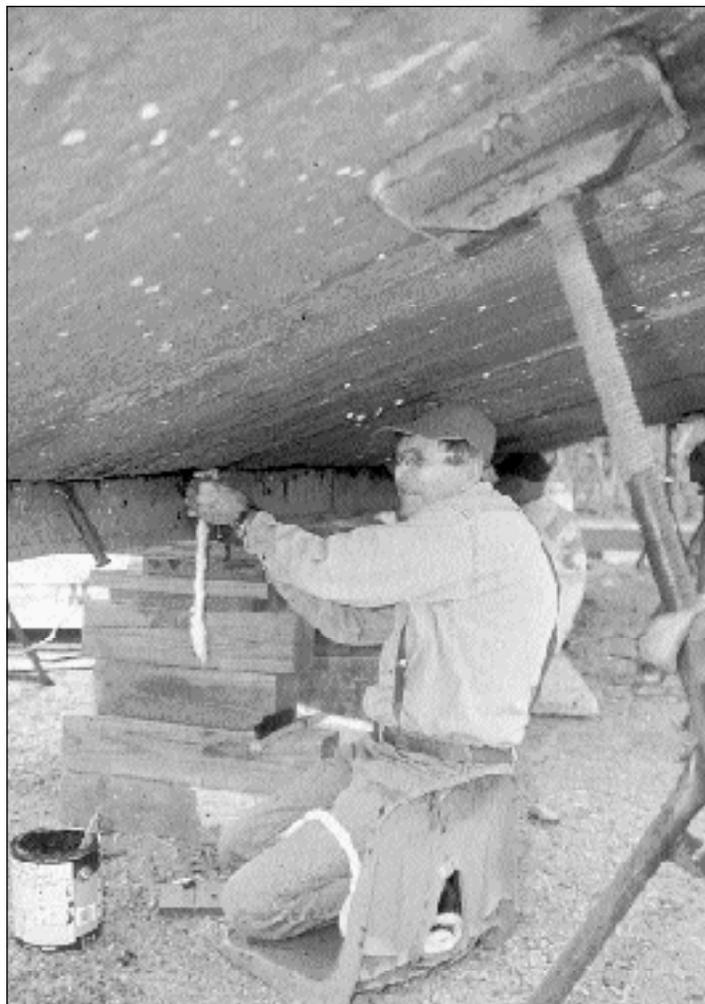
"Watermen come first with me and they always will," he says. "I guess it's because I worked the water and have been in the same place." **NF**

"I never really stopped doing boat work, even when my lung was removed. I slowed up but when I got enough strength I went to work and worked for 15 minutes that first day."

— Alvin Sibley

Larry Chowning is a reporter for the Southside Sentinel in Urbanna, Va.

For contact information on companies mentioned in this article, see page 61.



LARRY CHOWNING

HARD WORK and wooden boats help keep Alvin Sibley going.

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