



Wooden Boat News

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Look Aft and Learn

Lending a Hand With a Rodney

By David A. Taylor

Frank French, of Winterton, is building a rodney (punt) in his garage, and I'm helping him with it even though I am more than 1,300 miles away in Washington, DC.

Frank is building a 16-foot, 4-inch rodney that has virtually the same design as one his father, the late Marcus French, built for himself in 1978. It's the first traditional plank-on-frame boat Frank has ever built and he has been going about the work carefully in order to make sure he does it right. He has excellent mechanical aptitude, is very familiar with woodworking tools, and has been around small wooden fishing boats all his life. So, you might ask, why does he need me?

Well, for the most part, what I have to offer Frank is knowledge I gained in Winterton over 30 years ago. At that time, I was a graduate student in the Department of Folklore at Memorial University of Newfoundland, and I was enthusiastically carrying out fieldwork in Winterton to carefully document the community's long tradition of building wooden fishing boats—rodneys, trapskiffs, motor boats, speed boats and other local types. Beginning in 1978, I met Marcus French and several other men who built fishing boats from time to time and used them in the fishery. Through tape-recorded interviews with them and my observations and photography of their boat-building activities, I learned the essential features of their local tradition. (The tape-recorded interviews are available online through Memorial University's Digital Archives Initiative: <http://collections.mun.ca/index.php>) I learned the terms they used, and how they designed and built their boats. What these men taught me formed the basis of my M.A. thesis—"Boat Building in Winterton"—which was subsequently published by the National Museums of Canada.

What I had no way of knowing in the late '70s is that the fruits of my field research would represent documentation of the last generation of Winterton boat builders that had grown up in the tradition and used their boats in the inshore fishery. Of course, what made it the last generation was the collapse of the commercial cod fishery in 1992, which essentially eliminated the need for locally built fishing boats.

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Frank's rodney nearing completion





Wooden Boat
Museum
of Newfoundland
and Labrador

The Wooden Boat Museum of Newfoundland and Labrador archives, conserves, exhibits and transmits our wooden boat history and its contribution to the province's economy and way of life.

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Individual membership is \$30 and includes unlimited free admission to the Wooden Boat Museum in Winterton for one year (and 10 per cent discount on guest admissions); 10 per cent discount at the museum store in Winterton; and free subscription to Wooden Boat News.

For information on other membership categories and benefits, contact Beverley King. Phone 709-583-2070 or email bkingheritage@gmail.com.

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Wooden Boat News is published four times a year. Members contribute most of the information and photos for this publication.

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Planking with grandson Noah looking on

Fast-forward to today, and I'm helping Frank by answering his questions about fine points of designing and building boats as this work was done in Winterton in the past. I can do this because I obtained the answers when I interviewed his father and other local boat builders, and I saved the information.

Frank French is motivated to build a rodney mainly to see if he can do it. "Back when Dad was at it," he told me, "it didn't seem that I had the interest." However, because of his involvement in establishing the Winterton Boat Building and Community Museum (which has evolved to become the Wooden Boat Museum of Newfoundland and Labrador), he became interested in obtaining hands-on experience with boat building. He has taken two boat-building courses that were taught by Jerome Canning (the museum's resident boat builder), and is now engaged in building the rodney on his own. In addition to the knowledge he acquired through the two courses, he has gathered more information by calling upon his memories of his father building boats, studying Boat Building in Winterton (which describes the construction of his father's 16-foot, 4-inch rodney, and includes photos, key measurements and the vessel's lines plans), and analyzing the shapes of his father's original three-piece moulds.

The rodney Frank is building is very similar to the one his father built in 1978, but it differs in several significant ways. With regard to the shape of the boat, Frank has given his boat more hollowing between the midship bend and the counter, and also added tumblehome at the stern. (He said he found these details in the old moulds; his father evidently decided not to put them in the boat he built in 1978.) With regard to construction details, instead of using naturally curved



Laminated timber

tree sections for timbers, as his father had done, Frank is using laminated timbers he fabricates out of five layers of juniper, using a jig. As well, he is putting in a keelson, which was not part of his father's routine. Also, instead of using galvanized nails to fasten planks, risings and other parts, he is using stainless-steel screws. As his father had done, Frank is using locally available woods for the planks (spruce; from Hindy's Home Hardware, in Winterton), the timbers (juniper), the stem (spruce; a gift from his friend Chris Sullivan), the sternpost (spruce), the keelson (spruce), and the keel (spruce; from Forest Products, in Tilton). Instead of using oakum to caulk the boat's seams, he is using Bostic 920, a commercial urethane adhesive/sealant.

When Frank puts his rodney in the water this summer, it will be equipped with paddles (oars), a sculling oar, and a small spread sail. It will probably also have a low-horsepower outboard motor that can be easily mounted on the counter whenever it is needed. Frank is looking forward to rowing, sculling and sailing the rodney, especially when his grandchildren are aboard.

For Frank, there's satisfaction in learning the skills needed to replicate his father's rodney, adding a few changes of his own. Also, he told me, the project has given him a deeper appreciation of "the skills my ancestors had; thinking back to when they came over from the British Isles and went into building boats over here."

As for me, I take great satisfaction from my decades-long friendship with Frank and his family, and the knowledge that the work I've done to document Winterton's boat-building tradition has made it easier for Frank and others to "look aft and learn" and keep the tradition moving ahead into the future.



Marcus with his rodney in 1978 - photo by David Taylor



Frank with his rodney in 2012



David A. Taylor works at the Library of Congress, in Washington, DC, where he is the External Relations and Program Development Officer for the Library's largest administrative unit. Previously, he was Head of Research and Programs at the Library's American Folklife Center. He continues to do research and write books and articles about design and craftsmanship.

His work on boat building in Winterton was the catalyst that encouraged the Winterton Heritage Advisory Board to develop the Winterton Boat Building and Community Museum, which has evolved to become the Wooden Boat Building Museum of Newfoundland and Labrador. (WBMNL)

Just as David did for Winterton back in the late 70's and early 80's, WBMNL is now beginning a similar process in other areas of the Province. Beside documenting a number of older boats in danger of decay over the past couple of years, a documentation program has been developed and was piloted this summer in Glovertown. A navel architect and a folklorist spent a number of weeks documenting boats, boat building techniques and the influence of boats on the local way of life; they are now analysing the data collected and recording it to help future generations understand their past. It is the intention of the Museum to continue this process in other areas of the Province as quickly as funds and time permits.

Out and About

The Heritage Foundation of NL Honours Iconic Marine Engines

The 4th Annual Provincial Folklife Festival, organized by the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador, was held this past weekend in Bonavista, Newfoundland. This year, the theme of the festival went beyond the reach of land and into Bonavista Harbour. Make and break engines, in Newfoundland “motorboats,” were the focus of this year’s events.

On August 4th, people from all over Newfoundland gathered together at Ryan Premises National Historic Site in Bonavista to watch and listen to a small flotilla comprised of five vessels all powered by make and break engines. The Wooden Boat Museum of Newfoundland and Labrador got involved by bringing a small exhibit about the history and influence of these iconic motors on the province. Afterwards, enthusiasts gathered in a nearby parking lot where a parts swap took place. Parts were exchanged, engines were bought, experiences and stories were shared.

Overall, the event was a great success. People left with smiles on their faces and the rhythmic putt-putt of “them ol’ engines” in their hearts.



Four motorboats in the Inner Harbour of Bonavista



Participants at Make & Break Event - L to R - Charles Donnelly, Philip Lethbridge, Chris Sullivan, Kevin Price, Ted Hiscock, Joelle Carey, Max Clarke, David Ellis, Ed Norman, Charley Abbot, Robin Paul

5th Annual Wooden Boat Conference

The Newfoundland Schooner

...A Workhorse of Beauty, Speed and Grace

We are thrilled that Henry Vokey from Trinity, NL will kick off this year’s conference by sailing his 44’ wooden schooner into Winterton Harbour on Friday, September 7th. A flotilla of small boats will greet Henry upon his arrival – you won’t want to miss this!

Saturday’s sessions will focus around the schooner with presentations on

- Newhooks of Trinity Bay
- Schooners in the Conception Bay Trades
- Ships and Shipwrights of Heart’s Content

We will also be showing a documentary video that outlines the construction of Henry’s schooner, the Leah Caroline, from start to finish.

Conference Dinner and Kitchen Party will end the conference on Saturday evening. Deadline for registration is August 30th! Complete conference package can be found on our website – www.woodenboatnl.com.



Leah Caroline - photo courtesy of Kevin Toope

Look Aft and Learn is our motto.

Seafarers commonly say “look aft” to mean look behind, to the rear and the wake of the vessel. As a wooden boat museum, we feel it is a fitting expression that shows our commitment to looking to our history and heritage as a means of learning for the future.

