

New Owners Making Hall's a National Center for Wooden Boat Conservation

At Lake George's Oldest Boat Shop, Boat Building Crafts Are Not Only Kept Alive, They're Passed On to Future Generations

By Mirror Staff

As the executive director of an organization called Traditional Arts in Upstate New York, Jill Breit spends most of her time promoting local crafts and craftsmen.

On occasion, though, she's a student of those traditional arts.

That was her role one cold morning in early spring on Lake George, where she was among those attending the first "Open Shop" at Hall's Boat Corporation.

The series of presentations about boats and boat building is held on the first Saturday of every month at the marina, which is located on Lake George's east side, from 9 to 11 am.

"Every event includes a special skills section, where we talk about a particular aspect of the boatbuilding trade," said Reuben Smith, the Boatworks manager who initiated the series and who delivers the presentations.

In April, Smith talked about boatbuilding lumbers; the next month, he talked about tools.

"There's always time for folks to talk over their own boatbuilding, restoration, and maintenance projects with us as well," said Smith.

The boats at Hall's undergoing restoration, repairs and refinishing provide Smith with ideal instructional aids.



"On any given day, about half a dozen boats are on the shop floor at Hall's. There are boats getting full restorations, being built from scratch, or just in for minor repairs and refinishing," said Smith.

"We talk about the boats on the shop floor, their history, and the work being done on them," he said. Applying traditional skills, Reuben Smith and the craftsmen he works with at Hall's Boat Shop spend much of their time restoring those wooden boats to a condition as close to the original as possible.

They're eager to explain how it's done.

"Usually it's the not-for-profit organizations who assume responsibility for educating people to appreciate local crafts; it's great to see a business doing the same thing," said Jill Breit.

Based near the St. Lawrence River, Breit's organization is a repository of information about

locally-made rowing boats and canoes.

Hall's "Open Shop" series intrigued her, Breit said, because she was less familiar with the wooden Gar Woods, Hackers and Fay Bowns that were popular on Lake George.

"The larger craft, no less than the rowing boats, were a part of the recreational life of upstate New York," said Breit.

She could not have chosen a better place to learn about that aspect of boating in the Adirondacks.

Hall's first opened in 1908 as the boat shop of Walt Harris, who became the nation's largest dealer of Fay and Bowen launches.

Hibbard Hall bought the property in 1928.

Hall's was the place where the residents of Millionaire's Row, New York Times publisher Adolph Ochs among them, bought their boats and had them repaired and refinished.

It was Gar Wood's Lake George dealer and the place to buy a See Bee airplane. It survived two fires and the Great Depression.

According to Smith, Hall's still maintains some of the boats that it sold to local families in the 1920s. "That speaks a lot about the relationship of Hall's to the boating history of Lake George," he said.

Reuben Smith learned his craft in his youth, working with his uncle, Everett Smith, and his father Mason Smith, restoring runabouts and launches, Adirondack guideboats, Rushton canoes, St. Lawrence skiffs, and building the cold-molded Adirondack Goodboat.

In 1997, Smith moved to the South Shore of Boston Harbor, where he worked as Boat Shop Director for the Hull Lifesaving Museum, building and maintaining the museum's fleet of open-water, multi-oar gigs, and training crews of at-risk kids in Boston. In 2000, he set up his own business, working out of the storied old Jones River



Landing in Kingston, Mass. There, he worked on saltwater vessels, everything from dories and wherries to 20,000 pound motorsailers.

While working in Massachusetts, Smith became the founding director of Massachusetts Bay Maritime Artisans, an organization dedicated to preserving and protecting the historic boatbuilding industry in Massachusetts.

That organization was a source of inspiration for the Open Shop series, said Smith.

"We wanted to foster an appreciation of the boatbuilding trades," said Smith. "We created a lecture series that drew people from the trades as well as boat owners."

The organization also enabled boat builders to exchange and transmit information to younger craftsmen, something Smith would like to see happen on Lake George.

"On Lake George, boat building has a continuous history; there's no reason for every shop to be an island," Smith said.

Smith has given courses in boatbuilding at several institutions, including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; he plans to start doing that on Lake George, too.

"We'll start by offering Saturday afternoon workshops, and then expand to week-long courses," said Smith. "We have in mind some-

thing like the Wooden Boat School in Brooklin, Maine, but on a smaller scale."

According to Nick Lamondo, Hall's general manager, Smith's dedication to keeping the craft of boatbuilding alive complements rather than detracts from the boat shop's business interests.

"With the Open Shop sessions and other events, we get people into the shop and give them a chance to check out what we're doing," said Lamondo. "The level of the work we're able to do, from refinishing a boat to custom building a new one, is higher than it's ever been. We want people to be aware of that."

When Lamondo and his brother Steve acquired Hall's Boat Corporation in 2006, Steve Lamondo promised to make Hall's a nationally-known center for wooden boat conservation.

As word gets out of what they're up to at Hall's - from restoring and building wooden boats to teaching others how to do it - that promise will no doubt be fulfilled.

The First Saturday Open Shop at the wooden boatshop at Hall's Boat Corp. on Lake George are held on the first Saturday of every month from 9:00 to 11:00AM. Registration is required; to register, call Hall's at 518-668-5437 or email info@hallsboat.com.

Photos by Clea G. Hall

