



The Herreshoff Registry
A resource for owners, prospective owners, builders, and aficionados

The Documenting History Initiative

An Interview With Dan Shea

This interview was conducted by Steve Nagy in the morning of November 17, 2010 via telephone. Mr. Shea was at his shop on Burnside Street in Bristol, RI.



Dan Shea is the founder and proprietor of Bristol Boat Company. He has 30-plus years of hands-on experience in the construction and restoration of fine yachts working with world class yacht designers, exceptional boatbuilders, and discerning owners. Dan has pursued a highly focused career that has steadily progressed from apprentice to journeyman builder to general manager, and ultimately business owner. During his career, he has participated in the building of more than 70 custom yachts, including boats of all types and materials, ranging in size from a 10-foot carbon tender to a 60-meter alloy motor yacht.

Dan describes his insight into what it means to build boats. As you will hear, Dan's years of experience have given him a very keen sense of what it means to be a boat builder, a sense of appreciation for fine shapes, and a respect for the work it takes to transform a concept into a fine boat.

THE TRANSCRIPT

SN: So let's ... let's start out. Just so we can get a little background, I understand you've got over thirty years of experience in boatbuilding. So, could you tell me a little bit about how you got started and how it all transpired.

DS: Yes, I'd be happy to give you the quick read of my boatbuilding and supervisory management experience, which began in 1974. And I should say, previous to that, I had an ongoing interest in boats in that I grew up down the street from a small one-man boat shop that specialized in building Lightnings. And I always thought that that was like the best job in the world. So when it came time to work out my career after high school, I had already been interested in woodworking ... was looking forward to furniture making and cabinetry ... and found at that time that there really wasn't much good or interesting work out there that I could find, and the ... the appeal of boatbuilding still being with me, took me from Green Bay, which is my

hometown, to Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin. And I applied at a yacht builder there called Palmer Johnson, and over a period of about a year and a half of reply ... re-applying, was accepted into the joiner shop there as, well let's say, an apprentice. That was in 1974. I happen to be the first person in the joiner shop that wasn't of the regional Belgian descent. And, in the joiner shop, Belgian was spoken routinely, so I had to pick up on the ... the tradework and detail a bit by osmosis. And I really, really enjoyed that whole work experience there. We were, about, let's say, sixty people total in the boatyard. And it was a very progressive boat yard, being owned by Patrick Hagerty, who founded Texas Instruments. And his interest in purchasing the yard and running it was to, as I said, be a very progressive building yard and build very strong, very efficient and lightweight sailboats. So the team of people there really had a special mission in building the best boats, and strongly and lightly. And I really ... really enjoyed that. Hello ... are you still there?

SN: Yeah, sure.

DS: Oh, good. Was a tick in the phone.

SN: Before we continue, I just want to take you ... you just triggered something in my mind ... we had been speaking and you were telling me about your apprentice days ... this was at the Newport show. And you were explaining how you were pushing wood through the planer ... and because you were an apprentice, you had to stand on the end where all the chips were getting spit out. You called that something ...

DS: Well, it's actually a pretty telling experience. If you can picture standing in front of a rather giant four-knife planer out in exhaust to it, milling teak for a teak deck in a not very well lit shed in what was probably on the warmest of days during the winter 5 degrees, and sometimes well below zero. If you think that's a good job, then you're pretty well in good shape to be an apprentice boat builder, because there was just a plain old lot of cleaning up, and mill work, and things that young apprentices did.

SN: Right.

DS: But I really enjoyed it. That to me was a pretty great day because one of the magic bits in the business for me is working with wood and, every new piece of teak through the planer was sort of a discovery, and being able to pick boards out of the stock, put them through the planer, go through and do the rest of the mill work for laying a teak deck, and then being able to lay a teak deck, was really a lot of fun.

SN: Sounds like almost like a Zen thing. Kind of like George Nakashima.

DS: Well ... I think I know who he is.

SN: A furniture maker.

DS: Yeah, and it's telling in another way. And that is, seeing a job all the way through from start to finish has always been important to me. And one of the parts, or facets, of boat building is

that, that each person gets to participate from start to finish. Usually in a number of trades, and ... you get a whole lot of satisfaction on completion.

SN: Very interesting. So, you obviously worked your way up through the boat building trade, if you will. How did you get involved with the Herreshoff Museum?

DS: Well, that's interesting. Burnside Street sort of got burned into my mentality at an early age when I was visiting the boat shop down the street which was somewhat littered with old Rudder magazines and I recalled looking at ... well I think it was one of the W.P. Stephens articles about Herreshoff and boat building. And they had a picture of their building process which was building the hull upside down, and I remember remarking to the boat builder how amazing it was that they could build these big boats upside down, and that sort of discovery in being smart in building boats and all the rest of the article, and advertising that was done by Herreshoff sort of burned into my head Burnside Street, is a pretty great place, at an early age.

SN: Right, and I guess when you started hanging out at the Museum, like you said, when you met Halsey, you became eventually associated with Herreshoff Designs?

DS: Indeed. I can tell you that I purposely moved to the Narragansett Bay region and specifically the town of Bristol, just because it was close to the Museum, and I had participated with the Wisconsin Maritime Museum, and found that to be awfully enjoyable, and did want to spend some time with the Herreshoff Museum, having been there a few times and seeing the depth of what the Museum had, not just in boats but also in people and references and other interesting aspects of the boat building that went on here.

SN: When I first asked you whether you'd be willing to participate in this little project, you replied that you considered it almost an obligation. Could you elaborate on that? Is it related to a feeling of the importance of our maritime heritage, or a desire to preserve history in general, or just really ... what makes you feel that this is an important exercise?

DS: Yeah, and I hope I can answer your question well. If you can picture a kid, you know, getting a job in a boat yard and ... and really enjoying it ... and feeding his family from working hard ... but also working with people that really knew their trade. You get a certain sense of obligation to the trade work and boat building in general, that if you succeeded on the account of your hard work and other people's hard work, and learned from it that what had been learned about the trade work, and maybe more importantly about the respect for the traditions, and the openness to do things a new way, really makes me feel obligated to share what I've learned. I guess I see my trade work as an aggregation of my experience, and that experience was hard-earned in boat yards over lots of generations. It's not all pretty work and it's not all easy work. In fact, it can be really hard and tedious and frustrating and dirty and cold. So, the skills are hard-earned and worthy of passing along.

SN: That's a very interesting and informative answer. I appreciate that.

DS: There's another aspect that I would add in there. And that is if you go into any boat yard and look at what contribution, let's say a production manager or designer or set of drawings actually contribute to a project, you'd see that contribution is really almost negligible

compared to the contribution that comes from guys with lunchboxes. And I think one of the great things about boat building is that it's so reliant on experience, on an individual level, and it's so reliant on the experience of a group or team, that if not for that experience, boats just wouldn't get built and they wouldn't be as good as they could be. And I think the Herreshoff Manufacturing Company really exemplified that, by looking at how much design and engineering work they didn't have to do because they had such a great repository of skills in the yard. And I have to say that, in my career and my apprenticeship, I've never been told I couldn't do anything. And I think that's been true for a lot of people. That there were opportunities to be gained and nobody was there saying "Well, you can't try this" or "You can't do that" or ... There weren't really any limits that I could see put on people, and I think that caused a lot of personal enthusiasm and creativity that is one of the driving forces in ... getting into boat building.

SN: Well ... very interesting, Dan. You also mentioned to me when you were talking about the H20 that one of the rewards for gathering years of experience, I guess to phrase it, is that you, and I'll use this phrase, you GET TO build an H20. You consider that to be one of your, I don't know, rewards. And to me, that not only says what a wonderful hull the H20 must be, but it also says to me that you're a guy who truly loves what he does. I guess this might be why you decided to start your own company?

DS: Well, I really do like what I do, and ... if I can sort of go back to the genesis of the H20, and how I got into it. I was in one of the model room walkthroughs, and it was at the time I was re-framing my 12 ½. So when you are on your hands and knees framing a 12 ½, you get pretty intimate with the shape. I've spent a lot of time under boats and building boats and lofting boats, so lines and shapes to my eye are, I'm not sure what to say, pretty significant. And the model for the 20, I think sort of jumped off at the wall ... in that her lines were so exquisite. In looking at it, I thought, boy, how could you get such exquisite lines in what appeared to be a very short waterline length. And it was just, to me, pretty breath-taking, the shape of the 20. And ... in asking Halsey about it, he filled in the blanks with sa ... said 20 feet overall, 17 ½ foot waterline, that the model was carved to develop a new class to replace the 12½. So, that all made, let's say, exquisite sense to me. And again, the lines were so refined in particular, being able, at this point, to realize that shape that were carved with the hands of a gentleman who spent his lifetime looking at shapes and carving shapes and in his 81st year to refine a design that he had done several decades earlier was ... was really important. So it's the shape of the boat and the intent of the design and the accumulated experience that the design ... that's gone into it that, to me, is hugely significant.

SN: Hmmm ... you're such an insightful guy. You brought up the topic of your own 12½, that would be PEEPER. Can you tell me how you came upon her? I think she was once owned by Gladys Brightman.

DS: Yes. The neighbors of my boat shop here on Burnside Street come by to look at "Gladdie's boat." She's known as "Gladdie's boat", and she was owned by Gladys Brightman. And I was given the boat by her, I'd say, great-niece, who had inherited the boat and had ... at the time she got it, she was not in very good condition, and was subject to, I think, several sort of half-interested rebuilds, or repairs. And I saw her completely covered in the backyard.

SN: What was her name?

DS: I'm drawing a blank. Oh ... Kim. She would be Kim Brightman.

SN: Anyway, you saw her in her backyard ...

DS: Yeah, she was completely covered. But it looked like from the shape that inside it could be a 12½ . I asked her if it was, and she said "Yeah, it was. It was owned by my great aunt, and boy, I wish something could happen to it." So I popped up the cover and found her it to be completely decrepit, and almost felt an overwhelming sense of obligation to get her back on the water.

SN: This was what, about two years ago, something like that?

DS: It was, yes.

SN: Gladys, is she ... she was related to Tom Brightman?

DS: Yes, I'm digging into that. She may have been the daughter of Tom Brightman's brother, but I can't give you the exact here. Asked a couple of people who are asking a couple of people just how that...

SN: How that works

DS: How that works

SN: Did you ever get to meet Tom Brightman? I guess he died not too much after you started your apprenticeship, or your career in boat building.

DS: No I never did meet him.

SN: Yeah, I would have ... he would have been a very interesting guy.

DS: Yeah, for sure.

SN: So another ... another question I have is... again, these questions all go back to conversations you and I have had over the past months. I heard one of the things you mention was of the smell of a boat shop. Personally, I mean I've done a little bit of schooling, if you will, or taking lessons, and jobs, and I think it is probably one of the most pleasant aromas that exist in this world. The smell of cedar shavings is just incredible. I guess that brings back some memories to you? Does the smell, when you walk into a boat shop, does it do anything to you?

DS: Well, it does. It's really a constancy, I guess, more than anything. You get up in the morning and you go somewhere that has a joiner shop, and if they're milling Honduras mahogany, it's a terrible day. But if they're milling cedar or something else, it can be a pretty great day.

SN: Mahogany doesn't smell that well?

DS: No, not to me.

SN: You know what else I like the smell of is white oak. I guess that's your old boat-building aroma, cedar and white oak right?

DS: I think... when I smell white oak ... it smells sort of strong and wiry, almost like the attributes of white oak itself, and cedar is sort of light and airy, again, sort of telling about the characteristics of the wood, at least in my mind.

SN: Let's see ... another question is ... I'm getting to the end of my prepared list here, so to speak, and I was interested in trying to minimize my intrusion on your time to 30 minutes, so I think we're pretty close to schedule. After the H20, do you have any ideas for your next project?

DS: Well, I do. And I should explain the H20 to me is... first of all, building the first boat and making all the preparations and pattern making for follow on boats that can be basically built in the Herreshoff Manufacturing Company production style. My big goal for the 20 is not so much the boat building as trying to establish a new class of boats.

SN: I see.

DS: I'd really like to see the 20 become a class of boats because I think it will be found to be an excellent day sailor, you know, a sprightly boat to sail and compete in, and a good sail training boat, which are all the aspects that it was originally designed to be. So, I have a sense of obligation building the first boat, also putting effort into developing a class, which is, I think, a vision Adam and Halsey as well share. And in developing that class, we also want to go so far as, you know, developing a support network for service and being able to put on regattas and do sail training, and generally foster all those good, fundamental things that keep people interested and participate in a life-long sport like sailing. And being here on Burnside Street, there is a stream of people that come in, and as I mentioned, talk about their sailing against "Gladdie's boat" when they were young and having sailed all their lives, which has been huge to them and I think a fundamentally important part of what our society should have. I hope we can build a class, and have a follow-on class of a more knockabout type. And, specifically, we are looking at four boats that were delivered pre-New York 30 era to the Seawanhaka Yacht Club.

SN: A Fish?

DS: Pardon me?

SN: Are you talking about a Fish?

DS: No. No. I can send you the details of it. There were four boats that were ordered in, I think 1898. 26 foot waterline, 32 feet length overall.

SN: I can probably look those up.

DS: Yeah.

SN: Anyway, one more question. How is PEEPER coming along?

DS: Well, since I started this project, I haven't had any time to spend on her, but I've essentially replaced all of the floors and framing up to the forward bulkhead, and part of the keelson, and gotten her straightened up to the point where I'll jump in next and make a transom, and then start planking.

SN: Hmm.

DS: So she's back in shape with new frames and floors.

SN: Well, Dan, I just have to say that I found you to be one of the most eloquent speakers and one of the most broadly-visioned boat builders I've ever had the pleasure of discussing things with. You really seem to understand the place in society that boats and the heritage and boat-building take and I really enjoyed listening to you discuss things. That's pretty much the end of the questions I had for you. If you have anything else you'd like to say before we make a tape out of this, please feel free.

DS: Well, I'm certain some of my comments can be a good jumping off point for thinking about what the industry is today and maybe gathering some consensus on what's important now in preserving skills and trademarks and what's good about boat-building and think about how best to place those so that they can go on in the future. Because there's literally been a lot of generations of people who have worked really hard to get the skill level to where it is. And I think the trade skills and the work ethic and the mentality of good decision-making and the mentality of teamwork and aspiration are all things that are pretty sorely needed these days. I think will be needed even further in the future.

SN: Interesting comments. I think we'll close it up for now.

DS: All right.

SN: I appreciate your taking the time.