



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

The Documenting History Initiative

An Interview With Owen Brooks

This interview was conducted by Steve Nagy in the afternoon of November 15, 2010 via telephone. Mr. Brooks was at his home in Amityville, NY. At the time, he was 86 years old.



Owen E. Brooks was born in Wantagh, NY on Long Island August 9, 1924. During his youth he spent summers with family in East Marion, LI just east of Greenport. Summers during High School were spent splashing about in Gardiners Bay or working for his grandfather, a commercial fisherman sailing out of Greenport. It was during these years he remembers seeing several of the Cup Defenders and Challengers of the 1930's sailing into Greenport for repairs.

After graduating Amityville High School in 1942, Mr. Brooks enrolled at R.P.I. on the accelerated Naval R.O.T.C. program. He graduated two short years later with a four-year degree in Chemical Engineering and as an officer in the United States Navy. He was placed immediately on active duty aboard a converted yacht sub-chaser along the Atlantic seaboard. With the war in the Atlantic winding down, he was soon transferred to the West Coast for duty as a Radar Officer aboard the Essex Class Aircraft Carrier U.S.S. Ticonderoga (CV-14). On his 21st birthday while en route to the Sea of Japan and an impending invasion, the United States dropped the second atomic bomb on Nagasaki.

After the war, Owen Brooks took a teaching job at R.P.I., got a teaching degree from Columbia, and eventually began his career with Pfizer Pharmaceuticals in Brooklyn, NY. He would retire from the company as Vice President of World-Wide Engineering in 1987.

In 1950 he married his wife of 60+ years Marilyn. They both share a deep and abiding faith in God along with a love of the water and especially sailing. She already had a Hampton one-design, but there was one boat that he always wanted and that was a Herreshoff 12. He remembered spying one at anchor in Bristol on their Honeymoon that had a tear-drop shape to the mast. We believe this to be "Minx", which in fact did become his boat in 1964, renamed TARGET.

With the addition of children, sailing became a family affair, with his daughter and two sons sharing in sailing, crewing, and maintaining various boats, including the 1937 12 1/2 "Target", a 1929 38' Matthews cruiser, a 10' Old Towne rowboat, a Blue Jay class sailboat, a 13' Boston Whaler and even a Grumman Canoe!

TARGET (ex-MINX) was donated to the Herreshoff Marine Museum in 1980, and soon Mr. Brooks ordered a Edy & Duff Doughdish, DOWNEAST. This he has sailed each summer since, winning many trophies, and spending many fine hours on the bay with his wife, children, and now nine grandchildren. He and Marilyn split their time between their home on Long Island and Vero Beach, FL.

Family friend Adam Albino recalls sailing with Mr. Brooks, saying "he was a very intimidating man, who commanded respect from the moment you met him. When he spoke, you jumped. He is, however, one of the finest sailors / yachtsmen / boatmen I have ever met. He is one of those guys who just have a real "feel" for a boat and water."

This discussion centers around TARGET. Mr. Brooks owned the boat for 18 years before donating it to the Herreshoff Marine Museum. The Museum was quite pleased to accession the boat, as president Halsey Herreshoff learned to sail on her when she was named MINX. Halsey personally asked permission to rename her back to MINX from TARGET.

THE TRANSCRIPT

SN: So anyway, I appreciate you taking the time to talk to me again today.

OB: Yeah.

SN: I just wanted to ... I've got a recording going right now. I just wanted to go through, you know, and hear you tell me again about MINX. How you got her, the relationship you had with Becky Herreshoff and, you know, I just wanted you to, you know, kind of run through the story of Minx for me.

OB: Ramble, huh ?

SN: Yeah, yeah, exactly. If you would please.

OB: Fine.

SN: So as I understand it, you got it from a guy named ...

OB: C. Raymond Wescott

SN: Right. And the story goes that it was, this is my understanding anyway, the story goes that the boat was in the Herreshoff plant during the 1938 hurricane and it got wrecked, and Sidney rebuilt it.

OB: Well, that part of the story, I can only say I'm aware of part of that. It was wrecked in the hurricane of '38, but where it was wrecked, I have no idea.

SN: Oh.

OB: Becky told me that it was wrecked . She wanted a boat to teach Nat III and Halsey to sail in and she bought it for \$126, but where that was, if she ever told me I don't remember it. But I don't remember any story of it being wrecked in the plant, but obviously Sidney, when he rebuilt it, probably rebuilt it in the plant.

SN: Right.

OB: I can't say quite where it was wrecked.

SN: Right, a couple of questions. We had spoken about the fact that the hardware on the boat was chromed?

OB: Yes, it was all chromed.

SN: Was that originally like that, do you know?

OB: No, I don't know. I never really asked, but every ... every piece of hardware on it was chromed, and interestingly, all of the cleats and a lot of the hardware were all stamped with, you know, that Herreshoff logo, where it says Herreshoff, Bristol, where the Herreshoff was in script. They were all stamped with it somewhere, and then chromed. And I don't know who did that.

SN: I'm sure that was done by the factory.

OB: While sure, it was done by the factory. It was probably done for the chief engineer, huh?

SN: Yeah, right, right. I understand you were saying that the mast was a little bit special on MINX?

OB: I thought it was. The mast was a Marconi-rigged mast, and it was apparently made in two pieces and if you looked it carefully, it was glued-up with the ..., half and half, with the, say, a port and starboard with the glue seam going fore-and-aft on the mast. And, but as I recall, the grain of the wood on one side was perpendicular to the grain of the wood on the other side. And I looked at that and wondered ... I wonder why they did that. Is that to stiffen it up so that when they glued it together it won't tend to warp or shift. The two grains are ... for whatever reason.

SN: That's interesting. Maybe it was an attempt to minimize movement.

OB: Yeah. And I felt the mast was light and I always wondered did anybody ever hollow it out before they glued it up.

SN: That could be.

OB: But I never asked Halsey ... never discussed it with Halsey ...

SN: So, so the boat ... the boat was rebuilt by Sidney. I guess it was probably ... you know ... pretty specially ... specially well done.

OB: I felt it was. The mast ... you were talking about ... the mast was interesting. It was round at the bottom up to about the gooseneck, and then just above the gooseneck it went to almost a tear-drop section. A fat teardrop that was round in the forward side, and then the sides would slope back slightly, and curve off at the after side, and the sail track was just screwed to the after side of the mast. But it was ... a lot of round masts like that they might stick a piece of wood down there to put the track on. And this one didn't have it because of the shape of the mast.

SN: Yeah ... I think ... I had a 12-1/2 ... you know ... a regular one ... and it had a round mast and there was a sail track screwed onto it. Right to it.

OB: Onto the round wood itself?

SN: Yeah.

OB: Well this one had the other shape. In fact, I was thinking after you called this morning that the first time I ever saw that boat, I took a trip up to Bristol just to look around. Before I got married ... in 1949. And there were two or three of these boats sitting right off where Sidney and Becky lived, right off Love Rocks there, next to where Nat had lived. And it was in the morning I went past there and the sun was shining on the masts and so there was no question about TARGET sitting there ... had a wider mast. When you looked at it from the side, it was a bigger dimension fore-and-aft than it was athwartships.

SN: So ... and then ... then you donated ... how did this work? You donated the boat back to the Museum and Halsey was excited to have it?

OB: Yeah. Well we went up there to the first Rendezvous in 1981. And by that time I'd had the boat for 18 years. And ... I really at that point was ready to buy a Doughdish. I was doing a lot of maintenance work on the boat. It had been raced hard by Halsey, and it had been raced hard by Ray Wescott, and it had been raced hard by Owen Brooks for 18 years in Great South Bay. And it would start putting screws in every year and doing different things to keep it going and ... Jonathan, he was really gung ho. He wanted another boat ... he sailed it a lot, but he was hoping I'd get a Doughdish and I figured it was about time, so I had already ordered one, before I went up for the Rendezvous. And I was just thinking about selling the boat, how much could I sell it for, and so on. But we went up to the Rendezvous, and Jon and I raced. And we broke down in the race. We had ... Halsey and I had gone out sailing the night before, and Halsey had commented about the beautiful splice that was in the bottom of the mast. I wanted to save the bottom of the mast, but we'd had a ... several years before we'd had a rigging failure when it was blowing hard out there. We lost the mast over the side, it cracked.

And ... so I brought it back into the boatyard here, and they ... they made up a piece that had a long "V" on the bottom, a long "V" on the top, that they worked into the pieces that we wanted to save, so there was only about 2" of new mast in the middle, in these pieces, and they glued everything up and put it together, and we raced it for several years, and Halsey admired that, but when Jon and I were racing it, I think there were eighteen boats sailing, and we were on the last leg, in second place, coming up behind lead boat that I want to blanket and we had the spinnaker set. And the glue started to fail. I had oft thought many times, wouldn't it been something if ... Halsey made a big thing at the start of that race. They fired the cannon. The guy who was closest to the cannon complained afterwards at the award of prizes they shot a hole through his sail. They let him do something during the award of prizes, and I thought to myself wouldn't it have been something after that if we'd just been able to cross the finish line in first place. They'd gotten the cannon and had the whole rig go over the side. But it didn't work that way. We ... we had to drop out. And ... so, at that point the night before I talked to Halsey about wanting to ... to sell the boat. And I asked him if he knew of anybody who might want the boat. I had an idea of what the price would be that I could get out of it. And ... before we got through, we just decided to leave it there because I didn't want to tow it home with ... we had our motor boat there. We towed it all the way up from the Great South Bay in Long Island with my 1929 Matthews cabin cruiser. We towed largely with the line around the mast so that we had a good ... not too much strain on the bow cleat, and I really wasn't happy about taking it home, but I didn't know what I was going to do at that point, so. Halsey and I had talked about possibly getting an appraisal, and he knew what I was looking for, and he got the appraisal I was looking for. And I came to the conclusion that if I gave it away, ...

SN: For a tax donation, or a deduction...

OB: For a tax donation, I'd save on New York State and Federal capital gains tax, because I had paid \$1200 for it, and I think by that time I was up to ... I got it appraised for \$4000 eighteen years later. And I looked at the whole thing and said it was a break-even to me, so let's give it away and put it in a good spot.

SN: And it kind of went home, in a way.

OB: That's right. So that's what we did.

SN: So I understand that ... you had just mentioned that ... Owen Brooks raced her hard. I understand that you're quite an accomplished sailor.

OB: Well, I don't know about that. Someone said to me one time "When did you learn to sail?" And I said "I'm still learning."

SN: Well there you go.

OB: Every time I go out.

SN: Right.

OB: But, yeah, we, we sailed it a long time. I had I guess I my first boat when I was 15, and now I'm 86. So ... But I had been commodore of the sailing club here in town, and then. That was the Narrasketuck Yacht Club, and I belonged to another club that I raced in. And we have 19 clubs on Great South Bay that go from Shinnicock, which is about ... almost out to the Peconic Bay on the south side, all the way in to Kennedy Airport . And there are 19 clubs and I was president of that yacht racing association for awhile too. So I was involved in some sailing here.

SN: Another question about MINX. I don't know ... I think we had this discussion, but her hull number has always been a real interesting question. The ... is she ... I think its number 1376, the builder's plate.

OB: Well that's what the plate says.

SN: Right. And the interesting thing is in the Herreshoff builder's record, it distinctly says that 1376, the contract for it, was cancelled and it was never built. And then ... there is another notation in that builder's record that there was group of boats, there's twenty of them, of which 1376 was one, that specifically state that there was a mix-up between the shop and the office and that the hulls weren't actually delivered as they were recorded. So what that really means to me is, 1376 ... was used on ... on TARGET and another one of those twenty has got a missing hull number and, you know, we'll never know which one is which.

OB: Well, one of the things I had mentioned to you before I think was that ... looking at some of the information on the ... from your ...

SN: Registry

OB: study, the Registry, I was speculating that it was probably ... that TARGET or MINX was built in 1936 and possibly is either 1278, 1279, 1282, 1284, 1288, or 1291. So that's what, six boats.

SN: Yeah. I don't think it could go as ... well, I'd have to look. There was twenty of them in the class that 1376 would have been a member of.

OB: Yeah.

SN: It started with 1364, and I don't know if it went up to 1384. It might have gone up to a few more than that, because there were maybe other boats, not twelves, that were given hull numbers in there. So I think the numbers ... the numbers that you just speculated, it's probably one of those.

OB: Well they were earlier, but the reason I speculated there is they are the only ones that I could find in the Registry that were unknown boats that had the same construction characteristics as me. They also listed 1281 as unknown, but I know that one was Bob Gregory's boat. And I knew that one here, and he came and saw TARGET. When I first got it, I called him up and he and Fred Hard came to look at the boat one night to see what the third one here on the bay looked like. But ... they had ... those earlier boats had the ... a whole series of things. The type of fittings they had, the ... the

SN: The fittings

OB: the trim, the Marconi trim ...

SN: The ... the mahogany

OB: The bow chock, the swinging open mast bail

SN: Right.

OB: And all of those things were fittings that stopped, didn't they, in 1937, for the most part?

SN: There was a couple of changes in the way that the fittings were. And I think it was 1937, if I'm not mistaken, or the very end of 1936, yeah. When they switched from an opening mast bail to a, you know, a one-piece casting.

OB: Right. Right.

SN: But I think ...

OB: The traveler, too.

SN: The traveler was different, the bow chocks were different.

OB: Yeah.

SN: I think, interestingly enough, those chrome-plated ones that are on MINX, they are ... or TARGET ... they are of the older style but they have the chrome plating on them, I think.

OB: Right. That's right. In fact, in your Registry you have the picture of the transom on TARGET.

SN: I think Adam ... Adam took that picture.

OB: I see. Well it certainly shows the ... shows the chrome-plated traveler, and I know it's my boat, and ... because I look at the tiller. The tiller was broken too. Adam and Jonathan were out in the boat and got in a hassle with a ... quote, "some acquaintances of theirs." Who ... jumped on board and broke the tiller.

SN: Oh, really?

OB: They had to get towed in, and the owner of the boat was very livid, I'll tell you that.

SN: That would be you, right?

OB: That's right. But you can see, it's riveted together in the ... in that picture. So I know it's ... from that picture, it's ... must have been taken up in the Museum.

SN: Right.

OB: Yeah. But for all those reasons, I always said, that from what you said, if there was ... just going through the boats in there, if it isn't 1376, I was sort of doing a study on which one could it be, and I sort of came to the conclusion that it might have been one of those six.

SN: Well You know ... I'm not necessarily saying that it's not 1376. It might be that it is 1376, and where the builder's record said 1376 wasn't built, maybe, you know, one of those ones that you just mentioned was the one that wasn't built.

OB: Right, but if it... if it really was 1376, and they changed all the fittings, that when Sidney Herreshoff rebuilt it, he must have had some of the older fittings to put on the boat all the way through.

SN: Right. Maybe he had them, and had them ...

OB: Chromed.

SN: Chromed. Maybe. He would certainly be one of the ones that would be able to do that. Well, I guess that's really what I wanted to hear, Mr. Brooks. Your ... your relation of the tale of ... of TARGET. I don't know if you have anything else you wanted to mention, but if not, I do appreciate you taking the time.

OB: Well, I wanted to mention that it was great boat to sail, I'll tell you that, and I had always felt that it had some characteristics some of the other ones didn't. I got pictures that ... I don't know whether my wife or my daughter took them in that first Rendezvous, where they had it up in Bristol. And ... we were very conservative. I ...really, I felt I was sailing around in a museum piece with 17 other museum pieces and I didn't want any conclusion ... any collisions or anything else in the crowded start of that first race up there, that race we were in. And we had a very conservative start, and there is one picture that showed us well ... way, way back in the pack, and right next to us is a ... a Fishers Island Bullseye with a genoa jib, and as you look at these pictures, they were taking several pictures in a matter of a few hundred feet. Why, it looked as if we had a ... a motor in TARGET, just sailing through them and up towards the front ... the front of the fleet. And we went around that way, and as I say we were coming into the finish, we were in second place, just right back of FROLIC, which was ... Halsey would have been delighted if we had beaten FROLIC, because FROLIC was from Bristol, and he and the owner of FROLIC always used to race very tightly together with their two boats, and I didn't know that at the time, but we were coming up on the boat that won the race, and doing very well.

SN: FROLIC ... FROLIC is still in Bristol.

OB: Yes, yeah. But the boat had a, a very nice touch of speed that would go. She'd sail well, and

SN: Well, like I said, I appreciate ... I appreciate you taking the time. I'm going to record ... you know ... make a recording out of this, and I don't know if you'd like a copy ... do you use a

computer?

OB: No, I don't. I'm a ... I'm computerless. When I

SN: Oh, OK ... that will

OB: When I retired, I made the decision not to have a computer.

SN: That will make it difficult for me to get you a copy of the thing, but maybe I can make a tape or something and send it to you.

OB: Well, why don't you make one and send it ... you got Jonathan's address, don't you? He'd be ...

SN: Yeah, yeah.

OB: He'd probably like one.

SN: Ok, I can do that. Yeah, that's what I'll do.

OB: He's the big 12-1/2 enthusiast right now, and has been for all his life.

SN: OK, well again, I appreciate you taking the time to speak with me ... and I really appreciate it

OB: Yeah ... do you still have a boat, or do you ...

SN: No, I don't have ... well ... no ... I sold my 12-1/2 to buy a 15, and I restored the 15 ... and somebody came along and gave me an ungodly sum of money for it. So right now I don't have a boat at all, but ...

OB: Oh boy

SN: That situation that will be corrected one of these days.

OB: Well I may be boatless soon myself. I think Jonathan would love to get my Doughdish up on Lake Champlain so he can have a boat.

SN: I won't tell him you said that.

OB: Quite frankly, when I was sailing this fall at 86, I said ... alone, I said, you know, realistically if something really went wrong on the boat, which heaven forbid happens. But, you lose the rig over the side because one fitting quits or something like that. I'm not sure I'm really am at the point where I want to be out there crewless.

SN: I understand, I understand.

OB: So I don't know. At some point, you have to look at things and use your head.

SN: Yeah, unfortunately.

OB: Yeah, Yeah.

SN: Alrighty then.

OB: OK, well it's nice talking with you, Steve.

SN: Yeah, maybe I'll get to talk to you again one of these days.

OB: That would be nice. Be nice to see you somewhere along the line.

SN: OK, yeah, I would love to meet you too.

OB: Good.

SN: Thank you very much.

OB: Ok, you're welcome.

SN: Bye bye now.

OB: Bye.