ON SAILBOATS

BY DIETER LOIBNER

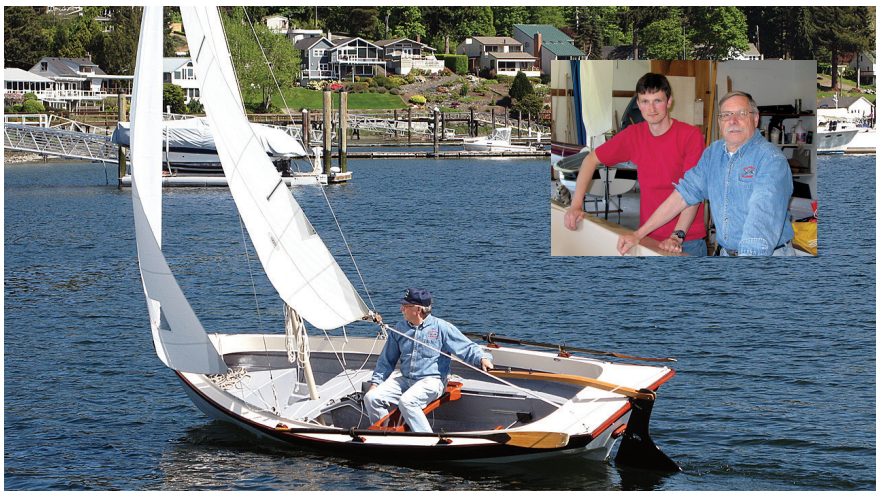
Muscle power and wind are all you need

Small boats built at Gig Harbor Boat Works are a throwback to another era — and maybe one to come

I was at Gig Harbor, Wash., on southern Puget Sound about to try one of the rowing/sailing skiffs built in the Pacific Northwest. To someone who's been prejudiced against rowing as "sitting down and going backward as fast as you can," it was a big leap of faith. It was also a date with the past since rowing and sailing as combined modes of propulsion have been employed for centuries, long before internal combustion.

Nestled in the bucolic settings off Peacock Hill Avenue, the Gig Harbor Boat Works shop radiates the charm of a family venture. Founder Dave Robertson, his son-in-law Falk Bock and two other employees work here to turn out about 100 salty little boats from 8 to 17 feet per year, which they sell across the country and around the world, mostly by word of mouth and on the Internet.

Models include a Jersey Skiff, Whitehall, New England dory, Melonseed, Maine lobster boat and whimsical tenders. "It's a niche industry," Robertson says. "There are perhaps 10 manufacturers in North America who are serious about this business and committed to craftsmanship." By that he means neat hand-laid laminates, practical details, quality kit and good sails to bring this ancient style of boating up to date.



Dave Robertson reaching across the bay of Gig Harbor in his 17-foot Jersey Skiff; (inset) Gig Harbor Boat Works founder Robertson with his son-in-law/employee Falk Bock.

SIMPLICITY AND VERSATILITY

All of the vessels can be rowed, most can be sailed and some can take a small gasoline outboard. Alternatively, Robertson offers a rudder-mounted electric drive. But it's really the rowing part that intrigued me, with bench seats that roll on custom wheels in grooves at the top of the buoyancy tanks. For sailing, they can be locked into position with pins. Are these rowboats that sail or sailboats that row? "It is what you want it to be, because they do both well," Robertson says.

It is a delicate compromise because, typically, an efficient rowboat is not a good sailboat and vice versa. To row fast, you need to be in a narrow craft that's low in the water. To be dry and stable under sail, you need freeboard and beam. In a world that thrives on specialization, Robertson's field of play is defined by the space between these two parameters. Refusing to call his boats hybrids, he stresses two enduring qualities: versatility and simplicity.

Ditching a corporate career and the associated hassles, Robertson simplified his personal life by turning his hobby of building small vessels in his garage, which he'd practiced since age 12, into a livelihood. Expressing his life's philosophy, he shuns the "creep of technology" as he calls the proliferation of expensive and often unnecessary gadgets. His boats use muscle power and wind, the most fundamental modes of propulsion. They are also light enough for trailering behind a compact car.

From a short row across the harbor to an afternoon sail to multiday trips and expeditions, they appeal to different tastes. Many customers, Robertson says, are reformed kayakers, but few are first-time boat buyers. "They made their mistakes before they come here," he chuckles.

In no time flat, we drove down the hill from the shop to the sparkling bay of Gig Harbor, rigged and launched a 17-foot Jersey Skiff that was equipped with a sliding bench and oarlocks. I was baffled by the quick assembly of the parts that all fit inside the boat: The two-part aluminum mast, the tie-down shrouds that are fastened to a cleat on the gunwale and the custom-made mast hoops that hold the sail's luff to the spar.

We shoved off, lowered the centerboard and sheeted in. With the pleasant sound of waves smacking against the fiberglass lapstrake-style hull the skiff gently heeled to the breeze, moving at hull speed. It was a gentlemanly pursuit, but near shore it became sticky as the flood began to impede our progress. Instead of shifting gears, we shifted modes by furling the jib, dousing the main and shipping the spruce oars. My moment as a rower had arrived.

CARDIO, NOT CARBON

With my feet strapped to the footstop, I tried to plant the slim blades squarely without digging (or "catching crabs") while skipper Robertson steered us past the current rips. When I managed to coordinate my stroke with the sliding seat, the power of my leg muscles drove the boat nearly as fast as a cruising boat under engine on a parallel course.

This efficiency is a tribute to the lightweight composite materials (all-up the skiff weighs only 360 pounds) and the hull's fine entry and a clean exit. "It is a shape that evolved over centuries and was dictated by purpose," Robertson points out. These skiffs were used for fishing, surf rescues, even ocean crossings.

Our goal, of course, was more modest. We wanted to beat the ferocious current to get out of the bay and that was good exercise, yet gentle on my battered back. As we rounded the sand spit and poked our bow into the Tacoma Narrows, we entered a churning river. Forget sailing, the only way to go upriver was by oar close to shore.

On the way back, under canvas again, we scooted "downhill" toward the lovely town, past cruising boats that sat unused at their moorings. Quite a few showed the rot of neglect. "It's symptomatic for our time," Robertson says. "People have boats they don't use because they can't fit it into their schedules or they are tired of sailing in the same place all the time."

Sailing and rowing a small craft might be a throwback to the past, but in the light of reality its future looks increasingly bright. ■

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