

Case in Point

Nova Scotia's Covey Island Boatworks leads by example, in demonstrating how to create an international demand for its product.



by Aaron Porter

Covey Island Boatworks is not a typical Nova Scotia boatshop. But, as a builder of custom yachts primarily for the export market, it's a model that more of the region's builders are bound to study in their quest for similar success.

The Covey Island enterprise is a good example of what the Nova Scotia Boatbuilders Association sees as the future of the province's marine industry: locally owned rural shops building custom and semicustom pleasure boats for export. "We're a niche within a niche," said Covey Island's marketing manager Eric Hustvedt, referring to the shop's specialty—custom and semicustom wood/epoxy composite construction.

Covey Island's operation, now located in the center of the South Shore town of Petite Riviere, has been in business since 1979. At the time, wood/epoxy technology was relatively new to the boatbuilding industry worldwide, and remains rare in Nova Scotia, where Covey Island is the only commercial shop specializing in large custom projects of this type. To some extent, that fact is a function of geography.

"We're remarkably isolated," said company founder John Steele, of his

adopted home province. "It's like 1950 still. That's our advantage. And our disadvantage," by way of contrasting Nova Scotia with neighboring New England. It means property values are relatively low, boats are primarily for commercial use, rural unemployment runs high, and materials aren't necessarily available for overnight delivery. "Everything has to come from away," Steele said, "and that goes for the market, too."

The come-from-away nature of the business was evident during a visit to the shop this past September, when Covey Island had two schooners under construction: *Maggie B*, a 62-footer (18.9m) designed by Nigel Irens; and *Sir Edmund*, a 49-footer (14.9m) designed by Chuck Burns. Both boats were destined for U.S. clients. [For a profile of Irens and his portfolio, see Professional BoatBuilder No. 63, page 86—Ed.]

Nova Scotia enjoys a historical reputation as a source of fast fishing schooners, but these Covey Island projects are decidedly a modern departure: they are performance vessels made of wood and epoxy and fiberglass and, in the case of the Burns schooner, Corecell structural foam. Both boats are fitted with carbon

Above—The Nigel Irens-designed *Maggie B* heads out on sea trials following her launching in January 2006. The wood/epoxy yacht was built for a U.S. client who will use her for extensive world cruising.

fiber spars, overlapping or high-roach foresails, and on the *Maggie B*, Vectran standing rigging.

Maggie B is the second-largest boat the yard has ever built, and arguably the most radical. Dubbed a "fusion schooner" by Irens—whose design credits include everything from offshore racing multihulls and foilers, to traditional pilot cutters—*Maggie B* suggests traditional aesthetics without being a slave to them. Her nearly plumb bow and ample bulwarks refer to working vessels, but her carefully placed spike of a centerboard and her overlapping foresail tell a different story. "She's an Open 60 with a gaff schooner rig," Steele said, only partly in jest.

Intended by her owner for serious ocean cruising, *Maggie B* is an extraordinarily tall, baldheaded schooner with high-peaking gaffs. Her high aspect ratio rig is carried on GMT (Bristol, Rhode Island) carbon fiber masts, supported by single Vectran stays on either side. Those advanced fiber shrouds terminate at custom-cast bronze deadeyes at the deck. Spectra lanyards, rove through the deadeyes, tension the rig.

Her hull is constructed of 1 1/4" (4.4cm) Douglas-fir strips covered with three layers of 10-oz fiberglass cloth. East System epoxy, a product of Epoxy Tech MCS Inc. (Montreal, Quebec), is used throughout the boat. Larry Weagle, who supervised the *Maggie B* project, explained that Covey Island has employed the East System product extensively for more than 15 years now, although the shop has also worked with WEST SYSTEM (Bay City, Michigan) and MAS (Cinnaminson, New Jersey) epoxies. *Maggie B*'s hull interior is protected by three coats of epoxy, with six coats in the bilges.

The 3/4" (1.6cm) vertical-grain Douglas-fir deck, too, appears very traditional, but it's laid on top of a lightweight sandwich of tongue-and-groove pine (visible as the overhead below), fiberglass, Corecell, and another layer of fiberglass to which the fir decking is glued.

The tight headroom below makes possible a broad, open deck above. A low doghouse aft houses the galley and saloon area as well as a sheltered extension of the cockpit, which can be fitted with Plexiglas ports facing aft

in foul weather. Weagle explained that this detail is intended to provide shelter in the wide range of conditions the owner can expect to encounter on an extended world cruise.

Landing the *Maggie B* contract offers a lesson about positioning—both geographically and within the wider boatbuilding industry.

Covey Island is close enough to the U.S. market to be readily considered by serious Yankee buyers. But it's because of Steele's passion for sailing and his interest in European markets that the little shop in Petite Riviere has a working relationship with a designer as prominent and imaginative as Irens. Indeed, it was Steele's friendship with British sailor and sailing writer Tom Cunliffe that led Steele to first work with Irens in 1992. Their project at the time was a Bristol Channel-style cutter for wood/epoxy construction. It resulted in the creation of two sizes of this type and was given the series name Westernman. Covey Island has now built four of the 40' (12.2m) version and one of the 51-footer (15.5m).

More recently, Irens designed a so-called Bristol schooner for Steele. The 56' (17.1m) *PaPa*, built by Steele and his family, was launched in September 2005. The boat draws heavily on the lines of an 1890s-vintage Bristol Channel cutter called *Marguerite T*, which Steele and his family partially owned and sailed extensively in the Caribbean, the British Isles, and the Azores. Steele said he admired the looks and the seakeeping abilities of that cutter and wanted to re-create them with *PaPa*—with a schooner rig. The result is a blending of old and new rig approaches, and old and new construction methods.

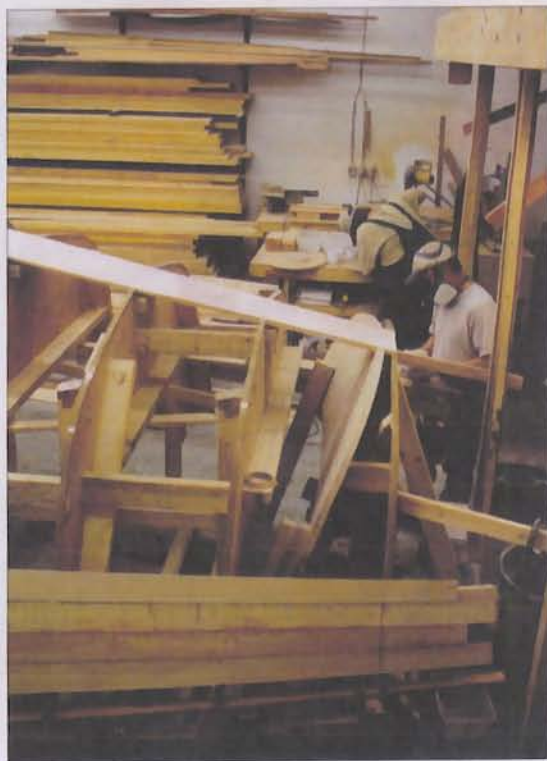
Similarly, *Maggie B* is

The hull of the 49' (14.9m) Chuck Burns-designed schooner yacht Sir Edmund starts to take shape in one of the shops at Covey Island.

another example of evolving designs and builds that were going on at Covey Island well before the client walked through the door. To Steele, his own time spent sailing is vital to his role as a boatbuilder. "It's a hugely important thing," he said. "If you aren't sailing and don't have that experience, you can only rely on the owner and designer."

It was in fact Steele's relationships with the British designer and U.S. owner that made the *Maggie B* project happen at all. While a healthy percentage of Covey Island's orders come from U.S. customers—with designs drawn by Sparkman & Stephens, L.F. Herreshoff, Dave Ger, and Spencer Lincoln, among others—Steele has been careful to position the company so all its eggs aren't in a U.S. basket. Most of the Westernman builds went to clients from the United Kingdom and Bermuda; a recent 59' (18m) Burgess-designed schooner also went to the U.K.; a sloop sold to the Bahamas; and a few schooners and motorsailers went to Canadian clients.

Aside from the challenge of marketing custom and semicustom yachts to prospective buyers who bring all sorts of expectations, and interpretations of "tradition," to any commission, there are some basic jurisdictional matters





Left—The 52' (15.8m) sloop Barbara Ann, designed by Sparkman & Stephens, was built for a New Hampshire client in 2001.

Right—The 59' (18m) schooner Niñita was designed in 1927 by Starling Burgess. Covey Island built her in 2004 as true to the original plans as possible, for clients in the U.K.



that must be taken into account, depending on where the boat is destined. Steele said Covey Island belongs to the U.K.-based Wooden-boat Builders Trade Association, because one customer wanted the yard to use that association's standard contract. Steele was happy to comply.

The yard has also met CE (Conformité Européenne) standards and the Nova Scotia Boatbuilders Association best-practices guidelines. "In a sense, you're adding one man to the project," Steele said of the shop effort involved in meeting CE standards. "But when you come out the other

side, it adds to your credibility."

The CE mark is necessary within the European Union to assure that products comply with specific health, safety, and environmental regulations laid out in E.U. product directives. Yes, there is one for recreational boats. While it isn't prohibitively

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expensive for production boat-builders to meet the standards, Steele said, it is more complicated and costly for a custom shop, where every build is different and must be assessed as such. However, he doesn't shy away from whatever standards a client might want Covey Island to adhere to. Having experienced a selection of the better-known standards, Steele can now sell that fact to a host of potential international clients. In addition, Steele sees a need to understand foreign markets as more than just another set of construction standards. He said he's observed significant differences in the expectation of clients from various countries as they buy and use boats. He cites his own market research as a good reason for travel. "If you want to start selling to France, you've got to start going there," he said.

For a boatshop in rural Nova Scotia, Covey Island has a surprisingly international flavor, and it's not just the designers, suppliers, and clients; Covey Island frequently has



Covey Island's Terry Sundbo applies a first layer of planking on Sir Edmund's hull last September. Her construction is cold-molded cedar and Corecell foam.

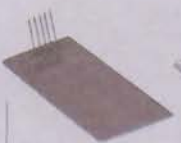
apprentices from Denmark, Germany, and France on the shop floor working alongside Canadians. "We've had six European apprentices come work in the yard," Steele said.

Last summer he had a French apprentice lay the decks on *Maggie B*, and two recent apprentices from Germany served their 20-week internships at the yard as they pursued

degrees in wood technology engineering. "They come from a culture where having a trade is something to be absolutely respected," Steele observed with a hint of envy. The Nova Scotia Boatbuilders Association training program is intended to help address the marginalization that the marine industry feels in Atlantic Canada, and imbue it with a sense of

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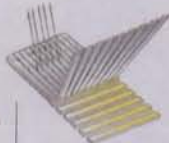
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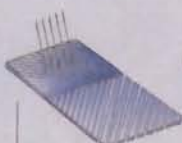
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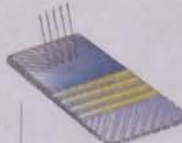
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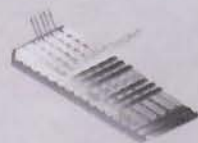
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COVEY ISLAND BOATWORKS (BOTH)

*This yard began as a production lobsterboat builder before transitioning to custom and semi-custom yachts, with most—but not all—of them sail. Two of the yard's powerboat projects include the 40' (12.2m) Spencer Lincoln—designed Pilgrim, **above**, built in 1990; and Nancy Lakin, a 47' (14.3m) shoal-draft cruiser designed by Dave Gerr and built in 2002.*

skilled trade. But for now, Covey Island benefits from having a few imported apprentices enriching the shop's atmosphere and knowledge base.

Steele recalled asking Weagle, who frequently oversees the shop, whether he would like to have another German apprentice next year. Weagle pondered the question and replied, "No, I want 12." But don't take that as an indication that Covey Island can't find a work force close to home. Sitting in the bright-finished deck-house of the newly launched *PaPa*, Steele said proudly, "Ninety-nine percent of this boat was built by people in their 20s," including four of his own children who are partners in the boat's ownership. Those age statistics are positive, not only as one contemplates the future of Covey Island Boatworks, but also as an indicator of a more generalized opportunity for rural prosperity in a province where many skilled and educated residents were compelled to move to urban centers, or to other provinces or countries, in order to thrive.

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The other side of the training-and-education effort spearheaded by NSBA is a need to make the boatbuilding industry attractive to young, intelligent Nova Scotians who can take advantage of the new program and revitalize the industry. Covey Island is an example of the type of shop that makes it clear that boatbuilding can be engaging, cutting edge, even a bit glamorous as a career choice.

"In Nova Scotia the light went on that everyone couldn't be a doctor or computer expert," Steele said, giving the province due credit for aiding NSBA with its training program. In addition, he pointed to the recent purchase of the heart of the working waterfront in nearby Lunenburg. The province helped finance that acquisition, consisting of eight docks and nearly two dozen buildings, by the independent Lunenburg Waterfront Foundation. The mission of the group is to have the properties used for commercial marine enterprises, not residential development. Steele's concern now is that all of these efforts be sustained long enough to allow the once-thriving boatbuilding industry to really take hold again in the province. "We're talking about a generation to establish a reputation and clientele," he said. He ought to know, as someone who's spent a quarter century shaping Covey Island's.

When Steele and a business partner started the company, he had recently arrived in Nova Scotia after building houses in British Columbia. And, he came east with a predilection for wood construction. "We were not going to set up doing vacuum-bagging and foam core," he recalled. Even so, setting up to build with the emerging wood/epoxy technology was anything but a sure bet.

"We had to educate, let alone sell," he said. He and his local crew built a few small boats on spec, and then went on to capitalize on a Canadian fisheries effort to modernize the commercial fishing fleet, starting in 1980. Steele got Brooklin, Maine-based lobsterboat designer Spencer Lincoln to design a 38' (11.6m) hull that would be a fast, seaworthy alternative to some of the aging boats still fishing. Lincoln's boat could run easily at 16 knots, as opposed to the 8 knots many Nova Scotia fishermen were accustomed to. Interest in the Covey

Island product was strong, and the company built 20 of Lincoln's hulls for working fishermen, although some have since been converted to pleasure boats.

The construction of those first-generation workboats has allowed Covey Island to see how its hulls held up in relatively harsh conditions and heavy use. Some of the boats that received the toughest use remained remarkably sound over time. "The

technology is better than we thought, and also more vulnerable than we thought," Steele said. Apart from a better understanding of just how and where weaknesses can develop, Steele believes the basic wood/epoxy technology hasn't changed substantially. What *has* changed is consumers' acceptance of wood/epoxy construction and the cumulative experience of Covey Island Boatworks in the international yacht market. **PBB**



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