

Classic Boat Build

Building *Fly Boys*—Replica of a 1939 Barrelback Wooden Runabout

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Abstract

Description

Attention to detail, persistence, and striving for perfection...but never quite achieving it. These are attributes I put into my career as a researcher and are remarkably similar to the skills I apply to boat building. What you see pictured are thousands of imperfections that, I humbly assert, coalesce into something extraordinarily beautiful.

Keywords

humanities; research activities; boats; boatwright; well-being

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Introduction

Christopher Columbus Smith began building boats as a boy in 1874, subsequently joining forces with his brother to form the boat company ultimately known as Chris-Craft, headquartered in Algonac, Michigan. Chris-Craft produced their iconic “Barrelback” from 1939-1942.¹ The Chris-Craft Barrelback had a curved transom (stern), basically forming an arc from the starboard waterline to the port waterline, making the shape of a half barrel. (**Figure 1**) I built a tribute to the Barrelback design, *Fly Boys*, from plans (Glen-L Boat Design). (**Photograph 1**) This sport-utility version of the Barrelback is called the “Key Largo,” designed by naval architect Ken Hankinson.

Inspiration

In 2002, my 13-year-old son Joe (now a third-year Internal Medicine resident at Carolina Medical Center, Charlotte, NC) and I built a 20-foot tandem kayak, to paddle and camp in the Thousand Islands region of upstate New York/Canada. We started July 1, 2003, in Kingston, Ontario and paddled ~110 miles down the St. Lawrence River, camping on islands each night. We noticed that most waterfront homes had a boathouse, most with a standard garage door. We learned later that many of those boathous-

es held classic wooden boats, most built in the early part of the 20th century. I started dreaming about building a Barrelback, mimicking the classic lines found on Chris-Craft, Garwood, and Hacker-Craft boats. However, with kids still in school, a project that big had to remain a dream.

The name—*Fly Boys*

Many people with the last name Flynn, sign their name Fly__.

That’s how my Dad signed his name, John W. Fly__.

The build is a tribute to Dad and to his military service. At age 17 he became the sixth of the aptly named “Fighting Flynns of Brockton (MA)” to enter World War II. Dad was a tail-gunner on a B-24 Liberator bomber and flew his first mission over Europe on March 3, 1944, his 18th birthday. Roughly 50% of tail-gunners were killed flying missions over Europe...that was the “Greatest Generation,” indeed.²

My son, Stephen Flynn created a font, using samples of his grandfather’s handwriting, and then hand-painted the name on the transom.

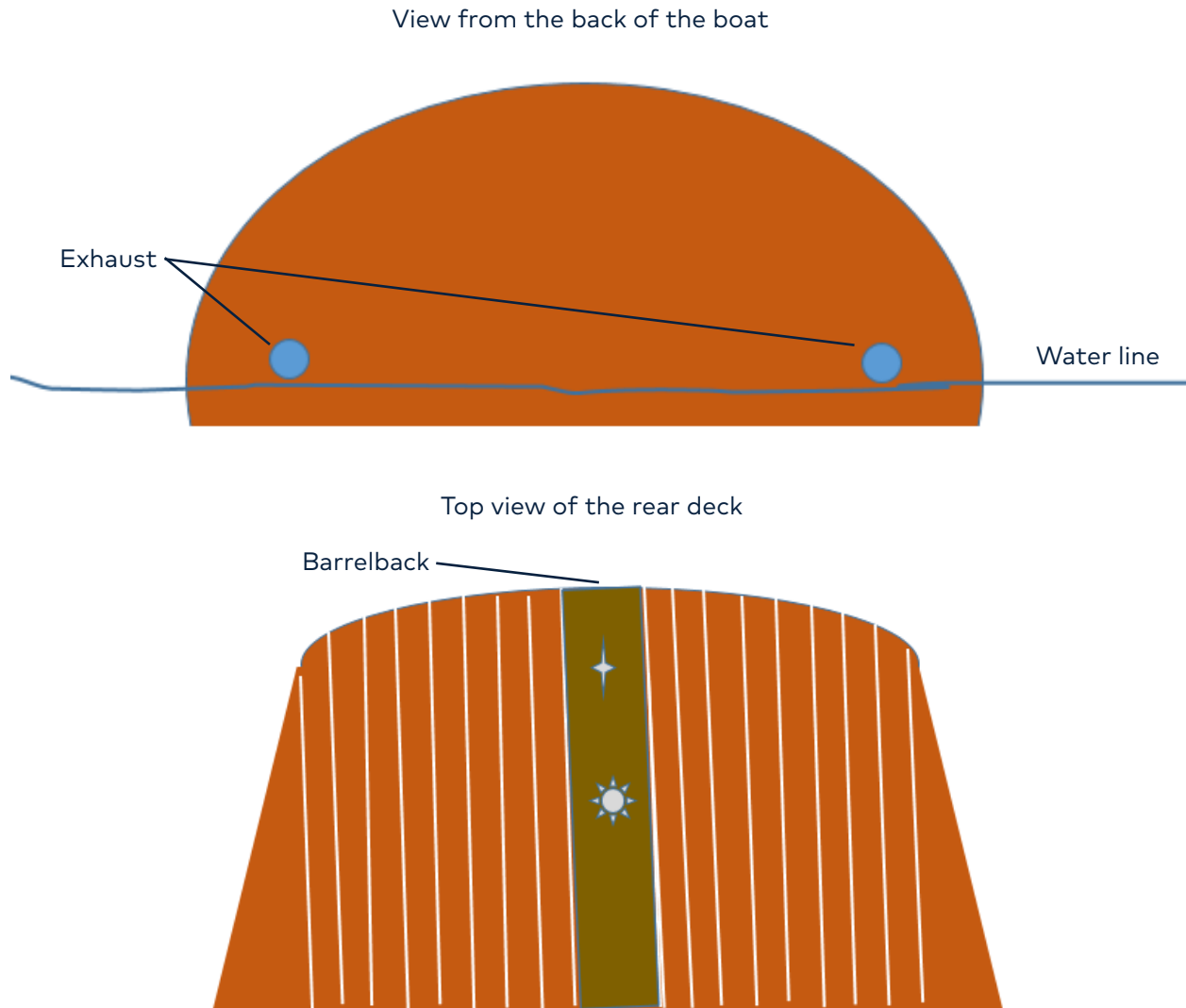


Figure 1. The Barrelback has a double-curved transom.

He also inserted a “24” after the ‘B’ (for B-24) in the boat name and swirl of fishing line and a fly—Dad loved fly fishing. **(Photograph 1)**

56?

A bit of “numerology:” 1956, my birth year, is also the sum of my father’s birth year (‘26) and my mother’s birth year (‘30). Dad was age 30 when I was born and Mom was age 26... also summing to 56. During the early stages of the build, people wanted to know what I was going to name the boat. I started telling them, “56,” not wanting to reveal the real name until launch day. In the final weeks of the build, I found a company that made small, stainless steel numbers, typically used for saddles, and I mounted a 56 on the dashboard of *Fly Boys*. **(Photograph 4)**

Parallels Between Boat Building and Research?

Constructing a boat or a research project does not require extraordinary skill. It does require dogged persistence, problem-solving, and an acceptance of small failures. I’m in my workshop nearly every evening and most weekends. You don’t always have exactly what you need, but you craft a direction that will work. Consistent attention to detail, persistence and striving for perfection, but never quite achieving it—the only way to get a project of this magnitude or a research project, across the finish line. These are attributes I put into my career as a researcher and are remarkably similar to the skills I apply to boat building. What you see pictured are thousands of imperfections that coalesce into something extraordinarily beautiful. **(Photographs 2 and 3)**

Having a hobby to distract me after the stresses of the workday is critical to my well-being and mental health. Of course, a project of this magnitude teeters toward obsession, but I managed to find a proper balance between work, family, and hobby/obsession.

The Launch

My masterpiece was launched on September 18, 2021, after six years and nearly 2700 hours of work. As you might expect, it was an emotional day. Beyond emotion, I expected an overwhelming feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction. Those feelings didn't arrive—the dominant emotion instead being launch anxiety, but the launch went well. The rewards have since come in little moments of satisfaction when the boat behaves the way a boat in that class is supposed to behave...or when I get to see the smile on the faces of my daughter-in-law (first-time boat driver), my sons, my younger sister, and several other friends when they are driving it. To date, *Fly Boys* has been driven by an 83-year-old and by a 3-year-old. The knowledge that I built that boat is very satisfying! (**Photographs 5-7**)

To Be Continued...

As much time and energy as I've put into my boat building, I've also gotten a lot back. For the past six years, I've participated in an online boat-building forum, posting pictures of my progress and asking questions of other boat builders. I also met a fellow builder on this forum who is building the same boat. We've texted, shared ideas and even face-timed on occasion. I stopped to see his build in Boise, ID when I was on the west coast for a vacation. Now, as a veteran of boat building, I answer questions online and encourage other builders. My wife and I attended the 15th annual Gathering of Glen-L boat builders (**Photographs 1 and 7**) at Lake Chickamauga, TN. This trip gave us the opportunity to meet the folks who inspired me and the chance to give builders with in-progress boats a turn at driving *Fly Boys*—fast!

In October 2021, I entered *Fly Boys* into the Georgetown, SC Wooden Boat Show. It was the 32nd annual show with over 100 wooden boats on display. *Fly Boys* was entered in the "owner designed and built" class. I had con-

vinced myself I didn't care about the awards, I just wanted to show my boat, answer questions, and hopefully get others interested in boat building. My wife, two of my sons, daughter-in-law, and my oldest and best friend and his girlfriend were in attendance. Turns out I had lied to myself about how much the recognition meant to me. At the end of the first day, one of the judges came up and handed me a giant white ribbon. On the ribbon, it said, "Judges Award." I cried like a baby.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares he has no conflicts of interest.

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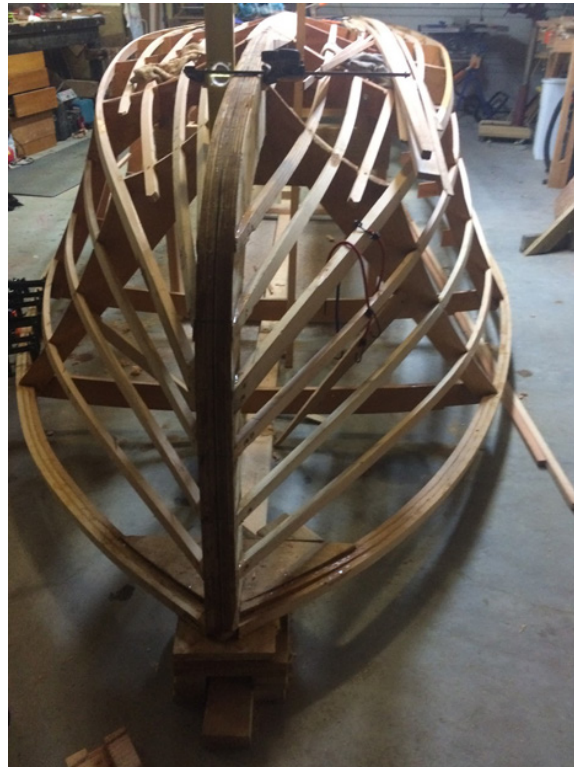
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Photograph 1. *Fly Boys* in the twilight at the 15th annual Gathering of Glen-L boat builders, showing the classic lines and the “Barrelback.”



Photograph 2. A boat “skeleton”—showing the frames, stem, keel, and longitudinals of *Fly Boys*, prior to starting the sheathing on the hull. Note the imperfect union of the sheer strip laminations (bottom boards near the bow) on one side—a result of the difficult steam bend required for those longitudinals. The builder can point out dozens of similar, small imperfections.



Photograph 3. A little help from our friends...After three years of work, about 25 friends helped flip *Fly Boys* off of the building frame and onto the custom-built trailer.



Photograph 4. A little bling...with the "56" on the dashboard signifying the builder's birth year, which is the sum of his father's (1926) and mother's (1930) birth years.



Photograph 5. About two months prior to launch, the hull polishing was completed. The hull and decks have 15 coats of marine varnish, which was then polished with 1000, 1200, 1500 and 2000 grit sandpaper to bring out the luster.



Photograph 6. The builder at the helm, after anchoring on the riverside of Folly Beach, SC, during the first sea trial, September 11, 2021.



Photograph 7. The builder, his first mate (wife Susan), and Boatswain (dog Indy) after docking (whew) at the 15th Annual Gathering of Glen-L boat builders on Lake Chickamauga, TN.