

John M. Chadwick

by Victoria Lassonde

If it's to be made, and if it's wood, John M. Chadwick will build it. Or fix it.

Born in 1946, his dad was John Chadwick Sr., a Navy man and sneakbox builder with J. Howard Perrine of Perrine Boatworks in Barnegat, and his mom was Carolyn. "Mr. Perrine practically raised my father," Chadwick said. "And Uncle Alan." Chadwick's grandmother and mother also sewed sails for Perrine, in the old building – he remembers how they would cut the canvas material and lay it out, with nails in the floor and strings. As a boy, Chadwick would climb on the heaps of canvas and play in the piles of drying lumber that had come off the boxcars.

"Basically, I just grew up hanging around the boat shop. I guess when I first started working on boats I was 13 years old; and I worked on charter fishing boats out of Barnegat Light." He got more heavily into sneakboxes around the time his father died, in 1974.

"There were still work to do, still sneakboxes to be built, and there was nobody to do it," he said.

He married his wife in 1981, and that's when he organized his first gillnetting boat, got some second-hand fishing nets, learned to mend nets and knit lobster/fish pot funnels. He would plant clam beds in the bay and sell the harvest to local seafood markets. He would run his gillnet boats in the spring and fall, when the weakfish and blues would show up; in the winter, and in the summer when it was too hot to be out on the ocean, he'd be in the shop, working, with box fans blowing. Plus he always had the clamming, off and on.

"I've don't just about everything out on the bay," he said. "I've pulled seine for perch, I've tonged, I've raked, I've scalloped, I've baited



codfish tubs, set lobster pots..."

He also studied decoy carving under Budge Ridgeway. Everything he learned, he learned by watching and listening to the old-timers who were skilled in the traditions.

"I've scrimped and saved, come up the hard way; I never had anything handed to me. All the things that I have now, I've worked for."

A natural outdoorsman, Chadwick has always loved wilderness and speed. He likes fast cars, motorcycles, boats, decoys and guns. He has traveled to the country's best destinations for downhill skiing; he enjoys working on his '74 Corvette and riding his Harley; years ago he did a lot of duck hunting and fur trapping. "Back then, you could get \$75 for an XL coon. Maybe 50 bucks for a nice red fox. But then the fur prices just fell right off. Then they came out with snares, and I won't do it anymore. That's not my idea of seeing how an animal winds up. That's a pretty ugly picture, when you see a snare around an animal's neck. Leghold (traps), you can let them go, but with a snare you don't have any choice."

All along, he said, 75 percent of his income has been working on boats and the rest clamming. By '85, the fishing was starting to drop off, he said, as the regulations grew more stringent. Meanwhile the repair business was picking back up,

so he was happy to shift focus.

Chadwick believes: “Either you’re born as a fisherman, or you’re not. I was not.”

He was born a craftsman.

“When I build now, I still build from the same patterns that are in the shop that Mr. Perrine used 100 years ago,” he said. The main differences are the rising cost and shrinking availability of cedar. “Nowadays materials alone would probably cost you \$4,000-\$5,000. Fiberglass has gone from. “I think I paid \$5 a gallon, where it’s probably \$40 a gallon now. Rib material I used was 90 cents a board foot for five quarter and now it’s \$3.75 for the same thing.” In the old days he got his cedar from Schairer Brothers in Egg Harbor Township, Hershell Abbott in Manahawkin and the Coughlin yard in New Gretna. “

Chadwick’s father was somewhat tight-lipped about his techniques. “He didn’t tell me very much, but I observed. I would come home and write things down. And that’s how I learned how to do it. I mean, woodworking is a passion for me.”

“It’s family tradition, basically, is what it is.”

John estimates he has built more than 50 sneakboxes and repaired countless other boats and furniture, in addition to decoy carving for pleasure. (Chadwick is also an award-winning carver, though he no longer sells or competes with his decoys.) “Decoys are my thing – decoys and fine, old guns.” And he has a fine collection of both including his first, a Stevens bolt-action rifle, and his grandfather’s 1901 Winchester.

For years he kept a pace of two sneakboxes a year, but he hasn’t built any in the last five years while he’s been taking care of his mom, and, at the same time, the demand has dwindled sharply. Not too many people are willing to spend \$7,000 on a sneakbox, he said, which is why he sees the future of boat building as a grim prognosis. “And really, for the amount of ducks that are around anymore, you don’t need a sneakbox. You could just camouflage anything over. I go down to the bay in the wintertime, and I see Boston Whalers with reeds sticking up on

the side of them. I don’t think half the people would even know what a sneakbox was. But they’re the best boats for gunning, without a doubt.”

Perrine’s sneakbox design was a modified version of the original, a hunting vessel nicknamed “the devil’s coffin” built by Hazelton Seaman. Perrine developed a 15-, 18- and 20-footer, to train young sailors at the local yacht clubs.

Nowadays Chadwick builds in the tin shop, originally built for boat inventory storage when business boomed after World War I, across the street from the original in Barnegat. A replica of the original can be found at the Tuckerton Seaport. By the 50s, however, business tapered as fiberglass took over the market.

“But there’s still nothing like having a wooden sneakbox. If you’re going to be out in the bay, in rough weather, there’s nothing better than a solid sneakbox underneath of you. Fiberglass is fine for dragging over the meadows and stuff like that, but (you can’t beat a sneakbox) for its stability.”

Chadwick sews his breakwaters on the 1930s industrial Singer sewing machine Perrine and his mother used. His boats are all cedar (no plywood), all cut-timber, with tongue-and-groove decks and watertight breakwaters tacked with copper carpet tacks. Over the years he’s learned, through trial and error and by sharing stories and ideas with fellow craftsmen, to know how to read the wood – to identify good, clear lumber; to know how dry it is; whether it’s seasoned or not (must be seasoned at least a year to be viable); which way it cups; to use thinner planks for a nicer curve; to know how to plane a plank, when to start curving it. The amount of caulking in the seams is another consideration.

He built one boat, start to finish, in 41 hours, once, but the typical length of time is about a month, interspersed with clamming during the day.

Chadwick believes “hardworking” and “passionate” are the hallmarks of his legacy. “I really enjoy working. Building sneakboxes. I don’t like to be rushed; I don’t like people to tell me how to build

the boat. ... I’m sorta like a perfectionist. ... And I do have a passion for working with wood. And I know what I’m doing when I’m building sneakboxes.”

Now, after a long hiatus, he is eager to get his hands back to the work he loves best: