

CHARLES E. HANKINS

The boatbuilding business has been the Charles E. Hankins family's calling since 1912. Hankins, his father, Charles M., and his brother James perfected in particular the Jersey sea skiff. For commercial use and for pleasure, the skiff was at one time the boat of choice along this part of the Jersey Shore. The Sea Bright sea skiff, as the Jersey skiff was also named, could be launched and landed safely through the rough surf and steep seas. With its one-foot draw and slanting stern to help it slice through the breakers without overturning, it accommodated travel through the waves.

The old fish pounds used a larger version of the sea skiff, and the type is still used by some lifesaving services. Most of the wooden lifeguard boats on the beaches of Ocean and Monmouth counties are skiffs, and most of them were built by Hankins.

The name Charles Hankins is known throughout the world in connection with boatbuilding. He has built boats for the Turkish government and oil companies in South America, as well as for the U.S. Coast Guard and the Navy.

Charles builds boats in 1990 the same way he built them in 1950, and the same way his father built them in 1920. The specifications and the construction materials, Jersey white cedar, have not changed. Most of the tools of his trade are hand tools, marked and scarred by years of faithful service. Some of his favored tools can no longer be bought, such as a two-foot-long chisel with an oversized blade, and a special plane he's had since 1946.

So, too, is his craftsmanship the last of its kind. Many years and some 4,000 boats after he started, he is the only one left who builds the Jersey sea skiffs out of wood today. It takes about two weeks — roughly 80 hours — for Charles to finish a model. In doing so, he is carrying out a tradition that is believed to have begun around the middle of the last century in northern Monmouth County.

In the last few years, there hasn't been much demand for wooden lifeguard boats; Hankins said it has to do with the cost of everything — the world has evolved from a place that appreciates traditional workmanship to one that prefers mass-produced disposable goods.

Charles grew up appreciating other aspects of coastal life. His father was also a lobsterman, and he duck hunted when boatbuilding allowed time. He was also in the Coast Guard during World War II. He lives in Lavallette.



