

# AVOCATION IN WOOD



MAINE IS HOME TO SOME OF THE FINEST WOODEN BOATBUILDERS IN THE WORLD, AND SEVERAL OF THE MOST WELL-KNOWN ARE BOWDOIN GRADUATES. DICK PULSIFER '62, BOBBY IVES '69, AND BOB STEPHENS '84 NOT ONLY BUILD BEAUTIFUL WATERCRAFT, THEY'VE MANAGED SOMETHING EVEN MORE FINE AND DIFFICULT CREATING CAREERS FROM THEIR AVOCATION.

**B**rooklin, Maine is a small coastal town with a barn-red general store at its center. Route 175, the main road into town, snakes past tall pine trees and classic New England homes inhabited by some 800 year-round residents. Set on one of the thousands of rocky cut-outs that give Maine its distinctive shape and form its hard-to-reach corners, Brooklin embodies Downeast Maine with each windswept inch.

Despite its diminutive population, Brooklin is home to eight boatyards, and a sign marking the town's edge proclaims it "The Boat Building Capital of the World." As such, it is a fitting place for Bob Stephens '84 to call home.

Ever since he was a 10-year old drawing meticulous Revolutionary War frigates, Stephens has known that he wanted to design and build boats. Now, as the chief designer at Brooklin Boatyard, he is principally responsible for creating plans for the two or three multi-million dollar wooden boats the yard produces each year.

Wooden boat-building is a way of life, a skilled craft, and a precise art form. It requires attention to detail and scientific execution, artistic imagination, and mathematical certainty. Boatbuilders must love what they do, and if they are talented, they can do what they love for a living. Finding this level of fulfillment in one's chosen field is the elusive aspiration of all college graduates. And, while it can be difficult to find a career that engages the heart and mind

equally, Bob Stephens '84, Dick Pulsifer '62, and Bobby Ives '69 have all done that.

Stephens spent years building boats before he became a designer. He is now responsible for meeting lofty goals of wealthy customers and has a team of boatbuilders at his disposal, ready to execute his designs.

Dick Pulsifer is a boatbuilder in the most exacting sense of the word. He spends his days building small wooden boats in the woods of Mere Point, about 15 minutes from the center of Bowdoin's campus. He works from a set of plans from an old lobster boat that he fell in love with as a child spending summers in Cundy's Harbor. That 20-foot boat is now in the lobstering exhibit at the Maine Maritime Museum in Bath. Its dimensions, angles, and measurements are scribbled on pieces of scrap wood scattered throughout Pulsifer's small workshop. He replicates the same no-frills boat two or three times a year and can reel off the names of his past customers.

Bob Ives, though a boat builder, has made ministry his primary focus. "Hands to Work, Hearts to God" is the motto of his non-denominational Carpenter's Boat Shop, located an hour northeast of Brunswick in Pemaquid, Maine. Ives, a Quaker minister, likens his boat shop to a harbor where "people in transition" can come for nine months to assess their direction in life. When they leave, Ives hopes that his apprentices will be emotionally ready to pursue their goals with passion and vigor. Boat building provides structure and daily routine, and also some of the revenue that makes the operation possible.

# BOB STEPHENS



## THE DESIGNER

If you have \$2 million and want Bob Stephens to design you a boat, it will be about two years before it hits the water, and there is a long waiting list. In the fall of 2004, Stephens was taking orders for boats that would launch in the summer of 2007.

He spends his days drawing plans in a narrow third floor office, the fulcrum of the boatyard, laboring with a pencil over designs for 70-foot decks, carefully calculating the measurements and angles that will one day form a grand sea-faring vessel. To his left is the yard's large workshop. To his right sits Center Harbor, dotted with resplendent yachts, some of which have been built and launched at Brooklin. Looking toward the water, then back at the 76-foot sculpture taking shape in the workshop, two years doesn't seem too long to wait for a boat designed by Stephens.

Stephens started at Brooklin Boatyard in June 1984, about a week after he graduated from Bowdoin. During his spring break that year, he rented a car and drove the coast of Maine looking for work in a boatyard. He found Brooklin and took a job painting hulls and boat bottoms.

Finishing out that summer, Stephens left for a job at Robinhood Marine Center in Georgetown. He began in the cabinetry shop, making cabinets and other wooden fixtures for fiberglass boats, and eventually became the shop head. By 1991, he'd moved to Searsport and was building small wooden boats in a two-car garage when he heard from Steve White (the White family, whose patriarch is the author E.B. White, owns Brooklin Boatyard), who had a 55-foot racing sloop he needed to build on strict deadline. For the next two years, Stephens worked about 30 hours a week at Brooklin Boatyard, while continuing to build boats in his garage. Then, he started doing some small design projects, and moved into the design shop as a full-time employee in 1994. Ten years later, he is the man responsible for the large wooden yachts that take shape there every year.

Stephens has watched as wooden boats have surged back

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to popularity, a process he estimates began around 1991. In the mid-1980s, Stephens recalls, fiberglass boats were all the rage. “They were touted as miracle boats. Cheap, no maintenance, no headache.”

Brooklin Boatyard had a seven person staff in 1984. Fiberglass boats could be produced inexpensively and in mass quantity, forcing the wooden boat industry to lower its standards to compete. Today, business is strong, as wooden boats have once again risen to prominence, and there are 50 employees at Brooklin.

“We’ve seen steady growth since 1991,” Stephens said. “People have come back around to wooden boats. They are hand-made pieces of art that caring people put together. People are attracted to that.”

Understanding what customers want is one of Stephens’s most important tasks as a designer. Clients are demanding and knowledgeable, and can be at once fascinating and challenging. They have very specific ideas about how they want their boat to look and a sense of how it should function, but often lack specific knowledge of what is feasible. This forces Stephens into the role of translator—parsing a boat design from a series of conversations with a potential buyer.

“You have to kind of interpret what the customer wants,” says Stephens. “Everyone wants everything, but you have to figure out how to produce something practical that they will be happy with.”

While there is certainly a great deal of science involved in his job, Stephens got into boat building because he wanted to



## A SENSE OF PRIDE

**H**inckley Yachts has been on the leading edge of boatbuilding technology since its founding in Southwest Harbor, Maine, in 1928. It was the first company to feature hot/cold running water on a sailboat, one of the first to feature a rolling furling main, and one of the first production companies to build with fiberglass. In 1992, they became just the second American boatbuilder to adopt a vacuum-assisted production technique called SCRIMP, that reduced environmental emissions by 98%. Now, they lead the way in composite hull construction and waterjet propulsion.

Bob Hinckley '58, son of founder Henry Hinckley, has been with the company off and on since 1947, currently as senior sales director and consultant. Bob ran the company for 15 years, before selling to the Talaria Group in 1997. Talaria, Hinckley's famous logo, represents a wing from Mercury's ankle, "testament to the company's swift pursuit of superior ideas," explains Sandy Spaulding '79, Executive Vice-President of Talaria, and Bob Hinckley's son-in-law. (Sandy's son, Gus, will join Bowdoin's Class of 2009 next fall.)

Hinckley Yachts hand builds about 80 semi-custom boats a year (it takes 70-thousand man-hours to build a Sou'wester 70), with new sales totaling around \$50 million. The Hinckley Yacht Service portion of the company does another \$50 million annually, with five full-service yards down the eastern seaboard.

What type of Hinckley is parked in Bob's slip? A fly bridge T44 jet boat, *Night Train*. "Pretty good music back in the Bowdoin days," he says. Bob's owned 20 or so Hinckleys over the years, a series of them named for jazz themes. "I've had sailboats but, at my age, that's too much work." With Hinckley's amazing jet-stick technology, Bob can slide the 44-foot *Night Train* into a berth sideways.

"The boats we're building now are very different than the ones we built 10-15 years ago," he remarks. "We try to build each boat better than the one before."

"It's a company that's changed with the times," remarks Spaulding, "though the legendary craftsmanship and joinery of a Hinckley boat is still alive and well in Southwest Harbor."

"My dad would be proud," Bob says.



A Hinckley T55 jet boat, one of the gorgeous models of hand-made Hinckley Yachts from Southwest Harbor, Maine.

# LEARNING THE TRADE

by Katy Adikes '04



Few drive past the Pulsifer mailbox without taking notice. Its aluminum letter basin settles, comfortably askew, over a worn stem with PULSIFER hand-painted in black. It seems strange that this box stands out along the wooded Mere Point roadside, for it fits the unassuming character of that peninsula so well. Nevertheless, I am only one of many who decelerate as they pass it.

Readers of *Wooden Boat Magazine*, like my uncle, recognize the name and drive by chuckling at the possibility that it marks the home of the Richard S. Pulsifer, maker of the Pulsifer Hampton. Locals and boatbuilders know this to be

that boatbuilding was precisely what he was meant to do. The years he spent patiently adjusting the Hampton design—deepen the keel, enlarge the propeller, add the spray rails—made him, like his tools and like his mailbox, more comfortable in his trade. In contrast, I was a senior in college who felt my own purpose to be more convoluted and mysterious than usual.

From this perspective, the construction of a Hampton appealed to me. It seemed to make tangible the results of hard work and precision. So, I asked Dick and John, his partner in the two-man shop, to share the frozen January of 2004 with me as they started hull number 92. For the chance to

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true. And others, myself once included, ignorantly admire it as a simple, Maine mailbox.

My senior year at Bowdoin, I lived in an old farmhouse just beyond the Pulsifers'. During our first two months as neighbors, I considered their mailbox a landmark on every hurried drive to and from class. I saw it stand under the leaves, in the wake of speeding trucks, and smothered by morning fog.

One November evening, I finally turned down the Pulsifer's driveway to find out what punctuated the other, hidden end. A "SLOW NO WAKE" sign obliged me to hit the brakes just in time to see the Casco Bay mudflats through a gap in the trees. The drive weaved, and I followed blindly until a chorus of corgis, the diminutive dogs I now know as the mascots of the Hampton, swarmed me. Though I could see only their disproportionately large ears over the hood of my car, their barks directed me to the boatshop.

I poked my head into the small building, and the dogs wriggled in between my feet. Smells of cedar, varnish, and woodstove enveloped me, and Maine public radio murmured in the background. Dick Pulsifer appeared from behind the sloping deck of a Hampton with the warm smile of someone who welcomes even unexpected visitors. We began talking about our times at Bowdoin, boating, and building, and I surveyed his shop. From the tools, the pine strips and the paint cans to the aging story articles pinned above his workbenches, the space shared the settled and efficient character of the Pulsifer mailbox.

Turning out the light as we exited the shop, Dick recalled that sometime between his first Hampton in 1972 and when he began full-time construction in 1978, he had realized

learn woodworking skills and observe a person who realizes his passion, I offered my unskilled labor.

They accepted, and that month the negative 30-degree windchill flooded our boat shop and our lungs everyday as we carried planks of pine through its lifted garage door. I tried to agree with Dick's belief that our runny noses were signs of "good health," but that could not keep me from hovering so close to the wood stove that it melted my hat. By the end of my winter break, we had planed, stripped and sorted the pine until hull 92 lay in piles like an incomplete puzzle.

It was not until early March that I sensed what Dick calls the soul of this boat. Finally free of the wooden mold, its pieces were joined solidly together. Dick pointed a corrective finger to the floorboards. "It's not the sole of the boat," he reminded me, "but the soul."

I looked over my shoulder and saw Dick, spitting his sunflower seeds and taking a moment to scan the boat. The soul of the Hampton, I realized then, starts with its builder and his willingness to follow a calling. By sharing his time, skills, and laughter with those who wander into his boat shop, he reminded me that it is possible to experience a sense of purpose and pride through my own work—whatever that may be.

By May of my senior year, my time with hull number 92 had left me with a friend at the seaside end of the Pulsifer driveway. As I search for those things that I was meant to do, I will remember to welcome others into the process so they might learn and teach along with me.

*Photo above: Builder's trials: Katy Adikes '04 at the helm of the Pulsifer Hampton, Peggy A, she helped build with Dick Pulsifer '62 during the winter 2004.*

“think like an artist.” He knew he wanted to build boats when he was looking at colleges, but said his only options were naval architecture and engineering programs. His parents eventually convinced him to look at liberal arts schools.

“It didn’t take much convincing,” Stephens admits, “I wanted the engineering skills, but not the [engineering] mindset.”

## THE CRAFTSMAN

Dick Pulsifer shares Stephens’s creative outlook. Like Stephens, he considers his boats works of art, but understands that creating them requires precise repetition and scientific accuracy. Pulsifer, in fact, only builds one type of boat, the Pulsifer Hampton, 22 feet long, equipped with a 27-horsepower engine, and built to meander across the water. The exposed cockpit of the design—with the protruding oak ribs that give the boat its strength and integrity in plain sight—resembles a Viking ship. Finished and painted, the boat derives its grandeur from simplicity.

Pulsifer has been building boats in a garage tucked in the woods of Mere Point since 1973. His workshop is sparsely decorated and cluttered. There is a yellowed editorial from *The New York Times* adorning the wall, the requisite picture of the Bowdoin campus, a roaring wood stove in the corner, three corgis, and a new, high-tech stereo, which would seem out of place if it weren’t constantly blaring Johnny Cash or public radio.

The discernible progress and repetition involved in the boat building process gives Pulsifer great pleasure. His eyes glow when he speaks of the transformation of anonymous trees in a forest to logs to carefully measured pieces of wood that are sanded, screwed, and nailed to form a boat. His words, usually clustered in metaphors, resonate with a passionate intensity. You sense that boat building is his life and that he wouldn’t have it any other way.

Dick knew early on that he wasn’t meant to sit in an office. “I would end up in an insane asylum,” he says, pausing for a moment to consider what it is about boat building that he finds so satisfying. “[Life’s] more than just papers moving

from one side of the desk to the other.”

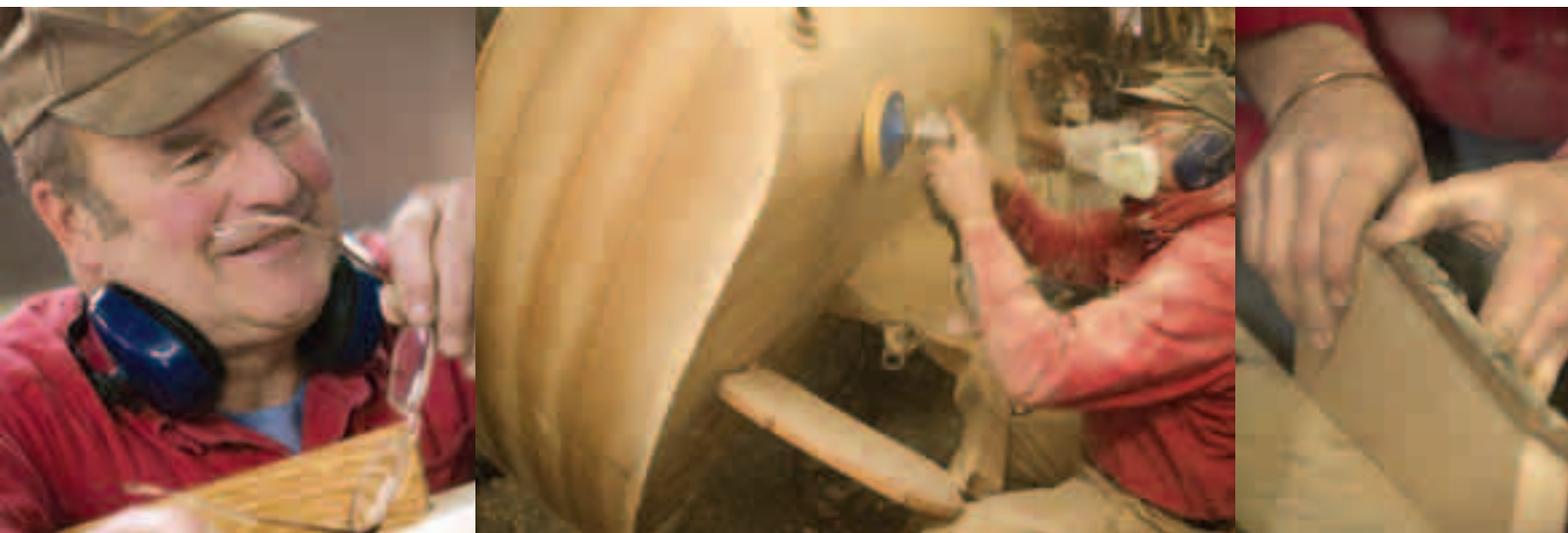
Dick Pulsifer embodies what is unique about wooden boats—the personal touch, and the unspoken sense that the boat has been crafted by a builder deeply involved in the process. It is the tangible difference between a sweater carefully knitted by a loving grandmother and one assembled by a machine in a far-off factory.

He has built 93 Hamptons since 1978, and was building number 94 early in 2005. Each boat is normally spoken for before it is finished. Number 88 was for his daughter. Sensing that a grandchild might one day romp around that boat, he paid special attention to sanding and smoothing the hard to reach corners and edges that only a child could find. Despite recreating the same boat design, Pulsifer finds a sense of discovery in each creation. “It’s always new,” he says. “Especially when you have a short memory.” Some days, while swimming laps at the Bowdoin pool, he counts off the boats, recalling the names of the owners.

Growing up on Long Island, New York, Pulsifer’s constant desire to “tinker and find out how things worked” was a prevalent family trait. He recalls a childhood memory—in a hardware store with his mother, when another customer came in inquiring about a doghouse. When the clerk said they didn’t carry doghouses, Pulsifer’s mom spoke up. “I’ll build you one,” she said. It wasn’t long before Dick was spending his summers tinkering with the lobster boat that taught him to love the ocean, and by extension, boat building.

Each Pulsifer Hampton takes an estimated 400 man

**His eyes glow when he speaks of the transformation of anonymous trees standing in a forest to logs to carefully measured pieces of wood that are sanded, screwed, and nailed to form a boat.**



**DICK PULSIFER**

# BOBBY IVES



hours to build. Pulsifer works with an assistant boat builder, John Lentz (son of Jim Lentz, former Bowdoin coach and Director of the Outing Club *Emeritus*). Dick's son, who lives in Washington, D.C., maintains the company website, steering interested buyers directly to Dick. The boats sell for around \$43,000, and come equipped with a trailer and operating instructions. There isn't a pretentious or patronizing bone in his body, but Pulsifer is truly invested in his boats and wants his customers to enjoy using them, so, he takes his customers on sea trials to teach them the ins and outs of their new boat.

"They get the whole program," he says of his clients. "We took great pains to build the boat and feel a deep connection to it. We're concerned that people understand the responsibility that goes along with operating it on the open ocean."

Over the years, Pulsifer has taken in several Bowdoin students as apprentices (see sidebar). There have been history majors, studio art majors, students of science and English. Many are recommended by the Bowdoin Outing Club. Some are there for independent studies, some come when they have spare time. What unites them is the desire to create, Pulsifer says, and to get involved in an activity that can't occur on campus.

"The creative process is in them," Dick remarks of his apprentices. "The desire to create is very, very real. They have a talent and can come here and be productive without a lot of training."

## THE HARBORMASTER

Bobby Ives also provides his apprentices with a unique experience, though the focus is not solely on building boats. At the Carpenter's Boat Shop, located on 21 acres of land near the Pemaquid River, he has combined his two passions, using the daily routine of wooden boat building as a conduit to his larger goal of helping people in need.

Ives, a warm, bespectacled man, takes in 10 apprentices each year. They pay nothing and are not paid. If they work,

building small wooden skiffs and furniture, they are given room, board, clothing and medical coverage. There is no age requirement. The apprentice only has to be willing to work hard, live communally with the other apprentices, and strive to live as simply as possible. They cook, eat, sleep, work and attend chapel together. Likening his boat shop—which includes a workroom, chapel and two farmhouses—to a harbor, Ives describes the apprentices as "people in transition," who come to him to assess their direction in life.

"They might be might in transition from alcohol to sobriety, or drugs to sobriety, or jail to civilian life," Ives says of the apprentices. "Maybe they have just gotten divorced. Maybe they have worked 35 years and can't face the thought of

**"It gives (the apprentices) the chance to reflect and find balance, so that when they do set sail they do so with a more confident, complete and balanced perspective."**

another day. Maybe they have just graduated college and aren't sure what to do."

At the Carpenter's Boat Shop, apprentices come to drop their metaphorical anchors for nine months. Ives encourages them to live a spiritual life, though he does not proselytize or push any particular denomination. Boat building provides structure and a daily routine that allows the apprentices to immerse themselves in their work. There is also time to walk on the network of trails found on the property, or take a boat trip to a nearby island for a solo, overnight camping trip. In fact, the apprentices are required to do a "solo," twice a year.

"It gives them (the apprentices) the chance to reflect and find balance, so that when they do set sail they do so with a more confident, complete and balanced perspective," Ives said of the experience he provides. Besides the 9-month appren-

## Boat building provides structure and a daily routine that allows the apprentices to immerse themselves in their work.

ticeships, Ives also offers week-long seminars for teachers and clergy each summer. He is, however, somewhat leery of publicity, an aversion he developed after the boat shop was misrepresented on the TODAY show in the 1980s. Now, apprentices learn of the boat shop primarily through word of mouth. For each apprentice that arrives, Ives said, there is another who has to wait before space opens up.

Ives is a Quaker minister. He graduated from Bowdoin in 1969, worked a year in the admissions office, then went to Scotland and earned a master's degree in theology. He then served for two years as a minister and teacher with his wife in a one-room schoolhouse on Monhegan Island, off the coast of Pemaquid Point. After that, he lived on nearby Muscongus Island for two years and commuted back to the mainland to work as a minister. It was on Muscongus that Ives met Evard Salor, a Norwegian shipbuilder, who Ives calls his boat building mentor. With Salor's tutelage, Ives's boat building progressed from a serious hobby to a true craft.

Ives built his first boat from plans he found in *Boy's Life* when he was nine years old. He grew up in Middlebury, Connecticut, but his parents died when he was 16, and he went to live with his grandmother in Cape Elizabeth, Maine,

a seaside community south of Portland. "I always loved boating and being around the water," he recalls.

Eighty percent of the apprentices arrive at the Boat Shop without any tool experience. They spend the first two weeks learning basic carpentry skills and building a toolbox and Shaker lap desk. The third week is spent building a skiff. The ten apprentices divide themselves into two groups and each group constructs a boat. That week ends with a boat launch in a nearby harbor. The test, Ives said, is self-explanatory.

After the boat launch, the apprentices spend the fourth week performing maintenance on the boat shop, chapel, and dormitory where they will live. Then, they begin building boats; meaning that in one month, Ives is able to make boat-builders out of apprentices who arrive devoid of carpentry skills. Ives's non-profit operation survives on donations and the proceeds from the sale of the wooden skiffs.

Whether a means to an end, or an end itself, what binds Bob Stephens, Dick Pulsifer, and Bobby Ives to this world is their avocation. Each has found a passionate engagement in their careers that many can only strive to emulate. They build wooden boats, and discover much more in the process.

## Many Bowdoin alumni are involved in various aspects of boatbuilding.

Here's a partial list (let us know who we missed!).

William T. McKeown '43  
Boating Editor  
*Outdoor Life* magazine

Robert H. Vaughan '70  
President  
Seal Cove Boatyard, Inc.

Gregory M. Smith '80  
Boatbuilder  
Redfern Boat

Lance Lee '60  
President  
Atlantic Challenge Foundation

Benjamin B. Whitcomb III '71  
Designer/Builder; Ship Captain  
Captain's Carpentry; Dirigo Cruises

Avery K. Revere '82  
President  
Grandslam Boatworks

Paul D. Lazarus '65 (see profile)  
Editor  
*Professional BoatBuilder* magazine

Louis H. McIntosh '72  
Boat Yard Manager  
McIntosh Boat Yard

Morgan Binswanger '88  
Educational Consultant  
Attended boatbuilding school in 1999

Carl B. Cramer '68  
Publisher  
*Wooden Boat* magazine

Daniel deLeiris '73  
Boat Builder  
Self-employed

Brian Wedge '97  
Director  
Integrity Teamworks  
Attended boatbuilding school in 2001

Samuel T. Hastings '70  
Proprietor  
Oregon Boat Company

Ian G. Pitstick '73  
Sailboat Rigging Company

Dave Thomas '00 (see profile)  
Manager of Research & Development  
Wintech Racing

Alexander M. Turner '70  
Owner/Operator  
Belfast Boatyard

Albert H. Spinner III '79  
Owner  
Beacon Boats

James Strohacker '03  
Trainer/Captain  
Hinckley Yachts