

To build a "beautay"

By Ralph J. Smith

Building a boat in Maine is an eye-opening experience for a newcomer to the state. Not because of craftsmanship, although the standard continues to be high in an area where the craft of wooden boatbuilding hangs on, if desperately. Rather, what is impressive is Down-East savvy in the properties and use of wood.

This became apparent to me soon after I started work on my 15-foot Wittholz-designed catboat. As with any boat project, there was an immediate eddying of visitors to look the boat, and me, over. Mine was a special audience—boatbuilders in whom was ingrained an eight-generation tradition of craftsmanship, and fishermen who study a boat's lines and build as though their lives depended on it, as, in fact, they do. They pronounced the boat a "beautay," which is high praise for an area where garrulity is not endemic. My credentials thus established, I found myself admitted into the fraternity in which help and counsel were volunteered.

I felt my boatbuilding credentials were established when my Maine audience pronounced my catboat a "beautay"

My initiation was my tiller, which I had planned to shape out of oak. The tribal elders said it had to be out of ash, which they also use for cleats, ladder rungs and tool handles.

For the ash my counselors took me to a lake-bordered stand that for a half century has furnished the town with its needs. The grove is on paper-company land (paper companies own more than half of Maine) but the community attitude is that tradition of usage tran-

scends right of ownership.

My advisers searched out a young tree grown to approximate curve by the weight of a wind-uprooted deadfall across its branches. From it I fashioned a tiller tapering down to not much more than an inch in diameter. Subsequently I lost my balance while reefing down off Great Wass Island and fell across the tiller with my full weight. The tiller survived unharmed. I cracked a rib.

As the catboat hull neared completion and the need for a mast became obvious, villagers began clueing me in on the location of stands of spar spruce which they use for the masts of riding sails on lobster boats. I had to ask for clarification.

Illustration by C. L. Peterson

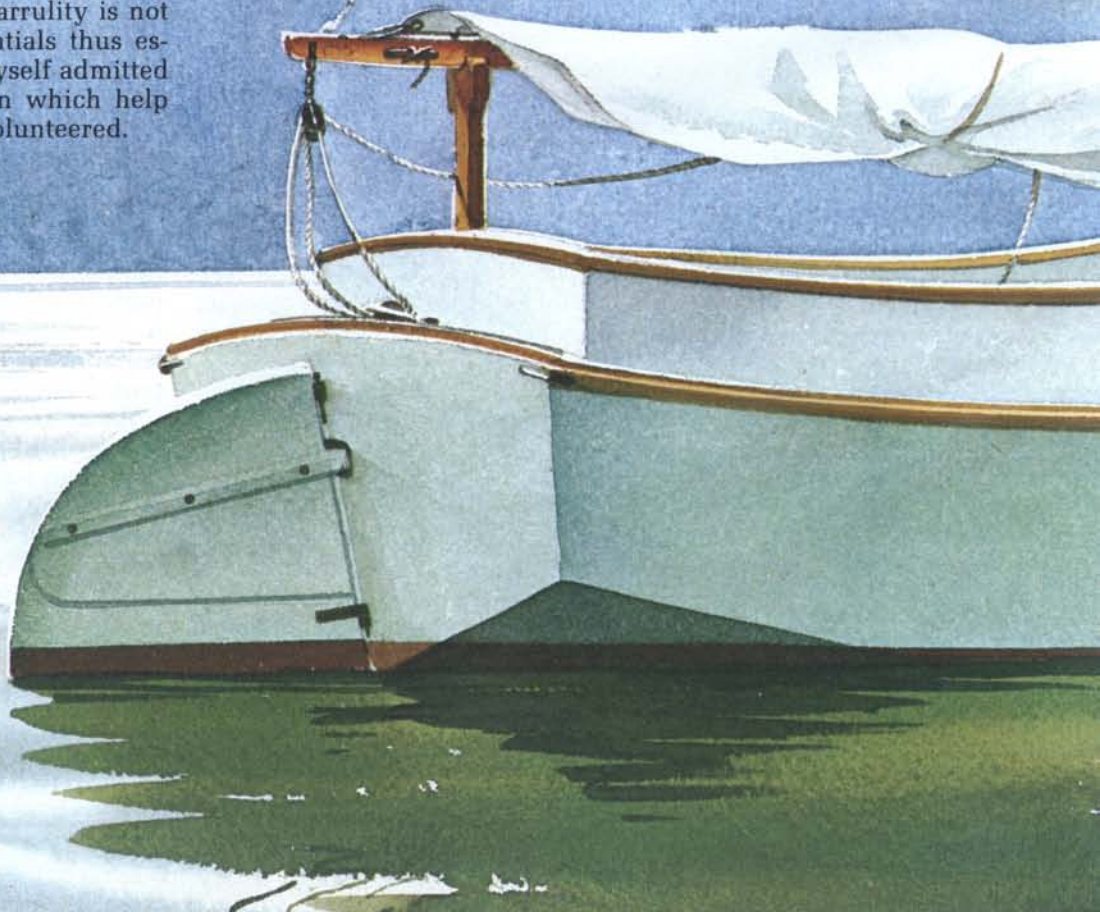
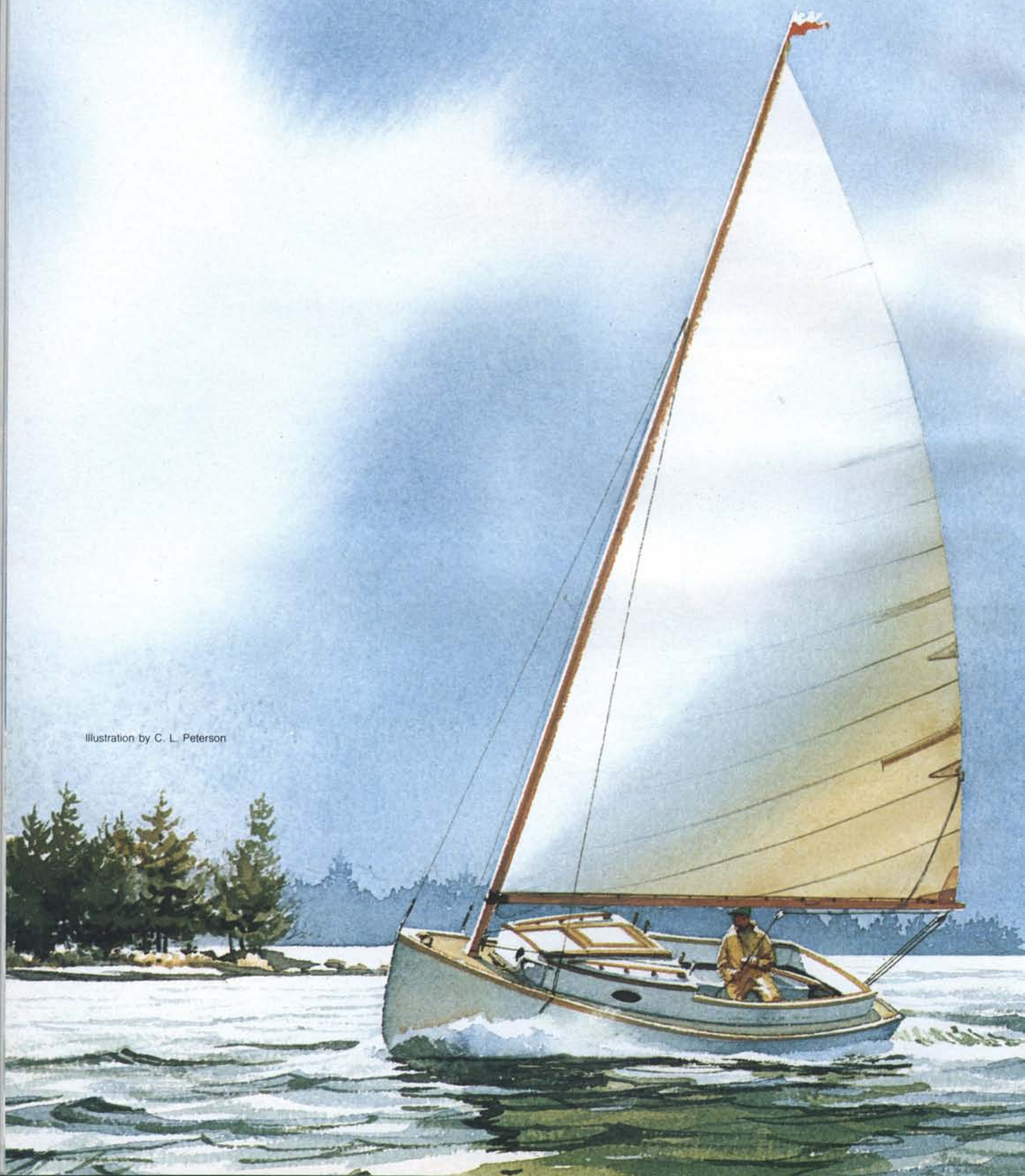




Illustration by C. L. Peterson



Spar spruce is the New England equivalent of lodgepole pine in the West. A spruce tree growing in the openness of a second-growth forest is thick of butt, marked of taper and possessed of large side branches that leave unacceptably big knots. Spar spruce, by contrast, grows in groves where trees have sprung up so thickly that they reach up tall and slender in the arboreal competition for sunlight, while the side branches wither in the mutual shade so that knots are negligible.

My neighbors and I had to cut five trees to find one acceptably straight but we ended with a timber 28 feet long, five inches in diameter at the butt and three at the truck. The biggest knot was the size of a quarter. It took six men to thread the tree through the forest's denseness and carry it down a ridge to a logging trail for loading. Soon after the boat was launched, a weld gave way in a headstay fitting in a Force 5 wind. Not yet fully seasoned, the mast flexed like a fly rod but I sailed it to the mooring on the wind without failure.

Maine natives rarely use a built-up stem on their boats. They don't need to. They have readily at hand the grown knees shaped from the trunk and root section of hackmatack trees. My catboat has a false stem fashioned from an 18-inch hackmatack tree. The false stem runs in a single sweep approximately four feet down the stem and three back on the keel; its grain exactly parallels the bow's arc.

To get a knee, I made a rough pattern and then prowled the forest, exposing roots with a shovel until I found a tree of the proper size and conformation. The knee root was cut off at the appropriate length, the extraneous roots sheared off at the trunk and the tree pulled down with a tackle. Thereafter the knee was shaped and finished with a chain saw, axe, adze, chisel, plane, rasp and sandpaper. Since pulpwood is harvested in the winter and knees can be grubbed out only in the warm months when the ground is unfrozen, the remaining tree is left to rot. With a Midwesterner's Druid-like regard for trees, I cannot sup-

press a feeling of guilt that a 50-foot hackmatack had to die to give me a three-foot bow knee or that a dinky 15-foot boat destroyed 12 trees.

Wide pine boards, locally known as boat boards, are the sole exception to Maine's largess of tree resources. The state's majestic pines, which towered up to 200 feet tall and were up to four feet in diameter, started disappearing three centuries ago when they supplied the masts for the King's Navy. The big trees were reserved for the Crown; possession of a board 24 or more inches wide was evidence of poaching and was punishable by jail. Many of the surviving pre-Revolutionary houses have wainscoting of the old wide pine boards. The boards measure up to 23½ inches. Never wider.

Today about the only surviving big pines are trees that were overlooked, rejected or inaccessible

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when the area was logged over. Word gets around when such a survivor is cut. Buyers gravitate to the mill and each board is toted off as it comes off the saw. I used two 19-inch-wide boards for my cabin and cockpit coaming. They were true pumpkin pine, with a texture and fiber that made them a tactile delight to work.

Wood usage has continuing subtleties that, even with the boat behind me, continue to reveal themselves. My stock for the clamps and chines was spring-cut oak, each piece dripping with newly risen sap and so supple that it could not be picked up by one end. Following Down-East practice, I buried the pieces of wood in the mud of a clam flat for a couple of weeks to limber them further and to let the salt water kill any incipient rot spores. They lay in their notches like so many rubber bands. Spruce trees for masts and cedar trees for mooring poles are

cut in the spring when the sap-loosened bark slips off in sheets under the nudge of a chisel. The alternative, at other times of the year, is to chip away the bark, a tedious task even if one is fortunate enough, as I was, to find an old sparmaker's curved drawknife at a yard sale.

Finding seasoned wood is more of a chore, as I discovered when I sought to build a watertight bulkhead of splined, seasoned pine. Our lumber, locally cut, is all green; kiln-dried wood, even if one wanted to use it, is almost impossible to come by. Where dimensional stability is critical, the builder uses plywood where he can. Where he can't, neighborliness comes to the rescue.

Most Maine locals have overhead in their woodsheds and barns, under a coating of cobwebs, sawdust and hay chaff, a supply of boards accumulated from projects of past years. When word of my problem got abroad, a neighbor came forward to help me out with some nice pine left over from a job of 12 years ago. In turn, I was happy to give a fisherman whose hull had been holed a couple of live-edge cedar planks that were in my barn when I bought my place.

Our lumber comes from a small family mill that for three generations has specialized in supplying oak and cedar to boatbuilders at Jonesport, Beals Island, Lubec and other Down-East towns. Buying lumber has its own fixed procedure. The customer doesn't go to the office with a list. Instead, he goes to the mill and stands, boat plans in hand, in attendance to the head sawyer. A running discussion, half soliloquy and half consultation, takes place against the screech of the saw as each piece is cut to exact dimensions and function:

"... This 2¼ by 10-inch chunk of oak will make a nice skeg; when you cut it to shape that knot will disappear and the grain around the knot will follow the hull's curve. Clamps? I'll have the boys bring in that log from the pile we got from Everard Pendleton. It's a nice piece. It says 1¼ by 2¼ inches but we'd better cut them a mite wider to allow for the bevel—a

pretty sharp angle there. Outside stern post. What do you want one of those for? The knee gives all the strength you need. Keel? Let's see. You'd better have winter-cut oak. Hmm . . ."

The other side of the coin to the availability of lumber is the difficulty of buying sailboat fittings and hardware. Our remote section is midway between the areas that produced the Eastport pinky and the Friendship sloop, those two masterpieces of small sailing craft, yet a resident sailboat today is a rarity.

As a consequence, one can buy equipment for a lobster boat at any village hardware store or lumber yard, or even crossroads garage or village store, but sailboat fittings are hard to come by. To go to the boatbuilding shops and marine hardware stores up in yachting country at Southwest Harbor, Camden or Portland is to go to a foreign world, one of fiberglass, metal masts and racing gear. Catalogs are scant help. Marine supply firms, which today seemingly focus on inventory turnover rather than on service, no longer list the old items. It would be great if some marketing research genius were to discover all those amateurs out there building all those traditional boats so that two-band goosenecks, gaff shackles, wye bands and the like would again become available. Meanwhile, builders like me have to order gear from England, which is slow, or whittle out patterns for custom casting, which is the hard way to get a two-bit item that a few years ago could be picked up almost anywhere.

Since the area east of Schoodic has no marinas, no hauling facilities and no storage yards for pleasure craft, one must look to his own ingenuity and muscle to moor, haul and reach his boat. Fortunately, fishermen have worked out practices to follow.

My mooring was put together from a granite slab out of the cellar hole of a long-gone house, a fair-sized cedar tree felled for a mooring pole and a piece of 3/4-inch Coast Guard surplus chain that asking around turned up in the corner of a bait house; the assembly weighs more than half a

ton. I would be surprised to find a mushroom anchor along Washington County's 700 miles of coastline. In the spring the local garage-man winches a boat aboard a lowboy trailer with his tow truck and hauls her from dooryard to low-tide beach. There the owner weights the cradle with beach rocks. The incoming tide lifts the boat free. This is *setting her off*. In the fall the process is reversed; this is *bringing her in*. Since we are on the threshold of the massive Bay of Fundy tides, we use a pulling line, an endless line run to a block on a stake out in the water, to get our skiffs in and out.

In building the boat, I chose between old and new materials and methods without self-consciousness and in the conviction that I was true to the greater tradition of the sea. It seems to me that the current cult of the old, whose voice shows signs of getting un-

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pleasantly shrill, is based on a false premise and has about it a certain element of preciousness. The larger history of boatbuilding is one of constant technological striving, paced by a conservatism that acknowledged the stakes involved, for greater efficiency and safety at sea. The use of tar for protection went out quickly when the merit of copper sheathing was discovered. Wire rope and turnbuckles quickly replaced hemp shrouds and deadeyes. Machine-made duck, in displacing linen sails, affected naval history. Hull form and size showed similar shaping by evolution. The Muscongus Bay sloop was a center-board craft that could be launched by her owner off the beach and used among the rocks of the in-shore fishery. When fishing became more commercialized and moved into deeper water, the boat grew in size, acquired a keel and became the Friendship sloop. I love the old designs, which I find

aesthetically pleasing, because they acquired perfection of form by the modeling of an implacable sea. Many of the production-line boats offend me because merchandising gimmickry rather than sea-going function determines their design. But I reject the idea of old for the sake of being old. When something new and better comes along—Dacron cloth and synthetic line, for example—I'll use it, even though the traditionalist deep within me objects.

This attitude showed its effect in the boat. I made the spar of spruce not for reasons of tradition but because the tree came free from a neighbor's woodlot whereas a metal mast would have cost around \$300. I covered the boat with plywood, both because the specifications said to and because caulking is no job for an amateur, and then sheathed it with fiberglass. Thereafter the boat broke loose from her anchor in an unpredicted night storm, bumped through a rising storm tide up over the rocks and finally grounded out in Seth Gray's pasture. She came through with a few scratches. Had I planked her with cedar, as I was tempted to do, she would have been reduced to a pile of kindling.

Thus I built my boat. The manner of her construction did nothing, I like to think, to lower my standing in the community. She has proved to be a wonderfully eager and forgiving craft; she is more boat than I am sailor. She doesn't like light airs, especially against a chop, and, as sulkily as a petulant child, under such conditions resists my efforts to make her go. But when the wind picks up almost to reefing strength, out in the open where the swells rolling in from Portugal are so big that when the boat is down the entire horizon is a circle of translucent green above my head and the next moment I'm so high that I can see all the way to Cape Split, then she puts her shoulder into it and moves, and when we slide down the swells she goes *who-o-o-sh*, and she and I come gloriously alive. Then is 20 months of work repaid. The boat is the cake. My schooling in the ways of wood, and of Maine, is the frosting. 