

THEY STILL TAILOR MAINE LOBSTER BOATS

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Boatbuilding may seem unrelated to the banjo playing, storytelling and Indian dancing that are presented at the 1970 Festival of American Folklife. However, the same traditional body of ideas that motivates and influences the folk performer, narrator, or dancer also is manifested in the enduring evidence of craftsmanship.

The author of this article has been working under a research appointment from the Smithsonian Office of Academic Programs in a field of investigation that includes the study of lobster boat building on the Maine coast as a traditional, community-related industry in which the correlation of craftsman to client, or maker to user of a traditional artifact, can be examined.

Maine lobstermen have remained independent enough to retain for themselves a precious service in this industrial age—the privilege of commissioning the individually tailored building of their own lobster boats.

Professional, traditional boatbuilders provide this service, although it may not survive much longer because of the growth and increasing sophistication of fiberglass boatbuilding for the workboat market. Presently, however, there remain approximately fifty boatbuilding shops on the coast of Maine whose primary business is the construction of wooden lobster boats. It is to these craftsmen that most lobstermen prefer to turn for their work boats. The lobstermen, through experience and custom, have come to require certain characteristics of boat performance. They demand seaworthiness under varying weather conditions, durability, maneuverability, adequate speed, working comfort,

sufficient carrying capacity, and, perhaps most compelling, economy. They want boats which achieve these performance requirements in time-tested ways. In addition, it is important to them that their boats be built according to locally accepted standards of appearance.

Thus the traditional boatbuilder, who develops his own designs, must create boats which satisfy a very choosy buyer. He must be sensitive and responsive to the lobsterman's needs. To do this, he relies heavily on his apprentice training and experience as a builder, his creativity in improving the local type of boat, and his salesmanship. The builder, after spending many years in his trade, settles into the practice of constructing a progressively more integrated design. His apprenticeship and early experience instruct him well in the accepted boat forms. He innovates only after mastering his craft. In his mature period he develops his own personal style or variation on the local boat type, and it is frequently this which attracts his clientele to him.

After a lobsterman chooses his builder, they meet and discuss requirements. They agree on a model and a price, while exchanging experiences, opinions, and attitudes about specific boat qualities and how to achieve them. The lobsterman pays twenty-five percent of the purchase price in advance. Then the builder proceeds to adjust the design to the buyer's satisfaction. The builder lays the keel, sets up molds, bends frames, and fastens planks. He follows a schedule lasting several months from the time the keel is laid to completion of the hull and superstructure, with engine and equipment installed. The final cost to the buyer is about \$12,000—ample reason for the lobsterman's concern with the preparation of his new boat.

The folklorist is interested in recording this construction process, but is especially concerned with defining and understanding the social context in which it occurs—the body of tradition that influences the buyer and builder in their thinking. Their concern for improvements in boat design must be balanced against past successes. It is clear that the successes of boats built in the past are always an influence on both craftsman and client. The builders and lobstermen have great respect for the traditions which protect them against a high rate of failure in boat design.

The relationship between the craftsman who builds the product and the man who is to use it has a history as long as the specialization of tool-making. But in our complex society one seldom has a chance to observe a situation in which builder and user meet face to face and work together directly. Industrialization has placed many middlemen in between, and the relationship is often muddled, or even lost entirely. The relationship between producer and consumer is now best evident in activities such as boatbuilding, chair making, rug weaving, or in the performance of traditional music where the musician is a "craftsman" and his audience is the "user" of the entertainment he provides.

While observing the exhibits and performances at the 1970 Festival of American Folklife, the visitor should be aware of the reality and authenticity of the regional American folk culture that he sees, and of its importance in telling us basic facts about ourselves. Folklore is the body of traditional, verbally expressed, conventional ideas shared by the many groups in our society. Folklife is the assemblage of traditional material objects and their use which reflect these ideas. Folklorists, through the study of these traditions, gain insights into the structure and unwritten ways of society.

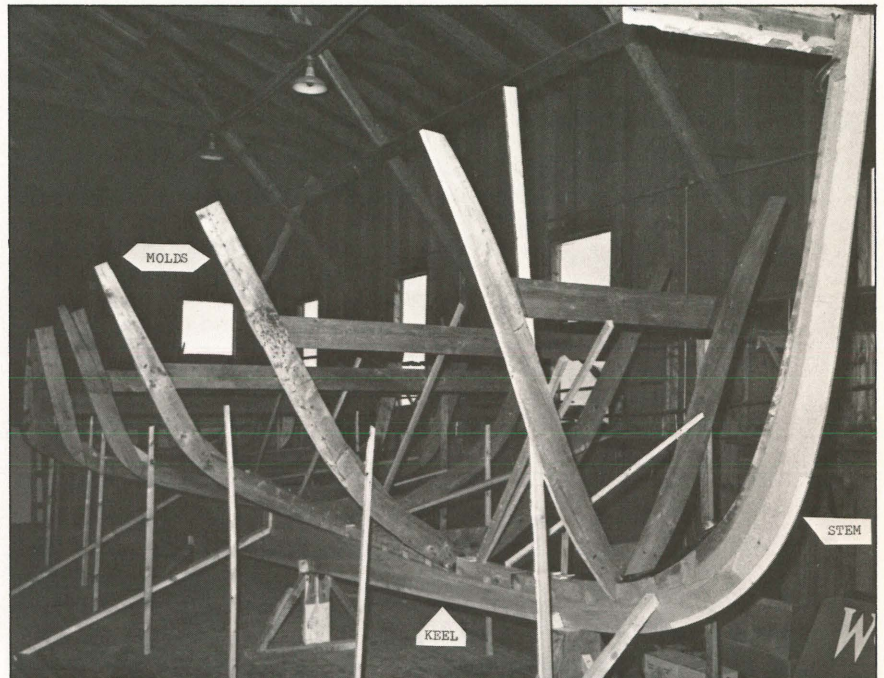
We are indebted to our cultural past for aid in many of the decisions we make, the entertainments we choose, the labors we perform. Not many of us are lobstermen who have boats built, but most of us buy cars and can openers, furniture and

houses. What traditional values prevail in our relationships with the producers of these objects? How much of the finished product results from our own influence, from the influence of the designer and the manufacturer, and ultimately from traditional ideas which can influence us? These are questions the folklorist asks. The answers teach us about the nature of what we so often take for granted—the common heritage, tradition, and customs in our everyday lives which distinguish us as a society, and yet at the same time unite us with all of humanity. For it is human to seek conventional solutions to recurrent problems encountered in day-to-day living, as the boatbuilders and lobstermen do when they combine their experience to carry on a unique heritage of craftsmanship.

*Traditional Steps in Building
a Maine Lobster Boat*

Photos by C. Richard K. Lunt

After lobsterman and boatbuilder have agreed on a model and a price and a deposit is paid, the builder adapts a design to his customer's satisfaction and begins construction. Here in the initial stage is a thirty-three-foot boat at the Frost Shipyard Company, Jonesport, Maine. The keel and stem are set upright and plumbed with hull shape molds set.

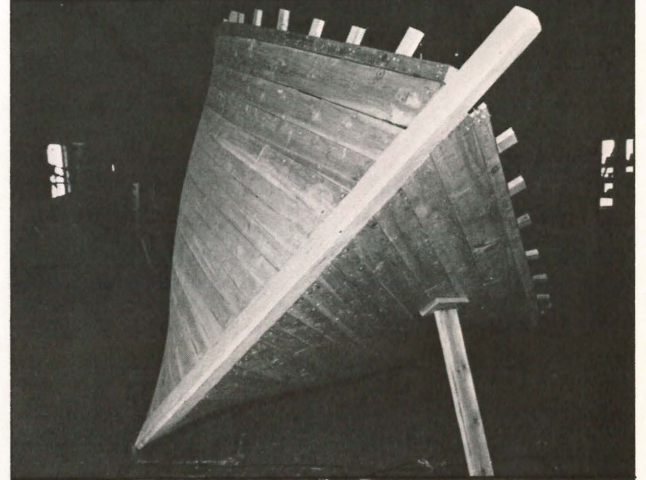


Bert Frost is shown bending in the first steamed oak timber (rib). The molds have been tied together and faired with horizontal battens to which the bent ribs are clamped.

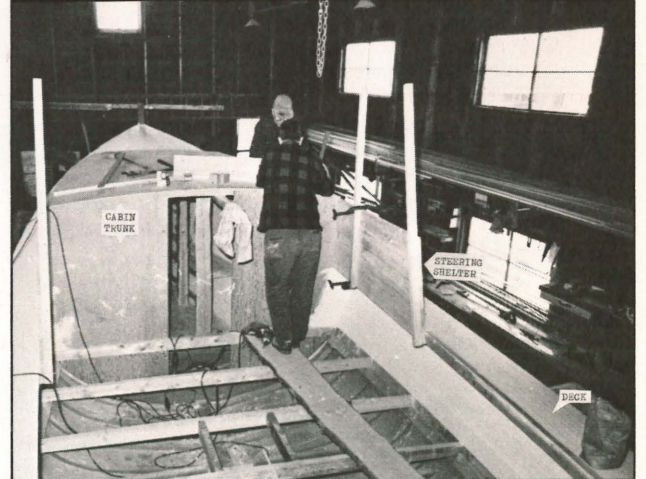
Timbering of this thirty-four-foot boat has been completed and the builder, Richard Alley of Beals Island, Jonesport, is planking the hull. He uses cedar plank and Everdur clinch nails. Each plank is shaped, then clamped to the ribs and fastened. The battens are removed one by one as a plank reaches them.



Oscar Smith, a Jonesport builder, has finished planking the hull of this thirty-two-foot boat, and has begun sanding it smooth in preparation for caulking the seams. Tipping the hull facilitates work on the bottom. Molds are now removed.



Decks have been installed on this thirty-two-foot boat built by Alvin Beal of Beals Island. The cabin trunk is also finished, but the cockpit floor and the steering shelter are in early stages of construction.



Sliding down the way after four months under construction is a thirty-foot boat built by Harold Gower, Beals Island. Such a craft costs \$5,000 to \$6,000, depending on the builder and the requirements of the buyer. The cost of the motor, drive train, and other equipment increases the final price.

