

Passing It On



COLIN ROBERTS

A master Pocock shell builder shares a lifetime of experience

by Eric Sorensen

The hull planking of a Pocock cedar rowing shell is $\frac{1}{8}$ " thick, like the skin of a Stradivarius violin. Of course, Antonio Stradivari carved into his instruments a tone celebrated three centuries later. But he never made a 26' violin.

That job fell repeatedly to four generations of the Pocock family, which built a dynasty of championship-quality rowing shells by marrying Pacific Northwest wood with refined techniques brought to Seattle, Washington, from Britain almost a century ago by George Pocock. The Pocock shells were light and strong but "dazzlingly beautiful," to quote Bill Tytus, current owner of Pocock Racing Shells.

"This is what we call 'industrial art,'" he says. "...This is art that works."

But the wooden Pocock shell was in danger of disappearing when the company went entirely to synthetic materials in 2003 and Bob Brunswick, its last wooden shell builder, retired. Now the type is undergoing a renaissance

in Port Townsend, Washington, where the Northwest Maritime Center and Wooden Boat Foundation (a recent fusion of two formerly separate organizations) plans to build nine singles to bolster its endowment and celebrate Northwest maritime traditions. The success of the project has hinged largely on a collaboration between Brunswick and Steve Chapin of the Point Hudson Boat Shop. Between them, they had to preserve a building technique going back more than 150 years. The Pocock shells were unique, Chapin says, for omitting frames to save weight. The result is a monocoque hull in which the skin, as Brunswick calls it, is a structural element. The shells also used one thickness of solid, steam-bent wood per side, unlike strip-planked or cold-molded hulls. And the Pococks pioneered the use of Western red cedar, giving their boats a combination of stiffness and springiness that other boats of the type don't have. Preserving these innovations fell to the Brunswick-Chapin collaboration, with precious little documentation to follow.

Above—Boatbuilder Steve Chapin of Port Townsend, Washington, takes the newly completed shell LEGACY for sea trials after her launching in May 2007. Such new wooden-hulled singles are a rarity these days.

Right—Bob Brunswick, who built wooden hulls exclusively for the Pocock Company in Seattle, Washington, for many years, worked with Steve Chapin on one more boat.



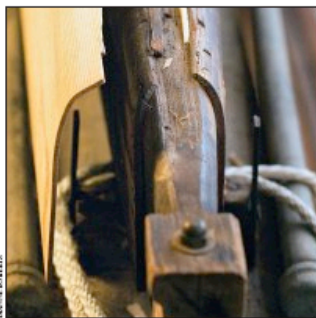
YVES FETTER

Chapin had a spectacular trove of tight-grained old-growth cedar that George Pocock's son, Stan, had squirreled away in a shipping container. Some pieces were as thick as 7" x 7" and 32' long. Chapin also had many of the pieces that the Pocock shell company had precut for efficient assembly. He even had photographs taken by a Pocock customer for whom Brunswick built a single in 2003. But Chapin had no instruction manual or drawings, the Pococks having handed down their technique through apprenticeships and pencil-marked jigs and forms, some of which Chapin acquired. "We were doing forensic work in a way," says Chapin, a Port Townsend boatbuilder of long experience who was venturing into a type of boatbuilding calling for a high degree of specialization. Along the way, he started a construction manual with drawings, diagrams, and photographs. Dianne Roberts, the shell project's publicist, is acting as photographer while local videographer Jane Champion has put much of the process on tape.

The course Brunswick and Chapin finally settled on speaks volumes about the shell itself, its history, its evolution, and the genius borne out by hundreds of details that contribute to the boat's strength, lightness, and world-class grace.

The two started collaborating about two years ago. Chapin was displaying various shell-building parts at the Port Townsend Wooden Boat Festival, and while the multitudes paraded by, Brunswick would explain how the different pieces worked. Later, as Chapin started to build, he would work up lists of questions, then ask questions of Brunswick in phone calls that could stretch to more than an hour.

"Bob's not much of a talker on the phone," says his wife, Goleen, "but Steve knows the right ways to get him talking."



BOB BRUNSWICK

They're an unlikely pair. Brunswick, 80, is an old-school, flannel-shirt guy. He grew up in the house he was born in, a child of the Great Depression, son of a Boeing Company woodworker and furniture maker. His life has been a succession of woodworking projects, be they shells, a mahogany fireplace bench built in high school, or the Rubs Goldberg-inspired marble tower in his living room addition. He had done stints in the U.S. Navy and at The Boeing Company. When a nasty construction fall limited his mobility, he found work with Pocock in the rowing shell house at the University of Washington. He ended up building shells for 54 years, learning at first from the master.

"I'd just do what George told me to do," he recalls with a laugh. "Oh, I watched what they did and they'd give you little jobs. It took me about four, five years to really learn."

Chapin, 50, started learning about the Pocock shells by making repairs to the local rowing fleet, and he owns a wooden Pocock single himself. But he also reaches back to his college days in Minnesota, where he studied both materials science and how to row in a Pocock Eight. "I had a full year of coursework in crack-propagation theory," he says. "Talk about a niche. But it's funny how things come around. The concepts I've learned have been useful in the materials I'm working with."

For Chapin, the Pocock cedar single is in many ways an idea as much as a physical reality, a concept refined across several generations and dozens of dust-covered hands, a 32-ft "highly engineered structure" of wood, fabric, fastenings, adhesives, and history.

It's a complicated rowboat. You should not attempt this at home.

Each side of the shell consists of a single steam-bent plank of Western red cedar, visible at left, only $\frac{1}{8}$ " thick.