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Blast

from
the

past

IN A LONG ISLAND POTATO BARN,
A LEGENDARY FIFE EIGHT-METER
YACHT IS BEING REBORN

By Pat Mundus

Photos by Peter Brauné

The agricultural North Fork of Long Island, New York, is known more for wine cultivation than for boatbuilding. So encountering a slender wooden 48-foot 1930s-era racing sailboat under construction in a cavernous potato barn is quite a surprise.

The boat's long overhangs and fine entry make her seem to be going 12 knots even on the shop floor — she seems ready to burst through the double doors at any moment. This new William Fife III-designed 8 Meter is as sexy and intriguing as the boat she is modeled on. With a 30-foot, 8-inch waterline, 8-foot, 6-inch beam, and 6-foot, 6-inch draft, she is a historically accurate new build: a replica of *Invader II*.

Eight Meters were, and still are, a highly competitive racing class with a specific design measurement formula equaling 8 meters. (It was an Olympic class from 1908 to 1936.) The original *Invader II* was commissioned to match-race in the 1932 Canada's Cup — the freshwater equivalent of the America's Cup — between the Royal Canadian Yacht Club and the Rochester Yacht Club on Lake Ontario. George H. Gooderham, commodore of the Royal Canadian Yacht Club, had led the successful 1901 campaign with the



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EIGHT METRE YACHT. N^o 793 AND 794
SCALE $\frac{3}{4}$ " = 1 FOOT.
29th December 1930
in red ink for N^o 794
"THE FOR BASKIN" DEC 1986



original *Invader*. Although the competition from the Canadians was fierce, the Rochester Yacht Club stubbornly refused to give up the coveted Canada's Cup from 1903 to 1954. The decades-long rivalry persisted. Determined to regain the Cup in 1932 after losing to the Fife III 8 Meter *Quest* in 1930, Gooderham commissioned the Scottish yacht designer to design *Invader II*. The public also sensed the urgency of the race — local newspaper clippings describe more than 20,000 spectators turning out to witness the battle.

Brian Hunt Lawrence, a New York Yacht Club member, is enamored of the 8 Meter Class. No stranger to pedigreed yachts, Lawrence has dedicated himself to preserving important classics and sustaining the esoteric skills required of those who fashion them. Among the vessels in his stewardship is Fife's personal yacht *Clio*, built in 1921. When Lawrence's love of match racing combined with his love of classic yachts — Fife's designs in particular — he began to search for an original 8 Meter for restoration. He turned to Donn Costanzo and Bruce Wahl of Wooden Boatworks in Greenport, New York. Costanzo is well-versed in the genius of William Fife III, having restored and raced several Fife yachts in Europe. Wooden Boatworks specializes in historical restorations and replicas (woodenboatworks.com). But after an exhaustive international search, it turned out that 8 Meters have enjoyed such an astounding resurgence in popularity that no originals remain left to restore. So what began as a quest for a historical restoration morphed into a historical replication. This was perhaps an even greater undertaking than the restoration of an existing boat would have been.

Invader II is a perfect candidate for a replication because she enjoyed an unparalleled provenance and has a well-documented history. The yacht had a vibrant racing career, and, most important, she was a Fife with excellent racing characteristics worthy of re-creating. But building a modern wooden boat to historical standards is challenging, even before you consider the precision demanded for meeting the parameters of 8 Meter Class racing specifications.

Building as close as possible to the original plank-on-frame construction of the Fife method, yet creating a boat fully compliant in today's competitive class, requires extreme devotion to historical plans and drawings. Construction details, materials and distribution of weight are critical, as are rig dimensions. The depth of research and preparation for building the new *Invader II* are impressive. Fife expert Duncan Walker, of Fairlie Yacht Restorations in Hamble, England, assembled the construction plans and drawings in Scotland. From these, English naval architect Theo Rye prepared the first table of offsets. Work began



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“Fast and bonnie” Fife’s legacy lives on

There’s something about a Fife. As the legendary designer himself put it, the secret of a great yacht is that it should be “fast and bonnie” and his creations were certainly that. William Fife III was born to William Fife and his wife Mary in 1857 in Fairlie on the Firth of Clyde in Scotland. A third generation boat builder and designer, he was apprenticed to his father and then worked at several other yards to advance his education. When the Royal Yachting Association was formed in 1875 to standardize racing rules, Fife and his rival G.L. Watson were very involved in establishing the rule changes.

By the time young Fife returned in 1886 to take over the business from his father, his reputation as a designer had been well established. Tea magnate Thomas Lipton settled on Fife to design *Shamrock* for his challenge for the America’s Cup in 1899 and *Shamrock III* for his challenge in 1903.

In the course of his lifetime, Fife designed over 600 yachts: including two for the America’s Cup, 4 for the 23M class, 2 for the 19M class, 8 for 15M class, 17 for 12M class, over 40 for the 8M class and over 50 for the 6M class. He also designed many extraordinary cruising yachts.

Thanks to the exceptional quality of the builds, over 100 Fifes still exist and more than 50 are still sailing, including *Altair*, one of Fife’s last great designs, built when he was in his seventies.

— Mary South

in late 2013, when Wooden Boatworks meticulously lofted and fine-tuned the lines to 1/16 inch, which were used to AutoCAD full-size construction drawings for cutting materials on the shop floor.

Wooden Boatworks collects the finest materials available for such projects. Yet the building stock for a precise historical reconstruction is not fully available today. Costanzo and Wahl reached out to some of the best sources in America for the new *Invader II*’s construction timber. New England Naval Timbers in Cornwall, Connecticut, located an extraordinary 46-foot white oak at the Thomas Cole Museum in Catskill, New York. The 30-inch-diameter tree was milled for the 25-by-2-foot keel stock. The original *Invader II* had 88 pairs of grown timber frames, meaning the frames were shaped naturally with the grain conforming to and running along the length of the curved frames. A modern boatbuilder could save materials for a lifetime and still not have enough grown frames to build a 48-footer. Wooden Boatworks’ construction team substituted the best modern equivalent — laminated cherry — for the grown timber primary frames. Then, as in the Fife method, they steam-bent two white oak frames between the cherry laminated frames.

Another divergence from the original design is the floor plates that support the keel bolts. Fife used galvanized floor plates — the standard of the era but not a long-lived material. With what’s been learned about galvanic action and corrosion in the eight decades since Fife’s time, Wooden Boatworks chose fabricated silicon bronze plating. The lead keel was molded by Mars Metals of Burlington, Ontario, and trucked to Long Island. The new *Invader II* is being planked and decked with Alaskan yellow cedar. The rig and sail plan, designed by Theo Rye, will be close to yacht designer George Cuthbertson’s improved modifications in the mid-1950s. Her interior will be from Fife’s original plan.

After *Invader II* is completed this summer, Lawrence is committed to building a second boat next year, using the same patterns and jigs. This will pair two sisters against each other in the true match-racing tradition. They will be raced in Oyster Bay, New York.

Building a 1930s-era sailboat requires intense dedication to yachting history and depth of research, so in the end, this is much more than a new boat. Lawrence and Wooden Boatworks share the common belief that restoring and re-creating historic yachts perpetuates old-world

skills and dedication to fine craftsmanship, keeping alive an important art form. Lead shipwright Ben Bentley supervises a four member team: Scott Braseth, Beattie Hays, Steve Lubitz and Mike Javidi. As graduates of the International Yacht Restoration School in Newport, Rhode Island, they are prepared for the exactitude required of such a special project. All are younger men who are intimately learning about and carrying forward the genius of William Fife III. They bring to the project a unique hands-on approach that melds art, history, engineering and craftsmanship. Lawrence, Costanzo and Wahl are certain this team will produce a stunning replica and that they will come away from the project transformed. As Costanzo puts it: “The boat builds the man; the man doesn’t build the boat.” ■

Pat Mundus is a retired merchant ship deck officer who lives in Greenport, New York. She contributes to boating magazines while winter-cruising her F. Spaulding Dunbar ketch, Surprise, in the Bahamas and Central America. During the summer season she arranges crewed classic-boat charters through East End Charters (eastendcharters.com).