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Working hard and waiting for winter to wane in the bustling boatyard

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Posted: Sunday, February 15, 2015 6:15 am

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OXFORD — It's cold. It's miserable.

It's winter, but there is still plenty to be done at Cutts & Case Shipyard in Oxford.

Plenty of it indoors.

"There's always something to do here," said Mike Moore, office manager. The yard is filled with shrink-wrapped boats waiting for springtime. One boat, brought out of the water an hour earlier, sits patiently on its carrier, waiting for the rain to quit and the yard to dry enough to move it away from the boat lift.

And some boats are inside the workshops, in the middle of repair jobs, such as *Country Girl*, a boat that was built by Ralph Wiley, who sold his boatyard 50 years ago to Edmund Cutts Sr. and John Case — the Cutts and the Case in the name of the business.

Country Girl, a 1935 Tancook Whaler, is in the shop for a new bottom, said Ronnie Cutts, one of Ed Sr.'s sons and vice president of the boatyard. That new bottom will be built to last using the Cutts method, devised and patented by Ed Sr.

Instead of a wooden hull, the Cutts method creates a composite hull, which is both stronger and lighter than a conventional wooden hull, Ronnie said. Lighter, because it doesn't rely on heavy wooden frames for its strength. The wood of the hull is scored by shallow grooves cut vertically. Kevlar cords are pressed into the grooves, and the hull is then slathered with an epoxy compound.

Another layer of wood completes the task, covering and closing the inner layer.

The method creates an essentially one-piece molded hull, strong, rigid and without the inherent flexibility of a wooden hull. The



PHOTO BY DAVID EVERMAN

cutts_rainandshine2

Although the boat has been lifted from the water, it still has to wait for a daylong rain to stop and the boatyard to dry before being taken into one of the workshops to repair a leaky keel.



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epoxy-Kevlar compound keeps the wood from swelling, shrinking or flexing, which prevents the hull from springing leaks.

A Cutts method-built hull doesn't need caulking — material driven between the planks to keep it watertight — because the seams are filled with epoxy.

"We take a saw and we cut all the stuff out of those seams, like cotton and caulking," Ronnie said. "We like to get rid of all that." Any screws or nails are removed from the planking, and the holes filled with the epoxy, which prevents any electrolytic reaction between water and any iron in the hull.

"I thought it was a neat little boat to save," Ronnie said, saying that *Country Girl* may be the oldest boat in Oxford — with more years ahead.

"She'll last 100 years easy," he said.

One drawback in Cutts method boat building can be appearance. There is no natural wood to put a shine to — these boats have to be painted.

"People like shine," Ronnie said. "Varnish has a lot of shine. They'll see a varnished boat and go crazy."

Even Ronnie likes a bit of varnish.

"I prefer a painted boat," he said. "With varnished cabins."

The Wiley-built boat was a treat for the yard to bring in, but everyone pays attention when a boat built by Ed Sr. comes back for repairs.

"We're always looking for our dad's boats and we like to restore them," Ronnie said. "They're like lost children to us."

Boats, however, don't have to be under repair to be treasured at the yard. Some boats are kept in boat sheds long-term, while smaller craft — canoes, an ice boat, old racing shells — are tucked safely into the rafters.

Some vessels have been in progress for years, including a 65-foot project being built in slow times as a "spec boat," designed like 20th-century commuter boats but built by the Cutts method, with clean lines and room to spare inside, waiting for a buyer to come along and take it home.

"We wanted to demonstrate a big boat being built with the cords," Ronnie said. "We have more than half of it made. All we really have to do is put a good interior on it."

Cabins for the boat are already built, hanging in storage above it.

"It'll be good to find a client for that boat," Ronnie said.

Repair work has been the yard's mainstay the past few years, in addition to restoration and refitting, but it's been enough to keep the yard's seven employees working yearround.

A stumbling economy, however, has taken a big chunk out of the custom boat-building business. The yard hasn't built a new hull for about six years, said Eddie Cutts Jr., although the skill that made Cutts & Case a waterfront mainstay is still ready.

Boatbuilding is, after all, the family business, and it has a special attraction.

"It's the only profession that God taught when he told Noah to take a cane and walk," Ronnie said. "That was the first lofting, when Noah drew the ark in the sand."

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