



DOCKSIDE

# Lonnie Sæck

By Bill Baldwin

**Bill:** Lonnie: what is your background and how did you get involved the wooden boat hobby?

**Lonnie:** Bill, I grew up and spent my first 20 years on a small lake in the Adirondack Mountains. Boating restoration for me started when an old flat-bottom skiff drifted up in front of the camp with a very rotten back half. I was less than 10 years of age for sure. My Grandfather helped me saw off the back five or six feet, then nail on an old board for a new transom using plenty of black roofing cement. Along with a unmatched set of oars, and a tin can for bailing, he gave me a shove off the shore, and I have been on the water ever since. We had about the first fiberglass outboard boat on the lake, but our neighbor's 1940 Chris-Craft 17-foot Deluxe Runabout was the envy of my eye for as long as I can remember. This very special boat in my life is now in my possession. I own bigger and—maybe to some—more prestigious boats, but this small barrelback will always be the one that started it all for me. I still find the beautiful lines of this boat to be as captivating as ever. Like many before me, and I hope many to follow, I have discovered that there is nothing else quite like a mahogany runabout. Working with wood is a family tradition, a lifelong passion, and a relaxation technique for me.

**Bill:** Why did you choose the late Thirties early Forties?

**Lonnie:** Actually I didn't. My love has always been the triples from the late Twenties and early Thirties. The double upswept from Chris-Craft; the long, narrow, ever-so-graceful Hackers; Gar Woods; and oh so many other builders are to me the epitome of the runabout era. I have been a "groupie" and customer of Spencer Boatworks in Saranac Lake, New York,

since they first started in business. They had a 26-foot double-upswept in storage for many years. Their crew had completed a full restoration of this fine craft. Fortunately for me the owners did not have enough room in their boathouse for all their boats (if my memory is correct), and thus it stayed at the shop for a number of years. I wanted my wife Carol and daughter Ellison to see this elegant boat. When I did get them over to take a look, there was a fully restored 23-foot barrelback parked next to the upswept. I am not sure either Carol or Ellison ever saw the 26-footer, but did they take in the lines and curves of the barrelback triple. I knew then I was in trouble, and spent a number of years locating an unrestored 23-foot barrel. Since then, I have grown to love this wonderful-to-look-at and fine-riding boat. With my favorite Chris engine, the "MCL," *Symmetry* is a joy to drive and performs very well whether carrying myself or a boatload of friends. Her beauty-of-line is self evident, but her performance—without any bad habits—is a wonderful added benefit. I currently own three 1940 Chris-Crafts, with only the 23 barrel restored, as yet. I can assure you another early triple will show up at some time in the future.

**Bill:** How did you find *Symmetry*?

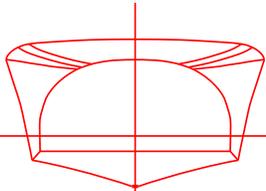
**Lonnie:** As I just stated, after Carol and Ellison saw the barrelback at Spencer Boatworks, there was no doubt what boat needed to become a part of our "fleet." At the time, we were using my first Chris restoration, a 1929 Cadet as our primary family hauler. In hopes of reducing the trailering of a boat each year from our home in NC to the summer vacation on Saranac Lake, I was storing a 1947 Gar Wood 18.5-foot utility there. With the

cost of the barrel triple, I knew that both these boats would have to go. Lou Rauh was the listing agent for the new boat, and I elected to have both the current boats shipped to his Cincinnati showroom.

*Symmetry* had been purchased by a group in Sweden. They knew what the boat was worth and did not consider bargaining. I gave up after the first few months of unsuccessful negotiating. It did not seem this purchase was meant to be. A year and a half or so later, the Gar Wood having sold, I again started browsing ads for a possible new addition. To my surprise, the 23 barrel in Sweden was still listed. Again I started the negotiation process, and this time struck a deal. The Swedes shipped the boat to Portsmouth, Virginia, a one-hour ride from our home.

It was about a four- or five-month process to get a survey, arrange shipping, clear customs, and complete the rest of the details. I know that I learned a lot in the process, and—for the proper, must-have, hard-to-find boat—I might do it again. But there are pitfalls to purchasing from overseas, especially when traveling to do a pre-purchase inspection is not feasible.

I was fortunate in that the boat itself was accurately described and did turn out to be a very original, unmolested treasure. However, the sellers were not totally honest and honorable in that they substituted a very undersized and rusted utility trailer (with a makeshift two-by-four cradle and rotten tires) for the nice boat trailer they pictured. That one-hour trip from the container port to home ended up as a very frustrating six-and-a-half hour ordeal, even with all my spare parts and previous experience. Would I do it again? Absolutely. There are boats that I haven't yet owned!



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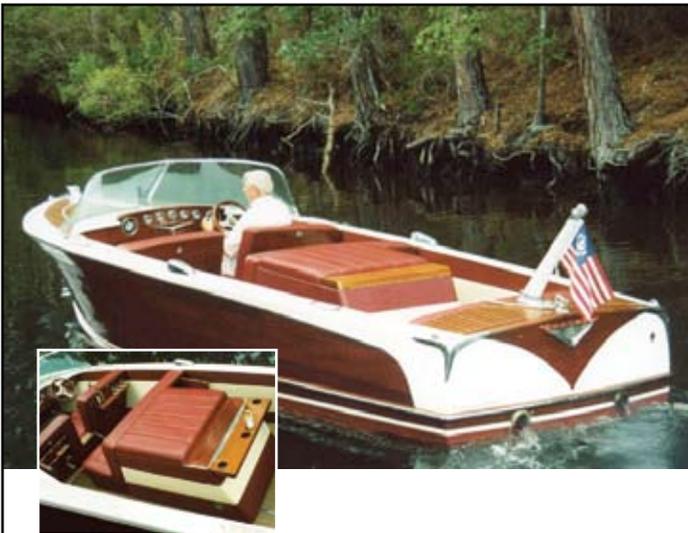


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*Bill:* What was the boat's condition out of the box?

*Lonnie:* I had already purchased a hull card from the Mariners' Museum and verified that the boat was indeed an original Chris 23-foot barrelback from 1940. The big "W" engine and almost all the hardware were also original. There were a few very obvious repairs done on the bottom frames to keep her floating, but more than 95-percent of the wood was original. I did have many close-up photos to judge this before the purchase.

The varnish was in bad shape. The hardware looked to be in very poor condition because of some salt water usage overseas. Elbow grease and metal polish did wonders for the latter. There are still some pieces that I have not had re-chromed and still do not need it. With a bilge pump or two, some more over caulking, and taking it somewhat easy, the boat could probably have been used as is. In fact, I did this for about three years with my Cadet on an original bottom and a modern, double-the-original-horsepower engine.

Say what you want about Chris-Crafts being less-than-perfect factory assembly-line boats, but the engineering is absolutely grand. That being said, the worry and safety issues are not to be taken lightly. Any boat that comes into my shop gets all-new-wood-below-the-waterline. My

piece of mind, and the safety of family and friends warrant nothing less. I assume any original boat of that age is going to have rot and degradation, and any variance from that is an unexpected blessing.

There was considerable rot at the low point of the keel and the lower transom—in other words: normal stuff. The issues in the keel area and the mid-bottom, in general, were perhaps exaggerated in this boat due to the weight of the "W" engine. That beast is huge for a moderate-sized runabout, and in my mind not the best idea. As mentioned earlier, I love the "MCL," and didn't think twice about putting one in this boat. I will keep the "W" with the boat, but don't plan on reinstalling it.

The interior of the boat had some second-rate, old-and-worn, vinyl upholstery. The gauges were faded to the point of not being fully readable, with one obvious replacement. The only problem that was not immediately obvious—until the point at which I stripped and refinished the hull—was the skill of the previous restorers. Whomever they were, they saw themselves as Grand Masters of rotary sanders. The overly dark stain they used covered up some very poor work; after my refinish there are still some cross scratches in areas if you wish to get picky and look for them. But I wanted to keep the original wood

for as long as possible. The wood is already somewhat on the thin side for strength, and I had no choice but not to sand any further. A concours judge could find reason to pick on her, but she is still original and gorgeous—and I am into using the boat, not showing.

*Bill:* How did you develop the skills to do such a professional job of restoring this grand, old boat?

*Lonnie:* First and foremost I have been messing with boats all my life, and I have always been a hands-on kind of guy. My knowledge base for doing hands-on work derives primarily from a voracious appetite for reading and asking questions of those who are more experienced. I have every issue of *Wooden Boat* and *Classic Boating* magazines, all thoroughly read and ideas researched. There probably is more than one restoration shop that hates to see me show up, as I take up a lot of their time in observing and questioning. My bookshelves are also filled with many volumes on restoration techniques, history, methods, statistics, and all those wonderful pictures we all love.

Most of us in the hobby today owe much to people like Bob Speltz, Don Danenberg, and oh so many other individuals who sacrificed much to keep these rare, wonderful-but-fragile boats alive and documented long before the sport became popular and a little bit profitable. My family members of generations past have been craftsman in wood. I have inherited a wonderful collection of hand tools from a great uncle. I think much practice and patience is a large part of the equation. I hope that my methods and materials prove to enhance these rare classics better than the shelving board, roofing tar, and galvanized siding nails my grandfather and I used on our flat-bottomed skiff—though I had as much fun as a person can have on the water for at least three or four years in that rotten, old row boat. The enjoyment of boating is not all about perfection; it's getting on with it and getting out on the water. Safety however is never overrated. Don't be foolish.

*Bill:* Tell me about your experiences restoring this boat.

*Lonnie:* Bill, this was a very intimidating project for me. Even unrestored, it was a financial investment that required sacrifice and angst. This model is so rare and sought-after that doing a less-than-profes-

sional job just would not do. The boat was only about my sixth or seventh full restoration on a documented mahogany runabout. I did much research and recorded all my steps in the process with many pictures. The few previous alterations and repairs had been poorly done and obvious. Nevertheless, the boat was 95-percent or better original; that made the job so much easier. I use a frame to straighten and align the hull. This boat was close, but the heavy “W” and some rot did take its toll. The boat had not been in the water in years. It was very doubtful that the engine ran at all, and, as I have said before, a totally new bottom was the only option.

Although I had closed the deal in the Fall, it was mid-March before the boat was in the shop. Then it hit me: We go to the Adirondacks for our only vacation the last of June and this year, we had no boat! The task of a complete bottom job and getting the boat running, dependable, and in good-enough cosmetic condition as not to embarrass, in three months, working alone, and part-time after a full-time day job (plus occasionally saying hello to the family) was daunting to say the least. Working until past Midnight many nights, relying on the dedicated help of a few very good friends, and departing about five days late for that vacation made it happen. There were times when I nearly gave up and declared there would no boat for vacation. But—in the end—I made it, although the cosmetic part was just a little touching up on the peeled places. I have to give another plug to Spencer’s in Saranac Lake for spending a full day of their busiest week helping me sort out the “MCL,” bought from an unknown restorer, never before run by me, and never installed in this boat. Both it—and the vacation—worked.

Over the next two years, I completely stripped the boat, refastened the topsides, and—with some tolerance for the “patina” of past usage and misuse—re-stained and varnished everything to as high a standard as I need for everyday use. Most of the hardware has been re-chromed. The gauges were redone by Mark Clawson to his usual perfection. The new leather upholstery was done as a kit by Rod Souza and installed by me. Souza’s knowledge of how the original was done made doing the job long-distance easier than most. Knowledgeable experts like the Chris-

Craft Antique Boat Club’s Director of research, Don Ayers, were so great in taking their time to help out. In fact, having such a perfectionist like Don in my very unorganized shop was a little unnerving. The people in this hobby are such a huge and wonderful part of the sport.

*Bill:* How much engine work was necessary—and how much did you do yourself?

*Lonnie:* The original “W” turned over, but the compression was off in a few cylinders. Eventually, I will rebuild this engine, mount it on a mahogany frame, and keep it with the boat. I just feel it is way too heavy for this relatively small runabout. The frames are of increased thickness from most Chris-Crafts, and the extra weight is most likely the reason. I elected to put in an “MCL” that had been rebuilt by an unknown rebuilder. The neatness of the paint work, gasket installation and such, suggested the rebuilder cared about the engine and his work. The compression for all cylinders was right on and so in it went. I enjoy tinkering with engines and my ever quest for more power and performance just made it impossible not to explore some improvements. I love the sound and low end torque of the old flat-head engines, but when I hit the key I want to go. Conversion to 12-volts, which the “MCLs” have to start with, is a no brainer for me. The addition of electronic ignition is so easy and worthwhile for immediate starts—if not any increase in power. A modern full-flow oil filter is also part of all my engines. I generally have the heads milled for a little higher compression, and I place thermostats on all my engines. Alignment and installation is pretty straightforward on these rather simple beasts. I did have to get some help from my local machine shop to get the shaft coupler to fit a modern shaft and mate to the “MCLs” transmission. I also had a shaft extension machined to mount a modern alternator with the cooling fan intact and not to do a major visible alteration to the housing on the engine. With only one battery on board, having it charged at all times is not an option for me. Hey this is the family hauler. Some day I would like to experiment with a modern fuel-injection system for these rare beasts. That may sound like sacrilege to most but the decrease in emissions into the air and the lake would be a very good

trade off. Also there is much less wear on an engine with very accurate fuel and timing management. Being a little more efficient with expensive fuel would not be a bad thing.

*Bill:* I understand you have a 40s boat waiting to be restored. Tell us your plans for the future.

*Lonnie:* Bill, actually I have two 1940s Chris-Craft waiting to be restored. The first is the 17-foot barrelback that belonged to my neighbor when I was a lad growing up in the Adirondacks. This boat is totally original with the original stain and varnish. The man who owned the boat was very protective and rarely used it. It might have been in the water for seven or eight weeks a year, at most. It rarely left the dock and almost never was used at speed. It has been in storage since the late 60s. He only added to the original finish without stripping, and it is now very crackled and dark—but original. Much of this poor cosmetic appearance is due to being out those summer weeks with only a canvas cover—not in a boat-house. The only alterations that I could find were a replacement exhaust elbow (with proper documentation of the order through Chris-Craft), and the addition of a small electric bilge pump. Oh I almost forgot: the front flag is a Fifties variety for a slanted mast. The original “K” turns over easily; the boat has its original fuel stick, oil can, and Owner’s Manual. I hope to do this restoration within a year.

The other boat that I currently own that needs restoring is a 1940 25-foot Sportsman. As the broker who sold it said when I inquired: “It suffers from an owner amateur restoration that started out with high intentions and went very bad.” From a few hundred feet of distance, it looks quite good, but all the shine on the deck is on plywood—and it goes downhill from there. I hope to get the boat into my shop and started by the end of this year. The sounds here in Eastern North Carolina are large and very choppy. I believe this big Sportsman will make a great family boat.

There are so many boats that I have not owned as yet, and it is my hope that I will have a chance to bring many more back to a quality life in the future. I only work on boats that I own and as a part-time hobby. I do sell most of them eventually. But for sure the 17-foot barrelback will never be for sale. It is the one that started it all. 🚤