

# SO, YOU'D LIKE TO OWN A CLASSIC WOOD BOAT?

ONE FAMILY'S JOURNEY TO A FIRST PURCHASE



By R.K. Booth

## PRELUDE

Life was good in North Carolina during the summer of 1965; I learned to water ski, and one of our neighbors on Kerr Lake purchased a used 1956 Chris-Craft Capri. At seven years of age, I was hooked on both lake life and old, wood boats. I can still hear the rumble of the engine and smell the earthy scent of wood, water, oil, and varnish.

Thirty years later, my wife Cindy and I were to purchase our own cottage on Lake Gaston, on the North Carolina/Virginia border. This would make the fourth generation of my Family to be raised on the water. We started with the usual array of “Tupperware®” watercraft: ski boat, pontoon boat, and multiple Personal Water Craft (a sin: I know and understand). Somewhere along the way, my brother Michael, brought his 16-foot reproduction Gar Wood by the dock. The seed was planted; my interest in wood boats rekindled.

There are a number of classic boats on Lake Gaston. They travel in packs of three and four, early in the morning. My son Harrison and I tailed them, often by Personal Water Craft, just a couple of “wood boat wannabees.” After a while we figured out their habits and routes, ultimately learning where they were docked. The fever was growing.

## INITIAL STUDIES

During the off-season, I started educating myself about antique and classic wood boats. I knew my interest was leading up to a purchase, and, like the Engineer I am, I wanted to learn all I could about them. Although I am sure any number of resources exist out there, I chose a combination of good old-fashioned books and the more modern approach of surfing the Internet.

Initially, Cindy and I purchased books from our local book store. After exhausting this supply, we started making purchases through the Internet. The books' value as a resource varied from pictorials, to reference, and then “how-to” guides. All of them served to peak our interest. Some favorites:

*Wood & Glory*—by: W.M Gray & T.M.

DuVernet; Publisher: Stoddart

*Classic Speed Boats*—by: Gerald G. Guetat; Publisher: MBI

*Classic American Runabouts*—by: Philip B. Ballantyne  
& Robert B. Duncan ; Publisher: MBI

*Chris-Craft Boats*—by: Anthony Mollica, Jr.  
& Jack Savage; Publisher: MBI

*At the Waters Edge*—by: John de Visser & Judy  
Ross; Publisher: The Boston Mills Press

*Gar Wood Boats*—by: Anthony S. Mollica; Publisher: MBI

*Dodge Boats*—by: Anthony S. Mollica, Jr.; Publisher: MBI

*The Wooden Boat*—by: Joseph Gribbins; Publisher: MetroBooks

*Wood Through Water*—by: J.W. Ogilvie-Knowles &  
Justus Hayes; Publisher: Friedman/Fairfax

*The Book of Wooden Boats Volume II*—by: Benjamin  
Mendlowitz & Maynard Bray; Publisher: Norton

*Classic Boats of the Thousand Islands*—by: Anthony Mollica,  
Jr. & George Fischer ; Publisher: The Boston Mills Press

*Cutwater*—by: Robert B. Duncan; Publisher: The Top Ten

*The Boat Builders of Muskoka*—by: A.H. Duke &  
W.M. Gray; Publisher: The Boston Mills Press

*How to Restore Your Wooden Runabout (Volumes 1 & 2)*—  
by: Don Danenberg; Publisher: Motorbooks

*Chris-Craft the Essential Guide*—by: Jerry Conrad;  
Publisher: The Mariners' Museum

While surfing the Internet for books, I came across a number of Websites relating to wood boats. In general they fell into several categories including:

- ★ Marinas
- ★ Wood Boat Restorers
- ★ Direct Sales Companies
- ★ Brokerage Firms
- ★ Related Products and Services

If you have a similar interest, I would suggest looking at these sites, in addition to [www.chris-craft.org](http://www.chris-craft.org):

- ★ [www.acbs.org](http://www.acbs.org)
- ★ [www.antiqueboat.com](http://www.antiqueboat.com)
- ★ [www.classicboat.com](http://www.classicboat.com)
- ★ [www.chriscraftboats.com](http://www.chriscraftboats.com)
- ★ [www.antiqueboatamerica.com](http://www.antiqueboatamerica.com)
- ★ [www.vintageboat.org](http://www.vintageboat.org)

### RALEIGH BOAT SHOW

In early February of this year, Son Harrison and I decided to attend the local Raleigh, North Carolina Boat show. This was a turning point in our boat search for a couple of reasons. First we discovered the local, RDC-Triangle Chapter of the Antique and Classic Boat Society, Inc. (ACBS); secondly we learned the difference between a “real boat” and a reproduction.

On our way out the door, I casually mentioned to Cindy that we were going to buy another Personal Water Craft. This would have been our sixth such purchase. Much to my surprise, my normally easy-going wife shot back, “The next such purchase should be residing on my ring finger!” Ouch! I think I’d had struck a nerve. Clearly feeling guilty about her jab, she offered the following: “If you see a wood boat you can buy it.” At the time, that did not seem like much of an olive branch to me. Especially, since Raleigh’s proximity to the coast made the show pretty much of a “saltwater” affair.

Because Raleigh’s new Convention Center was still under construction, the show was held at an unoccupied warehouse. Imagine our surprise as my son and I stepped through the door to find the first boat on our right looked like a 1941 Chris-Craft barrelback. We both looked at each other and grinned. Fate had smiled upon us; it seemed as if our new wood boat might just follow us home!

The boat we had spied turned out to be a prop for the Raleigh, Durham, Chapel Hill (RDC) Triangle Chapter of the ACBS. They were holding a membership drive and using the boat to attract attention. Their ploy had worked all too well. As we approached the booth, we were quickly engaged by a group of enthusiastic group of gentlemen including: retired deputy Sheriff Mike Miller, Charles Mansfield (Boat Show Chairman) and a shifty character named Bill Baldwin from the Chris-Craft Antique Boat Club. We were quickly given a membership application, a copy of *The Brass Bell*, and an invitation to the ACBS Chapter’s monthly luncheon. This event was important for the following reasons:

- ★ We now had a link to people who actually owned wood boats
- ★ These people could be used as a resource for answers to our many questions.
- ★ They were actively involved in the wood boat avocation.
- ★ They represented a support group meeting on a monthly basis to further my wood boat education and knowledge base.
- ★ They were clearly new friends with a similar interest and mindset to my own

### THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN REAL BOATS & REPRODUCTIONS

Mike, Charles, and Bill seemed quite pleased with themselves. They had hooked another wood boat sucker. Little did they know: all we wanted to do was look at the wood boat that was sitting behind them. Maybe, just maybe—if we acted really interested and I agreed to join their little club—my son and I would get to sit in the barrelback.

It turned out that the boat belonged to the father of Chapter Treasurer Bob Banta.

It was for sale, and it was drop-dead gorgeous. *Memories* was her name, and she had so many positive attributes:

- ★ A very reputable manufacturer: Fish Bothers
- ★ Very low hours
- ★ Flawless finish
- ★ Posh, green-leather interior
- ★ Modern construction
- ★ Mercruiser engine
- ★ Aluminum trailer
- ★ Meticulously maintained
- ★ Fair Price

I was sold; in fact we came back to the show three times that same day. The following week, we scheduled an appointment with Banta. He graciously met with us at his home and gave a very thorough showing of the boat. Being a cautious buyer, we decided to think it over for a few days. Ultimately, we declined to purchase the boat, and here is why. We wanted:

- ★ A “real” old, wood boat
- ★ A boat with “soul,” “character,” and bit of history
- ★ A boat something less than perfect: a user boat
- ★ A boat for puttering around on (I’m a tinkerer at heart)

Finally, something my brother said about his reproduction Gar Wood stuck with me. While he was at a local lake one day, a haughty wood boat aficionado looked down his nose at the boat and sniffed, “You know, all you really have here is a plywood tub.” Michael said it hurt, but he knew in his heart the man was right.

### DEAD-END MARKET PROBES

Our failed “near purchase” left us undaunted. In fact, it served to sharpen our resolve to find a “real” wood boat. One way or the other, we were going to have that boat by early summer. The Engineer in me decided on a multi-prong attack:

- ★ Prepare a letter describing our Family’s interest and desire to make a purchase
- ★ Research the Internet to find as many potential markets as possible
- ★ Narrow our choice of boats down to three Chris-Craft candidates:
  - » 1946 to 1950 Custom
  - » Riviera
  - » Capri
- ★ Circulate the letter and generate interest in our cause.

This effort produced mixed results, and we became even more frustrated than ever. There were many helpful people and firms, but they just could not seem to meet our needs, much less close a deal.

*At the 2007 Raleigh, North Carolina Boat Show: In the background, a Fish Brothers reproduction of a 1941 Chris-Craft 19-foot Custom Runabout, the ACBS RDC-Triangle Chapter booth, and—foreground—a shifty character named Bill Baldwin from the Chris-Craft Antique Boat Club*



### DECISION TO GO WITH A BROKER

Along the way, that shifty local Chris-Craft Antique Boat Club member decided to adopt me as a “friend.” He kindly gave freely of his time and expertise. My adventure was to have many bumps along the way, and my new-found buddy stuck with me. He provided good, solid advice. On a number of occasions, he had suggested I employ a broker. However, because I am more than a little hard-headed, his suggestion took a while to sink in. Besides, dealing with a broker was going to be like handing my wallet over to a “suspicious” used-car salesman for safe keeping, right?

Although a number of firms suggested themselves, we chose the Antique Boat Center, in Cincinnati, Ohio. The Owner, Lou Rauh, took us seriously; he decided to take our quest on as a project. He listened to what we wanted, and it did not take long for his firm to send us solid acquisition candidates. By narrowing down the choices and working with a single broker, we were finally starting to get somewhere.

### THE DEAL STRUCTURE

Lou produced two Capris in quick succession. One sold before we could respond, but the other appeared to be a go. Having no experience purchasing old boats we decided to trust our Broker. Then came a big surprise: The Deal Structure.

Lou proposed the following:

- ★ Lou would handle the negotiation process
- ★ After both we and the seller agreed on a price, he would send us an Offer-to-Purchase contract.
- ★ We would sign the contract and return it along with earnest money in the amount of ten percent, subject to a satisfactory marine inspection.
- ★ A duplicate copy would be forwarded to the Seller, signed and returned by Fax.
- ★ After everybody had signed, and money had changed hands, a wood boat restorer (not a marine inspector) was to be hired. Although Lou put us in touch with the restorer, we hired and paid him directly.

Now we are from the South and talk a little “slow,” but sending money to a stranger in some far-away city to buy a boat sight-unseen seemed a bit risky—at best. However, our Chris-

Craft Antique Boat Club friend and advisor said we could trust Lou, and so we did. (No regrets!)

Ultimately, this second Capri failed inspection. Bummer! On a bright note, however, we learned more about wood boats through the inspection process. We also met a very pleasant and knowledgeable restorer: Jim Grant of Hartwell, Georgia.

### OUR INTEREST IN THE CUSTOM

The third boat we seriously considered from Lou was the “charm.” She had every thing we wanted for our first wood boat:

As a 1946 Chris-Craft Custom, the boat was rare enough to be interesting with many desirable features later dropped by Chris-Craft because of cost considerations

- ★ She was “classy,” yet a user boat
- ★ She had a West System bottom
- ★ She had modern 350-cid block; the top of the engine and flywheel were from the 1950s; and so was a Carter WCFB Carburetor; all elegantly installed with a single exhaust
- ★ She had gorgeous red-leather upholstery
- ★ She had a low hull number: 20 of 369

It did not take long until we had a signed sales contract.

### THE NEARLY BOTCHED APPRAISAL

The Custom was located in Roseville, California. Lou put us in touch with a local restorer, Todd Jeffery of Grass Valley, California. Todd is extremely knowledgeable and a self-described perfectionist. (So am I.) Todd has an excellent reputation and is known as one of the upcoming “superstars” in wood boat restoration circles.

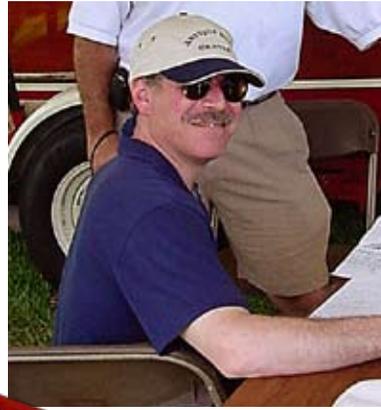
I talked with Todd by phone; immediately I liked and could relate to him. Everything seemed perfect—until we got back the initial inspection report. Negative! Another setback in what now seemed to be a never-ending quest. In essence: Todd did not think much of the boat; in fact, he terminated the inspection process prior to conducting the requested water test. We were sick.

Over the weekend I discussed his findings with my Chris-Craft Antique Boat Club mentor. In turn, he contacted a friend,



*Home at last! Old Soul resides in her new, East-coast boat house*

At a recent seminar, Lou Rauh adjusts a projector prior to one of his signature presentations about “How to Buy an Old Boat”



Andy Hoffman (in sunglasses), Lou Rauh’s business partner and Vice-President, is seen here at a recent Mount Dora show, signing up another customer



Master Restorer and regular *Brass Bell* contributor Jim Blake, whose recent work included last year’s Tahoe winner. The next thing I knew, I was being encouraged to call this world-renowned restorer to discuss my user boat. A bit awestruck and intimidated, I did give Jim a call. He could not have been any nicer and spent more than thirty minutes with me: a true gentleman and a scholar!

Here is what we learned from Jim Blake:

- ★ There are varying degrees of perfection
- ★ Each individual must decide what is correct for his or her situation
- ★ If you want a user boat, then you should buy one
- ★ If you want a Tahoe winner, then go see a professional restorer.
- ★ Be leery of “gloss & toss” boats
- ★ Use a qualified inspector (a restorer) to evaluate any wood boat purchase.

Armed with renewed confidence, we requested that Todd Jeffery complete the inspection and water test. This time, we asked Todd to view the boat from a “user & structural” view point. He did an excellent job, and completed the report. After careful consideration we decided to purchase our first classic wood boat, this 1946 Chris-Craft Custom, which we would ultimately name *Old Soul*.

### THE FINAL TEN DAYS

Just a big kid at heart, I never was very good at waiting for Christmas. The final ten days waiting for delivery would prove to be even harder. Our family always spends the week of July 4th at the Lake House. Just to myself, I was hoping that the boat would be delivered in time for the Holiday. With just a bit of luck and timing, maybe “Murphy” would not step in this time.

We sent a check overnight for the balance of the purchase price (less the deposit) to the Antique Boat Center. They in turn sent a check to the seller (less the brokerage fees). After waiting a few days for the check to clear, the Seller was satisfied and the deal closed. During this same period of time, Lou Rauh began making arrangements to transport the boat from

Roseville, California to Lake Gaston North Carolina. This is a trip of over 2,900 miles.

### LOU DISAPPEARS FOR THE SUMMER

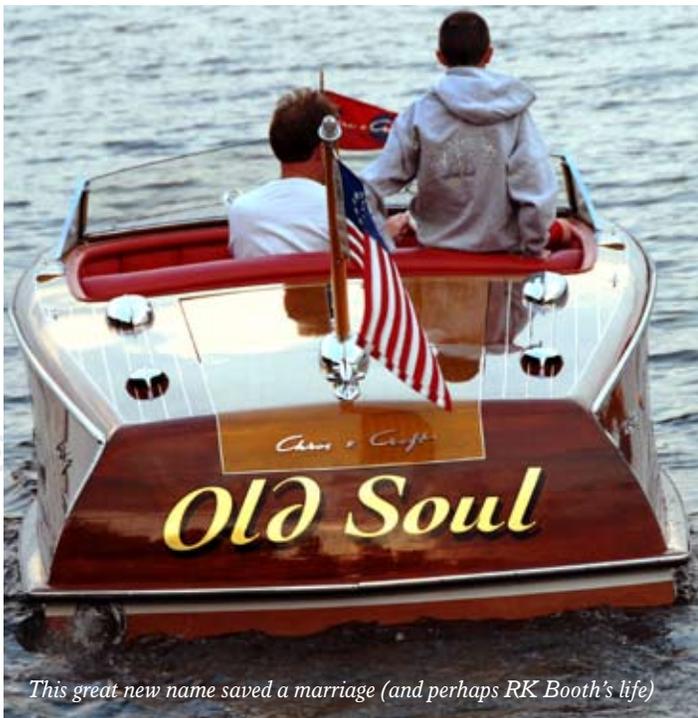
Oh yeah: the part about “Murphy” stepping in—that did not take long to happen. Lou Rauh can and will make things happen. In fact I had grown accustomed to his “can do” attitude. My confidence in a successful delivery by the 4th was ‘way up when... we got a call from Lou’s cohort, Andy Hoffman. Lou would be gone to his Lake Home for the next two (2) months! Arrgh! Who the heck was this Andy Hoffman, and what kind of a business man was Lou to leaving me dangling one week from delivery of our first wood boat? I thought I was going to pop a cork.

My initial reaction could not have been any further from reality. Once my blood pressure had dropped to a normal range, Andy explained that he was Lou’s business partner (and vice-president) and he would be handling delivery. Lou had left his personal cell phone number, and Andy encouraged me to give Lou a call. You can bet I did—and believe it or not, Lou picked up on the second ring. Now Lou is the kind of guy who can charm the collar off of a junk-yard watch dog. It did not take long before he had me purring like a kitten again. He had complete confidence in Andy, and guaranteed the deal would come off without a hitch. Being the pessimist that I am, a little voice in a back recess of my mind kept whispering: We’ll see...

### OH, THAT NAME HAS TO GO

For a moment, let’s return briefly, to basics. As you begin your search for an antique or classic wood boat, a good place to start is the Internet. There are literally hundreds of brokerage sites offering boats for sale. A common way for a broker to interest you in a particular boat is through photographs. After pouring over thousands of pictures, you may notice that they rarely offer a view of the boat’s transom. I believe there is a reason for this: a stern view often shows the name of the boat. Any number of times, I fell in love with a boat, only to find that we could not live with the name plastered across her transom.

Such was the case with *Old Soul*. Her former name—deleted here to protect the innocent—was absolute



*This great new name saved a marriage (and perhaps RK Booth's life)*



*Son Harrison and Daughter Caley took to Old Soul like fishes take to water*

anathema to Cindy. My 18-year-old blonde daughter, Caley, thought it was a “hoot.” My 14-year-old son thought it was a “rockin’.” But for Cindy, it was a total deal breaker. Period. End of report. (My opinion—whatever it might have been—was immaterial.) In the interest of marital bliss, I made changing the boat’s name a condition of the purchase.

#### ANDY TO THE RESCUE

Being a former business owner myself, I was wondering how Lou Rauh could “disappear” for months at a time. Truly, I admired his resolve, understood his devotion to lake life, and was seriously jealous. But Lou has a real ace in the hole: Andy Hoffman is a fine business man. During the final seven days of our dealing, I understood why Lou would trust him in his absence. Andy did an excellent job, pulling many loose ends together. He:

- ★ Closed the deal
  - ★ Arranged for delivery from California to the Antique Boat Center in Cincinnati, Ohio.
  - ★ Had the name and registration number changed
  - ★ Recognized that the boat’s carburetor was set up for high-altitude operation (at Tahoe) and had it adjusted for North Carolina’s lower altitude
  - ★ Had the shaft and rudder packing replaced
  - ★ Resolved a trailer title issue
  - ★ Arranged for delivery from Cincinnati to Lake Gaston
- In the end, Lou and Andy made us very happy customers.

#### ROSEVILLE, CA TO LAKE GASTON, NC

We were thinking that they would either ship the boat by truck or rail. That turned out to be wrong. Here is what actually happened:

- ★ Photographs and a description of the “load” were placed on a trucker’s bulletin board; bids were taken.

- ★ The rest of the process was much like making a purchase on e-bay.
- ★ Because bidders had previously been scored on previous performances, “purchasers” had an idea of their ability. Such a precious load certainly deserved not the lowest price but a blend of cost and performance.

From Cincinnati, we used one of Antique Boat Center’s regulars: a wonderful couple named Johnny & Sharon Miller.

The boat was driven the entire distance on its own custom tandem trailer, supposedly the best way to move a classic boat. The most amazing thing of all is that it did not rain and no one suffered a flat along the entire route.

#### THE REWARD

This morning at dawn, Lake Gaston was like a sheet of antique glass. Mother Nature’s prism painted the water ever so gently: first black, then purple, finally a brilliant orange. With the familiar, old-fashioned smells wood, water, oil, and varnish in my nostrils, I fired up *Old Soul*; her throaty bellow broke the morning’s silence and flushed a nearby crane that had been concentrating on morning breakfast. Carefully, I backed the boat out of her slip, pushed the gearshift level forward and locked it in place. We eased past the neighbors’ docks barely stirring up a wake. As I cracked the throttle open ever so slightly, the vintage carburetor sputtered a bit—the engine a little cold from the night’s chill—then rumbled to life as we headed down the Lake.

Another early morning ride, trials of the week slowly melting away...A fitting reward after a long journey.

How soon they grow up! No keeping Harrison from the controls. Chalk up a future Chris-Craft Antique Boat Club and ACBS member. 🚤