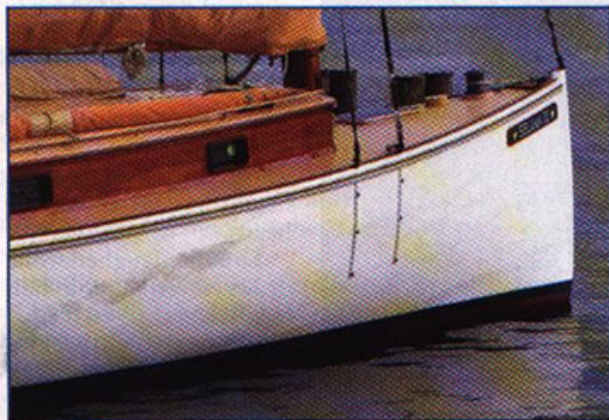


One Family's Treasure

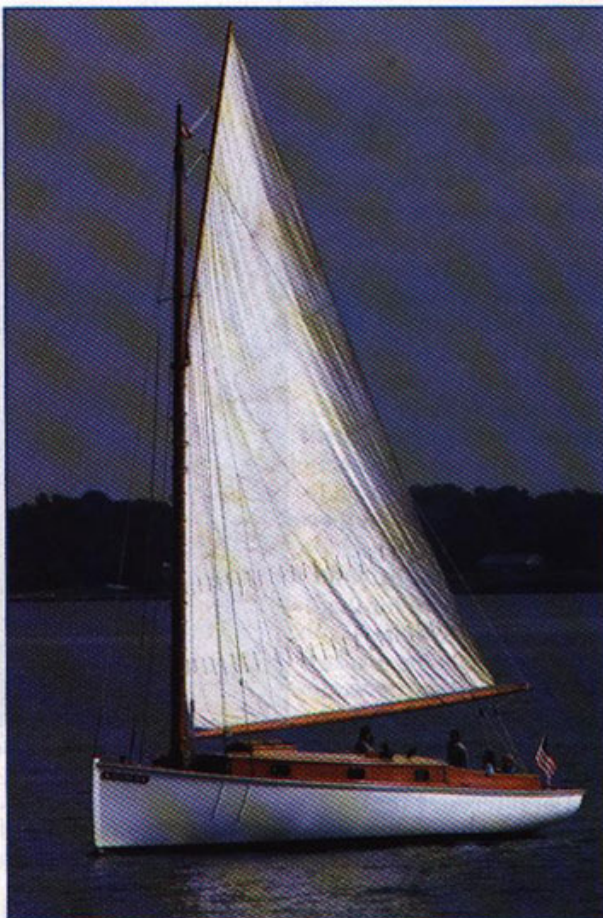


The allure of SELINA II

by Bill Mayher
Photographs by Rick Maloof

Beginning 39 years ago, at the summer colony on Shelter Island, New York, I worked for three seasons aboard one family's treasure, a 42' Cape Cod catboat named SELINA II and built for the Hurd family in 1926. At 42' x 16' x 4'6", she may be more noteworthy for her size than for her pedigree. Sweet's Shipyard of Greenport, Long Island, built her to Grandfather Hurd's specifications, and two years ago, at age 75, she entered her third generation of ownership by the same family. This set me to wondering: Why do such family boats, held for generations, often live in their own state of grace?

Like old dogs and old front-porch wicker, the tenure of old boats still counts for something in summer communities built on foundations of shared history. Often, their arrival predates that of any living family member. In SELINA II's case, Grandfather Hurd had wanted a boat to take him saltwater fishing. The summer before he had had some scary moments in the first SELINA, a narrow open launch of 20-something feet. The ebb tide was running hard against the southerly. While jigging for bluefish, SELINA's professional captain got her side-to against the steep seas, and she nearly broached. Not only had Mr. Hurd had a bad time of it, but Mrs. Hurd had, too. So,



Built in 1926 by Sweet's shipyard of Greenport, Long Island, SELINA II has been owned by three generations of her original family.

in short order he had gone over to Sweet's to talk about something bigger—something wider. By then catboats were a proven entity as yachts: beamy, stable, dry, and, with their commodious cockpits, comfortable. With plenty of room for auxiliary power, you didn't have to sail them if you didn't want to, which, it turns out, the Hurd family didn't particularly want to do. In 1926 Sweet's was known for commercial vessels—fish draggers and the like—but they were willing to take on a big catboat because there were plenty of models to go by in the area. Furthermore, Mr. Hurd was happy enough to forgo the construction complications of a centerboard, an item that Sweet's had no experience building. For an owner who didn't intend to sail the boat, 16' of beam assured plenty of stability. For more than three decades, Mr. Hurd was happy with his boat and so was Mrs. Hurd.

After Hurd's death in the early 1960s, SELINA II passed to his youngest daughter, Esther, and her husband, Bridg Hunt. When they decided to take on the boat, it never actually seemed like a decision. SELINA II had been in the family since Esther was four years old. To her, the boat was family. If there had ever been talk of sending SELINA II on her way, I never heard of it. Esther and Bridg weren't

big spenders, eager to pour money into the boat. Generous? Yes. Hospitable? Absolutely. Good to work for? The best. But beneath these fine qualities lay a pair of "string-too-short-to-save" Yankees, frugal loyalists who weren't about to get rid of a perfectly good boat that had come to them free and clear—even if keeping it might eventually cost them a fortune.

Perhaps a more important factor making SELINA II's departure from the family a non-negotiable proposition was the web of relationships on Shelter Island that had been built up around her care. Foremost among these was Tuthill's Boatyard on Menantic Creek, where Alfred Tuthill (and his father Everett before him) had maintained SELINA II for decades. The Tuthills represented old-school Shelter Island. Besides boatyard work they had farmed the hundred or so acres of ancestral land adjacent to the yard, hauled shore seines on the island's beaches, and for two generations were important leaders in local politics, struggling to keep the island's head above water against a flood tide of summer people overrunning about every square foot of buildable land.

Besides Alfred, who was at the yard full time, and an independent mechanic named Freddie Farrow who came by to service SELINA's engine, there was Bucky Clark. Bucky had phenomenal power to notice details and figure out original solutions, qualities that made him a valuable jack-of-all-trades around a small boatyard.

I first came upon the Tuthill yard in the summer of 1963. Along with a couple of college pals I was considering purchasing a 28' Gil Smith racing catboat (see page 68) built in the late 1890s. Even at the modest asking price of \$250, we never would have bought the thing, beautiful as she was, if it weren't for the optimism and love of boats radiating from Alfred Tuthill. Forty years later I can still picture his shy grin and hear his east-end-of-Long Island drawl (equal measures of Brooklyn and New England) reassuring us that, with a little elbow grease (easy enough for young fellas like us), she'd be right again. All summer long we worked like dogs, as much to earn his approval as to get the boat up and sailing. In the end, commissioning this boat was too much for neophyte college students also painting houses to pay tuition bills. We were disappointed by this outcome and hated to give her up, but the fact is we had achieved something more important: We had become citizens of a precious and all too quickly disappearing world.

I, for one, had never heard such talk among men before. It took in the whole of the island, weaving through boats, fish, ducks, deer, and those obsessed with them. On most days we'd take lunch on a bench out front of the shop, us college boys perched at the periphery, soaking in all we could about living alongshore in a place that still had the feel of countryside.

As far as work was concerned, Tuthill's ramshackle and respectfully old-fashioned layout meant that anyone on the job there spent at least part of each day pawing through drawers and boxes in search of the right tool or



SELINA II's spacious cockpit—13' x 13'—is matched by a similarly spacious interior.

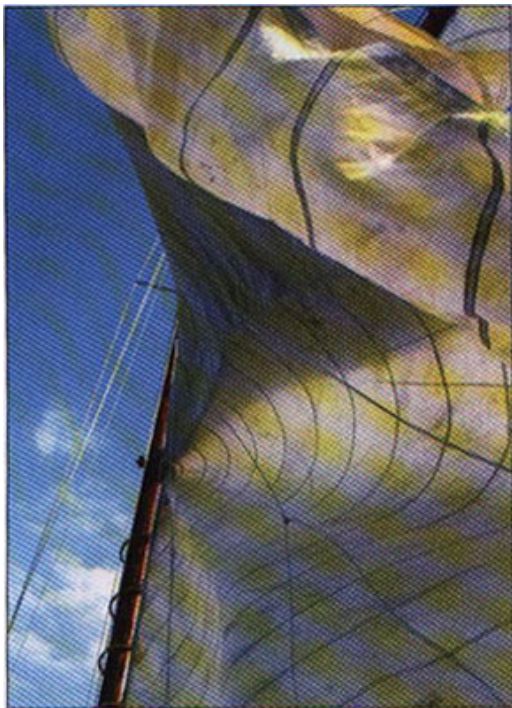
the right screw. While this kind of activity might appear hopelessly wasteful in an era of computer-controlled inventories, the fact is that you not only found what you were looking for originally, but came across a couple of other things that might come in handy down the line.

It was in this milieu that SELINA II had been kept. Work at the yard was conscientiously done, and problems were noted and dealt with before they evolved into financial sinkholes; bills were meticulously drawn up and moderate and, above all, the hours of conversation with Everett, Alfred, and Bucky were essential to understanding a life spent in company with an ancient boat. For Bridg Hunt, after a week of battle in Manhattan in the service of his management consulting firm, nothing could be a better tonic than a long talk about whether to strip the varnish on the toerails this season or next.

Not surprisingly for a two-shed, one-shop, two-man boatyard (three, really, if you counted Roscoe the bottom-paint guy), come June, Tuthill's was generally behind on SELINA's fitting out. It was on one of these particularly far-behind early June mornings that Alfred suggested to Bridg and Esther that they take on a college kid like me to continue the work after they had brought the boat to her summer mooring in Deering Harbor. This kid could do a little painting, a little light carpentry, and he could keep an eye on things.

At the time I didn't know much about the more complex aspects of wooden boat maintenance, but I'd been in the Alfred-Bucky training program for a couple of summers. I could sand and paint to beat hell, and I loved the idea of living on a boat bigger than a rumpus room and getting paid for it. Furthermore, the fact that Alfred had conceived of the plan to begin with meant that it had to work. And it did.

Working on SELINA II turned out to be as good as I could have hoped it would be. The family used the boat regularly, sailing her every chance they got. In those years she still had her original canvas mainsail of just under 1,000 sq ft. Hoisting a gaff sail of that overall heft was a



"Hoisting a gaff sail of that overall heft was a major event. So was trimming it closehauled in a breeze." Iris (right) and friends get underway.

major event. So was trimming it closehauled in a breeze.

Although no witch to windward, SELINA II would slide along when sailing off the wind. Our favorite day sail was a trip around Shelter Island. At lunchtime we would set up a couple of card tables in the 13' x 13' cockpit and put out a ham and a turkey with all the fixings for sandwiches. Counting family and guests, the crew for the day often numbered a dozen and a half. People sat in canvas director's chairs, lounged on deck, and when we were headed down wind, often trailed through the water on lines strung from the boom.


SELINA forged a close relationship between the Hunt family and the boatyard community of Shelter Island. Bridg and Esther loved the scene at Tuthill's, and in return were respected owners of a vessel regarded by many islanders as a community undertaking. When Bucky Clark's son Keith came to work with me on various projects aboard, he became good friends with young Bridgford. Ultimately Bridgford decided to build himself a ferro-cement, junk-rigged cruising boat (down at Tuthill's, of course) and move to the island full time.

Alfred Tuthill died in the early 1970s, and SELINA II's maintenance fell to a boatyard in Greenport. But the crew there didn't have much experience or interest in the care of vintage wooden boats and didn't do much more than keep her painted and varnished. In the meantime Iris, the youngest of the Hunt's three children, became an enthusiastic sailor accompanying her parents on a number of sailing adventures. After SELINA II celebrated her 75th birthday in 2001, Esther and Bridg decided to turn ownership over to Iris. She lived on Chesapeake Bay and had the idea to run her as a charter boat there.

Iris and her father brought SELINA II to the Chesapeake's Eastern Shore, where Mike Vlahovich's survey soon revealed she would need a major refit. As shipwright Tom Howell tore into her, he found she needed a

new stem, 13 planks on the starboard side and 8 on the port, a new keelson, and a new sternpost. Her planking was also rotten where it landed on the transom. Instead of scarfing in short pieces, the decision was made to shorten the boat by a foot and build a new transom. The sheerstrake was also replaced, the boat was redecked, her age-sunken housetop was pushed back up to its original position, she got a new maststep, and her forepeak was rebuilt. Although one is never quite out of the woods on a vessel of these dimensions and this age—this winter she's scheduled for four or five new sets of frames—as Iris puts it, SELINA II is a "happy camper."

Personalizing the old girl's state of mind is no new thing for the Hunts. Bridg has for years referred to his conversations with SELINA, and Iris has continued the tradition. Although literal conversation with a boat may seem far-fetched, both father and daughter are convinced she communicates with them, especially when she needs something. And it isn't just her owners that SELINA talks to. "She's a terrible flirt," Iris says. "I hear guys talking to her all the time at the dock... 'You're so beautiful,' they'll be saying, and going on and on."

Childhood memories of the sandy shallows and mysterious hedgerows of a summer colony can stay with a person for a lifetime. Amid the gentle flows of July and Augusts, little changes in these ancient enclaves—not the yeasty whiff of mildew mixed with mothballs in the upper bed chambers, nor the rippling linoleum on the kitchen floor. And not (one hopes) the sight of the family boat swinging to her mooring off the dock. Although Iris transferred this venerable piece of Shelter Island history to the Chesapeake, SELINA II's essential spirit is alive and well there—and ready for another summer. 

Bill Mayher is a frequent contributor to WoodenBoat. He wrote about shipwright Doug Shumpert in WB No. 173, and the Buzzards Bay 25 class in No. 172.