

Handmade Strip Boats Growing In Popularity

BY TERRY POPE

They start with strips of cypress and marine plywood and in less than eight hours they have a boat. Not just any boat, but a strip boat made completely by hand and custom-designed for speed, fishing or hunting.

"You can use a strip boat for so many purposes—riding, fishing or waterskiing," said Mike McPherson, one of two strip boat builders located in Grissetown. "They are the fastest selling boat I know of. They are really catching on in popularity."

What attracts boat buyers to strip boats may be their natural grain finishes sealed in a clear fiberglass coating. For duck hunters, the natural wood finish is camouflaged from the prey, giving the hunter an edge in the sport.

For others, the lightweight body may allow some designs to glide across the waterway or rivers at speeds up to 75 mph. Since the boats are sealed in fiberglass, they may be used in both fresh or salt water and are occasionally seen along the waterways in southern Brunswick County.

Strip boats are given the name strip boat because of the strips of wood that are used to build the different models, rather than using commercially formed fiberglass or whole plywood sheets. Once the boat is constructed strip by strip, a propane torch is glided across the wood to give the boat a darker tint, rather than using stains, McPherson said.

There are several different models of strip boats available, depending on what the boater has in mind. For some, it is racing, like the boat McPherson built for himself from the

scrap pile at his shop. With a 40 horse power engine on back, the thin, lightweight model will top 62 mph during those weekends out on the lake or river with friends, he said.

Some strip boats are built only for speed, with thousands of dollars riding on their performance in national racing contests. Several strip boats were entered in last year's speedboat races during the N.C. Fourth of July festival in Southport.

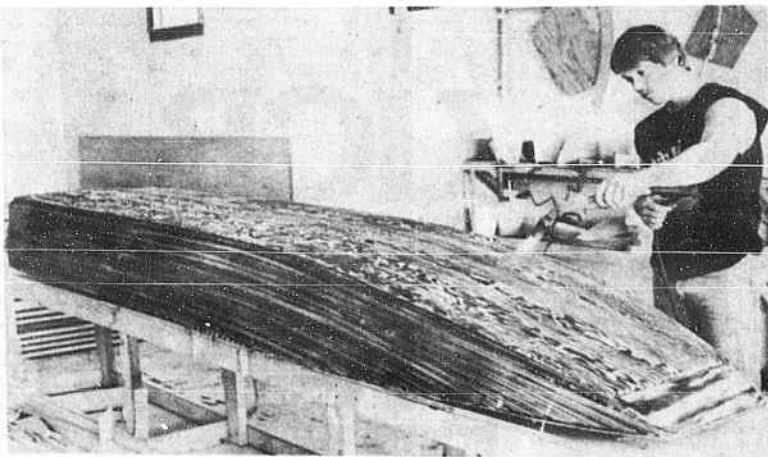
McPherson, who has been building boats for 17 years, built his first strip boat about ten years ago. At that time, there were only two people in the southeast making strip boats, and both of them were in South Carolina, where he learned the trade, he said.

McPherson has designed several types of boats since entering the business, including a flat-fronted bass boat that gives the fisherman more room than the normal models, he said. A one or two man boat will take about three hours to piece together and another hour to seal in fiberglass.

For larger boats, like the 14-foot fishing boats, it may take up to eight hours before they are complete. Wood used to make the boats is always carefully inspected from local sawmills, which often call boat builders when they have a good supply available.

"There are just so many little things that you have to think about when making the boats," McPherson said. "The little things will affect how the boat handles. We worked using the trial and error method until we got the designs we wanted."

McPherson estimates he makes



GLENN HOWARD uses a propane torch to burn the hull of one strip boat used for fishing. Burning the outer layer of wood gives the strip boats their natural coloring.

about seven to eight strip boats a week at his small shop. The boats are so popular, he does not build for dealers, only on his own. McPherson also doesn't add the extras, such as seats, speedometers or steering wheels, leaving that to the boaters' own tastes. The whole idea behind owning a strip boat is that they are unique and each one should bear a different personal touch.

McPherson has found that since tacking together his first plywood model more than 17 years ago, building boats has not been a boring job.

"What I do when it gets kind of boring is sit down and redesign something else," McPherson said. "They are the smoothest running boats. You can set a cup of coffee on the bow and it won't spill if you're out riding on the river."

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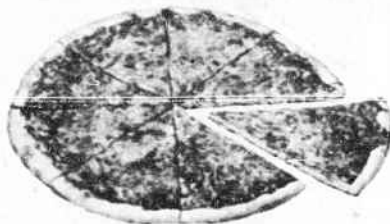
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