



A Boat Named 'Brick'

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My Father's Boat

My father's boat is stout and grand
Broad and majestic against the hot, smooth sand
With its little sails, it is graceful and true.
Seeming large, it only fits a crew of two.
Made of wood, and five feet long. My
father's boat is tiny, yet strong.
Challenging nature as it tries to get by,
While cool, blue waves lap at its sides.
My father made it with screws and nails,
Needles and thread for its red sails.
My father looks on, while it stands tall.
Though, as you know, it's rather small.
It sleeps there, calmly, in my garage,
As if it were a petite mirage.
Oh, but wait, 'til winter's end,
And you will see it, out there my friend.
Waiting ... waiting for you and me.
To take it out into the great blue sea.
And you'll know ... finally ... what it's like to be free.

Kimberly Ong, Age 12

We started working on our new house in October 1993 but did not move in until six months later. You could call it a fixer upper. It was built in 1906 and, with due respect to its grand, stately maturity, it needed a makeover. I would like to add "but its foundation was sound." Alas, I cannot.

I am not good with my hands and this I sincerely regret. One might say I am handicraft impaired. Since I do not have talents in the crafts, it is my great fortune that I can make a living doing other things. However, by necessity, I tried to do what I could to fix our new house. We spent a few days plastering its cracked walls, of which it had more than a few. Brimming with enthusiasm, my wife and I would hurry to the new place after work. Armed with spatula and sandpaper, we attacked the walls with the raw excitement of new homeowners. The work looked fine in the evening by the glare of a few bare incandescent light bulbs. Nevertheless, the true light of day revealed that we had replaced the latticed crevices of original plaster with an ill-defined bas relief of lumps and bumps of various shapes and heights. Like I said, I am not real good with my hands.

It was not with some small surprise and trepidation that my wife heard of my intention to build a sailboat. I assured her it would be from a kit and nothing could possibly go wrong. Though she seemed to take the news in stride, I did take umbrage when she questioned whether it would float if I made it. Frankly, I think she welcomed the thought that the project would take me away from working on the new house for a while. Since my handiwork was in the process of being covered with plasterboard by people who knew what they were doing, I had some time on my hands.

When the boat kit arrived, I cleared the garage and set up shop. I had all my power tools plugged in, a work table set up, and I had even read the instructions that came with the kit. For me, reading instructions is a sincere demonstration of commitment and fortitude. After all, it is a bother figuring out what to do with all the extra parts if I do not. There was the time I did not read the instructions to my son's tricycle and assembled a unicycle instead. As you will see, this actually proved fortuitous.

Like everyone else, I have made other kits. When my brother and I were kids in Detroit, we used to make plastic model airplanes from kits. We would often celebrate their maiden flights by putting lit firecrackers in the cockpit or fuselage and throwing them off the balcony. Yes, I know display models are not meant to be flown or exploded. Call it a prescient act of re-engineering. I had no intention of blowing up my new boat, but there was a precedent in that general direction that had to be overcome.

The kit came together well. The manufacturer fit all the pieces together prior to disassembly and shipping. Though I had ruined a few shirts and pants with epoxy, it was well worth it. Finishing the boat took patience, epoxy, primer, two coats of white polyurethane, topped off with two coats of clear polyurethane. A reminder: do not forget to wipe off the amine finish from the cured epoxy before applying the next coat.) Even my wife and children thought it was pretty.

The launch date drew near. My wife had but one question. She repeated the question many times but it was always the same question: "Will it float if capsized?" I bit my tongue and promised to call the manufacturer to get the answer. Wives have this uncanny ability for being right and never letting you forget it. This is to compensate

for our ability for being wrong and never remembering it. I called the kit maker and he seemed a trifle miffed when I asked my wife's question. He had been extremely helpful over the phone while I was building the boat. So, when he said "Of course it'll float. It's made out of wood," I had no reason to think otherwise.

The day of the launch arrived and the weather was perfect. The sun was out. The mooring floats were being attached in the bay in preparation for the coming sailing season. Spring was definitely in the air. The wind was coming from the southwest at no more than 5 mph. All the portents promised a beautiful day on the water. I pulled on my trusty wet suit and PFD and walked my little boat on its homemade dolly down to the dock. Incidentally, the "extra" wheels from the aforementioned tricycle worked swell on the new boat dolly. A few curious neighbors looked on as I stepped the masts, ran the rigging and set the sails. The skeg keel made rigging on the beach easy. The little ketch made a handsome picture with its red sails, white hull and brightwork. The spectators made appreciative comments as my boat made ready to sail. The ultimate challenge had come: would the boat float?

After a couple of pleasant reaches across the bay, I lay down, set the sheets, and let the boat sail itself. As advertised, the little boat had neutral helm on a beam reach. Cormorants dove for their breakfast. Seagulls sang their greeting to the warming sun. I basked in the spring sunshine, dreaming of summer zephyrs to come as my boat gently sailed. The bay was completely clear of other watercraft. They were still safely tucked away in boatyards and backyards. In another month, the moorings would all be attached to boats several times the size of the one I sailed now. Sailing off-season has its own attractions. Even the busiest venues are tranquil and serene.

I was proud that I had made something with my own two hands that actually floated. Well, pride before the fall. A puff heeled us over just a tad and water started to come over the rail. No problem, I thought, just shift my weight and straighten up. Dinghy sailors are nothing if not agile ballast. Before I could put thought to action, water was up to the gunwales. I suddenly wondered why bathtubs usually take forever to fill, especially in mid-winter while our feet freeze to the tiles and we haven't a stitch on in contrast to the instantaneous deluge that flooded my boat. No problem, I thought. I will just get my handy bailer and we will be back on, rather than in, the water in no time. The manufacturer was right in one respect: the boat did float when swamped. What he neglected to mention was that the hull would be totally submerged. The deck was a half foot beneath the surface. It was impossible to bail the boat without having to empty all of the bay and Long Island Sound first. I had my PFD on and would have eventually hand paddled to shore, hopefully sometime before the end of the coming sailing season. Luckily, my friend Lew was out there setting the mooring floats and he towed me back in. I recounted the story to my family who quickly christened the boat "Little Brick," not because of any resemblance to the popular, time-honored Phil Bolger design but because of its less than optimal flotation characteristics. I called the manufacturer who responded that there was nothing wrong with the boat and that I should: (1) never sail out of swimming distance from shore; (2) always sail with a chase boat nearby; and, (3) always sail wearing a PFD. I personally believe that everyone who sails should wear a PFD, but the other two suggestions were nothing short of outrageous. Firstly, staying within a couple of pool lengths from shore did not sound like much fun. Secondly, my friendship with Lou or any of my other neighbors would have been sorely tested if I asked them to chaperone me in a chase boat. If I had been forewarned that the boat could not be bailed if swamped, I would not have bought it.

What to do? "Little Brick" was too pretty to discard and too big to hang above the fireplace. I had to devise a means to give it more flotation. I asked other like-minded boating enthusiasts, conversed with comrades on-line in the Sailing Forum and generally poked around for any and all ideas. The addition of almost minuscule styrofoam-filled chambers to the bow and transom would make the boat's interior even smaller without any guarantee of working. Putting enough styrofoam in the boat to work would have destroyed it aesthetically. Removing one of the masts and spars might lighten the load above the waterline but would seriously compromise speed. I tried sailing cat-rigged with one sail and the results were uninspiring. Learning from the Optimists in our junior yacht squadron, I experimented with flotation bags. One inside on port, another on starboard and the last inside the transom did the trick. Even when the boat is completely filled with water, the gunwales are a few inches above the surface and the boat will still sail. The bags also make excellent backrests. Ironically, after I successfully field tested the boat with the new flotation bags by capsizing then bailing or sailing, the query I got upon returning to shore from one young observer was, "Gee, mister, that's a great looking boat, but why does it keep filling with water?" So, the story does have a happy ending. The little boat that sank became the little boat that could. Our new house was made a home. Last and probably least, the "extra" tricycle wheels helped make a great boat dolly.