

LEW'S LESSONS

Seattle's Jensen Motor Boat Co.

Seattle, Washington - Does anybody really believe the official unemployment numbers that have become the new baseline of economic verity in America? Maybe that ten percent number works as a general rule of thumb for the recently unemployed, but it certainly doesn't reflect the reality of life on Boat Street or First Avenue, where my offices have been located. It could be that I'm a bit prejudiced because I just had to lay off a staff of people I care about a

great deal due to the harsh realities of an economic climate over which I have no control. Of course, no matter how tough things get, there's always somebody who seems to buck the trend. But there is relatively less "trend bucking" among the specialist marine trades here on the west coast as the very best wooden boat yards that have been so busy during the boom years of the last century and early part of this one have found themselves with fewer jobs in the hopper. And this is not a singular event here; the best remaining specialists are universally concerned about where the next jobs are going to come from. Unemployment really doesn't mean much until it's your turn but then it gets really personal.



So it's a tough time for some of our very best resources, the ones we count on to keep 'em afloat. But the reality is, it's not as if these guys haven't been there before. I'm no Polyanna in respect to the latest economic developments, and nobody is paying me to put a happy face on so you won't get one here. I get all the upscale mega yacht magazines in the mail every month and to read them you'd think that the economic woes of the rest of the world simply didn't exist. But my world is not that one, as I live in the world of the preservationist and active hobbyist and in my world money is scarcer than we imagined it could be just a scant few years ago. The trades that service my interests are struggling harder than ever to keep a

solid footing. To stay in business as a shipwright specializing in classic boats takes a bit of character and resolution these days, but then, it always has.

Take Boat Street, for instance. Does your town have a Boat Street? I thought not, but here in Seattle, there is a genuine Boat Street that carries its name from a time when most of the businesses there serviced the yachting trade. Wooden boats weren't just a big thing fifty years ago; they were the only thing. Boat Street came by its name honestly, even if it took a little push from the Jensen and Bryant families to get the name changed from Northlake Avenue. There was a row of companies on it dedicated to serving the sophisticated yachtsman, and you

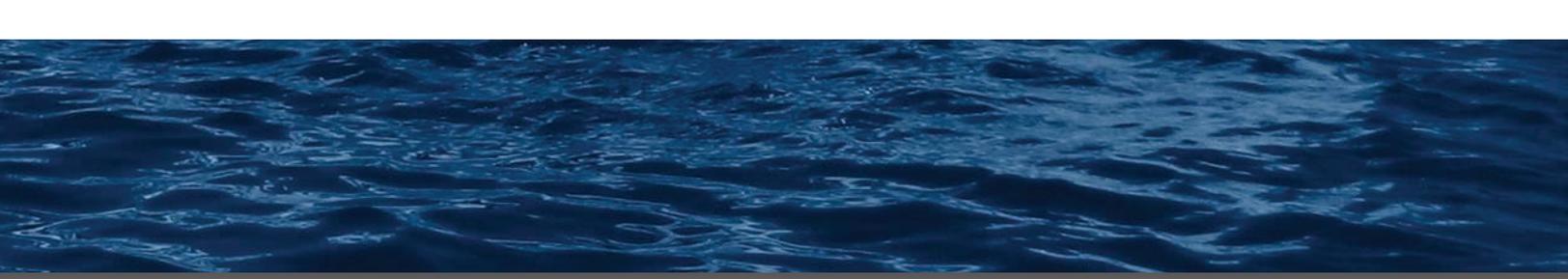
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could get your swaging done, or maybe have a new suit of sails sewn, some canvas dodgers made up, get fitted out for the season or you could commission a custom yacht and have it built all within a four-block walk. To hear the old timers talk about it, it was never really easy for the workers on Boat Street, but there was always enough carriage trade to keep the doors open and food on the table. Almost always, anyway.

For now, the last significant business strictly serving classic power and sail yachts on Boat Street remains the

famous and proud Jensen Motor Boat Company. Just how tough and resilient is this place? Glad you asked! Jensen has survived every turndown and tough spot that eighty three years of building custom wooden boats could throw at it. If you take Tony Jensen's first jobs into account, we could stretch that number to one hundred and four because that's when Tony got started in the trade. Although Tony was a Julliard trained classical musician, it was boat building that would come to make his name in Seattle. In 1926 Tony and his wife returned home from British Columbia



where his music had taken him. In BC, Tony alternately led the orchestra at the Pantages Theatre and built boats in his “spare” time. On his return to Seattle, he bought a nice piece of waterfront near Lake Union on Portage Bay, erected the shop that still stands there today, and moved upstairs into a small apartment where he lived and worked the rest of his life. His sons, George and Anchor, cemented the legend that is the Jensen Motor Boat Company in the ensuing years. George drew them and Anchor built them. And what boats they were and still are.

Probably the most famous of the yard’s creations were the Slomoshun series of Gold Cup racers, capped by *Slomoshun IV* and *V*, the world’s fastest boats at the time. You can see *SloMo IV* at the Museum of History and Industry here in town, and to this day it fulfils my notion of what a fast, unlimited hydroplane is supposed to look like. These boats were the first and best of their kind and at the time, they were a revolution in speedboat design. Seattle has remained a center of unlimited hydroplane racing ever since, and it can truly be said that the Jensens were fundamental and instrumental in

making it so. But that is a story that has been covered before, so I mention it only in the event you needed a reminder of just how significant this yard has been to the boating and industrial history of this coast. The story today turns on the yard’s work in preserving the legacy of the past, a



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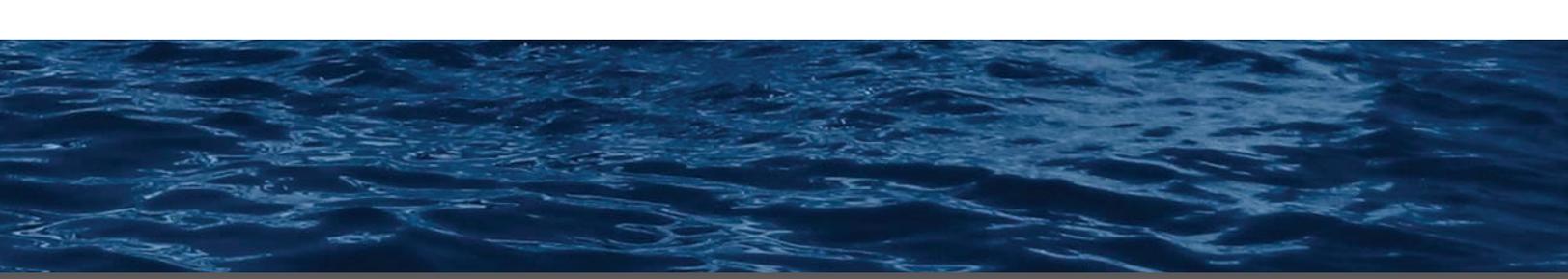
ambitious restorations remain the order of the day. Peter and Steve are both veterans of the Seattle Shipwright's Co-Op who joined DeWitt in 2003 and have infused the yard with their energy as another generation of workers now practice a tough trade with the familiar passion that this sort of work evokes for a certain kind of person.

Times have not gotten easier these last several years, even though the yard enjoyed the mini-boom that infected the area in the early part of this century. I'll guess that in 2003 when Peter and Steve "hit the lottery" (their words) and hooked up with DeWitt, things were probably looking pretty good. A lot of us were deep into significant restorations and it took some doing to get a scheduled weekend out on the Motorboat's railway. My boat *Rita* came out there in March of 2008, and it was hard enough scheduling two days to get a survey and paint the bottom. But as ever, when my number came up, the yard was ready for us in the best professional manner. The blocking was correct for my boat, the workers were staged and on time, and everything went forward smoothly and efficiently, and this was reflected in the



reasonable bill I was presented with at the end of the weekend.

Today, with money drying up and even the software and biotech people feeling the pinch, it's a bit easier to get a slot on the schedule. Peter, Steve, DeWitt and I gathered upstairs in Anchor's old office last week and discussed the new dynamics of business. I was more than just a little sympathetic, having experienced the disappointment and heartache of having let my own staff go just two weeks prior, and I asked Peter



how he thought the current environment compared to Tony's experiences during the Great Depression. Peter and Steve together told me how the yard had paid the workers in food alone when the money was too tight to meet payroll back then. Everybody ate, but there were times when there just wasn't money to make payroll. That hasn't been the case during this downturn, but the staff has been shortened and nobody is happy about that. There is work for the spring but without saying so, I got the sense that the backlogs that used to provide a modicum of security just aren't there this year. And it's no surprise to me because

that's the case all over the area. Money is just too tight for most people to be doing all but the essential work right now.

But guys like these are tough. They have been there and seen it before. Nobody picks this kind of boat work expecting to get rich. An honest living doing what they know and enjoy is all the Jensens and their crew ever expected and frankly, it's all they've ever really gotten despite their acknowledged preeminence as a Seattle force majeure in wooden boats. Sitting in the warm presence of years of history, looking at the simply hung

photos of all the boats this yard has had a hand in was a real thrill for me. It was and remains a matter of pride for me that I was speaking comfortably to DeWitt Jensen, Anchor's son, and chatting amiably with Peter and Steve. Here I was on equally comfortable footing with Mikey and the other guys in the yard, talking about the old shop and joking about how hard it was to take a flattering picture in such a busy and chaotic place. For a



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wooden boat person, acceptance at this level is a sort of coming of age, and I felt for a minute as if I actually knew something; something that might allow me acceptance in such a respected and respectable shop. But I don't know much, and that is never clearer to me than when I am in the presence of those who do. The Jensen Motorboat Company is that sort of place. The genetic knowledge and experience runs so deep and the history is so thick there, but in the most relaxed and unassuming sort of way. And as so many of us are, the Jensen Motorboat Company is in a battle to protect and maintain both a way of life and a very personal industry with a glorious past. I wish them better luck than I had and they damn well deserve it. Just look at the pictures of these boats

and be thankful that guys like these enjoy working on them. Without their dedication and facilities, maintained with great skill and at considerable risk all these years, many of our boats would have been long gone years ago.

If you need some work this year, you're in luck. Hire a legend and get a slot on the calendar soon enough to enjoy a full season of boating. Visit the Jensen Motorboat Company at: www.slomoshun.com/jensen.htm and www.jensenmotorboat.com. You know I wouldn't steer you wrong on this. After all, I'm not in it for the money anymore!

Lew Barrett owns Rita, a 1938 50' (15.2m) Ed Monk-designed motoryacht based in Seattle.