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REAL BOATS, REAL BOATERS

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Cool Change

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When boatbuilder Thomas Townsend saw the *Alice W.* for the first time he was immediately smitten, even though the Beals Island-style lobsterboat was in need of

repair. Growing up in Northport, New York, on Long Island, he remembered seeing Beals Island lobsterboats moored near his family's 1928 Wheeler, and thought they were "the sexiest, coolest and most seakindly boats around."

Townsend's parents, grandparents, aunt and uncle all owned boats, so he went from being a baby in a bassinet to a toddler on deck, where he says he learned how to walk. (That is why, he likes to joke, walking is not something he does very well today.) During high school, after his parents' divorce, he moved from his family's house onto a 42-foot Matthews motorboat he shared with his father. It was at that point Townsend realized he was happiest near the water.

When it came time for Townsend to think about applying to colleges, he realized the the idea of sitting inside a classroom all day held no appeal for him. Instead, Townsend attended The Landing School of Boat Building and Design in Arundel, Maine, from 1989 to 1990. There, he met Jamie Houtz, who became his instructor and friend. This is also where he became acquainted with the *Alice W.*, a 35-foot vessel with a 10-foot beam that sat at the school awaiting restoration. Townsend had admired the boat and told Houtz if he were ever tempted to sell her, he would buy her.

The boat was built in 1969 by Vinal Beal on Beals Island in Maine for a lobsterman from New Hampshire. Beal and his three brothers were all boatbuilders, born in the early 1900s. Beal's son Osmond

followed in his father's professional footsteps. He too built boats on Beals Island, sometimes with help from his grandson, Erick Blackwood. Blackwood eventually traded in his tool belt for tackle and became a lobsterman using a boat constructed by his grandfather.

The actual Beals Island design, which is also known as a Jonesport-style boat, did not originate from a member of the Beal family, but rather from boatbuilder William Frost, who hailed from Nova Scotia. Frost started adding skeg-built hulls and "cut-off" sterns to fishing boats, which made them faster, lighter and more stable in hazardous waters while carrying heavier loads as opposed to the traditional "built-down" style.

In *The History of Downeast Boats*, Nancy Beal (not a direct descendant of Vinal) acknowledges the impact of Frost's work. "His influence was felt by everyone who was building or would build lobsterboats from then on."

The *Alice W.* had workboat roots. Houtz bought the vessel directly from the New Hampshire fisherman who had commissioned her. That was in 2002. She had good bones, but restoration was required.

"Jamie picked away at her in his spare time and got a lot of work completed," says Townsend. "He reframed and replanked as needed, added a new transom and new floor timbers aft of the bulkhead, installed a cockpit, deck structure and beams, and refurbished the engine."

The first best decision Townsend says he ever made was going to The Landing School. His second best decision was taking Route 1 home from Maine after his training had ended and stopping in Mystic, Connecticut, where he remains to this day.

As fate would have it, he met Joshua Friedman, a furniture maker, and boatbuilder Jeff Hall. The two men were working out of the same building at the time. Townsend wound up working for them both, but realized furniture was not his forte. He was soon employed full-time by Hall. He learned a lot over the next five years before branching out on his own to establish Thomas Townsend Custom Marine Woodworking in 1996. "I repair, restore and maintain classic wooden boats, power and sailboats. I've built dinghies, worked on bass boats, lobsterboats, cat boats and yachts up to 65 feet," says Townsend. "And I still do."

In 2012, he purchased *Alice W.* from Houtz and moved her to his shop, although at that time she was nameless. Townsend thought it appropriate to name her after Houtz's mother, Alice Walker, since that had been Houtz's intention before she was sold.

Even with all the work Houtz had done on the boat, there was more to do. Townsend built a new wheelhouse, cabin structure and windows; refastened the hull above the waterline; replaced floor timbers from the main bulkhead forward; fiberglassed all the plywood decks; and substituted the old 350 Chevy V-8 engine with a newer version of the same.

The *Alice W.*, which is light and nimble with a weight of about 12,000 pounds, debuted at the 2014 WoodenBoat Show held at Mystic Seaport in Mystic, Connecticut. While on display at the dock, Off Center Harbor, a film company, created a short video about the boat that was subsequently seen by Ralph Dafoe. Dafoe wanted the boat and went to Mystic to see her. When he became the new owner, he hired Townsend to add an interior and a lobster pot hauler, which he used to bring up the anchor. "He did not want to hang an anchor off the bow and destroy the look of the boat," says Townsend.

Dafoe kept *Alice W.* on a mooring near his home in East Blue Hill, Maine. He occasionally spent the night onboard, but mostly enjoyed day-tripping. Sadly, Dafoe's health started to decline and three years after acquiring the boat, he asked Townsend if he would like to buy her back.

“When I find a boat I like, I buy it, I fix it up, I use it for a while and then I sell it. I do this again and again. But with *Alice* the sale happened so fast I did not have enough time to use her,” recalls Townsend. So, when Dafoe offered to sell, he accepted.

Townsend continues to work on his classic lobsterboat. He recently added a couple of bunks, an 18-gallon water tank and a small galley. “There is no headroom down below, but you do your best sleeping lying down,” he laughs.

Today, Townsend, who is 53, uses the boat to cruise with his girlfriend, Mary, to places like Block Island, Shelter Island and Cuttyhunk. These destinations are roughly two hours from his homeport of Mystic when running at a cruise speed of 12 knots. (The boat will top out at 19 knots.) Says Townsend, “*Alice* is seakindly in that she doesn’t pound and is easily driven with a narrow beam and fine entry at the bow. ‘She sails easy,’ as the lobstermen say, ‘long and lean.’”

Will *Alice W.* be sold in the near future? It’s hard to say. Townsend has his eye on many boats, so who knows. In time, she may be on the market again, even though he thinks she is one of the best-looking boats around.

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