



The Herreshoff 12½ Class

99 Years and Counting

Bill & Maria Museler

History

In the fall of 1914, Capt. Nathaniel Green Herreshoff, the “Wizard of Bristol” and probably the most celebrated yacht designer and inventor in American History, took an order for a small (12½’ LWL – 16’ LOA) training sailboat for children originally labeled “Buzzards Bay Boy’s Boat.” Capt. Nat had already designed and built America’s Cup defenders, US Navy torpedo boats (including designing the engines), and yachts for many of the Captains of American Industry; all at his famous boatyard in Bristol, R.I. The little 12½ has been variously known as Doughdish, Bullseye, Buzzards Bay 12, and most commonly, the Herreshoff 12½.

There were 20 boats built in the winter of 1914–15, and they sold for the princely sum of \$420 each. By the time WWII shut down their production, 357 12½s had been produced at the Herreshoff yard. Additional wood boats were built after the war by a number of yards, including the Herreshoff yard itself. As with almost all pleasure boats, builders began to experiment with fiberglass (FG) in the late 50s and by 1972, the first FG H 12½s appeared. Two builders, Eddy & Duff and Cape Cod Shipbuilding Co. eventually produced the FG versions maintaining the original lines and weights, as well as the beautiful wooden spars and gaff rig. Ballentine’s Boat Shop has now taken

over from Eddy and Duff and both Ballentine’s and Cape Cod Shipbuilding are still producing these sailing classics today. Well over 200 of the wooden boats are still sailing and racing today along with perhaps 300-400 of their FG cousins—most of them in the Northeast and concentrated in New England. Hull #1, *Robin* has been restored and is on display at the Herreshoff Museum in Bristol.

The little boat’s popularity is due to a number of factors beginning with its classic hull design and



*Sidney Herreshoff at the helm of Robin, Hull #1.
Photo courtesy of Herreshoff Marine Museum, Bristol, RI,
www.herreshoff.org*

beautiful sheer line; enhanced even further by its beautiful wood spars and iconic gaff rig. It has a large cockpit with room for 3-4 adults or a gaggle of kids, and a 750 pound lead full keel which provides outstanding stability. But its 99+ years of continuous popularity is mostly due to how the boat sails. Even in light air, the boat moves well unless there is a “bobble” due to boat wakes, etc. But in a moderate to fresh breeze, the boat comes alive and shoulders through the seas like a Gloucester fishing schooner on the way home with her catch. It’s tough to overpower a Herreshoff but when the wind really gets up, dropping the gaff some (known as scandalizing) dumps the wind up high and the boat still drives right along. Finally, the boat was designed with Buzzard’s Bay’s famous short chop in mind; reminiscent of another Bay’s equally famous chop with which we are all acquainted. Youth trainer, family day sailor, competitive racer; the 12½ is all of these and a piece of American sailing history to boot.

Herreshoff 12½s Come to Annapolis

(From an article by Susan H. Stobbart in the Aug./Sept. 1996 issue of “Inside Annapolis Magazine”)

“Annapolitans who know about the 12½ credit the late Arnie Gay, an Annapolis yacht broker, marina owner and boating enthusiast, with bringing the graceful little sailboat to America’s Sailing Capital in the early 1980’s. Arnie Gay had been admiring the Herreshoff for some time before he purchased hull #14

and had it beautifully restored. Legend has it that soon thereafter, Arnie Gay corralled friends Mike Ashford, owner of McGarvey’s Saloon, Howard Cohen, and Alan Weitzman into purchasing 12½s.

“Seeing that there were enough boats for a race, Mike Ashford hosted a regatta and post-regatta picnic at his home overlooking the Severn River. The Herreshoff sailors dressed in classic sailing attire. Randy Strauss, who was closely involved with the 12½ class at that time explained that “The clothing was to emphasize the Corinthian spirit of the boats.” Indeed, Annapolitan Ranlet Lincoln could frequently be spotted wearing a straw hat and sailing his Herreshoff around Annapolis. Around 1988, local developer Phil Dunn and his wife Judi Hermann Dunn, president of Hermann Advertising Design, bought a wooden 12½. After sailing the Herreshoff for one season, Phil began a project to restore this boat. Three years later, Judi surprised Phil with a FG Doughdish as a birthday present. Phil explained “We enjoy the best of both worlds now, as we have a glass boat to sail and a wooden boat to work on. These are great boats, and this is a great group of people to sail with. We really enjoy this class because it is sailboat racing we can participate in as a family.””

“Bert and Debbie Winchester purchased a Herreshoff after sailing with Dave Pensky and determined that the boat would be a great way to teach their daughters, Claire and Ellie to sail; and Bob Shapiro, AYC’s Sailing Director at the time, became a partner in Howard Cohen’s boat. “I wanted a boat that was a pleasure to sail, a pleasure to work on, and a pleasure to look at. The 12½ had all of that. It is a nice change of pace from

Gil Cochran's "Tactician," Lilly looking for windshifts. Photo courtesy of Spencer Leech.



the typical high-tech racing sailboat in Annapolis.” said Bob. Bert went on to organize the Annapolis H 12½ fleet and established a tradition of Herreshoff Memorial Day Regattas. A frequent spectator for these early regattas was Gary Jobson who watched with his wife Janice from the deck of *Silver Heels*, the schooner they owned with Jack and Carol King. Fortunately for the Herreshoff sailors, Jobson remained a spectator at these events rather than a competitor.”

Herreshoff 12½’s at AYC Today

Today, the Herreshoff Fleet is a fixture at the Annapolis Yacht Club. In the Wednesday Night Race series, Herreshoffs are the only class that both starts and finishes right in front of the Club; drawing “ooh’s and aah’s” from spectators on the Spa Creek Bridge, and AYC members and guests on the Clubhouse deck alike. They present a stark contrast between the classic sailing vessels of an era gone by, to the high-tech speedsters of today. The contrast extends to the intensity level of the racing as well. While most of today’s Herreshoff sailors have competed successfully at a high level earlier in their sailing careers, their current

approach to competition is a return to the “Corinthian” days of yore. Competition is close but not cutthroat, and yelling is not only frowned upon but prohibited except in dangerous situations. Family sailing is prevalent in the Fleet as well with Eileen Cochran, Ginny Hurley, and Maria Museler crewing for their husbands, and Art Edwards’ children have been spotted in the 12’s as have several of Chuck Hurley’s grandchildren. In fact, Gill Cochran’s tactician is his dog, Lilly, who excels in calling wind shifts with her sensitive nose.

In addition to the Wednesday Night Race series, the Herreshoff Fleet also hosts a Spring and a Fall Regatta

consisting of three short races followed by cocktail parties to present the awards, splice the mainbrace, and explain how “we would’ve won except for -- fill in the blank.” The winner of each Regatta hosts the cocktail party for the next Regatta. Bobby Frey runs these fun regattas along with John Love, Peter Gordon, and Carl Mott; and the idea of Spring and Fall regattas has attracted 2 new classes to the event; the Harbor 20’s and the Alerion 28’s.

The AYC Herreshoff Fleet is always looking for new members and will gladly take anyone interested in these classic mini-yachts out for a sail (any excuse to take the boat out will do). There are usually one or

two boats for sale in the area. The Fleet, which is currently at 8 boats, tries to keep the boats in the Club or at least locally to maximize the turnout for its regattas and events.

The Herreshoff 12½s continue to thrive in the Northeast with national championships held in Buzzard’s Bay with both wooden and FG boats competing on an equal footing. Anyone visiting New England waters can see large fleets of these classics moored in Edgartown, Beverly, Quissett, and Shelter Island. Annapolis represents

the Southernmost stronghold of the Class. Boats built almost 100 years ago are still competitive with boats built last year; crewed equally well by teenagers and septuagenarians alike. Based on its continuing popularity among a wide segment of the sailing public, it is highly likely that Captain Nat’s “Buzzard’s Bay Boy’s Boat” will keep the Wizard of Bristol’s creation plying the waters of the Northeast and Chesapeake Bay long into the future.

Anyone interested in these beautiful, family-friendly boats can contact Bill Museler, Fleet Captain, at museler@verizon.net. We would love to introduce more AYC members to this wonderful little boat. ⚓



Chuck Hurley and his grandson aboard Bit O' Luck.