

I have no one to blame but myself; it all started quite innocently. I happened to notice a posting on my company's electronic bulletin board, *"For Sale: 17-Foot, 1957 Chris-Craft mahogany boat. Garaged for 15 years. Runs Well."* I printed the ad and shared it with my husband Charlie; I thought it would be interesting to take a look at the boat. Little did I know that innocent act of showing a classified ad to my husband would change our lives forever.



My Girl, the boat that started it all

Charlie phoned about the boat and made an appointment to look at it. I should note that we weren't boaters, didn't own a boat, nor did we frequent any nearby body of water. Our weekends were occupied by chauffeuring our two daughters to soccer tournaments. Well, one Saturday he went to look at the boat while I took the girls to soccer practice. On Sunday he decided to look at it again. Needless to say, when we returned from the soccer game that evening, a 1957 Chris-Craft 17-foot Sportsman was on a trailer in the driveway of our Durham home. And there was Charlie, sitting in the captain's seat, beer in hand, grinning.

So, what are you going to do with this boat?" I asked. He replied, "I guess we need to find a lake house." From this point—in-between soccer tournaments and practices—we started traipsing around with real estate agents in search of a weekend lakeside house: Something small and simple, but with a covered boat house so the Chris-Craft would be protected from the elements.

I remember receiving the phone call while I was in Europe on business. My usually unexcitable husband said rather urgently, "Can you come home early? I found a house and I need you to sign some papers." So, I came home early, went straight from the airport to the lawyer's office, and signed papers. When I walked into our home in Durham, North Carolina, I was taken aback by the array of furnishings and housewares in my living room. Charlie provided me a copy of his spreadsheet of everything we would need to furnish the new lake house and explained that he had gotten a jump-start on shopping.

In my mind's eye, I'd envisioned a small, two-room log cabin on the shore of a lake. To my surprise, the house he had found looked like it belonged in Palm Springs. Built in the 1960s, it was a yellow ranch-style house with a double-door entrance, five bedrooms, and three bathrooms. The general décor was based around avocado-green drapes and walnut-brown paneling, not to mention the lovely *Sears & Roebuck* Harvest-Gold kitchen appliances. The bathrooms were, and are still, even scarier. Of course, none of this mattered—the covered boathouse was perfect for the Chris-Craft: two berths and electric boat lifts to suspend the precious cargo out of the water. The first evening there, after we signed the papers, we took our folding chairs onto the deck with a bottle of champagne and watched the sun set. I was sold. I didn't care that before me was a nightmare of fix-it and decorating challenges; the sunset view was, and continues to be, stunning.

The house is now lighter and brighter. I survived the first refinishing of the boat in the attached garage. Charlie had built a frame inside the garage so that the boat could be suspended by its lifting rings, allowing him to sand all sides. I had chrome pieces gracing my kitchen shelves for months. Many of them got shipped off to be re-chromed. When then returned, they were given a prominent place of display on the living-room mantle—they even sat for a formal portrait. I guess it was silly of me to ask why one would take a picture of boat instruments.

By this time, my husband had subscribed to every antique, classic, and wooden boat publication; he had spent hours in the evening in chat rooms engaged in on-line conversations with other wooden-boat enthusiasts. All through the Winter, regardless of the weather, he ventured up to the lake house—160 miles roundtrip—to work on the boat. Our daughters stopped asking, "Where is dad?" We began telling friends he is off with his "girlfriend." He also joined the local chapter of the Antique and Classic Boat Society—ours is the Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill Chapter. One couldn't find a nicer, more helpful group of people in the world. I remember a new member commented at one of our social events, "You know when you join a new social

group, you hope you find one or two people you really enjoy and you look forward to seeing. With this boat group, I just fell in love with everyone. That just doesn't happen." I wholeheartedly agreed.

THE CHRISTENING

With the help, advice, counsel and support of many wooden boat enthusiasts, the newly refinished and refurbished *My Girl*, was re-christened and launched at Lake Gaston in 2003. It was a joyous moment because she didn't sink. It was an awesome sound to hear her engine turn over as she delivered that geyser spray to the unsuspecting guests

aft on the dock.

My Girl is a beauty thanks to the Charlie's meticulous attention—and the wonderful workmanship of the following people or organizations: Pat Powell of Forrest, Illinois did the instrument refurbishing; Wade Technology in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania re-chromed the instruments; and Powell's Upholstering in Durham, turned out the interior in the original teal blue color

I SHOULD HAVE SEEN IT COMING....

Perhaps it was my comments about having to walk around the boat to get to anything in the garage, or the fact that we couldn't put a car in the garage for nearly a year, but that's when the discussion began. My husband very nonchalantly suggested, "Maybe we need a larger garage with a workshop for boats? I was thinking that when I retire, refinishing boats would be a great hobby, don't you think?"

The plans were underway. I had two requests as part of the construction: I wanted a potting bench on the rear side of the new structure and a cupola on top with beautiful weather vane. That's how it began, very innocently: build a free-standing garage and workshop. I thought I would be nice to for my husband to have a "little workshop"—keep the sawdust and chrome out of my kitchen. As I had with the lake house, I was thinking *smaller* in size. In my mind's eye, I could see the small workshop—big enough to accommodate a project boat and outfitted with a frame to suspend the boat and perhaps a space heater... Little did I imagine.





The Garage Mahal under construction

By the time Charlie was done with the design, the workshop morphed into what I have named the “Garage Mahal!” It is a 40-foot by 60-foot building which includes three car bays (one with a hydraulic car lift), and a 27-foot-long boat workshop (fitted with a steel beam that spans the space, and a pulley for raising the boat). Details of the building include cherry cabinets in the workshop, air conditioning, a commercial ice maker, and beer on tap. The sound system is absolutely first rate: speakers everywhere—inside *and* out—complete with satellite radio. Upstairs over the garage is a media room complete with a hundred-inch screen, digital projector, and its own sound system. Attached to the garage is a 1,200-square-foot, two-bedroom apartment with a lovely view of the lake. Details for the apartment include new carpet in a neutral color which compliments the custom cabinets in the elegantly outfitted kitchen. In total, the Garage Mahal has three bathrooms. The one in the workshop has an automatic towel dispenser! We hosted the Boat Club members, and they helped celebrate the dedication of the Garage Mahal. Tours were given and we heard “oohs” and “aahs” as we explored the space.

In the beginning, the Garage Mahal was really a blessing. For at least a year, I could park my car in the main-house garage, easily unload groceries, and store things in the extra space. The media room has been a great place to watch movies. This past summer we even relocated everything to the screened in porch and had movies outdoors! I thought all my problems were

solved, but, that turned out to be temporary. Currently we have a slight “back log” of project boats.

There is a project boat in my garage, a 1960 Glasspar G3. Charlie is determined to learn to work on fiberglass and this is the perfect project. There is no room for the Glasspar in the Garage Mahal because there is a different project boat taking precedence: a 1959 Golden Jubilee edition Highliner. Charlie has family members who are feeding his “habit.” It was his mother, Genevieve, who located the Highliner in New Hampshire, where she and Charlie’s father live. They called to tell him about the wooden boat they saw in a neighbor’s front yard. Negotiations were conducted by phone, and this summer, Charlie drove from North Carolina to New Hampshire to collect the new vessel. He had to tie down the bow strips to keep them from blowing away during the trip.

The Highliner is now suspended in the boat workshop and work on it will commence during the Christmas break. I am guessing it will be about a year before it is completed, however I must admit that this duration is based on my amateur-wooden-boat-enthusiast’s wife’s opinion and could be off by a little bit. So, next Christmas, I may have access to my garage again and perhaps the beautiful weathervane—that Santa brought two Christmases ago—will finally get installed on the roof of the Garage Mahal! 🚩