

Took First Prize
Amer. Institute Fair
Dec. 30, 1887.

A. BAIN & CO.,
MANUFACTURERS OF
ST. LAWRENCE RIVER SKIFFS,
Send for Catalogue. Clayton, N. Y.

A Thousand Islands Romance Is Rekindled



by **Kathie Barnes**

A century-old romance is being rekindled among the Thousand Islands where the once ubiquitous St. Lawrence River skiff is enjoying a revival, spurred by the energy crisis and the new passion for physical fitness. Skiff buffs are scouring backyards and barns for relics to rebuild, and replicas of these graceful, utilitarian craft are being built in both wood and fiberglass.

The skiffs emerged in the mid-19th century as a principal means of transportation for island residents along the scenic, 50-mile stretch of the St. Lawrence River separating New York State and Canada. They were developed by fishing guides who needed an easily maneuvered craft that could weather the river's sudden squalls and that would provide a stable platform for landing a 50-lb. muskie. Most guides built one of the round-bottomed, double-ended white cedar skiffs each year during the long winters when the river was frozen. There were even skiff-building bees.

First efforts were crude, but by the 1870s the graceful form of the classic skiff began to emerge. Builders like L.E. Frye, A. Bain, Wilbur Wheelock, George Miller and Xavier Colon of Clayton and Charles Estes of Alexandria Bay



St. Lawrence skiffs grace the river once more.

were turning out finely crafted, sleek rowing and sailing skiffs, not only for guide use, but for sale to island owners and the general public. Around 1905, the Spaulding Boat Co. of Ogdensburg advertised rowing skiffs from 15' to 18' in three grades at prices ranging from \$175 for a top-grade 18-footer to only \$50 for a grade-three 15-footer.

Rowing skiffs generally were in that 15' to 18' range, and sailing skiffs were from 19' to 22' long. All were designed to be rowed from two positions. Traditionally, there were two wood-and-cane seats with comfortable backrests for passengers, plus one or two wooden plank seats amidships. Most skiffs were of lapstrake construction and had nickel-plated and brass fittings.

Each builder's boats were distinctive, however, due to variations in the general design, such as altered bow and stern configurations, or special identifying fittings.

"Sometimes one can tell almost at a glance who built a skiff," says Harold Herrick Jr., one of the leaders of the skiff revival who lives in the quiet,

head-of-the-river village of Cape Vincent. His mailing address is P.O. Box 43, Clayton, NY 13624.

The seaworthiness of the St. Lawrence skiff is touted in an old catalog that shows a man standing on the gunwales of one of the type. Herrick says he's tried it himself many times and the skiffs won't go over. There is no record of a skiff's ever having been involved in a fatal accident. The late Dwight S. Simpson of Boston, a naval architect and authority on wooden boat construction, once said, "The true St. Lawrence skiff is about the best small boat ever developed for more or less open water."

Facing page: *The Jersey Lily, a prize winner at the American Institute Fair in 1887 is shown on display at the fair. The skiff's detachable rudder for long hauls is apparent at the stern. This photo was used as an advertisement for A. Bain and Co., skiff builders of Clayton, N.Y. The postcard at bottom shows a scene near the Hotel Frontenac at the Thousand Islands. Above: The Robin proudly displayed herself at Mystic Seaport in 1979. Harold Herrick, Sr. of Cape Vincent, N.Y., in the Thousand Islands, demonstrates the ballast steering method with the aid of his son, Harold, Jr.*

Although the skiffs are easy to row and were often propelled 20 miles a day or more by oar power, they are not light. Unlike the Adirondack guideboat, which is similar in line and was designed locally for area use and portage, the 22' river skiff weighs about 400 lbs. — hardly a practical craft for portaging. Rowing skiffs were often converted for sailing, while some larger models were built exclusively as sailboats. They were cheap and enormously popular with youngsters and lion-hearted adults.

Most sailing skiffs had an unusual fan-shaped centerboard invented in Clayton by the firms of Atwood and Couch. A few had conventional centerboards and some had no centerboard at all.

Some of the earlier models were rigged with batwing sails, reinforced with battens. Sails of 6 sq. yds. were carried by the 10-footers and 12-sq.-yd. sails were common on the 22-footers, some of which were ketch-rigged.

All St. Lawrence sailing skiffs have one distinctive feature — no rudders. They are steered by sail trim and weight distribution alone. The helmsman brings the boat about by moving forward. This momentarily buries the bow. The stern, which is almost identical in shape to the bow, rises up and swings. A quick shift to the rear stea-



A 'Junky Old Boat' Steals The Show

Two amateurs who succeeded in completing a stunning skiff restoration are Stephen Wiley and Michael Robinson of Convent Station, N.J.

Wiley found an ancient and decrepit rowing skiff five years ago in the barn of a home he purchased on Lake Champlain, 150 miles east of the St. Lawrence.

"It was just a junky old boat to me. It had no value," Wiley recalls.

It remained no more than an old boat until Wiley's friend Robinson ran across it one day and recognized it as a St. Lawrence River skiff. Wiley allowed himself to be persuaded by his friend to attempt a restoration and reluctantly cartopped the old wreck back to New Jersey. There he discovered that the boat wouldn't fit through his basement doors, so new doors were fitted. Wiley was hooked.

In the basement of Wiley's house, the friends literally dismantled the boat over the next few years and painstakingly rebuilt it.

"We had no idea what we were getting into," Robinson said. "We knew nothing at all about this sort of thing."

After trial and error and a great deal of frustration, Robinson and Wiley's persistence paid off. Ribs, seats, decking and fittings were repaired. The only new wood is in one rear seat. The last brush stroke in the gleaming varnish was applied, the last bit of polish to the shining brass.

Wiley and Robinson had learned their lesson well. After a fearful and prayerful 300-mile trip to Clayton from New Jersey, their Mary Skiff, as they christened her, stole the show at the 1979 Antique Boat Show. She carried home the blue ribbon in the rowing skiff category.

dies the boat on a new course. A temporary skiff rudder could be attached for long runs when loaded, for example, on delivery runs on adjacent Lake Ontario.

John Gardner, associate small craft curator of Mystic (Conn.) Seaport, wrote of his first sailing skiff experience: "There is nothing quite like sailing a St. Lawrence River skiff...the exhilaration, the keen sense of movement and speed and the lively action on the water add up to something that is close akin to flying..."

For the children who grew up on the St. Lawrence River, skiffs were a part of everyday work and play. Youngsters raced. Adults raced. Sailing skiff races became a rage which hasn't yet subsided.

Skiffs were also used for elegant and lazy transportation. Their gleaming brass bow and stern lanterns and comfortable wicker-backed seats take one back to days when ladies in long white lawn dresses, carrying lacy parasols were rowed through gentle waves by their swains.

Gracious skiffs began to appear with inlaid teak, butternut and mahogany decks, gleaming brass and nickel-plated brass accoutrements and fancy woven leather bumpers — amenities which made them desirable to Victorian era island dwellers.

When gasoline-powered boats and outboard engines came into being at the end of the first decade of the new century, however, skiff use died out. The quicker, easier transportation provided by powerboats soon eclipsed the river dwellers' romance with the skiff. Some skiffs had their sterns cut off and transoms added to accommodate motors. Others were left to rot in boat-houses, barns and backyards, where some were filled with geraniums and begonias to become lawn decorations.

During the past decade, Herrick and fellow skiff-lovers have made it their business to ferret out all that may remain salvageable among these dere-

licts and to persuade their owners to put them back to use on the river.

"There are enough representative skiffs in museums," says Herrick, who once served as director of development and projects at Clayton's Shipyard Museum. "Enough have been preserved for posterity. Now it's time to get the skiff back on the water for private use."

So far, between 30 and 40 old skiffs have been restored. But the skiff revival doesn't stop there. With the resurgence of interest in man-powered boats in general and in the St. Lawrence skiff in particular, skiff builders are discovering a new market for their wares.

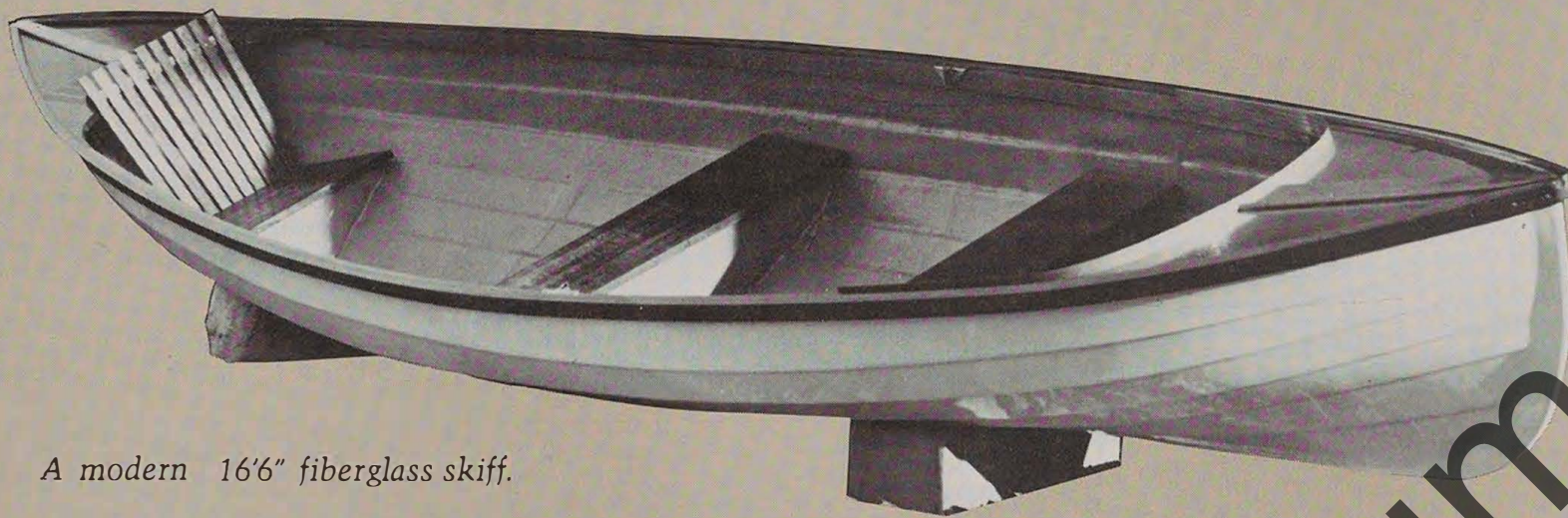
Jack Walker of Perth, Ont. (4A Colborne St.), is building five models of a modified skiff of his own design, ranging in length from 14' to 18'. He uses marine plywood "because you just can't get the white cedar anymore," but in all other respects Walker says his rowing skiffs are identical to the antique ones.

Skiffs are also being made now in fiberglass by Dale Stoughtenger of Schermerhorn's Boat Sales Inc. (Schermerhorn's Landing, Hammond, NY 13646). Stoughtenger's skiffs are built on a mold made by Ed Andres of Rockport, Ont., from an antique boat. They are finished with mahogany gunwales, seats and decks, measure 16' 6" l.o.a., weigh 135 lbs. and sell at the time of this writing from \$675, plus \$49.95 for oars. Schermerhorn's also sells a sail kit.

These new skiffs are quite adequate, Herrick concedes, but in his view they serve best to whet the appetite for the real thing — a restored antique St. Lawrence River skiff. The antiques, however, don't come cheap. A restored 15' ladies rowing skiff runs about \$3,000 and oars may go for as much as \$250 a pair. A completely restored 22' sailing skiff with sail starts at about \$7,500 — if you can find one, and it isn't easy.

"Restoration is an exacting job, really an art and very specialized. There

David Putnam



A modern 16'6" fiberglass skiff.

are few people today who are really qualified to do the job right," Herrick says. One of the pros in Herrick's eyes is Mel Calhoun, a "real river man."

Calhoun's love for the old boats is obvious as his gnarled hands move over damaged planking, dry rotted ribs and scaly hulls.

Skiff restoration requires equal amounts of labor and patient searching for materials and fittings, everything needed to make the finished product absolutely authentic. Calhoun, Herrick and numerous friends search out derelict river skiffs which can be used for parts.

"It's almost impossible to find proper white cedar for the planking and butternut and mahogany for the decks," Calhoun says.

Oarlocks and other accessories, like fishboxes, rod holders, flagpoles, seat braces and rigging are even more scarce, but Herrick and Calhoun are relentless. They pick up the needed parts all over the river communities.

The quiet simplicity and grace of the completely restored river skiff with its softly glowing planks, its satin-smooth decking and its wicker seats are tributes to Calhoun's talents.

A dream Calhoun has held for many years is to construct a new skiff identi-

cal in every way to the old ones.

"It's just not practical," he says with a shake of his head. "It would have to sell for \$8,000 or \$9,000. I'd have to buy twice as much white cedar as I need just to get enough that's usable."



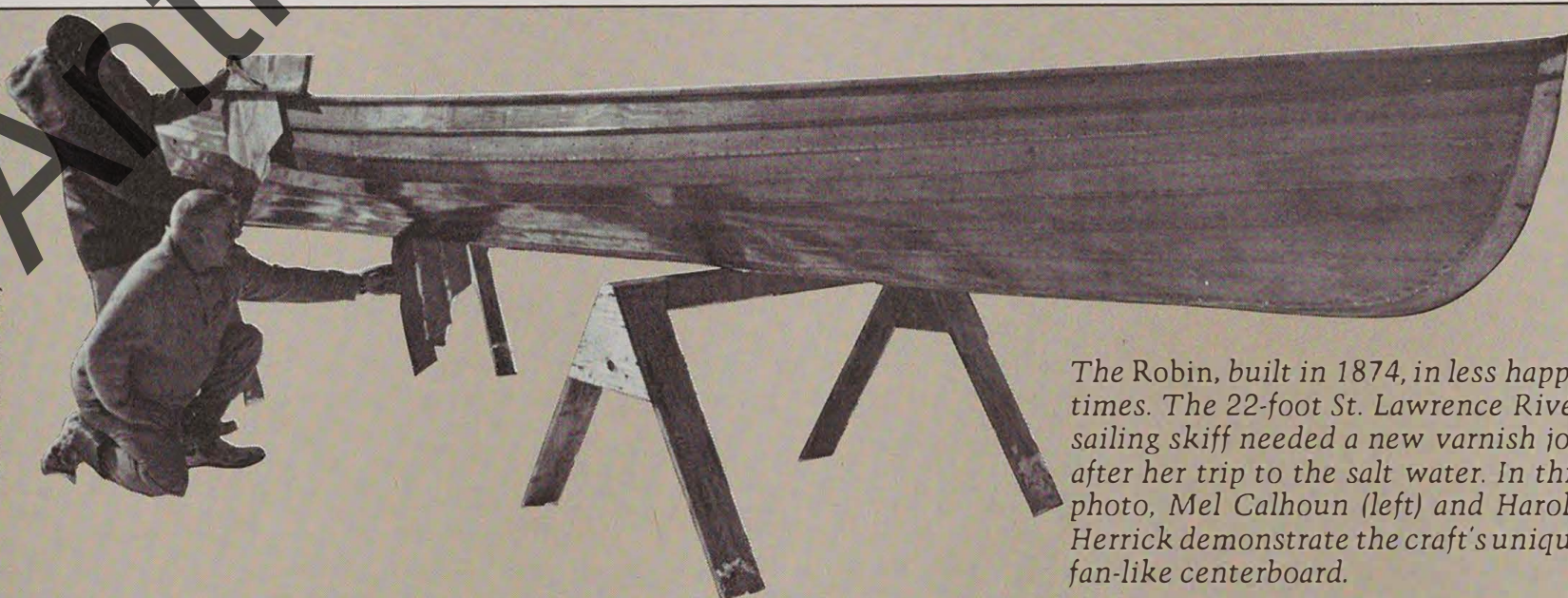
Kathie Barnes is a legal reporter for the Watertown (N.Y.) Daily News. She is an enthusiastic booster of the St. Lawrence River, the Thousand Islands and antique boats. She spends spare time working on her 15' 1955 Lyman, purchased a year ago, and boasts that she is usually one of the first boats on the river in mid-April and one of the last to haul her boat as the ice returns.

Roswell P. Trickey

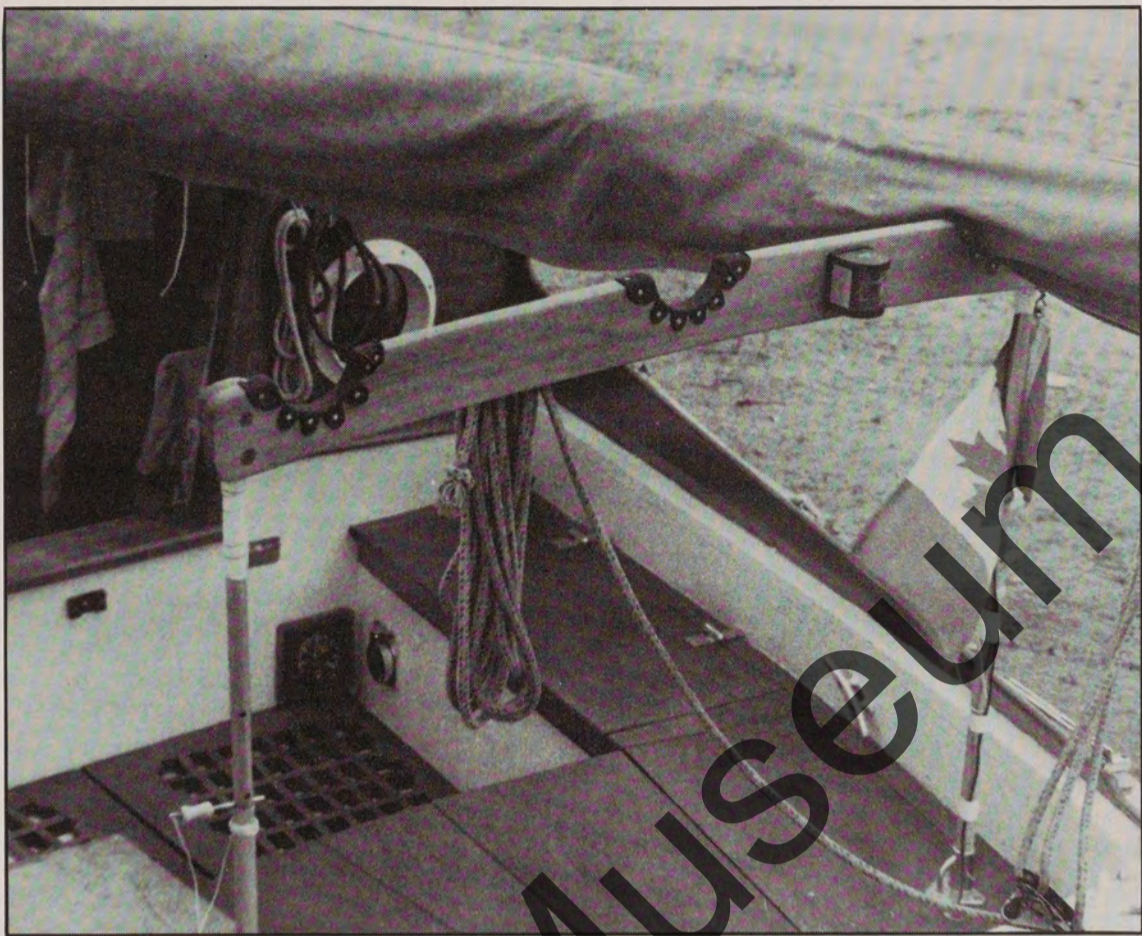
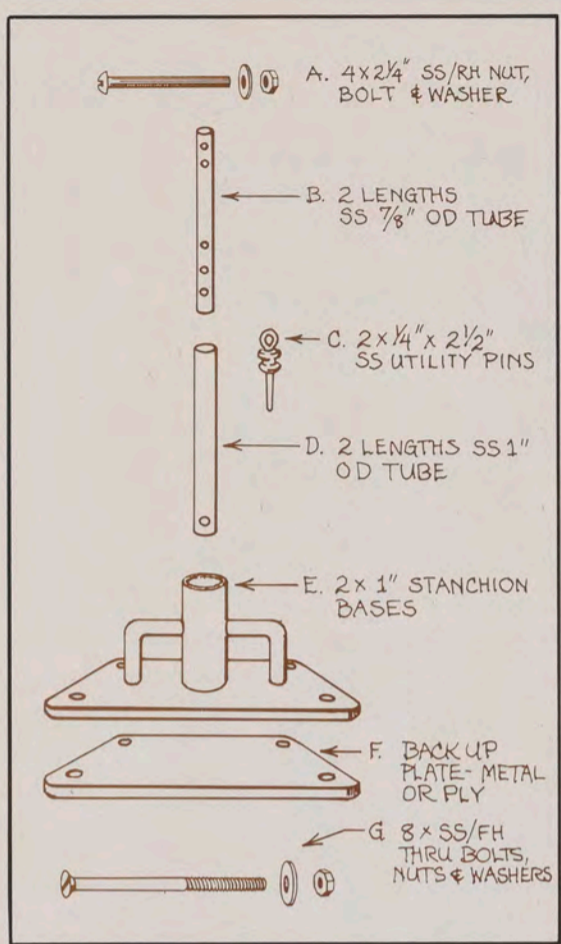


The Robin's second restoration is nearly complete as Herrick (left) and Calhoun inspect the workings of the St. Lawrence River skiff's retractable fan-like centerboard.

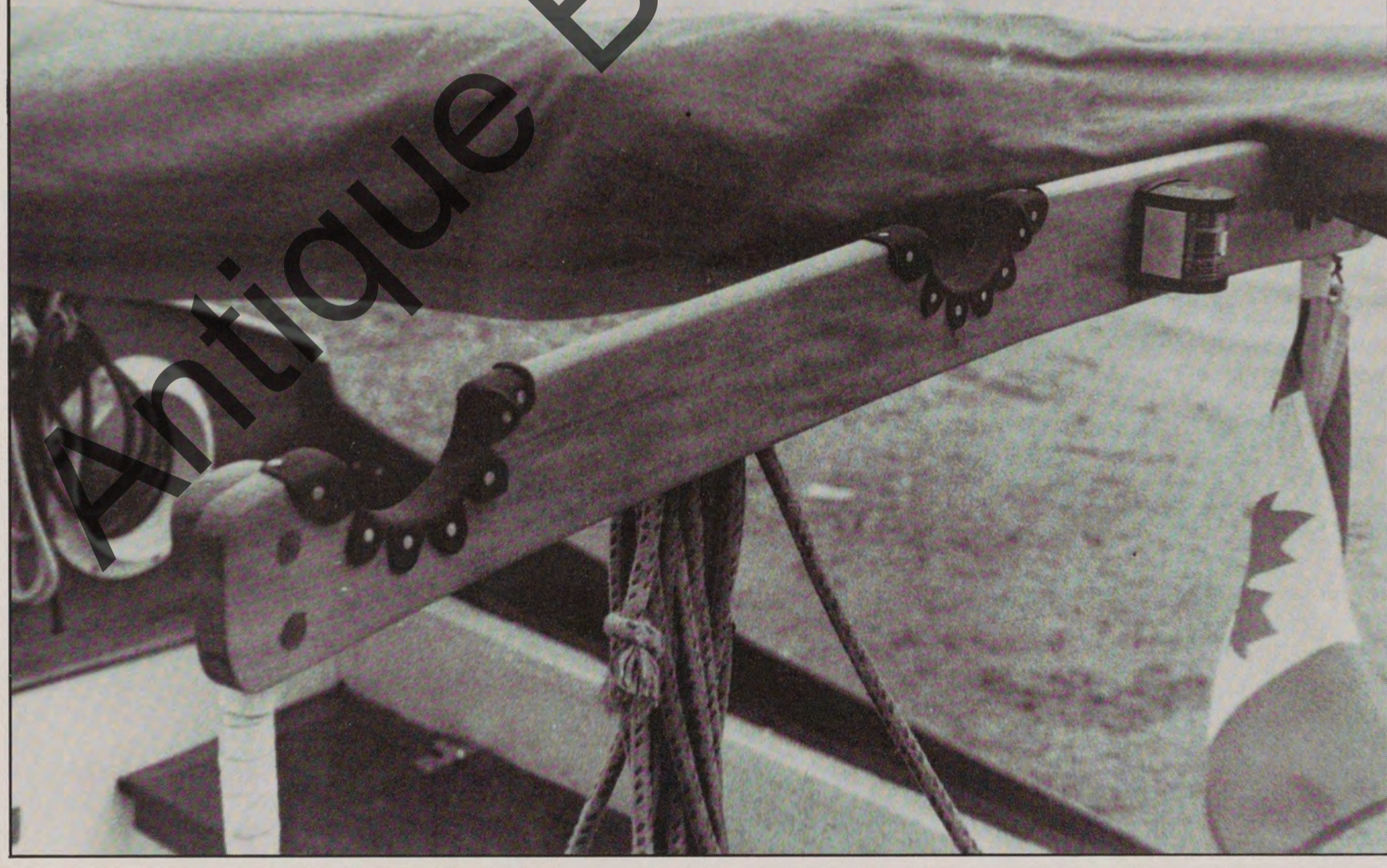
Roswell P. Trickey



The Robin, built in 1874, in less happy times. The 22-foot St. Lawrence River sailing skiff needed a new varnish job after her trip to the salt water. In this photo, Mel Calhoun (left) and Harold Herrick demonstrate the craft's unique fan-like centerboard.



Cockpit of Picaroon II showing boomgallows, teak grating & Boomgallows with sternlight & leather chafe guards.



Colin Adams