Sailing Craft of Belize

by Tom Zydler

Sheltered by a long barrier reef and an archipelago of small islands, and benefitting from favourable tradewinds, Belize has long recognized the value of her wooden working sailing boats built by skilful local shipwrights. Unlike many neighbouring countries, Belize has numerous lobster sloops – protected by strict fisheries regulations – and shoal-draughted sand lighters still earning a living.

To reach the Central American country of Belize a vessel must first negotiate one of the narrow channels through a barrier reef 135 miles long. In the late 1980s as a ship charged between the foaming breakers the first sign of human presence on the azure and placid inshore waters would have been the many white sails of the fishing fleets. In sharp contrast to the rest of the world, fishermen working under sail were then thriving in Belize thanks to timely conservation measures which kept the sea alive with lobsters and fish. From the 1960s, when national cooperatives took over the fisheries business from foreign middlemen, the number of fishing sloops rose dramatically and, with the growing demand for seafoods, the Belizean fishermen moved from a subsistence level to a significant place in the national economy. Today, the web site of the Belize government proudly announces that "Belize has a viable fishing industry. During 1996, Bz$24.3million of marine products were exported. Laws protect rock or spring lobster to avoid over-

With no method for reefing their generous sail areas, the Belizean fishing sloops are subject to exaggerated heeling which badly affects their windward performance. The fishermen therefore have become thoroughly adept at using primitive "trapezes" – lines to the masthead – to reduce heel.

Haulover Creek. During the fishing season, the sloops carry the little dugout canoes (locally called dories) on their side decks, one for each member of the crew. From these the men dive for lobsters and crayfish equipped with nothing more than face masks, long hooks, and their bare hands.

fishing; there is a closed season from March to July. Export markets for scale fish are mainly in the United States, Mexico, and Jamaica.

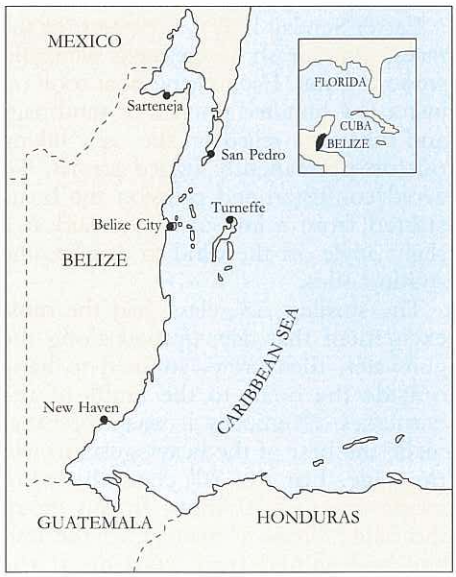
"The Belize Fisheries Department was established in 1965 and has been mandated to manage a sector that has been in existence for several generations – the Fisheries Sector. Belize's fisheries are exploited for commercial as well as subsistence purposes and are one of the most heavily exploited natural resources. In an effort to maximize the benefits obtained from the fishing industry, while insuring its long-term viability, fisheries managers are promoting an expansion in production through diversification of the resource base.

"Belize's fishing industry is small and growing; it is an industry with great potential for diversity. The Fisheries Export Products are: lobster, conch, finfish, aquarium fish, stone crab claws, shrimp, shark, dry sea farine, and smoked fish."

However, to talk to the fisherman is to hear a different story. Joe Young, sometime shipwright and now fisherman knows that the day when he must cross over to the tourist industry is coming all too soon. Fishing, he says "is strong right now but it is dying fast because the reef is dying".

The Sloops of Sarteneja

While sailing the Belizean waters in 1989 I encountered 155 sloops and most of the interviewed crewmen came from the village of Sarteneja. Friendly, Spanish speaking, and obviously descended from Mayan stock, they extolled their home as the centre of boatbuilding and tranquillity. Eager to see this maritime Utopia we sailed north.



It was the middle of March; lobster season had just ended and the Easter holidays were a few days away ensuring that the fishermen would be at home. As we hove in view of the village we were greeted by a forest of masts with a few sails scooting among them. The village pier was jam-packed with boats unloading their dugout dories and fishing gear. The largest items to come out of the holds were insulated iceboxes that kept the catch chilled for up to fifteen days. The men handling the heavy loads were generally very young and fit enough to free-dive as deep as eight fathoms in pursuit of the lucrative lobster.

The ten months of fishing drudgery were forgotten now with the sloop races uppermost in everyone's mind. Several boats were bending on new sails made from cheap Mexican polyester. Sewn in the village and roped with polypropylene line they last for only about two years. The low-aspect jib-headed mainsails are always gunter rigged. Their booms extend far beyond the sterns allowing no room for backstays and the only standing rigging supporting the solid masts are two shrouds tensioned by lanyards through deadeyes mounted on small bitts. The tightly wedged masts are stepped one third of the overall length

The fishing sloop *Eldy Maria* racing downwind off Sarteneja. The club at the foot of the jib helps to goosewing the sail when running.

from the stem which allows the club-footed jibs to be of generous size – simply lashed at the stem, the club can be moved outboard or inboard to account for wind conditions, wind direction, and helm balance. The club also keeps the jib goose-winged while sailing downwind. The jib halyard tension provides the only fore and aft support to the mast.

The sails have no reefing arrangements and fishermen anchor to escape extremes of weather. Fortunately, with their 2'6" draught, the sloops can be squeezed into tight, sheltered spots between the sandbars of mangrove islands. However, the shallow draught does not offer much space for internal ballast – very often only an icebox full of ice and lobster. So, to ensure sufficient stability for the large sail area, the sloops are quite beamy. For instance, one boat of 31'6" LOA (22' on the keel) measured 10' at the mast station; a smaller one of 26'6" LOA (18' on the keel) had a beam of 9'. Generally, the accepted beam-to-length ratio is about 1:3. The sailplan is low, the mast length being the same as the deck length, while the boom equals the above-deck height of the mast. It is worth noting that while the shipwrights refer to LOA to establish certain measurements, Belizeans usually use length-on-keel to describe a sloop: the racing classes of 18, 20, 22, 24' reflect the most typical sizes.

Easter Sunday 1989 was perfect for the races, with a fresh southeasterly wind and smooth water. Each racing boat took on just a few hundred pounds of sand bags and otherwise relied on the crew hiking out on permanently rigged strops. To avoid confusion and collision the boats started from a line of buoys laid at a slight angle off the wind to equalize the starting odds.

The smallest, 18', class, had the most excitement that day; tiptoed along the gunwales, their crews strained to hang outside the boats to the limits of the harnesses. Eventually it was *Alicia* that made the best of the heavy gusts to win the race. For the 20' class the wind increased to 25-30 knots. In this group the older *Marina P* maintained the lead she had gained from starting at the leeward-most buoy – a position that offered clear wind away from the crowd bunched up at the windward end. In the 22' class the lead changed several times between *Eldy Maria* and *Vitalia C* with the former finally confirming the previous year's winning reputation.

We followed the last race in our own yacht and, even though we were double-reefed we still made a brisk 6½-7 knots. But even this was not fast enough to catch the sloops that, under full canvas, now and then would take off on a semi-plane when reaching or running. Indeed, we only regained our self-esteem when it came to the windward leg and our draught made a telling difference in our favour.

Seventy men took part in those races and from the general enthusiasm it was obvious that the sloops meant more to them than just a means of obtaining a living. Still, their first and foremost raison d'être was to take the fishermen to and from the lobster grounds. As such, these craft had a good chance of survival for years to come and, though in far fewer numbers, they are still working today.

Sailing Lighters

The other group of contemporary Belizean sailing craft faces, in the late 1990s, in a less auspicious situation. Larger than the sloops, these are open-hold cargo carriers popularly known as lighters. Even in the 1980s they were often of a great age and were, already, survivors of a glorious past when all goods and passengers in Belize were carried under sail in the inner sea between the mainland and the outer reefs and islands. Since the land lies exactly north and south and the whole area is swept by easterly trades, a more ideal situation for transport under sail can hardly be imagined. Yet, the introduction of roads and internal combustion engines spelled doom to the great fleet of schooners and lighters.

For years lighters persevered by carrying cargoes to and from places inaccessible by land. Then, unexpectedly, in the 1970s, the ageing fleet began to see a brighter future. The steady growth of San Pedro on Ambergris Cay caused such an insatiable appetite for building materials that the boats were hardly able to keep up with the orders. Even after dark descended on the San Pedro waterfront the swoosh of a bow wave and the creaking of blocks from a sailing lighter were once again familiar sounds. By the end of the 1990s, however, the bubble had burst, a few of the old lighters soldier on but they are not being replaced. As Joe Young explained, "there's not enough money to be made from a lighter to pay for its building cost – wood is very expensive because the forest is in decline. I still build boats if anyone asks me; I build new, I convert old, but the last boat I built was in 1982".

Today there are but one or two lighters plying their trade in Belize's inland sea. Ten years ago there were eleven. The variety of their hull shapes reflected the history of west Caribbean small craft. According to Joe Young's father, the prominent Belizean boatbuilder, Simeon Young, the two double-enders *Yvonne* and *Lilly S* may have been built locally in the 1940s, but they belong to the type once prevalent in Yucatan and Cuban waters. On the other hand, the slab-sided *Journey's End* had a hard chine at the turn of the bilge highly reminiscent of the Honduran sloops seen in 1920s photographs. Variations in stern shapes caught the eye too. The counter sterns of *Jessi J* and *Mermaid* were remnants of a distant past, *Mermaid* being built in about 1910. *Radio*, built a decade or so before the turn of the century, and *United*, *Sophia*, *Claudette*, less than half her age, had transom sterns. Indeed, strong, simple, and easy to build, this is the prevalent stern type for all Belizean craft.

Whatever the hull shape, all lighters shared a characteristic shoal draught. *Radio* was deep indeed at 3'3" while the others had draughts of around 2'6". Nevertheless, a lighter has to be able to make good progress to windward even in rough waters. Nowhere is this more important than at Sibun river, south of Belize City, where sand and gravel are still loaded. Not only is the river obstructed by a shallow bar but there is a fetch of ten miles from the east. After loading, the boats must beat out over the bar against occasional 5' waves. Once in deeper water they turn north into the ever-present southerly current. Such odds, coupled with complete reliance on sail power, even in light airs, encouraged the development of impressive sail areas. For example, the largest boat that we saw in 1989, *United*, at 38'4" LOA with 10'9" beam and 2'6" draught had a gaff-headed main of 774sq.ft and a jib of 210sq.ft. It was enlightening to think that my own yawl of roughly the same length and beam, and 5'6" draught but considerably heavier displacement carried a sailplan

The Jones Boat Yard in Belize City can easily accommodate several boats at a time during their pre-regatta overhaul. Its wooden slipways are big enough to take two lighters at once. To aid windward performance, some of these half-decked boats are fitted with a false keel just for the racing!

of only 615sq.ft and depended on several special sails for really light conditions. Economical operation of lighters did not and still does not allow for such fancy rags and all the motive power is concentrated in the suit of two.

Some of the lighters set gunter mainsails but it is interesting to note how much more sail area is offered by a gaff rig on a mast of the same height: the 34' LOA *Sir William* (9'3" beam, 2'8" draught) carried a gaff mainsail of 557sq.ft and a jib of 152sq.ft. *Mermaid* at 33'6" LOA was rigged with a gunter main of only 410sq.ft and a jib of 150sq.ft, yet *Mermaid* was narrower at 8'2" and, usefully, slightly shallower at 2'6". Still, *Mermaid* worked to windward a good deal faster than the other boats, which, according to the lightermen, could be directly attributed to the more efficient shape of the gunter sail.

Customarily all lighters carried single rows of reef points in both mainsails and jibs. For good reasons these are regularly used in even moderate conditions: a load of 7 tons of sand, or even 10 tons in the case of a larger boat, dramatically lowers the freeboard and only a few inches of decking separate a low hold coaming from the sea rushing by, so the angle of heel must be kept to a minimum. A cargo of sand can soak a tremendous amount of water before letting it seep into the bilge to be pumped out and all that extra weight could easily sink a boat. The sails would often be kept reefed after unloading since, without the cargo, the empty boats become tender. "Ticklish" was the word the skipper of *Sir William* used. Austin Dasson described how his boat was running downwind and capsized when the long boom dipped in the sea: the weight of water in the sail forced her on her beam ends and the sea simply poured into the open hold. Fortunately the un-ballasted hull floated so she was righted with the aid of a block and tackle rigged from the mast of another lighter.

Working a Lighter

I joined *Mermaid* as temporary crew for a working trip to San Pedro. Both her captain, Fred Mejia, and mate, Carlton Young, had seafaring fathers and I soon learned that the lightermen formed a close-knit group and are often related. *Mermaid*, *Sir William*, and *United* were owned by Fred's uncle, Collett Maheia, who also managed *Journey's End*. Collett's brother, Baros, owns and skippers *Claudette*, named after Collett's daughter. Carlton's brother was a sailmaker, his uncle owned *Yvonne*, and so it went.

On *Mermaid,* sailed by a crew of two, the stress was on team-work but the customary division of duties was also in evidence. As mate, Carli was in charge of the cooking box – the bottom of a steel drum filled with sand and some wood smouldering under a grill. It was also his duty to tend the jib. As we approached Porto Stuck Channel, Fred called for a tack, put the tiller over, and hauled in the

Radio, the oldest working lighter in Belize, carrying ten tons of sand in the hold and her skiff on deck. *Radio* has been working for more than a century.

Loading a sand lighter: one member of the crew works the simple bilge pump while the others shovel sand from the skiff to the hold.

mainsheet while Carli crawled over the cargo to tend the jib. The embodiment of simplicity, the jib sheet was fastened with a bowline to the port chainplate, run through the clew of the sail, and ended in another bowline on the starboard chainplate. The line was long enough so that, after tacking, it could be sheeted in by doubling the slack through the leeward bowline and then making it fast with a slipknot.

Mermaid streaked along on a close reach and we soon passed *Sir William*, whose gaff sail was indeed less effective close to the wind. Carli threw some sweet-smelling buttonwood twigs on the fire and began boiling pigs' trotters for dinner. Relaxed, Fred and Carli talked about how they liked their sailing lives: the profits that were split in three even parts between the crew and the boat were satisfactory; the hard work of loading was followed by the enjoyable boat handling; they valued being able to spend most of their time under the brilliant sky in a clean, pure breeze. While waxing somewhat romantic Fred kept a sharp weather eye. A cumulo-nimbus cloud to windward reached such mammoth proportions that he decided to anchor in the lee of Caye Caulker. There, replete with Carli's soul food, we stretched out under the decked-over bow and dozed while the wind started to moan and the rain drummed on the planks above.

It was still very dark when we weighed anchor and sailed on to arrive in San Pedro just as the sun popped over the breakers marking the barrier reef, only a quarter of a mile away. *Mermaid* was soon anchored again and the flat-bottomed skiff was slipped over the coaming to ferry the sand ashore. On the sixth and last run I changed places with Carli so that he could knead dough for the "fried jacks", a delicious puffed up bread cooked in coconut oil.

When we set sail again, the departure was a lesson in flawless boat handling. The skiff was shipped onto the expected windward side as ballast. Carli hoisted the mainsail and sweated up the halyard while Fred stowed the scissors-style boom crutch. Carli then pulled in the anchor and, as the flukes hit the deck, Fred pushed the boom to windward to swing the bow; the boat fell off and gathered speed as Carli and I set the jib. In no time the boat was slipping along, the sun high enough to turn the shallow waters aglitter like a giant polished turquoise. We gathered aft to wolf down the breakfast contentedly.

In *Mermaid's* cramped cockpit Fred Mejia steers while Carli (Carlton Young) looks after the meal cooking over an open fire in a sand box.

The lighters' annual regatta. *Sir William*, with Austin Dasson at the helm, is no laggard even in a light breeze. Astern, *Claudette* skims across the water.

Sir William left just before us and now on a broad reach we could not match the powerful gaff sail even though it was of worn out and patched cotton whereas *Mermaid's* sails were made of Dacron by Lee of Hong Kong. I was a little puzzled by this extravagance until I learned that her canvas sails had fallen apart and she was working under the racing suit. Normally calm and self-possessed, Fred perked up when he talked about the previous year's races in which he had won his class.

The early March regatta became a regular annual event in 1926 when an eccentric gentleman, Baron Bliss, willed some money to that express purpose. Being a serious business, the races promised to be great fun so I sweet-talked Fred into inviting two extra "gringoes" as crew.

Two days before the regatta, even from a distance we could see that Jones Boat Yard in Belize City was bristling with masts and buzzing with activity. *Radio* had been out of the water nearly a month in the hope of drying out the hull and shedding some weight. Other boats were being sanded and painted top to bottom. The big *United* needed a new transom and some planking and, by the end of the next day, we had evidence of how easily a wooden boat can be maintained by skilful hands: a large piece of local wood, Santa Maria, had been transformed into the new transom and the new planks were already being caulked and painted.

Several lighters installed false keels: vertical planks 6-7" deep and 10-12' long screwed into the worm shoes under the mast steps. Fred decided that, in view of *Mermaid's* good windward performance, he would go for boat speed and sail without such a contraption. He also kept her old bamboo spars because they were dry and light, although other crews had made trips into the forest and had brought back huge pieces of green bamboo. Usually this wood cracks after about a year and only the hardwood gaff and boom jaws are kept to be slipped into the end of the new hollow spars.

On the eve of the races the lighters gathered at Barracks Wharf to unload all their punting and mooring poles, spare anchors, and skiffs, and to prepare the ballast – we filled twenty-five sacks with sand just for *Mermaid*. To tune the boat and crew we pushed off to tussle with *United*, and we, the newcomers, got a first taste of shunting 100-lb sand bags on each tack. Try as she might, *United* could not pass us on the wind. And, even after we went off the wind, the larger boat lagged behind and Fred, all smiles, called "You excited Carli, excited? We made the big boys think!" Indeed we did. As the sun went down *United* was still at it, changing the mast rake, reeving extra halyards, and moving sandbags.

After such high expectations the first race was a let-down. The crafty Austin on *Sir William* stole a perfect start and we kept behind him on the downwind leg. Once on the wind it became painfully obvious that a false keel made all the difference. Although she was pointing high with perfectly filled sails, *Mermaid* made much greater leeway. We stayed in second position and even an extra jib lashed beneath the main boom as a watersail did not help to regain earlier losses.

The second race included the boats over 34' and as the breeze dropped they made a picturesque sight as they crowded on flying jibs and watersails. Unfortunately, the race was cancelled just when Fred's tacking away to avoid the worst of the current had brought us into a better position.

There were still two more days of racing and *Sir William* turned out to be unbeatable this year. Austin surely earned the Dacron sails promised by the boat's owner.

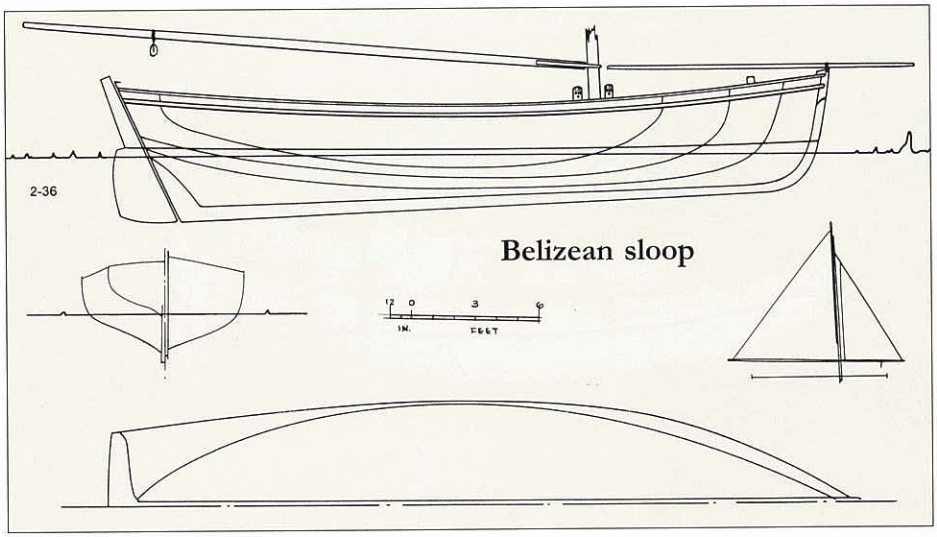
The Youngs, Shipwrights of Caye Caulker

The hull form of Belizean small craft was most likely introduced by Thomas Young, a Scottish shipwright from the Clyde who arrived on Caye Caulker in 1879. The cay made a wonderful home: a thick grove of useful coconut palms as well as some boatbuilding trees covered the land. Lobsters crawled in the shallows and schooling fish would bite empty hooks. The Young family flourished, and so started the longest continuous line of boatbuilders in Belize. Today, Thomas's grandsons, Peter and Simeon, enjoy the highest reputations in the country. After building forty-eight of his own designs, Peter retired on Caye Caulker in his eighties, and his brother, Simeon, moved to Belize City leaving their nephew, Nelson, to continue the boatbuilding tradition of Caye Caulker.

Simeon Young recalls that, happy as life on the cay was, the boatbuilder's lot had its share of hardships. Everything had to be done by hand. It took two men a whole day with a pitsaw to rip a plank from a log that had to be towed from the mainland. An adze was an essential tool and for a smooth final finish they used sting-ray skin in lieu of sandpaper. Many tools were made by builders and to this day Simeon uses his homemade planes that range from a big finishing one to a set of precise moulders. Even without power these men could build a 30-footer in just six months, but it required stamina and strength. It explains why, in 1989, the seventy-one-year-old, slightly built Simeon could grab an oar and pole-vault himself out of our skiff and over the muddy landing at his house and why, ten years later, he is still building boats on the mainland.

He lives in Belize City now because it is easier to find customers who appreciate his skills – but even there such people who have the money to order a new boat are now rare. In the past the necessity to provide for a growing family forced Simeon to travel far and wide in search of boatbuilding projects, even to Mexico and Guatemala. And it was a meeting with a fellow traveller, Melborne Smith, that eventually brought him to Maryland and the *Pride of Baltimore* project, a memorable time in his career (see Maritime N°1).

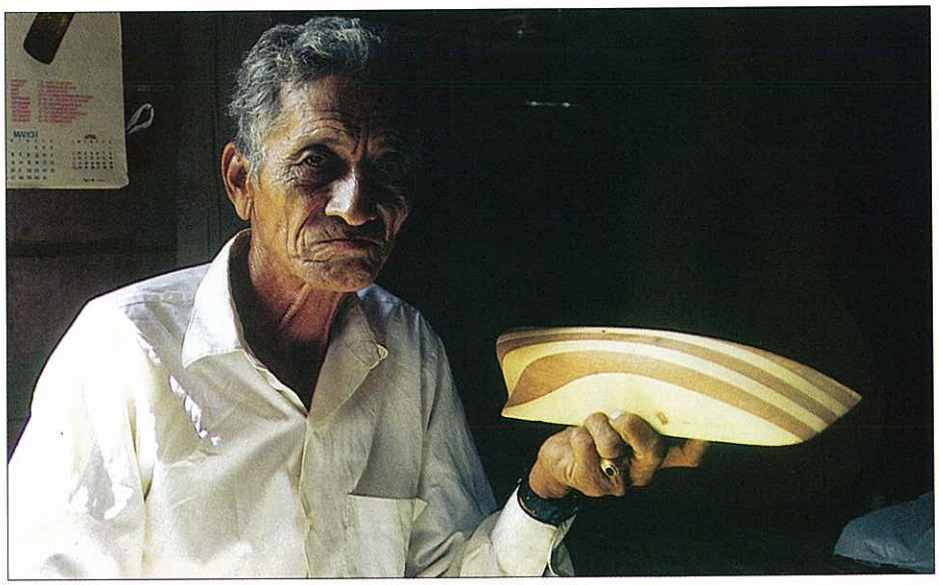
Exposure to yacht building gave Simeon the ability to loft from a set of lines drawings but his own designs begin with the carving of a half model that can be taken apart at waterlines. This method allows him to take offsets with a scale rule and to transfer them directly from the model to the natural tree crooks that he saws into frames. After the keel, stem, sternpost, and the transom are set up, the frames (locally known as timbers) are fitted and then adzed fair to the ribbands.



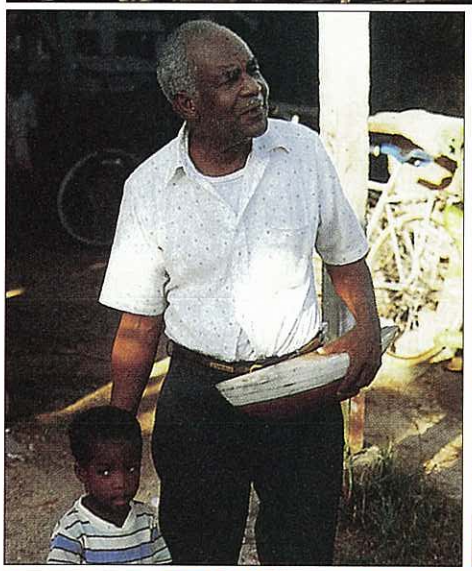
Lines of a Belizean sloop published by Thomas C. Gillmer in his book *Working Watercraft.*

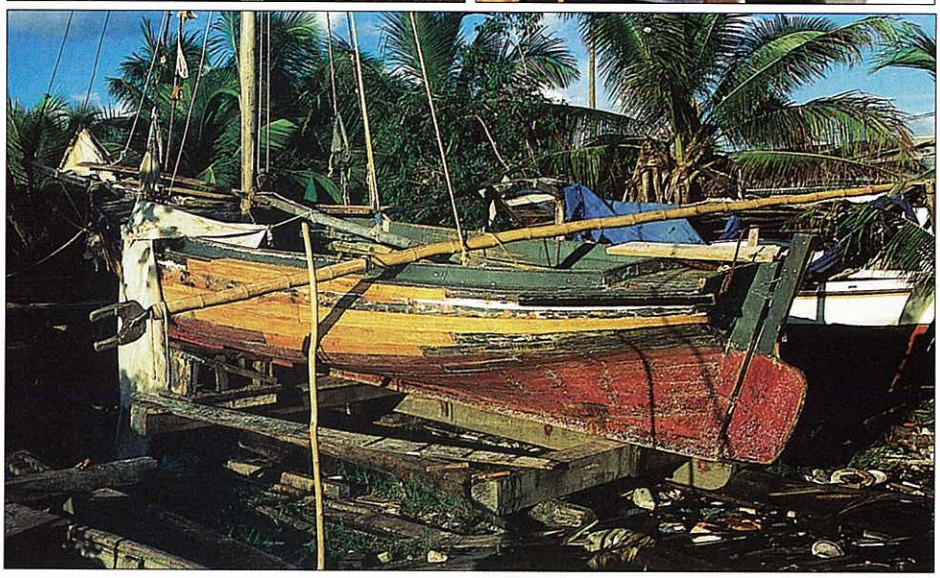
From Forests to Boats

Even after two centuries of intense logging the forests of Belize still yield boatbuilding woods of good quality but today you have to search for them and, as a result, the timber carries a high price. A tree incongruously called "cabbage bark" has a dense wood that is perfect for frames and beams. Another, heavy enough to sink, is appropriately named "bullet wood" and, being resistant to rot, makes very durable floors. The material considered best for planking and decks is Caribbean yellow pine and Santa Maria. Mahogany, so highly regarded in North America and Europe, is only used for interiors. Simeon believes that it rots too easily and that its acidity destroys galvanized nails, the common workboat fastening. Malodorous and immensely hard, dogwood makes durable chainplate stanchions and deadeyes; masts are of perfectly straight solid yellow pine or Santa Maria although the latter requires very meticulous supporting during seasoning. Traditionally, planking wood is not left to dry for long – perhaps about a month while the builder assembles the backbone of the boat and the frames using virtually green wood.



Simeon Young, the renowned boatbuilder and master craftsman, designs a sloop by first carving a half model. To improve her speed, this example has finer lines than most Belizean sloops.





Top: A fishing sloop brought up for repairs at Haulover Creek. Centre left: Maurice Bladen holding the model of a hull he built some years ago. Centre right: Carlos Cruz, sometime political leader, still enjoys boatbuilding. Bottom: The sand lighter *Lisa* in the Jones Boat Yard, Belize City.

The Boat Yards

Few shipwrights can make a living exclusively from boatwork but Simeon was a notable exception. Still working, when not actually wielding an adze he is often called upon to make half models for other builders or, more frequently in the past than today, consulted to solve unprecedented situations that may have cropped up in the established boatyards on Haulover Creek.

One of these is Jones Boat Yard. Set up by Gerald Jones who died in 1993 and was succeeded in the business by his son, the yard can haul vessels up to 75' LOA, 8' draught and 50-ton displacement. They are winched smoothly on huge wooden ways liberally daubed with thick grease. Apart from repair work this yard has done some sophisticated conversions. Mr Jones sculpted the pretty stern of *Claudette* after she finished her duty as a British army motor launch. *Mermaid*, also a motorboat in her previous life, was reshaped at her entry and stern run to change her into a successful sailor.

Directly across the river from Jones is a slightly smaller yard owned by Arthur Hoar, also an occasional customer for Simeon's designs. Quite a few sailing and motor yachts have been built here and many vessels have been repaired.

A couple of derelict cabin cruisers mark the site of the Bladen boatyard which was once busy constructing sloops. That Maurice Bladen, now eighty, is an accomplished shipwright is best shown in the classic lines of the two lighters, *Sophia* and *Lisa*. In his youth Maurice worked in San Pedro until an order for a yacht from the US Consul, Mr Oakley, brought him to Belize City. The 25' sloop fastened with screws – more labour-intensive than nails – was built in three months thanks to the town's electricity and, thus, power tools. Other yacht orders followed as Maurice's designs and work were of high order. Now that he has retired his sons have turned to making more profitable power skiffs.

The Village of Boatbuilders

At Sarteneja's peak, its 1,800 inhabitants owned about eighty sloops between them and had at their disposal six resident boatbuilders, an obvious surplus. During slack times, the shipwrights, with their natural individualism and creativity, became active community figures. Carlos Cruz, now fifty-six, built twenty-three sloops during the 1960s boat boom.

When the demand slackened he captained his small trading vessel in the west Caribbean. The experience of dealing with the skulduggery of commerce in some of the coastal republics toughened him for the position of political and social leader that he first assumed ten years ago.

It was Cruz who trained young Juan Guerrero in the art of boat construction and, like his mentor, Juan has since become an established star in both boatbuilding and politics – he leads the opposition party in the village. A prolific shipwright even at his young age, Juan turned out several sleek sloops some of which, maintained in yacht fashion, are still used to take tourists sailing from the resorts. Ever in search of development, in the late eighties, he built *Golden Odyssey*, a 23' on the keel, 32' LOA, copper-fastened sloop with the planking edge-glued with epoxy. To protect the wood from shipworm, the whole boat was epoxy-coated which in turn reduced the number of annual haul-outs from the usual four to only two.

Natividad Verde, the most experienced of Sartenejan boatbuilders loves sailing the boats he has built. He owns one himself and spends a good deal of his time on the water fishing or carrying merchandise. He races regularly, quite often against his own designs, so even when he loses it is a compliment to his skills. In 1989 he proudly showed me the half model of the last boat he would build before retiring. While explaining some distinguishing features he mentioned that he had learned boat construction from watching Peter Young many years ago. He must have watched attentively – ten years ago there were about fifty of Nativ's boats sailing in Belize and Mexico. His younger brother and son, both skilled craftsmen continued to perpetuate the Verde fame of building fast sailboats.

And the Future?

Belize is the last country in Central America with several boatbuilders capable of designing and building sailing craft. Fortunately, Hurricane Mitch of 1998 that wreaked such fatal chaos in neighbouring Honduras, swept inland of Belize leaving that small country almost untouched. Yet for all that the shipwrights are being forced into other trades through lack of affordable timber resources and a poor local economy. Now, at the beginning of 2000, there is little new boatbuilding here – some see this as a testament to the longevity of the existing boats but economics, a shifting population, and an increasingly "modern" society are perhaps more responsible. Even in the best of times boatbuilding did not bring great wealth to the shipwrights and the latest generation has turned to the more profitable building of fast plywood skiffs. Nevertheless, in Sarteneja, the fishermen and boatbuilders remain as a self-sufficient community that has retained a strong sense of traditional values.

As for Simeon Young, now in his eighties, he is of the opinion that the future of wooden boatbuilding in this country of just 160,000 people depends on the North American market. He believes that American yachtsmen will come to see more beauty in the traditional wooden craft, and at last favourably contrast it with what he describes as fibreglass boats with "camouflage" – thin veneers parading as teak decks and interior joinery. Is he as good a soothsayer as a boatbuilder? Only time will tell. He himself would love to put all his knowledge into one last boat. Her name, he suggests, should be *Fling* – as in the last fling. ■

Tom Zydler is a regular contributor of *Maritime Life and Traditions*.

With special thanks to Simeon and Joe Young.

When the wind dies on the shallow banks north of Belize City, the crew uses a long punting pole to manoeuvre the boat. Note the old fashioned counter stern.