

Adrian Morgan



Borne in the USA (turtle ate me boat)

Adrian meets an American boatbuilder with an unusual approach to work

Why ain't mo' people heard o' Robb White? Boatbuilder? Ya have? Better ship off ter the nex' page. Dang (as Robb would say).

To those who ain't (I should say haven't) heard of Mr White, he's also a writer and sage from Thomasville, Georgia, with quite a following 'cross the ol' pond. Heck, there I go again, that's what a week in Florida does to you. His boats are fast and light and his approach unique. He won't quote a price; won't let you see the boat until it's finished; won't set a delivery date; most certainly won't discuss any aspect of the boat with you while he's building her. May not even part with her. "The whole business is my business, not their business," he says. There's a waiting list for his boats as long as the beach on Dog Island, where he escapes every summer to test them.

As a writer, Robb provokes as much ire as admiration. He is, one might say, provocative; about boats, despoilers of nature, property developers, and the purveyors of plywood. There's more about him (and of the new Florida Maritime Museum's little festival at Cortez, where he brought his Atkin-modified shoal-draught planing boat, *Rescue Minor*) on p11, so I will add, simply, that he is a wise and lucky man – owns 1,200 acres of virgin pine forest, including some of the only surviving long-leaf yellow pine in the world.

What makes Robb so interesting to a fellow boatbuilder – though I hesitate to bracket myself with him – are his methods. For a start he induces curves in $\frac{1}{8}$ in (3mm) tulip poplar planking for his crazily lightweight boats under heat lamps (and a tin hat to protect his brain cells). Encapsulated in glass cloth and 'epoxified', it produces clinker dinghies far stronger than plywood. Lighter, too. Much lighter. "Don't give a fat rat's ass fo' plywood," he says.

The other day I had the privilege of meeting Robb in his clearing in the woods outside Thomasville, where he lives with his wife and son (who's also a boatbuilder) and a collection of most unusual boats, cars, engines and such. He took us to see his



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long-leaf pine, a material of which I am inordinately fond as my old Vertue is planked in the stuff.

Increasingly, however, after a lifetime studying marine life forms, driving tugs up mangrove rivers on Florida's Gulf Coast (he'll tell you he was just the cook) and building small boats, he writes – in particular a column in the fortnightly *Messing About in Boats*. *How to Build a Tin Canoe* is the autobiography of a wild Georgia boy, of boats and fishing and all kinds of quirky, unrelated stuff in which his voice comes through as clear as a whippoorwill (N American nightjar).

Among his stories – and they lose a deal in translation – comes one about the new boat he trailed near his family's beach house on Dog Island; while out, he chances upon what he reckons is a dead turtle, which he circles and hauls aboard. Turns out it's not dead and proceeds to eat his new boat. It's the kind of story you don't hear this side of the great divide.

More's the pity, for voices like Robb's are rare indeed. But enough of me: catch yourself a copy of *How To Build A Tin Canoe*. Better hurry: like his boats, 'fore long it'll just be a collector's item. Dang.

Can we wait? More next month!



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