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About 2700 Words

A CHEESEBURGER IN PARADISE

The advertisement read: 18-foot Bequia wooden whaling sloop.
Must sell this week. Call 773-7892.

For months, I had been looking for an island-built daysailer. I was in the midst of a major rebuild job on TUMBLEWEED, my sixty-year-old Alden ketch, anchored in the protected lagoon of Maya Cove on the south coast of Tortola in the British Virgin Islands, laminating in new sister frames, refastening, replacing. Most of the interior was torn out to get to the skeleton of the forty-foot hull, leaving just Spartan living quarters. I figured I had another six months before she would be ready to sail again. In the meantime I wanted a traditional little boat to do some change-of-pace sailing and hideaway cove exploring on late afternoons and weekends.

Not much had turned up, and was either way over my budget or way below my standards of performance. Nowadays, most of the island boats depend on outboard power and sailing ability is often considerably compromised.

I read the short advertisement a second time with excitement. Oh, boy, a Bequia boat! Throughout the islands of the eastern Caribbean the Bequians are known as the finest boat builders. Their double-enders usually range from 14 to 22 feet and are descendants of the New Bedford sailing whaleboats. Up to the 1920s, the waters of the Grenadines were still hunted by the Yankee whalers who would base at Bequia from January until early May, using local men to fill out their crew. Through the years they taught the islanders to build

small working sailboats to their design. Today, these two-bow boats, as they are called in Bequia, are still used for transportation, fishing, whaling, and rum smuggling.

The Bequians also frequently take a busman's holiday and organize their own sailing races. Entry fee is one dollar per man. The winner gets his money back, and the rest of the kitty goes for a rum party on the beach after the race. Under full sail in a stiff trade wind breeze, they are a sight to see -- singing, hollering, sailing hard and bailing like mad. Up until a few years ago, the sails were often made out of flour sacks. The size of a boat would be identified by the number of bags used to make the sail: "She's just a little four-sacker" or "She's a big seven-sacker."

The Bequia boats are rugged, fast, and short-legged to skim over reefs to elude pursuers. The stern of a double-ender doesn't lend itself well to attaching an outboard motor, so the Bequia boats have continued to be build and rigged as 100-percent sailing vessels. And although of shallow draft, they must have windward ability to fight the strong west-setting currents in the channels between islands. Some are built with a centerboard, others have a long straight keel that gives enough lateral area for a good bite on the water. Stability comes from stone ballast and weight of the crew.

They are sloop-rigged with a short mast, long boom, and overlapping jib. A long bamboo sprit fits from the base of the mast up to the peak of the mainsail; this spritsail rig is a handy way of increasing the height and area of the sail set without a taller mast or an awkward gaff. When the wind freshens, the mainsail can be reduced by about 35-percent by dropping the sprit and securing the peak's tagline to the luff (sailing "scandalized"). The rig is simple and surprisingly efficient.

On a typical day for the Bequia fishermen, they leave the beach at four AM for a ten-mile beat out to the fishing grounds northeast of Mustique, trolling on the way out and hand-lining on the banks. If the catch is good, they set sail shortly after noon for St. Vincent, a distance of about fifteen miles. After the fish are sold, they sail home, about another fifteen miles. This means a daily outing of over forty miles plus fishing -- all of it in an open boat, and most of it in the open Caribbean Sea . . . the lee of Portugal . . . little more need be said about the seaworthiness and sailing ability of these small boats. And the men who sail them.

The telephone number in the advertisement turned out to be from St. Croix and a lady answered. Yes, the boat was very much available, but she couldn't tell me much about it. However, I was in luck. John, her husband, was leaving Christiansted that night on an eighty-foot trading schooner bound for Road Harbour, Tortola with cargo. So I said I would look for the LADY BONITA the next morning.

But there was no sign of the schooner and late in the afternoon I gave up the wait. But mid-morning the next day, I received a message that the BONITA had arrived and I could find John around noon at the waterfront Pub.

Tied up at the dinghy dock was a yellow-hulled double-ended sloop with a **For Sale** sign. He must have brought the boat over as deck cargo on the big schooner. I examined her for over an hour before the owner showed up. She was definitely a Bequia boat, but was rough with considerable wear and tear. Paint was peeling, dings and deep gouges in the topsides hull and rail. There were some broken frames, a poorly added stern deck showed rot, and plywood floorboards were delaminating. The solid wood mast was cracked, the the boom and sprit were the traditional bamboo, but both were splitting

with band-aid repairs. The cotton sails were old, well-stained, with numerous patches. And numerous places that needed more patching. The longer I looked at her, I felt my enthusiasm ebbing.

Then the owner, John, appeared. He was a stocky man of Dutch ancestry with blonde hair, jolly pink face, twinkling blue eyes. We talked for a long time about the little boat and about Bequia. I hadn't been back to Bequia for eight years; he had left there just two months ago after living in Admiralty Bay for three years. It sounded like Bequia had changed, but not a lot. There was still no airport, so the only way to get there was by boat. He said it was still a happy, nice island.

John's price seemed high, considering the boat's condition, and the price was firm. He hadn't given me much of a sales pitch and I was about to tell him that I would think about it and let him know the next day. Which, I knew, meant I wasn't going to buy her, because I have always been an impulse buyer. Anytime I delayed a buying decision, it meant it was no-go. Before leaving, I asked him how he had shipped the boat from Bequia to St. Croix, a distance of some 500 open-water miles across a usually boisterous Caribbean Sea.

He looked at me for a moment, then said matter-of-factly, "Why, I sailed her up."

I looked at the boat and its appearance suddenly changed. This wasn't only a day sailer and fishing boat; she was a passage-maker. And she was equipped for cruising. There was a long sculling oar, a good anchor with plenty of line, two tillers -- one of regular length for normal sailing, then a long one for heavy weather to allow sitting amidships on the weather rail. And two water bottles, a canvas awning to provide shade at anchor, a three-step rope swimming ladder, a rolled up air mattress, a small coal pot charcoal

cooker, and a hammock for palm grove snoozing. There was a calabash gourd bailer with a copper sheet attached to the deep part of the bilge to absorb chafe wear. Internal ballast was four large sandbags.

I realized the defects I had noted earlier were mostly cosmetic. Although over thirty years old, the basic hull was strong and sound, and had been put together by a man's skilled and loving hands. I remembered years back when I had visited Bequia's south shore at Paget Farm and Friendship Bay where boats are still being built and repaired in the traditional ways with iron fastenings, deadeyes and stropped blocks. They are built on the beach in the shade of palm trees only a short distance from the shipwright's home.

Without plans or blueprints, the boatbuilders construct their vessels by eye, using age-old rules of thumb. They decide the keel length, then select and lay down a pitch pine timber. At this early stage, the builder can visualize the shape of his boat; sometimes he will carve a small model as a rough guide. The dry, wind-swept windward hillsides of the southern Caribbean islands produce twisted, close-grained, tough cedar trees that are ideal for the structural members of the new hull. The builder selects branches and roots that have the right natural curves, bends and crooks for the frames, knees, stem and stern post. After the roughly squared timbers are collected on the building site, they are put in sea water to soak and salt-cure. This pickles the green wood and keeps it from checking and splitting.

When the building of a larger fishing sloop or cargo schooner is completed, the boat is launched with great celebration and the assistance of the whole community, as aptly described by my friend Bill Johnson:

"For a year or more they have passed it several times a day and have watched it grow; they had gossiped about it, given advice, comment, and probably a helping hand, so there is a definite personal community feeling for it. The minister gives a blessing, a bottle is broken on the stem, another bottle is passed around, then all the men and boys put their shoulders to the hull. A shout is raised and everyone strains. The boat shakes, moves and starts to slide down the skids toward the sea. At the water's edge there is a pause as a new bottle is passed around again. Another shout, heave, and final strain and the hull is pushed across the shallows on the side of her bilge, then into the harbor where she floats light and high.

"Some of the old people say that when such a boat is launched, the waters of the world rise ever so slightly. The months of back-breaking work are done. Now only the mast needs stepping and the standing and running rigging fitted. Then the boat is ready to be sailed to the fishing grounds to earn her price."

Such a boat has to have a soul.

And I remembered some thoughts by Frank Mulville: "SANTA LUCIA was a romantic little boat, a cutter only eighteen feet long on the water line with a graceful clipper bow and a rounded counter to match it. She took us to Brittany, to Holland and across the Bay of Biscay to Spain, but on each trip she frightened us so much that by the end of it we hardly had any nerves left. She was a little bit tender, she had a big open cockpit giving any sea that came aboard direct access to the bilges and she leaked relentlessly and continuously. But she was fast, comfortable within her own limitations, seaworthy enough after we learned to handle her, and most important she had graceful, flowing, romantic lines.

"To us, she was a symbol of revolt and escape. When we went to

sea in her it was in defiance of every convention. We had no money, we always left behind some business enterprise which was on the brink of financial ruin and which ought to have had our constant attention, and we were living together in sin. Our affairs, generally, were in ruins. Invariably when we came back from our trips everything had to be sold to pay pressing creditors and we had to borrow money and start all over again. But SANTA LUCIA was so shapely and so noble that whenever we saw her graceful lines we knew that it was all worthwhile. She was slim and distinctive and lent a spirit of class and adventure to any harbor she was in."

I said, "John, I like her and am very interested. Can we go for a little sail?"

We reached out across Road Harbour. The wind was light, less than eight knots, but she moved through the water nicely, even though the sails had a poor set to them. But besides being old, a lot of their shape seemed due to bad adjustments in the way they were rigged. The boat felt good, handled some passing powerboat wakes without crankiness. John said the boat was originally called DAPHNE OF BEQUIA, but the first owner had kept the name for his next boat. John hadn't gotten around to a new one, so she was nameless.

It was too late to get the money from the bank that afternoon, so I said I would meet him at nine-thirty the next morning to finalize the purchase. It would leave less than fifty dollars in my Rainy Day Account & Retirement Fund. I didn't sleep well that night. It wasn't the decision of buying the boat, but rather I was afraid John wouldn't be there tomorrow for whatever reason. As I tossed and turned, I decided her new name would be NELLYROSE.

He was there. I counted out the money and he showed me a couple of things that needed fixing, made some small talk that seemed like

maybe a final delaying action in parting with the boat. Then I sailed out of Road Harbour bound for Maya Cove, about eight miles to the east. The last time I looked back, John was still standing on the dock, watching . . .

We close-reached south across Sir Francis Drake Channel to Peter Island. I fiddled with the sails and they began to look better. I changed the lead of the jib sheets, put a down haul on the boom jaws to tighten the luff of the main, adjusted the snorter loop for securing the lower end of the sprit, tweaked the main foot lacing here and there along the boom to get rid of some hard spots. NELLYROSE tracked well, didn't seem to make much leeway, and showed just a touch of weather helm. She felt solid and hummed along easily with the light six to eight knot breeze. I racked over and we slid up the coast of Peter Island. About six miles ahead was Cooper Island and the Beach Club that offered the best hamburger in the Caribbean.

A blue-darter line squall zipped down the channel, kicking up whitecaps. The Bequia whaleboat loved it; I started the sheets a little and she hissed through the water like a dolphin, throwing warm spray in my face and leaving a foaming wake.

NELLYROSE was definitely a passage-maker. I would most certainly have to sail her to Foxy's Jost Van Dyke Wooden Boat Race in September. Then I thought about sailing her over to St. Barts in February for their Regatta, especially Gaffer's Day. Yes, that would be a great idea. She could handle that 100-mile beat across the rugged Anegada Passage. Hey, then maybe island-hopping her on down the Windward chain to Bequia for the Whit Monday holiday races, and then the Carriacou and Petit St. Vincent Regattas. Oh, yes, that's a grand idea!

And then, parlaying my enthusiasm and exhilaration, I thought about a real adventure under a spread of sail: a classic rounding of Cape Horn, east to west into the snarling teeth of the gale-driven fury of the Roaring Forties and the Savage Fifties . . . ? . . . ! No one had ever done that in an open 18-footer! Not even Tristan Jones or Joshua Slocum. Iron men and wooden ships.

Then I realized that Webb Chiles is already on a circumnavigation in an 18-foot Drascombe Lugger. He would probably beat me to the Horn. Well, I could modify this sailing adventure. There is nothing wrong with a proper compromise.

So instead of a vigorous Horn passage, we settled for a balmy tradewind close-reach up to Cooper Island for a cheeseburger in paradise.

Epilogue: In September I sailed NELLYROSE over to Jost Van Dyke for Foxy's Wooden Boat Regatta. She made a clean sweep. As reported by the local press: "NELLYROSE, an 18-foot sprit-rigged Bequia whaling sloop, won the traditional class both days, beating a number of modern-rigged vessels twice her size boat-for-boat, setting yacht design back fifty years. A highly placed, reliable source reports that Dennis Connor, Sparkman & Stevens, and the New York Yacht Club are negotiating for the purchase of NELLYROSE . . ."