

Mr. Sailboat brings life to classic vessel Downriver

BY TAMMY STABLES BAT TAGLIA • FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER • AUGUST 3, 2008

She's been around longer than his kids, his home and his wife. John Borsodi has cared for her more than all of his jobs and some of his friends. She's bound to outlast even him.

Just about every day since 1962, Sailboat John, as he's called, has tended to Sagitta, a 43-foot-long custom wood sailboat built in 1907, bobbing in the water at the Great Lakes Steel Boat Club in River Rouge.

Sagitta, Latin for arrow, is the single sailboat among 96 powerboats in a workingman's club. And she's a year-round project for her captain. Mastless and partially covered with protective plastic sheathing, she's left the dock under power only once, when Borsodi took her out about 10 years ago.

"All my friends think I'm crazy for working on this boat for so long," said Borsodi, 76, a retired machine shop engineer who, when he's not working on the boat, lives in Dearborn with his wife, Helen. "Yeah, you have to be half nuts to do this stuff."

But for all the woodworking, metalwork, grinding, sanding, painting and sewing he's done on Sagitta, he's done even more for the Downriver boat club. And that means a lot to an organization that relies on members to run the place.

"If we need anything, he can fix anything," said Great Lakes Steel Boat Club vice commodore Mary Alderman, 46, of Wyandotte. "If you have a problem and something doesn't run and you need a part, he can make it. He sews: He does a lot of canvas work down there. He can make hundreds of knots: He taught a bunch of us girls how to tie our boats up. He's knowledgeable in every single thing -- everything. There's nothing he doesn't know about."

Bit by the boating bug

During his engineering career, Borsodi was the go-to guy for mechanical solutions. He retired in 2001, after 25 years with F. Joseph Lamb Co., a Detroit-area machine tool shop.

The boating bug bit him while he was helping another Downriver captain sail a customer's boat back to Detroit after the Bayview Mackinac race that starts in Port Huron. He bought his sloop from a Port Huron boatyard in 1962 for \$1,200, the same price he paid for his new Volkswagen the same year. He and an old pal from Lincoln Park, where he grew up, went in on it together.

More dedicated to Sagitta than his partner was, Borsodi bought her out in about 1965.

"You've got to entertain yourself somehow," Borsodi said. "That's the secret: If all you do is sit in a chair and watch the boob tube, you're in trouble."

Year-round resource

Today, it's the boat club, made up mostly of retirees and workers from United States Steel's Great Lakes Works division, that benefits most. There he shares his mechanical prowess, even though he worked for Great Lakes Steel for only about six months decades ago.

Connections mattered in 1962, when he set Sagitta up on shoreline next to the slip that launched the Edmund Fitzgerald. Only front office staff and shop floor foremen at Great Lakes Steel were allowed to join the boat club then. But his ex-partner's ex-wife was secretary to a Great Lakes Steel executive.

Now, along with being in charge of the club's spring launches and fall haul -outs, Borsodi's a resource as others work on their boats year-round.

"If anybody has any questions about fiberglass work or woodwork, he's the guy they go to," said club commodore John Armatis, 57, of Wyandotte. A member since 1999, he docks his 1978, 36-foot Trojan at Great Lakes Steel Boat Club.

Distinctive classic

As she appears in a memory book's black-and-white pictures with 1964 printed on the frame, so many wooden strips were missing from Sagitta's hull, you could see through her belly to the other side.

As she floats today in the Detroit River, her deck gleams a warm chestnut color and the cabin's roof is a wintry white. But down below, her skeletal bones show along the cabin's sides. She's waiting for someone to install a galley, sleeping quarters and finishing touches.

A friend spotted the plans for Sagitta a few years back in an issue of Yachting magazine. Original plans for the boat, designed by 20th-Century marine architect B.B. Crowninshield, are stored in the Peabody Essex Museum on the shore of Salem Harbor in Massachusetts. She's one of Crowninshield's faster hulls, a long, sleek design with a 60-foot mast, meant to carve waves off the Atlantic shore.

"Everyone knows what a BB is," said Yachting's deputy editor, Ken Kreisler. "There's something about the lines of classic boats, the profile, the certain shape of the stern, the certain shape of the bow, that are kind of classic in design."

Borsodi doesn't really talk about Sagitta's history. She's more a hobby to keep him busy. Shelves along the inside of her hull are packed with tools he's collected over the years. She's become a floating shed and a refuge for a mechanically gifted man used to working with his hands and his mind.

And he's making his own modifications. He already changed the motor to add enough horsepower to be able to stop the boat more quickly during docking and launching.

The six-foot-long bowsprit, the spar that juts off her front, is going to stay on the ground in a grove of red sumac trees next to the slip. And he's leaving off the rigging for a second sail that hangs off the stern.

"I've got enough trouble with the footage now; I'm not going to add another six feet on the bow," he said. "All of this adds interference when you're moving the boat."

Always learning

Mostly, he's self-taught in marine restoration, finding the answers he needs in old marine construction books in the clubhouse or at home. "It all depends where I get stuck, then I get out the books," he said. "That's what takes so long: With each new thing, you have to look it up."

His focus now: installing the railings along the boat's top. Until then, the plastic will stay on, keeping the deck dry so the railings' glue sticks -- when he gets to it. "Once I get that stern pulpit anchored down, then it's this bow rail. That's what I'm shooting for right now." He said he has set and missed so many goals, he doesn't look beyond the next task.

That's the way it goes for many boat restoration hobbyists, Kreisler said.

"It's an obsession, and some people might say an unhealthy one," Kreisler said. "The result is you get to own part of history, nautical history. ... The classic wooden boats, there's nothing like them. And you dream about them if you are so afflicted. No matter how glamorous the new boats are, these boats will turn heads."

A torch to pass

Borsodi knows he probably won't be the one to finish Sagitta, and isn't sure who will.

"Probably my number two son," he said. He has three children, two stepchildren and six grandchildren. "I'd like to have all the outside done. It's surprising: For that size of a boat, there's not a lot to the inside."

If Sagitta's story is like that of most old boats, Kreisler said, somebody, some day, will pour champagne over her bow for her first voyage after she's done.

"He'll pass the affliction on," Kreisler said. "But it will be finished. Somebody will pick up the mantle and make it happen."



The Sagitta under sail circa 1910. The original plans for the boat, designed by marine architect B.B. Crowninshield, are in the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts. One of Crowninshield's faster hulls, she was meant to carve waves off the Atlantic shore.

(Copy of early 20th Century photo)

