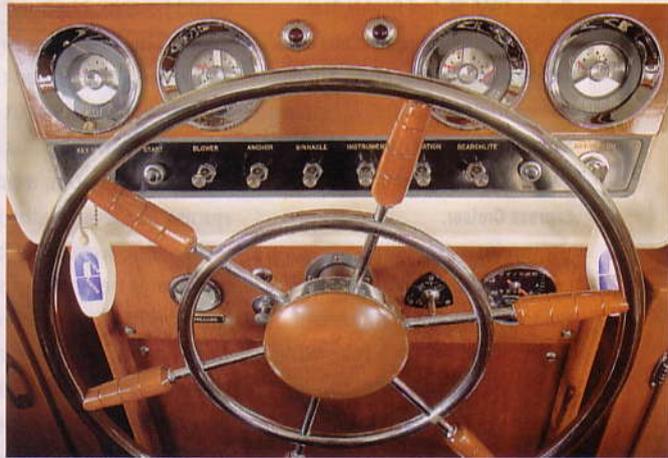


Oldies but Woodies

Chevrolet
*
Chevrolet

There's plenty of life left in these wooden thoroughbreds of the waterways, and plenty of people happy to keep them in their stable.

I WALKED PAST THE COVERED SLIPS OF A CERTAIN marina on the Northern Neck of Virginia, and this is what I saw, not skipping anything. *Minnow*, a lapstrake Chris-Craft cruiser; an old wood Citation; *Ole Chris*, an old Chris of about 30 feet; *Therapy IV*, an old Chris cruiser; a wooden Carver; a Chris-Craft Cavalier; a big wood something; an old Egg Harbor; and a 1965 57-foot Chris Constellation named *Good Spirits*. This latter is the marina's unofficial clubhouse, and, with its awning, soft chairs and wicker settees, its flybridge deck feels like the veranda of an old pillared plantation. Moving on, there was *Encore*, a 58-foot Elco that



once was named *Do-Ho* and belonged to Howard Johnson; an empty space usually filled by a 55-foot Chris Constellation that is currently out for repairs (always a word with dangerous

by JODY ARGO SCHROATH
photographs by VINCE LUPO



Above: Three classic Chris-Craft cruisers at the Antique and Classic Boat Show in St. Michaels, Md. At left is Pat and Russ Gray's *One & Only*, a 1950 36-foot Double State-room; in the center is John and June Beschenbossel's *Blue Moon*, a 1966 36-foot Tri-Cabin Constellation; and at right is Mary and Ned Crabbe's *Sweet*, a 1955 33-foot Commander Express Cruiser.

Preceding pages: Detail from *Sweet's* starboard hull; *Bella Navé's* helm station, David and Clara Ochipinti's 1966 57-foot aluminum Chris-Craft Roamer.

overtone when used in reference to an old wood boat); and a 1949 46-foot Chris-Craft Double Cabin Flying Bridge listing slightly to port. This one's mine. With some work she could be a real beauty, I said to myself yet again. This has been my mantra for the past five years. And indeed the long soaring curve of her cabin is pure Art Deco, by way of the Jetsons. Inside she has a large mahogany saloon and aft cabin, a full kitchen and a nifty turquoise linoleum bathroom—not that it actually works, of course. The bilge pump clicked on and water began to gush out the starboard through-hull. I smiled ruefully, remembering that my husband Rick calls her our \$2,000-a-year decorative fountain.

I looked back up the dock. Nobody. All these lovely old boats and nobody to talk to. I turned back to my own boat, leaning quietly and gathering dust, and I was overtaken by a wave of helplessness. Frustration. Loneliness. I needed to talk. I needed to talk Chris-Craft. What I needed was to find owners who actually come down to their old Chris cruisers, who take them out of the slip and out onto the Bay. I needed to sit in their saloons and feel like a glamorous Chris-Craft owner of the past—Katherine Hepburn or Eleanor Roosevelt, for example. I needed to see the brightwork at the end of the tunnel.

Over the spring and summer that followed I pursued my resolve. I attended every antique and classic boat show and rendezvous I could find on the Bay. I chatted up the owners. I oohed and aahed over restorations that left me avocado with envy and fairly popping my rivets with resolution. And I insinuated myself into boatyards where old cruisers were likely to be under the saw and fine china brush. Finally, I contacted the Mecca for old-Chris owners, the Mariner's Museum in Newport News, Va., which houses the 200,000-piece Chris-Craft collection, and I talked with Jerry Conrad, who curates the collection and is himself the author of *Chris-Craft, The Essential Guide*.

What did I learn? For one thing, the word "people" in the phrase "people who own old Chris-Craft cruisers" almost always refers to couples—Mr. and Mrs. Owner. *Guys* may own and love old Chris-Craft speedboats and utilities, but *couples* own and love cruisers. Women are as enamored of them as the men are, and they are in on the process from the beginning, from helping to choose the style of cruiser, to renovating and decorating it. Yes, decorating: one of the most compelling advantages of an old cruiser over a modern boat. You can make the interior your own the same way that you would in a period house. And you can make it

just as warm and welcoming. On top of that, there's room for the children and friends and the children's friends.

Why a Chris-Craft rather than an Elco, Trumpy, Trojan, Egg Harbor or one of dozens of other fine boat manufacturers of the past? Chris-Craft was the largest pleasure boat manufacturer in the world during the 1950s and 1960s, so there are a lot of them still around. And Chris-Craft made a lot of different styles and sizes—60 to 70 varieties in some years—so there was, and is, something for everyone. After World War II, the words “cabin cruiser” and “Chris-Craft” became synonymous. Every time you opened a magazine, from *Motor Boating* to the *Saturday Evening Post*, you'd be greeted by advertising that featured Chris-Craft “girls” waving merrily from the front deck of a new Express Cruiser or lounging about the saloon of a Commander or Cavalier. “Here is beauty beyond belief and comfort with a capital ‘C’,” enthused the advertising booklet *Chris-Craft* for 1950, referring to the 30-foot Express Cruiser. “See it and you'll sell yourself.” Chris-Crafts were everywhere, and people tend to buy what they remember in the happy past.

In June, when I attended the Antique and Classic Boat Society's boat show in St. Michaels, Md., that's just what Russ Gray of Oxford, Md., told me. “Growing up, I knew Chris-Craft, so that's what I wanted.” Russ and his wife Pat decided two years ago to buy themselves an old boat. “We didn't have any other hobbies,” Pat shrugged. The couple—he's an executive recruiter and she's an antiques dealer with a shop in Florida—had spied Mary and Ned Crabbe's 1955 33-foot Commander Express Cruiser *Sweet* at the cardboard boat races in Oxford and fallen in love with it. They resolved then and



I turned back to my own boat, leaning quietly and gathering dust, and I was overtaken by a wave of helplessness . . . I needed to talk Chris-Craft.



Clockwise from top: Looking from galley forward to V-berth on *One & Only*; *Bella Navé* heading down the Sassafras River; *Bella Navé*'s spacious saloon, looking aft; a detail of a classic Chris's locker door.



Ted and Mary Crabbe
bought *Sweet*, a 1955
Commander Express
Cruiser, as a wedding
present to themselves.

there to get one of their own, and soon afterward they did—a 1950 36-foot Double Stateroom. This is their first boat, and they consider the choice practically preordained. They first saw the boat at a show in South Carolina on July 21, 2005. They made an offer, and, when the purchase had been concluded, the owners gave the Grays the boat's original sales letter. That's when they figured it was all preordained. "It was dated July 21, 1950!" Pat says happily.

She said they are thrilled to be owners of an old Chris cruiser and to be at the boat show. But it didn't come easy. As so often happens with old boats, their new purchase turned out to have a few problems; notably the transom needed to be replaced. "At first you think it just needs a little paint . . ." Pat's voice trailed off, and I nodded with complete understanding. She's so right, I mused. First, it's "let's replace a few boards," and then it's "let's refasten the entire hull," and pretty soon it's five years later. In the Grays' case, they had the boat pulled right away and put Campbell's Boatyard at Jack's Point in Oxford to work on it. "We were still working on it up to the moment of last year's show." And to good effect. Their boat, *One & Only*, won Best Cruiser in Show its first year out. Well, I thought to myself, this is just the kind of happy ending I am after.

Ned and Mary Crabbe's story is a felicitous one, as well. They bought *Sweet* as a wedding present to themselves. "Instead of having a big

Above: *Bella Navé* cutting through the still waters of the SassafRAS River. Right: A Chris-Craft pennant on the bow of *One & Only* and *One & Only's* saloon.

Opposite page: *Sweet's* vintage engine-hour gauge; *One & Only's* helm station.



HISTORY AND STUFF

wedding, we thought, why not buy a big boat?" Mary told me as we sat in the stern deck seats enjoying the early summer sun at the St. Michaels show. (Their boat was two slips from the Grays'.) As the purchase of their chosen boat was proceeding—it was slowed by the fact that it was not actually for sale—they lost their house and workshop to Hurricane Isabel. But they went ahead and closed the deal. "Little did we know we'd spend five years working out the bugs." (Are you beginning to see a theme here?) *Sweet* has its original refrigerator, decking, interior and engine, but the hull has now been completely refastened. (Yep, I hear you.) The first year, Mary changed the bottom color and boot stripe. After that, the Crabbes realized that as small business owners (they have a renovation, design and building company in Oxford), they were just too busy to do the boat work themselves. "We're wood fanatics and Ned loves to restore, but he's so busy. We trust the boatyard." Like the Grays, the Crabbes had Daryl Frey at Campbells do the work.

Why did the Crabbes choose an old Chris-Craft? Searching the internet, they fell in love with the look of 1950s Chris-Crafts. And while Ned is the woodworker, Mary has experience with wood boats. As a teenager she worked at Thompson Boatyard in Chester, Md., where she learned how to varnish and paint and do other wood boat maintenance. "So I wasn't afraid of them." (Hmm, perhaps that is my problem: epifobia, the fear of Epifanes.)

Many buyers of old cruisers decide to eschew restoration—whether the do-it-yourself or the leave-it-to-the-experts variety—and instead find a boat already in tip-top condition. John and June Beschenbossel, for example,

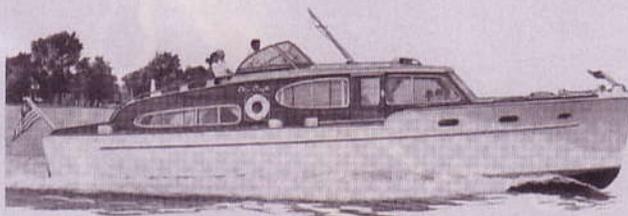
continued on page 85

While Chris-Craft boats date from 1876, the first Chris-Craft cruiser did not reach the popular market until half a century later with the debut of the 38-foot Commuting Cruiser. By that time, Christopher ("Chris") Columbus Smith and his sons had expanded the family business in Algonac, Mich., from a few dozen duck boats and fishing skiffs a year to hundreds of speedy mahogany runabouts and utility boats ready for an eager market. But in 1929, Chris-Craft decided to compete with the builders of elegant cruisers like Hackercraft, Robinson, Consolidated, Elco and Wheeler (Gilligan's Island's S.S. *Minnow* was a 1960 37-foot Wheeler) by introducing a small cruiser to its fleet. The new boat was a success, and Chris-Craft entered the cruiser market with a vengeance, offering two additional cruisers the next year and a full line of family cruisers in 1931. In the years that followed, the cruiser market staggered as the stock market crash was

as soon as the war ended, Chris-Craft picked up where it had left off and soon dominated the recreational boating market in all areas. In the decades that followed, models such as the Express Cruiser, Constellation, Cavalier and Roamer all helped make Chris-Crafts the most popular cabin cruisers in the world. But fiberglass was the wave of the future and the gleaming mahogany Chris-Craft cruiser would soon be a thing of the past. Chris-Craft produced its last wood cruiser in 1972.

Chris-Craft cruisers succeeded in large part because they were well built—for years, the best wood was graded "Chris-Craft quality"—well designed and offered at a price below the competition. In addition, Chris-Craft knew the value of an extensive dealer network and consistent advertising. Chris-Craft also offered a cruiser for just about everyone, from 30-foot bargain cruisers to 60-foot motoryachts. Antique and classic Chris-Craft cruisers continue to find an appreciative audience, even spawning

a number of enthusiast groups based on particular models, such as the Roamer, Constellation and Corsair clubs.

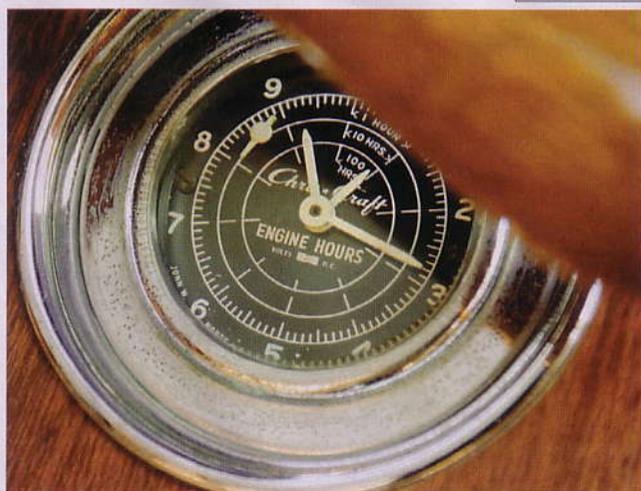


followed by the Great Depression, but as the economy began to recover in the late 1930s, the cruiser market did as well. In 1936, Chris-Craft introduced models such as Conqueror, Sea Skiff, Clipper and Sport Fisherman and continued to capture an increasingly large segment of the cruiser market. Production halted as the United States entered World War II and boatbuilders across the country turned to producing military vessels, but

Old is old, but classic is not antique.

What distinguishes an antique from a classic boat? According to the Antique and Classic Boat Society (and we're not going to argue with them), boats built through 1918 are "historic," those built between 1919 and 1942 are "antique," and those built between 1943 and 1968 are "classic." Everything else is "contemporary."

—J.A.S.



OLDIES BUT WOODIES

continued from page 55

purchased their 1966 38-foot Tri-Cabin Constellation in 2005 from the boat's third owner, a nuclear scientist who had maintained *Blue Moon* in excellent condition during his 30 years of ownership, winning prizes and helping to found the Chris-Craft Antique Boat Club. Now the Beschenbossels pretty much sit back and enjoy the fruits of the former owner's labors, including *Blue Moon's* wine cellar and flat-panel television (well hidden from view, of course). They have also coated *Blue Moon's* deck with the same rubberized paint that is used on tug boats, so that takes care of *that* maintenance problem. Still, John has plenty to tinker with. In addition to *Blue Moon*, he owns 14 classic cars, including Rolls Royce, Bentley, Jaguar and MG. The Beschenbossels had cruised over to St. Michaels from Mayo, Md., for the boat show, but also managed to bring a Rolls for the Rolls Royce show being held simultaneously. I forgot to ask how.

Back on the Northern Neck, I asked Jim Hillier, owner of *Good Spirits*, about his approach to old boat ownership. "I've restored more than a dozen pre-Civil War homes in Petersburg, Va., so I don't feel daunted by wooden boats," he told me as I settled comfortably into the wicker settee on the "veranda" of *Good Spirits* one Sunday morning. This is his third Chris cruiser. But all three were in pretty good to excellent shape when he bought them, he said, which has allowed him to spend more time enjoying them than working on them. No arguing with that, I thought, as two other marina denizens came onboard for Hillier's scrambled eggs and coffee.

Both the Chris-Craft Antique Boat Club and the Chesapeake Bay Chapter of the Antique and Classic Boat Society are great resources for getting to know old boats in general and Chris-Crafts in particular, but how about a yacht club devoted entirely to antique and classic boats, you ask. That would be the Classic Yacht Club, based on the Chesapeake Bay. Its members' classic

boats must be at least 25 years old and at least 50 percent restored. Each year they hold several social events, a judging event and several rendezvous at various locations on the Bay.

It was at the Classic Yacht Club's July rendezvous at North East Yacht Club that I met David and Clara Ochipinti and first saw their 1966 57-foot aluminum Chris Roamer *Bella Navé*. Immediately, I decided to apply for membership in their family so they would invite me back on a regular basis. I was enchanted with the Ochipintis because they represent both the do-it-yourself school of Chris-Craft ownership and the forget-that-buy-it-Bristol graduate school, and because they use their boat all the time—every weekend during the boating season, which for them runs into November. "We use the heck out of it," Clara told me. I loved that.

Their first boat, a 1955 37-foot Commander, was a baptism by fire, as in the first time they took it out the engines failed and they had to figure out how to get back without them. (A tow.) Their second boat was a 1967 45-foot Constellation, which they purchased near its birthplace in Michigan and brought back through the Erie Canal, tossing out things like old bedding at stops along the way. "We worked on the Constellation all four years we owned her," Clara said. "We did all the work ourselves. Finally, we said, 'What are we doing?' " This time they decided to find a boat in really good shape—and one that was even bigger since their two daughters kept inviting more and more friends onboard for family weekends. This time too they found their boat in Michigan, within a few miles of the factory where it had been built. But, instead of having to tie new bedding on top of the car (giving a good impression of the Clampetts on their way to Beverly Hills), this time they enjoyed a maintenance-free cruise down the waterways. "It was like night and day."

A fresh-water environment and ongoing maintenance have been kind to *Bella Navé*. All of the stainless and chrome are original. The aluminum hull has had an anticorrosion coating applied to protect it. "I hadn't intended to move away from

wood until I saw this," David told me as we toured the boat. From the hull up everything is mahogany—except for the decks, which are teak. A previous owner had installed a wet bar and restored the instruments. The Ochipintis have replaced the galley floor, which was linoleum. The guest cabins are remarkably spacious, with a hallway and closets opposite the door and three closets inside. There is a Jack and Jill shower (two entrances). The master stateroom has its own bathroom and about half-a-dozen closets. Because this boat is aluminum, it has more storage than a wood boat because the frames are thinner and storage space can go right up against the hull, David explained. *Bella Navé* also has new Cummins turbo diesels and zoned heat and air conditioning. She cruises 16 to 18 knots and is easy to handle, Clara said. At 63,000 pounds, the hardest thing to do is stop. ▶

RESOURCES

EVENTS

Interested in looking at some great old boats and talking with their owners? Here are the Bay's principal annual events and the month in which they are held. Check the websites or call closer to the event for exact dates.

Chesapeake Antique Boat and Marine Engine Show, Calvert Marine Museum, Solomons Island, Md., May (410-326-2042; www.calvertmarinemuseum.com)

Chesapeake Bay Chapter, Antique and Classic Boat Society's Boat Festival, Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, St. Michaels, Md., June (410-437-9066; www.chesapeakebayacbs.net)

Antique and Classic Boat Show, Reedville Fishermen's Museum, Reedville, Va., September (804-453-7159; www.rfmuseum.org)

Classic Yacht Club Rendezvous, various dates (www.classicyachtclub.org)

ORGANIZATIONS

Antique and Classic Boat Society, www.acbs.org

Chesapeake Bay Chapter, www.chesapeakebayacbs.net

Chris-Craft Antique Boat Club, www.chris-craft.org

Classic Yacht Club, www.classicyachtclub.org

Chris-Craft Collection, Mariner's Museum, Newport News, Va., www.mariner.org



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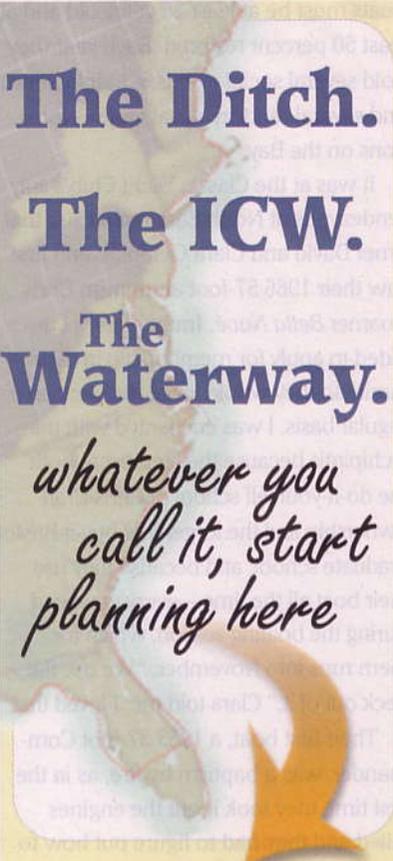
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OLDIES BUT WOODIES

Several weeks later, although my application for membership in the Ochipinti family was still pending, they agreed to take me out on the Sassafras River for a quick spin. Although they live in West Chester, Pa., they keep their boat at Skipjack Cove in Georgetown, Md. In fact, their second boat, the 45-foot Constellation, is just a couple of slips down; its new owners are now members of the Classic Yacht Club as well.

They made it look so easy. As David started the engines, Clara began the casting-off process. She stood at the bow and gave hand gestures as David put *Bella Navé* into reverse. Slowly, the boat eased out of the covered slip, which seemed to have room for no more than a saltine cracker or two between hull and posts. No rush, no panic, no bumps. They've done this a few times before. "We need 60 feet. The fairway is 90," David said as he pivoted the boat to port. There are three 90-degree turns just to get out of the marina. "Lots of people don't take their big boats out because they think it's more trouble. But it's not true." Out on the Sassafras, David kept the speed down until we passed the end-of-speed-limit sign downriver. We might as well have been aboard the *Queen Mary* the ride was so solid. David opened the throttle, and we picked up speed. The big aluminum hull went up onto a semi-plane. Onboard, it was quiet and still steady enough to play pick-up sticks. Wow! So this is what it's like, I thought to myself. I took a deep breath as if I could store all this enthusiasm in my bloodstream.

I'm going to need it. I don't have digits sufficient to count the major systems that need to be overhauled on my boat before the thrill is mine. But now I had a support group as big as the Bay, and that was a great start. And for the work I can't do myself, I know that there are a surprising number of boatyards on the Bay that still work on wood boats. Krentz Marine in Callao, Va., Campbell's Boatyard in Oxford, Md., Sarles and Petrini boatyards in Annapolis, and Hartge Yacht Yard in Galesville, Md., to name just a few. And there are classic boat restorers like

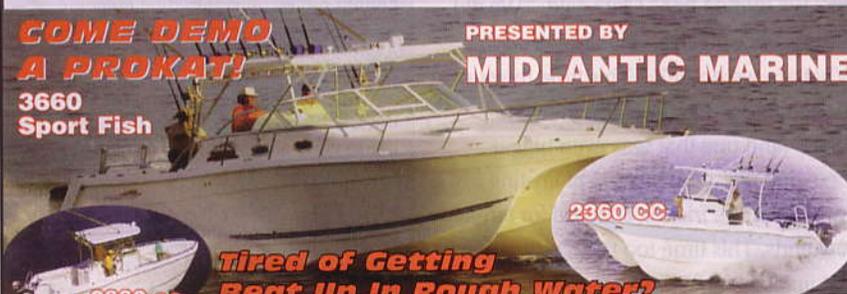


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Michael Haines in West Chester, Pa., Howard P. Johnson of Old Time World in southern Maryland and George Hazzard's Wooden Boat Restoration in Millington, Md. This is the lesson I have learned about dealing with boatyard craftsmen: When you bring your boat to them and they look at you as if you probably need help to turn the faucet on in the morning, don't let it bother you. The people who work on wood boats for a living are a militant lot. They love wood and wood boats and they hate to see them deteriorate. I am told that Doug Daiss, owner of Krentz Marine (that certain marina on the Northern Neck) turns purple when an owner tells him that he doesn't plan to keep his old Chris cruiser under cover. It's a source of deep frustration for all those who work on wood boats that neglect dooms hundreds of them every year.

Finally, I turned my attention to the southern Bay and the Mariner's Museum's amazing Chris-Craft collection. This was just great! I sent them my boat's hull number, and they sent me a fat packet of nifty stuff like the hull card for my very boat, which gives all the options it came with and even the color of the Simmons Hide-a-Bed sofa (green and white). They also sent me sales literature for my model, photographs and technical drawings suitable for framing. Believe me, this is the cheapest stuff I am ever going to buy for my boat. According to Jerry Conrad, since the museum took possession of the Chris-Craft archives in the mid-1980s, they have been contacted almost 40,000 times by phone, e-mail, fax and walk-ins. Since 1988, they have put together about 7,500 research packages. And they are still working their way through the 200,000-piece collection.

So that's how I spent my summer. Now it's fall, and once again I am walking out the dock to my boat. I have just come from the Reedville Fishermen's Museum's Antique and Classic Boat Show, and I am thinking, heck, with all those resources, why was I ever worried? Then it suddenly dawns on me that with all this research, I haven't done a lick of work on my boat all season! ■

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