

## Bjorn Again

### One Family and Three Generations of Boatbuilding Tradition

By Richard J. Dodds

On June 16, 2013, a gleaming 15-foot wooden runabout was launched into a narrow tidal creek in the town of Churchton, on Maryland's Western Shore, in the company of family and friends. It culminated a dream of professional artist Lisa Egeli to build a wooden boat, although she did not expect it to take ten years. It also marked the third generation of a Maryland family who has combined art and wooden boats like no other.



Bjorn Egeli and the 45' *Mary Lois*, almost complete. Launched in 1955, she is still in the Egeli family today. (courtesy, Peter and Stu Egeli)

The name of the boat, *Bjorn Again*, was kept secret up until the moment of launching, but it could not be more apt. Bjorn Egeli, Lisa's grandfather, was born in Horten, Norway in 1900 where he received traditional schooling supplemented by art classes and wood-carving, taught by his uncle. Bjorn left home after the death of his father in 1915 and went

to sea on square-riggers, rounding the Horn on a number of occasions. He came ashore in New York in 1919 where he took art classes at the Cooper Union and later at the Brooklyn Art School. In 1924 he entered the Corcoran School of Art in Washington, D. C., and graduated in 1929, after a spell in the U.S. Coast Guard.

By the time he married Lois Baldwin in 1932, herself a portrait and landscape artist, he was beginning to make a name for himself among Washington's elite, the start of a long career as a portrait painter. He would go on to paint the portraits of two U.S. leaders – Presidents

Eisenhower and Nixon – amongst other notables. Remarkably, all five children of Bjorn and Lois would go on to become professional artists.

Portraits of Bjorn Egeli show a broad-shouldered and strong man with classic Scandinavian features. In his youth he had been a champion wrestler and gymnast. Early on he channeled some of his energy into small boats and built a ten-foot dingy in 1921. He also owned a 26-foot converted lifeboat named *Blackboat* that was later damaged beyond repair in the great storm of August 1933 that devastated the Chesapeake Bay. However, in the spring of 1934, when living at Shady Side, south of Annapolis, he started building a 30-foot John Hanna-designed Tahiti ketch. Launched as *Lois* after four years of effort, she was sailed by Egeli and his family until 1945.

*Lois* went on to become a household name when bought by the famous French single-hander (and naturalized American citizen) Jean Gau and renamed *Atom*. Jean Gau, like Egeli, was another lover of the sea and a painter who crossed the Atlantic ten times under sail and circumnavigated the globe twice in *Atom*. In 1971, on his 10<sup>th</sup> crossing, and at the end of an arduous 123-day passage from South Africa, he stranded in the early morning hours of October 25<sup>th</sup> on the lonely shore of Assateague Island, on the Maryland-Virginia border. The struggle to free the boat and move her to Ocean City, Maryland made national headlines. The following year *Atom* was repaired by John Swain of Cambridge, setting sail once more for France in June. Long overdue, Gau later turned up in France without his beloved *Atom*, blown ashore on the coast of North Africa and this time lost for good.

Back in Maryland, Bjorn Egeli and his family moved to Glebe Farm in 1942, a two hundred-acre farm on Herring Creek off the Potomac, in St. Mary's County. From here he commuted to his

studio in Washington. At the time the farm had no electricity, no running water, and no central heat. Nothing daunted, the energetic artist/carpenter embarked on a program of improvements and bought a Belsaw sawmill to cut lumber for a new barn, chicken houses and a new and larger boat, a 45-foot ketch of his own design. He started building *Mary Lois*, named after his daughter, in 1946, after making several half-models of prospective designs. Juggling painting commissions and family commitments, construction continued over the next nine years until she was launched from the front lawn in 1955. Originally intended to cruise the South Pacific, *Mary Lois* mainly sailed the Chesapeake Bay, and is owned today by Bjorn's son Cedric Egeli and his wife Joannette, both artists living in Maryland.

In later years, Bjorn Egeli slowed down his portrait work and went back to his first love – painting the ships that he sailed on in his youth. He passed away on October 20, 1984.

Bjorn and Lois Egeli shared their artistic ability and passion for wooden boats with their five children, one of whom, Peter Egeli, went on to become president of the American Society of Marine Artists and a renowned portrait painter in his own right. Growing up on his parent's waterfront farm, Peter Egeli witnessed local watermen at work in the last era of commercial sail



Peter Egeli preparing *Galatea* for moving to its launch site, 1973.  
(courtesy, Peter and Stu Egeli)



Gaff cutter *Galatea* under sail.  
(courtesy, Peter and Stu Egeli)

on the Chesapeake. He also absorbed his father's stories of sailing before the mast in deep-water sail.

Peter Egeli graduated from the Maryland Institute of Art, studied at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington, D. C., and at the Art Students League in New York. He married Elizabeth (“Stu”) Wilkinson, and had two children, Stuart and Lisa Egeli. Like his father before, Peter Egeli also ventured into boatbuilding, completing the handsome 30-foot gaff cutter *Galatea* in 1973. It took Egeli about eleven years, working-on-and-off, to complete the boat. Construction started at Glebe Farm but the incomplete boat had to be hauled to Peter’s current home, a converted farmhouse on the St. Mary’s River.

*Galatea* was modeled after *Ben Bow*, a classic William Atkin-designed 30-foot gaff cutter with 550 feet of working sail area. She was used by Peter Egeli and his family to cruise the Chesapeake Bay but also ventured to New England. However, after twenty-two years of faithful service, the mast needed replacing and a secondhand mast and rigging was obtained through an advertisement in *WoodenBoat*. At this time the rig was changed to Marconi but the double head sails were retained. However, by the late 1990s *Galatea* had reached a turning point. The children had by now grown up and the boat was used less frequently. It was also getting more difficult to keep up with the maintenance. So in 1998, after sprucing up, *Galatea* was donated to the Apprenticeship in Rockland, Maine. She was last documented in 2001 as *Annie’s Song* out of Bristol, Rhode Island.

In addition to *Galatea*, Peter Egeli found time to build a small gaff-rigged sharpie – a good sailer, and enjoyed by all the family. In 1986, he and son Stuart also designed and built a 12-foot racing runabout, named *Mock I*, modeled after the outboard racers of the mid-1900s.

Daughter Lisa Egeli grew up surrounded by boats and art. As children, Lisa and brother, Stuart “helped” their father build *Galatea*, and then spent many summers sailing with the family.

She also gained familiarity with power and hand tools as her parents renovated the old farmhouse. But *Bjorn Again* was her first real building project.

Lisa Egeli spent two years at college in Virginia before graduating from the American Academy of Art in Chicago in 1988. After school, she worked as an illustrator in Baltimore while developing her interest in portrait and landscape painting. Taking her savings, Lisa bought a round the world airplane ticket in 1991 and spent nine months travelling and painting, but not before “giving my parents the car and the cat.” Returning to Baltimore, she shared several studios with artist friends and became involved in *plein air* painting, with a preference for coastal scenes. Like her father, she is a Fellow of the American Society of Marine Artists.



The Scamp 15 arrives in an “oversize pizza box.” (courtesy, Lisa Egeli)

While building her artistic career, she never lost sight of her dream to build a wooden boat of her own. In the meantime, she patched up and used an old plywood skiff that came with her house in Churchton. Taking the plunge,

around 2003 partner Jackie

Savitz bought as a gift the plans

and frame kit for the Hartley “Scamp 15,” from Clark Craft of Tonawanda, N. Y. The Scamp 15 was a roomy, plywood, V-bottom runabout, in the style of the late 1950s. The runabout was shallow-draft, lightweight, and versatile, and seemed easy to build, all attributes that appealed to Lisa.



Planing the keel. (courtesy, Lisa Egeli)

Frame sections were of mahogany but had to be assembled, something Lisa wasn't expecting. Also ordered was the bronze fastening kit and the epoxy kit, although by the time she got subsequently bought a set of plans directly from Hartley & Brookes Associates of Auckland, New Zealand, whose extensive offering of boat plans are designed for the builder with limited or no experience. The Scamp 15 is offered as an open boat or with a small cabin, for use with an inboard or outboard engine.

Building the Scamp 15 was very much a part-time effort, as an art career came first. The frames were actually set up on the floor of her studio located next to the house, and patrons had to step around this boat in progress while visiting. Later it was moved to a covered addition on the side of the house. Peter Egeli



Fitting the plywood bottom.  
(courtesy, Lisa Egeli)



Installing the cockpit floors.  
(courtesy, Lisa Egeli)

provided Lisa with a tablesaw and bandsaw while much of the white oak for the stringers and keelson, and mahogany for the trim, came from stock already owned by her father and brother, Stuart. Sides and bottom were made from ¼" fir and okume plywood.

Working on occasional weekends and evenings, and doing most of the work herself, the boat took about ten years to complete. A cabinetmaker friend helped with some tricky routing work on the cockpit trim, in exchange for a painting. Family friend and craftsman, Johnny Cook, supervised Lisa and friends when the bottom and sides were fiberglassed. All the help made this step go quickly but the filling and fairing seemed never-ending. He also led her in vacuum-

bagging the 1/16" veneer onto the transom to create a beautiful clear finish appearance. The original plans called for windscreen sides that were angled straight. But at her father's suggestion these sides were given a curved shape, improving the appearance.

Although she grew up sailing, she is pleased in a way that she built a motorboat. Her maternal grandfather, John Wilkinson, was a motorboat enthusiast, and active member of the Bush River Yacht Club. At various times he owned a converted Chesapeake Bay buyboat and an ex-landing craft with a shark's mouth painted on the bow.



Launching day, June 16, 2013, with proud builder Lisa Egeli on the right. Note the name still covered, a surprise to the last.



*Bjorn Again* floating for the first time. The long-awaited launching day was a festive occasion for all the family, although there may have been a time when some were not sure she was going to finish. But persistence is a family trait. After all, it did take eleven years for father Peter Egeli to complete *Galatea*, albeit a much larger boat. However, she did have one trip to the emergency room when she dropped a chisel. "Not a good idea to try and catch it." Completing *Bjorn Again* gave Lisa Egeli a great sense of satisfaction: "I loved the process. I really did, I loved it all the way through." Now, Lisa's thoughts have now turned to another project – fashioning a replica of the sharpie she sailed in as a child, the one originally built by her father. Stay tuned.