

Lady Virginia

She stirs my soul. She speaks to me. She waits for me. She is beautiful. She wants me to find her. By accident I stumble upon her in a small advertisement. 'I've been waiting,' she said when I laid eyes on her. I was breathless. She was what I had been dreaming of and she was real.

She is a Herreshoff Stuart Knockabout, the boat of my dreams first built in 1932, to be sailed in Maine. She is a classic open cockpit day sailor big enough to handle Narragansett Bay on a windy afternoon but small enough that I can easily sail her alone. She is beautiful as well as fast. After a test sail that exceeded my expectations I ordered her with the traditional cream deck, white topsides and a green bottom.

While we watched the production of the boat, we discussed what to name her. "It should be Lady Virginia after your mother," my wife Cathy said. Immediately I knew it was the right name and a fitting tribute to the woman who had loved classic boats and taught me to sail.

Lady Virginia is simple and easy to sail, even for one. She is a head turner.

"She is too pretty not to take a picture" a sailor once said snapping a picture as I sailed by. 'Lady Virginia, the prettiest boat in the fleet,' they announced at the awards ceremony at Wickford Yacht Club, in Wickford, Rhode Island in her first year of racing.

Her low freeboard allows me to sail close to the water and feel part of the action. Eight people can easily enjoy an afternoon in her large cockpit. Her rig is so simple and easy to handle it defies her nimble and fast performance.

Size, speed and agility makes it easy to sail her in and out of the moored boats in most harbors. She is as comfortable threading her way through the fleet in a crowded harbor as she is out in the open water.

Why would one want a 28 foot day sailor? Why would one want a cockpit and no cabin? The answer is simple: most sailors use their boats, regardless of size, as day sailors anyway, out for a few hours on the weekend. Many

sailors have boats that require a crew as they cannot manage the boats easily alone. They also spend time and money fixing all the problems with things they seldom use.

'Will you take me out," is the question that surprised me the first time I heard it from a large boat owner. Here was someone with a classic 40 foot cruising boat saying they wanted to sail in my boat. "She looks like so much fun,' he added. He even asked if his crew could join me. They all wanted a chance to experience this boat. Over the years I've taken out many larger boat owners who envy the joy of this pocket yacht sailing close to the water. Not only does she look like fun, she is!

In life, although we may already have the best for us, we continue to search. We never seem to be satisfied and are always searching. Many times what we want we already have. Many times what we have is better for us than what we are looking at. One may need to look at options to appreciate all they have. It has been five years since I bought Lady Virginia. Yes, I look at other boats, but I keep going back to her.

However, even a perfect boat has trade offs. The low freeboard makes her sleek, good looking, and fun to sail but also makes for a possible dousing on a windy, choppy day. As far as I am concerned it's a small price to pay for the occasional spray.

The design tradeoff doesn't allow for an engine. However, after 5 years and occasionally being becalmed, I am going to buy the removable bracket for the deck and buy an engine to hide below deck and hope I never have to use it. If I do, I surely hope no one ever sees me using it. Purist sailors eschew engines.

There are also tradeoffs in construction. She presents herself as a wooden boat. While she has a great deal of teak trim work which makes her look wooden, the deck is fiberglass poured over canvas and the aluminum mast only looks like wood from a distance.

Keeping her simple and true to the original plans means there is no head aboard. This can compromise a long sail in mixed company. Herreshoff used to deliver all his small boats with a wooden bucket to facilitate such needs.

Her beauty deceives people; how could a lady that gorgeous also be so competent. I am in awe. Sailors respect for her beauty turns to surprise at her speed. She is amazingly stiff in a heavy breeze of 20 plus knots. The rail will be under, water will be pouring into the cockpit and we will be sailing her on the edge driving forward.

'Are we pushing her to her limit or is she pushing us' I have often thought after a rewarding, exhilarating and tiring night of racing. She can take more and give more than we can.

There are now about 60 Stuart Knockabouts and production is increasing.

She is popular in places such as Edgartown, Massachusetts, Narragansett Bay, Long Island, and Annapolis as well as the Great Lakes. The most famous owner is Gary Jobson of America Cup fame. This was his personal boat.

While she is purchased for her beauty as a day sailor, more and more owners are racing them in local fleets.

With her centerboard up she draws only 2 feet 9 inches allowing her to sail where others cannot. Her sleek hull allows her to perform in light wind with

only 265 square feet of sail area. This makes her an easy boat to take out for a quick sail.

She performs beautifully for me, if I look after her well. She cries out to be well maintained. The varnish work is best done by professionals. At the end of the first season I had the builder prepare her for the next season before I stored her for the winter. 'Fluff, buff and lipstick,' were my orders as I left her. When I picked her up and brought her to the storage yard, they told me to leave her and they would put her in the shed. 'Please hurry as it is going to rain; I don't want to get her wet,' I said walking out of the shed. I believe they were laughing as I drove away. Foolish as it may seem, she is too beautiful to get wet.