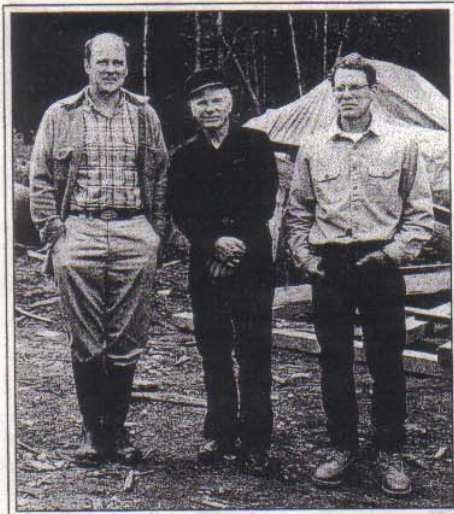
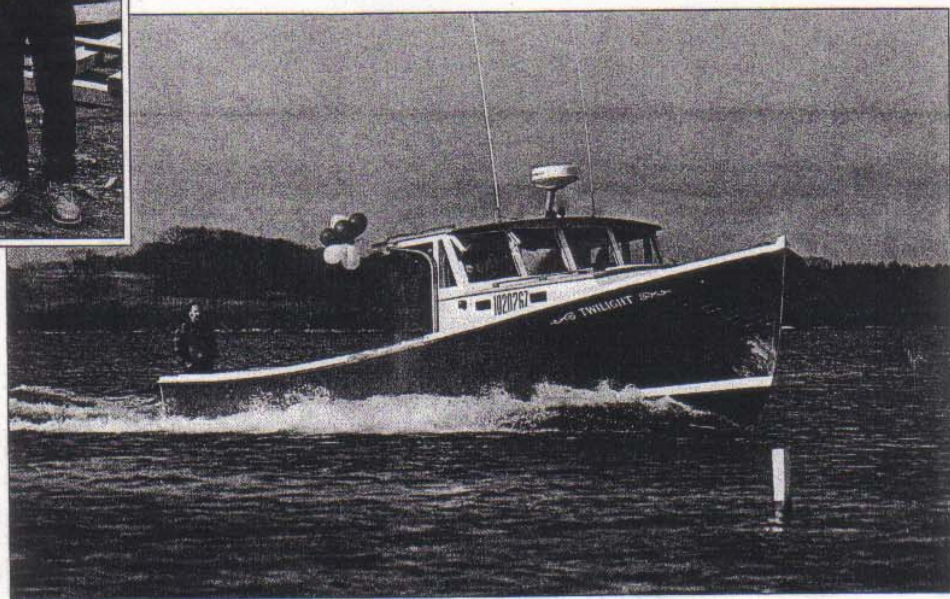


Working Watercraft



(Above) Left to right: Dick Pulsifer, boatbuilder, of Brunswick; the late Arno Day, boatbuilder and designer, of Brooklin; Peter Kass, boatbuilder and designer, of South Bristol.

(Right) The Kass-built lobster boat *Twilight*, launched in 1994, on her sea trials.



Everett L. "Red" Boutilier/2

Peter Kass, of South Bristol

by Everett L. "Red" Boutilier

If you have the talent and the calling, you have the goods.

Most people see wooden boats as relics of the past, but boatbuilder Peter Kass of South Bristol sees them as very prominent in his present and future. At this writing, he was planking his 50th wooden hull at his John's Bay Boat Company shop.

Kass discovered that he hated to work with fiberglass when he was in his twenties. Not long afterward he learned he didn't like to build in steel, either. He was of the mind that the type of craft to be built didn't matter, just as long as it was in wood.

Raised in Arlington, Massachusetts, Peter Kass dabbled in boats at nearby Spy Pond and on local waterways, where his dream of boatbuilding was rooted. After he graduated from high school he wandered down to Urbana, Virginia, where he worked for one year in the boatshop of John L. Conboy.

While on a visit to South Bristol, Kass was offered a job by Lin Gamage, who had taken over the Gamage yard from his father, the late Harvey F. Gamage. The yard was then building Herb Smith's schooner *Appledore II*, which would eventually circumnavigate the globe. Kass, who had already decided that his boatbuilding education had not progressed fast enough at Conboy's, hustled back to Urbana, collected his gear, came back, and resettled in South Bristol. He worked on the *Appledore* until it was finished and—the Gamage yard having turned to steel construction—moved on.

Kass knew where to go to learn more about the art and craft of boatbuilding. He spent seven months at the prestigious Goudy & Stevens yard in East Boothbay, commuting two miles across the Damariscotta River every day in a 17' Carolina dory he built

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himself. Then he took a job at Bruce Cunningham's Padebo Custom Boats in Round Pond, where wooden boats were built and fiberglass hulls were finished off.

Kass's next step was to begin building boats on his own—at first in rented shops; then, after he and his wife found the proper site, in his own, which he built in 1982. The new shop measures 35 by 45 feet and is surrounded by 2½ acres, from which many trees have been removed and terraced space has been provided for boat storage. The original greaseway has been converted to a railway.

At age 40, Peter Kass retains his youthful congeniality and his eagerness to learn a better way if there is one. Both characteristics have served him well, as older, experienced builders and designers appreciate a man who is still enthusiastic about wood construction.

Early in Kass's career, Alton Wallace of West Point, who was struggling with a three-year backlog of orders for his open skiffs, sent a customer who wanted a large skiff to Kass. He also allowed Peter to trace and use his molds. Later, another veteran builder, the late Arno Day of Brooklin, provided the designs on which Kass built two 23-footers.

Peter Kass really struck gold when he and the late Carroll Lowell became friends. Carroll, the one-time operator of the Even Keel boatyard in Freeport, had inherited the design operation of his older brother Royal, who had passed away. The Lowells came from a long line of Maine boatbuilders. With their father, Riley, they had worked with their grandfather, the legendary Will "Pappy" Frost, in Jonesport.

"We have a construction method that's been proven by the Frost-Lowell family for years," Carroll Lowell told Peter Kass. "If someone wants to know what I've got, I'm tickled to share it. I learned it from someone else. We all have to be teachers somewhere along the line."

Carroll Lowell challenged Peter Kass to build a boat to his design, and Kass accepted. Carroll would make many visits to the John's Bay yard to answer questions and provide advice. The result was the 42-foot *Sharon Roseanna*, built for a customer in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. To date, the John's Bay shop has built eight 42-foot Carroll Lowell models.

Working with Lowell was a big step up for Kass and his crew. Kass had demonstrated to Lowell that he had the talent and the calling to be a boatbuilder, and many more referrals were to follow. "Peter is com-

ing up in the school of hard knocks," Carroll Lowell said. "As far as I am concerned, he's the real McCoy."

Kass proudly acknowledges the assistance he received from Carroll Lowell, but he did try his own hand at design. He started in the old way with a half model and scaled off the lines from it. With Kass's tracings, Aero-Hydro of Southwest Harbor, a computer design outfit, produced a Mylar lofting, which was used to build the lobsterboat *Acadia*. When that boat proved successful, Kass took the half model and the lofting to Arno Day, who drew up a set of lines.

Usually, Kass works ten hours a day, four days a week, with a crew of two. "I don't like being a boss," Peter says. "I work right along with my men. If each keeps his end up, there is no problem. John's Bay Boat is too small to tolerate anyone who doesn't work right along with the others." Because the shop provides storage and does repairs, the staff is expanded to five men on a seasonal basis.

In the winter, when the crew can concentrate on new construction, it takes about five months to build one of their larger craft. If a boat is started in the summer season and work on it is intermingled with storage and repair work, the job takes about a year.

Because Kass's boats feature yacht-like finishes, they are attracting more and more recreational boaters, but a majority have been built for commercial use. They are ordered by fishermen, primarily lobstermen, who prefer the comfort and stability of rugged wooden craft to the speed of the lighter fiberglass models. Five John's Bay boats are working out of Spruce Head; four at Stonington. Still others can be found in Vinalhaven and Matinicus, and more are working daily from ports in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Michigan.

"If Kass and his crew stick it out, never slacking on the workmanship, they'll become the best wooden boat builders on the coast," Carroll Lowell said back in 1986. "That's how good they are."

Today, living up to the praise, Kass and his crew continue to follow Lowell's best advice: "Commercial boat or not, there is only one quality: Best." ✨

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Red Boutilier of Bremen, Maine, is a photo-journalist and a regular contributor to Maine Boats & Harbors.

"As far as I am concerned," Carroll Lowell said, "Peter Kass is the real McCoy."