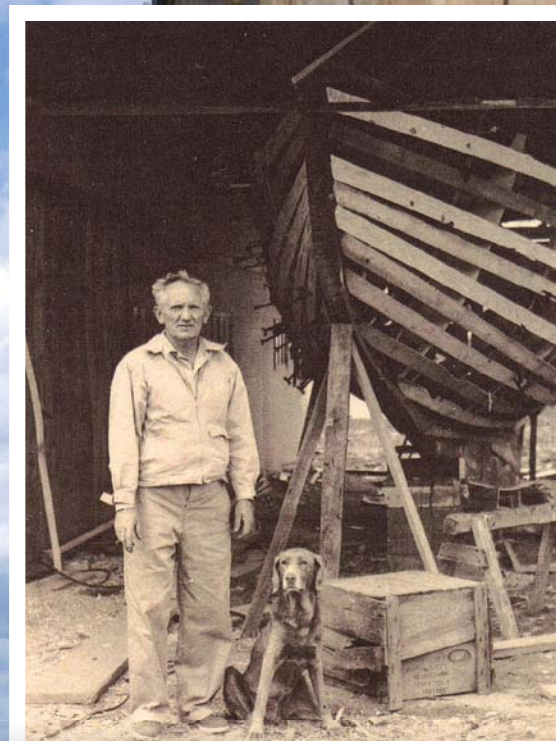


Dickersons FOREVER!

Owners of these iconic and beautiful Bay-built boats never say die—they just keep rebuilding and sailing and rebuilding and sailing ...

On a day in June very close to Fathers Day, Dickerson owners all over the Bay and in several neighboring states will lay aside their varnishing pots and boar-bristle brushes and set sail for the Choptank River. It won't matter whether it's still snowing or whether an early hurricane is taking aim at the middle Chesapeake, they'll be there. After all, Dickerson owners are people undaunted by perpetual maintenance and acres of brightwork, so why would they balk at the prospect of 12 hours of working to windward in 30 knots of wind? Heck, they probably won't even take a reef. Like the swallows returning to Capistrano or the eels to the Sargasso Sea, they will simply go; nothing will keep them away from the congenial company of fellow Dickersonians and the shared experience of a lifetime of upkeep on their beautiful and beloved

by Jody Argo Schroath



BELOW: *The beautiful 59-foot Dickerson ketch Chesapeake* (top); and designer *George Hazen on his 37-foot center cockpit ketch First Song* (bottom).

PRECEDING PAGES:

BACKGROUND: *Dickerson ketch Force Majeure during the 2013 rendezvous boat parade into Cambridge, Md.*

INSETS, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

Dickerson founder Bill Dickerson in his Church Creek boatyard; Dickerson 37 sloop Crew Rest off Cape Charles, Va.; and Chris and Bill Burry preparing to get underway on Plover.

“proper” yachts. Some, like Al Sampson of Bristol, R.I., owner of the 37-foot cutter *Wanderlust*, may occasionally come without their boats because . . . well, he’s in *Rhode Island*. Others, like Dick Young, may come long after they’ve sold their boats but still serve years later, as secretary of the Dickerson Owners Association.

In any case, they’ll be there. You can be sure of it. In 1987, which is coincidentally the same year the last Dickerson came down the rails, author and sailor Ferenc Mate summed up Dickerson owners perfectly in his book *The World’s Best Sailboats*: “The Dickerson boats, like the workboats around them, were designed and built simply and well, and because of that combination have gathered a following almost religiously devout, second on this continent only to the zealots of Henry Hinckley.” Today you can easily get into a scrap over which boats have the most militantly loyal supporters, but without a doubt you’d still find Dickersonians in the forefront of the melee. Let me give you two examples. . . .

Chris and Bill Burry of Queens Creek, Va., have owned their Dickerson, *Plover*, for 30 years. “We sailed to Europe and back in the 80s and thought we’d sell her when we got back,” Chris told me during last year’s rendezvous in Cambridge, Md. “But it’s a *Dickerson*,” she went on, “so we still have it.” She concedes: “It’s tons of work, but . . .” And like other Dickersons, *Plover* is no museum piece. Recently, the Burrys sailed *Plover* up to Newfoundland and are planning a return visit. Then there’s the case of Jim and Laurie Pollock, who recently rejoined the Dickerson fold after they bought back their classic 37-foot cutter, *Celeste*. The Pollocks, who live in Palm Harbor, Fla., plan to sail *Celeste* back up to the Chesapeake this summer.

If anything, according to Dickerson stalwart Joe Slavin, you could say the attitude of Dickerson owners, and their boats, is the same as the mark’s founder, William Cadmus Dickerson: conservative, no-nonsense and dedicated to quality. Dickerson moved south from Baltimore following World War II and set up a boatyard in his backyard on Church Creek, off the Little

The Call of the Rendezvous

The annual siren call for members of the Dickerson Owners Association is the early-summer rendezvous, held over the Father’s Day weekend. Each year, members gather for a boat parade into the harbor where they will be staying. The following day, they have a race to decide the next year’s commodore—followed of course, by the obligatory dinner, awards and the recitation of the Dickerson Prayer (Oh Lord, creator of mahogany from which all proper Dickersons are split, beveled, screwed and glued . . .). Rendezvous draw from 75 to 100 people. Often the celebration of all things Dickerson then concludes with a post-rendezvous cruise. This June, members will gather in Trappe, Md., at Dickerson Harbor, where all Dickersons after 1967 were built. On the following day, the race on the Choptank will be followed by a gathering and dinner in Oxford. Last year’s rendezvous began in Oxford, paraded into Cambridge for the dedication of the new Dickerson exhibit at the Richardson Maritime Museum, and the following morning raced down the Choptank back to Oxford for the dinner. In 2012, the 45th rendezvous honored Dickerson owners and boatbuilders. Among those present were former owners Tom Lucke and Ted Reed.

The association figures that there are 200 to 300 Dickersons still sailing on the Bay and elsewhere. To find out more about Dickersons and their owners, visit their website, www.dickersonowners.org. There you’ll also find an excellent history of Dickerson Boatbuilders—from which I’ve borrowed extensively for this story—as well as a video history and a link to a video tour of D and Don Wogaman’s *Southern Cross*, the circumnavigating Dickerson 41.



Dickerson Owners Association

Choptank River. The boats were built in a shed on a railway that ran down to the creek. Dickerson had a lot of good company in his new business, because in those days the Church Creek area was a kind of 1920s Paris for boatbuilders and designers. Where Paris had Fitzgerald, Stein and Hemingway, Church Creek had Preston Brannock, Paul Rybon, Ted Graves, Ernest Tucker Jr. and the great Howard Chapelle. It was Tucker who designed many of the early Dickersons, both sail and power cruisers as well as workboats.

Bud Rosenberg of New York was among those who found themselves making the trip down to Cambridge in search of a new boat. In 1958, Rosenberg and his wife were charmed by Dickerson and his wife and impressed with Dickerson’s workmanship. “Mr. Dickerson was so proud of his product,” Rosenberg remembers, “and, as I remember, he had a hull being planked in the shop. It was bottom up, and the chevron planking was being placed between keel and chine. We were sold on the spot.” The Rosenbergs consulted with designer Ted Graves and a new D-32 was ordered. The following year, *Polymer* was delivered, complete with dock lines, boathook and anchor with rode, for \$14,000. “The whole picture was one of meticulous care and fine materials. The proof of this was ten years with never a leak.”

During the 1950s, Dickerson boats, although they varied widely in size and configuration from small day sailors to a 59-foot bugeye, shared the same rugged construction and simplicity of style. As the Dickerson Owners Association history puts it: “They were capable of taking



John Albertine

whatever conditions the sea delivered.” It was in the 1950s that Dickerson developed the 34-foot hard-chine ketch, modeled after the Chesapeake skipjack, which drafted only two feet with the board up, making it a great boat for gunkholing the Bay. The model, which became known as the Simplissima, was a hit. In addition to the 34, Dickerson also produced the Simplissima in a 26-foot sloop and 32-foot ketch version.

Years later, in a tribute that appeared in a Dickerson Owners Association newsletter, Mike Clark documented the dedication his father-in-law, David Chambers, had to his 1950s 34-foot Simplissima-class ketch. “For nearly five years, he trekked sixty miles to Middle River to replace the dry-rotted hull, board by

Force Majeure, Rainbow and others racing down the Choptank River in 2013 (top); and (above) Sampson Post Joe Slavin’s ketch Irish Mist off Cambridge.

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board,” Clark wrote. “He would find the right replacement wood, painstakingly steam and shape it, sand and prep it, and then make the same drive a few weeks later to fit the new plank.” Clark continues: “His commitment and patience during five years of rebuilding that boat would have been very inspiring if we had any belief it would ever float, much less sail.” But sail it did. When Clark himself took the helm, “I was amazed that this big hunk of wood was as responsive as a sports car, reacting rapidly to my slightest movement of the tiller. Over the course of the next few years, we got to explore the upper part of the Bay on multiple occasions. We got the family out on some light wind days as well as some days heavy enough to reef the main. But steady *Nauta* with all her new planks and rivets remained steady and true.”

From the 1950s well into the 1960s, Dickerson continued to build a wide range of successful hard-chine sloops and ketches designed by Ted Graves, as well as a more spacious Dickerson 35 center-cockpit. But by 1967 Dickerson decided it was time to retire, so he sold the company to Thomas Lucke, a long-time sailor and avid racer who apprenticed himself to Dickerson for a year to learn the business before taking over the company. In accordance with the agreement, Lucke moved the business from Dickerson’s backyard on Church Creek to nearby La Trappe Creek off the Choptank River. Initially Lucke continued building in wood, expanding the 35 to a longer round-hulled 36 ketch. But soon he turned to fiberglass and, with the help of designer Ernie Tucker, produced a new 36-foot ketch in the new material, as well as a 36 sloop and cutter. Lucke, however, was careful to maintain the same classic “proper yacht” lines.

Joe Slavin’s *Irish Mist* is one of these late-1960s, pre-fiberglass Lucke-built 35-foot wooden ketches, which Slavin

bought in the early 1970s. Before that the Merchant Marine Academy graduate and retired NASA engineer owned an Alberg 30. “My wife thought I was crazy to sell the fiberglass Alberg 30 to buy a wooden boat,” Slavin says, laughing. But that was 30 years ago, and he’s still clearly happy with his choice, even though he never manages to win any of the association races. Which is important because the winner of the June rendezvous race becomes the next year’s commodore. To make up for that failing, the owners association has created a position especially for Slavin, named for one of Dickerson boats’ key characteristics—Samson posts, which the boats have instead of the more common but less substantial cleats. That’s right, Slavin now holds the permanent position of club Samson Post. “He always tells the commodore what to do anyway,” explains Barry Creighton, himself the owner of a 1984 Dickerson 37 sloop.

In 1971, two years after Samson Post Slavin’s *Irish Mist* was built, the first fiberglass 36-foot sailboat came off the Dickerson line, with molded fiberglass hull and glassed wood decks, cabin and cockpit sole. Three years later, using a full scantling oak-framed mahogany strip-planked hull built a year earlier as a plug, Dickerson produced its first fiberglass 41-foot ketch. That plug, incidentally, went on to play an important part in Dickerson history. It became the first Dickerson yacht to sail around the world. *Southern Cross*, with owners Neville and Louise Lewis and their son Christopher aboard, left La Trappe Creek in 1975 for a two-and-a-half-year circumnavigation. Three-and-a-half years later, the Lewises returned. (They had decided they were having too good a time to hurry.) More than 40 years and 43 thousand miles later, *Southern Cross* now belongs to D and Don Wogaman of Oriental, N.C., who often sail her north for the association rendezvous.

Dickerson Boatbuilders’ next owner had a connection with *Southern Cross*,

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as well. Ted Reed, a Philadelphia stockbroker and bluewater sailor, became acquainted with Dickerson boats when he sailed with the Lewis family for six months on the Puerto-Rico-to-Tahiti leg of their circumnavigation. On his return to Philadelphia, Reed and his wife Carla ordered a Dickerson 41, which they named *Papillon*. But instead of sailing her around the world, which they had intended to do, Reed and a friend, Bennett Dorrance, instead bought the company from Lucke 1978. In 1980, James Griffin—also a Dickerson owner—joined the company as a partner. Looking for a faster boat that would keep the classic design, the new owners turned to George Hazen, a naval architect, to design a high-performance cruiser. Hazen, who had grown up sailing on his parents' wooden Dickerson, came up with a quick 37 center-cockpit ketch, which was completed in 1983. An aft-cockpit version with sloop and cutter rigs followed.

Then in 1983, Dickerson Boats entered into one of the most exciting production agreements in its history, producing a high performance 37-foot racing sloop for Bruce Farr and Associates of Annapolis. In its first race in Annapolis, Bert Jabin's Dickerson-built Farr 37, *Babe*, beat the rest of the class by six minutes. Jabin went on to successfully campaign a Farr 37, *Ramrod*, for a number of years before donating it to the Naval Academy. That boat continues to win races in New England under the name *Chariod*. Her present owner, Rick Williams, wrote the association: "She is a great racing boat and is one of the most photographed boats in Marblehead." Another Dickerson-built Farr 37, *Sunrise*, continues to race internationally. Polish sailor Krystian Szyпка and *Sunrise* finished third in class in the OSTAR 2013 race from Plymouth, England, to Newport, R.I.

The Farr 37 turned out to be a kind of glorious finish for a noble line. The Trappe, Md., factory continued to

produce Dickersons in various sizes and configurations into the mid-1980s, expanding the facility and adding a marina. Then the recession hit hard. To add insult to injury, interest rates rose sharply, and, thanks to the strong dollar overseas, European sailboats became available at lower prices. The American new-boat market took a nosedive, taking with it many of the nation's boatbuilders, including Dickerson. In 1985, the company filed for Chapter 11. Its new owners, Dennis Blauer and Donald Griffin, tried to reorganize, but the market was gone. The final Dickerson was completed in 1987.

Jack Rinker believes that his Dickerson, *Force Majeure*, may possibly be that last boat. "It was built for someone else," he told me at the rendezvous, "but the sale fell through." Rinker and a partner managed to strike a good deal. Nearly three decades later, he now has three partners, and all of them, as he puts it, are getting up in years. "At some point, we need to transition to younger ones," he says. Rinker had sailed *Force Majeure* over from Herrington Harbor to the rendezvous with his son, who had just graduated from college when *Force Majeure* came down the rails into La Trappe Creek and into the Rinker household.

This year, the Dickersons will return to La Trappe Creek itself for their 2014 rendezvous. Barry Creighton, another owner of a late-run Dickerson and an active association member, will be there, aboard his 1984 37-foot sloop, *Crew Rest*, which he keeps at Old Point Comfort Marina at Fort Monroe, Va. Creighton has only owned his boat for seven years, but it's not for lack of trying. There were none on the market, so he had to wait. Why a Dickerson? I asked as he stood on the deck of his boat tidying up the lines. "Because it's a local boat—I grew up in Cambridge—you don't see many outside of the Chesapeake, so there's a common bond. And you own a Dickerson because you care about boats, and because that's the way a boat is supposed to look." ↴