

# My First Boat

Text by Karen McLaren Photographs Courtesy of Dave Higby  
More pictures at [maidenmichiganmarine.com](http://maidenmichiganmarine.com)

A gifted woodworker doesn't simply *see* the potential in a piece of wood, he (or she) *experiences* it – the beauty of the grain, its connection to the world around it, its potential to transcend from craftsmanship to art. For three decades, master woodworker David Higby has created nearly everything from grand staircases that seem to float at the entrances of fine homes, to the entertainment centers, bookcases, and mantles commissioned by the rest of us. Unexpectedly, the day came when he added something new to his repertoire and a passion was born.

"I have been a finish carpenter and stair builder since 1989 when I started my company," says Dave. "I was working in the South Lyon area on a big job. The customer paid me in full, then he asked if I wanted a wooden boat -- a 25' cabin cruiser built by his father in 1957 using a Steven's hull plan.

"I asked him how much he wanted for it and he told me I could have it for free if I promised to restore it." That boat became known as the *Maiden Michigan I*; it was Dave's first boating adventure. Soon he



**Dave Higby at the helm of *Maiden Michigan III*.  
Photo by Karen McLaren**

acquired the plans for a Jericho Bay Lobster Skiff, only it was not quite soon enough! The economy crashed and wealthy real estate barons were no longer in need of grand staircases -- or much of anything else.

Although the downturn slowed the skiff's progress, it also turned out to be a great incentive. Every boat builder or restorer knows that extra time isn't necessarily a bad thing to have when you're beginning a new project. Likewise, a new project is a good thing to keep the fears at bay while being under-employed. With more time on his hands than money, Dave delved into building the skiff with gusto, eventually transforming it into the *Maiden Michigan II*. He strip planked the 15'6" skiff in ash and trimmed it in cherry, then added an outboard engine. "Once



***Maiden Michigan I* under construction.**



**The artistic lines and curves of a grand staircase are also found in our wooden boats.**

it was completed, I took it to the Hessel show, and being that it was turquoise green in color, it stood out like a sore thumb!" he laughs. "But people seemed to like it and *Wooden Boat Launchings* printed it in their magazine."

By now his head was swimming from the many pictures and plans of the boats of the 1930s, built by legendary builders like Chris Craft, John Hacker, Don Philbrick, and Nelson Zimmer. Together they inspired the final design for Dave's next boat, the *Maiden Michigan III*. As with *II*, Dave experimented with locally harvested wood: the ashes, cherries, basswood, and walnut found in Michigan forests. It is built in the cold-molded style using wood and epoxy construction that is triple planked. By Dave's choice, he used basswood on white oak frames, then trimmed this *Maiden* in cherry and walnut, adding a 350 marine engine.

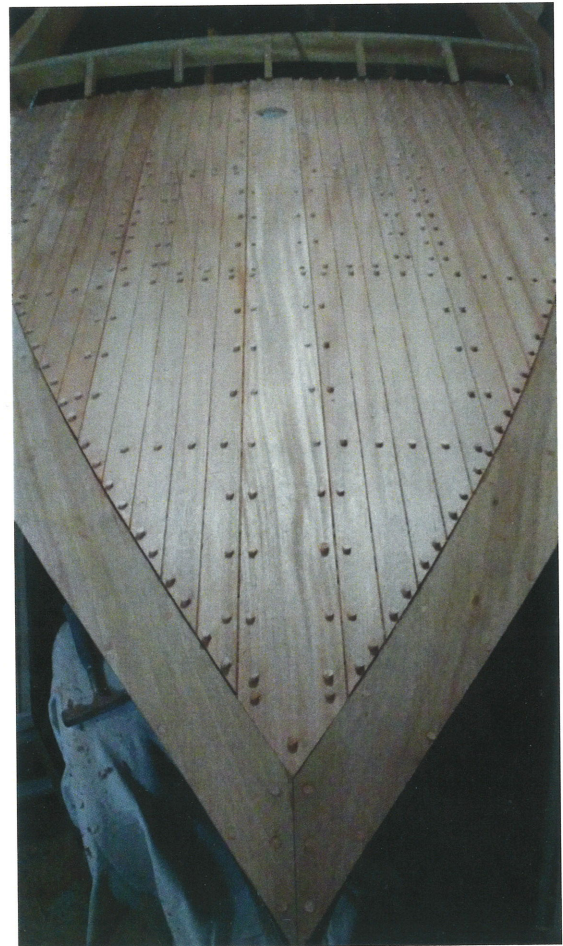
"*III* and I have been going to boat shows for about six years now," says Dave. At times, the two have basked in the warmth of the limelight. In 2015 *Maiden Michigan III* won the award for the Best Contemporary Small Craft at *Boats on the Boardwalk* in Traverse City, and in 2016 it was honored with the *Port Huron Squadron Commanders*

*Award*. *III* also appeared in *Wooden Boat Launchings* as well as in a previous issue of the *Channel Marker*. With three *Maidens* in his workshop, Dave's passion for wood boats has only been flourishing.

"I also acquired a 1947 17' Deluxe Chris Craft in New Jersey and am restoring it for a client." There would be a 1954 Penn Yan Captivator; a 1950s Peterborough which earned a second place award at Hessel; a 1957 Chris Craft Utility and a 1947 Chris Craft Express Cruiser. "Meanwhile, I also acquired a 1928 24' Chris Craft in St. Clair and am restoring it for myself. It is destined to be the *Maiden Michigan IV*."

And just how did Dave come to name his personal series of boats *Maiden Michigan*? Was it a double-take on the *Made in Michigan* moniker used by other artists and craftsmen in the State?

"I came up with the name after reading about Gar Wood's Miss America I-X. I switched the word *Maiden* for Miss and *Michigan* for America. The words worked together well, and so I ran with it." ❖



**The 1928 Chris Craft destined to be *Maiden IV*.**

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