

A Reborn Classic Sails the Bay

by
Dick Cooper

With all her sails aloft, *Elf* makes a big first impression on the water. She looks like a very big sailboat a long way off. Soon, you realize she is smaller than she appears – just 28 feet on the waterline – with a whole lot of sail.

With her long bowsprit and distinctive sail plan, it is immediately clear that she is not a Bay-built boat. Her lines make her look fast even when she is docked. Unlike the solid, practical, work-platform look of the Chesapeake's signature skipjacks and bugeyes, it is obvious *Elf* was built to play.

My wife, Pat, and I first spotted her while we were day sailing last summer on the Miles River. We saw this sleek, white hull with a cloud of sails cutting through the water just above the Herring Island shoal and noted how quickly she was moving. We also commented on the size of her crew with half of her dozen hands on the windward rail trying to flatten her out.

As we made our first crossing tack, we realized that this was no ordinary sailing vessel. Unlike the late model cruisers and racers that look more like a wedge of pie with a mast, this was a sailboat with style and a true sense of class.

A few hours later, as we motored back into St. Michaels Harbor, we spotted the *Elf* tied up quayside at the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum. With her sails off, she looked much smaller and lower in the water.

When Pat and I walked over to the museum to get a better look, the *Elf's* captain, Rick Carrion, was touching up some bright work with a small brush. We told him how pretty she looked out on the river and that was all it took. Carrion put down his brush, welcomed us into the cockpit and started his tale.

"Everything you see, every piece of wood, every fitting and line, is new," he said with paternal pride. "The only piece of wood that is original is her keelson."

Elf has the distinction of being one of the oldest yachts still sailing in America. She was built in Boston in 1888 by George Lawley & Sons as a thoroughbred racer. Carrion said she might well be the first pleasure cruiser in the country.

If Carrion had not fallen in love with her when he was a teenager, she would have sunk or been scrapped years ago. Now, she is a prize-winning vessel and the flagship of the Classic Yacht Restora-

tion Guild, a non-profit organization that Carrion formed to help fund *Elf's* rebirth.

Last year, *Elf* settled into her new home port at the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum and quickly became a regular sight on the Miles River, day sailing and racing against the rest of the PHRF fleet.

The story of the *Elf* and Carrion's passion for her is a tale that has consumed much of his adult life and stretches back to a time when gentlemen racers in whites and boaters chased each other around New England waters for bragging rights and pewter cups. It is a story that is part chance and happenstance, part luck – good and bad – and part detective yarn, all covered in sawdust and held together with a lot of hard work.

As Carrion tells his story, he slips into the rhythm of a schoolteacher working from a well-worn lesson plan. He knows it by heart.

In fact, he is a retired high school teacher who grew up in Earleville, Cecil County, just off the Sassafras River. It was while he was working a summer job as dock master at the Granary Marina on the river to pay his tuition to Salisbury State College (now Salisbury University) in 1970 that Carrion first encountered *Elf*, or *Flying High* as she was known at the time.

The owner had purchased a new fiberglass boat and put his old wooden yawl up for sale. Asking

price, \$950.

"*Flying High* was neglected and trying to sink. It was my job to keep the bilge pumps working," Carrion wrote in an essay about *Elf*. "Every weekend that I came home from college, I would visit *Flying High* and make sure the pumps were working."

He said he was 19 and eager to set out on his own. He had followed the sailing adventures of Robin Lee Graham as reported in *National Geographic*. He dreamed of sailing out of the Sassafras, down the Bay and off to the tropical ports of the world. He had saved up enough money to buy *Flying High*, but when he finally had his mother's permission, the price had jumped to \$1,500. He didn't hesitate, making that day the first happiest day of a boat owner's life. (There are just two, the day you buy it, and the day you sell it.)

"Keep in mind that the sails were in tatters, the below decks were full of mushrooms growing out of rotting wood and mildew an inch or so thick everywhere, or so it seemed," he wrote. "I had my work cut out for me, and I knew it."

He renamed the old boat *Paz* and moved on board. Soon he found keeping *Paz* afloat was a constant problem. One night, when he woke to a nature call, Carrion said he swung out of his berth and found himself standing in a foot of water.

When it came time to go back to

college, Carrion sailed her down the Bay to Salisbury, where he used her as his floating dorm room for the next few years. He said his friends, and even his teachers, thought living on a boat year-round was “cool,” and he had frequent and often unannounced visitors. When he wanted to get serious and study, he had to anchor out for the night.

Carrion said during this time he had no inkling that his *Paz* had a distinguished past. The title he had from the state listed her manufacturing date as unknown. Then he made a great discovery. While working below decks, he removed a beam that had been jury-rigged to add support and found the original documentation numbers carved into the wood. With hard evidence in hand, he was able to trace back to the year of construction and found out that his boat’s original name was *Elf*.

It was in 1975 that Carrion said he felt he had done all he could to *Paz* and it was time to move on. He listed the old boat for sale in several magazines.

“One day Donald Street, Jr., author of *The Ocean Sailing Yacht*, and many other publications, called me and said, ‘are you sitting down, lad?’” Carrion recalled. “After a short banter, he said that he was researching boats of the world that predated his 1906 *Iolair* and that I had the oldest American yacht. It was off the market in a heartbeat.”

He said his research became an obsession as he traced the boat’s history through museum and yacht club records. He found *Elf*’s name in magazines from the late 1880s and finally discovered a cache of photos of *Elf* under sail taken by famed America’s Cup photographer Nathaniel Livermore Stebbins.

“I can remember the day that I received the photos,” he recalled. “I was actually stunned. I simply could not believe what a beauty she was in the full glory of her 1888 sail plan. It really made me think about a proper restoration.”

Carrion said that he continued to work on the old boat for the next decade as he pursued his teaching career.

In the late 1980s, he met Gus and Vida Van Lennep of St. Michaels, who had owned *Elf* from 1932 to 1943. The Van Lenneps, co-founders of the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, became his mentors, advising him on how to form the Classic Yacht Restoration Guild and find funding for the restoration of the yacht. Carrion said the guild members, sponsors and volunteers who have pitched in over the years all made the restoration possible.

What began as a teenager’s dream had finally built up enough traction to become a reality. Carrion said he turned to a friend, Graham Ero, a boat wright from Still Pond, for the skills to restore *Elf*.

Carrion had the boat hauled to his farm and built a work shed around her. For the next 17 years, the work progressed as time and finances allowed.

Using the old Stebbins photos, as well as photos from the Van Lenneps' personal collection, Ero and Carrion were able to recreate *Elf*'s original look.

After several missed deadlines, the reborn *Elf* was launched in April 2008. Carrion took her to the Independence Seaport Museum in Philadelphia, where she was rigged as a gaff-rigged cutter to match those early photographs.

Carrion said the first sail on the Delaware River was thrilling as *Elf* moved through her paces, hitting 9.2 knots on 12-14 knots of wind. *Elf* was flying once more.

From Philadelphia, *Elf* was sailed to St. Michaels and her new home port at the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum.

Museum President Stuart Parnes said, "There is a special connection to the museum because *Elf* was owned by Gus and Vida (Van Lennep) for so long. She has sort of come full circle and we are delighted to have her here.

"It is a great survival story," Parnes said. "It is very unusual for a boat that is that old to have survived."

The museum boatwrights used Lawley plans to build a tender for *Elf*. It was named *Vida* for Mrs.

Van Lennep, who died last year at the age of 98.

Carrion said his plans for the 2009 season include a cruise to the Independence Seaport in Philadelphia and then to the Wooden Boat Show at Mystic Seaport in Connecticut before returning to St. Michaels.

Looking back, Carrion wrote in his essay, "I want to say that to facilitate a project of this magnitude has been a fantastic challenge, and that I am never finished. It is meant to now go onward for generations."

For more information of *Elf* and the Classic Yacht Restoration Guild, go to www.cyr.org. Information about the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum is at www.cbmm.org.