

## *Rick Carrion* of the Classic Yacht Restoration Guild



Photo by Deborah Albers

If there is a fine line between serendipity and “dumb luck,” as Bay sailor Rick Carrion calls it, he walked it on the Fourth of July in 1971 along the Sassafras River, when he handed over his wrist watch as collateral to buy an old yawl. The 35-foot *Flying High* cost the 19-year-old Salisbury State student \$1500, as well as the embarrassment of having to obtain his mother’s nod of approval before handing over his savings in cash.

Despite the mildew and mushrooms thriving in the cabin, Carrion moved aboard and began to sail and work on what the former owner figured was a 1920s-style sailboat. Four years later, he discovered a beam made of two pieces of wood nailed and painted together. When he split them apart, the original, carved U.S. Coast Guard number was revealed. Carrion sent it to the Office of Documentation to learn about the boat’s origins.

The response letter and document copies from the National Archives stunned him. He learned that the old boat—on which he’d just fiberglassed the decks—was originally built in 1888 by George F. Lawley and Sons

in Boston as *Elf*, a state-of-the-art racing yacht. Carrion was the owner of the oldest known racing yacht in the world. He knew then he had to bring her back to life.

“I didn’t understand the magnitude of money I would have to generate,” he says, more than 30 years into a tremendous, grassroots effort. “There were moments when it looked like it might not happen. The naysayers almost won a few times. But, I decided I wasn’t going to let them make the decisions.” The knowledge that he could always donate *Elf* and the fear that if he did so, he might lose contact with her, have kept him going.

In 1982, Carrion created the Classic Yacht Restoration Guild (CYRG), a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization dedicated to fostering American maritime culture and boat building traditions, particularly those of the Northeastern United States and the Chesapeake Bay. Restoring *Elf* with dedicated volunteers under the supervision of a professional shipwright has been CYRG’s focus to date.

Eastern Shore native Graham Ero rediscovered *Elf* while out rowing his skiff on

the Sassafras, shortly after relocating his wooden boat building business from New England to Still Pond, MD. Two decades before, he had camped out on Carrion’s boat with the crew of the then fledgling *Wooden-Boat Magazine* during the Annapolis Sailboat Show. Wooden boat surveyor, John Griffiths—whose expertise has been crucial to the restoration effort—reconnected the owner and shipwright. Ero became the only paid professional on the CYRG crew and the one with a reputation for having the highest standards.

Sixteen years ago, the boat was hauled and moved into Carrion’s backyard on a parcel of his family’s 287-acre farm in Earleville, MD, next to his self-built solar house. He built a workshop around the boat and with a team of volunteers began restoring the small yacht in earnest. What started as a few years’ worth of work ended up being a thorough, historically accurate, museum-quality yacht restoration.

Volunteer Bill Hamilton says, “There is a core of people that have been dedicated to the boat for a long time. It’s a real camaraderie. First of all, we’re all crazy.” Born

into a family of shipwrights and sail-ors, Hamilton specializes in joinery and art work (such as finely painted "duckweed" on the bow to match the yacht's original ornamentation preserved in photographs). He says, "This boat is a work of art. It's more like working on sculpture or a piece of furniture."

Much of the boat's wood came from Carrion's family farm and neighboring farms: black locust for structural members; North American black cherry for interior furniture; sassafras for the base of the bunks; cypress for the interior ceiling; and aromatic red cedar for the engine cabinets, (which will smell like the wood when warm). *Elf's* hull is planked with longleaf yellow pine, while the sleek deck is composed of Douglas fir with rails, hatches, a cockpit, and a companion-way fashioned with South American angelique (which proved to be sandy and tough on tools, however beautiful).

Although he was hopeful to have splashed the boat by this summer, Carrion, who is a retired environmental science teacher, sees the value in having the winter to complete her interior work and systems without being rushed. The spars and sails are ready. The bow piece and tiller are carved and varnished. In spring of 2008, *Elf* will



Built in 1888 in Boston by George F. Lawley and Sons at a cost of \$3500, *Elf* was a cutting-edge racing yacht. After undergoing an historically accurate, museum-quality restoration, the 30-foot beauty will be splashed on the Chesapeake Bay in the spring of 2008. Photo courtesy of Francis Russell Hart Collection/MIT

be christened. After two weeks in Independence Seaport Museum in Philadelphia, her crew will sail her around the Chesapeake Bay to exhibits and festivals all summer to show her off and fulfill their mission of education in yacht restoration, the art of seamanship, and traditional sail handling.

There seems to be a consensus among CYRG team members that Carrion's strengths lie in his organizational abilities and incredible



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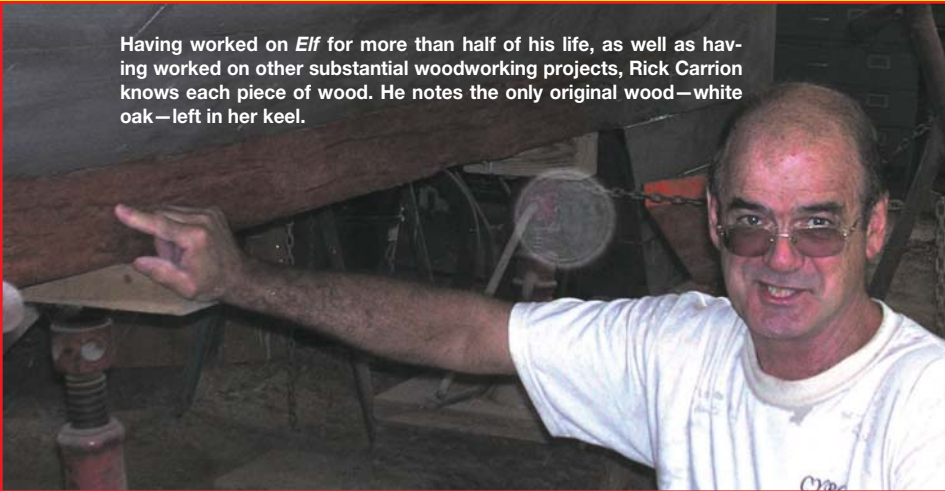
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Having worked on *Elf* for more than half of his life, as well as having worked on other substantial woodworking projects, Rick Carrion knows each piece of wood. He notes the only original wood—white oak—left in her keel.



What he has done with this boat is extraordinary.”

“Not quitting has always been a big thing for me,” says Carrion, standing on the cool, brick floor of his “air-conditioner-free” solar home on a hot summer day. “People said I was crazy to build this house.” He shrugs and says, “You can do anything you want to do. All you need is to want it badly enough.”

When he looks at old black and white photographs of *Elf* under full sail, Carrion’s passion for the project shines through. He has a series from Marblehead, MA circa 1889 and some from St. Michaels in the 1930s and early 40s when the boat was owned and happily sailed by Gus and Veda Van Lennep, the founders of the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum. Pointing to sections of the photographs he knows by heart, Carrion notes the keel of the boat, even in light air, and he

can envision his dream—so close to fruition—of burying her rail under full sail on the Bay.

As she did at the end of the 19th century, the historic yacht will cruise and race the waters off New England, but home will be where Carrion’s heart is. He says, “*Elf* will live on the Chesapeake Bay. She has spent half of her life here.”

Look for updates on *Elf* in *SpinSheet* next spring.

drive. His former professor, friend of 35 years, and CYRG newsletter editor, Ray Zeigler says, “I don’t know that I’ve ever met anyone who has spent this much time on one thing. It is going to happen. He *made* it happen.” Having sailed on *Elf* in the early years and been closely tied to the project, Bill Sonntag agrees. He says, “This simply would not have happened without Rick and all of his energy.

CYRG’s “wish list” includes corporate or private funding for a professional quality DVD of the vessel’s history, restoration, and future sailing activities.

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