

Life on the Pamlico

James Tyson, Boat Builder

By Jo Lynn Windley



Introduction

On June 3, 1992, Dr. Roy Armstrong and I, Jo Lynn Windley, went to the business and home of Mr. James Tyson. Mr. Tyson introduced us to the fascinating world of boat making and repair. Mr. Tyson makes small boats from start to finish,

BEAUFORT CO COMM COLLEGE

Life on the Pamlico

primarily for commercial fishermen. Although Mr. Tyson produces boats in small quantities, his devotion to his work and his expertise give him credibility in his profession. Mr. Tyson is an asset to the community which he serves. Commercial fishermen look to him for the care he takes in his repair work, which they need to continue their livelihood, and his boat dealer depends on him for quality craftsmanship in boat making.

Mr. Tyson lives just outside of Washington. His business and home sit on about two and a half acres of land, which he shares with his family and his two dogs, a chow and a dog which is half wolf. We were able to interact with Mr. Tyson, not only involving his business but his personal side as well. He seems to be a gentle yet spirited man concerned for life, which was made evident by the care and love he showed for his business as well as his family and pet dogs.

Entering this interview, I was impressed with the site and all that was involved in boat making. I saw boat making in progress and was amazed with the many stages and delicate work which must be performed before a boat is ready to be placed in the water, whether it be for recreation or commercial fishing. Leaving the interview, I felt admiration for his abilities as a boat maker and a human being. James Tyson is a friendly, kind, and very capable entrepreneur.

Life: First, I'd like to ask you how you got involved in building boats.

Life on the Pamlico

Mr. Tyson: Started 20 some years ago at Seacrest. Seacrest was building little plastic boats. I was working in the tool and dye department. They worked out where Stanadyne is now. The plant was built for around \$6 million [and now they're the] largest thermo-forming plant in the world. They made plastic boats and filled two skins with foam. I was working in the tooling department building thermo-form moldings.

Life: Stamping plastic means the whole thing's made out of plastic?

Mr. Tyson: Yes. It was just two ABS plastic skins filled with floatation foam, almost like a cooler. They were made to be "a cheapo" boat that somebody could pay three or four hundred dollars for, use seven or eight years and then throw it away. You still see a lot of them around now, 20 years later, that are in great shape. That's just like most anything; if you put it out in the sun, the sun beats it to death. You keep it under cover, and they'll last a long time. The last time I was in Key West, I saw a couple of them down there.

Life: How long are they?

Mr. Tyson: They were 12 and 14 feet.

Life: What primarily are they for, fishing?

Mr. Tyson: Yes, just runabout boats, fishing, piddle around, just whatever.

Life: What size motor would you put on it?

Life on the Pamlico

Mr. Tyson: They were rated. The 12 [feet length] would carry up to a 10 [horse power], and the 14 [feet] would carry a 20 [horse power].

Life: So you really learned about boats there?

Mr. Tyson: Well, yes. I got basically started there, and then I went to Charlotte and worked in a couple of bathtub plants up there for about six years. Then I came back down here, and Jack Brazier designed these two skiffs, the Bully Boat and Skimmer I'm building now. He and I worked together for about 12 years building boats. Then he got into building houses. I just kind of kept working on boats and did a lot of repair work on the side. It's got to where now that I'm trying to do just this for a living.

Life: I noticed your boats are wood, right? They're not plastic?

Mr. Tyson: Right.

Life: You make them out of plywood?

Mr. Tyson: Basically I make a plywood boat and and glass it on both sides. What I'm doing is using a composite structure like the big sailboat companies do and like Fountain [Power boat maker, located in Chocowinity, N.C.] does, but Fountain uses a divynycell for their coring, which is a real hard Styrofoam type product that comes in small squares, about two feet by four feet. These sheets are laid up in the hull and deck. They put the glass down first and then put their coring down, then glass over top of it. What it's doing is giving you

Life on the Pamlico

a lot thicker, stiffer product without actually having to pile 1/2 inch of glass or 3/4 inch to get a good solid boat. I'm doing the same thing; only I'm using my composite first and then putting the glass on both sides of it.

Life: What width is that plywood?

Mr. Tyson: Three eighths plywood.

Life: Just like you'd go buy at Moss [Building Supply]?

Mr. Tyson: Yes, that's right. I've got patterns for each type of boat. What I do is make five panels, two side panels and two bottom panels, and a transom.

Life: The first thing you do is make that frame right there?

Mr. Tyson: Yes. The frame is something I use all the time. I make all the boats off that one frame. The only thing it's used for is to hold the wood in place until I can get the edges glassed. I make a transom [back panel] on that rounded jig over there. It takes three layers of plywood and a layer of glass in between each, then clamp it down on that jig, which gives me a slightly rounded transom. Then it's cut to shape for whatever style boat I'm making. Then I bolt that up on the back end of the form. I make the two bottom panels, the two side panels and all of those are laid right on the frame and just tacked down with just enough nails to hold them in place. I've got a special router that routs the edge of the wood. So when I put two layers of glass on the edges, it finishes back off pretty close to even with the wood, so I don't wind up with big knots on the corners where

Life on the Pamlico

I overlay the first piece of glass. Then, when I glass the whole thing, it finishes off nice and smooth. After I glass all the edges and let it cure, I lift the boat off of the jig, flip it over, and put gunnel strips on the top edge, which actually stiffen up the side of the boat. It gives me a nice gunnel strip all the way around. Now, I resin the whole boat over. I use an acetone to thin down the polyester resin, so it soaks up in the wood as much as possible. I just brush it on until the wood won't take anymore. That way, when you put your glass on it, you get a real secure bond to the wood.

Life: The resin, is that like years and years ago sailors would use tar to seal ships?

Mr. Tyson: No, it's different from that. I think they were using more like a pine resin. This is a polyester resin; most builders now use polyester or epoxy resin.

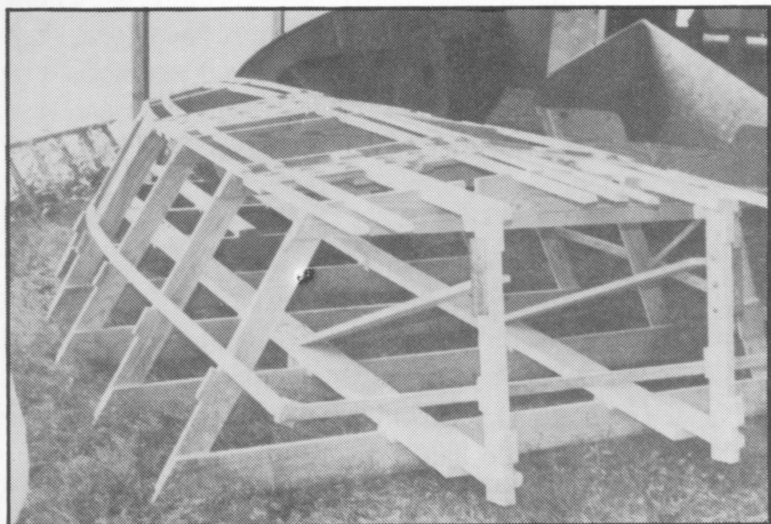
Life: So basically what you do is you have this frame over here that you use to start all your boats. You have your patterns for the bottoms and the sides, so you fit them on to this and then connect them together with what at this point?

Mr. Tyson: Two layers of six inch fiberglass strips are applied to all the seams to tie all the sides, the bottoms, and transom together.

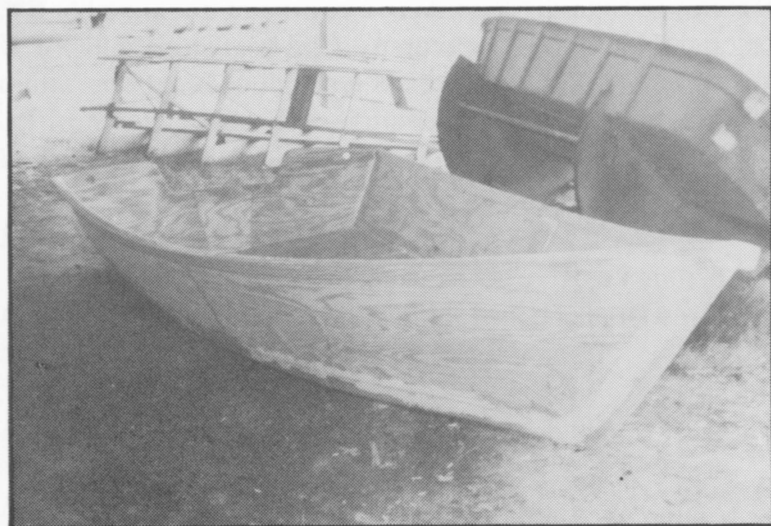
Life: So you do that over here?

Mr. Tyson: Right. While it's still on the jig [frame holding panels together]. All the boats come out with the same shape.

Life on the Pamlico



Skeletal Mold



Before fiberglass added to plywood

Life on the Pamlico

All my other molds, my seat molds and everything, were built to fit this hull. So as long as I keep the same dimensions, I can pre-make all my seats, and they can drop right in place.

Life: So this one right here [pointing], this boat has just come off of the skeletal mold?

Mr. Tyson: Yes, and the one inside came off the other mold. Both of them are 16's, but that one's just a different style of boat. This one, the Bully Boat, is more for commercial fishing; the Skimmer is made basically just as a little runabout, but also works well for setting nets or whatever. This type of boat built this way is just a little harder to build than building them completely out of fiberglass, from a mold. I build a wood boat and glass them on both sides and finish it off. So there's a lot more time involved in this process than just popping a finished boat from a fiberglass mold. You're kind of trading labor for material. I basically have a pretty solid boat already, just out of wood, but the fiberglass is to protect the wood.

Life: Now, once you get it to this stage, it's really finished except for putting the glass on. You spray it on?

Mr. Tyson: Yes. I've got a machine that sprays the glass resin and hardener at one time; then I use a special roller and roll it down.

Life: How much depth of glass do you put on it?

Mr. Tyson: An eighth to three sixteenths, well over 1/4 to 3/8 on the corners; everything is sprayed on a time limit, I know how much the machine puts out per minute and how much I

Life on the Pamlico

want the boat to weigh. So we spray, like, ninety seconds on each side and bottom panel to get the desired weight. If not, you can't judge how much material you've put on by just guessing. It keeps all the boats weighing pretty much the same when you're finished.

Life: Do you paint them?

Mr. Tyson: Yes. The one on the inside with the white bottom, it's at the stage now, as soon as I get the other decal stuck on the other side, it will be ready to paint. I'll pull it outside and spray it there.

Life: So you've got these two basic models, and you say the Bully Boat is more for, like, crabbing?

Mr. Tyson: It's more of a fisherman's style. Some like pointed bows where they can get up there and work their nets from either side, or when they pull their crab pots, they can grab it off from either side. The Skimmer has a wider bow, so you have more room.

Life: What is that mold?

Mr. Tyson: This is a fiberglass mold. This is what you'd make a complete fiberglass boat out of.

Life: You don't do this?

Mr. Tyson: I'm going to, but right now I haven't made one yet.

Life: Do you, or does anybody, make just a wooden boat?

Life on the Pamlico

Mr. Tyson: Yes. There are several companies that have made them. They made little cedar strip boats for awhile. They had polyester over them too. Then there's the little "Carolina Boats." You see a lot of green and white boats around here. I'm not sure if either one is still in production.

Life: I guess the wood just doesn't hold up as well, does it?

Mr. Tyson: No, not over the years, but if you've got somewhere to put them to keep them out of the weather, they do pretty well.

Life: This boat here, how many of these do you make, say, in a year?

Mr. Tyson: When Jack and I were first making the boats, we were making about six or seven a month, and right now this is my third or fourth I've made this year. I'm just getting back into doing this type of boat. I was making boats similar to this, but I was taking old hulls and sort of refurbishing them, gutting the whole thing out, and making a new interior. I've got a couple out here now that I'm going to try to get started on. I've got a basic hull already made, which saves me 200, 250 pounds of fiberglass right to start with. So all I've got to do is go in make a stringer system, put a floor and transom in, and I've got the same thing as this one. But I don't have any wood in it. I like to do that because it saves me a lot of time, plus it gives me something to do with these old hulls. It's getting to where it's hard to get rid of an old boat. You can't just take it to the dump because they're not biodegradable.

Life: So you can clean them up?

Life on the Pamlico

Mr. Tyson: Yes. This old blue one out here is just an old boat some guy gave me, and I gutted it and left the fiberglass shell there. It's actually easier to build a boat from old fiberglass hulls because there's a lot less time involved and I don't have to build the wood boat first. It's like I've already got my hull sitting there, and all I've got to do is the wood working in the inside and spray it.

Life: What would you put on the inside, the seats?

Mr. Tyson: Yes. Whatever the person who buys it wants: seats, console, storage, boxes, etc., anything he wants.

Life: What are stringers?

Mr. Tyson: The stringers are the ribs in the boat that run the length of the boat; it supports the floor, actually gives the bottom of the boat its strength. Usually, when I get to that stage, I put the floor in and leave it like that until I can find somebody that wants it. They tell me what type of interior they want, whether they want a console or a couple of bench seats or whatever. Then I build it that way. It's hard to build a boat to satisfy everyone, so I try not to build the interior until I have a buyer.

Life: This boat, this fiberglass one that is one someone gave you, is a different size from the ones you make?

Mr. Tyson: Right. Everything I get is a little different.

Life: So your seats that you've got made to just drop in, these

Life on the Pamlico

wouldn't work on these odd-sized boats?

Mr. Tyson: Well, I can use them. What I usually do is just modify them while they're still in the mold.

Life: Who are your customers?



"Skimmer" after fiberglass and painting

Mr. Tyson: I've only got one boat dealer that I deal with in Virginia; the rest are commercial fishermen.

Life: He'll take as many as you can get in?

Mr. Tyson: At the rate I'm making them right now, yes. But

Life on the Pamlico

I do a lot of repair work in between. When I don't have any, I work on these. It keeps me from wasting materials and gives me a little something to do all the time.

Life: I guess you have a reputation among the fishermen?

Mr. Tyson: Yes. I don't do any advertising. Everything I do is just by word of mouth. People whose boats I've worked on before bring them back, or they send people over here. Boat work is usually pretty seasonal, but that's one of the reasons I work with commercial boats. Commercial fishermen use their boats year round. Pleasure boats are just summer jobs. People only want them during the summer when they can use them; when they put them up in the winter, they don't think about it until it's pretty again.

Life: How much does this boat cost?

Mr. Tyson: It really depends on the way the boat's interior is laid out. The basic hull starts off around \$1,200.00 for the 16 footers, then depending on what's added on, a fully loaded one with console and wells runs from \$1,600.00 to \$1,800.00.

Life: So you do pretty well. It's a matter of how much time it takes you.

Mr. Tyson: That's the hardest part, just getting good enough at it. Yes, the faster you get it built, the more profit there is. It took me three months to make the first two. But I was doing repair work and other odd and end jobs, and I just worked on them when I could. About 90% of it I do myself. Once in awhile I'll call my brother or get my son to give me a hand, and

Life on the Pamlico

we'll do a big glass job, which usually takes 35 or 40 minutes. But when it's 85 or 90 degrees, you've got 15 minutes from the time you spray it until it's too hard to work on. So you've got to be right behind the gun. You've got to be real careful, or you'll have to do a lot of grinding. I try to avoid as much grinding as possible.

Life: Where did you get your patterns?

Mr. Tyson: Jack Brazier did all the frames. He designed and built the one I'm using now. We worked on Hackney Avenue for about 12 years, building boats.

Life: So you're just using the patterns you developed with him?

Mr. Tyson: Right.

Life: These boats are unique, aren't they?

Mr. Tyson: Oh, yes! They're different from anybody else's. I believe there's one company in New Hampshire that makes bigger boats like this, 28 to 40 footers; but they do basically the same thing. They make a big wood boat and then come back and glass it all over.

Life: Have you ever thought about modifying the patterns any or changing them around?

Mr. Tyson: Well, I want to make a bigger boat, a bigger boat like this. Make an 18 footer to go with that 16, with maybe an

Life on the Pamlico

eight-foot beam. I want to have a good line of high quality boats to sell.

Life: The basic design, I guess, is traditional, an old fisherman's boat.

Mr. Tyson: Yes.

Life: This is kind of a deep boat?

Mr. Tyson: Yes, a deep-sided boat. A lot of the fishermen like something they can lean up against. It makes them feel more secure.

Life: A 20 horse power motor is about maximum for these boats?

Mr. Tyson: No, they're rated up to a 50 [horse power], but little boats like these usually run about 20 [horse power]. I've seen 70 on them, but 70 is kind of overpowering. It's more power than you need.

Life: How fast will they go, say with a 50 [horse power]?

Mr. Tyson: It will probably run up close to about 35 or so. There's not a whole lot of weight with those. They weigh between 450 and 500 pounds when they're finished if it's fully loaded.

Life: You wouldn't want this for water skiing?

Life on the Pamlico

Mr. Tyson: You could use it for whatever you wanted to, but mostly they're commercial boats.

Life: Do you have much waste material in your work?

Mr. Tyson: No. All my cleaning materials that I use are used to thin down resin I use to treat the wood, so I don't have much waste. The first two boats I built I've got only a gallon of material left that's actually scrap, so I don't have anything that I have to send off. It costs over a hundred dollars a drum to get rid of that stuff.

Life: Let me just change the subject; we always want to get a little biographical information. Have you always lived here?

Mr. Tyson: Yes, I was raised on a farm in Pactolus. Lived in Washington most of my life, since I was 12 years old. I went in the service, and other than when I lived in Charlotte doing glass work up there, I've lived here all my life.

Life: Do you plan to stay?

Mr. Tyson: Yes.

Conclusion

Our brief visit with James Tyson was informative and enjoyable. During the interview when Mr. Tyson was asked if he had a reputation with the fishermen, he answered, "Yes. I don't do any advertising. Everything I do is just by word of mouth. People whose boats I've worked on before bring them

Life on the Pamlico

back or they send people over here.”

His excellent boat building and repair ability are all the advertising he needs to own and operate a successful and growing business.

Mr. Tyson is not a man concerned with boastful impressions, but he seems to be of a genuine nature, concerned with sharing his knowledge and his experience. He displays a passion for his work and a free-spirited yet devoted respect for life. I am impressed with James Tyson as a business man and an asset to our community.



James Tyson with journalism student Jo Lynn Windley