



## The Yachting Life

### **How I Became a Yacht Designer**

A naval architect reflects on his early years, how his path to yacht design was fueled by a passion and boyhood dreams.

Chuck Paine

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*Chuck Paine closed C.W. Paine Yacht Design and retired in December of 2008, but his friends and fans knew that he wasn't going to disappear from the public eye. Although he made his reputation drawing lovely vice-free sailing yachts, he also wrote the design column for this magazine from 1988 to 1999. Now, he's written a book, *My Yacht Designs and the Lessons They Taught Me*. The first installment of Chapter 1 appears here; part two will run in the May issue. The book will be available at [www.chuckpaine.com](http://www.chuckpaine.com).*

As far back as I can remember I loved boats. I was brought up in my earliest years on an island—Jamestown, Rhode Island—in the middle of Narragansett Bay. The beauty of sky and water was all around, and during long and sultry summers I was surrounded by whole fleets of elegant schooners, Navy ships and bumboats, rustic fishing craft, and even a steam-powered ferry that connected our humble island with glitzy Newport.

World War II had just ended and my grandfather offered his daughter and my recently demobilized father one of the ramshackle little cabins he'd been renting to summertime fishermen for years—just for the summer. That summer stretched into seven years. Gramp's shack was made of recycled cardboard called "Homasote" and comprised all of

515 square feet. My grandfather would take my identical twin Art and me flounder fishing in his flat-bottomed skiff. First he'd dip the transparent waters with a net to get shiners, or silversides as he called them. Then we'd go further out and anchor, dropping a sinker to the invisible depths where an occasional unlucky flatfish would be staring hungrily upwards with its two asymmetrical eyes. True, we lived in a shack, but we'd never known anything else—it was just home to us. I was surrounded by the riches of Nature. Wealth was to be found outside the cramped walls of our little home—down at the shores of our beautiful island.

I learned from my grandfather that there were people in the world who were content to work eight hours every day, but for him work began at five in the morning and ended at five in the evening when the fishing began—seven days a week.



My first idea of what I would want to do when I grew up and had to make a living—a dream shared with most boys on the island—was to be the captain of the ferryboat. But at about the age of seven it became my mother's version of daycare to leave my brother and me off at Wharton's Shipyard where we'd sit dutifully on a bench and watch Portuguese men fit steaming planks to the heavy oak frames of wooden boats. As soon as she'd driven away we'd abandon the bench and scramble along the seaside rocks to Round House Shipyard, which, like all boatyards in those days, was left unlocked and was full of white-hulled sailboats and outside, the sleek, narrow, double-ended motor launch *Thania*.

Every one of them was designed and built by Herreshoff Manufacturing Company up the bay in Bristol. And every one was indescribably beautiful. I think it was then that I decided I was going to design yachts.

My brother and I would debate the fine points among them; whether yawls gained or lost grace by that afterthought mast, whether or not overhangs could be stretched *too* far, whether schooners with two gaffs were more or less beautiful than those with Marconi mainsails, whether those newfangled and unsightly genoa jibs were acceptable if they made boats sail faster. My mother surely equivocated about her kids' nautical obsession. She herself feared the ocean—it had stolen away more than one fellow islander during her youth. On the other hand, her two boys fed off each other's happiness in drawing boats, boats, and nothing but boats on their father's discarded shirt-cardboards

At the age of eight my parents moved off the island to Warwick, a suburb of Providence. That was a sad day in my life. No more ocean, no more boats, no more Gramps. Though the tract house they had bought in the suburbs was much larger, my father worked even farther away from home. Both my parents were very intelligent. My father was a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Brown University. My mother was equally smart, but in those days men went to college and women didn't. She was a beautiful woman in her youth and escaped island life for the bright lights and marriage prospects of Providence, which is where she met my father.

I was what they now call a gifted child. School was a bore for me because it was too easy. I got straight "A"s without needing to try. So I filled my time and my school notebooks with sketches, mostly of boats, remaining sufficiently tuned into what the teacher was droning on about to always be able to stick my hand up if called upon and give the correct answer. I did enjoy some of my courses—English and Mathematics the most. When I got to junior high they'd figured out what to do with me, because in those days they had "tracking." Rather than have me suffer interminably as the teacher tried to explain to a kid in the back of the room what was intuitively obvious to me, they put all of the smart kids together in one class and gave us teachers who were capable of dealing with us. If you are reading this, thank a teacher. Thank you Rose Koralewsky (Latin), Dr. Rittman (art), Dr. McKean (physics) and Miss Schaefer (English). I only wish you were still alive to know how much you did for me.

Though school went well, home life did not. My father was chronically unemployed and my mother, saint that she was, went to work in Providence to pay for orthodonture and the mortgage and our daily bread. When I was nine years old she announced that we would all starve if we couldn't bring more money into the household and it was then when Art and I began our working lives. We each had a paper delivery route and at the end of every week the family would all sit down at the kitchen table with a pile of coins and bills in the center and divide up the spoils with a hefty percentage for the house. Only much later in my life did I notice that many of the people who became successful in America had one thing in common—they began their working lives as kids with a paper route.

The housing development where we lived was a long way from the ocean, but I remained obsessed with boats. I read everything Edward Rowe Snow wrote about the sea, tied virtually every knot in *The Ashley Book of Knots*, and practically owned the copy of *Whale Ships and Whaling* in the local library. I had added lawn mowing and driveway shoveling to the paper route as a source of income and by 13 was mowing the lawn of a fellow named Bill Berky. Bill and Ruth were unable to have children so they sort of adopted Art and me. He was a member of the East Greenwich Yacht Club, which was attempting, along with others at the time, to redress the commonly held belief that yacht clubs were elitist by reaching out to the community of non-members. Bill came to my parents and essentially said, "Those kids of yours need an outlet other than work—would you let me sponsor them for our new community sailing program?"

The battle that erupted between my mother and father was volcanic. If they had divorce in those days this would surely have precipitated it, but divorce was a word not even spoken between deeply religious spouses like my parents. "Over my dead body!" yelled my Dad, who equated yacht clubs with sloth and hedonism. "They'll be juvenile delinquents in two years if we don't do this!" screamed my Mom. The argument went on for days with Bill Berky occasionally intervening in favor. My mother won that fight and in doing so my life was changed forever.

Up until this point I had never stepped foot in a sailboat. The program borrowed benevolent members' Bluejay class sloops and used racing to teach sailing. You fumbled around trying to trim the sails something like they suggested in the morning on a blackboard with chalk and arrows. If you got it a little more than 15 other boats full of like-minded kids, they blew a horn and called you a winner! I never knew such fun as I had that summer. I was 14 years old and was beginning to notice girls. Half the students were girls and East Greenwich was hot in the summer so sailing was done in bathing suits. You have to learn the anatomy of the opposite gender sometime, and I contend there is no more healthy way for teens to do so than while the three of you (a safe number) are hiking your buns off trying to win a sailboat race.

The program was growing and the club sent out word that they would need more Bluejays next summer. They were boxlike plywood boats that could be relatively easily built from kits or with a bit more skill, from plans. Art and I had saved quite a bit of money from our various jobs—not enough money for a kit, but enough for the raw materials and plans. By then my father had to admit that rubbing shoulders with the highborn hadn't done his kids all that much harm and offered the garage over the coming winter. It was my first exposure to boat plans. We had to loft the boat, which we did in the basement. By the next spring she was finished. Since we had built her from scratch rather than the more common kit we named her *Scratch*. Not only did she float, but she "measured in" as an official raceable Bluejay. Over the next four years with the then much publicized "Paine twins" as crew, she won 90 out of 100 races she entered from Narragansett Bay to the Hudson River.





The next big crisis in the Paine household had to do with college. My father had graduated from an Ivy League college Magna Cum Laude and it had done him no good at all. He was going to write the Great American Novel someday but couldn't find time to sit down to a typewriter. My mother knew if you were bright and worked your heart out, who needed college? And despite the fact that the Paine family was descended from one of the wealthiest families in Providence, they had lost every penny in the Great Depression. The fact was, the family was struggling to meet expenses, had nothing in savings, and it was announced that college for the Paine twins was out of the question.

I was ambivalent, not knowing what college was about except perhaps avoiding real work for four years. Then another mentor entered the scene. He was Charles F. (Chick) Street, commodore of the East Greenwich Yacht Club. Chick Street was a graduate of the Naval Architecture department at MIT. He'd gone to MIT because, like me, all he ever wanted to do as a boy was design yachts, and Naval Architecture sounded at least vaguely similar. Instead he was working as a car salesman, at which he made pots of money. With a family and a big house and two kids to support it was too late for him to chuck in a healthy paycheck and do what he loved. So he decided to do it vicariously. He took me under his wing and basically said, if you go to college you can do this and if you don't you can't. He gave Art and me lessons at his home every weekend in everything he knew about boat design. I asked him, "Should I try to go to MIT?" He answered, "No, all they teach at MIT is big ship design and when you graduate the military will offer so much money that a poor kid like you will have no choice but to take it— and you'll never draw a yacht for the rest of your life."

Come junior year in high school this all came to a head. The other students in my accelerated classes were all applying to colleges. I was not—my parents said it was a financial impossibility. The high school guidance counselors were livid. They convinced me to apply to all of the colleges I liked, that I was a shoo-in to get scholarship money. If my parents wouldn't come up with the application fees, they'd do so themselves. My parents relented—if the scholarships actually came through it might just be possible.

I was accepted at RISD in architecture, Pratt Institute in fine arts, and a couple of others that were equally unaffordable. It was like an early Christmas when, with trembling hands, I opened an envelope from Brown University—my first choice. By this time I had learned the first rule of acceptance to college—large envelope good, small envelope bad. The manila packet in my trembling hands was huge! Far more important than the acceptance letter it contained was a long list of pure gifts from many people, most long dead, a Rhode Island State scholarship from its taxpayers, a low interest college loan, and a paying job to fill in the rest. Thanks to the generosity of a good many people I would never be able to thank, I was going to college!

At Brown I majored in Engineering, and, as I like to tell people, I minored in sailing. I took every course in mechanical engineering that I thought would have anything to do with designing yachts. And I honed my writing skills—easy to do at an Ivy League school. I don't think there's ever been a successful yacht designer who wasn't also a facile writer—writing is an imperative in the yacht design game. I quickly became Team Captain of the Brown sailing team, and we were highly competitive. We won the Ivy League Championship one year and were always in the top three at any regatta. The only guy I couldn't consistently beat was my twin, who sailed for URI and simply won everything. Both he and I were chosen All-Americans in 1965, and, as a consequence, spent that summer team-racing in England, which is probably where I caught the traveling bug.

In the spring of 1966, my graduation year, a famous yachtsman from Narragansett Bay decided to race his 37-foot Pearson Invicta in the Transatlantic Ocean Race. Milt Ernstof was fresh off winning the Bermuda Race and hungry for more. He reasoned that he had the best chance of adding to his silverware collection with a bunch of kids for crew who were too inexperienced to know when they were pushing a boat too hard. My best friend and "A" Division dinghy crew, Don DeLuca, got me an invite if I'd learn celestial and serve as navigator. We were all incredibly fit and enthralled with Milt, a man of the world with a remarkable sense of humor who'd made his fortune by the age of 44 selling surplus war materiel in India. All Milt had to do was open his mouth and you'd have to laugh. It was a summer of high adventure. I managed to find Bermuda using nothing but a sextant and we started the race there bound for Copenhagen. Over the course of the next 21 days and nights we tore through every spinnaker Milt had on board—literally—and set the boat on fire one night when the coal spilled out of the little stove we had on board for heat during a spectacular spreaders-in-the-water knockdown, and finally watched the rudder part company with our little ship one stormy evening hundreds of miles short of a landfall. I was miserable, I was cold, I was scared, and I could think of nothing more fun

than sailing small boats around on big oceans, which I've continued to do for the rest of my life.

*Next month we join Chuck Paine as a childhood fueled by a passion for sailing turns into a career designing some of world's prettiest darn boats.*

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