CarusoCraft

There's a definite retro quality to the 13′ runabout C AND SON. The little plywood speedster, built to the Fisherman 13 plan from the California-based Glen-L Marine Design Company, has details befitting a builder versed in the aesthetics and technology of, say, the 1950s and '60s. The steering wheel, the engine controls, the gauges and paint scheme, all hark back to a world of roller-skate diners, bobby socks, slicked-back hair, and the promise of a postwar America.

The boat's lead builder, Joseph Caruso, is a collector of antique outboard motors who also maintains a basement engine shop tidy enough to be the pride of any boatyard. Nine vintage Johnsons and Evinrudes currently occupy this space in various stages of disassembly and rebuilding. A fresh cylinder head caps the power plant of one particularly nice 35-horse Evinrude Big Twin, vintage 1958, whose carburetor Caruso has recently torn down and reassembled. Two period-correct pressurized gas tanks lie nearby, though Caruso's research has unearthed a way to add a mechanical fuel pump to the motor, eliminating the need for these obsolete tanks.

The boat, the motors, the shop suggest a certain scenario: a retired engineer, perhaps, indulging a passion for boats after a long career focused elsewhere—a recapturing of lost youth, a poignant grasping for the essence of what was. But that's not the case. Caruso, you see, was only 15 years old when he and his dad began building C AND SON, and he was all of 17 when he launched the boat last year.

"Aha," you say. "He built it with his dad." So maybe you're now thinking that the elder Caruso drove the Fisherman 13 project, plugging the kid into his own nostalgic ambitions. But that's not the case either. Beginning when he was 10 years old or so, Joseph had been building shockingly accurate model boats from birch popsicle sticks. The crude aesthetic dictated by the medium belied the young man's intuitive grasp of proper hull form. When it came time to build a full-sized

***Above*—Joseph Caruso enjoys an outing on Ipswich Bay near his home in Gloucester, Massachusetts. With his father, Joe (opposite page), Joseph built this 13′ runabout, called C AND SON, to Glen-L's Fisherman design.**

A pair of first-time builders launch a fine runabout

Text and photographs by
Matthew P. Murphy

boat, his father, Joe, tried to talk his son out of the more complex boat, arguing that a simpler project—Glen-L's 13′ flat-bottomed skiff Sissy Do—would be a better hull with which to begin real boatbuilding. Young Joseph steadfastly resisted this suggestion. "For some reason," his father said, "he knew this boat [Fisherman 13] would ride a lot better than the flat-bottomed skiff." As the elder Caruso recalls it, the conversation came to a head when Joseph said to his father: "Dad, you need to get more confidence."

"I couldn't let that go," said Joe. The Fisherman 13 plans were soon on order, and a trip to Boulter Plywood in nearby Somerville, Massachusetts, followed. Joe, who'd had no experience with woodworking at this point, recalls his silent prediction for the project: "I figured we'd be throwing it in the dumpster."

The Carusos' initial vision was for a workboat-style layout: no deck, tiller steering, and a good-enough paint job. The Glen-L plans (see sidebar) included full-sized patterns, so no lofting was required. The first step was to build a strongback on which to erect sturdy sawn frames, a plywood stem, and a plywood transom. Topsides of ¼″ okoume plywood followed, and then came the ½″ bottom, also of plywood. The builders accumulated a shopful of tools as they went; these included a tablesaw, a small scroll saw, an electric hand drill, a router, and a couple of sanders. A friend with a full cabinet shop loaned milling tools—stationary planer and jointer—as needed.

Two winters and uncounted hours went into the project, and there were challenges along the way. One of these was the chines—the longitudinal mahogany timbers that join the topside panels to the bottom. These take a hard bend forward, and this bend requires steaming. One could build a steambox for such an operation, but here the Carusos mustered their resourcefulness: They rented a wallpaper steamer and plumbed it into a length of dryer duct plugged with towels. They used this shop-made device to steam the required portion of the chine, and it worked beautifully.

Another challenging point, says Joseph, was the marking and cutting of the bottom-panel-to-topside-panel joints where their laps reverse. It works like this: On the inverted hull, the bottom panel laps over the edge of the topside panel to a point about three-quarters of the

C AND SON's builders gave the boat a custom configuration, with fuel-tank storage that fits neatly between two custom lockers in the boat's stern quarters.

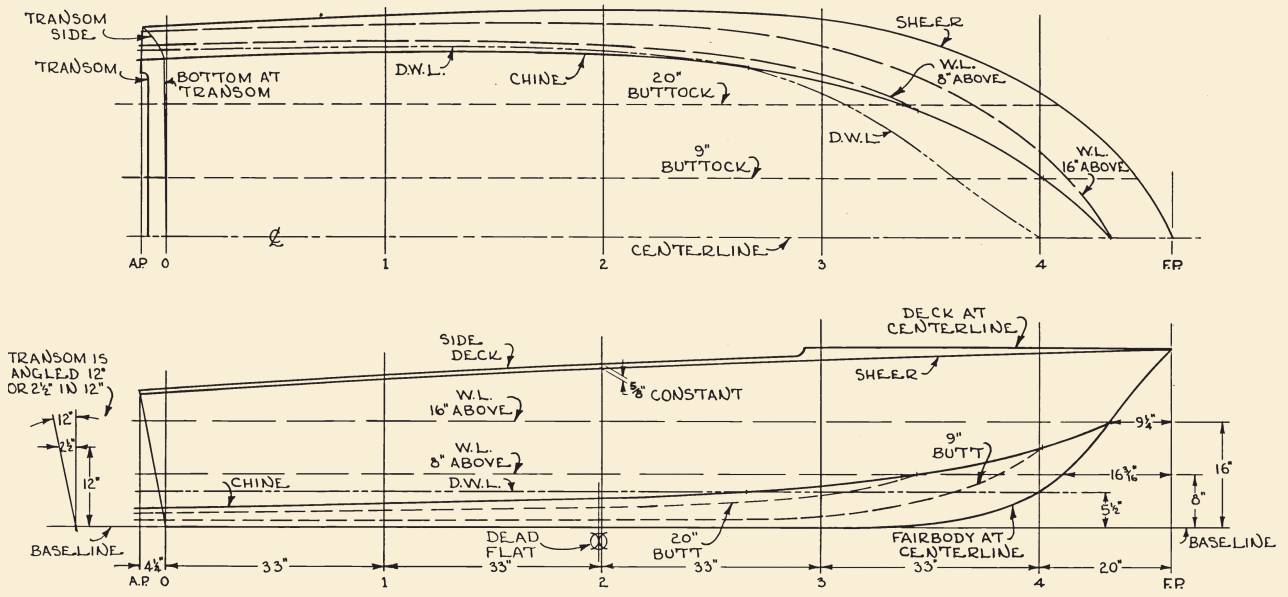
Joseph Caruso in his basement engine shop, with two of the vintage outboards he's currently fine-tuning.

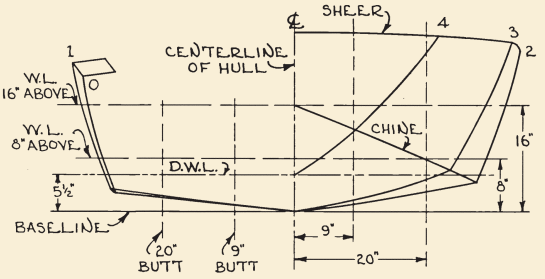
hull length forward of the stern. At this point, there's a hard reversal of the joint, and the topside panel laps over the edge of the bottom panel for the rest of the way forward. It's easy to describe, but challenging to do, and judging from the copious photographs in Joseph's album of the job, they got it right.

In fact, they got a lot more of it right than Joe had initially forecast. By the time the hull, sheathed in fiberglass, came off the strongback, it was clear that the project was not dumpster bound. The builders' confidence had soared, and Joseph began driving the refinement of the boat's details. There would be a deck. There would be shiny hardware. There would be custom varnished lockers added in the stern. And there would be a flawless AwlGrip finish on the topsides—this done by a nearby Gloucester shop that specializes in such finishes. What was the division of labor on the project? "We both worked hard on it," says Joseph "It kind of depended on what we were doing at the time."

Joseph's regular trolling on Craigslist and eBay unearthed period-appropriate engine controls—though they didn't have the neutral safety switch of the 2010, 25-hp Yamaha the Carusos had selected for the boat. Joseph read about how to retrofit such a switch to this engine, and wired it in—complete with an emergency circuit to jump the switch in the event it failed. Their engine, says Joseph, is from "the last year of the carbureted two-strokes"—an important choice, as it weighs 125 lbs, while a comparable four-stroke weighs 200 lbs. (Rapid developments in outboard-motor technology, however, have since given rise to better horsepower-to-weight ratios in four-strokes—and to clean, fuel-injected two-strokes; see "Two-Stroke or Four?," page 7.) Joseph, who aspires to an engineering degree after he finishes high school next year, also wired the gauges, lights, and starting circuit.

Joseph's forays on Craigslist also turned up a steering wheel—an aluminum one from a "1967 or '68" Boston Whaler. Its finish was beat, so he painted the wheel white and added silver accents to the grips. The frameless windshield came from a company called Retroboats (www.retroboats.ca), which manufactures





Glen-L Marine Design

"I read a lot before we started building," says Joe Caruso Jr. of the building of C AND SON. The Glen-L Marine Designs website, he says, was a particularly good resource. "You can see photos of the boats that their customers have built, and read customer comments. That was really helpful in picking out a design."

Glen-L was founded in 1953 by Glen L. Witt to provide plans, kits and materials to amateur boatbuilders. The cornerstone of its business philosophy was to provide plans that did not require lofting—the laborious full-sized drawing of the plans that often thwarts the efforts of first-time builders. Glen-L also provides fastening kits and fiberglass-sheathing kits for its designs—as well as easily accessed customer service. Until recently, Glen-L also offered complete frame kits for its designs, giving would-be builders a serious head start on their projects.

The Glen-L catalog's early offerings were all powerboats: runabouts and cruisers, mostly. Today, it lists more than 300 designs of every conceivable type, including rowing craft, workboats, displacement sailboats, and cruising powerboats. Its website is packed with reader testimonials and project photographs.

Glen-L Marine Designs, 9152 Rosecrans, Bellflower, CA 90706; 562–630–6258; www.glen-L.com.

Eldorado-finned fiberglass runabouts, as well as custom windshields.

The Caruso family had owned a Boston Whaler before embarking on the Fisherman 13 project. "My dad and I have always liked those boats," says Joseph, and its layout "was definitely a jumping-off point" in regard to the customized interior of the new boat. Like a Whaler, C AND SON has two simple mahogany thwarts. The forward one is fixed, while the aft one is slotted around a frame on each of its ends, and can be easily lifted out to free up space in the after portion of the boat. The bright-finished lockers built into the stern quarters house the batteries and gear. Two six-gallon polyethylene fuel tanks nest neatly between the box-shaped lockers, and these tanks are securely strapped down to the solid-teak sole.

C AND SON's helm station is carefully outfitted with aesthetically appropriate controls, wheel, and tachometer.

Builder Joseph Caruso runs the boat at idle speed, near the mouth of Gloucester's Annisquam River.

How does this little runabout perform? I got my first taste of an answer to that question when Joseph's dad and his mom, Lynne, had me aboard the family's Steiger Craft bass boat to shoot photos of young Joseph driving C AND SON on Gloucester's Annisquam River and nearby Ipswich Bay. We idled down the river and out into the Bay, and then Joseph touched the throttle up just a bit and the boat's bow rose briefly; then she leveled and took off like a rabbit. Joseph reports that it planes easily with six people aboard.

"We didn't know what to expect," Joseph said of his predictions for the boat's performance. Remembering the family's old Whaler, he then said, "The rides are pretty similar." I'd agree with that—at least the high-speed rides. But I think the Fisherman design is better at low speed. Later in the morning of our visit, Joseph and I made a nice, leisurely cruise down the Annisquam River and into Gloucester Harbor. We threaded through the river's marshy banks, under a few bridges, and into the expanse of the outer harbor. Joseph then set a course for Ten Pound Island and hit the throttle. The boat tops out at around 32 mph, and its moderate V-bottom makes short work of a small chop—though it's not intended for much more than that.

The 25-hp motor is quite enough for Joseph. The design is rated for 40 hp, but he says that's too much. I agree. In fact, as fun and thrilling as a wide-open runabout can be, this boat really shines as a low-speed launch. I asked Joseph how he uses the boat. Does he fish? Does he explore? Does he go joyriding? "I do a lot of cruising up and down the river," he said. And some days, he loads a gang of friends aboard and takes them to nearby Wingaersheek or Cranes Beach, where he runs the boat up onto the warm white sands. When he arrives, the boat invariably swells a crowd of admirers.

There's a logo emblazoned on each of C AND SON's stern quarters—cursive letters reading "CarusoCraft" that Joe custom-ordered from an online supplier. Not only do they indicate the builders' pride in their creation, but also their ambitions. For Joseph Caruso is currently clearing out the garage in anticipation of another project to begin this autumn. The top candidate at the moment is David Stimson's Ocean Pointer—a strip-planked interpretation of Alton Wallace's classic West Pointer Center Console Skiff. Given the confidence and lessons learned with C AND SON, by next summer, or perhaps the summer after, CarusoCraft hull No. 2 may well be cruising the Annisquam River.