A man with a mustache, wearing a dark green polo shirt over a light green t-shirt and light-colored trousers, is smiling and holding a small-scale model of a lobster boat. The model is white with a red hull and a white cabin. He is standing in a workshop with various tools and materials visible in the background. On a white table in the foreground, there are three wooden ship's wheels with brass-colored accents. The workshop has a wooden workbench, a green stool, and various tools and materials scattered around.

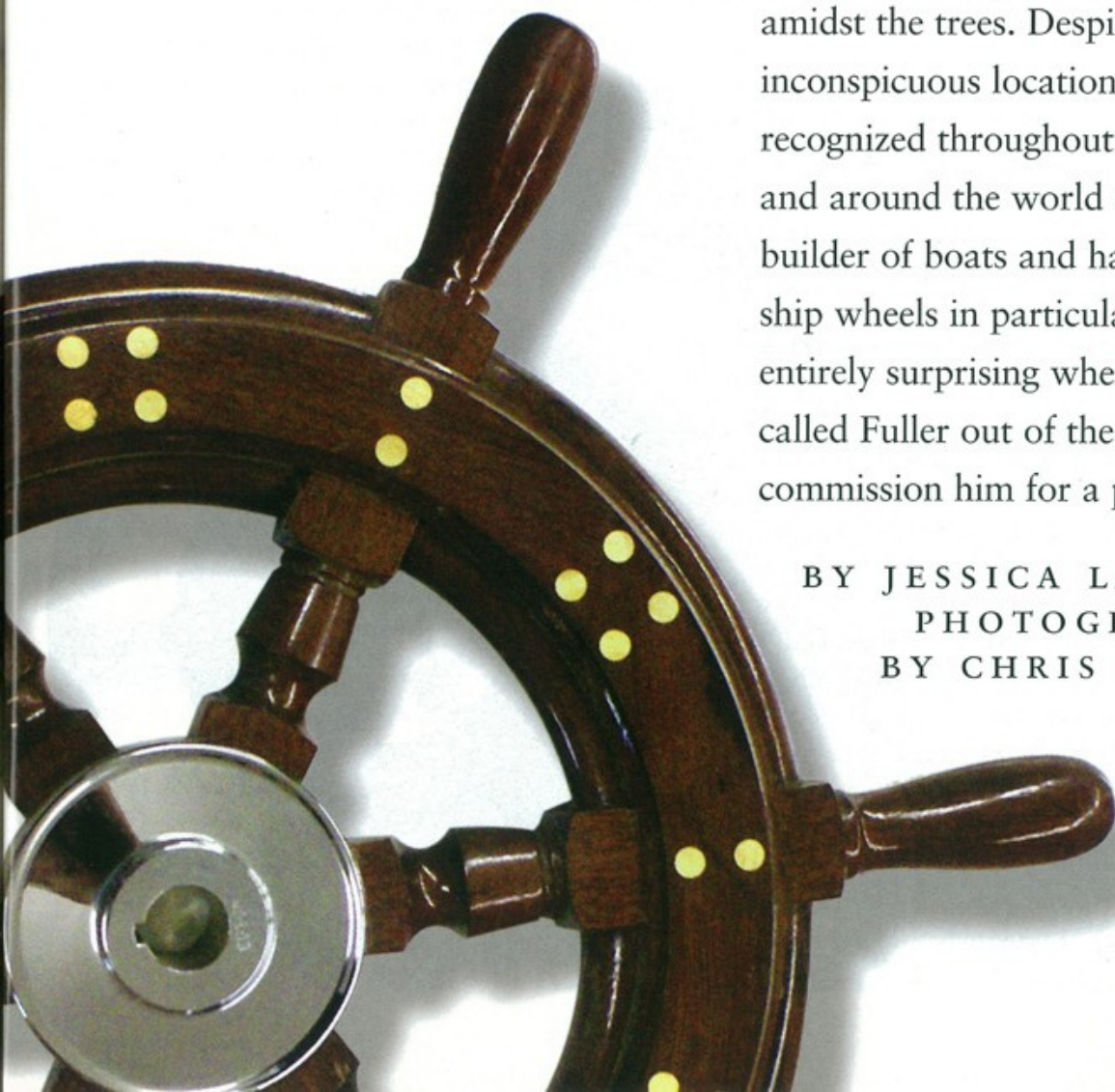
Inside his workshop, Bob Fuller holds the small-scale model of a 25-foot Gurnet Point lobster boat he is working on.

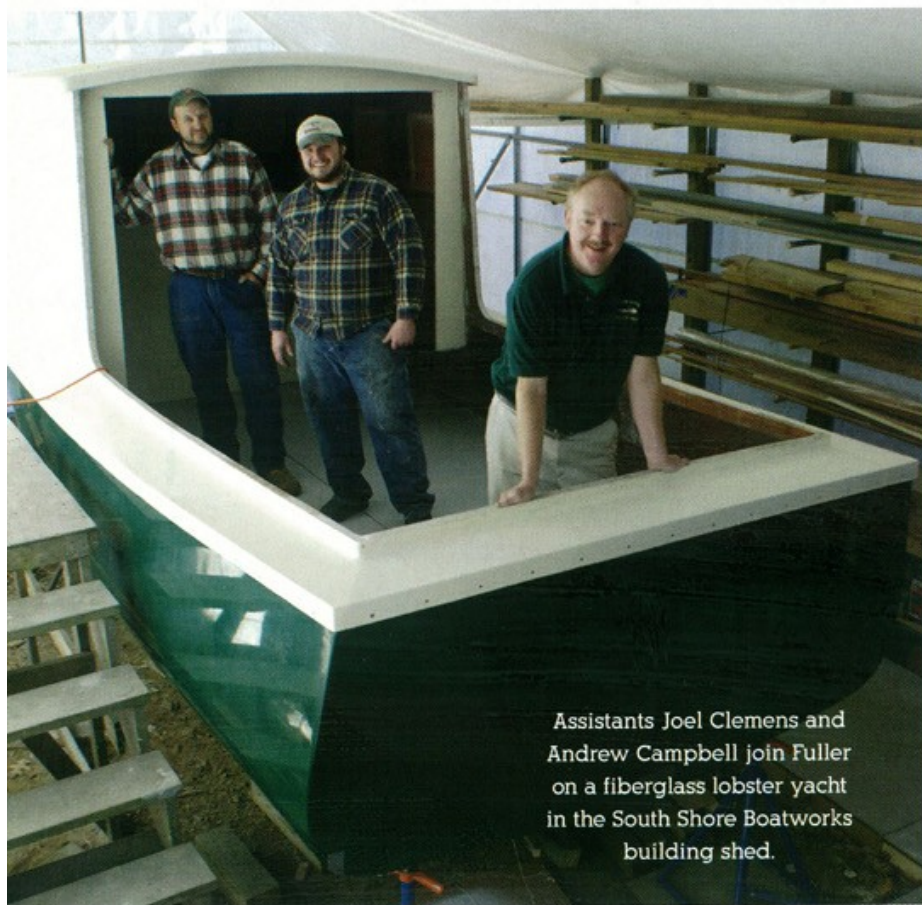
The Wheel Deal

*A third generation
craftsman keeps the
tradition of handmade
wooden boat wheels alive
in his Halifax shop*

Driving through the heavily wooded back roads of Halifax it would be easy to miss Bob Fuller's woodworking shop amidst the trees. Despite the shop's inconspicuous location, the craftsman is recognized throughout New England and around the world as an expert builder of boats and handmade wooden ship wheels in particular. So it wasn't entirely surprising when Max Kennedy called Fuller out of the blue last year to commission him for a project.

BY JESSICA LANIEWSKI
PHOTOGRAPHY
BY CHRIS LEWIS





Assistants Joel Clemens and Andrew Campbell join Fuller on a fiberglass lobster yacht in the South Shore Boatworks building shed.

Kennedy needed to replace the aging wheel on his father Robert's yacht *Glide*, and Fuller, the owner of South Shore Boatworks, was the guy chosen for the job. Besides outfitting the helm station of the Kennedy boat with a new 32-inch mahogany wheel, Fuller has built more than 500 other boat wheels over the past thirty years for private customers as well as New Bedford's Edson Corporation. He is one of the few remaining people in the country that make original wooden boat wheels as well as reproductions of classic pieces.

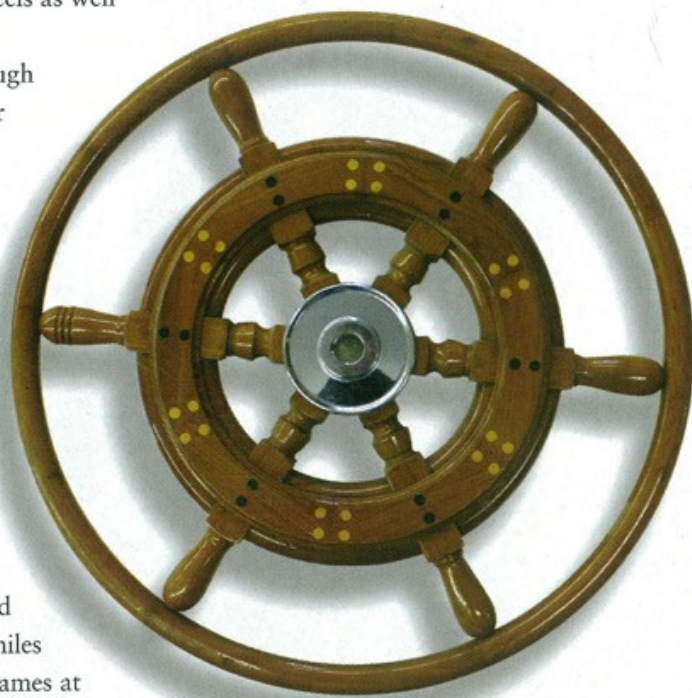
The craft is a family tradition that was passed down through the generations. Fuller began building wheels in 1977 after years of apprenticing under his father and grandfather. The Fuller men have been making the wooden boat wheels for Edson since 1965 when the company's prior president, Henry Keene, and Fuller's grandfather drew up a sketch of a wheel on a napkin. Their business agreement continues on a handshake to this day.

The home of South Shore Boatworks is a spacious garage that is connected to a two-level shop. Most of the labor on Fuller's wheels, a process that can take up to forty hours, is done by hand in the shop's attic. Fuller works closely with the customer to choose wood, generally tropical hardwoods such as teak and mahogany. Back when Fuller first started making wheels his craftsmanship helped a Bic sponsored French yacht steer clear in an America's Cup race and he smiles recalling the 14 large wheels he made to be used in animated games at Disneyland Tokyo.

The Wheel Deal

All of Fuller's wheels are built to custom specifications and the dimensions related to the size of the boat and the layout of its helm station. Each is made with six to ten spokes and can span from 20 inches to five feet in diameter. After sketching the dimensions out on paper and carefully deciding on handle size, which is an important comfort factor, Fuller starts to build his wheel. He begins by creating a wooden mold that is used to cast the solid brass or chrome hub for the center of the wheel. Using a lathe and hand tools he shapes the wood into spokes and the puzzle-like pieces that he assembles into the frame of the wheel. The wheels are finished with circular or diamond-shaped ebony and holly accents and multiple layers of hand brushed varnish.

Besides being well regarded by sea captains for their functional use, Fuller's wheels are also an integral part of local folk and marine history. Most recently, Fuller had a 36-inch teak



wheel on display at the National Heritage Museum in Lexington for the "Keepers of Tradition: Folk Art in Massachusetts" exhibit that ran through February. According to curator Maggie Holtzberg, Fuller's work was chosen because it reflects the important local maritime industry. She believes he is the only handmade wheel craftsman left in the state.

In addition to his infamous wheels, Fuller has been designing boats since before he was even building them.

"As a four year old I would sketch little boats and then my father or grandfather would cut them out of wood for me," recalls Fuller. "I'd float them in puddles in the back yard or in the bath tub." Before most kids even had the chance to enter a high school shop class, Fuller had already learned the intricate craft of building wooden boats and boat wheels at his father and grandfather's side. He fondly recalls years when the shop was bustling with the two preceding generations as well as him and his brother. "It was really important to me to work with my grandfather before he retired," says Fuller of Charles Fuller, who left the shop after a stroke at 79 years old. These days Fuller works with an assistant, Andrew Campbell, and his long-time friend Joel Clemens.

Fuller has come a long way since the first boat he built in 1975, a ten-foot wooden skiff. "I had always worked on my father and grandfather's boats," remembers Fuller, "but that was the first boat I completed alone." Originally only wooden boats were built but early on they eased into using fiberglass as well because of the high customer demands for its shiny esthetic and easy maintenance.

Inside his shop, Fuller stands at the helm of the Sandpiper 3, a 25-

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Fuller's 52-inch hand-carved wooden striped bass.

foot Gurnet Point fiberglass lobster yacht that he has been building for a client since last fall. Fuller, along with his assistant, makes the fiberglass by hand and using a highly detailed motorized model that he built as a reference he carefully marks off the area he will cut out for windows and other needed space.

Parked off to the side of the garage and protected from the elements by a tarp is a recently finished sailboat awaiting transport to Hawaii. A customer from the island commissioned Fuller to build a replica of an 1895 Gloucester sailing dory that is on exhibit at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington D.C. Fuller uses native woods such as white oak and pine for his boats and often has local residents drop off recently chopped wood at his shop.

Fuller is passionate about what he does, as are his clients.

"Fuller does excellent quality work but more importantly he is the type of guy who looks you in the eye and is honest and sincere," says Dave Waldrip a former Coast Guard and captain of Relentless Charters of Green Harbor. Fuller rebuilt the interior of Waldrip's boat by turning the galley space into an additional seating area and constructed a teak and holly hatch to replace the old one.

While Fuller has always put the

quality of his work over quantity, he does admit that his relatively new website has garnered him more attention. He has fielded telephone calls from curious citizens in England, New Zealand, and Germany and is not opposed to shipping his work abroad. For Fuller, 2008 was a record year for wheel orders but he doesn't see his work as merely a business transaction. "I guess the way I look at it is when I take on a project the finished product has to be something I would use," says Fuller. "Nothing can be just right, it has to be perfect and I'll redo it if I have to."

As for the fourth generation, Fuller has a ~~ten~~-year-old daughter, Christina, who understands the importance of his work and has shown interest in boat building. The pair takes wood burning and carving lessons at the Halifax studio of Nicholas Lonborg. But Fuller doesn't foresee a time when he will leave his work and the shop.

"I look at this as my lifestyle and not work" says Fuller, gently patting an antique mahogany wheel made by his grandfather. "This is what I do. I've done it all my life and I don't see myself ever retiring." SSL

For more information and to view samples of Fuller's work, visit www.southshoreboatworks.com.