

## Sparkman & Stephens: 75 years of Naval Architecture

The following piece is based on an article written by Hervé Eliès in 2004 to celebrate the 75th Anniversary of S&S. We remember this on the occasion of S&S's 85<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Hervé Eliès joined the association in its early days after a chance meeting with founder member Terry Sprake in La Rochelle in 1993. He raced under RORC rules throughout the 60's and 70's and continued with his 1962 S&S *Palynodie II* which he acquired just before meeting Terry. His last trip was to Cowes in 2007. Although he no longer owns an S&S yacht he continues as an active member of the Association.

In the summer of 2004 the renowned New York naval architecture firm S&S celebrated its first 75 years. Hervé Eliès, owner of *Palynodie II*, a sloop built in 1962 to an Olin Stephens' design, was there. He returns to this event and evokes the most beautiful creations of the legendary team that set Olin's seal on the history of yachting.

In 1928, the journal *Yachting* published a plan for a 6m IR yacht (International Rule – *Jauge internationale*) signed by a young man of twenty, Olin J Stephens. This son of a good family, a self-taught mathematician and passionate about racing yacht design, was not a stranger to the world of sailing. An excellent racer, he had already proved himself - with his younger brother Roderick Junior – on the most famous East Coast yachts.

A year later, Olin Stephens had the brilliant idea of teaming up with a ship broker, Drake Sparkman – well known in the New York Yacht Club – to start a naval architecture studio. The firm Sparkman and Stephens was born. Later, the two men were joined by Rod Jnr, an expert in construction and bridge design.

In 1929 Olin began by designing a racing cruiser for ... Roderick Stephens, his father. Papa Stephens, who had retired two years ago, knew that victory in his son's design could offer no better advert to launch the firm. This first yacht, *Dorade*, measured only 15.85 metres, a modest length for the time.

Built by Minneford Yachts, the yacht showed a novel finesse in its form and in its marconi yawl rig which could take a huge genoa or a small, very narrow jib,



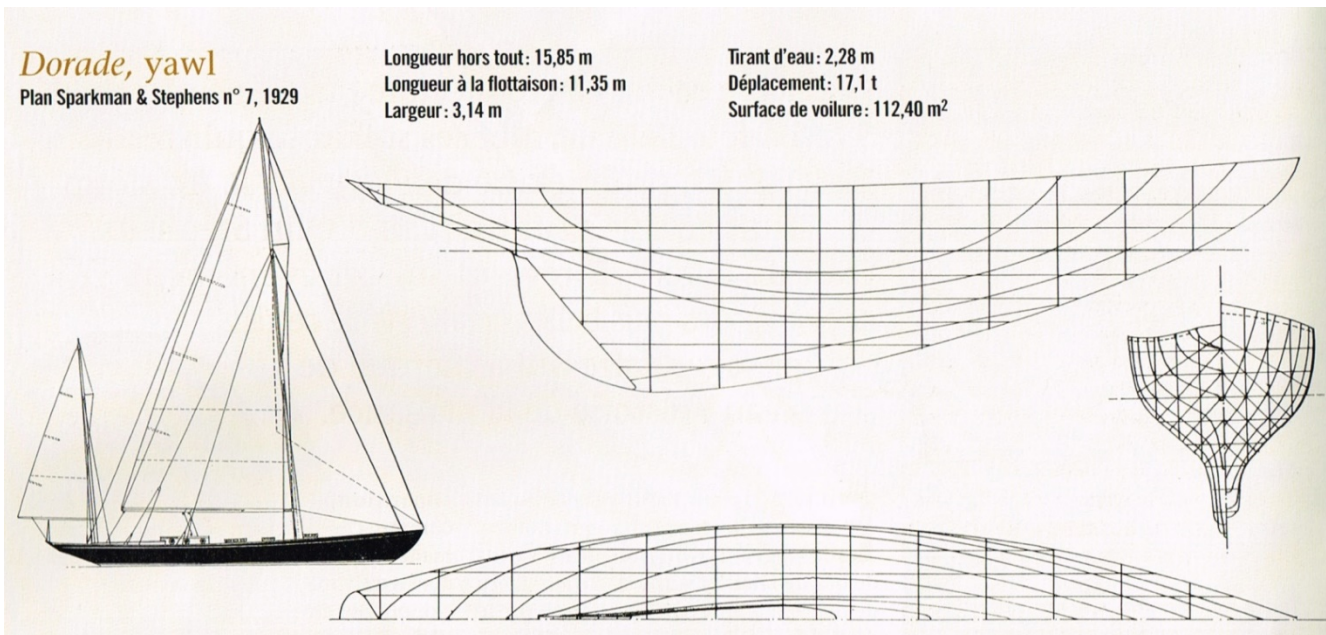
*Terry Sprake with friends aboard his S&S yacht Mornings End in 1993. Terry was the first chairman of the Association and died in January 2012.*

depending on wind conditions. The weight was very centred, and other innovations were introduced including baffled ventilators to exclude water – adopted as the Dorade box and now widely known as Dorades.

The yawl lined up for its first season in the famous Bermuda Race and finished second. For Stephens, however, this was only preparation for a more ambitious project: to enter *Dorade* in the Transatlantic New York-Plymouth race in 1931, a race usually reserved for 20 metre plus yachts thought capable of facing the rigours of the ocean. The two Stephens brothers and their father made a very young crew but *Dorade* crushed the rest of the fleet, finishing two laps ahead of the second place in real time, and four days on corrected time. A small boat, apparently so fragile that some wanted to prohibit it running!

And it wasn't over. *Dorade* soon added to her titles the famous Fastnet Race. Boat and crew returned to New York where the mayor organized a grand welcome parade. The S&S saga was launched and rapidly climbed to conquer the most famous yards in the world.

Even in 2004, despite his 86 years, Olin Stephens continued to travel the world - one day on the Isle of Wight, the next in Auckland, Italy or Rhode Island. Nothing seemed to quench his thirst for knowledge. It was enough to have seen him, studying at length a model in the Venice Maritime Museum to be convinced. And he remembered everything - from the J Class Ranger of 1937 to the Admiral's Cup of 1970 - and on the way the 12 m IR America's Cup!



*Winner of the Transatlantic Race in 1931, Dorade also won two Fastnets in 1931 and 1933. However, according to Olin Stephens "this yawl was conceived for the sheltered waters of Newport – and she seriously lacked downwind stability. As the wind increased it was necessary to reduce sail very quickly. And systematically we gained in speed what we lost in manoeuvres." In fact the form of Dorade was derived directly from the JI*

### Despite its world-renown S&S remains a human-sized company

July 2004, JFK. A yellow taxi takes us to our hotel in the heart of Manhattan. With Marie, my wife, we were invited to celebrate 75 years of S&S. Why? In 1992, I bought *Palynodie II*, a derelict 1962 S&S (CM 125). In 1993, I met Terry Sprake aboard his S&S 34 in La Rochelle. This dynamic Englishman with friends had founded the Sparkman & Stephens Association to gather together owners of yachts designed by the New York architects. So we joined and travelled with this international family to a different port each year: Portsmouth, Hamburg, Venice, Cowes and, in 2004, New York. Each time it was a childhood dream come true: discovering the high places of yachting with Olin Stephens as a guide, seeing the doors open, as if by magic, on the heritage of an era of naval architecture marked by a search for harmony and creativity.

As we have a day free before the celebrations tonight, we decide to search out the S&S office. A Breton can't help but identify rocks at low tide, an old reflex for safe anchorage! At the corner of 5th Avenue and 44th Street, at the foot of a skyscraper where the office occupies only a small part of one of many floors, a guard greets us with a big smile, "Sparkman & Stephens?" he asks, informed by my shorts and Docksidiers. Not the dress for the up market evening ahead! In the meantime, we explore Downtown - Brooklyn Bridge, South Street Seaport with its four-masted giants lying at the foot of huge glass towers, the

Statue of Liberty watching over the multitude of ferries, sailboats and freighters crossing beneath it ... New York is the perfect illustration of a city born from port traffic. Here as elsewhere, from Sydney to Istanbul, Piraeus to Amsterdam, maritime traditions make us feel at home.



*The S&S design staff*

6 o'clock. Dressed in "chic yachting", we exit the elevator into the S&S office where a dozen people follow the explanations of a manager under the watchful eye of the founder. The family atmosphere, far from the "factory floor" is designed for customers. On the walls, pictures and half-hulls recall glory days, before computers replaced the drawing board. Bruce Johnson, Director of Engineering, presents the design of a large motor yacht. The demand for sailing yachts is, however, still strong, whether modern or neo-classical lines, composite or wood. The firm can

respond to all requests, and references abound, as evidenced by the hundreds of plans lying in large drawers, fruits of 75 years of operation. A real treasure trove!

### **One hundred and fifty years of America's Cup models : I don't know where to turn !**

It is soon time to go to the NYYC, two steps away. On 44th Street, the institution does not go unnoticed with its facade and windows carved in the shape of a galleon sterncastle. The entrance - one of the most closed in the world - is a majestic hall, and we were on tiptoe as we climbed the grand staircase and thick red carpet to enter the model room through huge and solemn doors. My breathing slowed, I looked round the cases to study, compare, feel all the entrants in the America's Cup. Before me was laid out over a century of racing and naval architecture, from huge horn cutters of the 1880s, through the gigantic J Class, to 12 m IR post-war yachts, not to mention the schooner *America*, which stands alone in the middle of the room. I knew these boats from photos, but here I discover their hulls in

three dimensions - I am particularly surprised by the shape, very flat for the time, of Sir Thomas Lipton's *Shamrock*.

A further case presents, side by side, the two versions of the famous 12 m *Intrepid*, the, original designed by Olin Stephens in 1964, and the 1967 version developed by American naval architect, Britton Chance. At its first building, this resembled a ghost ship. Olin Stephens chose to install the crew under the bridge to lower the centre of gravity and *Intrepid* was characterized further by its boom above the deck, and the first rudder separated from the keel. This, relatively short, was provided on its trailing edge with an adjustable flap, the famous "trimmer" successfully trialled by Dick Carter, a young naval architect from Boston. The boat turned like a dinghy and with Bus Mosbacher as helmsman, overwhelmed the Australian *Dame Pattie*. In 1970, the new *Intrepid* won again beating Australian *Gretel II*. Four years later, the old 12m JI - the last built of wood - back to its original configuration, would again be present on the line ...



*The mythic NYYC Model Room ©Mystic Seaport, Rosenfeld Collection #1984.187.25T*

On the walls, hundreds of half-hulls, worthy representatives of the NYYC, are displayed in apparent disorder. Hans Kettering, a Dutch friend, grabbed me excited to see *Baccarat*, his 16 m yawl. The first owner had chosen the name in memory of the huge win that allowed him to build the boat. It would take days, months, to look properly at them all, but we only have a few hours - all too soon came speeches, toasts and champagne. Many personalities spoke - Olin Stephens of course, but also Mitch Gibbons Neff, the current boss of the firm and Dutchman, Rob Snoeks, President of the S&S Association.

It is curious that the Association was born in "Old Europe". It is true that S&S owes much to England, including the years of the Admiral's Cup, a competition founded in 1957 and held in the waters of the Isle of Wight between two teams of three boats, one British and one American. This soon opened to other nations

and quickly became the "world championship" of offshore racing. In the 70's, the Admiral's Cup represented the peak of research in naval architecture .. with Stephens' designs outrageously dominating the debate.

### **Fifty "Stephens" gathered to illustrate the art and talent of naval architecture**

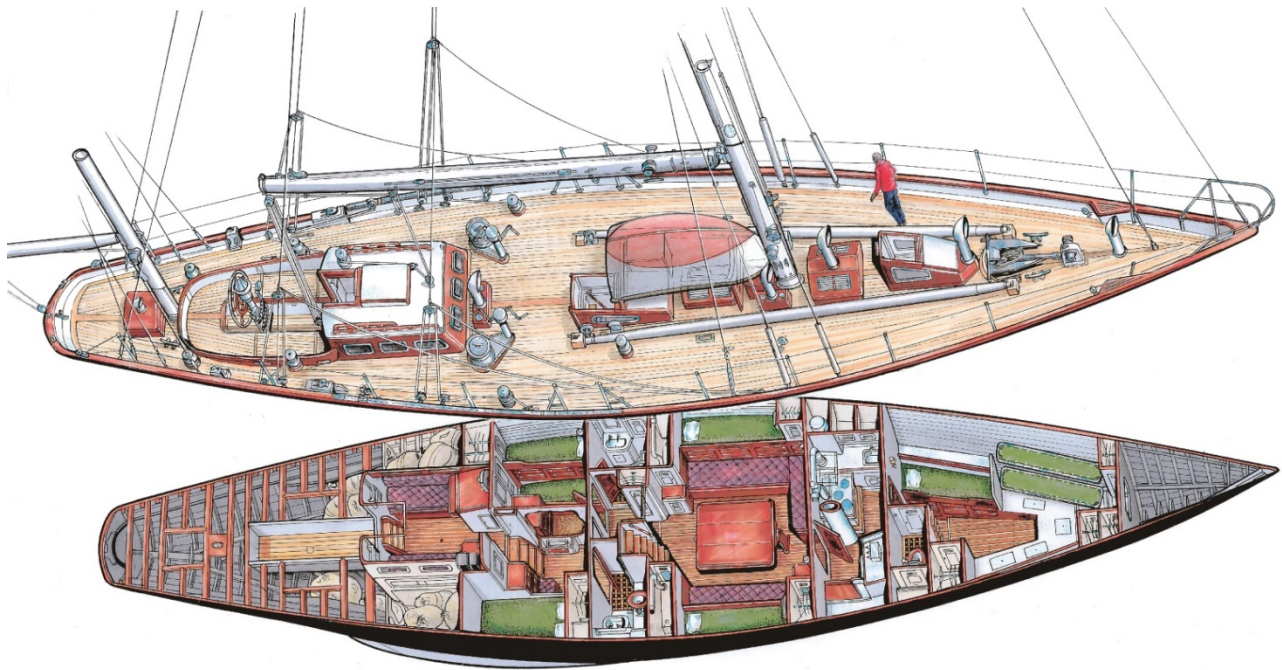
In Mystic Seaport, the splendid harbour museum created in the 30's between New York and Boston, we found fifty signed S&S units, quietly moored to the old stone quays, lined with trees and immaculately mown lawns. Although 30's yachts dominated the fleet in number and elegance, GRP is also at the feast, with Swan 43s (Plan No. 1973 of 1968) and 44s (No. 2112, 1972) from the Finnish Nautor yard.



*Fifty "Stephens" were reunited at Mystic Seaport, from the oldest Brilliant from 1932 to the Morris 36 the little newcomer to the flotilla launched in 2004.*

Personally, it was the old ones that fascinated me, like the great yawl *Bolero* (No. 711, 1949), and the owner kindly invited us aboard. *Bolero* was commissioned from S&S by John Nicholas Brown, then Commodore of the NYYC - a large racer inspired by the famous *Baruna* (No 222, 1937). Built by Henry Nevins, she lived up to the reputation of her creators and - at 22

metres one of the first post-war maxis - is a sumptuous yacht. Restored in 1995, she is now fully maintained by Edward Kane, who took over from his father at the helm. Impossible not to admire the quality of the accommodation, luxury finishes and immaculately varnished woodwork .



*Bolero* (Design No. 711 1946), built in 1949 at Henry Nevins in New York, this 22.5 metre 7/8<sup>e</sup> rigged yawl helped build the S&S legend, winning the Bermuda Race in 1954. She benefitted from a number of important innovations such as a “porque” at the foot of the mast to carry loads through the structure, a releasable stay, and two winches of the “coffee grinder” type.

Everything was so perfect that one began to regret the current fashion for “shining with a thousand stars”. Personally, I preferred the little less flashy look of *Stormy Weather* (No 27, 1934) from the time of Paul Adamswaithe, before her move to the Italian shipyards of Argentario. Of course, the more recent work is beautiful, but the varnish worthy of a Louis XV commode, the paint bright as a Ferrari and the chrome to grace a Cadillac, have somehow tarnished the souls of these legendary boats. Can’t old yachts stay “in their own juice”!

The schooner *Brilliant* (No 12, 1932), built at the same site as *Bolero*, was also here. Although its silhouette evoked fishing schooners of the Boston area dear to John Alden, the detail of the waterline and flush-deck bridge were the trademark of S&S, as well as the motor located between the two masts. This popular Olin Stephens’ configuration allowed better weight distribution but had the disadvantage of a very long drive shaft. The naval architect was only 21 at the time of setting down *Brilliant* .... A little later, three New York 32s (No 125, 1935) with extraordinarily pure lines prompt admiration of their slender hull and low freeboard. In the early thirties, NYYC members, happy with their famous “Thirties” designed by Nathanael Herreshoff but jealous of the success of *Dorada*, appealed to S&S to lay the foundations for a new boat. Club members wanted a more modern rig and a solid

hull, able to face the ocean to Bermuda, whilst still being comfortable racing between buoys off Long Island.

Olin and Rod Stephens, in association with the manufacturer Henry Nevins, answered this huge challenge, offering a 13.7 monotype, edged in Philippine mahogany on oak frames, with a very avant-garde marconi rig with two sets of spreaders and a jumper stay. It was a success: twenty units were built. And their reputation for robustness is not a legend - two-thirds of the fleet is still sailing! Furthermore, in 1944, Rod Stephens reclaimed the famous NY 32 *Revonoc* built for Harvey Conover, Commodore of the Cruising Club of America. In her beautiful blue livery, and renamed *Mustang* she was his faithful companion for 25 years.

A flurry on the pontoon. Olin Stephens, hat on backwards to avoid the visor is photographing the Morris 36 (No 2706, 2004), the latest S&S. The boat, with classic lines and extreme simplicity, turns on the spot with the vivacity of a small dinghy, not failing to entertain all of us, accustomed as we are to our Stephens from another time.

It will take a small series of rum and gingers to get us back to reality! “You know, Hervé”, says Harry, a Dutch friend, “my father built *Hestia* in 1959, S&S No. 1478”. Immediately, the story comes to mind. Mr. Van

Beuningen Senior wanted a very light 35 foot boat, but Olin Stephens advised him to choose a heavier hull. *Hestia* was a huge success in the RORC races including Cowes Week. "And you, Hervé, which is your boat?". "*Palynodie II* - Gaston Defferre's old boat launched in 1962". "Is this possible - I remember Defferre asking

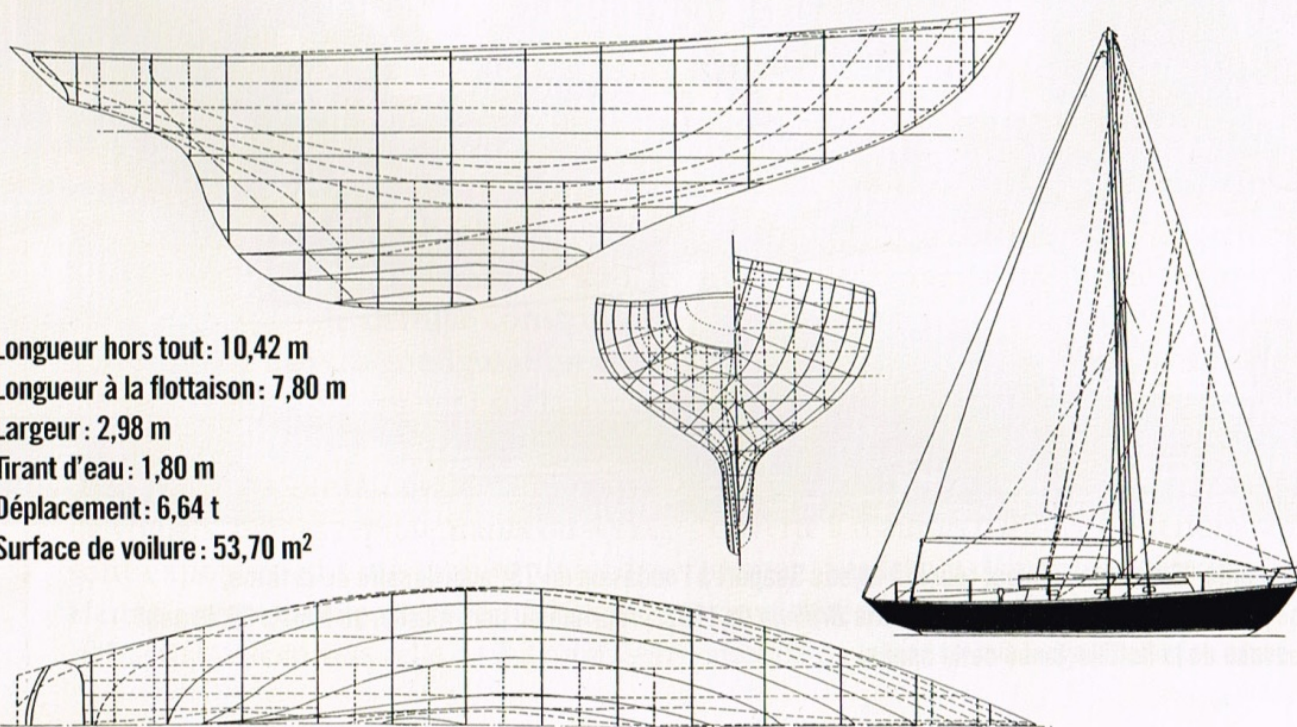
Olin to draw him something faster than *Hestia* ... he was furious!". "Tchin tchin" we toast to the history of these two boats. We end up discovering that our own brothers met aboard the schooner *Grand Louis* in 1973 for the first Whitbread Round the World Race!

## Hestia, sloup

Plan Sparkman & Stephens  
n° 1478, 1960

*Hestia* a remporté de nombreux succès dans les courses du RORC, notamment la Semaine de Cowes. "*Hestia* n'est pas un voilier extrême, raconte Olin Stephens, mais il a fait plus pour la réputation de S & S en Grande-Bretagne que n'importe quel autre bateau de son époque."

Longueur hors tout: 10,42 m  
Longueur à la flottaison: 7,80 m  
Largeur: 2,98 m  
Tirant d'eau: 1,80 m  
Déplacement: 6,64 t  
Surface de voileure: 53,70 m<sup>2</sup>



*Hestia* had many successes in RORC races, notably Cowes Week. "She wasn't an extreme yacht" recounted Olin, "but she did more for the reputation of S&S in Great Britain than any other boat of her era"

Soon, even the ice dare not clink in glasses. Silence. Olin Stephens, the master, offers us a wonderful speech. "On this anniversary, remember Rod, my brother, and Drake Sparkman, two men without whom this business would not have become what it is". Seven hundred guests applaud wildly for several minutes.

### S&S Birthday S&S doubles up for us as an American yachting experience

The next day, with the entire S&S fleet, we set off from Mystic aboard *Marionette*, a Dolphin 24 (No 1497, 1959), a small family GRP cruiser with a wooden bridge and superstructure. A few miles away off Fisher Island, a large tender transfers us to a small armada of power boats made for thirty years by the International Yacht Restoration School (IYRS). We discover their plush

lounges furnished with armchairs and thick curtains hiding large panoramic windows.

Midnight. Farewell those reckless and provident years; here we are on a 1941 lobster boat with the pounding of the old engine filling the night silence. Perched on his metal seat, one hand on the tiller and the other on the big inverter lever, Paul steers the boat to the wooden pier at Noank, the neighbouring port. And guess where Paul spends his holidays? In Europe, racing on classic yachts when he's not at home in Brittany - in Vannes!

The rain fell in torrents on the way to Newport, our next stop, the kingdom of lobster and clams. On wooden pontoons, fishermen have set up their shops, ponds full of crustaceans and shellfish. Each makes his

choice and the seafood is cooked immediately before your eyes. No frills - a paper plate, a cup of melted butter and a lemon, all enjoyed outside on a faded wood deck above the water.

Bridge after bridge, island after island - we finally make Newport, sanctuary of the America's Cup for over a century, up to the famous day in 1983 ... Although they celebrate tall ships here, as with us in Rouen, everything here is about the Cup, including the names of streets lined with beautiful old clapboard houses and set amongst lawns leading down to the water. In the harbour huge motor yachts line up in their opulent white, vying for stardom with a myriad of classic yachts. Newport is just too much! Fortunately, a great maritime bookstore lifts the spirit, a little crushed beneath the pyramids of dollars. In bars and restaurants - as good Bretons we take perverse pleasure in visiting them all - the democratic Bourbon lends a taste of nostalgia to pictures that reflect the glory of past years, making these places small museums dedicated to Stanley Rosenfeld, omnipresent artist in these parts.

### **From little Beetle Cat to *Coronet*, the carpenters at IYRS relive classic yachting**

We find the large red brick building that houses the IYRS the famous naval school founded by Elizabeth Meyer, an heiress passionate about classic yachting, who notably saved the J Class *Endeavour* from the mudflats of the Solent. While the vast hall of the site was cleared for the reception tonight, the excitement is still evident in the small workshops where the Beetle Cats (CM 124 ) are restored, with the profits supporting the school. Alone in a corner, the beautiful hull of *Aspenet* is being finished. Robert Vaughan, her last owner, offered this 31-foot sloop to the school. She was designed in 1896 by George Lawley and has amongst others belonged to John Alden. Outside, an impressive line of yachts awaits restoration. Even though I'm not a fan of diesel odour, I admire the aptly named *Belle*, a 1935 power boat, and the motor yacht *Osceola*. So charming!

Yet it is on the dock that we find the highlight of the show : 40.5 m overall, 8.22 m wide, 3.65 m draft, *Coronet*, a mammoth, ensconced on her throne waiting to be restored by IYRS, its new owner. This boat is, as they say, a legend, with one hundred and twenty years of uninterrupted sailing over 200,000 miles - launched August 17 1885 by C & R Poillon of Brooklyn, for Rufus T Bush, a member of the NYYC, as a beautiful and comfortable boat to sail the world's oceans. Heir to

the pilot schooners which the manufacturer had made a specialty, *Coronet*, with a crew of a dozen sailors needed to manoeuvre its 771 square meters of sail, carried ten passengers in unimaginable comfort : marble staircase, Cuban mahogany woodwork, hot and cold running water, piano, library ...

The magic of this schooner was not limited to her luxury. In 1887, Rufus Bush launched a transatlantic challenge, the third in history. Caldwell Colt, inventor of the eponymous revolver and owner of the schooner *Dauntless*, took up the challenge, but was defeated by thirty hours. W. N. King, a member of the NYYC and observer of the race aboard *Coronet*, took the first pictures of racing history on this occasion.

"Tomorrow . 9:00 at Fort Adams" calls Alain Hanover, the owner of 12 m IR *Columbia* (No 1343 1958), who had entered his boat for three days of Racing Twelves in Newport. What an honour to sail on the yacht that beat the English *Sceptre* in the 1958 America's Cup, the first year of the disputed 12 m IR, succeeding the huge pre-war J-class! To reach the final, *Columbia* had to win against three other "defenders", *Weatherly*, a Philip Rhodes design, *Easterner* designed by Ray Hunt, and *Vim* designed by Olin Stephens in 1938 for Harold Vanderbilt. Helmed by very combative Bus Mosbacher, *Vim*, although designed twenty years earlier than its opponents, held a candle to its competitors in light airs, thanks to a magnificent set of sails shaped by Ted Hood in a new fabric, Dacron. *Vim* bowed slightly to *Columbia*, with her outstanding crew: Brigg Cunningham the inventor of the luff tensioning eye at the bar, Colin Ratsey, the sailboat rigger on the tracks, not to mention Henri Herreshoff, grand-son of the wizard of Bristol ..

### **Investigating the history of the America's Cup aboard *Columbia***

On the beach, Rob Snoeks, President of the S&S Association, followed manoeuvres, pleased to be teamed up with one of the three permanent professionals on board. What a pleasure to be racing against six other 12 m JI's! Even the fog began to lift - we had several starts in a murk that I thought impossible. To top it off, we won all rounds in our category, in front of *Gleam*, Clinton Crane design from 1937, and *Onawa*, designed by Starling Burgess in 1928. Also present were *Freedom* - the last 12 m JI designed by Olin in 1979 and Cup winner in 1980 in the hands of Denis Conner - and *Courageous* - designed by Olin in 1971 and winner of the 1974 final against the Australian

*Southern Cross*. With its aluminium shell, *Courageous* still had a hard time losing the old *Intrepid* in the “defenders final”.

Final cocktails, final dinner, last speeches, closing applause. The festival ends. I flip through the small catalogue tracing the 75 years of S&S. Photos challenge with a date at the top of each page: Manhasset Bay One Design 1928; *Dorada* 1931; *Brilliant* 1932; *Stormy Weather* 1934 ... colour starts in 1977 with *Flyer* winner of the Round the World Race, and motor and sailing yachts are becoming ever bigger. In this year 2004, the small Morris 36 is numbered "2706". Yet we must not forget

all the hulls produced around the world .. who can imagine the creative capacity of these men?

Salut Rob, Patrick, Steve, Michael, Harry, Hans, Mitch, Bruce, Frederick ... Salut New York, Mystic and Newport. Farewell USA, and long life to naval architecture firm Sparkman & Stephens. Promise we'll be back in 25 years to celebrate your centenary ...

Hervé Eliès, Plouguiel, France

Prepared with the kind permission of Chasse Marée magazine where the original article was published in February 2005.



*Inward Bound*, a vessel from the Pilot Series designed by Olin Stephens and built in 1962 in Argentina