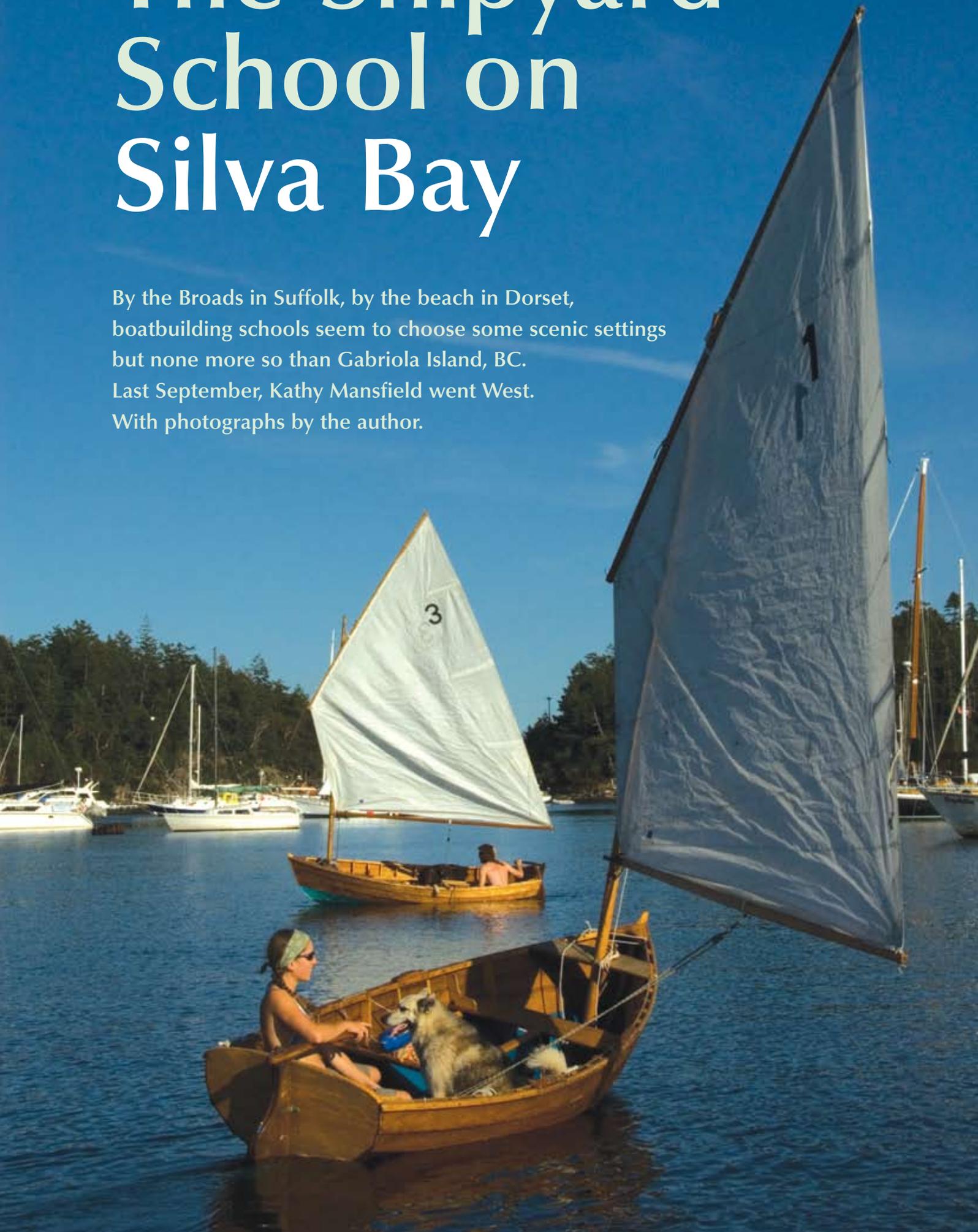


The Shipyard School on Silva Bay

By the Broads in Suffolk, by the beach in Dorset, boatbuilding schools seem to choose some scenic settings but none more so than Gabriola Island, BC. Last September, Kathy Mansfield went West. With photographs by the author.





This is an article I will not forget: although born and raised in New England, I had never been out West or seen the Pacific before I arrived at the Shipyard School from Vancouver in a gnat-sized De Havilland Beaver float plane, a really special experience. "The lifejackets have been stored within reach for 25 years and never been used," said our cheerful Austrian pilot proudly; I hoped they still worked.

When Claus saw my large camera, I was allowed the co-pilot's seat: we put on ear-protectors as instructed and took off down the estuary. Claus swooped down to just 150' (45m) above the Georgia Strait, according to his ancient-looking round dials, to show us sunbathing seals, a tow of barges taking building woodchips to Vancouver Island, then a ferry.



We were almost eye to eye with the ferry captain. Gabriola Island was about 20 minutes to the west and we circled Silva Bay, buzzing a sailboat and a turkey vulture and then edged down between rocky, pine-clad islands to touch water near the school. Claus opened the door and stuck his foot out to grab the pontoon, as if we'd come in a boat. We tumbled out and met Tad Roberts.

Silva Bay is indisputably a piece of paradise, much like a bay in Maine or Nova Scotia and along with an inn and a few houses consists of the Shipyard School buildings, the marina, and a good cafe/pub, all properly clapboard-built of local wood. We started with the latter, regaining our equilibrium, quenching our thirst and beginning to admire some of the yachts in the harbour, and some enticing wooden boats below us at the dock.

Gabriola Island is 8 miles long and 2 miles wide. It is just 25 miles from the centre of Vancouver, and a few hundred yards across Dodd's Narrows from Vancouver Island at the southern end. We could see Mount Whistler to the north and yet the greater world seemed a long way away: Gabriola is quite sufficient unto itself once you slow down to its pace. The Silva Bay Shipyard School, now ten years old, offers the only full-time boatbuilding and ship cabinetry courses in Canada, while nearby you can practice log cabin and barn-raising work as well. Students have come from the UK, France, Japan and Korea and the States as well as Canada. One of the founders came from the North West School of Boatbuilding at Port Townsend, Washington. Fred Apstien hired Bob Wyche, whose father Dick started the Wyche method for semi-production boats – www.graduatedinghy.com – and designer Ted Brewer lived here for a while. Paul Gartside visits regularly.

Left: xxx.

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Eventually the school was administered by a volunteer Board, taking in all age groups from school leavers to retirees, though many are young people looking for a change of direction, some never having held a woodwork tool in their hands before. "Most find themselves and the change that occurs can be astonishing, and satisfying," said Board vice-chairman Tad Roberts. Tad is now the resident designer, having studied at the Maine Maritime Academy and worked for Bruce King Yacht Design there before coming to Silva Bay to open his own yacht design studio.

Registered as a non-profit organization, the school takes up to 16 students who build four boats over six months. Combined with the Ship Cabinetry course, which lasts four and a half months, students can study for nearly a year. Just now the labour market is so buoyant that tertiary education courses are all down in numbers but the gathering clouds of recession might well change that.

This winter, they are building an Oughtred Tammie Norrie yawl stretched to 15' (4.6m) and a replica of Nathaniel Herreshoff's own 16'8" (5m) cat-ketch *Coquina*. A big piece of





teak has been chosen for the Tammie Norrie's transom, while that of the Coquina is already glued up. Knees are being built and stock is being cut for the keel, apron, centreboard case, and a stem for each boat... you can follow the progress of each build on their website. Most years, they build a powerboat as well, sometimes electric, sometimes diesel. The day before I had admired *Willow*, a William Garden Tomcat design, built of red cedar on oak which won Best of Show at the Vancouver Wooden Boat Show. Tad's son James and school instructor Trevor Henderson were sailing her back that day from Vancouver: we should see her later on.

We walked down onto the dock, past a strip-planked Cosine Wherry and a beautiful varnished Joel White Catspaw dinghy on a trailer. There we met Quill and Judy of Barefoot Wooden Boats, working on sails and rigs for their entries in the Shipyard Raid which was due to start in a few days' time. Quill had completed the Shipyard School course and had just finished two hollow spruce masts for customers. They had an 18' (5.5m) Mower Dory, designed in the 1920s by Charles Mower of Marblehead, Massachusetts.

Over by the slip was a 15' (4.6m) Paul Gartside Skylark, *Bellavita*, carefully built of red cedar on oak, with stringers, seat risers and centreboard trunk in Douglas fir and thwarts, transom and breasthook in cherry. She was built just this year by Damian Tokara from Rugby, England and two other students. He had heard about Silva Bay and other schools but it was the current good exchange rate and the website of a former student – www.rickcorless.com – who had built a Skylark dinghy which convinced him to travel over to Gabriola Island and do the boatbuilding course. Damian was now back



Above: xxx.

Insets L to R: xxx

on the island having sold his photography business and house in London, and bought land on Gabriola for his family.

Other boats were gathering for the annual Shipyard Raid to Port Townsend, Washington: I met Barrett Faneuf with her John Welsford Navigator yawls. She had just towed them across the continent from Maine, picking her mother up in Rochester, New York and arriving in Spokane, Washington just a few days thereafter, having slept very little.

And then there were the Pogies, a small boat design of Tad Roberts that is a favourite with the local sailors and students, often seen out sailing after classes finish for the day. These jaunty little varnished boats look just right on the bay, roomy enough, so it seemed, for a boatbuilder and his or her dog – and the dogs seemed to enjoy it just as much. I've never seen such a poser as Chunk, the chocolate Labrador, tail curled alluringly around the gunwale at every possible opportunity; maybe I should give up photographing people and boats and just specialize in dogs...

Tad's son James still wasn't back from Vancouver, so while we returned to the café for mussels and ginger beer, Tad set out on self-designed Ratty, a 20' (6m) standing lug cat-ketch built of plywood by Barefoot Wooden Boats and inspired by the Drascombe Lugger. Using a big Seagull in the well, Tad went to check the Georgia Strait for a lone small boat in the gathering dusk. There had been no wind that day and without an engine, James and Trevor had been rowing...and rowing... they had almost arrived back at Silva Bay.

The next morning Tad showed us around the school, its launching ways right next to the marina with a fishing boat in for repairs, the slipway below her newly scraped underbody redolent with the smell of mussels. The school was not in session when we were there: the new term would begin at the end of September, with the launching festival booked for the end of April. Tad is there each week, interpreting boat designs, explaining lofting, displacement, flotation, structure, wood engineering, and the basics of naval architecture.

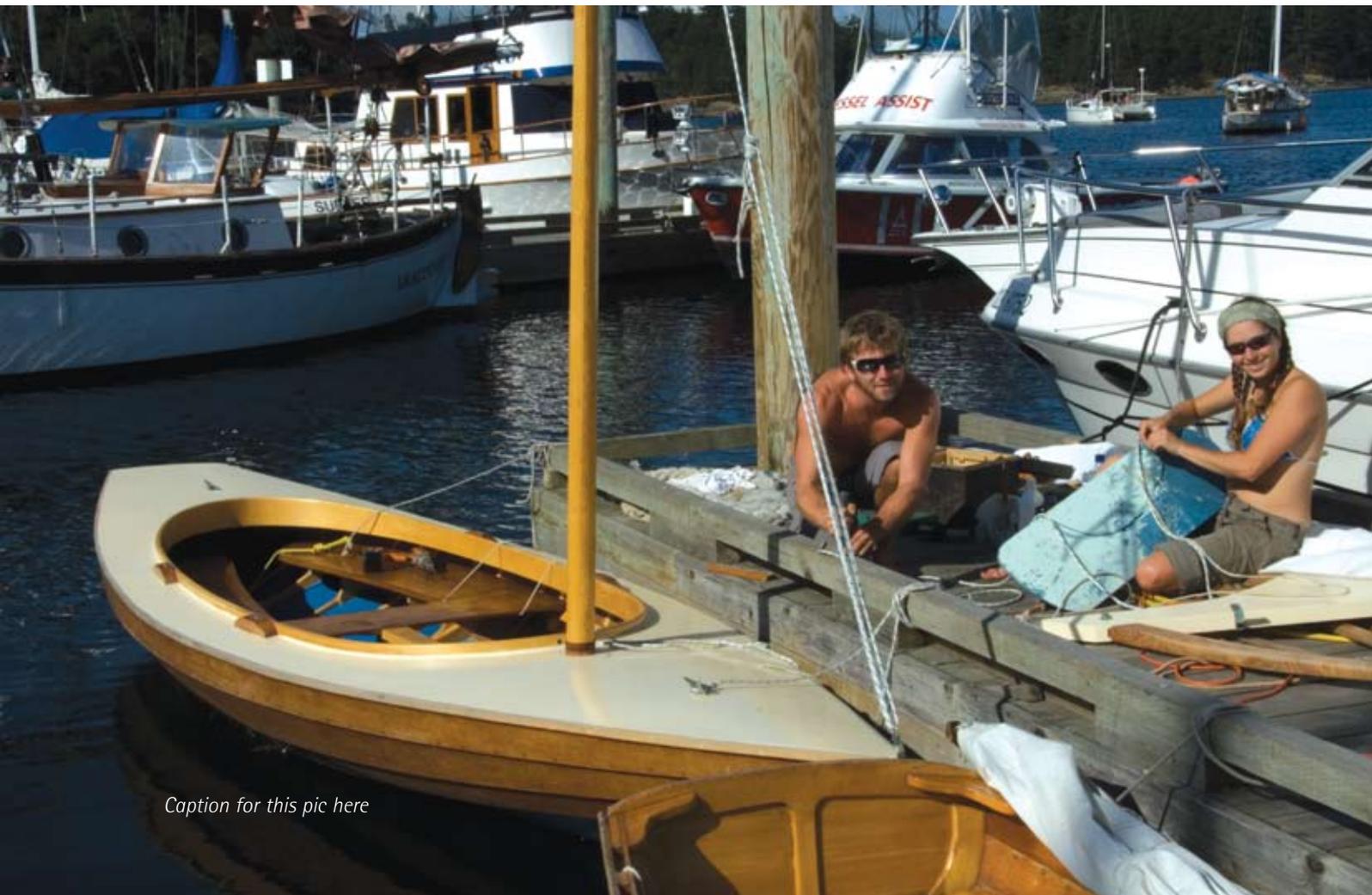
We met Les Jackson, formerly a boatbuilder and once the Shop Foreman for the Trent Severn Waterway, now School Administrator of the Silva Bay Shipyard School. Al Brunt is Head Instructor, with 29 years of experience in boatbuilding, cabinetry and fine furniture work, and Trevor Henderson is a graduate of Silva Bay, having also completed courses in cabinetmaking in Sweden and blacksmithing at the NW School of Boatbuilding at Port Townsend, USA.

The school itself is light and airy inside with views of the tree-lined bay and islands, as all along this coast. The workshops looked well-equipped and there were examples of students' first tasks. Trevor had designed a wooden tool tote with a laminated handle for freshmen, while the student cabinetmakers design their own tool chest with series of dovetail joints. Short courses are also offered on steam bending, making and using hand planes, oar making and building the Nutshell Pram and a strip kayak.

But as an example of what is possible, my last short sail was in *Miss Haley*, the beautiful 12'8" (3.86m) Catspaw dinghy, Joel White's interpretation of a Nathaniel Herreshoff design, which I had seen the previous day on a trailer. Her builder, Bill Dwolinsky, a local tree feller and student at the school a couple years ago, told me: "Like the Japanese craftsmen who come to these woods to choose the right tree for their temples and furniture, I chose the right timbers for my boat." Bill's boat uses cedars, yew, oak, fir, even imported purpleheart on the tip of the tiller. With great boatbuilding materials to hand in such a superb setting, I can well understand why Damian and others come here to learn boatbuilding... and just don't leave. ❏

CONTACTS

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Caption for this pic here