Conversations with
Bud McIntosh

by Peter H. Spectre

We're in a small room that occupies a corner of Bud McIntosh's new workshop, right next to the old shop, which is a much abused affair with a continuing list. Out front a marine railway emerges from the Piscataqua River, a tidal estuary emptying into the Gulf of Maine at Portsmouth; perched on a cradle over the tracks is the cutter MICKY FINN, built by McIntosh years ago and still in active use. On the river at a mooring is the BUNGEHEAD, Bud's own cruising boat, in which he and his wife Bebe sail the coast during the summers now that he has retired from full-time professional boatbuilding.

Bud's not comfortable in the new shop yet. Its sharp edges haven't been abused enough by rough work. He paces around the spartan room, shoving wood into the stove against the chill fall air, pausing at the window to watch the river traffic pass, leaning against the edge of his drafting table and fidgeting. In fact he's not comfortable with this interview—perhaps to say he has mixed feelings would be a better way of putting it. On the one hand, he welcomes the chance to talk about his career; on the other, he too modestly suggests that not much of value will come of it. I tell him to let me be the judge of the latter.

Bud McIntosh has always been one of those New England boatbuilders with a solid reputation, well known to serious boat buyers, brokers, and others in his profession, but lesser known outside this sometimes tight circle. He gained a larger audience after he began writing a series of articles on boatbuilding that have appeared with regularity in WoodenBoat magazine. He is that rare professional boatbuilder: a man who can express himself through the written word as well as the tangible product of his workshop.

I became interested in writing about Bud after auditing a course he taught at the Wooden-Boat School in the summer of 1982. I figured there had to be a significant story about a man who is so confident that his entire formal lecture on lofting went something like this: "You make a grid on the floor, consult your table of offsets, mark off the various points, lay down your batten, then draw a line. That's all there is to lofting. No great mystery. Now let's do it." (Needless to say, a number of questions were raised by the students in the next few hours, but Bud successfully proved that there was, indeed, no great mystery.)

We agreed to talk boats at some later date, so here I am now standing at the corner of his desk, my nerves still jangling after the long drive down from Maine. We play off each other's discomfort until our tongues loosen up. Then the time passes quickly.