

# CULT CLASSIC

Beloved by its owners, the Beetle Cat has been  
bringing sailors together for 100 years





Where you to encounter him in person, Bill Womack likely wouldn't strike you as a structural engineer with a lifetime of high-profile tunnel, bridge and road projects under his belt. He has a snow-white, Imperial-style beard and a friendly, softly weathered face. He wears a baseball cap, flannel shirt, wool sweater and wire-rimmed glasses. He looks like anyone you might find poking around docks and boatyards just about anywhere in New England.

Perhaps the look is fitting, considering that most of Womack's work these days centers around sails, sawdust, varnish and the sweet smell of sawn lumber. He's the owner of the Beetle Cat Boat Shop in Wareham, Massachusetts, the current iteration of a company that, since 1921, has been building the stately but simple Beetle Cat. It's a 12-foot, wooden, gaff-rigged sailing dinghy that Womack fell in love with near Onset, Massachusetts, during summer vacations as a kid in the 1940s and '50s.

With more than 4,000 hulls built over the years, the Beetle Cat today remains popular and enjoys a cultlike following among the owners of the 400 or so remaining hulls.

"People keep these boats in their families for many, many years," Womack says. "There are folks who have had several Beetles in their family for as many as five generations. Plenty of people consider them family heirlooms."

The Beetle Cat's graceful lines and seemingly perfect simplicity sprouted from the minds of John Beetle and his son, Carl, whose family ran a whaleboat-building operation that started around 1880 in New Bedford, Massachusetts. The Beetle Cat was designed 40 years later as a durable, easy-to-sail craft that the family's children could use. Womack says the first Beetle Cat prototype was built during 1920, and the original production craft sailed in 1921.

The Beetle Cat's 6-foot beam, 8-inch draft (with the board up), single gaff-rigged sail, and open, seatless cockpit turned out to be the perfect ingredients for a boat that kids and adults

*Left:* The Beetle Cat Boat Shop turns out between 9 and 12 new hulls each year. *Right:* A Beetle Cat mast on the lathe; a freshly planked Beetle Cat hull

alike could knock about with on Buzzards Bay, as well as the many coves, bays and marshes that line it. Soon, the Beetle Cat's popularity blossomed throughout New England. Beetles came pouring out of the New Bedford boat shop in volume.

John Beetle died in 1928, and the company changed hands and locations many times over the decades. Beetle Cat saw a number of owners, including Concordia Yachts and various Beetle family members. Concordia built the boats at the Palmer Scott yard in New Bedford for many years with Leo Telesmanick as shop foreman, moving operations to a new boat shop across from Padanaram Harbor in 1960. Telesmanick retired in 1983, leaving boatbuilder Charlie York in charge of production. York purchased the rights for Beetle Cat in 1993 and formed Beetle Cat Inc.

By the early 2000s, the business was struggling to remain afloat. "I kept watching Charlie's shop," Womack says. "I'd go down there and visit with him and talk to him about organization, productivity and economy of scale, and things like that. It turns out he was underfinanced and didn't have the capital he needed to make the thing go."

York built Womack a Beetle Cat in 2003. In the process of picking up that boat, Womack nagged York about keeping the business going and getting more productive.

"Well, for the right money, I'll just sell you the whole thing," Womack recalls York telling him. "Fifteen minutes later, we had an agreement. I was still working with a consulting firm and had my own consulting business, but I saw the Beetle shop as a way to get into wooden boatbuilding, making traditional things and sailing. It would be almost like an annuity for me. Hard to believe that was 17 years ago."

Today, each boat that leaves Womack's shop is built virtually the same way as the first hull that splashed 100 years ago.

"We use clear, unknotted Atlantic white cedar planks for the hull and deck, and steam-bent white oak for the frames, keel, stem and coamings," Womack says. "The decks are Atlantic white cedar covered with canvas. Everything is held together with domestically sourced silicon bronze fasteners. It's a 40-year boat."

According to Womack, the shop's staff of six churns out nine to 12 Beetles every year at a base price of \$19,995 per boat.

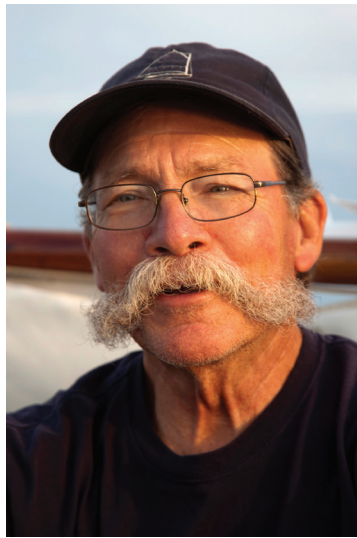
Though building boats is an important part of the business, a majority of the shop's revenue stream revolves around servicing, repairing and storing Beetle Cats for their owners.

"We quickly found out that the Beetle community needed a place to take their boats where they could get it maintained timely and efficiently, and that wouldn't break the bank," Womack says.



"So, that's what we zeroed in on. We started taking care of the repairs and storing the boats for the winter. We went from having 25 or 30 boats in the barn for winter storage to now, where we have 250. It's a full-service deal. We take each boat off the mooring or dock, bring it back to the shop, prep it for winter, store it and then make any necessary repairs. In spring, we put the boats back together and deliver them back to their homes ready to sail."

*Pollywog*, a 2007 Beetle Cat owned by the Hawes family of Westport, Connecticut, is one such boat in Womack's care. The family has had a five-generation love affair with the boats,



Clockwise: Beetle Cat Boat Shop owner Bill Womack; Beetle Cat regatta in Nantucket; owners enjoy multigeneration enthusiasm for the simple, fun design.

according to patriarch Bob Hawes, who is 73. A document much like a family tree shows seven individual Beetle Cat stories that start in 1928. Two of the boats survive today: *Black Duck III*, a 1976 model, and *Pollywog*, purchased in 2007. Both boats are enjoyed by the whole family, including Hawes' daughter, Jillian, and his grandchildren, whose ages range from 4 to 10.

"*Pollywog* brought back great memories of a lifetime of how fun it is to sail a big bathtub," Jillian says. "You can cruise upriver, go into the shoals and marshes, and beach the boat. Everything that I was taught by my parents and grandparents, I now am starting to do with my sister's kids and friends' kids."

Jillian's niece, Isabel, loves doing Beetle Cat races. "I also like pretending we're a pirate ship," Isabel says.

Isabel's mother, Heather, seems to enjoy *Pollywog* as much as her kids do. "Well, I certainly enjoy sailing with my girls," she says. "We pack a picnic, we go up the Westport River and then have little adventures on the sandbar and in the marshes."

Fellowship and camaraderie among family and friends is a common theme among Beetle Cat owners, says Tim Fallon, a Rhode Island resident in his 40s who spent summers growing up on Cape Cod sailing Beetle Cats. He's a keen Beetle Cat racer with a reputation for winning.

"There's just something about the solidarity among owners of [the Beetle Cat] that you don't find in other boats such as Optimists

and International dinghies," he says. "It's a great family boat that can be used and enjoyed across many generations together. My wife and two boys love sailing and knocking about in *Reminder*, our 2008 Beetle Cat." Fallon says *Reminder* was preceded in his family by *Holy Moley* and *Mole Minder*.

Among the numerous Beetle Cat regattas and gatherings is the Hog Island Beetle Cat Series. The regatta is one of a number of races organized by the New England Beetle Cat Boat Association. The series kicks off each fall with as many as 37 boats with multicolored sails crossing the starting line off West Falmouth, Massachusetts.

"My wife and I trade the helm every other year for the Hog Island Series," Fallon says. "Our boys crew too, and just love it. The races and socializing and reconnecting with other owners is really enjoyable."

The Beetle Cat's past and present are a wonderful story within the greater annals of boating, and Womack is equally optimistic about the future.

"We're here not only to produce new boats for people and store them; we're also trying to keep the older Beetle Cats around and running," he says. "Each one we have in our care is like a member of the family, much like the boats are to their owners. There aren't many boats like that around anymore, and we want to keep the Beetle Cat heritage alive and well."

