

Sailmaker

BY PAUL MARGOLIS

Long before engine-powered vessels came on the scene, the wind provided propulsion for boats and ships of all sizes, and sailmakers designed and stitched together fabrics to catch the wind. The art and craft—and now the science—of sail making date back thousands of years. The Chinese were probably the earliest sailmakers; their slatted bamboo sail designs date back to 3000 BC. Around 2000 BC, Arab sailing vessels used sails as they traded between ports in the Persian Gulf. In Europe, Greek sailmakers provided the square sails for trading and military vessels that plied the Mediterranean around 1200 BC. Sails, as we know them today, started to appear around 1600, when ships became larger and seaworthy enough to explore the as yet uncharted parts of the world.

Charles “Butch” Ulmer, the President of UK-Halsey Sailmakers, is the second generation of Ulmers in the sail-making business. His father, Charles, Sr., founded the business in 1946, after having worked for another City Island loft. Butch went to work for his father in 1965, after he got out of the Navy.

Forty years ago, there were a half dozen places on City Island that made or repaired sails and did canvas work. Today, UK-Halsey is one of two remaining sailmakers. Their facility on City Island, at the northern end of the Bronx on Long Island Sound, is across the street from the site of a former boat yard that turned out America’s Cup contenders and built wooden minesweepers and other small vessels for the Navy in the two world wars. Butch’s business is part of an international group that has sail lofts in Hong Kong, South America, Europe, and the Middle East.

“As an industry, sail making has gone through a total change,” Butch said, reflecting on the four and a half decades that he’s been in the sail-making business. “When I was a kid, sails were made out of cotton, and the work was done by eye and hand. They were weak materials, given to rotting and ripping under high wind loads.” In the sail loft, the entire sail was laid out on the loft

floor full-scale, and it was cut to conform to the design that had been hand-drawn to the shape and size. “Today, that’s all done by computer.”

Materials have changed dramatically over the past several decades: “Sails are made of Kevlar—the material of bulletproof vests—and other high-tech materials. They are more inelastic than canvas or Dacron sails of 30 years ago. Sometimes there will be some hand finishing, but mostly it’s a computerized process,” said Butch. He showed me a rigid piece of a sail that was a semi-transparent, high-tech fabric with a mesh of carbon fibers running through a Mylar “sandwich.” The new, high-tech sails are made in one piece and “cooked” in a heat chamber so that all of the materials bond together.

Butch doesn’t consider himself a sailmaker in the strictest sense of the word. “I’m a sailmaker in that I’m conversant in the ways that sails are designed and made.”

So, what has remained the same, or at least somewhat recognizable, from the old days? It is still possible to have sails made from Dacron; there are even polyester fabrics dyed to look like canvas sails, made for classic sailboats that have no need for the latest high-tech products. While those sails are also computer-designed, they are still sewn by hand-operated machines, and the finishing is done on them with waxed thread pushed through the stiff fabric by hand.

Butch showed me a Dacron sail, laid out on the floor of the loft, that was being sewn together on a sewing machine located in a pit that allowed the operator to sit at floor level and move the fabric along under the needle of the machine. That was certainly handwork, even if it was done with an electrically-powered sewing machine.

The sewing machines, which have been



Butch Ulmer, president of UK-Halsey Sailmakers, in his City Island sail loft. Photo by Paul Margolis.

unchanged for the better part of a century, along with “palms”—leather straps that go around the hand and have steel-reinforced sections for pushing needles through sailcloth—are still part of the sail loft’s equipment. Sections of tree trunks are still used to receive the pounding of the male and female parts of a grommet, the eyelets in sails and canvas.

“Sails,” said Butch, “do the same thing as always; they just do it better, since rigs and boats are far more sophisticated now.” Even though today’s sails are made of high-tech materials, they still serve the same purpose as they always have: to catch the wind and propel sailing vessels. ▼

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