THE SHARPIE - A PERSONAL VIEW

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To say that all flat bottomed boats are Sharpies is to say that all animals with four legs are horses. The statement simply does not hold water. It is true that most sharpies have flat bottoms, but the Sharpie is a unique design style which evolved over a specific period of history to fill a particular need, and to which certain well defined rules of design apply. The initial statement also denies the individuality of a multitude of other distinct hull 'types' such as the many and varied dory hull forms, skiffs, punts and hunting boats, and 'near flat bottomed' boats such as skipjacks, (not all Sharpies have absolutely flat bottoms, for that matter,) which developed in tandem with the Sharpie.

A common misconception is that the Sharpie originated in Europe. It is true that many flat bottomed boats have existed in Europe over the years, notably the 'Metre Sharpies', but to say that the Sharpie evolved in Europe would make such great figures as Howard Chapelle, the well known maritime historian, turn in his grave. While there will always be differing opinions, the accepted history of the traditional Sharpie as we know it, is that it evolved on the eastern seaboard of the United States of America in the Oyster fisheries of Connecticut. It is largely down to the efforts of Howard Chapelle, who spent a lifetime documenting the development of the simple working boats of the United States, that we can credit most of our current knowledge of the rules and characteristics which define the traditional Sharpie as a distinct vessel style. In deference to both sides of the argument, I will refer here to the 'American Sharpie', for the sake of clarity.

What then are the 'rules' which define the traditional 'American Sharpie'.

- Firstly, the Sharpies were considered to be larger boats, not dinghies. Many believe that a fair dividing line was around 20 feet of overall length. Under that length it was a Skiff, whilst over that length it was a Sharpie. (The dividing line is a little more blurred than that in reality.)

- Length overall was commonly about six times the maximum beam on the hull bottom. There were of course many designs which were wider than this, but the general principal holds true.

- The flare of the topsides was about 18 degrees, or a 1 in 3-4 slope. Freeboard was generally kept low, in keeping with their origin as working boats. The oyster fishermen of the U.S. seaboard needed to be able to work their oyster beds comfortably from the sides of the boat, and a low topside combined with high form stability allowed them to stand at the side of the vessel and use their oyster tongs in comparative comfort and safety.

- The traditional Sharpie was usually of light displacement, with a single chine sloping down from a forward point at or just above the waterline, running straight for about one third of it's length then turning gently up in a shallow curve aft.

- The light displacement hulls were renowned for their speed, and for this reason were taken up by the pleasure sailing community as a viable racing alternative. A light, low rig was mandatory, as with the narrow hull and light displacement it was vital to keep the weight and centre of effort of the rig as low as possible. To this end most Sharpies used twin masted rigs, usually but not always with unstayed masts and leg o' mutton sails.

- Another almost universal feature was the drop down, sled style rudder, a feature which allowed for extreme manoeuvrability in shoal waters but made the boats notoriously hard to steer in certain conditions.

- The Traditional Sharpies usually had very large centreboards, with trunk cases often extending over one third of the overall length of the hull.

- Construction usually featured transverse bottom planks and minimal internal framing. The method was strong, simple and quick.

It must be born in mind that these rules were, and still are often broken. For example, at least one well known designer of modern Sharpies uses vertical hull sides, and while some may not like the resulting aesthetics, this designer's boats have been phenomenally successful. The point is that successful variations emerge from a sound understanding of the rules before one breaks them.

The simplicity and low cost of these boats was one, but by no means the only factor in their popularity amongst the early American fishermen. Their flat bottoms provided a shoal draft, ideal for the shallow waters in which these men worked. The hull shape and low freeboard allowed them to stand comfortably at the gunwale while carrying out their fishing activities, with less heel at rest than would be normal on most other hull styles (accepting equal beam etc). In addition, the Sharpie was fast and seaworthy (in most respects).

Of course, the traditional American Sharpie also had its faults. Accommodation was usually poor or non existent due to the narrow beam and low freeboard, and was made worse by the massive centreboard trunk filling the middle of the hull. The sled rudders, designed for shallow water operation, made for difficult steering in strong winds, and the low freeboard and open cockpits required for working the oyster beds often allowed the boat to be swamped if not skilfully handled. One would not consider building such a boat today except as a deliberate attempt to re-create an historic craft. Another problem was that the flat bottom tended to slap in a chop, a problem which reduced as the boat heeled onto its chine and presented a 'V' to the water.

It has also been said that Sharpies are ugly. It is my view that such comments are belied by an appreciation of the classic style of these boats, and the undoubted grace of such boats as Munro's *Egret*, undoubtedly one of the most beautiful boats (Sharpie or otherwise) to emerge from that era.

The modern Sharpie overcomes most of the traditional shortcomings by simple and effective means. By the use of increased freeboard, watertight cockpits and heavily arched cabin tops, as well as the judicious use of ballast and modern light construction techniques, the modern Sharpie can be made watertight and self righting, with acceptable if not palatial accommodation, whilst still retaining the handling characteristics and speed which made Sharpies so popular in the past. Advances in rig and mast design allow weight aloft to be reduced, further increasing the stability of the boat. Advances in rig, rudder and centreboard design have greatly improved the performance. Tandem centreboards are commonly used to improve balance and reduce the intrusion of the board cases into the accommodations. Today, most Sharpies are constructed from marine plywood, an ideal material which when combined with modern timber/ epoxy construction produces a light, strong and attractive craft.

Several excellent designs for modern Sharpies are available from reliable, professional designers, and the Sharpie is once again appearing in numbers on waterways around the world. Let us therefore not discount the humble Sharpie as a cheap, easy and ugly duckling, but rather appreciate the classic beauty, simplicity and practicality of these wonderful

boats. For a yacht which is inexpensive and easy to construct, has reasonable accommodation, sails well, is remarkably seaworthy and is in it's own traditional way very attractive, one could do worse than choose a Sharpie as a home boat building project.