

On Living Aboard

by Gene Henson



There are times when, I'm sure, people question our sanity for choosing to live aboard an old wooden boat year round in the Northeast. And I do have to admit that there are times when we, too, wonder the same thing. Take this past winter, for example. For the past two months, I have been pontificating at length on these pages about how "it hasn't been all that bad" this winter. Then, of course, the hammer came down and we had several weeks of below normal temperatures and, finally, some snow.

One of the first questions people ask when they find out that we live aboard, and it's been mentioned here before, is "What do you do for heat?" When we bought *Patty O'*, she came equipped with a Shipmate Skippy coal stove which, while wonderful for those cool fall nights, proved to be inadequate for serious heat in mid-winter. Liking the dry heat of a solid fuel stove and also the ambiance of the Shipmate, we went looking for something in the same line, only bigger. After surfing the Internet, parking on E-bay and traipsing through half the nautical antique shops on the east coast, we found just what we wanted in the same boat yard we're tied up in!

She was an old dragger, way past her prime, and now she was to be cut up since her owners hadn't paid their dockage in a very long time. It's a sad but true story in many boat yards

in New England and the Middle Atlantic states. In fact, many marinas refuse to haul large, wooden boats for that very reason. "When they come out, they usually stay out," is what Ray, the manager of our yard, says. Indeed, we had to post a bond when we first arrived here to be hauled. It's a little easier for us now because *Patty O'* looks so good and we do have some creditability. Anyway, before they cut the old girl up, I'd taken a look to see if there was anything we could use, and there, looking petty ratty, was a Shipmate stove, model 212, which was just what we were looking for. Unfortunately, the yard owner knew what it was worth cleaned up, and so we did end up paying a bit more than I'd hoped. But in all fairness to him, there was a lot of money owed on that boat and business is, after all, business.

A trip to the local commercial shipyard to get the thing sandblasted showed that there was a large crack in the side of the fire pot. When I told the Blonde, my wife, about it, I could read her mind thinking, "Why can't you check these things out beforehand?" We'd bought *Patty O'* without a survey, depending totally on my own judgment of how she looked, balanced with all the enthusiasm of a prospective owner. But we'd done all right there, hadn't we?

It took a week to find someone willing

to weld forty-five year-old cast-iron. It seems that as it ages, cast iron doesn't like to be messed with. I couldn't understand inasmuch as the thing was meant to be hot anyway, but what do I know? Finally, the head instructor of the local tech school welding department agreed to take on the task.

"I won't guarantee anything," he said. "I'm only taking this on to show my students that it CAN be done." He then went on to explain how they'd heat it up gradually in an oven made up of fire brick and then weld it using some special rod. I could understand all this if it were to be under any kind of stress, but as I said, what do I know?

The stove came back and I painted it with heat resistant paint and after a struggle, two of us got all 200 pounds of it below. It served pretty well for a couple years, and then, at the end of last year, the famous crack cracked again and it was time to find something else.

The Shipmate Stove Company had long gone out of business, but an Internet search brought us to the Navigator Stove Company,

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which has begun manufacturing a model based on the old Shipmate 212. After gulping a few times at the price, we ordered one. It's a pretty neat stove, slightly larger than the old Shipmate, but much prettier; we ordered ours in porcelain enamel. It weighs 175 pounds and has a very heavy firebox. The cold snap we endured this past February gave it a good test, and I'm happy to say that it passed.

The biggest pain in installing the stove in the first place was the smoke stack. Charlie Nobles aside, much care is necessary when poking a stovepipe through the deck for obvious reasons. Ours has a water jacket around it to draw off the heat. And, of course, there's the matter of getting it through a winter cover, if you use one. After a lot of fussing and almost setting the tarp on fire a couple times, here's what we did.

First of all, I've always believed that money is the ultimate tool. If you throw enough money at a problem, you usually can make it go away. I say this because the cost of insulated, stainless steel stove pipe will make your eyes water. What I did was to get some eight-inch

stainless insulated pipe and run that from the deck up through the tarp. Into that goes the stove's four-inch stove pipe for its entire length, essentially making it a triple-walled chimney. I've run the stove full bore, damper and draft open with a wood fire, and I've been able to hold my hand on the pipe anywhere for as long as I like. Perfect? Probably not, but it works and I do feel safe. Of course, we have smoke detectors as well as carbon monoxide and propane detectors. Public service announcements advise changing the batteries when you change your clocks to or from daylight savings time. For me, that's too long. I change batteries in all five, yeah five alarms (two smoke, two O2, and one propane) each month. And it's logged. Some may call me paranoid, but that's okay. I'd rather they call me that than read about me in the paper - "Small boat burns overnight..."

There was a surge in coal-stove sales about the time everyone became aware that the cost of heating in the Northeast wasn't going to go down ever again. It wasn't long after that that people found out why their parents and grandparents were so happy to be rid of those stoves when they switched over to oil. I remember as a kid my father taking a hammer to the big, old

Glenwood kitchen stove and throwing it out the window when they got their first gas stove. And then, they went out to dinner to celebrate. Coal stoves are dirty. We use hard coal and pay good bucks for it, too. We could use wood or some of the soft coal that's around, but hard coal burns the best and the cleanest, although the last is a relative term. If we don't dust and clean daily, and sometimes twice a day, black soot gets all over everything. And then, there's the matter of ashes. When it's cold, twice, and often three times a day they have to be taken out. Sometimes, when I'm carrying a bucket of hot ashes up the dock to shore, I look over the side and think, "No one will know..." But I don't. I carry them up the dock, dump them into another pail, and when they have cooled, and I mean really cooled, dump them into the dumpster. And yes, there are many times, especially this time of year when we ask ourselves, "Why are we doing this?" But life is an adventure, and as long as the good days far out number the bad ones, we're here to stay.

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