

# The Path Of the *Panther*

By Dr. Richard S. Gambino

I first saw her eight years ago. My son, Chris, had become a member of the Miller Place Robotics Team and I had arrived to pick him up at the high school. In error, I entered the wood shop, and just inside my eyes caught the graceful shape of an old wooden hull. She was upside down with the outer bottom planking off, just a hint of canvas still attached to the inner diagonal planks and even some of those were missing. Sticking up was a rudder, shaft and propeller, so it had obviously been inboard-powered when produced. This alone further piqued my interest as her entire length only appeared to be between 16 to 18 feet. Over the next three years, whenever I was in the shop, I would stop and look at her, noting that she was becoming increasingly buried under discarded student projects (one was actually glued down) and assorted scrap.

One evening when speaking with the technology instructor, Paul Siller, he mentioned that the boat was a 1957 Chris-Craft that belonged to him and his brother, Walter. His brother had put up the money to purchase the boat from Steen Melby of Patchogue and he was to supply the labor and know-how to restore it. Well, 18 years later only a little progress had taken place. At this time the Miller Place School Board made a decision to convert the technology rooms into science laboratories; a decision that to this day is still controversial. Regardless, the boat had to go. Paul and Walter felt that it would be best if they sold the boat and donated the proceeds to the Robotics Booster Club.

After helping to lift up the hull (much lighter than expected) we pulled out the engine box cover and copied the hull number from a plate affixed there. Paul also said that at home he had a box full of the original hardware that was already re-chromed and the original 4-cylinder 60hp Type B engine was in the other shop room. The next day, a quick check with the Maritime Museum in Newport News revealed that it was in fact produced in 1950 and was a 17-foot Chris-Craft Sportsman, an entry level boat at the time. She had originally been delivered to Dr. Edward A. Hollander on November 16, 1950, at Mahopac Lake in upstate NY. The bottom was painted copper-bronze, the sides and deck were natural mahogany and there was a white boot stripe.

I had never seriously entertained the idea of



**Upside down, an early 2004 look at my 1950 Chris-Craft Sportsman with a natural mahogany deck & sides, 17 feet long and originally powered by a 4 cylinder 60hp engine.**

owning a mahogany boat due to maintenance issues, after all, that's why the buying public switched to fiberglass to begin with. But here was an opportunity not to be missed. This boat had been stored inside, out of the weather for at least the past 18 years! I went home and bounced the idea off my wife, Kathy, while showing her pictures of what a completed restoration would look like. I was prepared for her to put an end to this fantasy, even offering that I didn't really have anyplace to store the boat. To my great surprise, her reply was that there was room in the side driveway. Well, the last time that she had not specifically said "no," we ended up with our Carver the next day, so she must have known the consequences of her answer.

On May 5, 2004, using a rented truck from Budget with a 24-foot bed, six high school students, two teachers and I muscled the boat out of the shop and into the truck. Very little finesse was involved. Moving the engine left a trail of motor oil along the school hall, which was cleaned up



**Here's "Panther" at Tom Hilliker's restoration shop, Vintage Marine, where every missing screw and damaged wooden part was replaced.**

by Kathy, being a very good sport about the whole thing, and we were off to Vintage Marine in Mattituck.

On arrival at Vintage Marine, the owner, Tom Hilliker, grinned at the truck and commented it was the first time he'd never received a boat in a box before. Unloading was made easier when he pulled around a forklift to lower the Sportsman from the truck to a dolly. We then rolled her into a canvas hut for protection until room could be made in Tom's schedule for this restoration. In the meantime, the engine was sent to a shop in New Jersey for a complete rebuild. A note about Vintage Marine, the level of craftsmanship is of museum quality and Tom is well known in the restoration community. A look around the yard and building reveals a rare Sea Lion from City Island and Chris-Crafts from triple cockpits to Sea Skiffs. Tom also builds replicas with modern power. Check out his web site at [www.vintagemarine.com](http://www.vintagemarine.com).

While waiting for the project to get started we all had our own visions of what it would be like using her. My son, Chris, had visions of cruising Long Island Sound picking up bikini'd super models, my daughter Laura wanted to water ski, Kathy pictured herself waving during Fourth of July celebrations and I just thought it

would be cool. Since it would be on a trailer, trips upstate to Lake George or down to the Tennessee River system were also possible. At this time, we also decided to name her *Panther* after the Miller Place school mascot, because she had spent so much time there.

In the middle of October, 2004, I received a call that by the end of that week bottom planking would be started. Also some money would be needed to be dropped off. A word here about cost. Don't expect to see numbers in this article. Although Vintage Marine is right in line with other restorers around the country, I do not want to come home when this article comes out and have to face my wife saying "WHAT DO YOU MEAN IT COST XS!". I do wish to keep my marriage and scalp intact. Suffice it to say that if profit is your motive; put in the sweat equity yourself. I personally did not have the knowledge, tools or location to complete this restoration correctly. Some day I hope to take some courses at the Wooden Boat School, but for now this was the way to go.

Work progressed into the summer of 2006. Any wood that could not be saved was replaced, as was every last screw with new silicon-bronze ones of the correct type. They may look like Phillips-head screws, but they have a constant taper. In the interest of accuracy, a 1948 version of my boat was trailered in for measurements. I was also told that the next time I should get a boat with more of its parts intact. It soon became apparent that Tom was a purist. If the boat didn't come from the factory with it then it shouldn't be there. "Tom, how about we paint the bottom red to match the upholstery?" "Well Rick, what does the hull card say?" "Copper-Bronze". And that is what it was painted. "Tom, let's put some nice chromed horns on the bow." "Isn't on the hull card and I think it makes it look too cluttered on a boat this small". No horns. "Teak and holly decking?" "Red linoleum!", "Tom, I know that out of the factory the seat back was a flat board, but I really like the look of a small bridge deck behind it as the Sportsman Special had, thus making a separate cockpit up front.", "Well, Rick, I guess it could have been ordered that way, OK.". And so I was able to get about a 12-inch-wide strip behind the front seat. And he was right about all the decisions because it turned out to be beautiful. Don't try to second guess your dentist, surgeon or restorer.

When the time came to order a trailer, consideration had to be made that there is no bow eye to which a cable may be attached. Instead, there are lifting rings fore and aft on top, so a high pull winch is needed. Further, being a wood boat, rollers were out and carpeted bunks were in. It also needed to be a float-on trailer, less than 20 feet to fit in a garage and as saltwater resistant as possible. Vintage Marine handled it with an order placed with Float-On Trailers out of Florida.

The day finally arrived to bring *Panther* home. I hooked up the trailer and lights, crossed the safety chains, triple-checked the hitch and we were off. Lots of waves from fellow motorists made me feel

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