

# On Living Aboard

by Gene Henson



December has never been one of my favorite months. It's cold (usually), dark, (always) and then, there's the hype of the holidays. The Blonde, my wife, calls me a Scrooge. I'm sure part of the reason comes from being cooped up in such a small space like *Patty O'*. The winter cover hasn't been put over the boat yet; the weather has been pretty good. There has been a touch of snow inland, but none as of yet along the coast. Our winter cover, as anyone who has been following this thread knows, was designed to go on and come off in very little time so that we can, if we so desire, enjoy winter cruising when the weather allows. It's not all that robust, but we live aboard and can catch any disasters mostly before they occur. Since we've been using this system, it's come down around us twice. The big disadvantage is that once the boat is covered up, it's like living in a cave.

When we started this lifestyle, I had hopes that someday we could do like so many others do: head for southern waters during the nasty months, returning north in season. That still may happen, but with the cost of fuel being what it is these days, I wonder. In spite of all my whining, though, we're nowhere near ready to "swallow the anchor."

We were late getting to our winter dock due to some construction issues on the pier, which

meant that we came out of the water late. The usual scenario is that we haul out at the same time that we move to our winter dock and do whatever maintenance has become necessary during the summer season. Last year we had a major project in that the generator had to come out, so the fall maintenance was done at that time. This year all we did was power wash the bottom and add a coat of anti-fouling paint; *Patty O'* is in pretty good shape. This took only one day, and we were back in the water the following morning and that was a good thing because a cold snap was on the way. Unlike last year, the little coal burning stove was set up well in advance of any nasty weather, so we were pretty well set.

In spite of all my good intentions, *Mustard*, the little Century runabout we're rebuilding is still in my friend Ritchie's barn. Some of the reason for that was sloth and laziness on my part, but also the state of the economy had a bit to do with it. My ever-suffering wife has been on a reduced schedule for a good part of the year and we've cut back on spending a bit. In my case it was the reciprocal. I'd had many more consulting gigs than usual, do to the downsizing, or whatever the current buzzword is for giving people the axe. That means that in a lot of businesses people who survive have to somehow get the work done, and when they can't, management

grabs people like me for a short stint to put out the fire. Now that things have turned around a bit, the Blonde is back at what she loves doing, and I'm sitting here moaning about the lack of sunshine.

One of the things that I AM going to make sure of is that the little boat is, one way or another, going to get wet this spring. There isn't really a lot more to do. Her bottom has been completely replaced. All the bad ribs have been taken care of. Her metal trim has been sanded down, the corrosion from 40 years of sitting in a barn removed. What's left for that job is to have the pieces chromed. The big obstacle is, and has been, the engine.

When *Mustard* was put away in that New Hampshire barn all those years ago, no one knew enough to drain the residual water from the engine block, with the predictable result: the engine now sits in a corner of Ritchie's barn with a big

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crack across its side. In the past year or so, I have, at different times, begun a search to see if I could find a replacement. Her original engine was a Graymarine Fireball 6 cylinder engine producing 140 horsepower, a true muscle boat of her era. These engines, rebuilt, are still to be had, but the price will make your eyes water. So for the past year or so I've been procrastinating over what the deal will be. What I most likely will do is to power her with something modern. The intent has always been to be able to use *Mustard* like a car as much as possible, such as on a calm summer evening if we want to take a run over to Mystic. It's so much easier to cast off a 17-foot runabout than all 40 feet of *Patty O*.

Wanting to keep *Mustard* true to her past, I opted for an engine around the horse power of the original. An Internet search showed that there are many firms that specialize in re-building marine engines. One that caught my eye was a Chevrolet, circa 1968, four cylinder 2.5 liter that put out 140 horsepower, just what *Mustard's* original had. Now it was a matter of the tape measure and how difficult it was going to be to retro-fit something like this into a boat 15 years older than the engine. The Chevy was consider-

ably lighter than the Gray, which was a good thing. It was also a bobtail, meaning that it had no gear box, not a good thing. The Chevy originally was designed to be hooked to a stern drive unit, which incorporated the gear box. The Century, being of conventional drive, needs a transmission integrated with the engine. A fair amount of Internet time showed that it was not going to be easy to find a suitable mate. But then, as it sometimes happens, a partial answer came from a source I would never have expected. As I've mentioned before, I have a habit of eating breakfast at a local hash house close to the boat yard. Like thousands all over the country, this one has its regulars, many of whom are quite eccentric.

"Ya still got the old engine, doncha?" one wag said.

"Yeah, sure," I answered through a mouthful of toast.

"Why'entcha just use the old tranny then?"

Why indeed? I thought about it on and off all day and finally went to see Roy, the yard manager. "Do you know a good marine transmission guy?" I asked. Roy looked up at the overhead, the ever-present tooth pick moving back and forth in his mouth. I explained what I was look-

ing for.

"Yeah. Guy named Parker Henry. He's up in Lebanon. I think I got his number."

Parker Henry runs a small machine shop that specializes in odd-ball stuff. He's much in demand among race car drivers, and he does a pretty good business with local farmers, building parts for farm machinery long before originals can be had from manufacturers.

He listened carefully to what I wanted. "Why don't you re-build the original engine if you still have it?" he asked. I explained about the cracked block. "Who said it couldn't be fixed?"

"Well," I replied, somewhat chagrined, "no one really. I just assumed it was un-repairable."

"Why doncha bring it in and let me take a look?" I agreed to have it in his shop in two days time.

"What's on your mind, Sport?" inquired the Blonde that evening as she slid a plate of liver and onions in front of me. I explained about *Mustard's* engine. "Well, nothing ventured, nothing gained," she said with a smile. "Now, let's get going, or we'll be late for the movie."

"You're on," I said. "I'll drive."

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