

On Living Aboard

by Gene Henson

Sitting in unmoving traffic, no matter where you are, is not much fun. If you're on the way to an appointment, it's doubly worse. I was headed south on Interstate 95 just to the east of New Haven. Traffic had come to a halt, and in spite of the fact that it was only ten minutes ago, it felt like three hours. Finding a local AM radio station, the cause of the tie-up was revealed: a trailer truck had jackknifed across all three lanes of the southbound side. "Traffic is being re-routed around the accident scene," the oily voice went on to say. Looking at the dashboard clock, (I've long ago given up wearing a watch) it was quite obvious that I wasn't going to make my meeting on time. And I thanked my lucky stars that I didn't have to do this every day. In fact, I really didn't have to do it today either, but I had agreed to this one-day gig for an old friend who was having some IT trouble that his boys couldn't seem to fix. Not that I'm much better, but I've found that many times a fresh look at a thorny issue cuts to the crux of the problem quite fast. I've also become pretty good at fixing things I know nothing about, just by asking questions of those who do, who have become frustrated by people hovering and saying, "When can we expect it to be back on line?" for the twelfth time in an hour.

The line of cars moved a hundred feet and then resumed its life as a stagnant parking lot. Turning off the radio, not being able to stand the meaningless drivel of yet another talk show, I thought of how it was probably a good thing to see how the other half lives, once in a while.

When we started this way of life some five or six years ago, I had no idea how long it would last. My wife, the Blonde, was a little more cautious than me. "Well, let's try it for a year," she said. When I began sharing our experiences with readers of *Boaters World*, my first thought was, "Who will really want to read this?" I mean, we are a pretty normal couple in most every way. But I thought it would be entertaining first and informative second, to show how various problems living on a boat were dealt with. And it seemed to have worked. From time to time, we get letters from readers asking questions about this lifestyle. First of all, it's not for everyone. And you better be very close to your partner because there will be times when the strain can appear overwhelming when you spend so much time this close. Some letters ask specific questions about our lives not addressed here. We've taken the position that we will not answer anything about our personal lives, for obvious reasons. We're not looking for our fifteen minutes of fame; we just want to blend in.

The tie up lasted some 45 minutes, which of course, did indeed make me late. But the problem was soon solved and after a dynamite lunch, I was once again on I-95 heading east. This time, I was able to scoot along at a bit above the speed limit.

Back aboard *Patty 'O*, around 3:00 p.m., I picked up my cell phone, which I'd forgotten to

bring and, of course, three messages were thereon. Like a watch, I consider a cell phone a novelty, much to the disgust of both friends and family. There was a time when I HAD to answer the phone, and I truly enjoy the freedom of choice. The first message was from the man I was on the way to see when I got involved in the traffic jam. The second was from the Blonde, my wife, telling me that she'd be late. The third was from the guy looking at the Graymarine engine that came out of *Mustard*, the little runabout we're restoring.

I had given up on getting the original engine going for the simple fact that it had a very large crack in the block, caused by the failure to drain residual water from the engine cooling system when the boat was laid up over 40 years ago. For the two years we've had the boat, the engine has sat in a corner of my friend Ritchie's barn. There was enough to do on the boat before I would have to get serious about the engine, and in my never-ending quest to make procrastination work, it languished there under an old tarp. But now, with the end, or maybe the beginning seemingly near, it was time to give thought as to how all 18 feet of mahogany brightwork was going to be pushed through the water.

The options were several: There were exact replacement engines to be had. However, the cost of these jewels really make your eyes water. Option two is that more modern engines of the same power, albeit different physical size, are readily available...and expensive. I had just about chosen to take the latter route, but was stymied by the fact that most of these bobtail engines were made to mate to an outdrive unit, rather than a conventional marine transmission. Transmissions can be had, of course, but trying to find one this size can be daunting.

Deciding to see if the original one could be adapted to a modern bobtail led me to a little machine shop tucked away in the Connecticut woods. I'd explained about the engine and after a few questions, the owner told me to bring the whole thing in and "He'd see what he could do."

His message was short and to the point. "Give me a call."

Looking at *Patty O's* bulkhead clock, I decided to wait till morning. The trip down and up I-95 had me completely worn out.

Next morning, after breakfast with the usual wags, and listening to all the ways to solve most of the world's problems, I called Parker, the machine shop guy.

"I think I can fix it," he said "But I'd like you to come take a look first."

Having nothing else to do, I agreed and said that I'd be there around ten. The drive north was nice; any drive is nice when you don't have a lot of traffic to contend with. Parker's shop is tucked away in the woods on a dirt road that dearly needed maintenance. The Dakota pickup bounced



and slid on the washboard gravel and I wondered what the road would be like after a winter storm. Most likely, a lot better than this, I thought.

Just like the last time I was here, when I'd brought the engine, three mongrel dogs came out barking and trying to convince me that they were going to have me for lunch. But after a couple of sniffs, they went back to their perches beside the old Chevy pickup that didn't look like it had moved in the two weeks since I'd been there.

Inside, Parker and one of his cronies were hard at work on what looked to me like a corn chopper. He has a large open bay off the shop proper. "I don't like to get wet," he told me when I'd backed the truck in to get Gray out of the bed. It was raining that day.

The engine was sitting on a bench toward the back of the bay. It was on its side, and had been stripped of everything that could be removed.

"Here's the deal," he said. "I can fix it and it may last forever or it may not; can't tell. It's old cast iron, and it's a pretty big crack. So what I'll do is way old school."

What he proposed doing was to heat the block slowly around the crack, and gently tap the protrusion back into place. Then, he was going to drill several holes along the crack, with one at each end to prevent any further opening. Then, he was going to thread-tap these holes and set brass studs into them, bottoming out inside the water jacket. After that, it would be re-heated, and a soft patch of 50/50 bar solder would be flowed over the whole thing, effectively sealing everything up. The 50/50 ratio meant 50% lead and 50% tin, which is something you cannot get anymore for reasons I won't go into.

"What are the odds it'll last, and how much is it gonna cost?" I asked.

"Well," he said wiping his hands on the shop apron he was wearing. "Like I said, I can't be sure. But if it were mine, I'd give it a try. If it fails the first year, I'll give you half your money back."

How can you turn down a deal like that?

That night over dinner I told the Blonde how it was going to go down.

"Ya know, Sport..." she said, shaking her head. "You sure meet up with some interesting people."

"Yup," I replied. "I met up with you, didn't I?"

