

# Measure Twice! Cut Once!

## 12th Annual Wooden Boat Festival

**H**ave you ever seen this family boat-building thing?" asks C.F. Koehler, president of Koehler Kraft on Shelter Island. He refers to the annual event for families who each will build a small wooden boat in a weekend.

"It's really cool, but you can't watch it all day," says Koehler, whose boatyard hosts the event and the rest of the yearly Wooden Boat Festival. "You have to see it in spurts. It needs to be time-lapse. You'll go in there and it'll be cacophony; it'll sound like machine gunfire. Can you imagine six families all

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whacking away at little nails, hammering pieces together? It's a mini construction

site. They're crammed into a 20-by-20-foot space, and the head boat-woodwright, Doug Jones, a big, burly, fuzzy-faced guy, is trying to talk over the racket, giving step-by-step instructions, running around, fending off disasters, and screaming, "Measure twice! Cut once!"

The family boat-building event isn't unique to San Diego. The magazine *WoodenBoat* began the program in 1998. Since then, hundreds of Bevin's Skiffs have been built by families around the country, 13 of them in San Diego. This year, six more families here have signed up to assemble their own 12-foot, flat-bottomed, lightweight (90-pound) rowboats from pre-cut pieces.

Joe Youcha of Alexandria, Virginia, designed the Bevin's Skiff to be put in and taken out of the water with relative ease. Easily transportable too, it fits on top of a car. Using Bevin's Skiffs, Youcha teaches boat-building skills to kids who are "at-risk." No experience is required.

"I mean," says Koehler, "you're starting out with people who, you have to assume, know nothing about carpentry. Hopefully they're holding the right end of the hammer. So it's kind of crazy. And if that was the only thing happening [at the Wooden Boat Festival], you'd pull out all your hair. So you watch the families for a while, then you go look at some big boats. Then you go see the families again, and all of a sudden, 'Oh, wow. This really is gonna be a boat.' Or else, 'Oh, no. This guy's done it wrong. Okay, he's got it straightened out.'"

More than 70 classic and contemporary wooden boats are on display this weekend. Among them is the San Diego Maritime Museum's 40-foot gaff sloop *Butcher Boy*. Ray Ashley, executive director of the museum, considers the 100-year-old *Butcher Boy* to be "the oldest San Diego-built vessel extant." Her original owner, Boss Hardy, ran a market in San Diego at the turn of the 20th Century. "She was designed as a work boat," says Ashley. "She would take milk and meat and other supplies to sailing ships that were too big to enter the bay before the channel was dredged. She was so fast that yachtsmen used to rent her out to race. Eventually she was acquired as a racing boat."

The museum acquired *Butcher Boy* 30 years ago but has kept her in dry dock until recently. "When we put her back in the water, we didn't even know if she would float," says Ashley. "In fact, she leaked like a sieve until the planks swelled up. Then we started sailing her." A few weeks ago, she competed in the Lipton Cup.

The boat is still "incredibly fast," says the museum director. How fast is that? Koehler answers the question for



Boat construction

him: "Speed's relative. To the average person, a sailboat goes as fast as a 1965 Volkswagen Bug stuck in first gear. If you were swimming and *Butcher Boy* went by, it would feel like a 747 just passed you."

Other boats that visitors will see in the boatyard are works in progress. "Some will make you ask, 'Why isn't that thing in the dump?'" says Koehler. "They're basket cases. One of them I literally rescued from the dump. The truck driver knew me and said, 'Don't make me take this thing to the Miramar landfill.' He didn't know much about wooden boats, but he knew it wasn't ready to die." According to Koehler, the 46-footer from the 1940s is fully restorable.

On the subject of the durability of wood versus fiberglass, Ashley says, "If you neglect a fiberglass boat, it won't die. It'll just be ugly. Wooden boats are like children—they have to be nurtured all the time. Otherwise, they'll rot. But if you do take care of them, well, *Butcher Boy* is a prime example. At 100, she can race with boats built last year."

Koehler, whose specialty is wooden boats, naturally denigrates fiberglass boats. But he disagrees with the museum man about fiberglass boats lasting forever. "We're finding out with them that what we thought was waterproof isn't. The water seeps in and takes apart the structural bonds of the chemicals that held them together."

Somewhat contradictorily, Koehler says, "Fiberglass is not quite as bad as nuclear waste. But in a thousand years, when they dig up San Diego, all they're going to find are plastic bags and fiberglass boats."

— Jeanne Schinto

**12th Annual  
Wooden Boat Festival**  
**Saturday, June 15,**  
**9:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m.**  
**Sunday, June 16,**  
**9:00 a.m.–4:00 p.m.**  
**Koehler Kraft**  
**2303 Shelter Island Drive,**  
**Shelter Island**  
**Cost: \$5**  
**Info: 619-222-9051**

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Finished boat