

The Herreshoff 15s



A classic daysailer in several forms

by Maynard Bray

Photographs by Benjamin Mendlowitz

I'd never laid eyes on one of these distinctive sloops until Phil Farout invited my wife, Anne, and me out for an evening sail aboard ELF, a Herreshoff 15 (LOA 24'6"). Phil sat across from me in the Electric Boat (EB) design office where as a young engineer I'd taken a job. He kept ELF moored right off the waterfront apartment he rented in Noank, Connecticut, and when we arrived there and the boat came into view, she seemed to me to be all bow compared to the boats I'd grown up with. That long forward overhang made a lasting impression—unusual at first, but soon much appreciated for both performance and good looks.

Our sail turned out to be fun, big-time, as it was our very first in these strange new waters and, I believe, our first in a genuine Herreshoff.

ELF came more fully into our lives a couple of years later after Phil had sold her to Bill Welte, an EB naval architect who sat a few desks farther away. When Bill discovered he wouldn't be able to use her the coming summer, he asked if I'd be interested in taking her over by doing the painting, launching, and rigging in exchange for sailing. He only had to ask once, and we were on the case—sanding, filling, and painting at Joe Butson's yard, also in Noank, where ELF had been spending the winters under canvas.

Above—Recently built by Artisan Boatworks of Rockport, Maine, KITTY (left) is of the same configuration as the 11-boat fleet that the Herreshoff Mfg. Co. turned out in 1923 for Rhode Island's Watch Hill Yacht Club. The first boats of this hull shape, however, were gaff-rigged like MURMUR (right), instead of marconi (like KITTY) and began appearing as Buzzards Bay 15s in 1899. In all, well over a hundred originals and variants have been launched.

“They seem to have the perfect balance between speed, responsiveness, cockpit size, seakindliness, and good looks.”

Sailing ELF that summer taught me a lot. These are sporty boats with plenty of sail area, so they zip along surprisingly well in only a zephyr. You sit comfortably on seats down inside the boat, not on the deck as you’d have to in a boat with a self-bailing cockpit. Its long and high bow combined with a generous fore-deck helps keep spray from drenching the passengers. Nevertheless, daughter Kathy, who at six months rode in a car bed perfectly suspended between the centerboard trunk and the edge of a seat, got splashed occasionally, along with her parents. The three of us in ELF managed an overnight cruise to Millstone Point, along with lots of day sails in Fishers Island Sound. Ever since that summer with ELF, Buzzards Bay 15s and their derivatives have, for me, been special. The primary variants are called Newport 15s, which have slightly deeper ballast keels, and Watch Hill 15s, which carry marconi rigs. Four, including FLICKER, were built to this same hull shape, but with full keels.

In 1969, after I quit engineering and became Mystic Seaport’s shipyard supervisor, the BB-15 FIDDLER came under my care. For nearly a decade, she had been on dry land and was hurting from years of outdoor exposure, so I soon sent her to Sonny Hodgdon of East Boothbay, Maine, to have him replace all of her frames, give her a new deck and coaming, and generally refurbish her. Sonny’s uncles had worked for Herreshoff, so he understood their construction methods better than anyone at the Seaport at the time. That was some 40 years ago, and FIDDLER has been on inside exhibit ever since, neighbored by two other Herreshoff classics—ALERION and the 12½-footer NETTLE.

FLICKER, which Anne and I bought about 10 years ago, is the third boat of this model that I’ve been



A single jibsheet, made possible by the boomed jib, helps make this boat easy to sail. (Here, because of the light wind, the traveler-mounted block has fetched up on the opposite side from the jib.)

involved with. In FLICKER, N.G. Herreshoff eliminated the centerboard and gave her a deeper keel, along with a couple of inches more freeboard and slightly heavier scantlings, so she could be hoisted onboard her “mother” steam yacht without being strained. Because she’s never been restored or rebuilt during her 103-year life, she’s a bit fragile. So we sail her gently. Big winds don’t seem to bother her, but I fear that seas would, so she’s pretty much confined to Eggemoggin Reach’s sheltered waters.

Compared to ELF, FLICKER is easier to sail, and for me, more fun because she has a self-tending jib and no running backstays. (Herreshoff gave her a stouter mast, and I added a boom to the jib.) Once you have the sails up, about all you have to do are steer and occasionally trim sheets. I deal with big wind differently than I used to with the other boat, thanks to advice from sailmaker Nat Wilson: When the breeze stiffens and the boat begins to dip her rail, and you wish the mainsail were half its size, you can quickly ease her yet keep her moving without reefing. You do this by backwinding the forward part of a slacked-out mainsail with a tightly trimmed-in jib. This puts a big and visible “bubble” in the main that greatly diminishes the angle of heel. Yet the boat keeps on moving nearly as fast, can point at least as high, and has much less weather helm.

These boats turn on a dime because of their short waterlines and saucer-like underbodies, so in having no running backstays to tend while jibing, FLICKER is ideal for doing this maneuver Hudson River style—even in

Artisan Boatworks has turned out three of these lovely cedar-planked craft, the two most recent having full keels rather than KITTY’s keel-centerboard combination. The latter two draw about a foot more water, but are stiffer under sail because their cast lead ballast keels are that much lower.

strong winds. It's rather spectacular to view or experience, but so far has proven perfectly workable. With the mainsheet slacked out for running downwind, all you do is quickly pull the tiller to windward for a jibe and leave it there. You don't touch the mainsheet except to make sure it doesn't snag on anything. The boat snaps around, jibes, and comes up into the wind so fast that the mainsail luffs on the new tack instead of filling. What appears as a disaster in the making—the boom lifting, the sail and gaff starting to wang across to the other side of the boat—ends up with the sheet completely slack and the boat sitting there like a pussycat, ready to head off on her new tack in whatever direction you wish. The jib, usually trimmed in, takes care of itself because it's on a traveler and has but a single sheet.

Some sloops, once their mainsail is hoisted, seem overanxious to start sailing even though they're still moored. By contrast, FLICKER just waits there with her mainsail luffing (as long as its sheet is kept free) until you're good and ready to cast off. After you slip the mooring by walking its pennant aft on what will be the windward side, you gently trim in the mainsail and pull the tiller to windward, and she's reliably off on the tack of your choice, either with jib or without; it doesn't seem to matter.

Herreshoff 15s have long had their enthusiasts, and for good reason, for these are really wonderful little boats. They seem to have the perfect balance between speed, responsiveness, cockpit size, seakindliness, and good looks. Herreshoff turned out over 90 of them in several configurations between 1899 and 1928, and since then others have been built in both fiberglass and wood, bringing the total to date to 131.

Although I don't recall having seen a cruising cabin on a Herreshoff 15, it could be done without spoiling the looks, as long as it was kept low and short. One of the round-fronted day cabins (basically a roof resting on turned stanchions, and enclosed when needed by roll-down canvas curtains) that were once common on Great South Bay catboats would work well and could easily be removed for switching back to a full cockpit. A boom tent would be another option in creating a weekend cruiser. This kind of setup served us very well on ELF, but for FLICKER I'm hoping for the Great South Bay version. 🚤

For finished boats, contact Artisan Boatworks, 410 Main Street, Rockport, Maine 04856, 207-236-4231; www.artisanboatworks.com.

Once the sails are raised, about all one has to do is to steer these fine craft and occasionally adjust the sheets. Here, while maneuvering KITTY for the camera, Justin Ward grasps both sheets as well as the tiller, giving him full and rapid control of the sails as well as the boat's direction.



**Buzzards Bay 15
Particulars**

LOA	24' 6"
FLICKER version	25' 0"
LWL	15' 0"
FLICKER version	slightly more
Beam	6' 9"
Draft	2' 3" or 2' 9"
FLICKER version	3' 5"

This drawing, made by naval architect Edson Schock from measurements of Mystic Seaport's Buzzards Bay 15 FIDDLER, represents the boat's lines and the gaff sail plan originally carried by the class.

