A New Essex-Built Schooner
Make Your Own Wood-Shelled Blocks

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It is more fun to design some types of boats than others,” wrote naval architect William Atkin in *Motor Boating* magazine in 1953. He was referring to his design No. 712, the Russell R., a flat-bottomed outboard utility boat. Fifty-three years later, Jeff Hutter, a West Coast housing contractor, bought the boat’s plans for $50 and set about building his own dream boat.

Having just completed construction of his house, Hutter was looking for a new project. For his wife, he framed this quest as needing to replace his 19', 1960-something Owens runabout. He knew he didn’t want another white fiberglass hull with blue canvas, and when he visited the Concours d’Elégance on Lake Tahoe, one of the most prestigious vintage boat shows in the United States, he fell in love with the acres of varnished wood on display. He longed for the romance of leisurely afternoon wine cruises aboard a classic boat that evoked thoughts of a bygone era. So, when he got home, he searched the Internet until he found a drawing of a day launch with heart and soul.

The idea for the Russell R. came to Atkin as a pencil sketch and a request for plans by Russell A. Rogers of Portland, Oregon. Atkin discussed the drawing with John, his son and partner in the family design firm (see WB Nos. 168 and 169), and soon a skiff materialized, 21'10" long and 5'-8" on the beam. Atkin, whose company tag line described his own design sensibility—Individualized Designs for Unregimented Yachtsmen—believed in simple elegance and preached that "excessive breadth in any motorboat should be avoided." Therefore, he designed a long, slim boat that could be built of plywood or solid lapstrake construction, and that would reach a top speed of 17 mph.

"It’s like a pretty girl," says Hutter. "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and to me this was a beautiful girl from the moment I saw the drawing." He ordered the plans from the Atkin website run by John’s widow, Pat, which offers 300 of the original 873 Atkin designs. In the mail he received a table of offsets, a construction plan, profile, and sections; the scantlings were lettered on the drawings, and the original “how-to-build” text was included in the package. Also included was a stern warning to not stray from the plans, so Hutter stuck to the original structure and shape and personalized the rest of the boat to his needs, tastes, and climate.

It took Hutter six months to decipher the directions and learn the terminology. As an experienced house carpenter, he didn’t anticipate so much new language or the need for different tools and multiple jigs. “Boatbuilding is nothing like building a house,” says Hutter.
"Boats are all compound curves, and there isn’t a simple angle anywhere, I had to use a Japanese pull saw for just about everything."

Hutter chose to build the plywood version with 3/8" okoume plywood on the bottom and 3/4" on the sides. The station molds were built of plywood, and the chine, frames, keelson, and sister keelson were crafted of straight-grained white oak. The wood was mostly cold-bent, with nothing needing to be steamed except for the caprail where it transitions from the coaming to the sides of the windshield. The windshield itself departs slightly from the plans: Instead of a two-window windshield, Hutter chose one continuous piece of safety glass, beveled along its edges for a vintage effect. The deck, transom, and the motor hatch that covers the well-mounted outboard motor are plywood covered with a 3/4" Honduras mahogany veneer.

Atkin estimated that it would cost only $280 in 1953 dollars to build the little boat. Hutter spent closer to $14,000, having indulged in certain contemporary technologies, such as two-part linear polyurethane paint, and several gallons of epoxy. And then there was the labor: Hutter spent nights and weekends on the project and averaged 12 hours per week for just over two years. He did most of the work himself, with the exception of the final coat of paint, which had to be sprayed. He also hired help for the final coats of varnish. With a chuckle,

Hutter confessed that when he estimated his time in the boat, it brought the total cost up to around $95,000. The insurance estimate brought it in closer to $40,000. In the end, the cheapest thing on the boat was the $19 DMV registration.

Atkin's plans called for a 12-hp motor. Hutter chose an 18-hp Tohatsu to add power but stay roughly within the same size and weight of a 1953 two-stroke engine—although that horsepower grew even larger after an unfortunate incident. While testing the original 18-hp motor in his backyard, Hutter received a phone call from a client. He had the hose connected to the water intake via muffs, and as he got wrapped up in his conversation, he walked away from the running engine. Fifteen minutes later, the little motor was billowing.
Atkin’s plans call for either lapstrake cedar planking, or plywood. Hutter chose the plywood option, and finished it in high-gloss linear polyurethane. Here, he’s on an outing on Newport Harbor. The varnished, tight-seam deck contrasts nicely with this finish.

smoke. It took months to figure out how the motor burned up, but one day when watering his yard, Hutter noticed how the hose started with a good volume of water but soon trickled down to nearly nothing. Mystery solved, gummy impeller and all. Since the Tohatsu 20-hp engine has the same head as the 18-hp model, Hutter yielded to the temptation of a few more horses within the same footprint. The 20-hp, four-stroke engine that ended up aboard was much more powerful and slightly heavier than the original specifications, which changed the boat’s trim slightly; ballast in the bow brought the boat to her lines.

The simplicity of Atkin’s design extended to the boat’s layout. The Russell R. is an open-cockpit boat and was originally to have a hood or dodger over the steering station. Given Southern California’s weather, Hutter prefers to go topless so as not to ruin the boat’s looks; the attachment points for the hood were never added. Below the helm seat is a small, varnished locker that holds odds and ends, and steering is provided by remote cables leading to a wheel instead of the original tiller. The entire rest of the cockpit is centered on a table and two long bench seats aft. The table has a compass-rose inlay, and the benches look like they might have come from a 1950s roadster. A small afterdeck extends beyond the seating area and has a mahogany-topped hatch, below which sits the outboard motor. One of Hutter’s pleasures is that as the driver, he gets to sit forward and separate from the party going on aft. He relishes being left in peace, just a man and his boat.

In the end, Hutter marveled at the precision of the design that had withstood the test of time. “Atkin designed this in the days of the slide rule,” says Hutter. “And still, he created a design that 60 years later came together with such symmetry, accuracy, and beautiful natural curves.”

Hutter’s Russell R. was christened ON THE JOB II. His first boat was ON THE JOB so that when clients called and asked where he was, he could truthfully say he was “on the job.” Hutter’s wife positions herself as the patient and understanding woman who put up with her husband’s multi-year obsession. The truth is that as launching neared, Cheryl was so excited that it was she who was the first to invite all friends and family to the christening party.

Today, the Hutters cruise ON THE JOB II in Newport Harbor where they watch summer-afternoon beer-can sailboat races up close as they host cocktail parties for friends. It’s anyone’s guess what the boat’s top speed
The plans for Russell R. include lines, offsets, construction, and layout drawings. They're available from Atkin & Co. (see address below).

is with her oversized engine, because so far she has only roamed inside the harbor where the no-wake rule keeps her to 5 knots. It's expected, however, that she'll do quite a bit more than the 17 mph forecast with the originally specified 12-hp engine.

With her ample topside flare she's a relatively dry boat in the harbor chop, and she's easy to board from the dock since her freeboard is only 2'10" at the bow and 1'10" at the stern. Atkin referred to her as a "shapely little packet." More important, in today's world she is a new boat built to look like an old boat, which is something clearly appreciated by those who stop and notice.

"She's a head turner," says Hutter, who is uncomfortable with attention, especially when he's docking and instantly gathers an audience. People everywhere stop and ask what year she is, and with that kind of a draw, Hutter feels he can't take her out with so much as a water spot of imperfection. "If I had a boat like everybody else's, I'd probably be more comfortable."

However, it's a little late for that modesty, no matter how sincere. ON THE JOB II has become an award-winning boat since her launch in 2008, taking the Judges' Choice award at the Wooden Boat Festival in Newport Beach two years running. In 2011 she was also voted Fan Favorite.

When I asked what the boat meant to him, Hutter thought a moment and then jumped up and ran out of the room. He came back with an old black-and-white photograph in a frame. In it is a boy of about three sitting on a plank that an older man is sawing. It's Hutter and his grandfather, whom Hutter credits with teaching him a trade. "It's who I am, he says. "Playing with my grandfather made me a builder, and now I've even built a boat."

Having never built a boat before, Hutter thought the process was fascinating and thoroughly enjoyed watching her come together. "It sounds odd to say, but in a way, I had way more fun building her than I even do driving her."

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Plans for Russell R. are available from Atkin Boat Plans, P.O. Box 3005A, Noroton, CT 06820; www.atkinboatplans.com.