

Friday, October 2, 2009

Morning

Port Townsend, Washington

Boat Basin and Point Hudson Boat Shop

Today *Better Angel* says good-bye to her creator and goes home with me, Old Judge. After an early breakfast, Steve Chapin and I stroll to his nearby shop, where he throws open the door to reveal the boat, fresh and gleaming and cradled by slings. It smells mighty fine – clean varnish over Western red cedar – and I am in love with it! He points out myriad details of finest materials craftsmanship. We scratch and grin, most of the grinning on my part, for clearly he is sad over the imminent departure of his baby. Steve checks the spread between the pins, adjusts the pitch and fiddles with the boat, allowing me to feel less like I am robbing the cradle and providing him, perhaps, some solace.



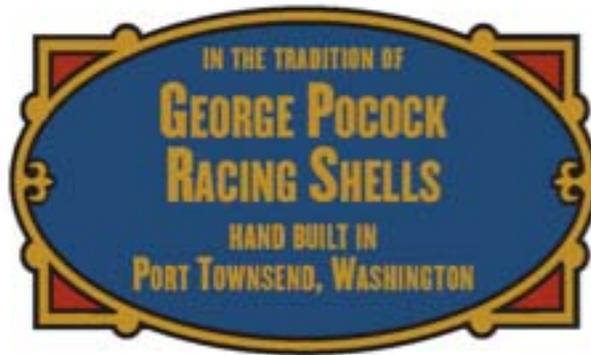
Steve Chapin checks the oarlock pitch of *Better Angel* one last time.

But Steve is no whiner and I am here for my due, and soon we are ready to get on with it. Steve pronounces the boat “ready” just as Dianne Roberts arrives, full of her trademarked enthusiasm. She takes photos to commemorate this important day. I present Steve with a jacket and Dianne with a vest I have commissioned with the boat’s name on front

BETTER ANGEL

THE DRAWING BOARD, INC
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PORT TOWNSEND, WA 98368
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and the Pocock Classic logo on the back.



They seem pleased. I realize I am the first of the Pocock Classic sponsors (the “Pocock Eight”) to acquire a Pocock Classic cedar single with the intent of rowing it hard and racing it. A sense of responsibility settles in and crystallizes the scene.

Steve and I carry the boat and my pair of never-used wooden Pocock sculls to the dock at the other side of the boat basin. Dianne walks along with us, taking photos. Steve and I place the boat in the water and I am pleased to see it balances perfectly. It is a beautiful and cloudy morning. All is calm, all is right. We visit for a while, no one in a hurry, three rowing enthusiasts breathing clean air and savoring the moment. We chat about rowing in general and *Better Angel* in particular, and find meaning in the fact that neither boat nor oars have been in the water before. I say that when I purchased the oars from Pocock in Seattle, I was informed they were the last pair of “longs” – 9’ 10” wooden racing sculls – in stock. I saved them for this day.

Kneeling to combine the latter-day sculls and nascent single reveals larger meaning. I see myself as if through others’ eyes: a facilitator passing a baton in the evolving wood-on-water tradition. It is a culminant moment, a duality meant for a paean:

Ah, child of countless trees.

Ah, child of boundless seas.

...
Quick beats in an icy heart.
Catch-colt draws a coffin cart
There he goes now, here she starts:
Hear her cry...

Cassidy

John Perry Barlow and Bob Weir
Grateful Dead, "Ace" (Warner Brothers, 1972)



Passing the baton: Don Costello with *Better Angel* and Pocock wooden sculls.

Energized, I set my reverie aside and turn to a more practical consideration: is the *Better Angel* rowable? I gingerly step aboard and paddle back and forth in the boat basin, with slight regard for the fresh stitches in my back from yesterday's skin operation and no regard for the doctor's admonition to not row at all for five days. From the first stroke I know all I need to know: ***this boat is imminently rowable***. I return to the dock, climb out and surprise Steve by asking him to take a spin. How good he looks, rowing his gorgeous creation!



Steve Chapin test-drives *Better Angel* in the Port Townsend boat basin

I speak with a reporter from the local newspaper and am happy she seems to “get it”. Steve and I carry the boat and oars back to the shop, wash and dry them, and bag and load everything onto the car. An older guy who rowed decades ago at the same club in Minnesota where Steve rowed happens by and lingers to talk rowing with us. He proves to be the first of many who will succumb to the allure of *Better Angel*. Later, at lunch with Dianne, her husband Jim Whittaker, Steve Chapin, and Stan Cummings, I feel elated and playful and goofy as all get out, to where I have to put a lid on it lest I make a total fool out of myself. It is time to say good-bye. There are smiles all around as I drive off toward Portland.



Better Angel rows well and rides well.

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