

Rebirth of a Continental

*notes and submission by
Dick Mickelson

I met Jerry Battis and his brother Steve last year at our boat show on Lake Minnetonka and they started telling me about their '58 Chris Craft. I mentioned to Jerry that I would really like to see the boat and finally in February I drove to Monticello, Minnesota to take a look.

Jerry, a contractor, has a great shop building with in-the-floor heat (wouldn't we all like to have such a building for our toys!). There sat the Chris – a beautiful piece of art, showing the classic lines and grace of the period. It was obvious at first glance that this restoration was undertaken with not only a passion for wood but also a desire for perfection.

The following is their story written by Jerry Battis.

The boat we restored is a 23-foot 1958 Chris Craft Continental utility boat with a 175 horse power Hercules motor. As far as we know, this boat had only one owner. It was originally delivered to the Minnetonka Boat Works and had a sale price of just under \$6,000. My brother Steve purchased the boat in 1998 for \$8,000. from a family in the White Fish chain whose father, Curtis Widen Johnson, (the original owner) had passed away.

Steve began the process of stripping off the old finish and then got busy with life so he let her sit for about nine years. Finally in 2007, he brought her to my shop and we began the restoration process in earnest. Neither of us had ever restored a boat before but both of us have extensive knowledge in the area of wood working and engine work. We did a lot of research, read a lot of books on the subject, and talked to a lot of people who are familiar with this process.



The boat's structure was in very good shape. We had to replace one splash rail and one transom plank that were rotted but all the side planks, all the bottom planks and all the other structural members were in fine shape. We stripped all the remaining finishes off the boat, replaced a number of wood plugs and silicon bronze screws, and began the task of sanding the wood to make it ready for the staining process. There were a few challenges along the way such as removing all of the old caulk that was laid in the joints of the wood in the deck surface. We ended up using a grout removal tool which gave us a uniform line on all the grooves. This tool has a flat blade with dia-



mond fragments on the edges that allow you to 'grind' or 'sand' out material in a groove.

The next big item to tackle was the motor cover. When we got the boat, the motor cover was a plywood box with 1970's style orange upholstery.

Rather than re-upholster this box, we decided to rebuild it. We took the basic design and re-built it using the original plywood box but we cut individual planks of mahogany and laid them over the plywood surface. We chose mahogany planks to replicate the decks of the boat. We cut small rabbets in the edges so that when they were assembled, they resemble the deck boards. Once completed, we could install the Sikaflex caulk into the grooves we created by rabbeting the boards. We also built a lifting handle into the front of the motor cover so that no additional hardware would be needed.

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After sanding the entire boat, we stained it to the original color and set up to varnish. We used the Epifanes varnish but applied it with an airless sprayer. We started with two coats of Pettit sealer, and then applied the Epifanes. Each coat was thinned slightly with the thinner to make it spray more evenly. We sprayed one day, let it sit a day, hand sanded it with 400 grit sand paper, tack clothed the entire surface to remove any dust and then applied another coat of varnish. This process was done for 10 coats after which we diagonal sanded the entire boat to eliminate any sags or runs and to make the surface more even. We then applied two more coats and caulked all the deck seams with mahogany colored Sikaflex caulk and sprayed the entire boat two more times. (*note, not everyone has the skill and talent necessary to 'spray' the finish, or maybe feel it is not 'factory', however as I viewed the end result is truly beautiful).

After two coats of Pettit sealer, and fourteen coats of Epifanes varnish, we were ready to buff the hull. We started with 1500 grit sand paper on a pneumatic orbital sander over the entire surface, followed by 3000 grit sandpaper on the same applicator. Next we used a car polishing style orbital buffing machine and some very fine automotive liquid buffing compounds. We buffed the entire surface until we achieved the desired luster. After the buffing was completed, we taped off all the deck seams with 3M striping tape, painstakingly measuring each space and each line, and then painted the white stripes with two coats of heavy duty oil based paint. (* note, seeing the end result first hand it is difficult to believe this is their first restoration. Their combined talents are evident when you view the finished project. No one told them of the difficulties involved, they just did what had to be done.)

We prepared the chrome pieces by buffing them and those that were presentable after buffing were installed. The other pieces that needed re-chroming were sent out to be plated.

The windshield presented the next challenge. It was scratched and yellowed over time so rather than throw it away, we decided to try and repair it. We

started with 400 grit sandpaper and sanded in vertical lines to remove the scratches. Then we progressed through the grits until we reached 12,000 grit sandpaper. Once we were satisfied that all the scratches were gone, we buffed the windshield with the same car buffer and liquid compounds that we used for the boat. We were able to revive that old Plexiglas which is now as clear as day.

The next challenge was the motor. The carburetors were completely locked up so we had to rebuild both of them. Once we got them working, we changed the engine oil, installed all new rubber parts, plugs, wires and sensors, set it on our test stand and then fired it up. The motor had not run for fifteen years so we were glad to hear it roar to life. After getting it running, we took a compression test of each cylinder only to find out that two cylinders had very

low compression. Once we removed the head, we discovered two broken pistons and two cracks in the block. We disassembled the entire engine and sent the block to Lester Prairie Engines where they were able to pin the cracks in the block, replace the bad pistons, install new intake seats, grind the valves,

and plane

the head. We re-assembled the motor according to the original Chris Craft specs and fired it up again. This time it roared to life immediately, with great compression in all cylinders. The motor was then lifted into place, aligned with the shaft and installed. To prevent premature wear of the strut bearing, the motor has to be perfectly aligned with the shaft.

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We accomplished this by shifting the wedges under the motor mounts until there was .003-inches even clearance at all points between the shaft coupler and the engine. Then the engine was locked into place. (* note, the spec, .003 is measured all around the coupling, it is not a five minute process. To Jerry and Steve, it was no 'big deal', just something that had to be done).

When we got the boat, the upholstery was a 1970's style orange. We decided to upgrade to a more pleasing deep red with tuck and roll style seat cushions. The dashboard had that same orange upholstery so we stripped it off, and discovered the dashboard was solid mahogany. We sanded it and applied the same stain and varnish as the rest of the hull. The instruments were also in need of repair. The previous owner installed automotive instruments to replace the failed original Chris Craft instruments. We sent the old ones to Kocian Instruments and had them refurbished back to original.

Our intention in this project was not necessarily to restore this classic to original specs, but rather to restore the beauty and functionality of this classic vessel. To this end we chose to install upgrades such as the plank style motor cover, electric bilge pump, a blower in the bilge to remove gas fumes, and tuck and roll upholstery to further enhance her beauty and make it more saleable. Since the restoration, the boat has not seen water. Once the weather warms up and the ice leaves the lakes, this boat will be launched. The process of

restoring this old beauty has been quite enjoyable. It will be great to see her back in the water. (* note, there was and is no name on the transom, however Jerry was thinking of naming her 'La Costa Lota'.

Well, that may be up to the next owner).

We plan to display this beauty throughout the season by bringing it to several of the local boat shows. We recently joined BSLOL and look forward to sharing our Chris with many other boat enthusiasts. We hope to see you on a lake in your neighborhood this season.

Written by Jerry

and Steve Battis

We welcome Jerry and Steve to BSLOL and look

forward to the launching party. Their enthusiasm for the club and participation in club events was evident by their attendance at our recent educational workshop on fiber-glass restoration held in Princeton, Minnesota. Thanks for sharing this Chris Craft restoration project with us.

If this is the type of quality they

put into a boat, I wonder what one of their finished houses look like.

Dick Mickelson

