



A Family Affair

Custom Steel Boats
takes on its own line of trawlers

Story And Photography By Bill Parlatore

On my way south from Annapolis to visit a couple of boats on the lower half of the East Coast, I wandered over to see our friends at Custom Steel Boats in Merritt, North Carolina. We have visited this custom builder's yard several times over the years, checking out the company's latest projects, each a custom creation in steel and aluminum, built to a number of designs—and from many different designers. From Buehler to Benford, Sponberg to Johnston, the family-run operation has a history of producing metal boats in many shapes and sizes. Siblings Rodney and Theresa Flowers carry on the tradition started by their parents, and now with Rodney's two children, Sean and Kait, on the company payroll, the Flowers family has taken the company beyond its historical roots.

The yard used to create a partially completed vessel that would then be moved to other locations to be painted and have its furniture and systems installed. But now the yard builds a fully finished yacht—a major step forward for the boatbuilder. All electronics, furniture, and painting are done at Custom Steel Boats' 17-acre yard, which features 20,000 square feet of enclosed facilities.

And now the family business is stepping even farther into new territory, with the introduction of its own line of production boats to complement its custom-yacht business. The new line of full-displacement trawlers comes from the design desk of Charles Neville Associates, of Centreville, Maryland. Three boats are planned for the line, ranging in size from 39 to 56 feet LOA. The first

47-footer, *Carol Marie*, was launched just prior to my visit, so I got a chance to go aboard for a quick tour of the boat before she headed south to her new home port.



The custom aluminum stanchions on this trawler exemplify the outstanding metalwork for which Custom Steel Boats is known. It is flawless.

The mix of a production line with custom projects means that the builder has capacity to have three boats under construction at any one time, and the yard typically launches three boats a year. Unlike my previous tours of the yard, when I had seen metal workers and welders buzzing around the boats in various stages of

metal work, there are now carpenters, painters, electricians, and systems installers as well. Using experienced subcontractors to build an integrated and complete yacht has changed the personality of the yard—and definitely for the better.

THE NEVILLE 47

I went aboard the new trawler as we put a few more miles under her keel to test her systems. The chined steel hull, painted in "Marlin Blue" Awlgrip, looks serious enough, the bow 8 feet off the water. This little ship is clearly capable of shrugging off logs, debris, or just about anything one is likely to encounter under way—including shipping containers. Yet the hull is smooth and fair. The yard is known for its expertise in metal work—my eyes were drawn to the flawless aluminum handrails.

Cruising along at 8 knots, in calm conditions, the Deere 6081 turning at 2000 rpm (76 percent load), I measured sound levels throughout the boat. In the pilothouse, with both doors open, the readings were 64dBA; 68dBA in the saloon; 77dBA in the midship



guest cabin; and only 61dBA in the forward master stateroom with the door shut. The objective was to build a quiet boat, and it seems they achieved that goal.

The 18-inch-wide side decks allow easy movement around the boat, and there are handholds placed strategically around both exterior and interior. I found a minimum of 6 feet 7 inches of headroom throughout the boat, from the 8-foot-long aft cockpit to the curly maple-trimmed saloon and staterooms.

Running along at displacement speed, I was reminded of how comfortable it is to be under way on



a small ship. While this boat will not be a full-time home for its owners, it will easily take them comfortably and safely to the islands and beyond with well-appointed spaces and top quality equipment and systems.

The boat has a single large head with an enclosed shower, both of which are unusually spacious, taking advantage of one large space rather than attempting to fit two smaller heads in a boat that seems built for one couple. The guest cabin has two single bunks and an access door into the engine room, and enough storage for infrequent guests.

The master stateroom is in the bow, with an island queen, matching bureaus, and two cedar-lined hanging lockers. The obvious layout preference is to offer maximum owner spaces at the expense of guest accommodations—a real-world decision that makes sense.

I found standing headroom just inside the engine room access door. While headroom diminishes as one moves aft in the engine room, I still measured 55 inches of headroom on either side of the centerline Deere power plant. Surrounding machinery, fuel system plumbing, and other equipment appear easily accessed without the need for gymnastics.

As I made a quick walk around the galley and forward accommodations, I noted a consideration



Top: The saloon has large windows, making for a bright interior and a great view of the world while anchored in any cruising hot spot. Center: The forward stateroom's island berth has storage on all sides and under. Left: The large head offers unusual room for living aboard in comfort.



Top: The portside galley is well equipped with the best equipment available. It has everything needed to create wonderful meals for a hungry crew. Above left: Access to the pilothouse is across from the galley, along with storage and other appliances. The joinerwork and other details show how far this builder has come in creating a complete yacht. Above right: The raised settee in the pilothouse allows crew members to be a part of the fun and provides a great view forward over the helm chairs.

worth mentioning. We often discuss the compromises and tradeoffs that are required when building a boat. It all has to do with determining the intended use of

the boat. This Neville 47 is bound for extended waterway and coastal cruising. As such, all cabinets and drawers have standard domestic hardware and



The pilothouse offers excellent sight lines forward and to the sides. There is an expansive console for electronics and ample room for dual Stidd chairs. A nice place from which to run the steel mini-ship.



The engine room of the Neville 47 is a good example of proper engineering, with easy access to systems and machinery. This view is looking aft through the access hatch.

catches. This speaks to the convenience of simple access, although it would not do at all if the trawler were instead headed offshore.

In any sort of rough seas—and I'm not talking the perfect storm here, just normal stuff—I can easily imagine the havoc of cabinets unloading their contents with the violent fury of cascading cans, bottles, and other lethal projectiles. For that sort of cruising, positive-locking marine

hardware would be required. Domestic magnetic and spring latches have no place on an offshore passagemaker.

But as offshore is not on the program for *Carol Marie*, the additional inconvenience of positive-locking hardware is simply not worth the trouble. This is a clear case of the inevitable decisions one

NEVILLE 47

LOA 47' 2"

LWL 42' 6"

BEAM 16' 5"

DRAFT 5' 3"

DISPLACEMENT 94,000 LB.

CRUISE SPEED 7 KNOTS

TOP SPEED 8.7 KNOTS

FUEL CAPACITY 1,534 U.S. GAL.

WATER CAPACITY 260 U.S. GAL.

BASE PRICE \$888,000

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The easy-to-access fuel filtering system includes proper filters and fire-rated hoses and makes filter changes easy.

must make, and why it is so vital to honestly assess what kind of cruising one realistically plans to do.

But that is not to say the outfitting of this boat is cheap and substandard. In fact, quite the opposite—fit and finish were definitely upscale, and the equipment list is first class: Wagner steering, John Deere engine, Freeman ports and windows, Maxwell windlass, Michigan Wheel propeller, MarQuipt crane, Northern Lights genset, Awlgrip finish, Sub-Zero fridge, Force 10 stove and oven, Surrrette batteries, Fernstrum keel cooler, Exalto wipers...the list is long and impressive.


My visit to Custom Steel Boats was brief. I had to continue south, so I didn't get a chance to really climb around the boat. But from what I saw, *Carol Marie* should prove a wonderful companion to fulfill the dreams of her owners. And she marks the



From left: Rodney, Theresa, Sean, and Kait are the second and third generations of Flowers boatbuilders.

beginning of a new chapter in the story of Custom Steel Boats.

If you want a production steel full-displacement trawler, there are not many choices out there, at least not in this country. The advantages of steel are well known, and with today's coating systems, maintenance is not the worry it was years ago.

If a steel trawler is on your wish list, perhaps one of these Chuck Neville-designed trawlers, built by the experienced hands of the folks at Custom Steel Boats, is worth consideration. Now in its third generation, the yard remains a family affair. The Flowers family invites you to come to the Tarheel state and see for yourself. 

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