

CURVED RAKED TRANSOMS • MAINE LOBSTERBOAT • A HESS CUTTER

# WoodenBoat

THE MAGAZINE FOR WOODEN BOAT OWNERS, BUILDERS, AND DESIGNERS



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# The Architect's Dream

## *A Hess cutter for the ages*

Text by Randall Peffer

Images courtesy of Ken Minor, except where noted

Not long ago, I was having lunch with a professional boat-restoration specialist and he said something that took me by surprise: “The best-built wooden boats I have worked on have been done by amateurs, who have the time to perfect every little detail. This is not a luxury a professional builder can afford when building for a price.” He went on to add that the amateurs who actually end up completing their backyard projects have to tap into a reservoir of passion and commitment over years and years. It’s an energy, an inspiration, that can raise the level of boatbuilding from craft to art.

A few mornings later I found myself in the Breakwater Restaurant on the harbor at Santa Barbara, California, with just such a boatbuilder. His name is Ken Minor,



TERESA THORNBUROUGH (BOTH)

and he is a highly regarded 79-year-old local architect. I had come here to learn about the commitment, passion, and artistry that went into the construction of his opus, the 29’6” Lyle Hess–designed Bristol Channel Pilot Cutter MORNING SONG. And, of course, I had come to see MORNING SONG, which after 25 years under construction was now afloat and gleaming.

I had heard about Ken’s project from a number of sources, but what really piqued my curiosity and compelled me to make this pilgrimage to Santa Barbara and MORNING SONG was watching filmmaker Casey McGarry’s documentary *The Boatmaker* about Minor and his boat. Something about that man in the film—denim shirt, chisel in hand—with the trim, white beard and the kind, soulful smile, spoke to me. Something about

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**Above—Ken Minor, an architect from Santa Barbara, California, laid the keel of the 29’6” Lyle Hess cutter MORNING SONG in his back yard in 1991. He launched the boat in the spring of 2016.**



**Ken fashioned the yacht's backbone structure from two substantial pieces of balau—a dense, durable, edge-tool-blunting hardwood from the Asia Pacific region.**

the glossy white topsides and mirror-finish of the varnish on his cutter called to me like a violin adagio.

Ken and his wife, Loretta, sitting in this restaurant that he designed during his architectural career, unfolded a tale with all the hallmarks of an epic quest. The story had trials of endurance, resourcefulness, and courage. There were legendary mentors, natural ordeals, a villain, magic, and ultimately a legion of followers. The story of the Minors and their MORNING SONG also had a personal and unique quality rooted in faith, love, and self-preservation.

Growing up during the 1950s in an agricultural region of inland Southern California, Ken had learned to use hand tools from helping his father on building and repair projects around the farm. He was an avid reader of *Popular Mechanics* and caught the boatbuilding bug early from that magazine. In his early teens, he stumbled across a set of plans for a 15' outrigger canoe that sparked his imagination. He lofted his patterns and cut his molds, but he never finished the canoe. Love intervened.

One Sunday, when he was 16 and ushering at the morning church service, he caught the eye of a precocious 13-year-old, Loretta. Soon after that encounter, young Ken tucked away the molds for his canoe and put his energy into romance. The couple married in their teens. Loretta worked as a teller at Bank of America to earn money to send Ken to California Polytechnic State University to study design and architecture. His only nautical adventure came when he taught himself to sail at college in a borrowed 8' skiff on a pond smaller than a big-box-store parking lot.

The engine bed, also of balau, was installed before planking. It reflects the high standards and machine-like fits of the entire boat. Ken took much inspiration from Lin and Larry Pardey, whose TALEISIN (see sidebar, page 44) is impeccably built to the same design.

Shortly after he graduated from Cal Poly, Ken and Loretta settled in Santa Barbara and became the parents of two daughters. As a designer and architect, Ken felt drawn to the classical Spanish architecture that dominates that town's historic district. He also felt drawn to the harbor which back then, in the 1960s, was rife with classic wooden yachts and an active fleet of rugged fishing trawlers—a number of the prettiest of which were built by the local legend Sugar Lindwall.

There were mornings when Ken would drive down to the harbor to meditate and pray. He would look at the honest, rugged lines of Lindwall's trawlers and think that someday he was going to get a boat like that and sail around the world. The same keen eye that drew him to the lines of the traditional boats in the harbor gave rise to Ken's exceptional appreciation of proportion and functional elegance in Spanish colonial architecture. It was not long before his client list included many of Santa Barbara's most notable families and businesses, and Ken was spending 60 to 80 hours a week at his drafting board.

He's a man of uncompromising standards when it comes to strength and beauty, and so no matter how many times he worked over the elevations and floor plans of a new project, he never felt done. With a perfectionist's aesthetic and work ethic, as well as a burgeoning career, Ken barely noticed that years passed without his ever walking down to the harbor even though his office was just three blocks away. When he could take time away from work, he designed and built his family a magnificent, contemporary cedar home high above Santa Barbara in Sycamore Canyon.





**Above**—Sometime around 2003, the boat received the name MORNING SONG, and this, and the hailing port, were carved into transom planks. **Right**—MORNING SONG is planked in 1¼" mahogany. Ken worked alone on this phase of the project.



Career success and the joy of raising a family in a nest of his own building all but blunted Ken's dream of sailing around the world, until nature took a nasty turn. In July 1977, the Sycamore Canyon Fire, sparked by a kite caught in power lines and fueled by 70-mph winds, swept down the mountain slopes and consumed 195 homes. In just seven hours the fire caused 100 injuries and \$28 million in damage. The Minors lost almost everything except family photos, important papers, and pets. Their daughters saved a dulcimer and a banjo, both of which Ken had built.

They were down, but they were not out. Ken rebuilt the family home. But he found himself thinking about that fire, the shortness of life, and the mutability of things. Always devoted to his Christian faith, he found

himself returning to the harbor more regularly now for reflection and prayers. It was on one such day that he came upon a small but handsome sailboat on a trailer waiting to be launched. It was a 22' Lyle Hess-designed Falmouth cutter, built in fiberglass by the Sam L. Morse Company in Costa Mesa, California. Ken saw in the little cutter the same sturdiness that he admired in Lindwall's workboats. "If I ever have a chance to own a boat," the architect thought to himself, "I would like one that looks like that."

Once the image of that Hess cutter had imprinted itself on Ken's mind, he could not shake his renewed dreams of world voyaging. He began amassing a library of classic cruising tales such as Joe Richard's *PRINCESS* (see review, WB No. 203) as well as works by Eric and

## Lyle Hess and His Cutters

**B**orn in Blackfoot, Idaho, in 1912 as one of 12 children, Lyle Hess spent his youth carving model boats and floating them on inland waterways until his father moved the family to Long Beach, California. In 1928, he designed and built a 16' hard-chined sloop with "a little cuddy cabin to keep dry in and 400 lbs of lead ballast to get me home safely." During the three years that Hess owned VIAJERA, he made more than 40 trips between the Southern California coast and Santa Catalina Island.

Mentored by master shipwrights George Chalker and Bill Whiting as well as designer Edson Schock, Hess took his boatbuilding skills to Harbor Boatworks in San Pedro, where he helped build wooden torpedo boats and minesweepers during World War II. As the war came to an end, Hess shifted his skills to building fishing boats and tugs.

In 1946, he partnered with Roy Barteaux to start L.A. Yacht Yard in Harbor City. Working with client Hale Fields, Hess designed and built a 28' cruising cutter that preserved the lines of the working sailboats from Britain's south coast. He also built *RENEGADE* for Hale, a 24' cutter similar to the Itchen Ferry workboats of England. The looks, seakeeping abilities, and modest costs of Hale's little cutters made Hess believe that small boats were the answer for putting cruising within the reach of the average person.

But when the fiberglass revolution signaled hard times for wooden boat builders, Hess sold out his share in the yacht yard and started building houses in Southern California. Still, in his spare time he continued to work on refining designs of small yachts derivative of Britain's workboats. It was at this time, in the late 1960s, that a young Canadian boatbuilder named Larry

**The little yacht has structural elements of a much larger vessel: the deck is reinforced with bronze strapping, and, in time-honored fashion, the bulwark stanchions are independent of the frames.**



Susan Hiscock and Miles and Beryl Smeeton. Then he discovered *Cruising in SERAFFYN*, by Lin and Larry Pardey, who had circled planet Earth twice in two Hess cutters, SERAFFYN and TALEISIN, they had built themselves. Ken devoured all of the Pardeys' books. "I became an armchair adventurer," he said.

What he did not tell Loretta, his architectural partner, or his minister, was that he was feeling depressed, and he couldn't escape the darkness despite his loving family, his faith, his beautifully rebuilt home, and his thriving career. He needed a distraction. So in the mid-1980s, he partnered with a friend to rescue a neglected, wooden 25' Cheoy Lee Frisco Flyer. He subscribed to *WoodenBoat* and to the U.K. publication *Classic Boat* to gain an informed perspective on owning a classic wooden vessel. The Cheoy Lee's laid decks were in particularly bad shape, and Ken threw himself into the project of refastening and recaulking them to see if he liked wooden boat maintenance. He did.

By this time his daughters were in college, and Ken began to share his boat dreams with Loretta. Always sympathetic, she listened as he shared his enthusiasm for Sam Morse's fiberglass version of a 28' Hess cutter.

Eventually, he asked her to join him in a pilgrimage to the Morse yard. After that visit, he began to contemplate purchasing a Morse boat or perhaps a bare fiberglass hull to finish off.

Loretta could feel his yearning, sensed that he was wrestling with something deep inside, and realized that sailboats were somehow the antidote and the core of a primal dream for him. By the mid-1980s, she saw that prayer, her love, and fixing up the Frisco Flyer would not be enough to soothe his soul. She asked him why he wanted to buy and sail a boat built by somebody else—why not build his own?

And so he started a dialogue with Hess about the design of the Pardeys' 29'6" TALEISIN. Before long,

Pardey bought a set of RENEGADE's plans. Hess also met Richard Arthur of Arthur Marine, who commissioned the design of the trailerable Balboa 20. Once again, Hess was back into the design business full-time, creating the Balboa 26 and the Ensenada 20.

Pardey launched SERAFFYN in 1968, and sailed away from California with his young wife, Lin, to England and beyond. The Pardeys' numerous articles about their adventures in the yachting press and subsequent books engendered a wave of interest in small-boat cruising, and in Hess's cutter designs, which led to the construction of his 28' Bristol Channel cutter in fiberglass by the Sam L. Morse Company of Costa Mesa. In subsequent years, Hess designed the smaller version of RENEGADE, the trailerable Falmouth cutter that inspired Ken Minor, and a clutch of other traditional-looking small and mostly trailerable boats.

To date, about 35 or 40 Bristol Channel cutters have been built in wood, mostly by amateur boatbuilders.

Hess died in 2002 at the age of 90, but he will long be remembered for his sturdy cutters defined by his signature quote: "I feel that any boat that points her bow out to sea should be designed so that the crew need not worry about a safe return—no matter what tricks the weather may play. I guess if there is a unifying thought behind my designs it is to bring skipper and crew home, in one piece, no matter what."

Hess's plans reside with his daughter, Linda, and her husband, Steve DeCoux, who sell study plans and full construction plans for five of Hess's designs.

Each set consists of lines, table of offsets, construction drawings, and sail plans.

—RP

To order Hess's plans, or to gather more information, leave a message at 714-680-0400, or write to Lyle Hess Designs, c/o Linda DeCoux, P.O. Box 2849, Fullerton, CA 92837.



The teak deck planks are fit into nibbed covering boards, which are carefully mortised to receive the bulwark stanchions.

he had purchased plans. In a vacant suite beneath his architectural office, he created a lofting floor. At night and on weekends he began lofting the lines from the table of offsets, then transferred measurements to full-sized patterns. Little by little, his depression began to vanish.

Almost six years passed before Ken started construction. First, he had to build a boat barn and workshop to meet his high standards. Then he had to wrestle with his doubts. Nothing about the woodworking aspects scared him. What bothered him was that he had a history of projects that never fully bloomed. Building a Hess cutter was a significantly larger commitment of time and money than building

that if he had never planked a boat before, he had better hire professional help.

Something about that warning energized Ken. Like rebuilding his house after the forest fire, building his boat became more than a project. Eventually, he called Edensaw Woods, a Port Townsend wood supplier, whose crew he had met at the festival, and ordered two 22' balau timbers for the backbone and white oak for the sawn frames. In 1991, he laid the keel. He thought building his cutter would take him about 10 years.

But because he was working on the boat only on nights and weekends, Ken took about seven years to get it fully framed. When he worked on the project, he lost track of time the same way he did when he was deep

## TALEISIN

MORNING SONG is a sistership to the Pardeys' TALEISIN, with one exception: it has an engine. Larry Pardey completed TALEISIN in 1983 as a larger sequel to the 24' engineless Hess cutter SERAFFYN, in which he and Lin sailed around the world in the 1970s. TALEISIN was built for a materials cost of \$38,000 and voyaged 80,000 miles, sailing westward from California through the Pacific.

The cutter also logged two voyages from New Zealand to Australia and return. The Pardeys sailed TALEISIN through the Cook Straits of New Zealand to Sydney and Tasmania, westward through the Australian bight to the Indian Ocean, South Africa, Brazil, Ireland, England, Scotland, Norway, and along the U.S. East Coast. Eventually, TALEISIN



D. EMMETT/LIN PARDEY

sailed south to Argentina around Cape Horn, crossing its outbound track to complete a circumnavigation in 2003, before sailing to Canada.

The Pardeys now reside in New Zealand.

—RP



With the hull and deck complete, interior joinery commenced. Ken had no plans for the accommodation, and so spent much time pondering and sketching before cutting any wood. The absence of the deckhouse at this stage allowed easy access and plenty of light.

into his architectural drawings. For him, designing and building both have a dreamlike quality. He can often sit for hours while his imagination runs through all the possible permutations of each of his choices the way a chess master might consider a next move before executing it.

Realizing that his careful, dreamy style was unlikely to change, and noting that he was turning 60, Ken told Loretta that at the rate he was going, his grandchildren would be finishing his boat. If he wanted to complete the cutter in his lifetime, he needed to find more hours per week to dedicate to the boat. The couple weighed their priorities and finances, and by the end of 1998 Ken retired to work full-time on his boat.

"Now, get going," Loretta recalled saying. "I want to see some work happening in that barn."

The Minors drove to Newport Beach to hear the Pardeys speak, and afterward Ken asked Larry Pardey to sign his copy of *Details of Classic Boat Construction*. Noting the worn look of the book, Pardey said he could see that Ken was actually using the volume. After Ken confessed that he was ever so slowly trying to replicate TALEISIN—and he had a lot of questions—the Pardeys shared their contact information and invited the Minors to come and look over their famous cutter. It was the beginning of a friendship that lasts to this day. "The Pardeys became our gurus," Loretta said.

Meanwhile, people who came by the boat barn in Sycamore Canyon began to take a personal interest in Minor's boat. At one point, the UPS driver who often arrived with materials told Ken he was delaying retirement until the boat was launched.

"Noah" became his nickname among friends. "I'll know when it's done," one neighbor said, "when I see the animals coming up the road."

Now working four to six hours daily on the yet unnamed cutter, Ken threw himself into shaping and hanging the 1½" Honduras mahogany planking by himself. Just as Larry Pardey had done when building TALEISIN in the early 1980s, Ken fastened his planks

with copper rivets and bronze clenches. He enjoyed the process of fitting his planks and pinging away at the rivets with his ball-peen hammer. He loved the sound.

But some of his neighbors in the canyon didn't. Ken was about halfway through planking when a neighborhood association representative showed up and said he had to stop: Ken was in violation of a bylaw prohibiting commercial enterprises in the canyon. "It took me a few hours of showing that man around my shop and the boat before I convinced him that there was nothing commercial about what I was doing." There was no client. Ken had no concept of the time or money he had invested in his boat. And, well, the yacht spoke for itself with its robust structure, beautiful curves, and the sweet scent of mahogany and white oak. The ambassador left shaking his head like a man who had wandered into someone else's dream. He never returned. Ken picked up his hammer and began again peening away at the rivets. Sometimes he wondered exactly what was the musical pitch of that pinging sound that echoed through the hull and his soul.

Around 2003, as the hull neared completion, the Minors began to see the boat as a living thing in need of a name. One Sunday morning, when he was parked by the harbor after his daily walk with his dog, he was listening to a minister on the radio. And it then struck him that the name of the show, "Morning Song," would make the perfect name for his creation. Loretta agreed.

In the ensuing years, Ken laid the teak deck, built the deckhouse, and fastened the stanchions and bulwarks. With no plans from Hess for the interior joinery, and only snapshots of TALEISIN's for guidance, he sat in his empty boat imagining how he would build out its cabinetry. Sometimes he went into the barn and the boat for days and weeks at a time just to measure, plan, sketch, and detail how the interior would develop. "Until I came down there and asked if any work was happening," Loretta said.



The deck furniture neared completion in 2008. Around this time, a wildfire raged in the Minors' neighborhood, and they were forced to evacuate. When they returned, the tarp covering the boat was charred, but the boat itself survived unscathed.




In spring 2016, MORNING SONG awaited launching after being trucked to Santa Barbara Harbor.

of the Pardeys and of sharing, he would freely offer the molds and patterns for MORNING SONG to committed dreamers who know that life would not be complete without building a Bristol Channel cutter.

As for my friend the boat restorer's claim that the best wooden boats are built by amateurs? In the case of MORNING SONG, his observation may well hold true. The quality of the work lies in subtle details of fit and finish, not in elaborate carvings, exotic woods, or an interior with the look of fancy furniture. Like the buildings Ken has designed, his cutter is all about functional elegance.

Riding in her slip at Santa Barbara, MORNING SONG looks as strong and ready as the Lindwall fishing trawlers tied up nearby. The planking seams are just right. The hand-cut dovetail joints have a machined precision. Few human eyes can spot the glued joints in the hollow, tapered spars. Best of all, the minimalist use of interior ceiling leaves much of the hull's planking and framing visible. Sitting in MORNING SONG's saloon, you can look around and understand exactly how this boat was built. Ken experimented with three different varnishes before settling on one, and beneath its seven coats you can see the rich, red hues of mahogany contrasting with the gleaming white oak frames. Neat, staggered rows of copper rivets and bronze clench rings dot the frames with a measured uniformity that shows that everything in the building of this vessel has been done with thought, purpose, and inspiration.

Goodbye, darkness. 

*Randy Peffer is a regular contributor to WoodenBoat. His latest book, Never to Return: The Mystery of the Worst Combat Loss of the U.S. Coast Guard, will be out in October 2017 from Lyons Press.*

By 2008, MORNING SONG was starting to look like a complete Bristol Channel cutter when another fire raged down the canyon. This one, called the Tea Fire, sent the Minors fleeing. "When we left the house and boat, the air was full of smoke and sparks. We thought we would never see any of it again," Loretta remembered. "It was an awful feeling."

But a couple of days later when the Minors returned to charred Sycamore Canyon, they found that the fire had leaped over the boat barn and house. There were burn holes in the tarp over MORNING SONG, but the boat was fine.

"It was like angels were looking out for us," Loretta said.

As the spars took shape and Ken ordered a suit of sails from Carol Hasse's loft in Port Townsend, he began to realize that somewhere along the way his dream had changed. He no longer dreamed of sailing around the world. "Maybe building MORNING SONG is your journey," Lin Pardey told Ken when he confessed doubts of ever becoming a voyager.

Surrounded by a legion of well-wishers who followed the trucking of MORNING SONG from the canyon to the harbor, the Minors launched their cutter in the spring of 2016 after 25 years in the making.

Ken Minor felt the truth in Lin Pardey's words as his boat floated free of the slings and took to the water. Maybe he would never see Tahiti or the Marquesas from the deck of MORNING SONG, but he knew now that this boat could carry him and his lady love across Santa Barbara Channel and out to the Channel Islands off Southern California. He knew that every moment under sail would be a dream come true. He knew that when the sail ended, they would bow their heads and give thanks. And he knew that in the spirit

**Summer 2016: MORNING SONG makes an outing near Santa Barbara. Ken Minor's dream of building the boat was inspired by the vision of voyaging in her, but he no longer aspires to that. "Maybe building MORNING SONG is your journey," Lin Pardey said to him.**



TERESA THORBURN