

When the demand slackened he captained his small trading vessel in the west Caribbean. The experience of dealing with the skulduggery of commerce in some of the coastal republics toughened him for the position of political and social leader that he first assumed ten years ago.

It was Cruz who trained young Juan Guerrero in the art of boat construction and, like his mentor, Juan has since become an established star in both boatbuilding and politics – he leads the opposition party in the village. A prolific shipwright even at his young age, Juan turned out several sleek sloops some of which, maintained in yacht fashion, are still used to take tourists sailing from the resorts. Ever in search of development, in the late eighties, he built *Golden Odyssey*, a 23' on the keel, 32' LOA, copper-fastened sloop with the planking edge-glued with epoxy. To protect the wood from shipworm, the whole boat was epoxy-coated which in turn reduced the number of annual haul-outs from the usual four to only two.

Natividad Verde, the most experienced of Sartenejan boatbuilders loves sailing the boats he has built. He owns one himself and spends a good deal of his time on the water fishing or carrying

merchandise. He races regularly, quite often against his own designs, so even when he loses it is a compliment to his skills. In 1989 he proudly showed me the half model of the last boat he would build before retiring. While explaining some distinguishing features he mentioned that he had learned boat construction from watching Peter Young many years ago. He must have watched attentively – ten years ago there were about fifty of Nativ's boats sailing in Belize and Mexico. His younger brother and son, both skilled craftsmen continued to perpetuate the Verde fame of building fast sailboats.

And the Future?

Belize is the last country in Central America with several boatbuilders capable of designing and building sailing craft. Fortunately, Hurricane Mitch of 1998 that wreaked such fatal chaos in neighbouring Honduras, swept inland of Belize leaving that small country almost untouched. Yet for all that the shipwrights are being forced into other trades through lack of affordable timber resources and a poor local economy. Now, at the beginning of 2000, there is little new boatbuilding here – some see this as a testament to the longevity of the existing boats but economics, a shifting

population, and an increasingly “modern” society are perhaps more responsible. Even in the best of times boatbuilding did not bring great wealth to the shipwrights and the latest generation has turned to the more profitable building of fast plywood skiffs. Nevertheless, in Sarteneja, the fishermen and boatbuilders remain as a self-sufficient community that has retained a strong sense of traditional values.

As for Simeon Young, now in his eighties, he is of the opinion that the future of wooden boatbuilding in this country of just 160,000 people depends on the North American market. He believes that American yachtsmen will come to see more beauty in the traditional wooden craft, and at last favourably contrast it with what he describes as fibreglass boats with “camouflage” – thin veneers parading as teak decks and interior joinery. Is he as good a soothsayer as a boatbuilder? Only time will tell. He himself would love to put all his knowledge into one last boat. Her name, he suggests, should be *Fling* – as in the last fling. ■

Tom Zydler is a regular contributor of *Maritime Life and Traditions*.

With special thanks to Simeon and Joe Young.



When the wind dies on the shallow banks north of Belize City, the crew uses a long punting pole to manoeuvre the boat. Note the old fashioned counter stern.