

Sailing Lighters

The other group of contemporary Belizean sailing craft faces, in the late 1990s, in a less auspicious situation. Larger than the sloops, these are open-hold cargo carriers popularly known as lighters. Even in the 1980s they were often of a great age and were, already, survivors of a glorious past when all goods and passengers in Belize were carried under sail in the inner sea between the mainland and the outer reefs and islands. Since the land lies exactly north and south and the whole area is swept by easterly trades, a more ideal situation for transport under sail can hardly be imagined. Yet, the introduction of roads and internal combustion engines spelled doom to the great fleet of schooners and lighters.

For years lighters persevered by carrying cargoes to and from places inaccessible by land. Then, unexpectedly, in the 1970s, the ageing fleet began to see a brighter future. The steady growth of San Pedro on Ambergris Cay caused such an insatiable appetite for building materials that the boats were hardly able to keep up with the orders. Even after dark descended on the San Pedro waterfront the swoosh of a bow wave and the creaking of blocks from a sailing lighter

were once again familiar sounds. By the end of the 1990s, however, the bubble had burst, a few of the old lighters soldier on but they are not being replaced. As Joe Young explained, "there's not enough money to be made from a lighter to pay for its building cost – wood is very expensive because the forest is in decline. I still build boats if anyone asks me; I build new, I convert old, but the last boat I built was in 1982".

Today there are but one or two lighters plying their trade in Belize's inland sea. Ten years ago there were eleven. The variety of their hull shapes reflected the history of west Caribbean small craft. According to Joe Young's father, the prominent Belizean boatbuilder, Simeon Young, the two double-enders *Yvonne* and *Lilly S* may have been built locally in the 1940s, but they belong to the type once prevalent in Yucatan and Cuban waters. On the other hand, the slab-sided *Journey's End* had a hard chine at the turn of the bilge highly reminiscent of the Honduran sloops seen in 1920s photographs. Variations in stern shapes caught the eye too. The counter sterns of *Jessi J* and *Mermaid* were remnants of a distant past, *Mermaid* being built in about 1910. *Radio*, built a decade or so before the turn of the century, and *United*, *Sophia*,

Claudette, less than half her age, had transom sterns. Indeed, strong, simple, and easy to build, this is the prevalent stern type for all Belizean craft.

Whatever the hull shape, all lighters shared a characteristic shoal draught. *Radio* was deep indeed at 3'3" while the others had draughts of around 2'6". Nevertheless, a lighter has to be able to make good progress to windward even in rough waters. Nowhere is this more important than at Sibun river, south of Belize City, where sand and gravel are still loaded. Not only is the river obstructed by a shallow bar but there is a fetch of ten miles from the east. After loading, the boats must beat out over the bar against occasional 5' waves. Once in deeper water they turn north into the ever-present southerly current. Such odds, coupled with complete reliance on sail power, even in light airs, encouraged the development of impressive sail areas. For example, the largest boat that we saw in 1989, *United*, at 38'4" LOA with 10'9" beam and 2'6" draught had a gaff-headed main of 774sq.ft and a jib of 210sq.ft. It was enlightening to think that my own yawl of roughly the same length and beam, and 5'6" draught but considerably heavier displacement carried a sailplan



The Jones Boat Yard in Belize City can easily accommodate several boats at a time during their pre-regatta overhaul. Its wooden slipways are big enough to take two lighters at once. To aid windward performance, some of these half-decked boats are fitted with a false keel just for the racing!