

BOAT BUILDING:

STARTING WITH A TWO-PART, NESTING, SAILING DINGHY

By Wendy Hinman, wife of Garth Wilcox, Pacific Northwest Station

When we set off for our open-ended adventure in 2000, we carried an ancient Avon Redcrest inflatable dinghy that we'd bought used at Seattle's Fisheries Supply swap meet a few months before we left. We are tightwads, after all. That dinghy, which closely resembled a kiddie wading pool, got us all the way to New Zealand, but was frustrating to row or motor with the tiniest of engines that could perch on its transom without sinking it. Max hull-speed was 1 knot, no matter the form of propulsion. Anything faster and the bow would dive under the surface as though it were Jacques Cousteau headed for the vast depths. We'd left the dinghy's rigid floor behind after deciding we couldn't spare the room to carry it. (Our light-displacement 31-footer didn't even offer Garth adequate stand-



Dinghy stored underway



Wendy and Garth dinghy sailing

ing or sitting headroom.) Without the rigid floor, the dinghy would undulate in any waves to the point where forward propulsion was nearly impossible.

Once, when offered a tow in Tahiti and, grateful for the respite from an unappealing slog under oar back to our anchorage, I failed to mention this little factoid to my rescuer. As soon as she had hold of my painter, she cranked the throttle as though I were a water skier in tow who'd just yelled, "Hit it!" The bow immediately dove for the bottom. I managed to get her to cut the throttle before the painter ripped off the bow, but not before the flour and other groceries congealed into a tepid seawater soup.

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In New Zealand, faced with a multi-month cruising hiatus until the end of the South Pacific cyclone season and a reasonably short project list for our small, simple boat, Garth devised a plan to build a two-part nesting dinghy, the plans for which someone had given us years earlier. Danny Green's Chameleon dinghy featured a design that offered us a way for our 31-footer to carry a sizable 10-foot 4-inch dinghy because it split into two segments that, when stacked, would fit—bow nestled beneath the stern—before the mast of her mother ship. There she could ride in moderately low profile beneath the height of our lifelines while we were underway.

Where to build a boat is the first challenge of the prospective boat builder. "No worries, mate," said a Kiwi we'd met in Tonga, who stopped by one morning for coffee. Coincidentally, he was a boat-builder with a shop that stood empty only a couple miles from Bayswater Marina where we were moored in Auckland. When Garth mused aloud about

the challenge of reaching the shop, Ted, our boat-builder friend, offered an old bike he wasn't using. A quick trip to Cash-Converters for a helmet (miniscule protection on New Zealand streets buzzing with road racers who may have already downed a few with their mates) and the lumber store and Garth was set.

Each morning, Garth diligently commuted on his loaner bike to his borrowed boat shop for a day of boat building as though reporting for an employer, yet with the enthusiasm that comes with being his own task master. With a simple stitch and glue technique, he steadily turned a pile of lumber and plywood into the shape of a small but sturdy vessel. He lined it with fiberglass to lend it strength.

When the day came to cut the two segments apart to turn his nearly completed masterpiece into the two-part nesting dinghy as advertised, he was filled with apprehension. At that moment, he had a



Building Tasty Penguin

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Launching Dinghy, Launching Dinghy2, Launching Dinghy3, Launching Dinghy5

perfectly good boat. If he cut in the wrong place, he wouldn't. Keeping in mind the old builder's saying, "Measure twice, cut once," he carefully made his cut along the double bulkhead that separated the bow from the stern of the boat. And voilà!

No more wrestling an unruly oversized bag through the hatch and pumping for 10 to 15 minutes before launching, then struggling to deplete the filled dinghy of air and squeeze it back into what suddenly seemed like a microscopic bag that still took up a quarter of the v-berth—and all for a craft that performed poorly. Instead, after only a few moments of simple coordination between *Veleva's* married crew, we were ready to explore any anchorage. We'd simply plop each section into the water, unite the two halves (nestling a tab on the stern into a slot in the bow) and hold them together with three bolted wing nuts. In the islands we wowed countless natives who watched us from their dugout canoes as we magically transformed two boats into one.

Those 700 hours of work morphed into one of the most useful investments in our voyage — our daily car. We might have had the smallest cruising home in any anchorage, but our tiny 31-foot boat carried one of the bigger dinghies, at nearly a third of its length. At one point that dinghy carried nine people — most of them were more my size than Garth's — but still a feat that would have sunk our poor Avon Redcrest. The tired and retired Redcrest still fetched its original swap-meet price, passing into the hands of a young Italian single-hander on a tighter budget than ours, who was happy to have a dinghy at all.

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Our first season with our new dinghy, which we'd named the *Tasty Penguin*—don't ask, it started out as a joke—pulled heavy duty, hauling countless groceries through waves with a steady pull of the oars. Its extra-deep skegs kept it from slipping sideways and helped it glide gracefully while offering protection whenever we dragged it up a rocky shore. A two-horsepower motor could propel it in a straight line as long as required and a simple pronounced shift in our weight helped us steer the dinghy without needing to hang onto the outboard. I could stand easily in this stable vessel, which proved useful whenever we unloaded groceries or jugs of water.

We ran out of time in New Zealand to craft a sailing rig for the dinghy. No matter. Inside a stunning lagoon filled with turquoise water, we lashed two oars together to form a mast and lashed the remnants of an old awning to it and sailed for miles, offering rides to bored cruisers who shared the anchorage with us — until the wind came up and our make-shift awning/sail began to tear. Eventually we turned a broken windsurfing mast and an old tall boy into a proper sailing rig, though a lack of reef points made for one exciting sail in a rapidly building gale on Great Barrier Island the following season.

We built that two-part nesting dinghy a bit heavier than we probably needed, but it could withstand the coming of the apocalypse and still report for duty. A little paint every few years is all it needs to keep going for as long as we can imagine.

When we sadly parted company with our beloved *Veleva*, the star of our seven-year adventure, we kept its co-star, the *Tasty Penguin*, to feature in our next adventure aboard a 38-footer of Garth's own design. Building that two-part, nesting dinghy turned out to be great practice for our next monumental undertaking: building Garth's dream cruiser in our own workshop behind our house. ✧



BIOGRAPHY

Wendy Hinman is the author of "Tightwads on the Loose: a Seven Year Pacific Odyssey," about her 34,000-mile voyage aboard a 31-foot boat with her husband, Garth Wilcox, to whom she's still married and happens to like. Her book was reviewed in the 2013 "Voyages," the October 2013 "Sailing" magazine, and November 2013 SSCA news. www.wendyhinman.com.

Photos by Lee Youngblood except for dinghy construction and test sail.