

Famed Lifeboat Work Of Provincetown Man

by EARLE G. RICH

(Earle Rich of Wellfleet has had a career on merchant ships in marine diesel engineering. He knows ships — and has a fund of first-hand Cape Cod lore, besides. Ed.)

The term "Race Point Model," as applied to that particular surfboat, came as result of one man's unrelenting search for an ultimate in human ingenuity. That man was Charles Gardner of Provincetown, Mass., a renowned boat builder of his time.

He was convinced in his own mind that the type of surfboat then in use by the Life Saving Stations along the shores of Cape Cod, were not adapted for the kind of surf conditions they were required to meet.

Going on this assumption he determined to try to produce a boat that would meet any conditions at any time, anywhere. Many of his friends in the little town had lost their lives in vain attempts to save the crews of ships cast ashore to become total wrecks. Charles Gardner spent hours on end studying the lines of the boats then in use, trying to discover wherein lied the fault. The end result was an attempt to design and build one of his own. It was a radical departure from the conventional, so much so that even he had misgivings at the start.

How He Worked

This was long before the era of wind tunnels, float tanks and current recorders, but he knew he could get the answers he wanted from the expanse of Provincetown Harbor. The wind and waves would be nature's contribution to his undertaking. The size of the harbor would enable him to pick to his own choosing the exact locations needed for the various tests that would be required.

From these tests he would be able to determine exactly how his boat would perform under all adverse conditions.

His model and a pair of rubber boots, comprised all the research equipment he needed to verify his concepts of what a surfboat should be like. Little did he realize that what he discovered would revolutionize so completely all former concepts held to be best for so long. He was the type of individual who could envisage the seemingly impossible, confident in the knowledge his hands could produce

what his brain dictated to them. Thus began the labor pains of what was to become the birth of a great event of the times, the Race Point Model surfboat.

First Gardner procured a suitable piece of sugar pine, a wood used by all model makers because of its uniform grain, texture and lightness. Then he proceeded to shape it into the desired proportions of what he had in mind.

With a model maker's spoke shave and plenty of coarse sandpaper, he painstakingly removed all surplus wood in the areas he knew to be necessary. With a model makers gauge, he then removed all surplus wood from the interior of the model, but remembering always that weight was an important factor in the final analysis. It was a work of love that only the true craftsman can best enjoy.

The Tests

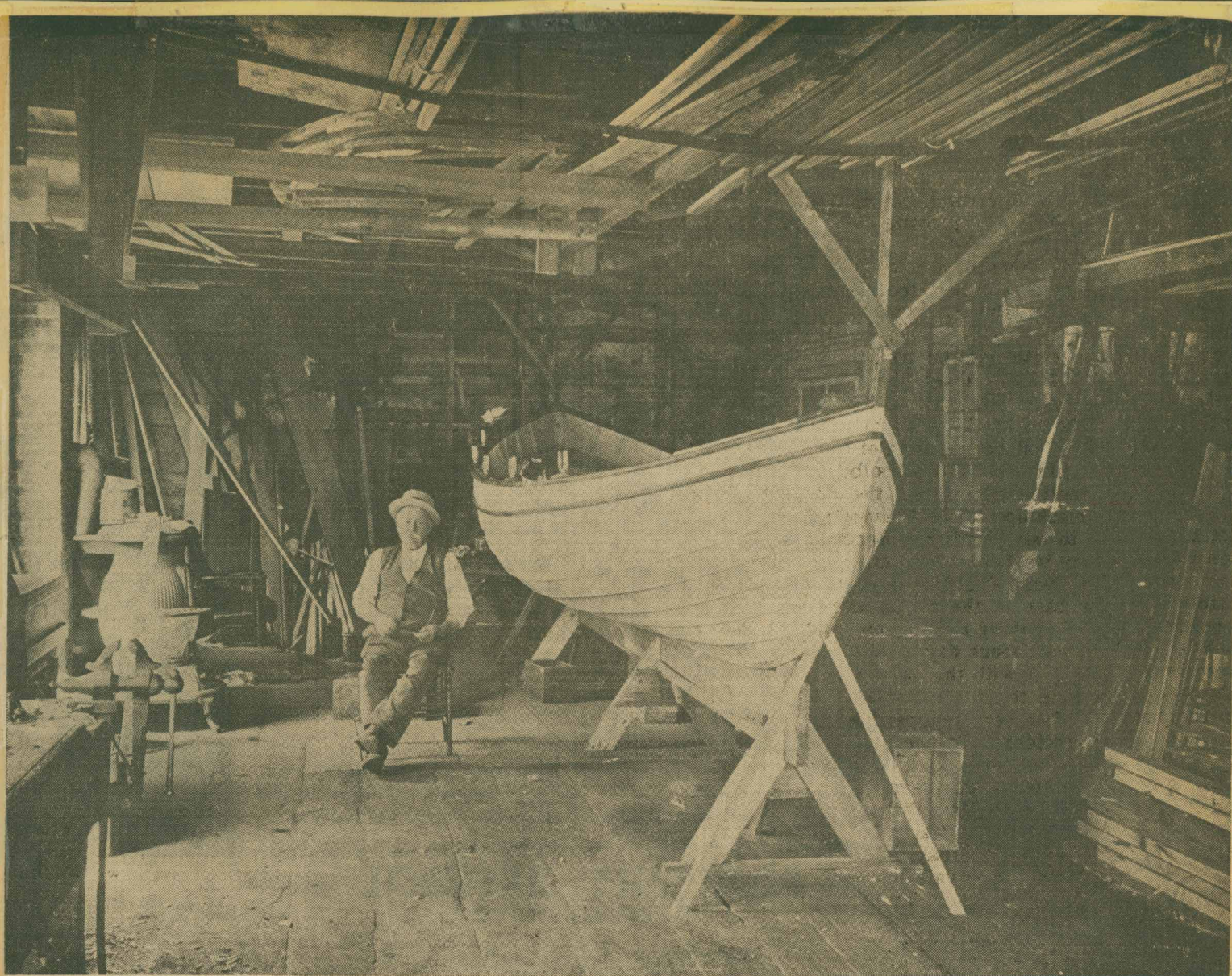
After many hours of work and study Gardner was at last satisfied that the model was ready for the first of a series of tests.

Slipping the model under his arm he set out for the proving grounds nature had provided for his purpose. It took him some time to locate a section of the beach on which the waves formed the right pattern of movement and action as they hit the beach. This was important, as it would be a miniature performance of what the finished product could be expected to prove. Here and here only would he learn the answers.

Basing his theory on a belief the boats now in use offered too much resistance when struck by a following wave, he had accordingly altered the shape of the stern of his model. He made it more pointed, thus reducing somewhat the surface area. It was his contention this was the one weak point of all other boats and what caused them to "broach to" and capsize.

Wading out into the water, model in hand, he waited for just the right moment to place it in the right position in the path of the oncoming wave. As the approaching wave hit the stern of the model, he watched intently.

The results were heartening but not as satisfactory as he had wished. The stern raised more than he had anticipated, but he was encouraged by the fact it did not throw the model around broadside and capsize it. It was back to the work bench now for more study and alterations — but now he knew he was on the right track.



Charles D. Gardner, ship carpenter, had his workshop in the three-story building off the foot of Gosnold Street now owned by the Provincetown Playhouse on the Wharf. This mid-1890's photo shows him beside one of his famed Race Point model surfboats designed by George Bickers, father of Museum curator Arthur Bickers. Years later, Charlie's successor Jonathan "Jot" Small took over. Morris and Stanley Snow are among the Provincetown boys who learned about boat-building from Jot. About 1938 the late artist Heinrich Pfeiffer bought the property from Jot

and used the second floor as his studio. He introduced open air movies next door. Because rain often cancelled them, he engaged the elder Jimmy Perry to build the one-story theater building the following year. Naming it "The Artists Theater", he showed foreign films there. Several years later he let the present repertory company use the theater for summer performances, and in 1958, shortly after Heinrich's death, the Provincetown Playhouse bought the property. Incidentally, this historic photo was found recently at the Town Dump and rescued just in time. Flyer Santos has it now. Courtesy Clarence LePeer

It Looked Good

With spoke shave in hand he took a little off here and a little off there, then applied sandpaper to smooth the overall surface to a moulded appearance.

His first test had proved to him that his basic ideas had been correct; surf conditions on the back side of Cape Cod were like no other, therefore a boat designed for Cape surf had to be a radical departure from all other boats employed in life saving. So sure was he of his success now that he even

rubbed powdered graphite into the wood of his model to reduce water friction before setting out for the next test.

On this particular day weather conditions were ideal for what he wanted to prove. It blew quite hard, which caused miniature breakers to form well off shore, increasing in momentum as they neared the beach — perfect conditions for this test.

Again wading out into the water, model in hand he waited for a wave to start forming offshore,

waiting as it progressed toward the beach. Watching his chance, he placed the model in its path just before the wave reached its crest and broke.

His model remained motionless, it was as if the wave simply opened on contact with the stern of the model and sped along on its way to the shore, exactly the way it would under the worst conditions. Had Gardner not been alone, one might have noticed a slight smile spread over his features as

he bent over and lifted out of the water what was to become one man's humble contribution to humanity. The gods he challenged were invisible and not of flesh and bone, yet he had met them on their own grounds. The results are now history. Statistics verified the sharp decline in the grim toll of lost mariners.

In retrospect you will ask what set this man apart from others of his profession. The answer is simple — he was a creator. Only such names as Herreshoff, Crosby, Lawley, Phinney and Donald MacKay comprise that legendary roster