

Chatham's Tiniest Shipyard

David Murdoch Builds, Repairs, Restores Ship Models



The elegant lines of a classic catboat are preserved in miniature.



David Murdoch spends his summers running a seal watch boat, and becomes a miniature shipbuilder in the winter.

Story and photos by Alan Pollock

David Murdoch is an accomplished boat builder, having single-handedly built several catboats and power boats, not to mention a few schooners and a 265-foot yacht. And he does it all in his basement.

But just because the boats are miniatures doesn't lessen the labor or the craftsmanship required to build them. "Everything I build is scratch-built," Murdoch said. Even the working blocks, or pulleys, in the rigging, are crafted by hand out of bronze or brass or wood, whatever the real thing was made of.

In his career as a miniature shipbuilder, Murdoch has made about 20 boats from the keel up, including one he gave to his son, which is on display in the lobby of the Cape Cod Five Bank in Chatham.

Showing off a model catboat, Murdoch gingerly lifted off the glass case to reveal a beautiful craft, finely detailed in every respect. The deck is made of individual planks, apparently fastened with tiny nails. But those aren't nails, Murdoch said, they are trunnels (wooden pegs, or "tree nails," historically used by boat wrights). To make a trunnel which is 1/32 of an inch in diameter requires taking wood and repeatedly drawing it through a special jeweler's tool to shave it to the right size.

"I start with bamboo skewers from Stop & Shop," he said with a chuckle. Working with tweezers and miniature tools—including a table saw with blades less than two inches across—Murdoch charges an hourly rate to build model boats. In fact, most of his business involves repairing and restoring models built by other people, or heaven forbid, "from a kit," Murdoch said, looking at the ceiling and grabbing his chest.

Model shipbuilding is more than a passion;

it is an off-season business for Murdoch, who operates a seal-watch cruise business in the summer. He advertises his business by word-of-mouth and by a Web site, www.chat-hamshipmodels.com, and receives all kinds of requests. One Chatham family has just asked him to make a model of a beloved Boston Whaler, not the most elegant of crafts, but one which has special sentimental meaning to the family, "which is very often the case," said Murdoch.



The tiniest details are replicated in this model of a catboat.



The hoops holding a catboat's sail were painstakingly made from layers of wood shavings, glued like plywood.

Working on one particularly intricate catboat, Murdoch even provided detail inside the cabin, which is viewed by carefully removing the top. Inside are perfectly varnished bunks and a perfect little galley with a tiny sink, ice chest and cook stove.

In crafting the stove, Murdoch labored for hours making the firebox and the flue, and toyed with the idea of making it actually functional.

"And I said, David, get a hold of yourself."

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