



# Extreme Boat Makeover:

## Turning History Into Art

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY PATRICK SCHNEIDER

Most people take the road less traveled but not Pat Crusse. A love of wood, water and working with his hands put him not on a road, but on a lake – literally.

Crusse will tell you that he found his career by accident and not by design. Call it sibling rivalry mixed with a love for preserving history that got Crusse into the classic wooden boat restoration business. He relates that he told his brother, “your boat looks terrible” and several months later, Crusse had restored the Chris-Craft Silver Arrow, Hull #16 down to the original blue paint. That was 15 years ago and he never looked back.

Crusse admits that his work is truly a labor of love. It requires undying patience, long hours and the ability to see beauty in what meets the eye – often a boat that is past its prime and has been neglected over time. Describing the restoration process as one akin to “putting on makeup,” Crusse starts from the bottom of the boat and works upward.

The self-taught man grew up tinkering with old cars, trucks and even aircraft. He acknowledges that he was influenced by his father and grandfather, who were woodworkers but says

he learned primarily by day-to-day experiences, reading and asking a lot of questions.

The first step in the makeover process begins with the “before” picture of the boat, which soon becomes a mere memory as the talented craftsman goes to work. Mounds of mahogany and white oak, used for their rot-resistant qualities, are a testament to the work in progress and signify the changing times. Today’s boats are primarily constructed with fiberglass, making wooden boats prized by the nostalgia lover and history buff.

A steady hand is required for the meticulous work that includes replacing old or damaged screws, sometimes up to 30,000 per boat. The finishing touches are equally painstaking and entail a three-layer wood and plywood treatment on the sides of the boats followed by sanding and staining. Sealing the beauty of the wood is accomplished with up to 30 coats of urethane. A boat restoration can take up to one year or in some cases longer.

“We encourage our customers to do their own ‘due diligence’ and to get all the documentation that they can about the boat. Also, I caution buyers that if a seller is not willing to show you the bottom of a boat, then you don’t want to buy it,” says Crusse. He requires the same diligence from himself and obtains original engineer drawings of the boats he is restoring from the Mariner’s Museum in

Newport News, VA, to ensure accuracy.

Crusse usually has a cornucopia of history-in-wood in his shop that has included a 1937 Emmons Hull #1, a one-of-a-kind boat built originally for a tobacco tycoon that came to Crusse in pieces; a 1881 White Hall rowing boat that was delivered to the original owner by rail and ox, and the crème de la crème classic boat by Boesch, made in Switzerland. The luxurious boat comes equipped with a convertible top, stereo and refrigerator.

As one of only a few boat restorers in North Carolina, Crusse’s reputation has preceded him throughout the state and nationally. Former pilot Don Burrows owns a 1958 20-foot Chris-Craft Custom Sportsman, a numbers matching boat (engine, transmission and hull number are original). Burrows met Crusse at a boat show and knew he was the one to restore his boat. A long process ensued along with a new friendship borne out of respect, admiration and a mutual love of water.

Crusse started the long process of rebuilding Burrow’s boat, named *Miss Patti* after Burrows’ wife. The boat was totally disassembled and everything was replaced except for the hull boards on the side. *Miss Patti* was built to exacting standards, and photographs were taken during the entire process to document the restoration.

The last step remaining between *Miss Patti*

and the water was a windshield. Since there was not an existing windshield available, Crusse had to make one out of Plexiglas. He also made a spare – just in case.

Over two years later *Miss Patti* made her debut on Lake Norman at the Annual Charlotte Classic and Antique Boat Show where Crusse and Burrows made sure that *Miss Patti* had her dip into North Carolina waters before making the long journey home to Oregon and the reservoirs and rivers of the west.

Burrows compares his wooden beauty to a fancy station wagon, but it is clear that she is more than just a utility boat. She cast a flirty eye with her tango-red dash and seats and her apple-green linoleum interior. *Miss Patti* boasts an uncommonly low hour meter that just turned over 400, and she is longer than most boats of her kind. Instead of the normal 17 feet, *Miss Patti* tips the scale at 20 feet.

The restoration was a long process but well worth the wait according to Burrows. “Pat is an incredible craftsman and human being. He is exacting and detail-oriented and he does what he says he will do, which is rare these days. Pat’s work hearkens back to a better time when things were simpler and people worked on a handshake.”

The humble man just smiles. “If it’s man-made once, it can be man-made again,” says Crusse. 🛥



### Special Note:

Classic boats are defined by the boating industry as one built between 1943 and 1968. Ninety-two Silver Arrow boats were built between 1958 and 1959; today only about 35 are still in existence.

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