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A runabout is reborn as better-than-new classic

He can see it already — a Chris Craft pennant flapping at the bow, an American flag waving at the stern, glossy varnish and polished chrome gleaming in the sun as the boat planes across the water accompanied by the rumble of its 120-horsepower inboard engine.

Nick Janous, 24, of the Town of Port Washington, is about a month away from realizing his dream of cruising on inland lakes in his restored 17-foot Chris Craft, a 1956 vintage mahogany runabout aficionados call a woody.

Since he bought the boat last summer from a man in Fitchburg who planned to restore it but never did, Janous has spent almost all his free time working on the boat with his father David.

Janous, a civil engineer for Aquarius Technology in Port Washington and a Port High graduate, said the idea of restoring a classic boat began percolating while he was on the rowing team at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Spending so much time on the water with the UW crew, he saw many beautiful wooden boats that had been restored to their former glory.

“There’s something about those old wood boats,” Janous said. “You don’t see that kind of beauty in new boats.”

When he bought the Chris Craft for $2,000, “it was in really bad shape,” he said. “We replaced 90% of the wood.”

The craft, he said, is actually in better shape now than when it was built. In the 1950s, wood boards that swelled to close gaps were susceptible to rot. Janous encased the bottom planks with six layers of waterproof epoxy that acts as a glue and seals the bottom of the boat so it

won’t rot.

The 120-horsepower engine was rebuilt by a mechanic in Illinois and painted aqua with black wire casings, just like when it came from the factory.

Janous said the Chris Craft is known for the sound of its engine. “There is no muffler. It has a rumble to it, a great sound,” he said. “You know exactly what it is when you hear it.”

In his research, Janous discovered the website www.chriscraft.org and connected with woody buffs who were more than willing to help with problems he encountered.

“Some even volunteered to come and help,” he said.

He didn’t take them up on those offers, but he did rely on their expertise.

Although Janous and his father, who is an architect, had done woodworking projects together since Nick was a boy, neither had built a boat before.

“I had to learn quite a few new skills, like bending wood and learning to fit boards on curved surfaces. That was really difficult,” Janous said. “It took a lot of research.”

The vessel is constructed entirely of Philippine mahogany. Janous saved the scraps from each board. He numbered each one. When they made pegs to hold the boards in place, they used the same board so the grains matched. The pegs are virtually invisible.

The white pinstripes are just as they were originally.

The boat gleams with eight coats of varnish. Next year, Janous will add another five or six coats.

“After that, it will look like a piece of glass,” he said. “Every step has been so much fun because every step it gets prettier and prettier.”

Janous is working on the interior chrome work and wiring. The steering wheel and windshield have to be installed and exterior chrome added.

The seats are being covered in red Naugahyde to look original.

Janous is on a cycling team in Cedarburg and a triathlon team. Both teams practice two to three times a week. After those workouts is when he usually works on the boat, often until 11 p.m.

The restored boat’s maiden voyage will be on Random Lake to make sure everything is OK.

Then Janous will take the Chris Craft to the family cottage on Tuttle Lake near Neshkoro for a christening party. That’s where he plans to do most of his boating.

Janous said his next project will be to buy a house, either a farmhouse or a historic building he can restore.

Image Information: After almost a year of painstaking woodworking, Nick Janous is about to launch his gorgeously restored 1956 Chris Craft runabout.