

# History of Snyder's Shipyard stretches back almost 150 years

PETER SIMPSON

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Snyder's Shipyard co-owner Wade Croft is dwarfed by the 25-foot rudder being constructed in Dayspring for the Bluenose II. (Peter Simpson)

"You have to understand the sea, listen to her, look out for her moods, get to know her, respect her and love her. Only then can you build boats that feel at home on the sea."

– **Michael Morpurgo, author**

Nova Scotia's fishermen obviously place their trust in the folks at Snyder's Shipyard. The Dayspring shipyard has built 225 new boats and refitted, repaired or restored hundreds more, including Bluenose II.

Records show the shipyard's origin dates back to 1871. The Leary family operated the business until 1944, when the shipyard was purchased by Teddy Snyder, who eventually passed ownership to son Philip.

Philip Snyder remains as co-owner, while long-time staffer Wade Croft, who became co-owner in 2004, handles the shipyard's day-to-day operation and its staff of 15, aged 19 to 65. Dennis Stewart, 40 years, is the longest-serving employee. The sole female, office manager Donna Hatt, has 22 years on the job.



*Fisherman Paul Rhuland (left), boatbuilder Gary Hirtle, Snyder's Shipyard co-owner Wade Croft and apprentice boatbuilder Nathan Schmeisser gather at the bow of Rhuland's new lobster boat, which is nearing completion. (Peter Simpson)*

Croft's introduction to boatbuilding occurred as a young child, when he built a raft. It sank in the lake.

Even his life-long career at Snyder's, now 37 years and counting, began inauspiciously.

"I started as a labourer splitting firewood for the boiler to keep steam going to bend timbers. Then I just cleaned up the shop and swept sawdust," said Croft.

"Some of the older more-experienced guys took me under their wing and showed me the ropes. I was learning and I figured better assignments would follow if I worked hard," he said.



*Theodore Too, which was built at Snyder's Shipyard, returned to Dayspring last year for maintenance and repair. (Peter Simpson)*

Two of those better assignments were rebuilding Bluenose II and building Theodore Too, the lovable tugboat based on the fictional character, Theodore Tugboat.

“Theodore was my first and most memorable build. It was fun. They used to bring children on buses from local schools to see the boat being built,” said Croft. “The kids who loved Theodore Too back then are now grown, but they bring their kids to see it when it comes back to our shipyard for maintenance.”

Croft becomes as animated as a proud parent when he talks about the shipyard’s staff. “We have a good reputation, and that’s because of the people. Our crew is excellent. I can’t emphasize enough how proud I am of them. It’s a family. We all have our days, but generally everyone gets along fine,” he said.

Boatbuilding preferences and technology have changed over the years. One major change is the transition from wood to fiberglass, resulting in faster builds and lower maintenance.

What has remained the same is the good-natured competitiveness of fishermen, a benefit to boatbuilders.

“From my experience, if you have one fisherman who wants a boat built 25 ft. wide, the next guy wants to have one built 30 ft. wide. It’s just their competitive nature,” said Croft. “The wider boats work better for them because the crew can load all the traps on one trip. They want to be as efficient as possible.”

Snyder’s Shipyard has been busy the past couple years, injecting millions of dollars into the local economy. However, the boatbuilding industry can experience cyclical peaks and valleys.

“It all depends on the fishery. Lobster fishing is not as lucrative as it was last season. Catches are lower, but keep in mind that fishermen enjoyed an exceptional season last year,” said Croft.

“The desire for lobsters in Europe is strong right now, as well as in South Korea and China. I’m hearing from fishermen that they are fearful they won’t be able to satisfy the market demand this year,” he said.

A drive through many of the fishing communities from Lunenburg to Digby last summer revealed the growing need for new boatbuilders to replace the craftsmen whose retirement is imminent.

This presents a timely opportunity for young people to pursue a viable career path. The province of Nova Scotia recognizes boatbuilding as a trade. Snyder’s has seven certified boatbuilders on staff.

“There was a time when building two boats at a time was a real challenge for us. We needed more experienced builders and it was difficult attracting young people to do this kind of work,” said Croft.

“The young guys I have now are exceptional. They learn fast, are reliable and they work hard.”

Nathan Schmeisser, 20, is one of those “exceptional young guys” who is learning the ropes at Snyder’s.

A high school graduate, Schmeisser is part of a new breed of apprentice shipbuilders eager to build careers close to where they grew up. He has been with Croft’s boatbuilding team for two years.

“It’s been good. I enjoy building boats and I’m learning a lot,” said Schmeisser, a Middle LaHave resident.

“The first day here I was handed safety gear and a grinder and I grinded out a boat hull. Since then I’ve done a little of everything. I’m now working on finishing the wheelhouse of a new lobster boat,” he said.

“When we are done building a boat, I feel a great sense of satisfaction and pride when I see a happy fisherman steer his new boat down the river.”

Although Schmeisser is focussed on building his career, he still finds time to contribute to his community by serving as a captain in the Dayspring & District Fire Department. He is trained in many key functions, including suppression of structure fires, occupant extrication and motor vehicle accidents and water rescues.

One of Schmeisser’s co-workers, Gary Hirtle, started working at Snyder’s two weeks after his brother was hired, 30 years ago in April.

“My brother Brian and I worked together at other jobs before we got into boatbuilding. It seems everywhere he went, I followed,” said Hirtle.

“When we started, here, it was all wooden boats, then a few years later fiberglassing caught on. I like what I do now but wooden boats were much more fun to build,” he said.

The Hirtle brothers worked on the recent rebuild of Bluenose II, their father helped to build Bluenose II in 1963, and their grandfather was involved in the construction of the original Bluenose in 1921.

The term “original Bluenose” is open to interpretation. According to records kept by the Nova Scotia Archives, seven vessels were registered under the Bluenose name prior to 1921— three schooners, two brigs, a barque and a sloop. The vessels were built and registered from 1839 to 1903.

Currently, Snyder’s Shipyard is constructing the 25 ft. wooden replacement rudder for Bluenose II.

Paul Rhuland, is eagerly awaiting the completion of his new lobster boat. The Cherry Hill fisherman said the boat is a forward-looking investment in the family business. The Rhulands have fished for generations.

“My son and son-in-law fish with me now, and I’m hoping one or both will carry on the fishing tradition when I retire,” said Rhuland.

“My current boat is too small for where I fish at Sable Island in the summer and the 50-mile limit during the winter,” he said.

Standing on the deck of his new boat, Rhuland praised the craftsmen finishing the interior of the wheelhouse. “Snyder’s wood work is second to none. I can’t see where their craftsmanship can be beat.”

Rhuland said his new boat will soon earn its keep. “When the boat is ready to go next month, she will be put to work fishing right away.”

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