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Ready and able . . .

Tugs reflect the working-class heritage of their forebears

By Steve Knauth, Staff Writer

Everyone knows, you don't buy the first boat you come across. But Gerald West and his family couldn't help themselves.

"This was the first boat we'd really traveled to look at," says West, 57, of Washington, D.C. "So, we were ready to not like it, ready to say no."

But West and his wife, Gillian, and their son and daughter-in-law, were taken aback. "We stood there looking at it, and it was gorgeous," says West. "I said, 'We gotta have it.'"

Was it a vintage schooner that swept West off his feet? A stately old cabin cruiser? A modern express cruiser?

The Wests were beguiled by a **Lord Nelson Victory Tug**, a 37-foot single-engine pleasure tugboat. The high bow was graced by a rope fender puddening, the curved wheelhouse topped by a visor and cambered roof. A long, sweeping sheer capping sturdy bulwarks ended in the tugboats' characteristic round stern.

To top it off, she was red, white and blue.

"We took a walk through, and the boat sold itself," West says. "The interior woodwork, the layout and the workmanship were just incredible."

Although few people, it seems, go boat-hunting with a tug in mind, tugs have the power to impassion. As one owner says, "You don't buy a tug; a tug buys you."

Take Bob Pence, for example. He and his wife, Pat, left the Chesapeake in 1997 on their 36-foot sailboat, fully loaded for an extended cruise. By the time they arrived in the Bahamas, they were in a 40-foot Pilgrim tug.

"We sealed the deal along the way," says Pence, 70, a retired businessman from Kent Island, Md. "We unloaded the sailboat onto the tug and took the new boat down to the islands."

Pleasure tugs are an offshoot of the trawler family, with similar performance and cruising characteristics. They've got little in common with the 10- to 15-foot minitugs that are popular as day boats. Nordic Tug in Burlington, Wash., builds models from 32 to 42 feet. The 150-year-old Crosby Yacht Yard in Osterville, Mass., builds a 26-footer and a semicustom 38.

The Pilgrim tugboats, once designed and built by sail designer Ted Gozzard's North Castle Marine in Goderich, Ontario, and Lord Nelson, formerly built in Taiwan, are available on the used market. The popular 37-foot **Lord Nelson** tugs and the Pilgrims can be found for \$145,000 to \$185,000. (For more information contact the Pilgrim Owners Association, 2960 Aiki Ave., Seattle, Wash. 98116-2762; or the Lord Nelson Victory Tug Owner's Association, 1108 Marine Way W., Unit BTH, North Palm Beach, Fla. 33408.)

Pleasure tugs from 26 to 42 feet generally run at trawler speeds — 10 to 12 mph — on displacement hulls powered by a single engine. Nordic Tug, however, offers more performance; the 42-footer can hit 15 to 16 knots on its hard-chine semidisplacement hull.

Tugs sleep up to six people with at least one private stateroom, usually placed forward. Larger tugboats — 35 feet or larger — can carry the on-board necessities of passage making: generator, expanded fuel and water supply, watermaker.

And then there's the look. "It's got the prettiest sheer you'll ever see," says Susie Watson, 47, of Bridgeport, Conn., who owns a 37-foot Lord Nelson.

"Look at the wheelhouse, the smokestack — the tug is a real eye-catcher," says Mitch Page, head of the Florida-based **Lord Nelson Victory Tug** Owner's Association.

"They're character boats; everyone takes a second look," says Dan Moogan, a broker with Richard Bertram Yachts in Miami.

"Cute" is a word often used to describe the pleasure tug. But the word belies its workboat heritage. "Any time you pull into a marina, people think it's the cutest thing," says Phil Rogers, 60, of Fort Pierce, Fla., a Nordic Tug owner. "Sure, I like the tug's character. But I've always been more impressed with the boat beneath the look."

Rogers should know. He and his wife, Patty, bought their 32-footer in Michigan City, Ind., near Chicago, nine years ago. Their first trip took them across Lake Michigan to Chicago, down the Illinois and Mississippi rivers and up the Ohio to their Louisville, Ky.-area home. The circuitous voyage took 21 days and covered 1,500 miles.

When the couple moved to Fort Pierce a few years later, they took the boat down the Ohio River to the Cumberland River, through the Tombigbee Waterway and eventually to the Gulf of Mexico, then through Florida's Okeechobee Waterway to the Atlantic.

"The boat has a single 145-hp Yanmar and cruises real comfortable at 9 to 10 [mph]," Rogers says. "It's very efficient — that whole trip cost maybe \$600 in fuel."

Rogers' Nordic Tug is laid out for comfortable cruising for four, and the two often go out with another couple. The dinette makes a bed in the spacious saloon, and the head is large for a boat this size, Rogers says. It also has a separate shower and lots of storage space. "We carried all our provisions for the Louisville trip with us," he says. "With everything we needed right on board, we were self-sufficient."

The tug layout

The pilothouse, with its tall windows and side doors, is more than just good-looking, Rogers found out. "It's an ideal place to handle the boat from," he says. "You can see so well from up there." Outfitted with leather armchairs for helm seating, the pilothouse serves another function, too. "At anchor, I like to sit up there in the captain's chair and maybe just read a book or look out the windows," he says. "It's got a homey kind of feeling."

Watson says the pilothouse on her 37-foot **Lord Nelson** is like a kitchen. "It's where everybody wants to be," she says. "It's the center of life on board."

But the pilothouse is only one example of what's different in a tug layout. Real stairs with brass railings fill the companionway between the pilothouse and the forward cabin in Watson's **Lord Nelson** tug. "It's a little like living in a two-story house," she says. "There are lots of social places to be — like the wheelhouse or the saloon — and lots of privacy if you want it."

"It's a two-level boat, and I like that," says Rogers of his Nordic Tug. "When you go below to go to bed, it's a nice, secure feeling."

Gerald West is adding air conditioning to his capacious Lord Nelson tug to get through that Maryland summer humidity, he says. But other than that, there's little he'd change. "The boat sleeps four in total comfort and can handle six in a pinch, with the settee and the three-quarter berth in the pilothouse," he says.

Gillian West, a cookbook author, put her stamp of approval on the galley — laid out with a three-burner stove, refrigerator, freezer, stainless sink, counter and storage space. "It's nice because it's part of the saloon, which is a big room," she says.

Tug or trawler

Why not just get a conventional trawler?

Size and simplicity have something to do with it, according to tug fans. Nordic's 42-footer weighs about 28,000 pounds and runs on a single 330-hp diesel. A comparable trawler may weigh 35,000 pounds and carry two engines of 375 hp or more. "For some, the trawler can be just too much boat," says Page, the tug association president. "I think a different kind of person goes for the tug, a more casual boater, maybe."

Watson, the Connecticut tug owner, had never owned a boat. But the Lord Nelson turned out to be the perfect fit when she bought it five years ago.

"It's a little weird, buying a 37-foot tug for your first boat, but I'm known for that sort of thing," she says. She and her boyfriend, Henry Godbout, studied hard, took boating courses and got four days of intensive on-board help from a local boating school after buying the boat. Then came the moment of truth. "[The school] helped us bring the boat to our marina slip, and then they left," Watson recalls. "We looked at each other and said, 'I guess we're on our own.'"

A hesitant first trip from Old Lyme, Conn., into Long Island Sound turned into two days of idyllic cruising around Shelter Island, N.Y., and Peconic Bay. "We found we could not only handle the boat, but [we could] do it with confidence," she says. "This is it, we said to ourselves. And we seldom missed another weekend."

One memorable Thanksgiving saw Watson's tug still in the water, the windows steamed by a full turkey dinner cooked on board for family and friends.

Speed and handling

Tugs attract neophytes and experienced boaters, including sailors such as Ken Schuler, who owns Nordic Tugs Midwest in Kiel, Wis., a Nordic Tug dealership. "[Sailors], in particular, seem to appreciate the added comfort of the tug layout," he says. "They also get a steady 8 to 9 knots, and that means more range, compared to what they're used to."

Crosby Yacht Yard President Richard Egan agrees. "When you're coming down from sail, you're used to sail speed," he says. "That's when a tug seems fast but still comfortable. And, let's face it, the tug has an aura of character that's appealing to most sailors."

They also handle well, says Pence, the Maryland tug owner. "The tug rolls like any trawler-type vessel, but they do less of it than most," he says. "With those round bilges, the tug loves a following sea, and it'll go straight ahead through just about anything. So I try to stay away from the beam sea, that's all."

The Nordic Tug uses a semidisplacement hull with hard chines to get its speed and stability. "In rough weather, the boat runs best at about 10 to 11 knots," says Schuler of Nordic Tugs Midwest. "At that point, with the chines and the full keel, the boat becomes almost self-stabilizing."

Rogers stepped up from a houseboat into his Nordic Tug. "We wanted to expand our horizons with the tug," he says. "A houseboat can go out on some open water, but you have to be lucky with the weather to do it. With this tug, we have more latitude. For most inland waters, houseboats are hard to beat. But these tugs are really made to cruise places."

Crosby's 26-footer is designed and built to be seaworthy beyond its size, Egan says. "It's a heavy displacement hull with 1,500 pounds of ballast in the keel," he says. "It's maneuverable, and the high bow makes it good in a head sea." Powered by a 50-hp diesel, the Crosby 26 cruises at 9 to 10 mph. "With the high bulwarks, they look and feel safe and substantial," Egan says. "And they are."

John Underwood, a Pilgrim 40 owner from Sapelo Island, Ga., runs his tug on Lake Lanier from the optional flybridge. "I prefer it up there," he says. "You get a great view, and in tight quarters, it's the place to maneuver from. The single engine and bow thruster can make you look good around the dock."

Underwood's Pilgrim gained a certain fame on the lake, too. During Underwood's tenure as commodore of

the Atlanta Athletic Club's yacht club, the Pilgrim was used for club celebrations, acting as review vessel for the commissioning parade and taking guests and the occasional dignitary to weekend races. "It's a great boat for that sort of thing," he says. "Very distinctive, with plenty of room."

Boats — loved and not so loved — come and go in an owner's life, and Underwood is selling the Pilgrim for personal reasons, but not without some misgivings. "This is the first boat I've sold that I can say I'm sad to see go," he says. "The others, I'd pretty much had as much fun with as I was going to. This boat is different."

Pence knows what Underwood means. "I'd highly recommend the tugs to anyone," he says. "They're no-problem boats with character and capability. I can't find anything I don't like about them."

"And," he adds, "it doesn't hurt that people want to take your picture all the time."