

The Star Talks To Dick Carlson

Boat Designer Not by Design

By RUSSELL DRUM

Dick Carlson's career as a designer of sailboats began without his knowledge.

"Like Abraham Lincoln and the Gettysburg Address, I sketched a boat on a scrap pad. A off-pencil drawing for myself. My first wife sent it off to a boat magazine. I didn't know anything about it," he said recently at his house in Sag Harbor.

"I got letters. The third inquiry talked about my drawing on page 52. I went to the newsstand and got the last copy they had. In those days, it was supposed to be formal," Mr. Carlson said, referring to the presentation of boat designs.

Nevertheless, on the basis of his drawing's reception, he put together examples of ideas and his drafting skills.

Taking a page from his earlier, successful crusade to become, briefly, a trainer of thoroughbred horses, Mr. Carlson wrote letters to some of the top yacht yards and designers in the country, to Otis Stevens of Sparkman and Stevens, to John Alden and to Philip Rhodes, just as he had written to Ben Jones, top trainer of thoroughbreds, and Andrew G. Vanderbilt, who owned them.

"I got a phone call and went to work for Phil Rhodes for about a year and a half. I could draw. I had taken drafting in school, but had to read up," said Mr. Carlson, who is now considering what to do with some 200 volumes on boat design and seamanship he no longer needs.

He began his freelance design career in 1955, supplementing his inconsistent income by surveying and delivering boats. At about the same time, he joined the fledgling Midget Ocean Racing Club, MORC, a group founded by East End boaters on the principle that smaller boats could compete in regatta races, an idea that had taken hold in England.

Mr. Carlson designed a boat, only 23.7 feet long, it called *Cutlass*. It got the attention of the small-boat racing community and became a popular class despite its unorthodox design.

Mr. Carlson was raised in Monmouth, N.J., and joined the Navy during World War II. Stagnant as it might seem, he was first stationed in Ithaca, N.Y., where he attended classes in engineering at Cornell University and helped raise sheep at the university's school of agriculture. He was then transferred to the seventh Fleet and assigned to an attack transport vessel during the battle for Okinawa.

Dependent about the world after the war, Mr. Carlson said, he went off to the coastack in Maryland, where he worked as a stable hand before writing the letters that had him judging horse flesh better long. He became a trainer, not a successful one



At home in his library, Dick Carlson held a model of one of the boats he designed during his long career. *Russell L.*

by his own account, but kept at it for four or five years. He also studied engineering at the University of Maryland.

Then he met his first wife and moved to Brooklyn, where he worked as a draftsman with the Phil Rhodes organization until 1955.

He was working at the Shelter Island Boat Yard, now Coeles Harbor Marina, when he joined the Midget Ocean racers. His *Cutlass* was designed with reverse sheer. Instead of a profile that rises at the bow, dips low midships, and rises again at the stern for a concave look, a boat with reverse sheer has a rather humped appearance not always pleasing, Mr. Carlson said, to lovers of classic boat design.

He said the design had advantages, however: more headroom in a smaller boat, and, because it has more freeboard midships, "the shoosh don't drag in water when the boat heels. High freeboard at the ends

[bow and stern] is counterproductive. Hydrodynamically, it makes sense," he said of reverse shear.

"They liked the way it sailed, and the way it looked once they got used to it," he said of the people signed for.

Cutlass had a seven-foot beam and drew four feet; was a "mushhead sheep," the designer said, even foremast was attached to the mushhead instead of pointing below it. He said the arrangement offers options with the boat's headstays.

"Later in life I have viewed sailing yachts. They are not products of engineering. Leave that of thing to the America's Cup."

Mr. Carlson said his reverse sheer design, which applied to a series of small boats of up to 30 feet, favor in England, Australia, and New Zealand.

"They were right for it; it was mostly wood of it. And a magazine would run a design and people call. I accused one guy of making me a career."