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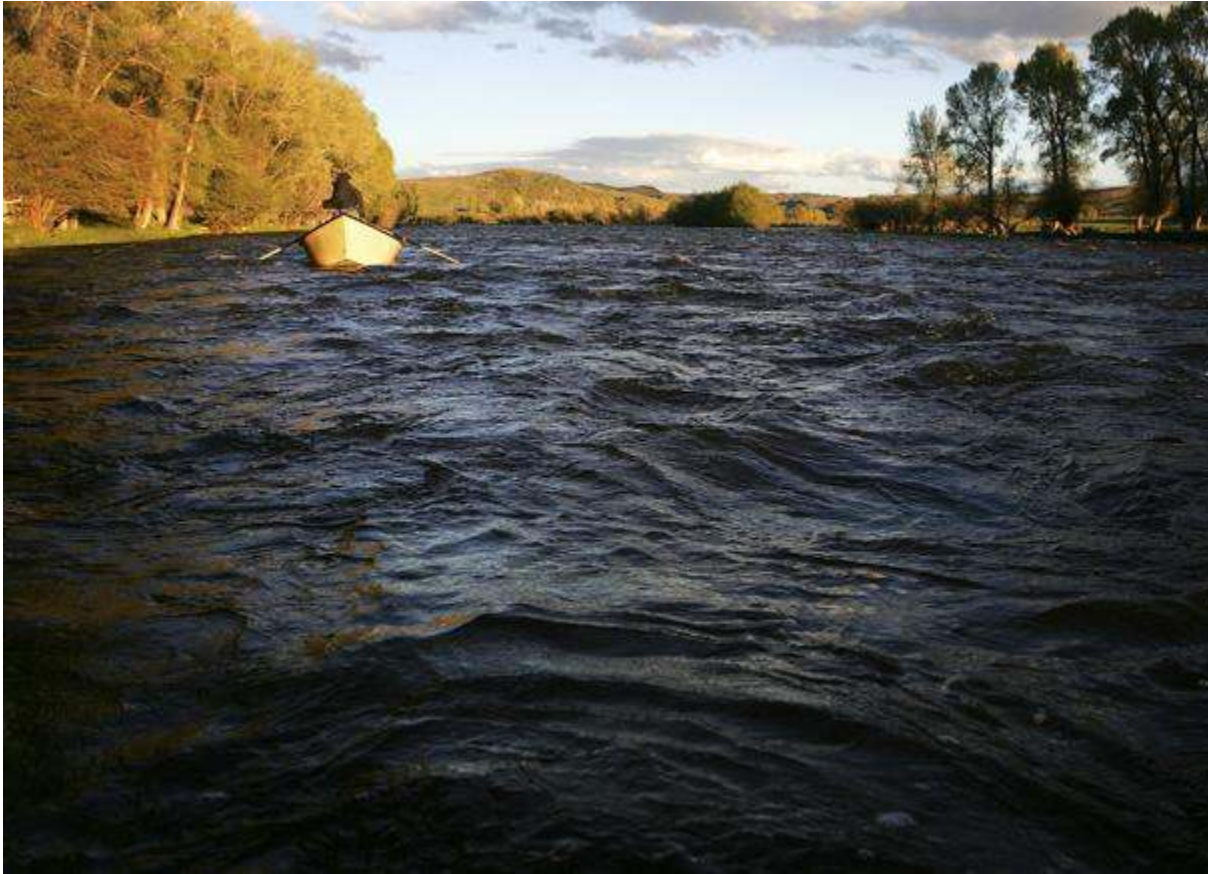
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HOME



Messing about in boats

By Shauna Stephenson



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"'Hullo, Mole!' said the Water Rat.

"'Hullo, Rat!' said the Mole."

And so began Kenneth Grahame's first chapter in "The Wind in the Willows" - an incantation to boaters the world round, the chant of those who throw themselves at the altar of the river.

"'This has been a wonderful day!' said (Mole) as the Rat shoved off and took to the sculls again. 'Do you know, I've never been in a boat before in all my life.'

"'What?' cried the Rat, open-mouthed: 'Never been in a - you never - well I - what have you been doing then?'"

"'What?' cried the Rat, open-mouthed: 'Never been in a - you never - well I - what have you been doing then?'"

Note here that it is a safe guess this poetic boatman never knew the delicious sway of the modern drift boat. But imagine, if you will, what literary genius might have been spouted if he had.



"'Is it so nice as all that?' asked the Mole shyly, though he was quite prepared to believe it as he leant back in his seat and surveyed the cushions, the oars, the rowlocks, and all the fascinating fittings, and felt the boat sway lightly under him.

"'Nice? It's the only thing,' said the Water Rat solemnly, as he leant forward for his stroke. 'Believe me, my young friend, there is nothing - absolutely nothing - half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats.'"

Truly, there is not. And at a small shop located on the outskirts of Boulder, messing around with boats has become a life's work.

Empty boat-shaped shells, shadows of what will be, are lined up outside of the unmarked shop.

Upon entering, a guest may be greeted not only by Boulder Boat Works CEO Andy Toohey and vice president Chris Schrantz, but an entire pack of co-workers: Bella the yellow lab, Mila the yellow mutt (easily confused with Bella), Fair the English springer spaniel and Gabe the brown mutt.

Easygoing, yet always sharp with a wealth of clever sayings such as "don't put a shoe on the bottom of the boat, build the boat out of the shoe," Toohey and Schrantz make business partnership sound like a really fun club you only wish you could be a part of.

Beyond the entrance is a large windowed room with views up shrubby foothills. Pattern pieces hang on the walls, and boats stand in different states of assembly. A spotting scope, used for the giant deer and elk that roam around here, sits in the corner so employees can take the alternative to a smoke break.

In a small office, they sit down to chat, Bella - or is it Mila? - asleep at their feet like the 1950s portrait of a good dog. Their story stops and starts, meandering forward and backward in time, each finishing the other's sentences like an old married couple.

The founding story of Boulder Boat Works is slightly confusing it seems, but suffice to say, it began with the meeting of a woodworker (Toohey) and a group of whitewater enthusiasts. Ideas were exchanged, tested, much coffee was consumed and eventually two camps were formed: one in the whitewater corner, and one in the fishing corner. Two more differently similar groups never existed (oil and water says Schrantz), but in the end the fishing crew won out.

Prototypes were developed and passed out to local guides with the request for feedback. Most returned with a few mumbled comments about cup holders, that is until Toohey handed out boats to Schrantz, who was then working as a fly fishing guide, and Radley Ott, another guide.

It was the first time his boats came back clean, and not only that, they came back with a page full of notes on how to improve the design.

"Andy and I learned we could talk to each other about designs," Schrantz says.

Not long after, Schrantz joined the burgeoning Boulder Boat Works, where Toohey built a float tank to test boats in the winter.

The first issue they had to solve was the layout. Many boats are based on a design used primarily on the west coast, the birthplace of the modern drift boat. Two anglers would sit in front and the oarsmen would row from place to place, getting out to wade fish. This played into the boats design, which was made to hold double the weight in the front and almost nothing in the back.

With the rise in fishing from the boat, that design became outdated, even though some leading manufacturers still use it because of ease of production.

"They took the cheap way out and told us to live with it," Schrantz says.

But Schrantz and Toohey wouldn't accept that as the answer - they wanted a boat that worked with the rower, not against them.

"The objective was performance based first," Toohey says. "If you stack a box out of kilter, eventually it will fall."

So they worked on finding the best design for the best performance.

Schrantz likens a boat in water to standing on one foot. If a person stands on their heel they are not as stable. Same for if they stand on their toes. However, once they come to rest on the balls of their feet, they can find a little more stability. With stability, they can more confidently maneuver.

The same holds true for drift boats. By placing the boat on the balls of its feet, for lack of a more complex terminology, the oarsman can make best use of the craft.

Once the design was complete, they began working with some new technology, building their boats out of a polymer which made them lighter and almost indestructible.

In truth, the first time I saw a Boulder Boat Works drift boat, it was being drug down the side of a rocky trail at the Six Mile put in on the North Platte River. Rafters gawked at the brazen disrespect men would have for such fine equipment. But close inspection of the bottom found nary a scratch on the vessel.

Early versions included a nod to Toohey's beginnings in woodwork with golden stained trim outlining the silhouette of the boat. Most recently, they unveiled the convertible river taxi, a no-maintenance lower costing rig, the trimmed down version to address the economic woes of anglers.

But the thing that keeps these boat builders coming back isn't the boat, itself.

Cut through all the egos and typical angling nonsense, and they truly like their customers.

"The people we deal with are like kids in a candy store," Toohey says. "We sell adventure in the form of a boat. There's a lot of emotion that goes with it."

For Toohey and Schrantz, and indeed those who own such a divine craft of any brand, the drift boat is about more than nice design.

It's about three buddies being able to fish side by side, reaching the other bank in June runoff, and getting out of the increasingly crowded waters.

It's about solitude, the water running beneath your oars and a perfectly executed run through whitewater.

It is excitement and it is reverence, all pinned on a pair of oarlocks and a bit of blue sky. It's the difference between being an outdoorsman and someone who just likes the outdoors.

"You take it away from us, and you're going to have to lock us up," Toohey says.

"You can't put it in a box and put the lid on and not expect it to explode," Schrantz says.

"Mental institutions would be full of fishermen," Toohey adds.

It's hard to say why the river calls some so incessantly, siren-like in its pitch, sending sane men into a state of red-eyed insanity, bent to top every wave and ride every riffle as though it were his last. The river is their temptress, the drift boat is their life vessel and if they can get that boat in their own back yard from two guys who have heard the same call - well, then that's even better.

Perhaps Rat sums a river up best, telling Mole, "It's brother and sister to me, and aunts, and company, and food and drink, and (naturally) washing. It's my world, and I don't want any other. What it hasn't got is not worth having and what it doesn't know is not worth knowing."