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FOR THE ALUMNI AND FRIENDS OF WILLIAMS-MYSTIC



From Master to Apprentice

**Douglas Brooks S80 learns an
ancient craft from Japanese masters**

from MASTER *to* APPR



Kazuyoshi Fujiwara working on the chokkibune. Fujiwara is a fourth generation boatbuilder in Tokyo and the author was his only apprentice.

DOUGLAS BROOKS S80 TAKES HIS PASSION FOR
TRADITIONAL WOODEN BOATBUILDING ACROSS THE
PACIFIC TO LEARN AND DOCUMENT THE SECRETS OF
A DYING CRAFT FROM JAPANESE MASTERS.

ENTICE

BY DOUGLAS BROOKS S80

Although I graduated from Trinity College in 1982 with a degree in philosophy, two exchange programs have directly shaped my current work. As a sophomore I attended Williams-Mystic in the spring 1980 semester, and as a junior I attended the University of Oregon. In Mystic I was one of three students chosen, solely because we possessed some rudimentary carpentry skills, to work with Willits Ansel in Mystic Seaport's duPont Preservation Shipyard. At the University of Oregon I was assigned to a dormitory of incoming transfer students and there met my roommate Nobu Hayashi, newly arrived from the University of Hawaii. It would take more than ten years, but my experiences at Williams-Mystic and a friendship forged in Oregon would intersect in profound ways.

In Mystic I experienced a taste of traditional wooden boatbuilding. I say "taste" because although we were to help Will Ansel build a replica boat for the Museum's collection, I think collectively we may have been more of a hindrance. I still remember with some residual shame having cut the stem wrong at least twice in building our little Noank lobster skiff. I had more success holding plank ends helping Ansel repair the Block Island cowhorn and I managed to shape a whaleboat steering oar by myself. A few years later I did my best to parlay what I knew to get a job in the Small Boat Shop at the San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park, where I worked from 1985-1990.

During those same years I kept in touch with my friend Nobu as he returned to work in Japan. We had become close friends, although Nobu retained an ability to say and do the unexpected. In Oregon his very first words had frozen

me. "I am from Hiroshima," he said, and added, "Have you heard of it?" In 1990 he surprised me again. Having heard that I had left my job at the maritime museum, he sent me a plane ticket to Japan.

In the intervening years I have traveled to Japan twelve times. During my first visit I was introduced to a boatbuilder on Sado Island. Koichi Fujii was one of only two men still building the *taraibune*, or tub boat. These unique boats are still used in six small fishing villages on Sado, where men and women gather shellfish and seaweed. With each successive trip to Japan I traveled the coastline looking for boatbuilders, photographing traditional boats wherever I could find them. Initially I relied on Nobu and other friends to interpret for me while I interviewed craftsmen. On my first three trips I went to Sado Island and met with Fujii, and at the end of my third trip in 1995 he invited me to be his apprentice. An islander told me that Fujii had said in the village that he wouldn't retire until he had taught "the crazy American," as I was called by other islanders. I did not hesitate to accept his offer.

In 1996 my girlfriend (now wife) and I arrived on Sado Island. By this time Fujii was the last craftsman left building these boats and I was his first apprentice. We lived with Fujii and his wife in their traditional farmhouse and he and I built one tub boat. Fujii's "teaching" was my first surprise: he expected me to watch him work in silence for hours and then I was asked to work. Fujii would not even watch me; he took those periods to nap or smoke a cigarette. He would return, critique my work and leave. Strange as they seemed, his methods were completely in keeping with tradition; in Japan observation and imitation are valued above discussion. We spent our evenings sitting on the floor around the Fujii's



The author with his first teacher in Japan, Koichi Fujii. Mr. Fujii was the last craftsman building tub boats. The woven bamboo hoops for these boats can be seen at their feet. Photo by Kazumi Muraki.



On Sado Island two companies offer rides to tourists using tub boats. The women are dressed in traditional attire and these boats feature glass panels in their bottoms. The author's teacher built this fleet.

low table eating, drinking and trying to communicate. The Fujiis had infinite patience with us, and we were happy in the evenings, to sit and watch Fujii quietly write poetry with his brush and ink. We also fished together and spent one backbreaking day bringing in their rice harvest. Soon after returning I published a feature article, "The Tub Boats of Sado Island," in *WoodenBoat* magazine.

I would never see my teacher again. In September 1999, a friend from Sado wrote to tell me that Fujii had died in an accident. While corresponding with his widow I learned that he had begun building a tub boat before he died. She expressed her worry as to how she would get the boat finished so I offered to come and complete it. In March of 2000 I arrived in a late winter blizzard, my fifth trip to Sado. I stayed for a week and managed to get the boat done. Twice a day Mrs. Fujii would bring a kettle of coals into the boatshop and insist I stop working and have tea with her. Most of what she said I could not understand—Sado dialect is difficult even for Japanese—but I did understand her detailed criticisms of my work. "Get that hoop a little lower," she would say before disappearing into the snow.

Before coming home I was introduced to two boatbuilders in Tokyo. Kazuyoshi Fujiwara was a third generation boatbuilder. He had built small fishing boats with his father until the 1970's, until developers bought the rights to the fishing grounds and filled them in for high-rise projects. Nobuji Udagawa lived in Urayasu, once a small fishing village and now a sprawling suburb of Tokyo and well known

to Japanese as the home of Tokyo Disneyland. Udagawa is one of the last boatbuilders of his community. A major chemical spill destroyed the fishing grounds in the early 1970's and land developers again began filling in the bay. Tokyo Disneyland now sits on the new edge of Tokyo Bay, over two miles from the original shoreline.

In the spring of 2001, Udagawa invited me to join him in building a bekabune, the small boat used throughout Tokyo Bay for gathering seaweed. He had been asked to come out of retirement by the directors of the new Urayasu Folk History Museum. The museum featured a boatshop, the first of its kind in Japan, and Udagawa and I would build a bekabune during the first month of the museum's opening. Udagawa was as voluble as Fujii had been quiet. He was also, above all, fast. For each step of the boatbuilding process, Udagawa would demonstrate at amazing speed,

then hand me the tools and step back. He could relax with visitors to the museum, telling anecdotes about his once sleepy fishing village, but once he touched a tool he worked at a furious pace. We used no power tools. I sawed all the parts of the boat with a hand-saw, including the sixteen-foot long planking. I planed all surfaces with hand planes. I used a special chisel called a tsubanomi to make holes for the boat nails. When he wasn't talking to visitors Udagawa hovered over my work, correcting and encouraging.

Every day at lunch we rode bicycles to Udagawa's house (Udagawa had never learned to drive). There I learned more about



The taraibune, or tub boat, built by the author and Koichi Fujii in 1996. Tub boats reflect Japanese cooperage, with some subtle differences. They are oval rather than round, which makes them track better at sea. About 200 of these boats are still used for fishing on Sado Island.

his life as a boatbuilder in Urayasu. He had built over 300 bekabune in a twenty-year career, as well as dozens of larger fishing boats. In a shattered post-war Japan, Udagawa had eked out a living building boats with two younger brothers. A new bekabune in the 1950's cost as much as a bicycle and his only holidays were the first and the fifteenth of the month. They were one of six local boatbuilding "houses." At the urging of an uncle he bought an electric bandsaw, the first power tool in Urayasu. It was 1955.

Soon after working in Urayasu I was approached by the Kodo Community Foundation. Kodo's members all live on Sado Island and they wanted to do something to preserve the tub boat. I suggested that we develop a project where I would train a craftsman on Sado and also publish a book based on my research, offering a step-by-step description of how these boats are built. Japan's last generation of boatbuilders have no apprentices, and because these men rarely wrote anything down—boat dimensions are usually memorized as trade secrets—an entire craft is on the brink of being lost. Although I had interviewed many boatbuilders by that point, an interview was a poor setting to record techniques. What my experiences with Fujii and Udagawa had taught me was that the craft has to be recorded from the inside—only by working directly with a boatbuilder can an accurate record of this technique be made.

In the spring of 2002 I went back to Japan to build tub boats with Taka Higuchi, a carpenter from Sado. With the help of the Kodo Cultural Foundation I was also able to survey all the remaining tub boats in use (about 200) and interview fishermen and other craftsmen. In 2003 my book, *The Tub Boats of Sado Island: A Japanese Craftsman's Methods*, was published in English and Japanese.

At the same time I was approached by the Freeman Foundation of Stowe, Vermont. The foundation has long supported educational projects related to Asia, and they asked how they could help me. The result was a year-long research project, in which I would build two traditional boats with Fujiwara in Tokyo and one boat with Seizo Ando in Aomori, the northern tip of the main island of Japan. The Tokyo boats were built in the fall and early winter of 2002, and the third boat built in the summer of 2003. In between the grant allowed me to lease a van and allow me to travel the coastline looking for boatbuilders. In the end my wife and I drove over 8,000 miles exploring parts of Japan I had never visited. This included mountain river valleys where I found four boatbuilders. In all I met forty-two craftsmen who ranged in age from 65 to 93. Only a handful had taught apprentices and many told me that they worked with no drawings whatsoever. "Kan de," they would say, "by intuition."

What's next in this odyssey? I am now seeking funding to continue working with boatbuilders in Japan. I would like to learn more from these expert craftspeople, or at least conduct detailed interviews to document as much of the craft as possible. Thanks to a follow-up grant from the Freeman Foundation, I have just finished measured drawings of the five types of boats that I have built in Japan. This summer I will be returning to Japan, this time to build a Maine peapod at the Michinoku Fishing Boat Museum.

Douglas Brooks S80 (www.douglasbrooksboatbuilding.com) is a boatbuilder, writer and researcher specializing in the construction of traditional wooden boats for museums and private clients. He lives with his wife Catherine in Vergennes, Vermont.



Research travel: Kazuo Tada standing in front of one of his river boats near Sawara City. He is a fourth generation boatbuilder and like many boatbuilders the author has interviewed in Japan, he has no apprentices.