



The seaworthy Beetle Cat, *Cover Girl*, keeps a crew of young sailors happy—and safe—on a breezy tack from Buzzards Bay to Chappaquiddick.

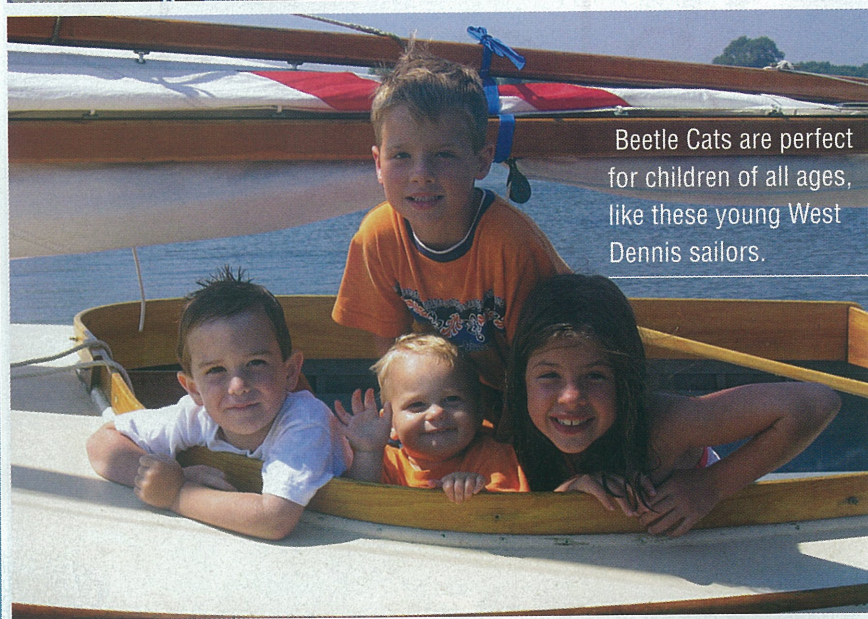
PHOTO COURTESY OF JOE KIRK

still BEETLING ...along!

For almost a century, Beetle Cats have held a special spot in the hearts of Cape & Islands boaters.

They are handed down through generations of families. Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis reportedly had one shipped to Greece for John, Jr. Senator John Kerry, Steven Spielberg, and Calvin Klein all own or owned one. They are Beetle Cats, the jaunty little catboats you see tied dockside, tugging at moorings, and pulled up on beaches on Cape Cod and the Islands.

by john grenier-ferris | photos courtesy of the beetle boat shop



Beetle Cats are perfect for children of all ages, like these young West Dennis sailors.



Charlie York, right, works with Jonathan Richards to plank a new Beetle Cat.



Beetle Cats exemplify the old Yankee traditions of permanence, practicality, and dependability, having not changed significantly since the Beetle family first began building them back in 1921 in New Bedford. If you set the first Beetle Cat ever made next to one built yesterday, only the construction materials would be slightly different. The lines of one would be made of manila and the other Dacron, and one sail would be of cotton sailcloth and the other Dacron. But both would be 12 feet, four inches in length and six feet on the beam. Both would draw six inches of water with centerboards up. And both would be constructed of half-inch cedar planks running the length of an oak frame, caulked with cotton, with the half-inch cedar deck covered in painted canvas. The spars—the 14-foot mast, the 13-foot boom, and the gaff—would be made of Douglas fir.

The Beetle's roots reach deep into Cape seafaring tradition, having been designed and built for the waters around the Cape. Modeled after the larger catboats used to fish in shallow water and cross over the sandbars along Cape Cod, the Beetle Cat was initially made by whaleboat builder Carl Beetle so his children could learn to sail. A gaff-rigged catboat—a sailboat with the mast stepped way forward on the bow and an additional boom or gaff at the head or top of the sail—will head up into the wind and practically come to a stop if the tiller is released, making it safe for youngsters and older people alike. With the whaling industry on the decline in the 1920s, and admiration for his little boat on the upswing, Beetle concentrated his entire business on building Beetle Cats.

The plucky little craft's popularity sailed along for years with yachting clubs, summer camps, and families until production stopped at the onset of World War II. After the war, Beetle became more interested in boats constructed of the new plastics and fiberglass than wooden boats built in traditional ways, so he sold the wooden Beetle Cat design to the Concordia Company in South Dartmouth, Mass., a company known for its beautifully crafted, deep-water cruising yachts.

In 1993, Concordia sold the Beetle Cat operation to Charlie York, and ten years later York sold the operation to Bill Womack, an engineer who owns and runs a consulting business, but who has deep ties to Beetles.

The Beetle Cat's lineage has landed in interesting hands. Womack is the yin to York's yang; Womack's business acumen is balanced by York's building skills. The two met when Womack contracted York to build a new hull for

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New Beetle Cat, opposite, launched in West Falmouth on Memorial Day weekend.

for 10 years, he knows a spreadsheet from a mainsheet, but his heart lies in all that is poetic and romantic about the sea: the touch, scent, and look of a well-crafted boat made of wood, the sense of freedom while heeling out on the gunwales of a boat pulled by the wind, the taste of salt spray on his lips. Born and raised near the water, a self-described Swamp Yankee, York says that nothing would make him happier than spending three days stripping the bottom of his boat. "If something gives you unmitigated joy, you're crazy not to do it," he says. A thoughtful, self-educated man, York explains, "Every aspect of a wooden boat is pleasing to me."

York, surprisingly, has nothing against fiberglass boats. "People ask me all the time, what's a good boat," he says. "And I tell them, a good boat is any boat that you use and enjoy."

"But the Beetle," he continues. "They smell good. They look good. They even sound good as they run through the water. Beetles have this aesthetic that comes from the head and heart of the boat builder. And that's what some people call craftsmanship." 🦋

For information on Beetle Cats, go to www.beetlecats.com.

John Grenier-Ferris is a freelance writer who lives in Quincy.



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his 1961 Beetle Cat. The day Womack picked up the hull, they talked about York selling the business. "I drove away and it hit me," says Womack. "I turned the car around, drove back, and asked him if he was serious about selling." York was serious and they agreed on a figure. The transaction took all of 15 minutes and the deal was sealed with a handshake. Womack would own and run the business, and York would continue to build the boats. "I feel like I'm the caretaker of an important lineage," says Womack, whose own ancestry can be traced to the *Mayflower* on his mother's side and who sailed Beetle Cats as a child.

Womack moved the company's operations to Wareham, where he has established the modern Wooden Boat Center. A storage barn, modeled after tobacco-drying barns to allow for ventilation, was constructed to hold up to 110 boats in storage during the off-season, increasing income for the business and adding a much-needed service to boat owners. Another smaller barn was built to cure the wood used for boat construction. Office areas, a conference room, and spacious work areas for boat-building and repairing were built, and an office manager was hired. Walking into Beetle, Inc.'s offices you are met with the mingling aromas of oil from cedar, tannin from oak, and resin from pine—all woods used in the boats' construction.

With Womack concentrating on the practical, business side, York is left free to do what he loves and does best—build the boats. Having run the business

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