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FLORIDA & THE SOUTH

JUNE 2004

PRIZED RUNABOUTS BOUND FOR SOUTH FLA.



By Jim Flannery

SENIOR WRITER

The Albury family has built boats for 200 years in the Bahamas on Man O' War Cay, and now American Jeff Lichterman has acquired a license from Albury Brothers Boats to build its sought-after center console runabouts for the U.S. market in Riviera Beach, Fla.

"I always admired the Alburys' boats," says Lichterman, a cruiser and frequent visitor to Man O' War Cay. "I have watched Willard and his kids build boats. I always wanted one. I could never get one."

The Alburys build 12 boats a year at their yard on the tiny cay (it's just a 1/4-mile wide and two miles long) across from Marsh Harbor in the Abacos islands. Many local fishermen, sportfishing guides and residents own Albury runabouts, and a steady stream of tourists who visit Man O' War see the Alburys working in their shop and ask if they can buy one. Willard Albury usually has to say, "No, not right now. We've got a waiting list."

Albury, who has been building boats for 45 years, says the small shop simply can't keep up with demand.

When Lichterman asked if Albury would consider licensing construction of his 20- and 23-footers in the United States, Albury agreed, but Lichterman had to assure him he would keep it the same traditional boat.

The Alburys are descendants of British loyalists who fled the American colonies after the Revolutionary War, as are many of the Abacos families. The transplanted New Englanders became notable builders of island sloops, fishing smacks and schooners in native mahogany and Abaco pine.



The Albury family of boatbuilders has been turning out rugged runabouts, first in wood now in fiberglass, on Man O' War Cay for the past 200 years.

Willard's father, Maurice, started building sailing dinghies for spongers in the 1920s. His sons, Willard and Benny, took over the family business in 1952, naming it Albury Brothers Boats. In 1960 they shifted their production to outboard runabouts for local fishermen. The brothers built the boats in wood with mahogany ribs and pine planking until the stands of timber on Great Abaco where they cut their wood succumbed to the saws of a lumbering operation. Without a local source of lumber, they started building in fiberglass in 1984.

Benny died two years ago, and today Willard builds with sons Donnie and Jamie. The Alburys also operate a dock and canvas business, and cousin Joe is famous for his sailing dinghies and carved half models.

The mold for the fiberglass Albury hull was taken directly from one of Albury Brothers' wood hulls. "It is a boat of our design," Albury says. "Dad started it, and we developed it until you get where it is today."

It is a modified vee-hull designed to take fishermen 20 miles offshore. "It's a very good sea boat," he says. "It takes a chop very well."

Lichterman, who had just opened a boat dealership,

PowerBoats, wanted to charge full bore into the marine business and thought the Albury boats ideal to build under license and sell in the United States because they always have a two- or three-year waiting list of buyers. A veteran sailboat racer, Lichterman has been a Melges 24 dealer and is an avid cruising sailor, so he knows boats and the boating business. He spent three months in the Bahamas documenting in meticulous handwritten notes and drawings the Alburys' method of building their boat.

"There are about twice as many hours in an Albury as a comparable boat," he says. "As simple as these boats are, still it's almost like building a yacht." He says his shop takes no shortcuts. "We are under a very strict license, so we can't deviate one iota," he says.

Alburys are simple and clean in design, without a lot of compartments or hatches or hardware to break or cause a headache in cleanup.

The stringers and sides of the hull are foam core, the bottom is solid fiberglass, the transom is cored in wood, and the deck is foam or wood core, depending on what the owner wants. The hull has a keel, a carry-over from the wood boat design, which helps the boat



Bahamian boatbuilders Willard Albury (second from right) and sons Donnie (far left) and Jamie (far right) have gone into partnership with Florida resident Jeff Lichterman (second from left).



The Alburys build 12 boats a year at their shop.

BAHAMIAN BOATS

track. Lichterman says the hull is rock solid, partly because of that keel but also because of the solid five-ply combination glass matt and woven roving laid up in the bottom. "It's very, very heavy stuff," he says.

The 23-footer tops out at 43 or 44 mph with a 225 hp 4-stroke.

The base 23-footer without engine or steering runs \$28,000, Lichterman says. With engine and steering, the price goes up to \$45,000. Dressed up with half tower, towing ring, extra compartments and twin engines the price could jump beyond \$60,000.

"This will be someone's last boat," Lichterman says.

The Riviera Beach facility is building a boat every three or four weeks now; Lichterman wants to bring production up to a boat a week.

The Alburys built their boats with hand tools until the '50s, when an American from Miami introduced the

brothers to power tools and a generator to run them. "One of Willard's brothers, Monroe, was named for the guy who brought [power] to the island," Lichterman says.

Man O' War had no centrally generated electricity until the 1960s.

Albury boats are heir to a long tradition of craftsmanship.

"I feel privileged to be part of this," Lichterman says. ■

For information, call (561) 863-7006 or e-mail info@alburybrothers.com. www.alburybrothers.com



The small Albury shop gets visits year-round from boaters who want to buy an Albury runabout.

COURTESY: ALBURY BROTHERS