

# No Small Feat

ON A LIMITED BUDGET,  
TWO DUTCH SAILORS BUILD THEIR OWN  
MINI TALL SHIP.

BY LORENZO CARICCHIO



A great, white beard of ice grew down the face of the South Haven lighthouse, tangling itself into the waters of Lake Michigan. Snowdrifts and wind-blown chunks of ice assailed the long pier leading out to the light, and the dim, red eye of the late afternoon sun barely penetrated the fog-shrouded harbor. I trudged through the last few yards of ankle-deep snow behind the Michigan Maritime Museum to the door of the Padnos Boat Shed. Taped to the inside of the door, an artfully hand-lettered broadside announced construction of a mysterious vessel "bound for foreign lands, looking for crew, helping hands and donations." This was accompanied by a pen-and-ink drawing of a strange but sturdy-looking ship, with sails that extended

well beyond her bow.

I'd come to lend a hand to a couple of former shipmates from the Netherlands, Jorne Langelaan and Arjen "Boogie" van der Veen. The two, then 22 and 26, were building their own version of a tall ship, a 52-foot traditional Dutch sailing vessel called a schonker. Similar to a topsail sloop but flat-bottomed with retractable leeboards and an odd yet gracefully curved mainsail gaff, the schonker is designed as a shallow-draft coastal cargo carrier. The ship's name, the *Pierius Magnus*, comes from a Norse freedom fighter whose victories against staggering odds won independence but no great wealth for the Friesian people of the Netherlands.

The aroma of sawdust and linseed oil enveloped me as I entered the shed. Lumber, wood shavings and tools were strewn all about the small building. A newly constructed, wide-beamed, 8-foot-long skiff to be used as a tender and yawl boat for the schonker, stood next to the door. The wall behind it was covered with plans for the *Pierius*. At the center of the clutter, Jorne, the younger of the two Dutchmen, stood pensively on the spine and lower ribs of what was beginning to look like a ship. Supported from the rafters, the tall timbers of the bow and stern posts angled down in front of and behind him. Additional parts, cut and ready for assembly, sat on a table nearby. My entrance interrupted Jorne's concentration and he came over to greet me. As I sipped a cup of steaming coffee, he gave me a quick tour and then put me to work sanding the skiff in preparation for the first coat of protective linseed oil. When Boogie arrived a few hours later, work stopped for another round of handshaking and shoulder-thumping.

The two men left their home in the Netherlands in their teens to sail most of the seven seas on various ships. Both have master certificates in commercial sailing from Enkhuizen Nautical College. They arrived in the U.S. on the three-masted barque *Europa*, and eventually joined the crew of the *Picton Castle* (another three-masted barque) for the Sail Op 2000 tour of tall ships.

When I signed on to the *Picton Castle* for the Great Lakes portion of the tour, the two Dutchmen were already talking about building their own ship. During late-night watches on the boat or beer sessions ashore, they would discuss construction details and talk about sailing their own ship from port to port, trading goods and handicrafts along the way. From my middle-aged, middle-class vantage point, these guys were the freest birds I had ever met!

It was apparent that these two young men, like most young men, wanted to sail their own course, in their own way. But unlike most, Boogie and Jorne actually did something about it. With a few pieces of clothing, and even fewer dollars, they shoved off from the relative safety of the *Picton Castle* when she docked in Chicago. They hitched a ride to Michigan, made their way to South Haven and went to work building their ship.

A friendly harbor town with a soft spot for sailors, South Haven was the perfect place to attempt this type of project. The town clusters on the last few miles of the Black River before it flows into Lake Michigan, where a long, elevated



The 52-foot schonker, the *Pierius Magnus*.

walkway runs out to the lighthouse at the end of the great pier. Most of the town's activities revolve around boating. Marinas, riverside restaurants and excursion boats abound, and the maritime museum frequently features wooden boat-building projects and marlinespike exhibits. The museum's *Padnos Boat Shed* and the *Blue Star Music Building* provided ideal work spaces.

Work on the *Pierius Magnus* began by building a one-eighth scale model based on pictures of traditional schonkers, and then adapting the original 17th-century design to take advantage of modern materials and methods. The two tried to go the traditional route, with much of the work fashioned by hand, but as Boogie is fond of saying, "If marine plywood and epoxy were available back then, they would have used them." The old Dutch shipwrights were thrifty innovators not opposed to saving time or money. However, one modern convenience Jorne and Boogie would not consider using was any means of mechanical propulsion. The feeling was that relying on an engine makes lazy sailors and takes up critical cargo space. So, with a combination of ancient craftsmanship and a few, select modern materials, these two intrepid dreamers labored on their odd-looking mini tall ship.

After cutting and fitting the donated white oak timbers, the two laid out the keel and ribs, but these couldn't be permanently joined because the shed wasn't big enough for the finished product. The rudder, leeboards, handcrafted wooden turning blocks, mast, yards, spars and rowing skiff were all built there, too, then moved to a larger building for final assembly.

As the project continued, there were heated discussions about construction and rigging details, and disagreements about the schedule, but the work never stopped. The friends would work on the boat all day. Then at night, Boogie would play piano and sing for tips in local pubs and coffeehouses, while Jorne would offer sketches of ships and seascapes in exchange for donations to the boat.



(from top to bottom) Jorne's artwork helped to finance the project; Jorne and Boogie christen the schooner, named for a Norseman who captured merchant vessels and turned them into warships; Boogie and his pals Andres and Kurt work on the yawl boat tender.

The night I joined them, Jorne moved among the crowd, hawking drawings and explaining the project to potential donors and crew. Boogie's tip jar was prominently displayed on an old upright piano he was playing, next to a hand-painted wooden sign much like the broadside I'd seen on the door of the shed. As the evening progressed, the crowd, mostly locals that time of year, sang along with Boogie and stuffed his tip jar. Jorne was in animated discussion, his hands sketching parts of the ship in the air as he explained their function and construction.

I glanced out the window through the lingering fog, past the snowdrifts that surrounded the tavern, to the partially frozen river that was the proposed birth canal of the *Pierius Magnus*. It didn't look promising, but I had a gut feeling they'd pull it off.

Sure enough, on April 2, 2001, seven months after she was conceived, the 5-ton *Pierius Magnus* was launched into the world. The two had managed to build a tall ship for \$10,000.

Towed out of the hoist straps by her own motorless skiff, she was rowed to a temporary dock where her spars were raised, rigged and fitted with sails. It was a warm spring day with a blue sky, light breezes and bright sunshine.

During the summer following her launch, the *Pierius Magnus* sailed most of the Great Lakes and participated in the Tall Ships 2001 Great Lakes Challenge. By October, she had made passage through the Erie Canal and down the Hudson River to New York City, and had logged more than 1,000 miles.

The ship wintered in Tuckerton Seaport, New Jersey and Jorne went home to the Netherlands to work on his art. His berth was filled by their longtime friend and shipmate, Andres Lakner, before sailing to Virginia Beach in spring '02 and then on to Bermuda in June. By the end of July, the *Pierius* had made her first Atlantic crossing and arrived in the Azores, where Capt. Boogie again played music in local bars for a few months to make enough money to refit and restock the ship.

In December 2002, with a crew of four and enough food and water for 14 days, the *Pierius* set sail for the Canary Islands off the coast of North Africa, a passage of normally six to eight days. But light and unfavorable winds held the vessel at sea for 31 days, during which time the crew fished and collected rainwater to bolster their rations.

The *Pierius Magnus* is now docked in the Canary Islands while Boogie and Andres earn money for her next voyage by making a boat delivery from Amsterdam to Barcelona (kind of a busman's holiday). Jorne planned to rejoin them, and then the ship will follow the trade winds to the Caribbean—a long way from that shed on the Black River. ↓