

# GOOD OLD BOAT



THE SAILING MAGAZINE FOR THE *REST* OF US!

[www.goodoldboat.com](http://www.goodoldboat.com)

Issue 81 November/December 2011



\$8<sup>00</sup> (Canada \$8<sup>00</sup>CDN)



0 62825 97035 7 12

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### About the cover ...

Summer nights are short on northern Lake Superior. Charles Scott had to get up very early to catch the sunrise over *Antares*, his Westsail 32, while anchored in Isle Royale National Park's Chippewa Harbor. Charles has a bookend position in this issue. His work is also on page 77. For more, go to <[seascottphotography.com](http://seascottphotography.com)>.

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# The legacy of Bill Tripp

*Good old designs that still catch the eye*

by Robert Perry

When I was a kid in the early 1960s, there were quite a few yachting magazines. Each had its own character but they all had one thing in common, the design section. It was my favorite section. Typically, each magazine would present four new designs a month, each one illustrated by the designer's drawings and accompanied by a cryptic and usually bland description giving the basic information on the boat. I liked Jack Smith's reviews in *Yachting* the best. To me, at 15, these design sections were gold mines. While I didn't have the money to subscribe, I became an expert at collecting cast-off piles of magazines, usually while they were being dropped off at the yacht club. My dad told me once that he was concerned about the floor under my bookcase sagging under the weight of all the magazines I had collected. It was a magnificent collection. I had *Yachting* magazines back into the 1940s. I had one from the month I was born, June 1946.

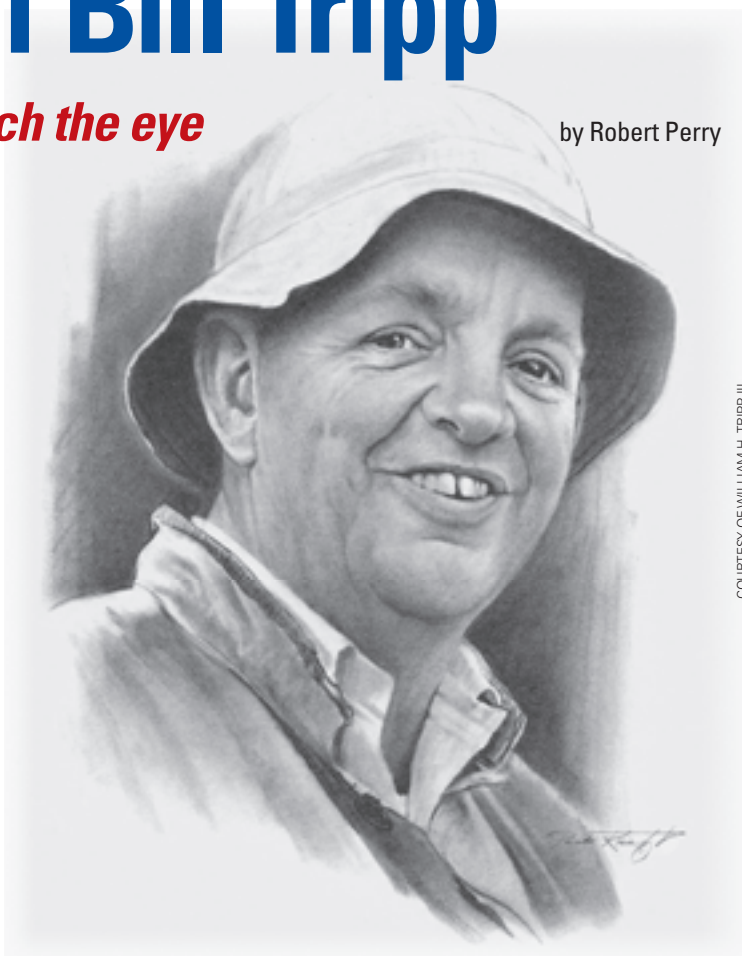
The dominant American designers of raceboats in the day were Sparkman & Stephens, Rhodes, Luders, Kettenburg, Lapworth, Seaborn, Morgan, Alberg, K. Aage Neilsen, and Bill Tripp. I cut out all the designs I liked and filed them in a cardboard box. I wrote letters to Olin Stephens, Phil Rhodes, and Bill Tripp. I got a short but nice letter back from Olin Stephens, a two-page handwritten letter from Phil Rhodes, but nothing from Bill Tripp. Ironically, Tripp vied with Rhodes to be my favorite designer.

Tripp's boats had a very distinctive look, with proud sweeping spoon bows, bold sheer springs, long concave counters terminating in almost vertical transoms, and sexy and svelte cabin trunks. You would never mistake a Tripp design for an S&S design. They just seemed to my young eye to have a strength and boldness, kind of an "in your face" quality. Plus, his boats were consistent race winners. Today, when you hear the name Bill Tripp, it is often his son, William H. Tripp III, who is being referred to, but in our world of good old boats we need to spend some time focusing on the work of William H. Tripp Jr.

Bill Tripp was a self-taught designer who came up through the ranks working for other designers, including S&S and Phil Rhodes. Unfortunately, in 1971, at the height of his career, William H. Tripp Jr. was killed in a car accident when his Jaguar was hit by a drunk driver.

## Early designs

Since I never met Bill Tripp, I am writing this from a distant perspective. I wish I had personal vignettes of the man and his life but I don't. Bill Tripp's output was very impressive, but I've tried to pull together the parts of his work that are relevant to *Good Old Boat*.

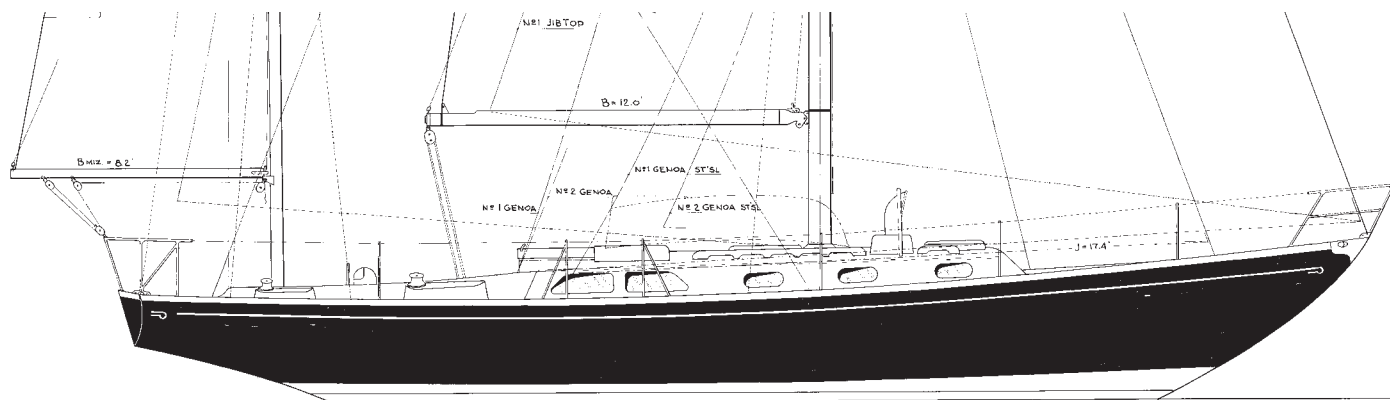


COURTESY OF WILLIAM H. TRIPP III

Probably the most noteworthy of all of Tripp's designs is the Block Island 40, designed in 1958. After several successful custom racers, including the spectacular *Touché*, his adventures in production boat design began with the Block Island 40. The next year, he designed the Bermuda 40, the first fiberglass boat built by the Hinckley Company.

The Bermuda 40 was a development of the Block Island 40 design, and it is very evident when you look at these two designs that they were designed to the CCA rule. They are centerboarders. The CCA favored centerboard boats and Tripp did many of them. The DWL is very short and the bow is quite full to take advantage of immersed volume when the boat heels. Interestingly, it's the stern where real advantage can be taken of overhang and, although much narrower than those on today's performance boats, Tripp's sterns were wider than the accepted style of the day. In fact, Tripp's hulls in general were considered "radical."

While you can argue about the effectiveness of the CCA-induced overhangs, there is to my eye no argument about the beauty of these boats. If you see a well-kept Bermuda 40 today, that will be immediately evident. Take, for instance, the bow profile, and this is consistent with most of Tripp's designs. They are not simple long spoon bows. There is a subtle flattening of the bow profile just above the DWL where the CCA measurement would be taken for



length, i.e., 4 percent of DWL above the DWL. Above that, there is a slight swelling to the profile to try to capture back volume lost at the measurement point.

The end result is a complex profile to the bow. I know this because I had a client who asked me to draw him a Tripp-style new boat. I agonized over that bow profile. In the end, I never got it correct, but I came close.

Their keels were long and fat and perfect places to get the lead down low. The centerboards themselves were of high-aspect-ratio shape and Tripp was one of the first designers I know of to start working with foil shapes in his appendages. But below that big fat keel, the poor centerboard is operating in a lot of disturbed water.

### A master draftsman

I must say a word about Tripp's drawings. They were, of course, all hand-drawn. Computer-aided drafting was off in the future when Tripp was designing. To be able to sell his ideas, the successful designer had to be an expert draftsman. You could have great conceptual design ideas, but if your drawings looked like the dog's breakfast the second time around, it was hard to get anyone to take your work seriously. So Tripp came out of that tradition of great designer/draftsmen who could bring their designs to life on a sheet of vellum with pencil, splines and weights, a plethora of ship's curves, and a drafting pen. Tripp liked to show his hulls black, and that meant taking a drafting pen and painstakingly inking in the blackened hull line by tedious line. I have done it, too, but today I just hit the "hatch" button, choose the "solid" pattern then stand back and just hope the computer doesn't crash.

**William H. Tripp Jr., on facing page, put his indelible stamp on yacht design with boats like the Bermuda 40, which carries his hallmark spoon bow and sweeping sheer, at top, and vertical barn-door rudder, at right.**

Tripp's drawings have a lace-like quality. The detail and control of line "weight" is exquisite. I marvel at the beauty of Tripp's hull-lines drawings (he guarded them like a mother lion — they were never published). I did note, when researching this article, that very often Tripp did not draw the "body plan" or sections on the same sheet of vellum that he used for the profile, plan, and diagonals. It may be that he found it more convenient, in that demanding exercise of transferring a multitude of points while he faired the hull lines, to expedite the process by having the body plan on a separate sheet. It's an unusual way of doing it. The hull lines for *Ondine* and the Columbia 26 Mk II show the body plan in its normal position, superimposed on station 5 of the profile.

As a kid, I would write to boatbuilders something like, "Please send me all your brochures." It usually worked. I amassed brochures. My very favorite brochure and boat was the Le Comte Medalist 33 designed by Tripp and built in Holland. It was a stocky little CCA design with relatively high freeboard, soon to become a Tripp trademark, and a sporty little bubble of a cabin trunk. Some call this Tripp cabin trunk a "gun turret" cabin trunk. This, too, would become an earmark of Tripp's designs when he later went to work on the Columbia line. I just thought this little Le Comte 33-footer was the sexiest thing afloat. I have the hull lines in front of me sans body plan. The keel is a



ANDY GOLDBERG

modified-full type with the leading edge of the keel pretty well defined from the forefoot. The rudder is on the trailing edge of the keel on a highly raked rudder stock. On many of his early designs, Tripp used barn-door-style rectangular rudders mounted on vertical stocks. That can't be a fast shape but it sure looks right and totally Trippy.

When I talk about Tripp designs with my cronies, the one boat that someone always brings up is the Mercer 44, arguably one of the best-looking stock boats ever built. I have two drawings of it here, but one shows an elongated cabin trunk that spoils the look. The other drawing, an inboard profile and layout, shows the truncated bubble-style cabin trunk and the long extended flush deck forward. As far as I know, this was the only deck they used. This remains for me the "Tripp look." You can still find Mercer 44s cruising and racing today. They are a marvel of balanced proportions and look as good today as they did in 1959. They have that distinct straight rectangular barn-door rudder on the vertical post.

## The Ondines

Tripp's first *Ondine* was a 57-foot aluminum yawl. I don't have any drawings of this boat. Many years ago, my cat mistook my precious collection of design-section cutouts in the cardboard box for its own cat box and there was no saving that material. Trust me, though, the first *Ondine* was a beautiful boat with that signature little bubble cabin trunk and long flush deck forward. This boat won everything it entered. It was followed by a 73-foot *Ondine* designed to the max LOA allowed by the CCA rule.

I know this boat. I redesigned the outboard rudder that was fitted after they discovered they could not steer the boat downwind in a blow with the original rudder. I redesigned the interior layout and I did some racing on this boat. It is now called *Atalanta* and lives in Seattle.

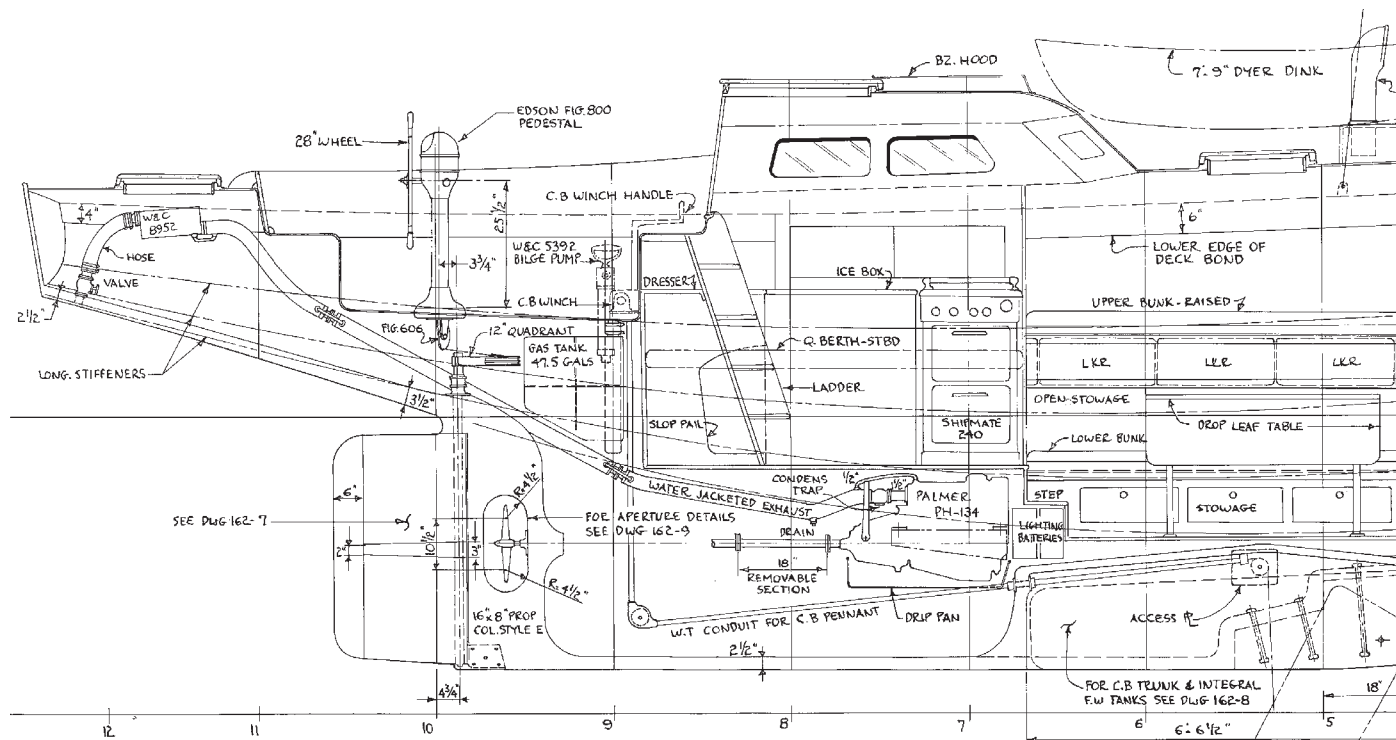
*Atalanta* is a brute of a boat, weighing 80,000 pounds with 40,000 pounds of ballast and "as stiff as a church." Its ends are relatively short with almost no overhang aft and it has a high-deadrise midsection similar to the 12-Meters of the day. Not all designers had yet bought into the concept of the fin keel and spade or skeg-hung rudder. When he designed *Atalanta*, Tripp was only halfway there. *Atalanta* had a very short-chord keel, much like any fin-keel boat, but the rudder was attached to the trailing edge. This put the rudder way too far forward. It might work upwind but off the wind it was hopeless. So *Ondine/Atalanta* was fitted with a transom-mounted outboard "flip-up" (no, I am not kidding) rudder like you would see on a 23-foot trailerable boat. It was this rudder that I redesigned, after it had given many years of service. The original forward rudder, which looked far more like a keel trim tab than a rudder, was finally welded shut to avoid the IOR's movable-appendage penalty.

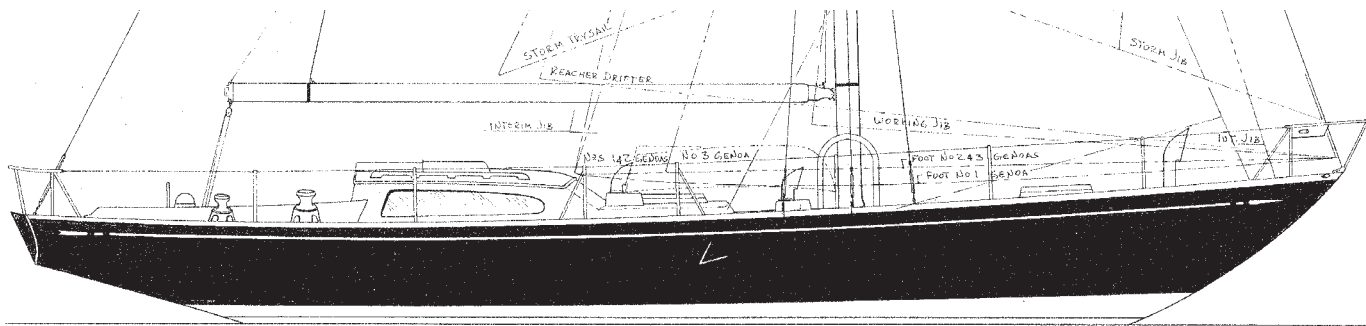
There is no ride to weather in a breeze quite like *Atalanta*'s. This *Ondine* had a sistership, *Blackfin*. They represent the last of the CCA maxi superboats. I'm sure glad I got to sail on one.

## Race winners and rules

Another high-school sweetheart of mine was *Burgoo*, the Tripp-designed Pearson 37-footer that won the Bermuda race in 1964. At that time it was the smallest fiberglass boat to ever win the race. Of course, it had all the Tripp trademark design features and it was a very sexy-looking little boat. In fact, and I could be wrong, this may be the first Tripp design to have the "gun turret" cabin trunk.

In the same time period as this design emerged, you can see Tripp turning out designs with high freeboard. High freeboard allows you to get headroom under the flush deck. But freeboard is slow. It's windage. Nonetheless, it suited Tripp's eye and he made it work.





But the 1960s brought rule turmoil. Europeans raced under the RORC rule that produced its own family of quirky rule-induced features. It measured sailing length by a series of girth measurements in the ends and produced pointy-ended boats that were in stark contrast to the full-ended boats the 4-percent-of-DWL CCA length measurement produced. It was pretty much impossible for the two fleets to combine for a race under one of those rules. That's where the IOR (International Offshore Rule) comes along. Championed by a small group of international racers and designers like Dick Carter, a rule was devised to take advantage of the best features of the CCA and the RORC rules. In short, they took the basic hull-measurement ideas from the RORC with its girths and combined that with the CCA's method of handicapping rig dimensions. Tripp fought hard against the IOR. He had the CCA down and I don't think at the pinnacle of his career he wanted to have to adapt to a new game. Although Tripp's work bridges the two rules, he never really got into the nuances of the IOR, and the work he did for Columbia in California is proof.

### The Columbia collection

Tripp started designing for Columbia in the mid 1960s. His designs for Columbia include the Columbia 26 MkII, Columbia 34, Columbia 39, Columbia 43, Columbia 45, Columbia 50, and the Columbia 57. Excluding the Columbia 45, which was a rather ungainly looking center-cockpit cruising boat, the rest of that design series are vintage Tripp, but with fin keels and spade rudders. Columbia and Coronado both built Tripp raised-saloon and long-cabin-trunk cruising boats and I have never believed Bill Tripp drew those decks. They just stand out as un-Tripp-like.

The two most successful of the Columbia line were the little 26 and the 50. Both were race winners and they also sold well — 948 Columbia 26s and 60 Columbia 50s were built. The 26 was a plump little rocket and did exceptionally well in West Coast racing fleets. It looked exactly like a Tripp boat with

**Bill Tripp's fine draftsmanship is evident in this small sample reproduced from a (very large) drawing he made for the Mercer 44, facing page. His "gun turret" house evolved into the "bubble" cabins on the Columbia 50, at top, and the Columbia 26 Mk II, at right.**

flush deck forward and little bubble house. At the time it was introduced, it was the sexiest little racing boat available. The Columbia 50 was a big elegant-looking boat with the same bubble house and long flush deck. It was a very good-looking boat and it was fast. Seattle's racing scene was dominated for years by a Columbia 50 called *Six Pack* while the smallest class was dominated by a Columbia 26 called *Miller's High Life*. But Tripp never went in for the distortions required to make the IOR rule work in your favor. To the end, his boats were pretty full in the ends and some, like the Columbia 34, were very full in the ends. The Columbia 50 stands out to me as being a more moderate approach to fullness in the ends. Maybe Bill was trying to warm up to the IOR.

It's hard not to wonder what would have happened if Tripp had survived that crash. What would his boats have looked like as the IOR took over and designers quickly learned how to play that game of distorting the ends of the boat to squeeze the girths together? It was a fun game to play, but those shapes only made sense in the IOR context. We will never know. Still, Bill Tripp left us a wonderful collection of beautiful designs that make some of the very best good old boats. *▲*

*Robert Perry is a contributing editor with Good Old Boat. A highly regarded yacht designer himself, he has a deep respect for the work of many of his predecessors and contemporaries in the field.*



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