

A FISHERMAN'S MUSE

Ramona came to Dean Doshier as a kind of daydream, so he built her from memory and vintage parts.

Now, when he pilots her along the Lockwood Folly River, the journey is a homecoming and a discovery.

written by EMILY WALLACE / *photography by* MATT RAY PHOTOGRAPHY





A childhood spent exploring the Lockwood Folly River inspired Dean Doshier to build the perfect boat for sharing this fragile and beautiful landscape with others.



After an accident left Dean in a wheelchair for months, he decided to rebuild his strength by building a wooden boat.

NEEDLE-EYE, Smokehouse, Drum Slough. Dean Doshier knows his way around all of the unofficial knobs and marshes of the Lockwood Folly River.

“I can come down here at black dark. I don’t need a flashlight,” he says, seated on a cypress bench in the wooden fishing boat that he built from memory.

A whole boat. Let that sink in.

Dean knows this river like other people know their hometown streets. He knows what’s around this watery bend and the three after that. He grew up in Varnamtown, in a house situated one mile from the river by road. Days were spent with his brother Don, known as “Grunts,” clamming and oystering along the banks, or building boats that they could take out fishing. “You either had to buy one off of somebody or build one yourself,” he says.

So by the time they were 5 and 7, the Doshier brothers were building little boats of their own, using nails they took from neighbors’ fence posts. “It was just part of the lifestyle,” Dean says.

That’s no longer the case. Fishing culture has changed. Approximately three-fourths of the Lockwood Folly’s shellfish acreage is now closed due to runoff and pollution. And wooden boats like the Doshers’ are hardly commonplace. But that’s not to say that their work is stuck in the past. With *Ramona*, the boat Dean completed in 2018, their eyes are clearly set on what’s ahead.

THE PROJECT STARTED WITH A PLUMMET. 15 YEARS ago, Dean fell off his son’s roof and fractured his heels in 52 places. “The accident took about three seconds, then everything changed,” he says.

Confined to a wheelchair for 18 weeks, Dean was forced to retire on disability from his trade as a house finisher, primarily building cabinets and staircases. Soon after, he was diagnosed with high blood pressure, a thing likely linked to sitting around for the first time in his life and the stress of not knowing what he'd do next. Then, as he puts it, "This boat came to my mind" and provided an anchor. "It really helped me get back to doing something, and doing it for myself," he says. The scope of the work quickly grew.

Dean thought a wooden boat, created in the tradition of those that commonly trawled the waters around Brunswick County between the 1920s and 1950s, would help draw attention to the local ecology. "I said, 'Well, I'll build a boat and I'll run tours up the river to make people aware,'" he recalls, "especially those who haven't seen it, and maybe spur some interest in taking care of the river."

"This boat came to my mind" and provided an anchor.

The vessel he envisioned was a "sound boat" with a rounded stern. "The style is called a fisherman's mule," he says. They are efficient work boats, whose curved sterns prevent nets from getting snagged when pulled out of the ocean, and provid-

less resistance to wind and waves compared with the flat-backs of other vessels. But as Lawrence S. Earley, the great documentarian of North Carolina's work boats, has observed, "Every boat carries a penumbra of

meaning beyond its physical structure." For Dean, that emotional freight was the bountiful Lockwood Folly of his youth.


The landscape provided as much as it inspired: Dean milled Brunswick County cypress for the hull, then began assembling it under an open-air shed in his backyard, working about three hours a day, as much as his chronic pain would allow. "There's as much of this county in this boat as I could get in it," he says. That includes local knowledge, which

Dean and his brother Don built a vessel like the ones they saw when growing up in Varnamtown, but *Ramona* has modern touches, like GPS.





Snaking through coastal Brunswick County, the Lockwood Folly River once held a trove of healthy shellfish. Now, three-quarters of its oyster beds are closed due to runoff.

An aerial photograph showing a small white boat with a person inside, navigating a narrow section of a dark river. The surrounding landscape is a mix of vibrant green grass and numerous dead, bleached tree trunks standing vertically. The scene is captured from a high angle, looking down on the boat and the surrounding terrain.

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Ramona features vintage hardware sourced locally and from eBay. The steering wheel, which came from a shrimp boat, was given to Dean by the captain's widow.

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runs deep in an area that boasted around seven boatbuilding yards when the Doshier brothers were children. Dean relied on his memories of the boats he saw to create *Ramona* by sight and feel. “There was no plan,” he says. “The boat told me what to do.”

For moments when he needed specific expertise, he had his brother. “I wouldn’t even have attempted it if he hadn’t been around,” Dean says. “He’s an encyclopedia when it comes to wooden boats.”

Don, a renowned builder, has constructed more than 100 vessels by hand and repaired hundreds more, giving him extensive knowledge of why traditional boats need repairing and how to prevent specific issues. That intel, Dean says, guided many of his design decisions. “I tried to not only duplicate what was there when I was a child — the shape,” he says. “But I tried to make it better and more functional.” That includes adding modern conveniences, like GPS and updated wiring.

Mostly though, *Ramona* incorporates older methods of building and vintage materials. When folks asked him why in the world he was using old parts in a new boat, Dean was quick with a quip:

“They’ve got experience,” he explained. “They know what they’re doing. They’ve already been tried.”

He searched eBay for years to find portholes from boats used in both World Wars, funded in part by friends (and strangers), who followed the boat’s progress on Facebook. Dean also salvaged equipment from local vessels that were no longer in operation. Of particular use was *Solomon T*, a former shrimp boat from the era on which *Ramona* was being modeled.

Capt. Bert Felton, who salvaged *Solomon T* from Wanchese and operated boat tours out of Southport, passed away while Dean was working on *Ramona*. Several weeks later, Felton’s widow Becky reached out to see if Dean could use hardware from his boat. He could, he told her. He’d be honored. Now, *Solomon T*’s steering wheel, which navigated waters around North Carolina for at least 75 years, fits nicely in Dean’s grip as he guides *Ramona* home.

DEAN LAUNCHED RAMONA, WHICH HE NAMED AFTER his wife of more than 50 years, on July 28, 2018. Local news outlets and friends wanted to attend,



Dean modeled *Ramona* on the wooden “sound boats” of his youth. By giving tours of the river, he hopes that he can inspire friends and neighbors to protect this precious resource.

but Dean tried his best to keep most folks at a distance. “You can’t talk,” he says. “You’ve got a boat that could sink, you know?” But *Ramona*, with her gleaming white boards and copper-colored hull, floated triumphantly.

Since the launch, Dean has taken several groups out, including Becky and other members of Bert Felton’s family. “We’ve become very good friends,” he says. “This boat — I’ve met people I never would have met.”

As he hoped, he’s also introduced people to the Lockwood Folly River. Recently, he piloted the waters with a 94-year-old woman who has spent her entire life in Brunswick County, but who had never been on the river. He says she stood on her tip-toes for most of the trip, thrilled to see what was around each bend. “One of the things I love most, when you go from salt to brackish to fresh [waters], the vegetation changes on the shore,” he says. “It’s amazing when you see it.”

But Dean hasn’t quite figured out how to do professional tours just yet. To offer paid trips would

require him to get a captain’s license, which, now that he’s in his early 70s, is a process he’s not sure he wants to take on. At the moment, a friend who is a licensed captain accompanies him on informal voyages up and down the river.

Through *Ramona*, however, he’s found a voice — one with a thick eastern North Carolina drawl. In 2019, the Southport Wooden Boat Festival chose *Ramona* to represent its 10th anniversary, printing her likeness on posters, shirts, and hats. Dean was there as well, to talk with other builders and enthusiasts about his craft and the water. “To me, it was like coming home,” he says.

Dean anticipates that *Ramona* will live on for another 60 to 70 years. “I’ll be way gone,” he says. But his hope is that his work will help the river carry on. **Os**

Emily Wallace is a writer and illustrator, and the author of Road Sides: An Illustrated Companion to Dining and Driving in the American South. She lives in Durham.