ISLAND GIRL

The Albury family has been handcrafting boats in the Abacos for more than 200 years. Now, the business moves in a new direction as it begins production of its runabouts in the States.

Story and Photos by NEIL RABINOWITZ

A handful of people reported to work in sandals and T-shirts at Albury Brothers, a seaside shop on Man-O-War Cay. The men yanked on rope pulleys to hoist open the rattling shutters and sent herons shrieking toward the sky. Willard Albury, a ninth-generation boat builder, leaned against the shop wall, arms crossed. His brown, sun-baked hands looked as thick as paws. He gazed quietly across the water. On this day, his company was headed in a new direction.

Albury Brothers is a family boat building business known today for the 20- and 23-foot runabouts produced by its small but stable workforce in the Abacos. Stylishly simple creations, these boats have developed a cult-like following. Alburys are owned by a select number of boaters stateside. In the Bahamas, they are a popular form of transportation for local fishermen, shopkeepers and residents, who use the craft to run errands, take their children to school and go to mass. Until recently, Albury made only 12 boats annually, which is why the demand for these craft often exceeded the supply. Last year, the company expanded its production by opening a manufacturing facility in Riviera Beach, Fla., where a limited number of boats will be produced in much the same way that they are in the Abacos.

Part of the allure of the Albury brand is the fact that it comes from Man-O-War, a tiny island surrounded by clear waters and crested by breezy hillsides. The culture here isn't diluted by a tourist economy. This is a small, tight-knit community with a population of just 300 people.

The Albury family first planted its roots here during the Revolutionary War when loyalist Ben Archer settled at nearby Marsh Harbour from the Carolinas. Ousted from the mainland and struggling to make a life on the islands, Archer bought Man-O-War from the English Crown in the 1780s. One day, Archer and his daughter Eleanor were on a farming visit to the cay when a loyalist sailor from Harbor Island named Benjamin Albury lost his boat on the reef and wandered ashore. Albury later married Eleanor and together they had 13 children. It wasn't long before the family got into the boat business. Over the many decades that followed, the Alburys produced fishing smacks, schooners and Bahamian-style sailing dinghies.

LOYAL FOLLOWING: The 20 (top) and 23 (above) have devoted fans.

Willard, the fifth of 17 children, began building wooden runabouts with his father, Maurice, 45 years ago. The company's shift to runabouts from sailing dinghies occurred naturally with the almost universal acceptance of outboards for both commercial and recreational use. In 1960, Willard bought the business from his father. Under his supervision, the company made the move to fiberglass construction in 1984.

THE PRODUCERS: Boats are crafted in Man-O-War (above) by Donnie, Willard and Jamie Albury.

Seaworthiness has never been compromised in these compact boats. In Maurice's day, the sponging craft he made could spend up to six weeks gunkholing the islands in any weather. Likewise, the runabouts currently produced maintain that seagoing tradition to provide safe, swift passage between islands in all conditions, particularly for those local people who travel inter-island every day.

Willard now runs the business with his sons Donnie and Jamie, who have long since mastered every facet of boat production. The company employs only a few other craftsmen. The Albury facility at Man-O-War consists of two buildings on either side of a waterfront path. One building is for offices; the other is the hull fabrication shed. Willard and Jamie prefer to work here in bare feet. When the large shutters that line the shed are open, there's a great panoramic view of the harbor and a cool breeze from the Gulf Stream winds. Here, the runabouts are built with great care, like any family heirloom, and the work is conducted at a slow, deliberate pace with few mistakes.

Jeff Lichterman was just one customer who had waited for years to have an Albury of his own. A boat dealer by trade, he approached the family with the idea to open a second manufacturing facility in Riviera Beach. On the morning Willard had paused to look east across the water, the first Albury boat to be built stateside was about to come off the line. The models in Florida are also produced slowly and deliberately, as they are in the Abacos. In fact, the Albury family oversees production in both places. With the new manufacturing location, the company will double its production from 12 boats a year to 24. Volume will remain low, and in that way, the brand will maintain its high quality and sought-after status.

"There is no doubt that buyers enjoy the atmosphere of Man-O-War, and the history and family culture of its boatbuilding tradition is seductive," said Lichterman. "We still bring buyers to meet the Alburys and see what they are all about. Fortunately, our place on the mainland is producing the same craft, and keeping it personal and somewhat exclusive."

The simple, almost Spartan designs of these 20-foot and 23-foot center console boats adapt to a variety of uses. There are few options offered, but each model is built solid as a rock. Both are based on a running bottom with a slightly rounded bilge that softens the motion. A small but effective keel helps tracking, reduces slippage and serves to protect the centerline when slicing through waves. These runabouts can make some similar-sized production rigs look flimsy by comparison. The bottom and keel are solid fiberglass; closed-cell, foam-filled longitudinal stringers enhance rigidity. The topsides are constructed with fiberglass and cored to reduce weight. The 20 and 23 are rated for 175 hp and 250 hp, respectively. With a 130-hp Honda four-stroke outboard, the 20 cruises at 34 knots. With maximum power on the 23, it will yield well over 40 knots.

The Alburys build boats of lasting value at a quiet pace among family and friends in their ancestral home waters. Now that production has been increased, more powerboaters will have the opportunity to own a piece of this proud but simple boat building heritage. "We grew up with these boats," said Donnie. "And so did just about everyone we know. Because we build them for the people who are close to us, we have the incentive to make every model strong, to make every model last."

Albury Brothers Boats, (561) 863-7006. www.albury brothers.com. For more information, contact (866) 626-2846 or www.motorboating .com/motorboat/productinfo.