

# Southern Roots

“There’s a big difference between just getting a boat out and getting a good boat out. Remember that.” – Captain Omie Tillet

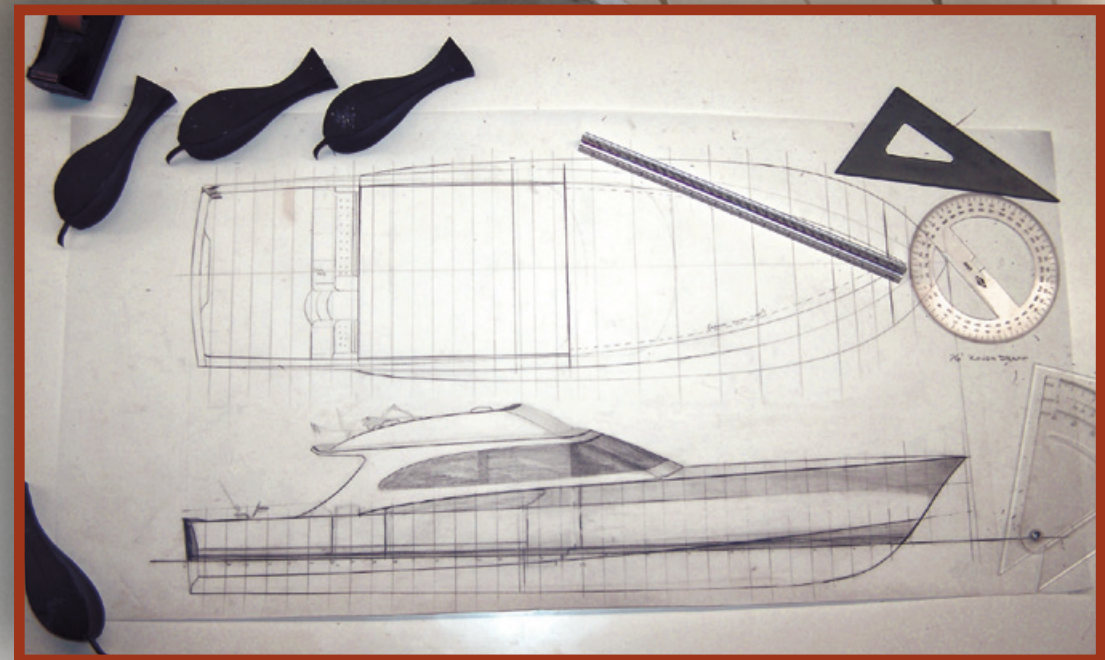
**Ask** Randy Ramsey to describe his success as a Carolina custom boatbuilder and he’ll likely admit to “just living the American dream.” As a child growing up in North Carolina, Randy—now president and co-founder of Jarrett Bay Boatworks in Beaufort, North Carolina—never imagined he’d end up building boats for a living. Fishing was his thing, and he was going to be a charter boat captain. “I remember being so excited when I got my Captain’s license on my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday,” Randy recalls. “Thank goodness I passed that test; I’d already booked a charter for the very next day. Talk about pressure!”

But don’t expect Randy to take all—or even most—of the credit for the success his company Jarrett Bay Boatworks ([jarrettbay.com](http://jarrettbay.com)) has achieved through the years. Instead he’ll rattle off names like Omie Tillet, Warren O’Neal, Myron Harris, Ray Davis, James Allen Rose, Julian Guthrie, and several others who he deems “the pioneers of Carolina boatbuilding.” They’re legends to you and me, but to Randy

they’re mentors, fishing buddies, neighbors... “family.” The history of Carolina boatbuilding is shorter than one might imagine. In fact, some of its founding fathers are still actively involved in the craft today, and each one helped Randy hone his skills along the way.

North Carolina’s Outer Banks offer undisputedly some of the best fishing worldwide. They can also offer some pretty treacherous conditions. It’s been said that one season of fishing the Banks can punish a boat like six seasons would elsewhere. Several currents merge together over shifting shoals here, and a good chop is typical en route to the rich offshore fishing grounds of the Gulf Stream. In the early days, most charter fishermen were also boatbuilders. They had to be. Fish the season; build a new boat in the offseason. As the demand for fishing grew in the post-WWII era, so did the need for bigger charter fleets, and these Carolina captains-turned-boatbuilders responded with more sophisticated

By **ANDREW PARKINSON**



JARRETT BAY BOATWORKS PHOTOS

sportfishing boats designed specifically for the tough offshore conditions found off the Banks. For one, Carolina boats required a sharper, knife-like bow entry—to slice through heavy chop—that flattened out as you followed the lines aft yielding an efficient hull capable of weathering heavy seas and providing a stable fishing platform for charter. The fishermen who built these tailored boats along the North Carolina coast became well recognized for their craftsmanship and innovation, and the legacy of Carolina custom boatbuilding was born.

Talk to any builder and you’ll hear the name “Omie Tillet.” Everyone knows and loves Omie. Often heralded as the “Father of Carolina Boatbuilding,” Omie was one of the first to see a blue marlin landed off the Outer Banks 50 years ago and still has his captain’s license today. His company Sportsman Boat Works made vessels known for their strength, classic lines and fish-catching ability, and they were highly sought after on the local market. Unfortunately, Omie was allergic to epoxy and he returned to charter fishing in 1977, selling the company to his foreman. But for any aspiring boatbuilder, a few minutes with Omie is worth a pot of gold.

Omie, like other pioneers of Carolina boatbuilding, didn’t just help. He shared insight on methods, materials and even a few life lessons. For Omie, he was just helping a fishing buddy build a better boat. It’s a cornerstone of Carolina tradition that explains why a huge local industry remains such a tightly



knit community. It's everything the South is supposed to be. It's about family, and it's contagious. After only a few minutes speaking with Randy, I'm having serious thoughts of giving my two weeks notice and moving to Beaufort to build boats next to legendary craftsmen, go fishing with ageless charter captains... and eat barbecue... and drink sweet tea...

Jarrett Bay Boatworks built hull number one in 1986 out of necessity to replace an aging charter boat. In an old tin shed, *Sensation* took shape like every Carolina boat before her, yet she was one of the first boats to use epoxy for the planking and lay fiberglass cloth, which was previously unheard of, and she's still in charter service today. Since its humble beginnings, Jarrett Bay has constructed over 85 boats and Ramsey's charter captain dream is on hold indefinitely. Today Jarrett Bay Boatworks has the capacity to build boats up to 120 feet, custom-built for their owners



Jarrett Bay President Randy Ramsey (left) shares a moment with Captain Omie Tillett (right).

with the same passion that went into hull number one.

It's a common tale for most Carolina boatbuilders, who consider themselves fishermen first, boatbuilders second. And while every Carolina-style boat is unique, the tradition is the same. Not surprisingly, a hub of activity through the decades is a sleepy little village by the name of Wanchese on Roanoke Island, where a stroll around town reveals an eclectic mix of residences from new construction to farmhouses to generations-old tumble downs, most with brightly-colored rowboats and decoys as yard art. You won't see Wanchese billed as a main tourist attraction in *Fodor's Guide to the Outer*

*Banks*. It's a modest fishing village through and through. But boatbuilding is religion here, as evidenced by the dozen or so Carolina custom builders all within a stone's throw of one another. Walking down Harbor Road in Wanchese is like a "Who's Who" of some of the biggest names in Carolina boatbuilding: John Bayliss, Craig Blackwell, Sunny Briggs, Ricky Scarborough, Paul Spencer; the list goes on. So does the common goal shared among these world-class boatbuilders—to continue to build a better boat.

Sure there's a natural competitive spirit to sell more boats than the next guy, but successful Carolina boatbuilders thrive on a different spirit: family. Everyone seems to know everyone in this business—most have caught a few fish together—and no one hesitates to lend advice to a fellow fisherman who wants to build himself a boat that's faster, stronger or goes farther than ever before.

Just ask Paul Mann, president of Paul Mann Custom Boats ([paulmanncustomboats.com](http://paulmanncustomboats.com)) in Manns Harbor, North Carolina, what makes his Carolina-style boats unique and you'll get an honest response. "We're all in the business of putting the highest quality boats on the water that perform beautifully in the elements they're intended for," explains Mann. "The bottom and style of a Mann boat is mine, but every boat is made custom to meet the needs of its owner, so it's really the owners themselves that make these boats special."

It's the 'people' that make us what we are today. It's about the level of service we provide, the amazing craftsmanship of our employees, and the lasting friendships we develop when we build your boat. Our owners become our family."

Like Randy, Paul earned his captain's license and ran his own offshore fishing charters from an early age. In the winters, he helped build boats alongside names like Sunny Briggs and Omie Tillet. Paul built his first Carolina boat in 1988 out of a shed with the help of a few local legends. Like many of his predecessors, one boat led to two, two led to four, and before he knew it, Paul had a full-time world-class boatbuilding

operation on his hands. "Most Carolina boatbuilders aren't marine architects, but they know what it takes to put a boat on the water that performs well, especially in rough conditions," noted Mann. "Any builder elsewhere can build a boat that's got the 'Carolina flare,' but it doesn't mean it's built for the seas and conditions we build our boats for out here on the Banks." Today, Paul Mann Custom Boats operates out of an impressive 40,200 square foot facility in Manns Harbor. Learning the trade amidst a constantly evolving boating era over his lifetime has made Paul one of the most innovative and trusted builders around, using his own combination of time-tested techniques married with the latest in high-tech materials, technology and processes to build true Carolina boats that are enjoyed throughout the world.

Recent innovations in Carolina boatbuilding find the incorporation of pod drives. "A big step in the next generation of Carolina boats," notes Tom Slane of Slane Marine ([slanemarine.com](http://slanemarine.com)) in High Point, North Carolina. Slane, whose father Willis founded Hatteras, plans to use IPS propulsion in its new 62. "The new technology IPS option



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PAUL MANN CUSTOM BOATS PHOTO

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*A new custom hull with the traditional Carolina flare about to be launched at the Jarrett Bay yard in Beaufort, North Carolina*

will provide even better fuel consumption and larger accommodations on a Carolina hull,” says Slane.

As sportfishing and boatbuilding continue to play a vital role in Outer Banks culture, the drive to keep building better boats remains as strong as ever. Boatbuilders may come and go, but the heritage behind them is everlasting. “When you walk into the buildings, you feel the pride in superior craftsmanship,” notes Ramsey. “You smell the

rich woods used to construct and accent the interiors. You notice the exaggerated flare and detailed finishings. You can’t help but feel the passion these craftsmen put into their work, the security of a family all working towards a common goal, and sense of tradition.”

If your cruising adventures ever find you on the Carolina coast, stop into one of these boatbuilders, say hello, and witness a proud North Carolina legacy at its purest. 🇺🇸

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