

Introduction:

Jim Tolpin is a renowned woodworker and author. He grew up in Western Massachusetts, and after getting a degree in geology, found that he preferred working with wood rather than rocks. Early on, he got to know the famous boat builder and designer Budd Macintosh, who became a mentor for both woodworking and writing. Later, he worked at the Penobscot Boat Company in Rockport Maine. He also got to know the founder of Wooden Boat Magazine and wrote a column for them in its early years. After moving to Port Townsend in the late 1970's, Jim specialized in building one-off custom cabinets and furniture while also working (and living on) boats from time to time. After ten years in Port Townsend, he thought he'd try his hand at writing, and now has written 18 books which have sold close to a million copies. He also wrote articles for many other magazines. Late in his career he has focused on using hand tools. Most recently, he has been rediscovering preindustrial woodworking and design techniques. In addition to these topics, in this interview he discusses what Port Townsend was like in the 70's and 80's, his experiences camp-cruising in a 14-foot open boat with his wife Cathy, he gives advice for people entering the trades, talks about the importance of efficiency in making a living in woodworking, and tells us about a hitchhiking dog and much more. My name is Jim Heumann. If you want to learn more, Jim Tolpin posts often on Instagram (@jimtolpin), and has a web site (<https://www.byhandandeye.com>), and a YouTube channel (@jimtolpin1).

Jim Heumann:

Where did you grow up and what was your young life like? And then we'll get to how you got to Port Townsend and how you started working with wood. Where'd you grow up?

Jim Tolpin:

I grew up in Western Massachusetts, Springfield, and then Holyoke, and then Amherst. I spent all the first, probably 25 years of my life was in that area. Just the whole public school thing and just the life in the 50s and 60s in a small town, very Port Townsend like town.

Jim Heumann:

Was it? How big?

Jim Tolpin:

Almost the same as Port Townsend, really. Maybe 10, 15,000 people, something like that. We had a paper mill, a number of paper mills down by the Connecticut River was the main employers along with Westover Air Force Base. We had an uptown and a downtown, just like Port Townsend. My dad worked at the military base. He was executive secretary to the commander. Fun part for me was I could go in the base whenever I wanted in my bicycle, which I did pretty often, and just hang around the flight line and watched all the jets take off and all that kind of stuff.

Jim Heumann:

Really? They would let you?

Jim Tolpin:

Yeah. Well, I had a pass, because I would go see my dad and then I would just wander. I couldn't get on the flight line because that was all fenced off. Back then I just trundled around on the base and waved at the pilots. Really, fond memories of that time.

Jim Heumann:

Did it make you want to fly?

Jim Tolpin:

Well, yeah. I became very interested in flight because of that, which for me meant building tons of model airplanes and studying aeronautics and stuff like that. I realized I couldn't become a pilot because of my eyes at a certain point. That path to becoming a pilot went away. Then the whole path to being in the Air Force went away when Vietnam started. My dad said, "You do not want to join the Air Force." To try to avoid Vietnam, he said. He didn't give me any good advice what to do otherwise, but he said, definitely don't just join up, so I didn't.

Jim Heumann:

You just had bad eyesight?

Jim Tolpin:

Yeah. Still do, for some reason.

Jim Heumann:

Wouldn't that have kept you out of Vietnam, just the bad eyesight?

Jim Tolpin:

No, I don't think so. I think that kept me out of flight school, for sure. No, not out of other fields. I almost did join up. I came really close, but then I got a teaching deferment. I became a teacher right after college in '69, '70. Just one thing after the other, I just lucked out a number of times in terms of not actually being sent over. I was drafted, but I didn't get inducted, so I didn't go through the whole process and ended up teaching instead. Then drew a high lottery number when that happened. Remember, that was '69, I think?

Jim Heumann:

I do remember that.

Jim Tolpin:

It didn't look like I was going to end up getting inducted, so that's when I went to New Hampshire and started doing woodworking basically, and boat stuff.

Jim Heumann:

Then how did that happen? How did you get over there?

Jim Tolpin:

That was through connections with friends of friends. It was the summer of '69, no, '70, I think. This group of guys had a big commission to build cabinets, high-end cabinets at a restaurant I think it was, and they needed help. I was not doing anything that summer and I just volunteered to help where I could. As soon as I got into it with them, I said, this is really fun. This is what I want to learn how to do. I

started learning, finish work, finish carpentry. Never went back after that, any kind of academics. I was really far more interested in craft at that point.

Jim Heumann:

Just stepping back a little, you were a teacher, you'd been to college at that point?

Jim Tolpin:

I had a degree in geology.

Jim Heumann:

You were teaching geology?

Jim Tolpin:

Teaching science to kids, science teacher.

Jim Heumann:

What levels?

Jim Tolpin:

That was third to sixth grade. This was through the Teacher Corps. That was primarily what I was doing in Teacher Corps, was doing science type stuff with the kids.

Jim Heumann:

Where did you go to college?

Jim Tolpin:

University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Jim Heumann:

Bachelor's degree in Geology.

Jim Tolpin:

Geology, yeah.

Jim Heumann:

Your first woodworking, that was on a summer off from teaching?

Jim Tolpin:

Yes. In between teaching. We had the summer off and I was still living with some of those guys, roommates, basically. They were all graduates of Rhode Island School of Design. They were doing pretty high-end furniture stuff and cabinetry. It was just pure luck that I fell in with those guys. As soon as I did, and also, that was also the year that I met Bud McIntosh and hung around his shop some. He was a real inspiration for me of somebody who was really very articulate, very highly educated. What he did for a living was what he loved to do, which was boat building. Working with wood, I just said, well, I guess I

don't have to feel bad about going into the trades with a college degree. If Bud could do it and love his life, I bet I could too. He was a main inspiration for me, and to write. He encouraged me to write at one point too. He was a really big influence on my life. I don't know that he knew that so much.

Jim Heumann:

It's interesting, because both Dick McCurdy, he had two degrees and then got into the maritime world and never used either of them. Sean Rankins, he had a degree that he never used either.

Jim Tolpin:

I know a few other people. I probably don't want to name names, but there's a lot of guys around here with college degrees that never went there. Well, they went to college, but they didn't go anywhere with the degrees they had. They went into craft, basically.

Jim Heumann:

What did your parents think of that?

Jim Tolpin:

I think they were a little surprised. Some of the extended, my extended family, aunts and uncles, they were very much into education as being the key to upward mobility, and that I would choose to go into the trades was surprising to them. Then when I started writing, which is about 25 years ago now, and they saw that I was having success with writing, I felt vindicated anyway. I think they realized, I guess I was just doing what I needed to do.

Jim Heumann:

Talk a little bit more about Bud McIntosh.

Jim Tolpin:

Well, the thing that really got inspired me later on was he wrote his own book on boat building, which was a wonderful book. I so enjoyed reading that book, and it was very conversational. It was funny, and it was highly technical also, in the midst of these great just stories that he would sprinkle in. I said, "Boy, if I was going to ever write a book on woodworking, this is the template I would use." It would be not just your everyday-how-to book, but it would be a real conversation and fun. Really, that is what I really owe to Bud and his life was not just the fact that an educated person doesn't have to be a professional carrying a briefcase and wearing a suit and tie. You could be a professional in just shape wood. Anyway, both those things were hugely influential on my life. Feel really glad I met him.

Jim Heumann:

Did you work for him at all?

Jim Tolpin:

No. At that point, nobody could work for him because he was a one-man shop. His shop was an OSHA nightmare. There was only one electric motor, and that was these leather belts that were running all these machines. No guards on anything. Truly, it was a nightmare in there. It was like a horror movie. He knew it, and he knew there was no way he could have people really working with him. He did under the

table sometimes, but no. At that point in his life, he was just about working completely alone, still building big boats. He was doing, I think it was a 48-foot schooner when I met him.

Jim Heumann:

By himself.

Jim Tolpin:

Yeah. That was for, I can't remember the name of the schooner. Anyway, he launched it and then he immediately started another boat. I think he started a boat for himself at that point too, just like a 30-foot power boat to just go upriver. He was on the Piscataqua River, launched right into the river with a Model T engine as the power source.

Jim Heumann:

Really?

Jim Tolpin:

Yeah. He's quite proud of that motor. He said it's been working for a long time. He had wrecks of old boats in his yard that were so fascinating, shoal boats and Crotch Island Pinky. At least one other one that were just dissolving into the brush. They all had been measured.

Jim Heumann:

You were doing the woodworking and then you met him and you just hung out with him some?

Jim Tolpin:

Yeah. I'd go ask him questions. I started building a little skiff and I would go pretty regularly on weekends and go and ask him advise on how to do certain things, which he would tell me. Then he gave me some instruction about how to rig it. Then he gave me some plans about here's the next boat you should build. He gave me a little river wherry and a cat boat. I've done models of them at this point. Then with Matthew Straughn-Morse, we built the Piscataqua River Wherry, which was a really fascinating boat. That's a whole long story in itself, but a traditional boat. Bud had built quite a number of them. I think he, with others, built I think six of them for the bicentennial, and they raced them in the Piscataqua River. It was just a program through Strawberry Bank, I believe. Anyway, that was one of the plans that I had from him and always wanted to build it. I finally did with Matthew about four years ago, I think, here in town.

Jim Heumann:

You didn't build it way back then?

Jim Tolpin:

No, that was here. It was at the point where I wasn't doing too much heavy woodworking myself. I worked with Matthew Straughn-Morse, who probably really did about 95% or more of the work on the boat, the physical work. We spent a good chunk of time together lofting it though, and figuring out best ways to do the setup and molds and all that kind of stuff, figuring out the wood. A lot of the wood was Alaska yellow Cedar offcuts from the Western Flyer project. Their offcuts were bigger than my boat, so that really worked out well too.

Jim Heumann:

I forget, do you have brothers and sisters?

Jim Tolpin:

Yeah, one sister down in Ojai, California. She's a teacher, been a teacher for her whole life, basically, and president of the teacher's union down there. Retired, but still active in the union, I believe.

Jim Heumann:

You're over in, did you say New Hampshire, working, doing, building these cabinets?

Jim Tolpin:

Yeah, that's where I ended up in New Hampshire, which is also how I got to meet Bud because he was in New Hampshire as well.

Jim Heumann:

You were there for how long?

Jim Tolpin:

Probably eight, nine years, something like that. Then Michael Albin came out here to Port Townsend and was working out here in the later 70s, '76, I think, was hanging out with him when he lived in New Hampshire. He was doing small boats and furniture-type stuff too. We knew each other. And he came proselytizing for Port Townsend. He basically said, "You can do really good boat-building stuff in Port Townsend, and your wage will be twice what you were making in Maine." Because I had just been working in Maine at Penobscot Boat Works, Penbo. We were building trawler, yachts-type things, all wood. I was making \$2.85 an hour.

Jim Heumann:

What year?

Jim Tolpin:

This would've been '74, '75.

Jim Heumann:

How did you get from New Hampshire to Maine?

Jim Tolpin:

From New Hampshire to Maine, that was the potential jobs around Rockport, Maine. Can't remember who directed me to that, but I knew that there was work at Penbo.

Jim Heumann:

This other stuff you were doing had finished and you were looking for?

Jim Tolpin:

I continued looking for work and education. Jobs that would educate you on the job, which Penbo was doing, for me anyway.

Jim Heumann:

Was this just another woodworking job, or were you really into boats?

Jim Tolpin:

It was really just another woodworking job. It was finish carpentry on the boat. I was not a boat builder. Still not a boat builder.

Jim Heumann:

Even though you've built a bunch of boats.

Jim Tolpin:

I don't consider myself a boat builder. I'm a glorified finish carpenter, basically. That's really was my specialty. At Penbo, I just worked inside the wheelhouse and trimmed out the wheelhouse and did that kind of stuff.

Jim Heumann:

You must've learned a ton just because of nothing straight.

Jim Tolpin:

Even all our levels had wedges on them. Because at that point, the boat was on the ways, so it was tilted down toward the water. When we were trying to make stuff level in the wheelhouse, our levels had these wedges stuck on them, so we had to account for that.

Jim Heumann:

What did you measure the angle of the boat and then make wedges that were the same angle?

Jim Tolpin:

Yeah. For the specific levels, like the two-foot level at a certain wedge and so forth. Then of course, I did run into having to do curves, meet curves mostly. I had cabinets that were just boxes, but then they had to be fitted to bulkheads, curved hull forms and that kind of stuff. That's when I learned I better really learn how to do hand tool woodworking. Because if you don't know how to use hand tools, you can't work on boats. I'll just come right on and say that. You'll take too long if you have to resort to power tools.

You got to know how to handle a draw knife and a spoke shave and understand how to lay out the curves and do it really quickly. That's really where I was introduced to that whole concept of working to non-rectilinear forms. I didn't really learn the layout procedures and all that until much later, after being here and being further immersed in the boat world. I didn't do planks. I didn't really get involved in the hull shapes themselves, really. I was all interior stuff and making skylights, boarding ladders, deck houses. I did a deck house at one point. That kind of stuff. All challenging, all fun, always learning something.

Jim Heumann:

What was it about wood that drew you right away into that profession?

Jim Tolpin:

Working with wood was challenging in that it wasn't just, it was engaging both sides of the brain, really, literally. I had to understand how things worked and measurements and layouts and all that kind of stuff, but I also had to have hand-eye coordination to work to that, to manifest all that in three dimensions. I just found all that together. Then running a business, because I was managing my own business for many years. Doing subcontracting, finish work and that kind of thing. I had to learn business management. All that became a challenge. I guess I enjoy that kind of a challenge. I never ever made very much money doing any of this stuff. The opportunities to make a lot of money were things that I wasn't interested in. I lived pretty close to the edge a lot of the time. I lived in boats down at the boatyard, on the hard, lived in teepees, lived in geodesic domes. Just all kinds of crazy stuff. Because what interested me was the work that I was doing and learning. That was really my focus.

Jim Heumann:

You worked with these high-end designer guys. Was design a big part of what you enjoyed as well?

Jim Tolpin:

Yeah. Beyond even just the design thing, cabinetry, there wasn't too much of anything all that unique really about the stuff I was doing. Some of the joinery was unique. Some of it was, but mostly it was learning how to do the stuff efficiently and make a living at it. That did mean taking on challenging jobs that couldn't be done easily by just production cabinet shops. Not that there weren't many here on the peninsula back then, there's only a handful of people doing custom cabinet work. I was getting this higher-end custom work, one-offs. That really, the guys who were pumping out kitchen cabinets really weren't that interested in the custom stuff that much. Slowed them down too much. I filled a niche. A lot of it was boat-related. I spent many years down at the Boat Haven in the old DeLeo building, old cannery. We had a couple of boat builders working in there. I was in there doing cabinets. Even just sometimes kitchens, but then I did a lot of boat stuff too, out of that shop.

Jim Heumann:

Was Van Hope there at that point?

Jim Tolpin:

He actually worked at that shop. That was right after I was there. He worked out of that shop too. He was building the Scow Schooner. I can't remember the name of the Scow.

Jim Heumann:

How about Miguel Winterburn?

Jim Tolpin:

Miguel Winterburn. He wasn't ever in our shop, specifically. We were around. He was around, too. Some of the guys in my shop worked with him. I actually got to work a little bit with him on his own boat up at his shop uptown. Not very much. Not as much as I would've liked to.

Jim Heumann:

Was he a mentor to a lot of people?

Jim Tolpin:

To a lot of people. Especially, to Ernie [Baird], especially.

Jim Heumann:

He was older.

Jim Tolpin:

He was about 10 years older than us. He was an absolute master shipwright. I mean, he had it down. He knew what he was doing and knew how to do it, and very energetic, powerfully built. He was a real, real doer. I'm so glad that I got to know him and hung out with him some.

Jim Heumann:

By the time you got to Port Townsend, you were pretty skilled at that point. You'd spent what, close to 10 years back east?

Jim Tolpin:

Yeah, at least that much. 10 years. All the stuff I was doing back east, I continued doing here in Port Townsend, but it became more interesting stuff, more challenging stuff too, a lot of it.

Jim Heumann:

Did you come out in a big truck full of tools?

Jim Tolpin:

I did carry some, but I procured probably more once I got here. I did have my basic hand tools with me. Many of which I bought at the old original Woodcraft store outside of, well, outside of Boston. Can't remember the name of the town. They were the only people that were able to outfit you with really good hand woodworking tools, was Woodcraft back then. They were importing most of it from England. It was Record and Marbles, that kind of stuff. I still have almost everything I bought from them. Good stuff. It was expensive back then too though, but at least it was there. Woburn, Mass, that's where it was.

Jim Heumann:

Was it you who worked in the gun factory?

Jim Tolpin:

Yeah, going through college. My aunt was the sales manager for Smith and Wesson. As a college kid, I could work summers there filling in for people on vacation. I did many different things in the factory. From the print shop to hardening the firing pins [for the] little gun, the 38s. I was doing, what's it called, brazing, I believe? I was running a blast furnace for a while. That was the fun part, standing in about 130 degrees and throwing bone meal inside these huge furnaces. Talk about grunt work. It paid for my college. It paid my way through college doing that.

Jim Heumann:

I worked in the Ford Transmission factory in Detroit in the heat treat department for a summer in the 70s. It helped pay for college too. It's hot work.

Jim Tolpin:

Really hot work.

Jim Heumann:

Did you learn anything in that job that applied later on?

Jim Tolpin:

Learned I didn't want to be a factory worker. For sure. I learned seeing how you had to be really efficient in where you laid out your tool stations. I could really observe the workflow, how they did that and understood the production process, basically. I'm not saying I really mastered anything there at all, but I did observe how a factory producing very high-end items could do it with mass production. Although, Smith & Wesson was, I guess it was mass production, but ultimately, every revolver was assembled by hand. Final assembly was always by hand by actual gunsmiths. I was told that they actually were the first ones to fire the gun too. Every gun was fired by the gunsmith. I thought that was interesting. Actually, when I think about it, my interest in woodworking started there too, just seeing the incredibly beautiful workmanship in the stocks, the checkering that they did, a lot of custom work.

I got to see these finished racks of guns going by my station a lot. I was really fascinated by it. Unfortunately, I never got to work in the woodworking department. There wasn't an opening while I was there. I did get to meet Daniel Wesson, but not the original, of course, the grandson. He would come through the shop floor sometimes. It was a family business and he treated the people there very, very well. It was a very sad day when Smith & Wesson was bought out by big holding company, which I think was in the last year that I worked there. I don't regret having that experience at all. It did buy my way through college and I learned how to write at college. That's really what I learned at college was how to write.

Jim Heumann:

During your geology degree.

Jim Tolpin:

Because we had to do a lot of papers with that program. Also, I minored in communications, journalism, so that was a minor. Because I enjoyed writing and I think I just had a lot of experience in college just writing papers that had to be clearly written and in the proper voice and all the usual stuff. I had exposure to all that at college and I enjoyed it. Not the physical thing of trying to type fast.

Jim Heumann:

Back in the day, typewriters.

Jim Tolpin:

There's no word processing. I would write it all long handed and then go to the typewriter. Stay up half the night typing papers.

Jim Heumann:

I remember those days.

Jim Tolpin:

That was horrible.

Jim Heumann:

Fast-forward now to PT. When do you start writing for money or what was the first thing you sold for writing?

Jim Tolpin:

The first thing I sold was the book 'Working at Woodworking'. That was basically how to set up a small shop like in a two-car garage to do custom cabinetry, built-ins and small furniture stuff. I had set that up after coming to the Northwest. I basically, again, as you can tell, I've always been interested in how to do efficient production processing. I wrote a flowchart for that small woodworking business in the two-car garage shop. The flowchart was for people that I worked with because we would partner on big projects and stuff like that. I actually had this flowchart that we hung up on the wall that said if you wanted to do, for example, the rails and stiles of a door, here's the process. Here's which machines to set up in which order to make it as efficient as possible.

I had a flowchart that would cover the entire process from bringing the wood in the door to having to go out on the truck. It's the most efficient way to get from start to finish. I realized pretty quickly that, that flowchart really could be a book. I could write a shop manual around that chart. I sketched it out and read a book about how to sell book ideas to publishers. I went through the whole thing of writing a cover letter and a sample chapter and an outline, and I sent it off to a bunch of publishers. Within days, I got a call back from Taunton Press. They interviewed me on the phone for a couple of hours and said, "Well, that sounds like the book we want to do." Turns out it was in the right place at the right time with the right idea. It was really a lot of luck. They were looking for a book just like that.

Jim Heumann:

What year was that?

Jim Tolpin:

That would've been probably 1988 or something like that.

Jim Heumann:

You got to PT in when?

Jim Tolpin:

'78. It was about 10 years later. I started really thinking about writing as a way to, well, increase my income a little bit, but not really because I knew you don't make a lot of money writing books. It was something, and it was a generous advance, especially for 1988, I think it was about \$8,000 advance. Because what I said was, I needed enough money where I can stop working for a couple of months and just focus on getting the book done for you. They were definitely into that. When we did, I made the deadline and then I went back to my cabinet projects.

Jim Heumann:

You were working on a word processor at that point?

Jim Tolpin:

Very small one. You would get about two or three sentences ahead and that's it. It was better than the typewriter because at least I could do corrections and I could cut and paste a little bit. I didn't really start using a real word processor until probably three books in or something like that. What a revelation that was to have Word Perfect. Now I just write on Google Docs because I'm working with another writer right now. We're co-authoring. The last four books have been co-authored.

Jim Heumann:

I want to get to that. Before we get there, tell me a little bit about what PT was like when you moved here, just what the town was like.

Jim Tolpin:

Well, for me, it felt very, very familiar. Because as I said earlier, it was very much like the town I grew up in Holyoke. A mill town, basically. Real blue-collar mill town. It had a downtown, it had an uptown. Then when I moved here in '78, there was the boat festival, which was one of the big draws. Again, what Michael said too, just wait till you see the boat festival. We just had the first one. You're going to love it, and I did.

Jim Heumann:

You were here for the second one then?

Jim Tolpin:

I think it was the second one. I'm pretty sure '78 was the second one. It was wonderful. At that point, the boat festival was not like it is today. It was just locals, it was people working on small boats and a little bit of the surrounding area. We were just playing with boats in the harbor, basically.

Jim Heumann:

It was at Point Hudson?

Jim Tolpin:

It was already at Point Hudson at that point.

Jim Heumann:

Was there a Wooden Boat Foundation at that point yet?

Jim Tolpin:

No, I don't think so. Sam Conner is the one that really pulled it together and a few other guys working in the Old Coast Guard, the large building that the Sail Loft is in. That's where he was working down in the shop and building small boats. He and Michael, I'll think of his name in a minute or two, but there was three or four guys working very regularly in there, doing small lap-strake boats. The town itself was like what you might think of Port Angeles, a small version of Port Angeles, which was not built around tourism. It was everyday people. I mean, teachers, policemen, they all lived uptown. They could afford

housing in town. The mill was a huge employer of the town, as was boat building and boat repair, that had already really been started up in town. Skookum was already starting to build boats.

Jim Heumann:

Cape George was going.

Jim Tolpin:

Cape George was going, and of course, the Haven Boat works. That was with Mark Burns. That was already well underway. That's where Michael was working, and they were bringing in a lot of boats from the Alaska fishing fleet. There was plenty of work for boat builders in this town in the late 70s, early 80s. It felt that, that was what the town was about. It was boat building and paper mill. Really, there weren't festivals other than the very beginnings of the boat festival. There was the Rhodie Parade, and that was about it.

Jim Heumann:

Did you have a boat back in those days?

Jim Tolpin:

I had a Poulsbo boat. Almost the first boat that I owned in town, I think was a Poulsbo, with a little outboard on it. Then I just had a little variety of different skiffs over time. Then I did get a Shane rum runner, a 30-foot rum runner that I lived on for a year or two, I think, down in the Boat Haven.

Jim Heumann:

In Boat Haven?

Jim Tolpin:

Yeah. My shop is right at the Boat Haven too, with the old cannery, which is no longer there. The DeLyos owned that huge cannery. We had one side of it, it was like 20 feet by 90 feet.

Jim Heumann:

That building is gone now?

Jim Tolpin:

That's all gone. The travel could come right up to our door, which was really cool. It was all gravel roads down there, so it was just all open.

Jim Heumann:

The railroad was still there going through Boat Haven?

Jim Tolpin:

Yeah, which was a little hard to sleep at night when the railroad came in, because they were loading cars onto the barge right at Boat Haven.

Jim Heumann:

They loaded the whole railroad cars onto the barges.

Jim Tolpin:

Believe me, you didn't sleep through that if you lived in Boat Haven. It was always at night, for some reason. The ferry came in the middle of downtown, right by the Town Tavern, but it was a small ferry, maybe 20 cars or something like that. The Olympic or the Rhododendron, these two really small ferries, which is the only time you got traffic in town. Otherwise, we literally walked. We would get our breakfast downtown at the old Blue Parrot or the little cafe behind the Town Tavern. Then you would literally just walk down the middle of the street to the Boat Haven.

Jim Heumann:

Sean told me dogs would fall asleep in the middle of Water Street.

Jim Tolpin:

Brian's dog, he had a wonderful retriever.

Jim Heumann:

Brian Toss?

Jim Tolpin:

Brian Hayes. I can't remember the dog's name. I wish I did. In any case, he would hitchhike from the Boat Haven to the Town Tavern and back.

Jim Heumann:

The dog would?

Jim Tolpin:

Everybody knew the dog. If Brian was at the Town Tavern and he wasn't ready to leave and the dog was ready to go, the dog would walk out and everybody knew him and they would take him back to the Boat Haven and vice versa.

Jim Heumann:

That's so hilarious. Did you hang out at the Town Tavern?

Jim Tolpin:

Just about everybody else in town at that point. We never lived there.

Jim Heumann:

I heard that it was a bit of a commune, almost.

Jim Tolpin:

Yeah, upstairs. There were a lot of rooms that you could rent up there very inexpensively. When I moved to town, I had enough money to buy a small house uptown, which means it was around \$20,000. That's all it took to buy a house in Port Townsend back then.

Jim Heumann:

Then why were you living on the boat?

Jim Tolpin:

That was in between when I didn't have the house, I had the boat, which we actually, at one point it was hauled out and it was right next to the shop, which was really convenient. It was more fun to live in the water. I'd do little cruises around and stuff like that. I have very fond memories of Port Townsend back in those days. Now it just feels like an entirely different town to me. It's almost as different as the boat festival today, as from the boat festival in the 70s. Almost no relationship at this point. There's some, but it just feels really, really different if you see the whole evolution of it.

Jim Heumann:

You start writing books. Did you ever have an agent or did you always work right with publishers?

Jim Tolpin:

Worked right with publishers. One book would lead to the next. Oftentimes, I would finish a book and then sometimes I would have an idea for another book. I had an idea we should do a built-in furniture book. Because that was something that I'd been doing quite a bit of anyway. I knew there was a lot to learn about how to do built-ins. I proposed that and they liked that idea. Then they proposed the toolbox book, because they said we need a book on doing toolboxes. That was one of the first books they did that was more not a how-to, but almost like a gallery book, almost a coffee table book really, of here's ideas for all this huge variety of toolboxes that are out there. They proposed it and I said, well, I'd be really interested in doing it, but more, again, as a coffee table type book rather than just here's how to make a toolbox book, which I felt there's plenty of that out there. That was probably their first book that you would call more of a general appeal.

Jim Heumann:

Did you do the photography as well as the writing?

Jim Tolpin:

Very little. Some of it simple in-shop stuff, I would take pictures. No, they always had it done professionally. Luckily, Craig Wester here in town did quite a bit of photography with me, for me. Well, for Tauton Press. He did at least four or five books with me, and he was great, really good photographer. Sometimes studio shots up at his studio, but a lot of it was on the road. We would travel and take pictures. The toolbox book required me to travel quite a bit, and I visited people that had really unusual toolboxes and we went to the Smithsonian, went to Williamsburg, went to Jamestown. We were at Jamestown, which we tried to identify what may have been the first toolbox in the United States. We did some research with them and then got to go in the catacombs underneath the Smithsonian Museum.

There's like five floors underneath that museum that are just storage. I got to go down with one of the curators and look at all the storage room filled with toolboxes, all different types. I remember looking at one that was for a circus clown from 1850, and it was in perfect condition. It was a dome top, and he opened it up for me and there was a poster for a circus laid underneath the lid that looked like it was just been printed. It was in perfect condition. This was 1850s of advertising a circus. It was really fascinating. He had toolboxes that were from shoeshine boys during the Depression, and then all these

really specialized trades that had their own types of toolboxes. I could have wrote a whole book just about toolboxes of the trades, not just woodworking. My focus was woodworking for that book. That was one of the more fun books that I think that I did was that one.

Jim Heumann:

How many books have you done total?

Jim Tolpin:

16, I think are in print at the moment.

Jim Heumann:

In print at the moment.

Jim Tolpin:

I think so.

Jim Heumann:

You've written more than that.

Jim Tolpin:

I think I'm on 18 right now.

Jim Heumann:

16, still in print?

Jim Tolpin:

I believe so. Well, no, actually, I just learned that, see the trouble with the publishing world now is that these publishers get bought out. Tauton Press just got sold, so they're no longer a family business anymore. F&W Media, Popular Woodworking, which I did at least three books with them, I think they got bought out by Random House. Random House kept some of my books in print. I don't know how many Tauton will keep in print. It's up to them at this point. The ones I've just been doing with Lost Art Press are of course, they're still in print, still selling too, which is amazing.

Jim Heumann:

I read that you've sold 750,000 books over all of those. Does that sound right?

Jim Tolpin:

There's more than that now.

Jim Heumann:

Towards a million?

Jim Tolpin:

Probably. Getting there. I don't know who that guy is that bought all of them.

Jim Heumann:

Did you end up with a process for writing books like you had a process for woodworking?

Jim Tolpin:

Yes. It's funny, I don't really think about it so much in the same way, but I definitely have a process. It changes depending on the type of book it is, really. I always will outline the book and I'll always try to think what the title is before I get in too deep. Because the title really has to say, "what's the book about?" Sometimes that's the hardest thing to come up with, because if I don't really understand the book, I can't really come up with a title. I've got to really, really understand what the book is supposed to do. Sometimes it takes a while. Sometimes I'll actually end up starting to write the book without really knowing what it has to do yet. I'll have a kernel of an idea, but I don't have a full outline yet. I don't really know everything that I'm going to get into until I start really immersing myself in it. Then that happens pretty quickly. I don't commit too much to the outline at first. It's a very rough draft at first of an outline, and it can change.

I can realize, well, I don't really need to show that part. I don't need to really get into that. Then sometimes I'll think, well, I really need to get more into this other thing to explain the first part or this is how the book evolves. The book I'm working on right now with George Walker, we only had a kernel of an idea of what the book was about at the beginning. We both knew that, and we said, we're going to just start the book and see what it teaches us and be ready to rewrite, be ready to reconfigure. Sometimes, really have to almost start over again in certain parts of it because we are having to learn a lot to write this new book. We know it, but we're also completely aware of the fact that we don't know it all yet. It can be revealed if we work hard enough. It's turning out to be true. We're finding some stuff that we suspected was out there. We're working at it hard enough now, we're realizing, yes, this is the way they probably did this. This really worked and it really makes sense.

Jim Heumann:

You're going back and figuring out how pre-industrial workers or woodworkers did their craft, basically.

Jim Tolpin:

Basically, especially this book is particularly about the fundamental design process, where the designs come from originally and then how they're laid out. We're looking probably 1850s and earlier and going all the way back to Egypt and analyzing from museum-quality drawings because those are accurate. We start exploring and we ignore all the measurements. They don't mean a thing. Dimensions don't mean anything. What means something are the ratios embedded in it. It's all basic Euclidean geometry, which doesn't use numbers. If you look at Euclid, the whole volume of Euclid, there's no numerical dimensions because they're unnecessary. They have nothing to do with what's going on there, which is really, really interesting and totally different than my entire life in the trades up until a few years ago.

Jim Heumann:

You've written from Truth to Tools and those books are leading up to this book.

Jim Tolpin:

Leading up by hand, and then we did the workbook by Hound and I.

Jim Heumann:

How did that transition come about from writing real practical?

Jim Tolpin:

I can almost identify when it happened, and that was when I really started refocusing on hand tools and started to really up my game because I was going to teach hand tool woodworking. I realized I knew how to do a lot of stuff with hand tools because I've been working with them for 45 years, something like that. I knew how the stuff worked. I didn't know why it worked sometimes. I didn't know why a hand plane shaped the way it's shaped. Why are paring chisels have long handles and butt chisels have short handles? There's reasons for all that. Why is a plane only the width of your fist and why are these layouts being done on these books with no mentions of dimensions, but we have these proportional bar graphs that will tell you what the proportions are. What's that all about, and how come you never see rulers ever in any of the pre-industrial drawings of furniture and stuff like that? Why are there always dividers in their hands?

You look at all these artisans and scientists from pre-industrial, which we mean 17th, 18th century and earlier, and it's because they were using Euclidean geometry and it was intuitive and it was extremely precise. It was as precise as however sharp you can make the divider points because they weren't using numbers, they were using reality and pinpoints and knives. I was getting into it from the point of view of layout and actually making cuts using pinpoints and knives and cutting into lines, and then using whole number ratios from one part to the next. It was just really completely making sense that this is obviously, well, we know that's the way they did it. There's enough information out there to show that. If you look at any rulers that were earlier than like 1900, it was rare to find rulers that even had anything less than a quarter of an inch on it.

Obviously, they weren't laying out to numerical rulers. They were laying out to story sticks, which were pinpoints from dividers and scratch lines, that kind of stuff. That just started opening the door for me. And then when I met George at a design conference and he was talking about how the Greek orders the columns, designs of Grecian columns, how that influenced furniture makers back in the 1700s, we realized... and we went to each other's lectures and we asked each other really annoying questions at the end. Finally, we got together after his lecture, because I was asking some annoying questions. He says, "We need to talk." We went out and went to a bar and started talking and we realized we were both coming at the same thing from two different points. I was coming at it from the tools, he was coming at it from these old books on woodworking that just went on endlessly about Grecian columns.

He's trying to figure out, well, why did they do that? What was that all about? What that was all about was learning how to use a whole number harmonic ratios to make designs. It wasn't about how to make columns. It was just a teaching tool for learning how to do segmentations, progressive segmentations, modules, segmented modules, secondary modules. All this stuff, which we've discovered that was in use back then and it makes perfect sense when you see it. We got very excited about that we were both onto the same thing and he had a lot to learn. I told George, "Well, you need to write a book." He said, "I don't know how to write a book." I said, "well, I'll show you." We did the first book together and we've done four since then.

Jim Heumann:

You said you were learning this because you were teaching a class on hand tools.

Jim Tolpin:

That's right.

Jim Heumann:

That was probably at the Port Townsend Woodworkers School.

Jim Tolpin:

That's right.

Jim Heumann:

That you founded.

Jim Tolpin:

With Tim Lawson and John Markworth.

Jim Heumann:

How did that come about?

Jim Tolpin:

It was all Tim's fault, basically. He knew I lived in town and then he ended up meeting me. He ended up buying a house right near where I lived, uptown. He ended up meeting me and just talking about, he knew some of my earlier books and he said, "Have you ever thought about starting a school, Port Townsend school? It'd be a perfect place to have a woodworking school." I said, "No, I really hadn't." I was interested in teaching a little bit or doing presentations. John Marckworth and I would do presentations together sometimes. We had a woodworker's guild that we would get together once a month or so and show people how to sharpen or do some basic demonstration type stuff. We weren't really serious about starting the school, but Tim was. Tim had the ability to pull together the kind of stuff you have to pull together to actually do brick and mortar type stuff.

John was a phenomenal cabinet maker and understood about putting a shop together. I said I would volunteer basically to write the curriculum for hand tool courses. I wasn't interested in teaching cabinet making, and John was. I said, I don't really want to teach to the table saw and all that stuff. I was done with production woodworking at that point and absolutely done with routers and skill saws, all that stuff that I'd been doing for 35 years, I was done. I said I would teach traditional hand tool skills, and I wanted the challenge of making sure I understood them myself too. That's where I got into the hand tools. Then that means doing layout for the hand tools with the hand tools. That's when this whole other world opened up to me and I started realizing that there was a whole another way of doing woodworking previous to the industrial age.

Jim Heumann:

Isn't that amazing that you can think you know it all and then something happens and you realize that you don't know anything?

Jim Tolpin:

I knew nothing about that stuff. I didn't know anything. I just assumed people had dimensioned on plans and they just measured things out and cut them. That's what we were doing. It's not what they were doing at all. Not even close. Who knew? Certainly, not me, until I started trying to do it. They said, no, they weren't using these rulers, folding rulers and with hand scratched numerical lines on it. No, that's not what they were doing. Then you started reading really old books. I'm talking about books from the

1600s and 1700s that talk about crafts and some woodworking, and all you get is geometry. The first third of those books is geometry, and it's not numerical. It's not algebraic geometry. It's here's how you lay things down on a piece of paper to get perfect squares and triangles and triangles with curves in them. Here's how you get two curves to meet at a tangent point and all this really practical stuff that the artisans would use.

Then it gets incredibly complex stereotomy type stuff. I think it's called the descriptive geometry, I think is what it's called today. It's basically where you're taking the three-dimensional object and you're laying all the facets of it down flat on paper. You can cut the true shape, you can develop the true shape, but you can't do in three views if there's any angles or curves involved. You can't do it except through stereotomy, which was taught by Roubou back in the 1750s, and you can get a whole book on it. It's still taught today traditionally in France. Of course, they're the ones that are doing the reconstruction of Notre Dame using those ancient layout techniques and real wood with real joints. They're not fastening things together with metal. They're doing it the real way, picking wood that was grown in the right part of the tree for the right application. You don't mix up posts and beams unless you know where they were in the tree, that kind of stuff, which nobody knows today, hardly, or even thinks about, but they do.

Jim Heumann:

Do you think bringing this back, writing these books will be sort of, I don't know, your legacy?

Jim Tolpin:

It'd be nice to think that would be true. Again, you don't make a living doing this kind of workmanship anymore, unless you're working at Notre Dame right now, and other places. I mean, you still see this in different parts of the world, people doing this traditional woodworking. They're aware of all this stuff. We are not creating any of this stuff. We're discovering this stuff. This is just a pure exercise in discovery, which is really, really fun.

Jim Heumann:

Well, do you think then the carpenters back that we're using these techniques, they had to be more, I don't know if educated is the word, but if they had to know geometry.

Jim Tolpin:

They would know basic Euclidean geometry. They would basically know how to take a circle and get a square out of it, for example. They would know how to develop symmetry very quickly as they were doing a drawing, and they would very quickly know how to proportion things simply and effectively. A lot of that would just be rules of thumb. They may not really understand how all the geometry works. They wouldn't necessarily know the books of Euclid describing the logic systems behind it. They wouldn't need to. They would just know if I'm laying out these two curves that have to meet, well, I need to know how to get a line between the two radius points and figure out where the tangent point is and make sure the tangent point is on that straight line between the two focal points. Simple stuff like that, which is almost just rule of thumb.

That's what most of them would know. The master of a shop might actually fully understand where the Euclidean geometry comes from, and he can extrapolate from it to doing more creative work, developing new furniture designs. He would probably know far more about the geometry than the workers would, and he would be the one that would create the story sticks that they work from and the templates for curved parts. Almost never drawings. They usually, well, earlier, they probably wouldn't

do too many drawings. They would develop most of it on sticks, I would think. When they did do the furniture, they usually did do full-scale drawings.

Jim Heumann:

Full-scale.

Jim Tolpin:

A lot of times it was full-scale. They would just stretch canvas, basically.

Jim Heumann:

Like lofting a boat?

Jim Tolpin:

Very similar, sure. The masons, they would do big slabs of limestone on the floors. The masons lodge, that's what the masons lodge was for, was them to do these big layouts.

Jim Heumann:

Really?

Jim Tolpin:

That's where they would get all the molding shapes laid out, all that kind of stuff was done full-scale. They actually find them, they find these big slabs of limestone with the geometry scratched into it. We're going to put that in the last part of this book we're working on right now. The whole way that they did layouts in large structures bigger than furniture. When you're doing structures, they use the same thing, but they had different tricks for doing layouts called seven-circle constructions.

Jim Heumann:

Does any of that translate into CAD, what people do in computer-aided design? Is that a totally different deal at this point?

Jim Tolpin:

I think it's a different deal in that the computers have to use the numbers that are generated with the geometry. There's a lot of tricks of the trade to generate like a 3, 4, 5 triangle. There's some mason symbols that show all these interrelationships of the geometric triplet, but it's overlaid underneath the hexagon, but the pentagon rising out of it. It all just works and one step leads to the next. I kept looking at it and I said, is this really true? Is this real? I mean, this stuff is perfect as it looks, and you put it in CAD and it's not.

Jim Heumann:

It's not?

Jim Tolpin:

It's not. It's ... like ... less than a percent off some of it, but it's not perfect. It's just, I think what happens is you have the problem with pi, it's irrational. You can find that in CAD too, when you're trying to do

things on CAD using irrational numbers. Well, things won't exactly meet in places. They can't because it's a round over. You're rounding. If your graphic is trying to do with a rounding, the two points can't come together because the numbers haven't closed. What's interesting is that they were generating all this stuff. It was absolutely good enough for construction, and there were tricks to getting this pentagon really quickly that Albrecht Durer showed how to do it. When you run it through CAD, you say, well, it's not a regular polygon because all the angles are the same, but all the lengths aren't quite the same. Or you can get all the lengths the same, but then the angles aren't exactly the same, which you would have to be true for a regular polygon. Which you can do, but you can't do it through this tricky construction stuff they were doing.

You'd have to do it by drawing a circle and doing pinpoints around it, so you could step five times around a circle, you keep adjusting, and until it fell back into the pinpoint, then you'd be there perfectly. Better than CAD. It'd be within 10 thousandths of an inch or actually, literally, it'd be perfect. Because it's even step outs. Again, these are people that were just fashioning stuff in stone and metal. Well, not even metal so much as wood, and the stuff doesn't have to be at that level of perfection that you would if you were doing high-end machining. It's interesting, because George Walker, the one I'm working with, he's a master machinist, that's where he's coming from. His working life was at Timken Bearings, and they worked to the millionths of an inch.

Jim Heumann:

Millionths of an inch?

Jim Tolpin:

Millionths of an inch on some of the bearings, the military gave bearings, and the ones for NASCAR, but that's a secret. They work super-high precision. You know what he does for fun is what I do for fun is just use sticks and hand planes and just making stuff fit. We're not thinking about it in these numerical terms at all. It's really fun to come from these different places. Just watch how all this unfolded in the course of the development of the arts, what they call the arts and mysteries of the trades.

Jim Heumann:

And are you getting a lot of interest in these books?

Jim Tolpin:

Yeah. Well, I just noticed by Hand and Eyes in its 14th printing or something.

Jim Heumann:

14th?

Jim Tolpin:

Something like that. It keeps getting reprinted. No, eighth printing. At least the last one that I saw at the store was in the eighth printing. I think he told me it's up to 12 now. Any case, yeah. Again, though, what do we mean by a lot of people? Well, that probably means 20 or 30,000 people, which on Instagram, that's nothing. We're not doing it to get rich, believe me. We're doing it because it's actually really fun and it's really useful if you really get into it and you are an artisan and you see how quickly you can generate these perfect polygons and perfect intersections of curves, you can just do it. Or design a piece of furniture, like a little chest of drawers with graduated chest of drawers with a nice little curved apron

underneath. Takes you 10 minutes using these old techniques, and I'm not even exaggerating. I just did one yesterday, literally took 10 minutes in full-scale.

Jim Heumann:

It's like 10 minutes, and how much study to learn the technique?

Jim Tolpin:

10 years, probably. The thing is, is that if I was in a shop in the traditional old school shop, I would have all this information in my head. I'd have all these rules of thumb in my head and I would just do it. I'd say, just whip one out. Even more likely, the master of the shop would've already done it, and it would just be on a story stick leaning in the corner with a pattern for the apron hanging above it in thin veneer. You just go over and grab the stick and the pattern, and you'd be expected to have the thing pretty much cut out in one day. Not assembled, but you'd have all the parts done in a day with hand tools and you knew your stuff.

Jim Heumann:

Speaking of writing, you've written a lot for Wooden Boat Magazine.

Jim Tolpin:

Over the years.

Jim Heumann:

How did that come about?

Jim Tolpin:

Well, again, just having article ideas. I knew quite a few people in the marine trades at that point. I would just run into an idea that I'd run it by one of the editors, like Tom [Jackson] or someone, and say, what do you think of this? If it was a good idea, we would put an article together. In the very earliest days, I was doing a column for Wooden Boat right at the very beginning.

Jim Heumann:

Beginning of your career or beginning of Wooden Boat?

Jim Tolpin:

Wooden Boat. I think the first two or three issues at least, I think I did. I was doing a tidings column, just news of the coast.

Jim Heumann:

Is that when you were living back there?

Jim Tolpin:

Yeah, because I was on the Maine coast then. I was in Rockport. I would just go around and give the news of what's happening in the shops.

Jim Heumann:

Like what Tom Jackson is doing.

Jim Tolpin:

Yeah, some of that. Because I met John when he was just starting the magazine.

Jim Heumann:

This is John?

Jim Tolpin:

Wilson. I just met him on the Maine coast in 1970, '71, something like that. I always wondered what would've happened if I had really stuck with it and gotten in more on the ground floor with moving right to Brooklyn and working in the magazine instead of just being a freelancer. I always thought that would've been a whole different career path. It was really beginning back then, he didn't have the place in Brooklyn yet. It was just in the shed in the woods, basically.

Jim Heumann:

Is that right?

Jim Tolpin:

A small house in the woods. Who knows whether the magazine was even going to work back then? He suspected it would, but not everybody else did. Turned out it did find an audience. It was the right time. It was the right time to start the magazine.

Jim Heumann:

Do you have a favorite article you wrote for them?

Jim Tolpin:

The one that I really remember the most is the one I wrote about leathering your oar locks instead of leathering your oars. That came from being up in Victoria one weekend, just walking around up there and I saw a lifeboat and all the oar locks were leathered and the oars weren't. I said, well, that makes sense. It's like when you go out for a walk, do you leather the road or do you put leather on your feet? No, you put the leather on your, you don't bother the leathering in the whole road. Why would you leather an oar when you can leather the oar lock? It just made perfect sense. I ended up talking to somebody up there in Victoria and they said, "Yeah, we always do that. Once a year we may have to change out the leathers on the oar locks, but at least we're not nailing leathers into the oars, and you don't need much leather. You just need it where it bears." It made perfect sense to me.

Then when you grease it up, you're not trying to grease up this whole sleeve of leather, you're just greasing the little bit on the oar lock. That was probably 35 years ago, I wrote that article. I still use leathered oar locks. Well, it's changed to gecko plastic lately, but don't tell anybody. Anyway, that was fun because again, it was one of those revelation type things. I would look at it and then all of a sudden, I realized what I was looking at and all of a sudden, I said, here's an article. This is really interesting. Use a baseball stitch to put the leathers on the oar locks. I was always amazed that it wasn't more prevalent, but it was prevalent in Victoria on this club that raced life boats and stuff like that. They were just doing

that. It probably came from some place in England, I'm sure, some locality where of course that's what you do.

Jim Heumann:

You've written for lots of other magazines as well, I mean, over the years.

Jim Tolpin:

Fine Home Building, Fine Woodworking and different various smaller magazines, Popular Woodworking. There were some small journals, monthly journals that I wrote for a while.

Jim Heumann:

Was most of your income then from writing after a period of time?

Jim Tolpin:

Yeah, after a certain point. Between books, I'd be writing for Coastal Living Magazine and Cottage Living, and then these woodworking magazines. It was getting to the point where I was writing one or two articles a month for someone, plus having book royalties coming in. I ended up transitioning in the past 20 years from making a living through having to produce woodworking in real time to producing knowledge, basically, and disseminating knowledge. It's easier on the back. It's fascinating because the rabbit holes you end up jumping down when you start exploring in the old literature is just incredible. I've been reading a lot of books that were written in the mid-1800s and earlier. At first, you just cannot tell what are they talking about. Then you keep looking at it and then you start getting out your dividers and your rule and you start doing it and you say, oh my God, look at how quick that was.

No wonder they did it that way. Just super simple ways of finding angles and not using protractors, because who can see a protractor at this point anyway, with little tiny marks on it? Plus, you're at the bottom of this huge angle trying to read an angle. Of course, now they didn't do that. What they used was a cord, which was however many feet out, usually it would be 16 and a half feet, which was a rod, 16 and a half feet. There were two sticks hinged at the focal point, you just took a rope or a cord. Literally, a cord of a certain length attached to the ends of the two sticks. All of a sudden, you've got your angle that you want. Sets it perfectly. You don't have to look at or read anything. That's why a cord of a circle is literally the cord. The cord shows you the cord of the angle.

There's a lot of revelations around where did these words come from. Irrational number, why is it irrational? Because it's because it's not able to ratio. It's simple. That's what it means. A right angle is recto, and it's recto because the other side is also recto, so they're called recto. Now you know where the word correct comes from. I run into this endlessly, which is so much fun to have these reveals. There's something that we work with every day and we never think about, well, why is it like that? Well, that's why it's like that, because it is that. The cords are the cords. Correcto means it's a right angle because it's the same angle on both sides. That's the only time you get a right angle. Why is it a right angle? Because it's the right angle. It's the angle that a post should meet a level floor at. Everything else would not be correcto, and you would not transfer, the compression forces wouldn't go straight down the post like they should. You'd be putting the grain in shear if you're not perfectly plumb. That's the right angle.

Jim Heumann:

That is fascinating.

Jim Tolpin:

All this stuff is fascinating. That's why I still am doing it, because it's endlessly fascinating and it's so much fun.

Jim Heumann:

Very cool. Let's talk a little bit about your boating. You've done a lot of camp cruising?

Jim Tolpin:

Camp cruising.

Jim Heumann:

Up in the San Juans?

Jim Tolpin:

Yeah, San Juans and the Gulfs.

Jim Heumann:

What kind of boat?

Jim Tolpin:

Denman, Hornby, some of the inland lakes of Vancouver. It was all with a little 14-foot Whitehall Well, it turns out it wasn't a Whitehall, but that's another long story. We thought it was a Whitehall for years and then we realized when we got to Campbell River, when we saw boats exactly like it, and they said, "No, that's a fishing wherry." Our boat is a fishing wherry, it's not a Whitehall, but it looks like a Whitehall.

Jim Heumann:

Is that the boat you have now?

Jim Tolpin:

Yeah, we still have it. We've owned it for about 26 years now.

Jim Heumann:

You and Kathy used to do this a lot?

Jim Tolpin:

Yeah. We bought the boat together when we first got together. The first thing we did is we trailed it up to Sydney, put it in the water at Sydney and rode across and started going around the Gulf Islands in it. We had absolutely no idea what we were doing, actually. When I think about some of the things we did, you mean there's a tidal current chart? I didn't know that.

Jim Heumann:

Well, that's what I'm thinking. Doing that up there. I mean, the currents are crazy up there.

Jim Tolpin:

Well, I think we were observant, I'll put it that way. We wouldn't go out when we knew there were going to be adverse weather conditions, we just wouldn't go, or fog. We just didn't. We didn't really understand how to read tidal charts and all that kind of stuff. If the current was too strong, well, we'd just go where the current was going.

Jim Heumann:

Go with the flow.

Jim Tolpin:

Literally, because we really didn't have an agenda. Even if it meant we didn't get to a certain island we wanted to get to, well, we just wouldn't go there. We would just go where we could go. It did have a sail rig, but we found we used the sail rig so little, it almost wasn't worth carrying it. Because it was easier to get some places by rowing to it in a straight line. We would sometimes take turns rowing. We could row, even though it was just 14 feet. If we were synchronized pretty well, we could row together. It was backpacking, really. We weren't carrying much more than you would carry if you were backpacking. That's how you get away with it on a little tiny 14-foot boat, but a very seaworthy little boat. I must say, that boat was in conditions we probably really should not have been in. It never got an ounce of green water over the gunnels on that boat.

Jim Heumann:

Never?

Jim Tolpin:

Never. It's always just incredibly buoyant. Not really a fast boat. It's still basically two people, it's effortless. You're not going fast though. You're going maybe three knots, if you're lucky, but it's steady. It just feels very, very secure. Obviously, it was built for working up in the top of Georgia Straits up by Campbell River, and that's pretty choppy out there. They would go out every day on these things, and they're all 14 feet and they're all same beam, which is I think about 52-inch beam, something like that.

Jim Heumann:

How do they do in a crosswind? Do they get blown off?

Jim Tolpin:

Not very much. They have a full-length keel, pretty good size, what turns into a skeg in the stern. There's a lot of cross-bearing surface on that boat. We find it very rarely blows. It's not hard at all to keep it on course, unless it's ridiculously windy when you shouldn't be out there anyway. In just general, up to 12 knots, you almost don't have to think about it. It just goes where you're rowing. Maybe a little harder to pull on one side than the other. We did learn the importance of balanced oars. We've got oars that are about eight feet, maybe a little. We made our own to a point, and now we use the ones that Tom makes down at Grape View Point, which are wonderful. They're so perfectly balanced. Just your hands on the oars, keep them level so it doesn't take any effort to raise and lower the oars.

All the effort goes just into drawing them towards you, and mostly that's just your weight moving back anyway. It took a long time to really learn how to row efficiently for long distances. At this point, you let momentum do as much of and your muscles the minimum amount and the momentum of your weight

doing as much as possible. We also learned the importance of having really good foot rests that are in the right position that you could really push against. Because you're not sliding seats, but you're still pushing a bit with your legs and you need them for bracing too. We've realized the importance. If I row without foot braces, I really feel the difference. I feel my energy has been really sapped, like 20% more energy it takes without foot rests.

Jim Heumann:

Really?

Jim Tolpin:

I think so. I really notice a difference now. Sometimes you can use the ribs of the boat or something, but it's better to have ones that are the size of your feet and they're in exactly the right position for you. It makes really big difference. We learned that about rowing too, just using balanced oars, foot rests and the right length of oar, which we sometimes change for conditions. If you're going upwind, you want to gear down to a little shorter oar.

Jim Heumann:

Interesting.

Jim Tolpin:

You want to change weight too. You want the bow to be down if you're going upwind and you want the bow to be up if you're going with the wind. Did I say that right? Upwind, you want the stern up. Downwind, you want the bow up. Again, that does make a difference.

Jim Heumann:

What was the longest trip you did in that?

Jim Tolpin:

As a single crossing or just in general?

Jim Heumann:

Just in general.

Jim Tolpin:

We didn't go long distances. We would be up there for a week or two and just going between islands. We never did really long passages in the boat, I would say two to three hours at the most for a single passage. We were in amongst the islands pretty much on purpose. We didn't try to do really long crossings with it. Part of it is just our confidence level for being in a very small open boat and very open water. That's tricky. You got to know what you're doing. Plus, we were always looking for campsites. We wouldn't be out in the water that long. We were pretty focused on getting to a campsite.

Jim Heumann:

Did Abel come along, your son?

Jim Tolpin:

Yes, he did. In the first years of his life, even when he was pretty small, we would do not quite as adventurous as we were, but we would take him places with the rowboat and then later, with the Poulsbo boat. The biggest thing of all is we took the dog, just me and the dog a few times.

Jim Heumann:

The big dog?

Jim Tolpin:

Yeah, the Newfoundland.

Jim Heumann:

The Newfoundland.

Jim Tolpin:

All 150 pounds of him. This won't be good if he starts moving around. Luckily, he was a Newfoundland, so he was happy just to lay in one place. I think he liked it. I would get him in the whole stern of the boat and I'd be rowing from the bow, and he would just be looking around. It must've looked really funny because it looked like he was the coxswain. I did that a couple of times. Not really far distances, like here to Marrowstone [Island], took him come across once. He was really way too big to be in a little boat. He weighed more than I did, and he wasn't rowing either. He was just like heavy cargo. I have very fond memory of a time rowing with him. That was fun.

Jim Heumann:

You're working on this book that you described. Well, you're working on a novel, I know.

Jim Tolpin:

Well, yeah. That's put away for now.

Jim Heumann:

Is it?

Jim Tolpin:

Yeah. I may not do any more with it at this point, I think. I got it out of my head, finally. Thanks to you, one of the people. You told me, I just needed to get the thing written down, so I did. I don't even know what to make of it. I really don't. There it is, it's out of my head, so that's good.

Jim Heumann:

Any ideas for other projects coming up?

Jim Tolpin:

Well, definitely, I'm focused right now on getting this book done. We're calling it a Good Eye, Skilled hand. That's what this newest book is called, which I hope does describe what it's about. My focus is very much on that. Every day now I'm spending a couple of hours on it exploring, looking through old literature, doing drawings. Trying to see what the geometry really is behind some of this stuff, and

having just real aha moments when all of a sudden, I realized, well, God, that's obviously the way they must've done this. This is so simple, but yet it looks so complex, but really, it's really simple.

That's where it's really fun. I am thinking that there might be one more book that's the tricks of the trade, doing the geometric layouts and stuff like that, solving equations using plain geometry. I mean literally, equations were things balance on each side of a balance beam, that kind of stuff. Just generating solutions to all these different geometric problems using, again, these really old methods. I already got the title for that book that's called Constructions and Conundrums. Now I have to write that book too. That'll just be a collection of tricks of the trade, basically.

Jim Heumann:

Like the rules of thumb that the old timers would use that you were talking about.

Jim Tolpin:

The thumb was basically, that's a plank. Just your general, that's a thumb-wide, typical plank. It's about 13/16ths of an inch, so a shelf, any of that stuff. Then there's hand widths, there's palm widths and all these different things that were used a lot. Like a working desk is almost never more than three hand spans wide because your arm is three hand spans. Why would you need [a desk] that's more than three hand spans? Because that the length of your arm and you can't reach more than that. Simple stuff like that. The tools are like that. This is a smoothing plane. This is a jack plane. Three of these is a triplane. They're always the width of your fist because if the blade was wider than your fist, you'd have forces that were making your fist go like this, pure physics. You want all the force to be directly behind the blade. Otherwise, you're going to be skewing. That's why they're the width of a fist. It's just pure physics, biophysics.

Jim Heumann:

Can I ask you, any advice for people, young people or people that want to get into the trades, woodworking, boat building?

Jim Tolpin:

Well, there's a lot of good schools out there now that there never used to be well, there were always a few, but hard to find or get into. There's more good schools around the country. It's actually starting to be a resurgence. Even in high schools, they're starting to think about letting kids work with their hands again. I think I'm seeing hope on the horizon that there will be places to learn hand skills, still. Otherwise, you just got to sort of do it and find a mentor or at least do a lot of reading and practicing. That's not easy. I was able to get on the job training. I was lucky I was working with people that could show me what to do. I feel very lucky I was in the right place for that. If I were doing it now from scratch, I would certainly think about for boats, I would definitely look at the boat school here [Northwest School of Wooden Boat Building] because it's here and it's a really good boat school. Not cheap, but you'll learn something there a lot there. Of course, Port Townsend School of Woodworking has a lot of stuff going on.

Jim Heumann:

I asked Leif [Knutsen] the same question and he had the same answer.

Jim Tolpin:

Is that right?

Jim Heumann:

Go to school is what he said.

Jim Tolpin:

Go to school. It'll save you so much time. It's got to be a school that understands what they're teaching, though. There's some schools that, I won't mention names, but there are some schools where they're just exploiting you. You just end up working, sanding boards, that kind of stuff. You're not really learning the craft anymore. I don't think the teachers really understand the craft themselves. They're too far divorced from, see, we have people like Miguel Winterburn here and many, many others I can mention. These guys were carrying the tradition on from the turn of the last Century. There was an unbroken string of tradition there and how to do things.

Jim Heumann:

You think there was?

Jim Tolpin:

Yeah. I think if you find the right people, sure. These people were trained by people all the way back to the pre-industrial era. They really understood hand tool skills, hand skills.

Jim Heumann:

You think there was an unbroken string.

Jim Tolpin:

Yeah.

Jim Heumann:

That's interesting. Because I always thought there was a gap between the late-1800s boat builders, and then the boat builders that were here in the 70s or whatever. Do you think there was?

Jim Tolpin:

No. I think there was a string. It didn't happen everywhere. It didn't happen for everyone. There were some people who definitely would carry that forward. Well, certainly for me, Budd McIntosh carried that forward. He was working in shops in the early 1900s, though. He worked at Sam Crocker's, for example. He built Concordia Sloops and earlier stuff. If you look at his earlier designs, they looked right out of the 1800s British boats and Scottish. I can name quite a few others if my memory worked well. There's a number of, well, like Leif [Knutsen], they understand the craft deeply and they know where it came from. They understand the why, not just the how.

To me, that's the key metric is if they understand enough to be able to explain to a student. They can't just say, well, don't ask that question, that's just how you do it, just shut up and do it. They've got to be able to say, well, this is why we do it this way. You could do it this way, you could do it that way, but it would be way less efficient. This is the really efficient way to do it, and this is why it's efficient. This is why a handsaw is never longer than the length of your arm, and they'll explain that to you.

Jim Heumann:

It's interesting. You've brought up efficiency several times in two or three different contexts.

Jim Tolpin:

That's true. Because it's the only way to make a living. You got to be efficient. If you're too efficient, then you might as well just be running machines with the CAD system. That's not what a lot of people want to do. They want to be engaged in both sides of the brain. I do speak to efficiency quite a bit. I never really thought about it that way, but that's a lot of the driving force in why I would learn things in certain ways. Try to find people to explain to me, why do we do it this way? Because I want to find out why. Should I be bothering to find a different way? Is this the only way? If it is the only way, why did it end up being the only way? I like that. I like that I have that curiosity because it's fun to learn the answer. Sometimes you have to find it out for yourself. A lot of that means you just have to be doing it. You got to do the work. You just got to use the tools, use the techniques.

Jim Heumann:

Many thanks to Jim for taking the time for this conversation. The interview was conducted on December 13th 2023 for the Maritime Voices podcast (maritimevoices.org) and for the Jefferson County Historical Society.