



The Wheeler 38 LEGEND

A new chapter in the saga of Ernest Hemingway's PILAR

Text by Tom Jackson • Photographs by Benjamin Mendlowitz

In September 1934, after the writer Ernest Hemingway's first months with his new boat, PILAR, a 39'5" LOA power cruiser from Wheeler Shipbuilding Company, he wrote a letter to friends about it: "Boat has been lovely—comfortable and a marvelous sea boat—all we hoped for and more." Eighty-six years later, on another September day, another new cruiser, this one inspired in turn by PILAR, has also been exceeding expectations.

The new boat, LEGEND, built at Brooklin Boat Yard in Maine, is best described as a modern interpretation of PILAR, which Hemingway made famous over the nearly three decades he owned her. For his Wheeler 38 Playmate, the numeral referring to its waterline length, he specified modifications to suit his newest passion—saltwater trophy sport fishing. The outward appearance of LEGEND would be as familiar to Hemingway as PILAR was, especially at the time the original boat was

delivered fresh off the ship from New York to Miami. His additional alterations came later, with early versions of a flying bridge, a sportfisherman's fighting chair bolted down in the cockpit aft, and long outrigger trolling poles. He would have been shocked, however, by the sea trials in which LEGEND reached a top speed of 34.5 mph (in statute miles), significantly more than the 30 mph anticipated, and more than double the original boat's top speed of 13 mph.

As impressive as that was, for Wes Wheeler, a grandson of PILAR's designer, the new boat represented more than a set of particulars and estimates of speed. It is a bit of a nod to a famous owner's famous boat, surely, but more than that it is a celebration of his family's history. Wheeler Shipyard rode the roller-coaster of the first half of the 20th century, with two world wars, an early boatyard fire, the Roaring '20s, the Great Depression, two bankruptcies, and multiple boom-and-bust

Above—LEGEND, a reimagining of the 1934 PILAR owned by writer Ernest Hemingway, is being considered a "Spirit of Tradition" power cruiser and the first in a new line of semi-custom 38'-waterline production yachts. She retains above-the-waterline elements of Hemingway's original boat—including the break he specified in the sheerline to keep the transom's freeboard low—but has modern construction and adaptations.



On sea trials, the twin 370-hp Yanmar engines took LEGEND to a top speed of 34.5 mph, which is more than double that of the original boat. PILAR had a single centerline 70-hp Chrysler Crown gasoline engine and an offset 40-hp Lycoming engine for trolling.

**Wheeler 38
Particulars**

LOA	39'4"
LWL	38'9"
Beam	12'
Draft	3'5"
Displacement	20,600 lbs
Power	Twin Yanmar 370-hp turbo-diesels
Transmission	Yanmar KMH50A, 2.13:1
Fuel capacity	250 gallons
Genset	Cummins Onan 13.5 kW

cycles. At its peak, the company employed some 6,000 people and built a staggering number of boats—about 4,000 of them, including some 800 military craft. The Wheelers of the current generations, including Wes, have that memory seared into their DNA.

Wes's father offered him a path to naval architecture, but he took a different route. "I was a typical 21-year-old, and I said, "To hell with that, I'm going to do my own thing," Wes, now 64, said during sea trials after LEGEND's launching. He embarked on a career as a mechanical engineer and worked for a dozen years building Exxon Corporation oil refineries before the entrepreneurial strands of his DNA emerged and he branched into pharmaceutical businesses. "I sold my last company to UPS, so I'm now the president of UPS Healthcare," with 6,000 employees in 33 countries, "a big, big operation."

Nevertheless, the ultimate failure of a family business that had been a source of pride for two earlier generations remained a nagging scar. "It was too big a deal to forget," Wes said. Howard Wheeler, his great-grandfather, started Wheeler Shipyard, as it was first known, in 1910 in Brooklyn, New York. He was soon joined by his sons Wesley and Lawrence. The company hit rough spots, the earliest in 1920, when it had to claw

back after a government contract brought the threat of bankruptcy protection from creditors. The business moved to Coney Island Creek, and younger sons, Robert,

Eugene, and Howard, joined in. Wes's grandfather, Wesley L. Wheeler, had trained in naval architecture at Pratt Institute, and it was he who designed the Playmate series of yachts, in various lengths, that Hemingway recognized as well suited for his Gulf Stream sport-fishing ambitions. Hemingway's growing fame, which began with *The Sun Also Rises* in 1926 and was solidified with *A Farewell to Arms* in 1929, no doubt helped spread the yard's reputation. So did the adventure fishing articles about exploits with PILAR that he wrote for *Esquire* magazine to pay off the advance his editor there had given him as a kind of loan for the \$7,495 boat. But Wheeler Shipyard was already thriving by the time the author placed his order in April 1934: as early as 1930, the yard was building 75 boats a year.

In 1940 and 1941, the shipyard won contracts for U.S. Coast Guard boats and Navy minesweepers, which involved expanding the yard to a second site for Wheeler Shipbuilding Corporation at Whitestone, Queens. After World War II, the yard consolidated at the larger facility in Whitestone. The business was reconfigured as Wheeler Yacht Company, but it struggled to retool for the postwar yacht market. Strikes and steel shortages delayed the yard conversion. Also, other postwar boatbuilders were emerging to



LEGEND was launched at Brooklin (Maine) Boat Yard for Wes Wheeler (right), whose ancestors ran the Wheeler Yacht Company in New York City from 1910 into the 1960s. Eric Stockinger (left) was the yard's project leader for the construction. The boat was conceived as a semi-custom production boat for a newly reconstituted Wheeler Yacht Company.

The boat's hard chines facilitated cold-molded construction using four layers of ¼" plywood for the bottom and three layers for the topsides, all sheathed in fiberglass cloth set in epoxy. The twin-screw configuration, with four-bladed propellers 22" in diameter with 23" pitch, allowed the original keel skeg to be eliminated.



meet the demands of the rising middle class, with new hull designs influenced especially by wartime innovations for increased speed. Wheeler went through Chapter 11 bankruptcy by 1947. The family in 1961 lost its controlling shares of the corporation, and the waning business moved to Toms River, New Jersey, for a time before taking over the former Dawn Boat Company yard at Clason Point in the Bronx, New York. The company never fully recovered after a fire destroyed the yard in 1963. The last keel was laid in 1966, Wes said.

Hemingway's fame, however, never abated. He was entwined with PILAR longer than he had been with any of his four wives or many of his friends, and his long ownership kept the Wheeler name in front of the public. The boat still survives just outside of Havana, Cuba, exhibited on land at the Hemingway home, Finca Vigía, which is now a museum.

Some 20 years ago, Wes was asked to serve as a consultant for a prospective Andy Garcia film about Hemingway's Cuba years and his friendship with his paid skipper, Gregorio Fuentes. Wes even suggested building a replica of the boat for the movie. Instead, a Wheeler of similar vintage was found and modified for use in the starring role, even though it didn't have the distinctive profile that was a sport-fishing innovation Hemingway specified for his new construction—a swooping dip in the sheerline aft, giving the transom low freeboard that, in conjunction with an athwartships roller, made it easier to haul giant fish aboard. Hilary Hemingway, the author's niece, wrote the film's screenplay, and she also wrote an article about the project in WB No. 233. The movie, however, wasn't made. Meanwhile, a book, *Hemingway's Boat: Everything He Loved in Life, and Lost, 1934–1961*, by Paul Hendrickson, put the boat in another kind of starring role in 2011. Like Hemingway, in critical reappraisals and biographies, the boat keeps popping up.

"I decided about 20 years ago that we were going to keep the name alive in some way," Wes said. He commissioned LEGEND and owns the boat, but he hopes that it will be but the first in a new line of Wheeler 38s,

called the PILAR model, for a newly reconstituted Wheeler Yacht Company.

"One day, I woke up and realized that *we* designed PILAR," he said. "I asked my aunt, and she says, 'Yeah—we didn't really talk about it. It was just hull No. 534.' Of course, she was a little girl then, but she said, 'Even as we grew up, we never talked about Hemingway. It was just another boat.'"

PILAR's fame made Hemingway's adaptations of the Wheeler Playmate a logical starting point for this new semi-custom production line of Wheeler yachts. Wes initially took the hull design project to the South Carolina-based yacht designer Bruce Marek. He worked from thorough measurements that Wes and others were able to take off PILAR in her on-land setting in Cuba, since no plans for the original type survived the 1963 yard fire. Marek's design adapted the round-bottomed hull for cold-molded hard-chined construction with a slight V-bottom.

With the hull design settled, Wes took the project to Bill Prince Yacht Design in Port Washington, Wisconsin, to finish it out. With a finalized conceptual design in hand, he started looking for a builder. Steve White,



To re-create PILAR's hardware, the builders tracked down vintage pieces to use as patterns for new fabrications and castings in stainless steel.



The two Yanmar diesel engines are installed in a compact engineroom below the cockpit sole but with additional service access through the bottoms of the side seats. The 13.5kW Cummins Onan genset is aft of the engines, and farther aft, where Hemingway would have had a large icebox for fish, LEGEND has a Seakeeper roll-dampening unit.

the longtime proprietor of Brooklin Boat Yard, who in July 2019 transferred the yard's ownership to his employees but still works with a five-person management team, met Wes at the Ocean Reef Club in Key Largo, Florida, to make a pitch for the project using samples made in the yard of various construction techniques that would be used.

"He says, 'This is how I'm going to make it,'" Wes said. "'This is how the stringers and the longitudinals are going to be made. Here's a sample of the keel. Here's the wood type I'll use. Here's the transom.'" To Wes, who had owned a succession of boats, almost all of them sailboats and never a cruising powerboat, a lot of the technology was new to him. "The cold-molded process makes the boats look and act much more like fiberglass, but they sound better, they operate better, they're smoother in the water, you don't get that lapping noise of the waves when you're down below at night. I think the boats ride much nicer."

The hull construction, which began in 2019, used four layers of 1/4" marine plywood on the bottom and three layers on the topsides, all sheathed in fiberglass cloth set in epoxy. Her structure is of laminated Douglas-fir, including sheer clamps, chine logs, and keel, plus she has heavy stringers of Douglas-fir covered in 1/2" marine plywood and sheathed in 'glass. At first, Wes intended to have Brooklin Boat Yard build just the hull, then pause the project. "We decided not to stop,"

he said. "As soon as the hull was almost finished, I said, 'What the hell, let's do it. Just go for it.' It's been a fantastic experience, really. We fell in love with Brooklin," trips that included six meetings at the boatyard. "Every time we come, we get more and more inspired to do more."

Because he is not a fisherman, Wes's boat has a swimming platform off the bright-finished transom, no fighting chair, and no flying bridge. But for another boat—for someone who really wants the full Hemingway experience—those elements could easily be added. His new boat, however, pays homage to Hemingway's specified alterations to his Wheeler Playmate: it has PILAR's swooping break in the sheerline aft to a low transom, the topsides are painted black, and it eschews a bow cockpit in favor of a trunk cabin that extends well forward and has a simple forward dropboard companionway for access to the foredeck. In outboard appearance, the boat looks very much like PILAR did when the writer first saw her upon arrival by ship to Miami. The yard even traced down a collection of vintage Wheeler hardware in New Jersey, allowing faithful patterns to be made for new castings, including the steering wheel. Wes provided a distinctive stem decoration, a "W" with an arrow, and searches for appropriate additional hardware, such as a large searchlight, have given the boat a deep authenticity. But there the similarity ends.

What Hemingway would not recognize aboard the boat is the degree of sophistication in its systems and the level of luxury in its appointments.

Start with the power. Hemingway had wanted twin engines, but to save money he settled on a centerline 70-hp Chrysler Crown engine with an offset 40-hp Lycoming engine for trolling. Both ran on gasoline. The new boat has twin V-8, four-stroke Yanmar 8LV 370 turbo-diesel engines, for a total of 740 hp—more than *ten times* the original horsepower. The engineroom ventilation is cleverly hidden, some of it behind cockpit furniture; the most visible vents are period-authentic cabin-side-mounted half-cowlings that face forward, replicating the original ones. These, however, lead to Dorade boxes hidden belowdeck to direct spray water overboard while allowing air to pass through to the engineroom.

The engines run through a 2.13:1 Yanmar transmission to turn Michigan Wheel four-blade propellers, each 22" in diameter with a 23" pitch. The fuel capacity of 250 gallons gives her a cruising range of about 400 nautical miles.

Stay in that below-the-cockpit-sole area for a moment: Aft of the engines is a Cummins Onan 13.5kW genset to handle the boat's numerous power needs. Farther aft—where Hemingway's copper-lined fish boxes would

Right top—Throughout LEGEND’s conception and construction, great pains were taken to hide most anachronistic technology. **Right bottom**—Sipo covers open to reveal the engine, Seakeeper, and trim-tab displays to port of the helm station. These instruments can be covered when desired; all functions can be operated through the Garmin multifunction display’s touch-screen, and all except those related to autopilot can be run through an iPad or iPhone.

have been—is a Seakeeper 3. This device is bolted to the heavy longitudinal stringers and counteracts a boat’s rolling motion by using a gyroscopic, vacuum-sealed flywheel spinning at 8,450 rpm with attitude controls that automatically react to sea states. The boat also has Zipwake trim tabs, which are also gyroscopically controlled to constantly adjust athwartship trim. Eric Stockinger, the boatyard’s project leader on LEGEND, said the Seakeeper works best up to about 15 mph, and the Zipwake units are at their best starting at that speed. “The two of them together give you this sort of seamless performance,” he said.

Moving forward, the aesthetics of the helm station echo the Wheeler style from the ’30s, but the variations are completely modern. Hemingway chose wood for his steering wheel, but LEGEND’s is of stainless-steel, which was an option in 1934, and is replicated from a vintage one to suit this boat’s aesthetics.

The helm chair is a custom design built by Arrigoni Design in Clinton, Connecticut, for full adjustability. It has a stout wooden ladder back in sipo, matching the wood chosen for the cabin in lieu of the mahogany available originally. The retro-looking analog instrument dials are by VDO. These gauges are not directly connected to the engines but instead mirror digital readouts on a multi-function display and also in a Yanmar monitor that is tucked away—but easily accessible—at the helm station. The multi-function display is a Garmin GPSMAP 8612xsv, and its navigation system integrates GPS, radar, and AIS, along with satellite weather. All engine functions are available by cycling through the Garmin’s touch-screens. For everything except the autopilot, the system is paired with an iPad for remote monitoring, and the boat has its own URL and WiFi system, accessed through a cell-phone connection, meaning that even an iPhone can duplicate the iPad displays. Among the other systems controlled through the screen is the boat’s computer-controlled lighting, which via digital switching by New Zealand-based CZone has a variety of user-specified presets. The central heating and air-conditioning system is also controlled by screen options.

The goal, Stockinger said, was to make these systems, as numerous as they are, disappear as much as possible behind woodwork inspired by the 1930s. The boat follows PILAR’s helm-station layout closely, as shown in photos and documentation of the original



boat. One variation is a starboard locker, where none existed originally, made specifically to house elaborate electronic switching systems. It’s made with raised-panel joinery, using sipo, to blend in.

Below, the yacht follows the theme of loading the boat with technology but hiding it well. The interior is trimmed with sipo but has a cabin sole of Douglas-fir and Herreshoff-style white painted surfaces and overhead to contrast with the deep-colored bright-finished wood. At the foot of the companionway, the galley is to port and an enclosed head and shower are to starboard. Moving forward, a dining area to port has a table that can be lowered to make a double berth. To starboard, opposite the table, are two custom, built-in easy chairs with a locker between them. Forward, an owner’s



The helm chair takes its ladder-back design from the helm seat and fighting chair on PILAR but is fully adjustable.

With a dining area to port and two custom-made upholstered chairs to starboard, LEGEND's saloon is comfortable and reminiscent of yachts from an earlier era.

private stateroom with a double berth canted off to port leaves ample elbow-room to starboard. Hiding the complexity gives the boat a conceptually simple layout.

The galley has all stainless-steel counters, with a two-drawer Vitrifrigo refrigerator below, giving an option for either of the drawers, or both, to be used as a freezer. A microwave oven is hidden in a locker above. The Kenyon induction cooktop uses silicone mat covers, rather than rails, to keep cooking pots in place. The result is a spare and clean layout.

Throughout, modern devices such as USB ports and plugs were kept out of sight. The sound system operates by speakers designed to be mounted on the hidden inside surfaces of wooden panels, using the resonance of the wood itself to transmit sound to the saloon, with another set for the cockpit, and a subwoofer is built low into the locker between the two starboard chairs. The USB port for the iPad control is inside the locker's drawer. A very-low-profile, flat-screen Samsung Frame television mounted on the port forward bulkhead displays artwork when not in use and has the look of a framed photograph or painting.

To dampen vibration of the powerful engines, the entire cabin sole is padded. "When you run the engines and the generator, you can't feel anything down here," Stockinger said. "We added a lot of soundproofing, too, to make things quiet. We wanted to showcase 21st-century technology. We want somebody who wants this boat to say, 'Look, I want it to look like this old boat but I want all the modern luxuries, I don't want to compromise on any of that kind of stuff.'"

It's hard to say what the famously hard-charging Hemingway, who fished aggressively and whose



principal personal device of choice was a Thompson submachine gun to keep sharks at bay, would think about it all.

He very likely would have appreciated the boat's performance, however. Steve White joined Wes for the boat's initial run south from Brooklin, staying aboard as skipper as far as Annapolis, Maryland. Wes intended to continue south, linger in North Carolina, then continue eventually as far as Key West and perhaps Cuba.

White has had his own relatively recent fondness for powerboats, having restored the 1937 commuter yacht APHRODITE, a 74-footer, at the yard some 20 years ago. He went on to own STINGRAY, a 56' LOA, Ray Hunt-designed, deep-V cruiser of 1964 (see WB No. 259), and now HONEY BADGER, a 1931 38' LOA Matthews. "I like sailing as much as I ever did, but I like powerboating *more* than I ever did," he said. "It's just easier to use, to hop in and point to where you want to go. It's easier to schedule."

During the autumn sprint down the eastern seaboard, he found that LEGEND's sweet spot came at about 23 mph, with the engines running at about 2,500 rpm and fuel consumption at 19.6 gallons per hour. More than that, he said, and the fuel consumption increases markedly, to 25 gallons per hour at 25 mph. The throttles have a built-in function to synchronize the engines, which he found remarkably effective and made the boat noticeably quieter and smoother-running than the usual method of adjusting independent throttles to match rpms.



Stainless-steel countertops and low-profile appliances give the galley a clean and spare functionality. In keeping with the desire to conceal most technology, a microwave oven occupies the locker above the cooktop.



FRANCESCO GORUP DE BESANEZ

The original PILAR, which Hemingway purchased in 1934, still survives and is on exhibit at a Hemingway museum at the writer's former home, Finca Vigía, just outside of Havana, Cuba.

"We had a whole variety of conditions going down," White said. The first day, to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, presented head seas in winds of up to 18 knots off the port bow. "Thinking about it, the hull was designed as much as possible like the original PILAR, which had a top speed of about 12 mph and no spray rails. Now, at

25 mph with 18 knots of wind, you've got 45 mph blowing right back at the windshield." Bill Prince designed-in spray rails as a contingency, and White said that when LEGEND returns to Maine next year, as expected, the yard will make and install them, starting just aft of the stem near the boot-top and extending aft about a third of the length of the hull on each side.

Later, while passing Sandy Hook toward Cape May, New Jersey, they found themselves in 10' swells. "The Seakeeper really paid for itself that day—we never heeled more than 6 degrees one way or the other," White said. The unit draws a lot of power, 80 amps, and takes about 25 minutes to come up to functional speed, although the boat can be under way while it's doing so. Each of the engines has a 100-amp alternator to more than meet the power demands. White had never driven a boat with such a unit before, and he was impressed by its stabilizing effect. "The really impressive test for me was when we were tied up at the dock, we would get four or five guys to run back and forth to rock the boat," he said, to test stability. With the Seakeeper functioning, "It would just stop."

With the maneuverability provided by twin screws, Wes and the yard jointly decided at first that a bow thruster wouldn't be essential. The experience White had in maneuvering into a tight marina slip in a stiff crosswind—being unable to enter bow-on he had to quickly shift to backing in, which proved easier—convinced them that it would be wise to have one. That installation, too, will occur when the boat returns to Maine.

Stockinger has taken to calling LEGEND a "Spirit of Tradition powerboat." For more than 20 years

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now the yard has been on the leading edge of Spirit of Tradition sailing yachts, designed to adapt the fine ends and long overhangs of classic racing yachts to thoroughly modern wood-epoxy hulls having having fin keels and spade rudders. Stockinger feels that with this boat the yard is extending that concept to classic powerboats. "I think that story is kind of part of Brooklin Boat Yard, with cold-molded, one-off boats," he said. "I think what's interesting now is that the retro powerboat market is taking off, too."

The yard's in-house design staff brought its own expertise to alterations that Wes wanted, and shoehorned systems into a hull that was never designed to accommodate them. "I was able to send him pictures every day, and he was able to text me and email me and send them back," Stockinger said. With such a streamlined flow of ideas, decisions could be made right away. Mock-ups, too, helped work out final details of such things as those custom-designed, yard-built saloon chairs.

It all came together in the days surrounding LEGEND's launching. "Yesterday was perfect," Wes said of sea trials a few days after the September 6 launching. "It was beautiful. The fog cleared," and four runs in a day took about 30 Wheeler family members who had made their way to Brooklin out on local waters. "It was the first time in a long time we've all been together. Everybody had a great time. This has been a long, long, long effort. We couldn't have been prouder."

TTrue to form, PILAR became entwined, just as wives and friends did, in Hemingway's outsized personality. He could be notoriously difficult. But his contributions to literature were real and broke the previous generation's accretions of convention. His contributions to sport fishing were also real, and not just in his equipment: the scientists he took to sea confirmed his observations about fish species; he set records for marlin; and his technique for landing giant bluefin tuna without shark attacks was new and it worked.

He was a very complicated human being striving to achieve a clean and spare virtuosity in plain words. In his writing, as in his life, a lot was hidden behind the woodwork. In a strange way, the writer for whom a boat became a

metaphor for a life has become a metaphor for a boat. LEGEND's very complicated systems remain largely out of sight, below the surface, so that it would feel right and living with the boat might be simple. And yet it will never fail to stand out in a crowd. 

Tom Jackson is WoodenBoat's senior editor.

Wheeler Yacht Company, Chapel Hill, NC 27517; 919-240-7258; www.wheeleryachts.com. Brooklin Boat Yard, Center Harbor Rd., Brooklin, ME 04616; 207-359-2236; www.brooklinboatyard.com.

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