

ABOVE LEFT TO
RIGHT: Ernest
Hemingway and
Carlos Gutierrez
aboard *Pilar*, Key
West, 1934; Ernest
Hemingway aboard
Pilar in 1950;
Hemingway's catch
of the day

PAPA'S GOT A BRAND NEW BOAT

A replica of Hemingway's fishing boat *Pilar* has put to sea and will soon enter line production, bringing a legend back to life. **Bruno Cianci** reports.

Photographs by **Billy Black**



Family means a lot to me and this boat brings back to life what my ancestors did.' Wes Wheeler, New York-born in 1956 and now a leading manager in the pharmaceutical industry, is talking about the passion behind his latest entrepreneurial venture: to build and market a boat based on the Playmate 38, a very successful motorboat produced in the 1930s by the shipyard founded by Howard E Wheeler, one of Wes' ancestors. Specifically, the boat in question is a modern reinterpretation of the legendary *Pilar*, the fishing boat bought in 1934 by Ernest Hemingway. The Pulitzer and Nobel Prize laureate was famously a great fishing enthusiast, and particularly active between Key West, the Bimini archipelago and Cuba.

A trendsetter

Pilar was a particularly innovative boat. It is believed to have had the very first flybridge equipped with a wheelhouse and the first outriggers, features now standard on all such boats. Not only did *Pilar* outperform most of the peers, but in the 30 years the writer owned her, she survived four hurricanes, as much testimony to the solidity of build as to the courage and determination of her owner. *Pilar* was the first known boat capable of bringing a perfectly intact giant tuna to Bimini, thanks also to the fishing techniques introduced by the writer, which included the most rapid possible hoisting of fish on board, to stop predators eating the catch, a problem played out in *Old Man and the Sea*.

Named after Hemingway's second wife Pauline Pfeiffer, nicknamed Pilar (also the name of a principal character in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*), the boat was a modified Playmate 38. The standard engine was a 70bhp six-cylinder Chrysler petrol engine powering the boat to an estimated 12-13 knots. Among Hemingway's many modifications, besides the flybridge and outriggers, was a Lycoming engine better suited to trolling at three knots, oversized stowage and tanks, a live well, a transom mounted roller for hauling fish and a fighting chair in the cockpit.

During World War Two, the boat was equipped with instruments and radios to transmit the position of German submarines, in the event of any sighting. But that's another story. Today, *Pilar* is a museum boat at the former Hemingway mansion of Finca Vigia in the Cuban capital of Havana. It was eventually handed over to Gregorio Fuentes (1897-2002), the sailor who perhaps inspired the fictional figures of Santiago (*The Old Man and the Sea*, 1952) and Eddie (*Islands in the Stream*, 1970). The boat was then donated to the Cuban people, and finally to the government of Havana, by Fuentes himself.

The Hemingway story played an important role in Wes Wheeler's decision to bring back to life this Playmate 38 and the family brand that had closed in the 1950s. What intrigued him more was the later. In just over four decades, the Wheeler shipyard had produced some 3,500 yachts, military boats, launches and skiffs; it was this reputation for quality that led Hemingway to turn to them to build the boat of his dreams. "Howard Wheeler was my great-grandfather" explains Wes, "while Wesley L Wheeler was his son, therefore my grandfather. He was the designer in the company in the 1930s and 40s, with the other

brothers in finance and sales. Today, there is no other Wheeler involved in the new business besides my family and me, although my cousin Eugene, aka 'Tut', has provided some advice. In addition to 'Tut', my wife Marianne, designer Bill Prince, waterline designer Bruce Marek, Brooklin Boat Yard owner Steve White and project manager Eric Stockinger greatly contributed in various ways. My two children, Gregory and Erica, have helped with marketing."

The challenge of rebuilding *Pilar* and restoring the Wheeler brand have been many. For obvious reasons, the new product has had to adapt to new construction and requirements, entailing hundreds of questions. For example, the engines needed a lot more air than the originals, "although we did not want to see the intake or exhaust grills." This was solved by bringing air into the engine room under the toe kicks of the cockpit bench seats, and by exhausting it out of the aft cockpit walls in similar manner. Those involved went to great lengths to make sure that the vast majority of technology on the finished boat would be invisible.

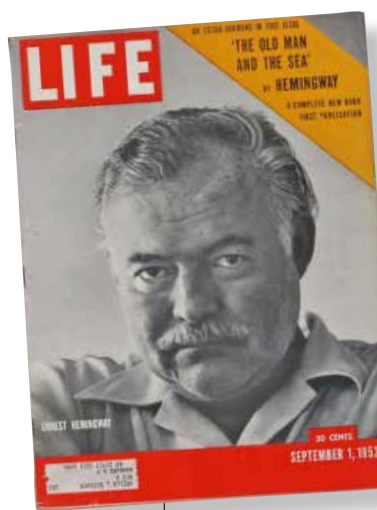
Better than the original

Given the times and the demands of the market, it was necessary for the boat to be far better than the original. It was a challenge to ensure that all measurements were perfect and then make the new boat look authentic, while also having all modern systems and equipment. "As for the plans," said Wheeler, "we reverse-engineered *Pilar* from measurements I took from the original in Cuba, which I supplemented using brochures from 1934". In terms of interior and finishings, the boat is all new and looks like an improved version in every respect, starting with the habitability of four berths.

Performance has improved significantly as well. The hull, in fact, was redesigned such that the new one allows the boat to achieve much greater speed and navigational comfort.

"The bottom of the boat," added Wheeler, "is flatter to allow it to run at high speeds, while the interior is more luxurious and systems are state-of-the-art. Thanks to a planing hull, the boat can easily reach 30 knots, more than double *Pilar's* speed, and has completed quite a cruise along the US Atlantic coast without any problems."

Bruce Marek, a native of Chicago and owner of Marek Yacht & Design, was involved in the project in 2012, when he was engaged by Wheeler to develop a set of replica hull lines. "Wes Wheeler's goal," said Marek, "was to get as close as possible to *Pilar's* original hull lines. Wes had various dimensions and pictures that he and [Ernest's niece] Hillary Hemingway took from the original *Pilar* in Cuba. And there was also a book on Ernest Hemingway and the boat that had snippets of related boat data that I was able to extract and use in my design efforts. It's amazing what an experienced yacht designer can do by importing a jpeg of a boat into AutoCAD, and scaling it based on some known dimension, or dimensions; deadrise angles can be verified, bow curve radius estimated, etc... In the old days, designers gave the builder a blueprint



ABOVE AND RIGHT: The Old Man and the Sea, first published in 1952 and the author on the cover of Life magazine the same year



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The galley; Wes Wheeler; saloon; Legend underway





drawing along with the table of offsets. The builder was expected to take the table of offsets, and redraw in full size on the loft floor, and to correct any small-scale drawing inaccuracies.”

Bill Prince, born in 1973 in Minnesota, inherited the boat’s hull lines from Bruce Marek: “We analysed them from a fresh perspective, looking at all the usual metrics like prismatic coefficient, buttock angles and deadrise at each station, etcetera. The lines were spot on, so we made no changes. From that we created about 75 construction and systems drawings. These sat idle for a few years, until Wes commissioned the build at Brooklin.”

The building process

Christened *Legend* and registered in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, home of the new Wheeler Yacht Company, the first of the Wheeler 38s was built in Brooklin, Maine, the starting point of the long southbound journey on the eastern seaboard. Many more will follow, thinks Wes: “The only authorised builder of the Wheeler brand is Brooklin Boat Yard, where we are ready to begin series production. The shipwrights and craftsmen there are from many generations of wooden boatbuilders and know very well how to handle the material.”

Steve White, president of Brooklin Boat Yard, explained how he came to be involved: “I met Wes at Ocean Reef Club in 2017. We had discussed this project with Bill Prince over the phone, and when I was asked to give a presentation of cold-moulded construction at the club for its Vintage Weekend I decided to build some full-size sections of the hull and deck construction as a visual aid to better explain the process. Apparently, this made an impression on Wes and we signed a contract to build the hull with an option to complete the boat. Brooklin Boat Yard’s input was construction scantlings and details – we did the construction drawings, systems and electrical installation.

“Among these is a Seakeeper gyro for stability, well tested and proven off the New Jersey coastline with strong westerly winds and 7-10ft easterly swells left over from Hurricane Sally

ABOVE: The building process and details of the dashboard

WHEELER 38

DESIGNED
Marek Yacht
& Design

BUILDER
Brooklin Boat
Yard, 2020

LOA
39ft 4in (12m)

LWL
38ft 9in (11.8m)

BEAM
12ft (3.7m)

DRAFT
3ft 5in (1m)

MATERIALS
Douglas fir,
mahogany
and teak

DISP
10.3 tonnes

PROPULSION
Twin Yanmar
370hp diesels

in mid-September. Our hope is that *Legend* will show people that the styling and character of a period yacht can be achieved with the performance and comfort equal to any modern one.”

Eric Stockinger, born in Dearborn, Michigan, in 1974, was the project manager and lead carpenter for *Legend*. It took 13 months to build the boat, a process delayed at least two months by the pandemic.

“Bruce and Bill had done a great job with the design” he said, “but it was our task to build it. The Wheeler 38 is a cold-moulded, wooden boat built using many traditional techniques in tandem with the latest in modern epoxy and vacuum bag construction. The hull is built upside down over a mould of bulkheads and frames of Bruynzeel mahogany plywood that stay with the boat. The individual pieces are puzzle-joined and epoxied together on a vacuum table. This vacuum process acts like a giant clamp that distributes constant, even pressure over the entire part while the epoxy cures. Once all the parts are glued together, the mould is assembled on the shop floor.”

The structural integrity of the design relies not only on frames and bulkheads, but on the stringers and beams running fore and aft. All structural members are built from Douglas fir. Some of these are made from solid wood while others, like the chine logs and sheer clamps, are laminations.

Because full-length lumber is not available, the beams and stringers are scarfed together from shorter pieces, a time-consuming task that involves routers, hand and power planes. The keel and engine bed logs are made the same way. The keel and stem are among the first pieces to be added to the mould, then the chine logs are laminated in place and the topside stringers are fitted. The engine bed logs and sheer clamps come next.

Once all the main longitudinal pieces are attached to the mould they have to be faired; an important step involving a lot of handwork. Because the stringers and beams are glued in place, the carpenters must work on top of the mould, using battens to make sure the hull is fair.

All of this is in preparation for planking. The bottom planking is four layers of 1/4in (6mm) Bruynzeel mahogany plywood laid in an alternating diagonal pattern that adds strength to the hull, whereas the topsides have three layers, including the transom, which receives mahogany veneers and is brightly finished, unlike the black topsides that are another distinctive feature of the old *Pilar*.

The boat’s name, in large italics on the transom, is *Legend* and aims at reviving that of *Pilar*, the boat that inspired many of Hemingway’s fictional characters that have thrilled so many of us over the years.

