



Captain Carol Bramblett steering the Joshua. With the help of family, friends and fellow boat lovers, Bramblett never lost sight of her lifelong dream of building a boat.

Captain Carol's Sleek Dream Ship



Cindy Frank (left) and Captain Carol Bramblett (right) on the Joshua. Frank was one of the many people who helped Bramblett live her dream of building a boat and is now a partner in the Joshua.

AS A CHILD CAROL BRAMBLETT DREAMED OF A SLEEK SAILING SHIP, NAMED "JOSHUA," BUILT AS FLEET AS THE OLD SCHOONERS THAT ONCE PLIED MOBILE BAY. AFTER AN UPHILL STRUGGLE TO LAUNCH IT INTO REALITY, SHE WONDERS IF THE TRUE KEEL OF HER DREAM WASN'T ALL THE PEOPLE WHO CAME TOGETHER IN THE PROCESS.

The Joshua sailed in the Tall Ship Parade for Mobile's Tricentennial, a paramount honor for sailors. She sailed in the place of honor between the Coast Guard Eagle and the Pride of Baltimore. Because the Joshua is the only two-masted wooden schooner in Alabama that can carry 49 passengers, she has been named Mobile's Official Tall Ship.

Tucked warmly in bed in Sheffield, Ala., between nightfall and sunrise, Carol Bramblett spent her childhood nights dreaming of a boat. Some nights it bobbed gently as it waited in its slip and other nights it stood like a magnificent creature surrounded by only wind and water, its sails connecting sea and sky. In her dreams the details were clear and compelling on the two-masted wooden schooner, down to the name painted on the transom: Joshua.

As she grew up, Bramblett was determined to find the boat named Joshua that had frequented her dreams as a child and began searching through archived photographs. In her search she learned that the Joshua was like the boats that sailed up and down the bay between the 1880s and 1930s and were no longer in production. Bramblett said that when she realized the Joshua was not recorded anywhere she stopped telling herself, "One of these days I'm going to find that boat." Instead she resolved, "Someday I'm going to build that boat."

Text and photos by Vicki Valosik ElZarrad

That someday came in 1991 when Bramblett was laid off from her job at the International Paper Company and decided to take the opportunity to pursue her captain's license. After two years of working as a charter captain, she began construction on the Joshua at Zirlott Boatyard, located in the south Mobile County town of Coden—an old fishing and shipbuilding community like neighboring Bayou La Batre. On November 14, 1993, Bramblett, along with friends and family, celebrated the laying of the keel, the backbone of the ship, with a huge party complete with fried chicken and red beans and rice. Keeping with sailing tradition, Father Patrick Manning blessed the keel after everyone had signed it.

Bramblett wanted the Joshua to look just as she had in her dreams, which meant building in the style and with techniques from the turn of the twentieth century. She enlisted the help of Gene Everet Zirlott, a friend and respected third-generation boat-builder, to take charge of construction, and the Joshua began to take shape.

But in 1997, tragedy struck. Zirlott was killed in an accident and his boatyard went bankrupt. After mourning the loss of her friend, Bramblett



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a second loan to cover the costs of the cranes and manpower. All the while, Bramblett never lost sight of her lifelong vision.

"She was like a dream," Bramblett says. "There were a lot of obstacles. Our boat builder passed away. I scratched my head and said I don't know how this is going to work, but I never said it isn't going to work. Everybody was so positive, I never thought for a minute it couldn't be done."



Carol Bramblett, along with her friends and family, celebrated the laying of the keel—the backbone of the ship—in 1993. In keeping with sailing tradition, Father Patrick Manning blessed the keel after everyone signed it. Photo by Carol Bramblett.

Bramblett makes no secret of the fact that she had a tremendous network of support from friends and fellow boat lovers. One of many examples is a group of college students who volunteered their spring break painting and hammering alongside Bramblett and her crew. On other occasions, Bramblett would arrive at the boatyard to find people she had never met already hard at work on the Joshua.

Bramblett remembers, "All the people would say, 'You're living my dream. I always wanted to build a boat.' They were living their dream through me. They wanted the boat finished."

Cindy Frank, who met Bramblett doing charter assignments and is now a partner in the Joshua, was one of those people. "We all have dreams," Frank says, "but Carol was able to carry on with hers. That's why so many people jumped on board, literally, to help. They were able to share the dream by helping to build the boat. I'm like

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everybody else. Her dream intrigued me. I wanted to see the boat get built. It was exciting."

After receiving an invitation to sail in the Tall Ship Parade for Mobile's Tricentennial in 2002—a paramount honor for sailors—Bramblett knew that she must get the Joshua seaworthy in a short amount of time, even if it meant running off an auxiliary tank in the floor of the cabin. The gaft-rigged sails were sewn by expert sail maker Willie

Paulson, who came out of retirement just to see the Joshua completed. A diver friend of Bramblett's on one of his dives found a buried helm estimated to be over 100 years old. Along with the helm, many of the doors and portholes inside the cabin came from ships of years gone by. An even older but hidden treasure aboard the Joshua is an 1800s Liberty Head, embedded under the mast along with a Sacagawea dollar and a Susan B. Anthony dollar, as tribute to a time-honored sailing tradition. Bramblett explains, "The money is supposed to pay the way across the Stix River. We joked that we should have put an American Express card because I wasn't sure if three coins would do."

With her schooner finished just in time for the parade, Bramblett captained the 72-foot Joshua for the first time on July 4, 2002, sailing in a place of honor between the Coast Guard Eagle and the Pride of Baltimore. Even though it was the first, she still considers the Tall Ship Parade the best trip she and the Joshua have taken.

Because the Joshua was built in a style reminiscent of the ships that brought cargo into Mobile Bay a century ago, and because she is the only two-masted wooden schooner in Alabama that can carry 49 passengers, the Joshua has been named Mobile's Official Tall Ship. As part of that honor, Joshua serves as an escort to Navy ships whenever they pass through or dock in Mobile.



Despite the fact that Joshua is a male name, Bramblett says, "Boats are always 'hers.' They're like our mothers, but guys say like our mistresses: They'll take care of you if you take care of

them. She is just named after a male. 'Anything of grace and beauty is always feminine gender.' That's what Alfalfa from 'The Little Rascals' said." She adds that anyone with the name Joshua can sail with her for free.

Now that the Joshua is complete,



"Boats are always 'hers,'" Captain Carol Bramblett says. "They'll take care of you if you take care of them. She is just named after a male." She adds that anyone with the name Joshua can sail with her for free.

Captain Carol spends her days doing what she loves. She leads tours (most starting at the Grand Hotel in Point Clear) and fishing expeditions and hosts get-togethers of all sorts on the Joshua, including weddings, birthdays and memorials. She says, "Any reason you can think to have a party, you can do it on a boat."

Although some excursions go out to the Middle Bay Lighthouse, Bramblett says the trips she likes best don't have a destination. "Sailing is all about sailing. It's not about going. Once you get out there and put the sails up, you're there. You don't have to have a destination."

As for her childhood dreams, Bramblett says, "I don't know why I dreamed it. I'm just glad I did. I know I should research it, but I'm too busy living life." She sometimes wonders if the dreams were really about a boat to be built or about all the people who would come together in the process.

"The camaraderie of the people who helped was the most wonderful thing," Bramblett says. "It's just goodness. I don't think I own Joshua. Everybody else owns her and I'm just the caretaker. It's more about Joshua than me. She'll be here a long time after I'm gone."

Vicki Valosik ElZarrad is a freelance contributor to Mobile Bay Monthly.



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