

Passion First, Then the Picture

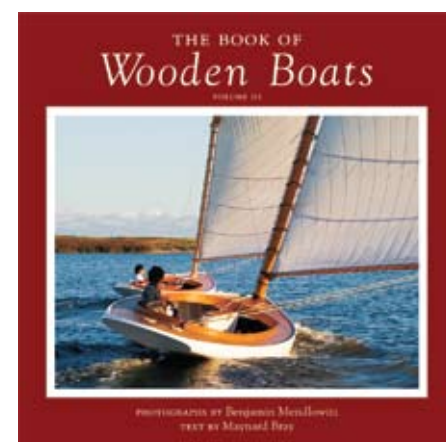


I've always envied colleagues in this craft who've positioned themselves to concentrate on subjects that permit that intensity all the time. The serious landscape and nature photographers come immediately to mind, the John Shaws and Tom Mangelsens, creating successful franchises from their love of critters, fresh air, mountain ranges, etc. There are countless others, too, in any number of fields—photographers whose private passions have evolved into thriving commercial specialties.

Several shooters in this category have really set my teeth gritting over the years, when their imagery hits some strong personal chord with me, some subject I love but will never have the time or where-withal to weave into my own magnum opus. A pair of classic cases in point have recently made it into booksellers' inventories: Volume III of Benjamin Mendlowitz' *The Book of Wooden Boats*, and the newly released softcover edition of Steve Gottlieb's large format collection, *Washington: Portrait of a City*.

Messing About in Boats

Almost everyone, certainly every mariner, knows the Water Rat's immortal line from Kenneth Grahame's children's fable,



The Book of Wooden Boats
Vol. III
 Benjamin Mendlowitz
 Text by Maynard Bray
 W.W. Norton & Company
www.wwnorton.com
 190 pp

PHOTOS THIS PAGE COPYRIGHT © 2010, BY BENJAMIN MENDLOWITZ, ALL RIGHTS RESERVED



A few years ago, an annual report designer caught me a little off guard when I submitted a job. I wasn't surprised he liked my images, but he also thanked me for my "passion." That word isn't bandied around much in the cinched-up corporate communications world. The journeyman photographer inside me was

dutifully appreciative. What the art director took for passion was mostly, I think, the result of having the time and freedom to thoroughly work the subject. The deadline allowed some breathing room, and there was a dose of creative license as well, so I went after it with a little more intensity than usual.



PHOTO COPYRIGHT © STEVE GOTTLIEB

The Wind in the Willows: “There is nothing, absolutely nothing, half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats.” It ranks as something of a mantra among those of us with a passion for waterborne vessels (in my own case, over 35 years on sailboats). And, if there’s a photographic analog of this quote, it’s easily the powerful, restrained elegance of Benjamin Mendlowitz’ dramatic studies of the wooden-hulled boat, a true icon of yachting. A longtime resident of the Maine coastline, Mendlowitz has the proverbial seawater in his blood, for 30 years addictively “messing about” with these masterpieces of ship craft whether they’re in flat inland waters, open sea, or reaching off blustery headlands around the world. His eye for the unique details of marine woodworking—graceful bends and radiuses, precision joinery—and his acute feel for the play of reflected light against hulls and varnished bright works are all impeccable.

To the vast majority of today’s sailors, addicted as we are to comparatively low-maintenance fiberglass hulls and topsides, and aluminum masts and spars, the very idea of owning, much less pampering a wood boat, is pure abhorrence. On the flip side, there are few sights to get any sailor’s juices flowing faster than the craft that skim, in rich stunning color, across the pages of this collection: A vintage Fife cutter; sails set “full and by” foaming through black water off the Maine coast; a spry little pair of Great South Bay catboats (the book’s cover subject) racing in golden light on Long Island Sound; the main saloon interior of Humphrey Bogart’s beloved schooner, *Santana*, with detailing so meticulous, it might have been crafted by a

violin maker. There are motor craft in this book as well as tugs, workboats and lobstermen, lovingly restored throwbacks, all pristine and eminently seaworthy. And, there are rowboats—the popular double-ended “peapod,” a Venetian gondola, and restored 19th Century San Francisco “pulling boats,” the waterborne taxicabs of their day.

Like mariners all over the world, I’ve been a de facto student of Mendlowitz’s work through his *Calendar of Wooden Boats*, perfunctory wall decor in the offices and workshops of shipwrights and yacht brokers and sail makers since 1983. *The Book of Wooden Boats: Volume III* is a selection from the calendar imagery of the past 10 years. For a yachtsman, it’s a walk down memory lane, and yet another salty addition to his home library. For the photographer, the book, along with Volumes I and II, and the resilient calendar/screensaver/t-shirt franchise Mendlowitz has created around his imagery—and the images themselves, textbook samples of maritime photography at its best—all comprise an object lesson in building a business and a creative persona driven by your own passion.

Moments Among the Marble

A friend of mine grew up in a little town in South Dakota, where every morning as he ate breakfast, he could look out his kitchen window at Mt. Rushmore. I used to think about him whenever I worked in Washington D.C., taking an early morning jog past memorials and monuments, the White House, the Smithsonian, the solitary bronze of General Grant guarding the Capitol steps—what it must be like to have all this pomp and history right in your own backyard. I remember stopping to gnaw on

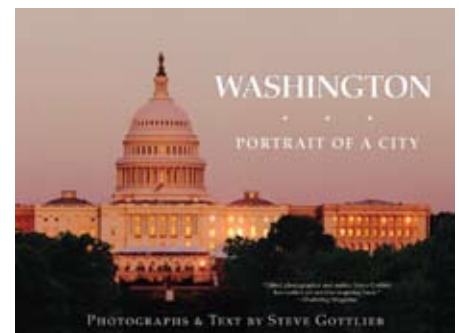
a Power Bar a few feet from the very spot where FDR (and practically every other president) took his oath of office. For a history buff this is intoxicating stuff.

Steve Gottlieb obviously shares my fascination with our nation’s capital, with the significant difference that he actually lives and works there. Historic Washington is his backyard, and his revised paperback edition of *Washington: Portrait of a City* celebrates his obvious passion for his hometown, already one of the world’s most copiously photographed cities.

The book should probably be subtitled “Portrait of a Capital,” dotting as it does on public Washington, the visual iconography that sets D.C. apart from every other city in the world. But beyond the postcard shots—the aerial of the National Mall under mid-day sun, the obligatory dusk silhouette of the Iwo Jima Memorial—Gottlieb also finds surprising details and touching moments of human interaction with all that marble. His Park Service worker scrubbing the great chiseled head of Abraham Lincoln and the candid glimpse of a young lawyer dashing between the Corinthian columns of the Supreme Court building are timeless images. They’re the testaments of a sensitive photographer (formerly an attorney by trade) that the symbolism around him, and the lofty words etched over every Palladian façade in sight—all this grandeur is really a matter of people.



Writer/photographer Jim Cornfield is a regular columnist and contributing editor for Rangefinder. He’s based in Malibu Canyon, CA.



Washington: Portrait of a City
Steve Gottlieb
 Taylor Trade Publishing
 The Rowman & Littlefield
 Publishing Group Inc.
www.rlptrade.com
 144 pp.