

Wood Drift Boats -

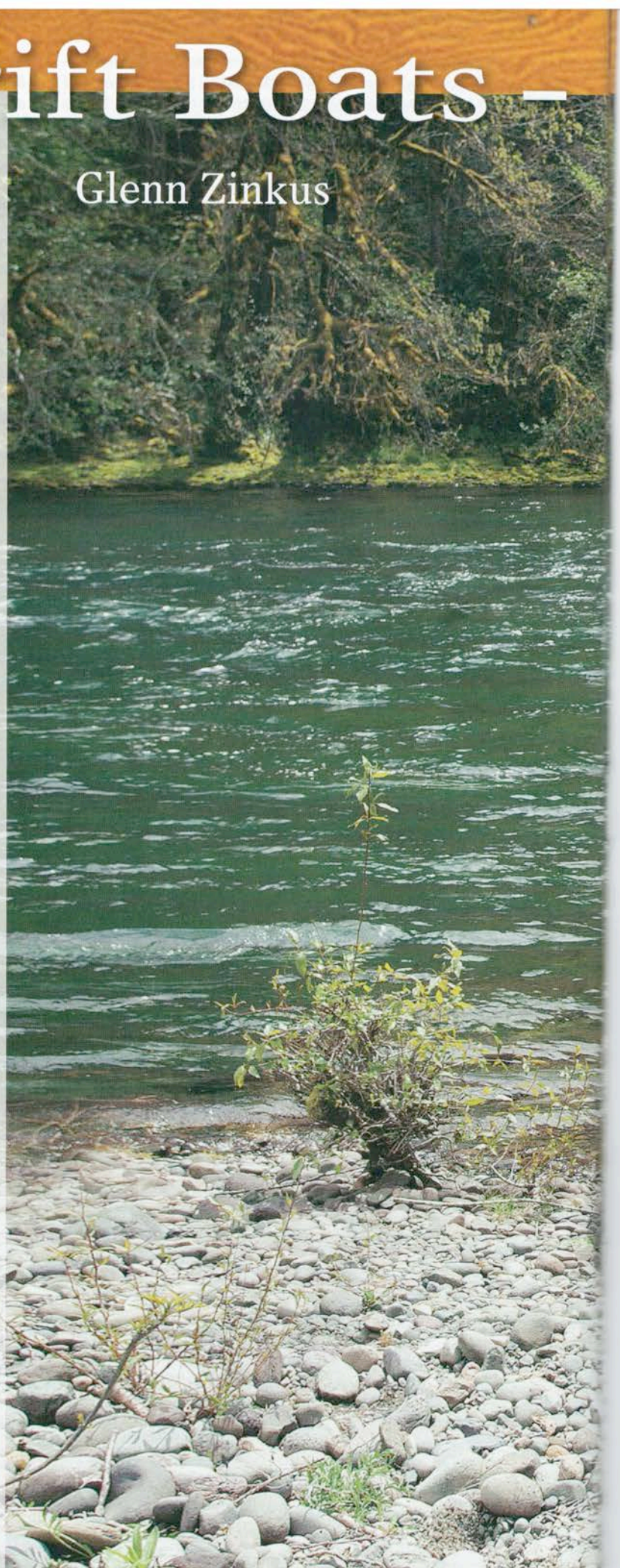
Glenn Zinkus

The McKenzie and Rogue River style drift boats popular on many Northwest rivers and around the world are a uniquely Oregon invention. The allure of wood boats is undeniable and can be attributed to their elegant construction showing off both artisan craftsmanship and the natural splendor of Pacific Northwest sourced hardwoods or exotic woods. Constructed of Douglas Fir, Sitka Spruce, Port Orford Cedar, and exotic mahoganies, these boats also boast a refined utilitarian design and forgiving sturdiness that can only come with natural materials; beautiful things to float through rugged beautiful settings. There is no place better to bathe ones senses in wood boat aesthetics than at the annual Wood Drift Boat Show appropriately held on the banks of Oregon's McKenzie River at Eagle Rock Lodge.

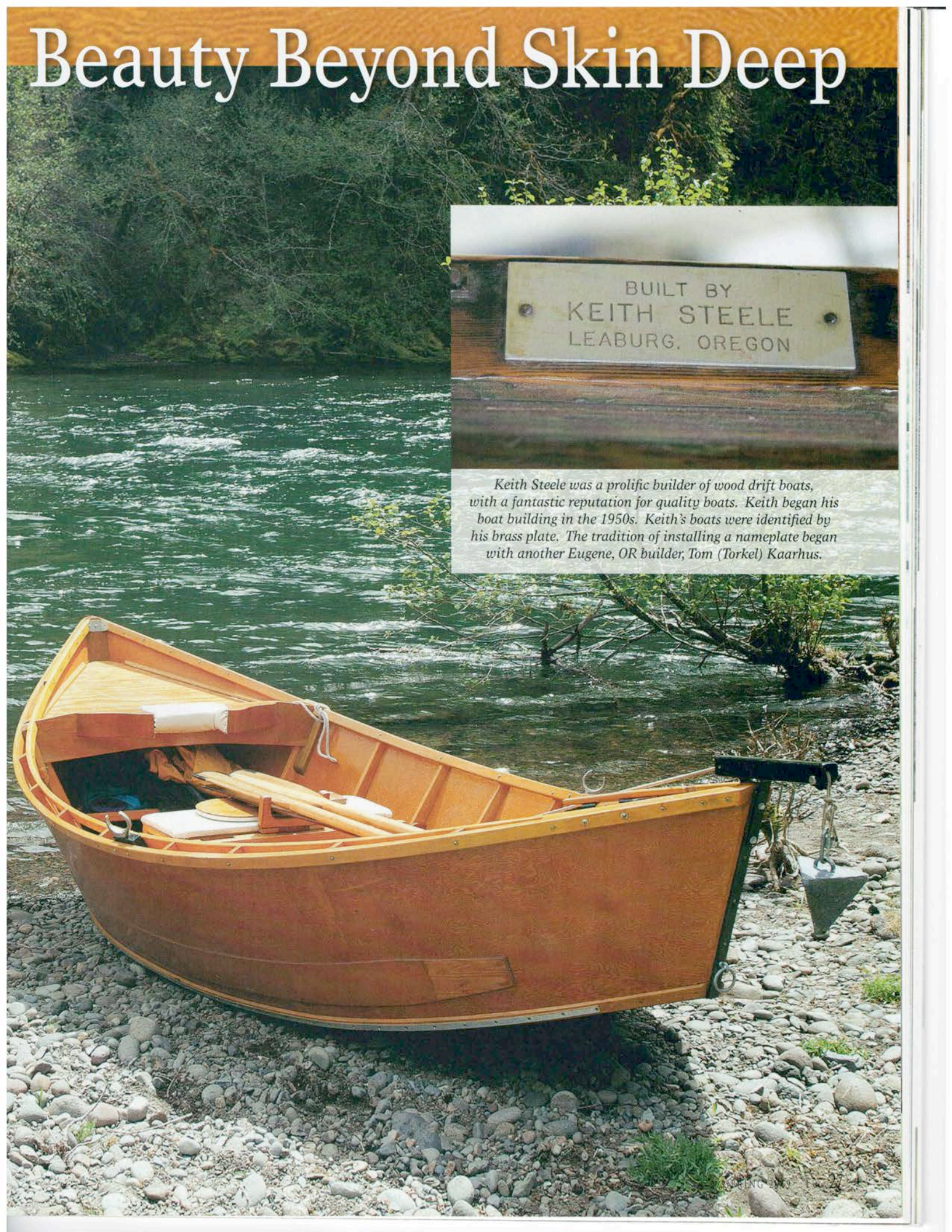
There are a litany of great wood drift boat builders, all of whom deserve mention for their contributions to the art and craft of designing and building these floating splendors. One such builder was Keith Steele, a prolific builder on the McKenzie River with a reputation for quality and craftsmanship. Keith worked for the Oregon Fish and Game Commission and also became a part time fishing guide sometime in the early 1950s. His first 'double-ender' used the dimensions from his brother's Woodie Hindman built 'double-ender' and proved to be a great billboard for his boat-building prowess. He went on to become a prolific fulltime boat builder with almost 3,000 boats to his credit.

Steve Steele, Keith's son, continues the tradition of boat building started by his father at his own shop in Lebanon, Oregon. As a part-time passion, Steve only averages about five boats per year, but his designs are his father's and he still uses the same patterns and tools.

*Facing Page: A "double ender".
Wood drift boat pioneer, Woodie Hindman, developed
the first double enders in the 1940s. This construction
revolutionized drift boat construction and use.*



Beauty Beyond Skin Deep

A photograph of a wooden drift boat on a rocky riverbank. The boat is light brown with a darker brown interior. It has a nameplate on the stern that reads "BUILT BY KEITH STEELE LEABURG, OREGON". The boat is on a rocky shore next to a river with white water rapids. The background is a dense forest.

BUILT BY
KEITH STEELE
LEABURG, OREGON

Keith Steele was a prolific builder of wood drift boats, with a fantastic reputation for quality boats. Keith began his boat building in the 1950s. Keith's boats were identified by his brass plate. The tradition of installing a nameplate began with another Eugene, OR builder, Tom (Torkel) Kaarhus.



Steve Steele lifting a 16' x 48" drift boat that he is building. The lightweight wood drift boat dates back to the 1920s when Veltie Pruitt had his wood milled to his thinner specified dimensions to save weight.



The beginnings of an original Keith Steele boat restoration.

The beauty of wood drift boats. Often these boats are constructed of local northwest wood and exotic woods, producing stunning results.



No component of the drift boat, "Out West" went without some western themed detailing.

The practical traditional rope seats in drift boats don't accumulate any water from waves or rain, and make for a comfortable ride.





Here is a whimsical wild west themed drift boat that was on display at the McKenzie Wood Drift Boat festival a few years back. Although this is a modern day boat, drift boat construction with side boards was the norm up until 1938 when Tom Kaarhus began working with the newly available plywood manufactured with waterproof adhesives.



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The McKenzie River drift boats are designed for rapid river water, with a low draft flat bottom with a continuous rocker.



This detail on a wood drift boat reminds us that these boats are a vehicle to reach great fishing water.

A tradition at the annual McKenzie Wood Drift Boat Festival is the parade of drift boats. Here this team of co-captains bring in a traditional McKenzie drift boat.



Steve Steele still uses patterns and tools from his father's original McKenzie River shop.

