



Edward H Hoppen

By Mark Hoppen, Ed Hoppen's oldest son

The *concept* Thunderbird (on a napkin) came from Ben Seaborn and, in Ed Hoppen's book, the concept counted most.

But the *actual lines* for the Thunderbird belonged to Ed Hoppen. His drawings showed Ben exactly to what tensile and compression tolerances Seaborn could bend the plywood on the cabin top and on the hull. In other words, Ed Hoppen gave and Seaborn the lines he was required to draw. Consequently, it's kind of like Michelangelo gets the credit, but Michelangelo's associate and actually chipped out David. Ben Seaborn deserves the lion's share of the credit, but Ed Hoppen is certainly a co-designer.

Edward Hill Hoppen was born in Hugo, Colorado, on a cattle ranch. He cut cattle on quarter horse at six years old (the horse knew what to do), and moved to Tacoma, in 1925 at the age of six. His mother, Ida, was born in 1880 in a little sod house on the prairie. She graduated from the University of Nebraska in librarianship in 1904. She, Edward, and his older brother by three years, William, moved to Tacoma, upon the death of William, Sr.

Early talents

Eddie, as he was called, learned about boats — particularly sailboats — from Mort Merrick, who owned a dance studio and a sailboat in Tacoma. Eddie attended Jason Lee and Stadium High School, and was a top finisher in the breaststroke and freestyle as a high school swimmer. Remarkably, at age 17, he was offered a position with the Ballet Russe De Monte Carlo as a ballet dancer. He never joined the group because his mother wouldn't let him until he finished high school.

As a teenager he taught tap, ballet, and ballroom dancing. Hoppen had years before received dance lessons at Merrick's dance studio in exchange for work he did on Merrick's sailboat. Also, at 6' 2" and around 200 pounds, with a 19 inch neck and 28 inch waist, he publicly performed high bar stunts (a macho display of the day, analogous to break dancing today).

A love of sailboats

Hoppen trained at Edison Boat School in Seattle as a loftsman, built PT boats at Western Boat during the war, and in another part of his military service served as an aerial photographer over the continental United States. Initially, Ed and a friend, Don Harter, formed a company on 6th Avenue in Tacoma just west of the shopping plaza. In 1950, Art Glein, who built the current shop on Harborview Drive in the late forties, approached Ed and Don and offered to sell the business site to two young men who seemed talented enough and responsible enough to make the transaction. Subsequently, Eddon Boat Company was formed. Don and went into the Korean War and the partnership dissolved in the early 1950s.



A gift for design

Ed Hoppen and his crew, especially craftsman Phil Manley, built Saint Regis boom tugs, fishing boats, pleasure craft (motor and sail boats) from dinghies to outboards to 50'-plus Ed Monk cruisers to a 64 foot Bill Garden yawl, as well as the first Thunderbirds and Thunderbird kits. Ed Hoppen's ultimate creation in 1963 was Diosa, a 40 foot masthead sloop, and the first big modern sailboat in the world to utilize both a fin keel and a freestanding spade rudder. Diosa was the progenitor of all modern light displacement racing sailboats. The immediate New Zealand designed offshoot of Diosa, the 69 foot Ragtime (currently restored and still sailing out of San Diego) adapted Diosa's lines and construction technology and held many ocean racing records over the next decade, giving birth to "ultra light" displacement sailboat racing design.

Ed Hoppen's most notable designs include the 9 foot Minto dinghy, the 12 foot Eddon Gig, and the 16 foot Eddon Wherry (the first rowboat to finish in the first two Gig Harbor Peninsula Historical Society's Heritage Rows), the 36 foot Plimsol Class, 40 foot Diosa, and the co-design of the Thunderbird.

Ed Hoppen's contribution to the T-bird

Text excerpt from the International Thunderbird Class Association roster, 1966-1967

Ed Hoppen had long had an idea of building a boat by setting up plywood molds and utilizing stringers much in the manner of a model airplane. His ideas and those of Ben Seaborn and Tom Sias (a Tacoma sailor working for the Douglas Fir Plywood Association who conceived the original idea for the design contest) came together in the first Thunderbird meeting. Hoppen persuaded the others to let him use his idea. At this point, Seaborn provided a profile drawing showing the chine location and an arrangement, but no other lines.

Using this Spartan design, Hoppen produced two solid models to develop the lines and a balsa model to show an interior layout suggested by Bob Price, a Tacoma architect. Seaborn's original sketches showed the present reverse transom (the vertical flat portion of a boat's stern), but plumb, reverse, and conventional transoms were all tried on the solid models. The reverse transom was most pleasing and was selected.

The first and Thunderbird was lofted from the model lines. Hoppen later pointed out that one of the difficulties of this type of construction was that all interior layout had to be predetermined before the molds were cut out. This design effort made the first Thunderbird a very expensive craft. The first boat had T-section stringers. Plywood construction resulted in more rigidity in the hull than had been expected and subsequent boats used the plain stringers of the ultimate design. The original craft also had deck beams in the side decks. Hoppen recalled later that he would fit one of these and the one before it would slip out.



This difficulty led him to invent the ingenious box beams which are in the final design. Other areas where a lot of design effort was expended were in the motor well and in the hatch. Ed recalled that there were three attempts made at getting a proper keel mold. The keel design, according to Hoppen, was the same as the Sierra design but had a different appearance because the Sierra keels were never properly made. The Sierra was an earlier design by Ben Seaborn which was very similar to the Thunderbird, except done in conventional plank construction without the hard chine.

The first Thunderbird was launched in November of 1958 and two more followed from Hoppen's shop in February of 1959 and August of 1959. Hoppen said that he and Phil Manley, one of his shipwrights, made most of the decisions on construction details as they went along. The plans with which we are familiar were drawn from the second and third boats. Hoppen took two truckloads of patterns to Seaborn's office in Seattle where the plans were made directly from the templates.

The first Thunderbird won the Rowland series in Tacoma very handily. Doug Sherwood skippered her. Seaborn himself sailed on one of these races and was pleased with the yacht's performance. About this time, Hoppen's enthusiasm led him to remark to his associates that he thought as many as 50 would be built! After seeing the lines Hoppen decided to build one for himself instead of converting a six meter.

Hoppen and a ghost writer wrote the instructions after the fourth boat was built. Bob Price suggested the name "Thunderbird" as indicative of the Pacific Northwest origin of the boat and Walter Hanson of Tacoma designed the unique Thunderbird insignia after some research. Don Diebel was probably the first amateur builder. He is pictured in the plans. By this time, enthusiastic amateurs in Seattle, spurred by reports of the boat's remarkable performance, were working from "bootleg" prints of obtained in advance of publication.

And thus was born the Thunderbird.