



Fox Islanders Go Rowing

*Students and their teachers
build boats, community and character*

BRUCE HALIBISKY





Students from both communities had to build shops before they could build boats.

On a Thursday morning in late summer, VIXEN, a 32-foot Cornish pilot gig with six oars and a crew of seven, weaves its way out of Carvers Harbor away from the island of Vinalhaven. Attempting to follow the stroke's lead, my hands pull at the loom of an 18-foot port side oar. At the helm, Gigi Baas grimaces into the fresh southerly breeze blowing up the harbor and maneuvers us around the paint-peeled skiffs and moored lobster boats.

"Port side hold water. Starboard side make way," she commands as we veer to avoid a mooring. Her body cranes as if trying to wish a bowling ball out of the gutter and we narrowly clear a barnacle-covered buoy. As we pass the docks, lobstermen look up from their work and give shouts of encouragement. We make our way out to the green can marking the entrance to the harbor, passing the herring boat STARLIGHT, rafted to the outer fuel float.

"Pull together, now," Gigi urges, shouting over the squawking seagulls that wheel and dive around STARLIGHT.

In this working harbor filled with lobsterboats and bait docks, VIXEN's long oars and bright red hull appear out of place — a summer folks' toy or maybe a mainlander's idea of recreation. The boat, however, is a product of the island, built by Vinalhaven School's Marine Technology class. It is actually the fourth school-built Cornish pilot gig to be launched into Penobscot Bay.

On this particular morning, VIXEN is being rowed by a group of women called the Granite Island Girls (G.I.G.) This rowing club encourages Vinalhaven women to get out on the water for exercise, compan-

ionship and the pleasure of rowing. The Granite Island Girls are one part of a larger group of islanders — including lobstermen, teachers and students — who regularly take VIXEN rowing in the waters surrounding Carvers Harbor.

As we turn into the stretch of water between Lanes Island and Vinalhaven, Gigi invites us to take a break and remove

extra layers of clothing. Leaning against the hull of the boat, Gigi says, "Most kids out here have been fishing all their lives. They just wait to finish high school so they can get back to fishing. Building VIXEN, they learned some things that were in line with what they would do after school." Reflecting on her

experience of rowing in VIXEN she continues, "I've been out here on Vinalhaven for 16 years and I've always seen the water as a barrier — something you had to cross on the ferry. VIXEN has allowed us to get out on the water for fun."

In 1993, Ron Watson, the Marine Technology teacher at the Deer Island-Stonington school, read about Cornish pilot gigs in an article in *WoodenBoat* magazine. The gig's design comes from Cornwall, England, where the boats were used to take pilots out to ships arriving from the Atlantic. The gigs are capable of making up to eight knots under oars and are known for their ability to go to sea in almost any weather. Traditionally built Cornish pilot gigs are now a competitive racing class in England.

Watson remembers someone at the school suggesting that he try to build a Cornish pilot gig with his students. At first he thought the idea was crazy but then, having heard about similar projects at the Hull Lifesaving Museum outside

*Competence,
Compassion,
Challenge and
Community*

—North Haven
Community School motto

of Boston, he decided to take on the challenge.

Once a shop was constructed, the students built a fiberglass version of the Cornish gig. Then, using the first gig as a mold, Watson and his students built a second one. Hoping to create a fleet of boats that could compete against each other, Watson sent out letters to all the high schools with access to Penobscot Bay, encouraging them to build their own gigs. At the time there was little response to his proposal.

In 1997, however, a group of students at the North Haven Community School, working with their teacher John Dieter, decided that they wanted to build a boat as an elective class. Dieter had heard about

the students of this fishing-oriented community. In his first year of teaching, his students designed and built scale-model lobster boats. The second year Jackson wanted to try a project that would encourage teamwork as well as develop patience and craftsmanship. Inspired by the North Haven Community School and Deer Isle-Stonington projects, Jackson recruited six students to build a gig. After securing a grant of \$9,388 from MBNA, lofting of the 32-foot boat began in the fall of 1999. The students worked through the winter and by the end of the school year, the gig, called VIXEN (playing with name of the Fox Islands) was launched into Carvers Harbor.

Billy Dickey, 18 years old, worked on VIXEN from start to finish during his senior year of high school. His summer after graduating has been spent mowing lawns and working at the island's lumberyard. After rowing with Gigi and the Granite Island Girls in the morning, I go up to the lumberyard to talk to him about building VIXEN. The sun is emerging through a layer of morning fog and Billy squints his eyes, his hand held up to his brow. As he talks he leans against a dumpster among the stacks of lumber and looks into the distance. From time to time he turns towards me for emphasis.

Throughout the project, Billy documented the building process with a camcorder. He has 15 hours of video and would like to take a course at the Maine Photographic Workshop in Rockport to edit all the footage into one concise tape.

Billy is proud that his town and school came together on the day the boat was launched. "Everyone followed the boat from the shop to the harbor with their vehicles and everyone was clapping," he remembers fondly. "It was just like the Fourth of July Parade. We carried the boat into the water and then rowed away from the town landing with Mark coxing. I'd been lobstering a couple times and I'd been on the ferryboat but other than that I hadn't done a whole lot on the water. It's peaceful being in VIXEN. You can relax and, once you get a rhythm, you don't have to concentrate on rowing."

After talking with Billy I walk back down to the harbor in search of Tiffany Koenig, who also spent her senior year working on VIXEN. She now works for the Bickford Lobster Company on the bait dock. She has her blond hair tucked under a Boston Red Sox baseball cap and chews rhythmically at a wad of gum. As we talk, lobsterboats motor by and there is a strong smell of bait and diesel in the air. On the dock a few men in greasy Levis and rubber boots haul crates of lobsters.



Peter Ralston

Vinalhaven students and their instructor worked on VIXEN through the winter.

the gigs in Stonington and realized what an ideal project building a boat would be for an island community. He sat down with the students and they tried to figure out what would be needed to construct a gig. The first item on their list was money. The students wrote grants, resulting in funding from the North Haven Arts Enrichment Foundation, the Island Institute and MBNA. John is quick to point out that the seven students who worked on the gig organized everything from balancing the checkbook to building a shop. Using the strip-planked method of construction, North Haven's gig was built with the help of boatbuilder Charlie Pingree and launched in May 2000.

In Vinalhaven, the driving force behind building a Cornish pilot gig was the Vinalhaven School's Marine Technology teacher, Mark Jackson. When Jackson was hired in 1998 he was determined to focus on projects that would relate specifically to



“There’s only one girl here and that’s me,” Tiffany says proudly, pointing at herself with both hands. She is used to this minority position — she was also the only girl involved in the construction of VIXEN. At first she was reluctant to take Mark’s class because she found the idea of building a boat intimidating, but now she is proud that a boat she built floats in the harbor. Unfortunately, since graduating, she works seven days a week on the docks, so she doesn’t have time to go rowing.

“I love seeing my friends go by in the boat that I helped build and I’d like to keep rowing if I have time — we’ll see,” Tiffany says, cocking her head trying to imagine how it might be possible.

A few months after rowing with Gigi and the Granite Island Girls I return to Vinalhaven. Encouraged by the success of VIXEN, which was rowed nearly every day during the summer, sometimes twice a day, Mark Jackson and his students have begun the construction of a second gig. Inside the bowed-roof shed, Jackson is dressed in white coveralls and is trying to pick staples out of a jammed staple-gun. While picking, he moves among the students, encouraging them to stay focused on the boat. He hands the revived staple gun to Nicole Laredo, an 18-year-old senior. From a dusty boom box a classic rock station plays Jimi Hendrix while six students work around the focal point of the shed, the hull of the 32-foot gig. The boat is being built upside down and the students are fitting the last of three layers of Spanish cedar over the mold. The

staples hold the layers in place while they are being fitted to shape.

Jamie Poole, an 18-year-old with blond hair and a red beard, sits in a gray metal chair next to the heater while prying plywood clamps from the hull. He is familiar with the construction process, having worked on VIXEN last year.

“I hope more schools will build gigs so there could be rowing races between the island schools,” says Jamie. He envisions a varsity rowing team that would train regularly and travel to other schools to compete.

While I’m talking to Jamie, Murray Thompson, 19, another of VIXEN’s builders, comes into the shop. I had wanted to talk to Murray earlier but it was difficult because of his work schedule. He leaves to go lobstering at 4:30 in the morning and isn’t back home until five or six in the evening. Fortunately for me, he didn’t go out today because the seas were too rough.

Murray positions himself near the bow of the boat-in-progress and casually rests his back against a shop bench. He often comes up to the school on days when he doesn’t go fishing. As he jokes with Jamie and the other students, he sips at a can of Pepsi held lightly in his hand. Murray has his own boat, a Duffy 35 called WHAZZ UP, and goes out lobstering every day he can, even during the winter.

Murray remembers Mark Jackson’s technology class as being much different than any schoolwork he had ever done. He liked the concrete goal of having to finish the boat by a certain date.

VIXEN’s launching in 2000 was an island-wide event



"I think the launching was the best part," Murray says to me. "A lot of people didn't think we would get the boat done. When we launched it I didn't expect so many people to come out. There must have been over a hundred people."

"Oh, there was more than that," Jamie Poole says, jumping into the conversation while still working on the boat.

"Yeah, must have been more than that," agrees Murray. "Anyway, all the respected townspeople were there."

After my time with the students in the bowed-roof shed, Jackson drives me into town to catch the ferry. I am early so I walk over to Bickford Lobster Company. Tiffany Koenig is still working there, now bundled up for the colder weather. She asks about progress on the new gig — she hasn't had time to go up to the school to see for herself. I talk with Dave Hildings, who is muscling a crate of herring onto a lobsterboat alongside the dock. Dave's son, Nick Hildings, worked on VIXEN last year. Nick was the salutatorian of his class at Vinalhaven School and is now attending Husson College in Bangor. Setting down a heavy crate of bait, Dave gives me Nick's phone number so I can talk to him about VIXEN.

Before going to college, Nick had worked on lobsterboats but the only rowing he had done was out to the mooring in

a skiff. "Rowing VIXEN is different from a rowboat because you have a lot of power," says Nick. "You can't see where you are going (the crew faces aft) and so you have to trust the cox."

Nick believes the builders of VIXEN grew to trust each other through the building process. It was necessary to depend on each other to reach the common goal of finishing the boat. In Nick's opinion, VIXEN helps to strengthen the Vinalhaven community by bringing together different groups of people to do something fun. The fact that VIXEN is shared by three or four different groups of rowers with student and adult crews is proof of this cooperative spirit.

Nick is majoring in accounting, a subject he believes the record keeping of lobstering prepared him for, and he doesn't know if he will be able to return to Vinalhaven to pursue his profession. He still comes back to the island when he can and keeps in touch with Mark and the builders of VIXEN. Nick is excited that another gig is being built in the same bowed-roof shed where he built VIXEN. He would advise the younger students to take on the challenge of building a boat. "It pertains to the island and the life out there," explains Nick. "If you're going to live on an island, it's a good thing to know how to build a boat."

Bruce Halibisky is a freelance writer and builder of wooden boats living in Rockland, Maine.

Except where noted, all photographs courtesy of North Haven and Vinalhaven schools — ed.