

# HUCK, *Be a* LADY Tonight

BY BILL MORRIS  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOTT TAYLOR

Frank Sinatra himself would have had a tough time finding a boat with more class than Lee and Margaret Day's *Lady Huck*.

And no way he'd find one any luckier.

She was launched out of the Huckins yard in Jacksonville, Florida, as *Riding High*, on April 12, 1962. A Fairform Flyer, she is the only remaining Huckins Atlantic 50 in the world. With a keel of solid oak and a mahogany hull, *Lady Huck* is old school – yet she will cruise all day at 25 knots.

Bernie Szetela, who has professionally surveyed big boats for over 35 years, sums up the *Lady Huck* in three words: “classic fast cruiser.” Asked about the keel-to-ensign restoration job that Lee Day did on the boat, Szetela is even more succinct: “almost unbelievable.”

What may be more unbelievable is that Lee Day bought his classic Huckins . . . on eBay.

There's obviously a story here, with *Lady Huck* a character. But first, meet the people involved.

Captain Leland Day of Morehead City is something of a classic himself. The family is originally from Cedar Island, and Days have as much saltwater in their veins as anybody in Carteret County.

“I got my charter boat license the day I turned eighteen,” Lee says.

After running fishing charters for about eight years, Lee came ashore and began working on boats. He built them with Buddy Harris in Marshallberg, and eventually started L&H Skiff Werks with his son Howard (also a captain, of the charter boat *Loaf-A-Long*).

Although they've built a hull or two in their time, the Days' real business is in re-fit and restoration. The father-and-son company has done major work on everything from a Ricky Scarborough to a Hatteras 42 to a 67-foot Bruce Roberts steel sailing hull.

Lee's wife, Margaret, was an art teacher in the Carteret County schools for 18 years. She has been just as enthusiastic about the *Lady Huck* project as Lee, and did some of the hull sanding herself.

It's safe to say that most wives would have tried to talk their husband out of buying a yacht – a sunken yacht – on eBay. But not Margaret. In fact, hers was the voice arguing that they should keep the Huckins, not fix it up to sell.





“If ever we’re going to do one for ourselves,” she told him, “this is the one.”

As a working man, Captain Leland Day didn’t have the unlimited financial resources that most buyers of a Huckins would be able to throw at a yacht restoration. What he did have was the vision to see what she’d be when made whole, and the talent and skills to make her that way.

Here’s how it all happened.

The story starts in early 2004, when L & H Day were hired as part of the team restoring Cherokee, a 65-foot Huckins. The Cherokee restoration was performed by Bryan Blake Boatworks in Gloucester, and Blake hired the Days because of their skills with Awlgrip – that Dom Perignon of yacht paints.

While spraying the Cherokee, Lee Day got his first good look at a Huckins and fell in love.

“I decided that I wanted one of those boats.”

About that time Howard was up late at night, trolling eBay, when he discovered a distressed Huckins for sale in St. Petersburg, Florida. Although it was well past his father’s bedtime, he picked up the phone.

“Turn on your computer,” Howard said.

Then a sleepy-eyed Captain Leland Day put in the winning bid.

Within a few days he received a call from the friendly folks at Huckins Yachts.

“Welcome to the Huckins family,” said the voice on the line. Lee is still baffled by how the factory learned about the sale so quickly.

Three weeks later, another call from Huckins brought some striking news. The company had only built five Atlantic 50’s, and the Days had just bought the only one remaining.



Lee and Margaret had bought a diamond in the rough – but now it had more facets than they’d known.

Soon enough they were headed south to see the boat. The classic Huckins was not quite a wreck, but close enough. Neglected for years, the entire stern had actually sunk to the bottom of a marina.

“She was pretty rugged,” Lee says.

(Let the record show that Capt. Day tends toward understatement.)

After their dunking in saltwater, the engines were ruined. The generator was shot, and the wiring suspect. The screws and rudders were covered in oyster shells. The cabins and salon

had been “re-decorated,” and a stacked washer-dryer crammed into the galley.

Then there was the enemy of all wooden boats: the rot. The spray rails were all but gone, the toe rail at the bow was rotted to nothing. Worse, there was obvious rot in the solid oak keel, where leaking batteries had been silently at work.

“You could see light through the holes in her keel,” Lee recalls. “It looked like Swiss cheese.”

Two other potential buyers had backed out at first sight. But Captain Leland Day wasn’t afraid of the hard work he’d have to put into her. He was no stranger to long hours in a hot boat yard.

Given her condition, there was no way to get the Huckins to North Carolina by water, so a Florida company was hired to truck her home. Ironically, the restoration’s first step was a little creative destruction: the top of the wheelhouse had to be cut off so the rig would fit under the overpasses on I-95.

The Huckins was unloaded into the yard at 70 West Marina in June 2004, and work was started to repair the keel and surrounding rotted mahogany planking. Partway through the restoration, construction of condos at 70 West necessitated a move over to the yard at Harbor Master. Work was completed there and the *Lady Huck* was launched in time for the July 4th holiday, 2005.

Lee and Howard Day had done virtually all of the work themselves, with help from Gregg Penley of Beaufort, who worked with L&H between marlin tournaments.

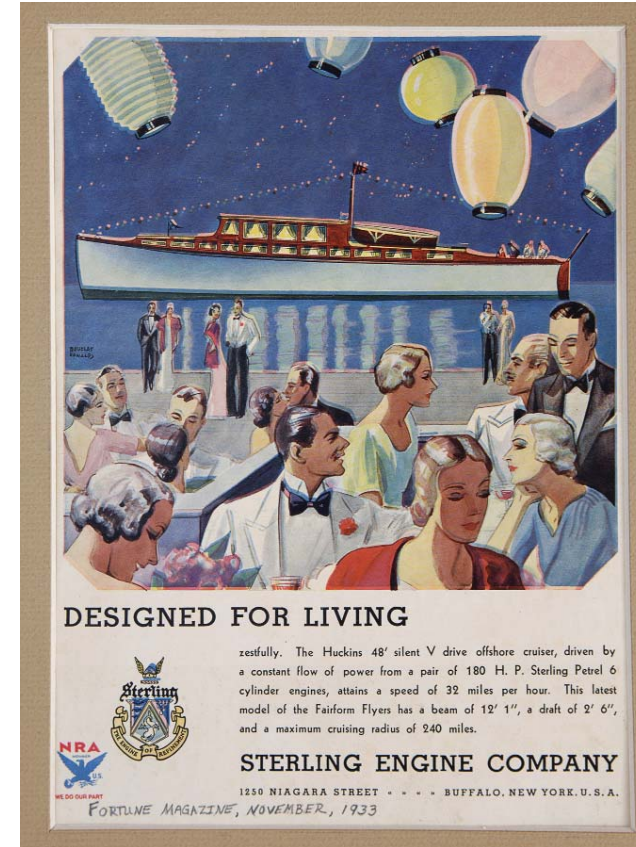
When the work was finished, the last Huckins Atlantic 50 on the planet was fully restored and seaworthy, right down to the sur-

prising sprocket-and-bicycle-chain throttle and rudder controls.

Bernie Szetela’s MBT Marine Survey Inc. documented the restoration at every step. He says that Lee and Howard Day are a special breed. “They are talented shipwrights, guys who can do it all. That’s a dying art.”

Over the two years he’s worked on the Huckins, Lee Day has learned to love the boat even more. He uses both hands to describe the Fairform Flyer hull, designed by Frank Pembroke Huckins and proven in PT boats that he built for the U.S. Navy during World War II. This unique “Quadraconic” hull has been described as a series of concave sections that form a hull bottom with a warp that creates lift. It enables the *Lady Huck* to plane at just under 10 knots. With the twin 6-cylinder Cummins replacement engines (that the Days installed themselves), she will top 30 knots without breaking a sweat.

That is nothing short of incredible, for a 50-foot yacht built in 1962 based on plans drawn in 1928 – the



year the first Fairform Flyer was launched.

Margaret made sure that the amenities were restored to a high quality level as well. The washer-dryer is gone, and the galley is as close to original as possible. (The microwave is a necessity, after all.) The fore and aft cabins are comfortable without being fussy. The salon and the wheelhouse are both great spaces for entertaining, or just kicking back with a drink.

Now, with the project finished, Lee and Margaret regularly untie the *Lady Huck* from her slip near the Sanitary Restaurant and cruise to Cape Lookout Bight, where they drop anchor and live the good life.

“They go every weekend the boat’s overboard,” Howard says. “And the anchor seems to get hung up on Sunday afternoons. Once it got hung up until Wednesday.”

Can’t you hear Sinatra singing? “Stick with me baby, I’m the guy that you came in with/ Luck be a lady tonight . . . “