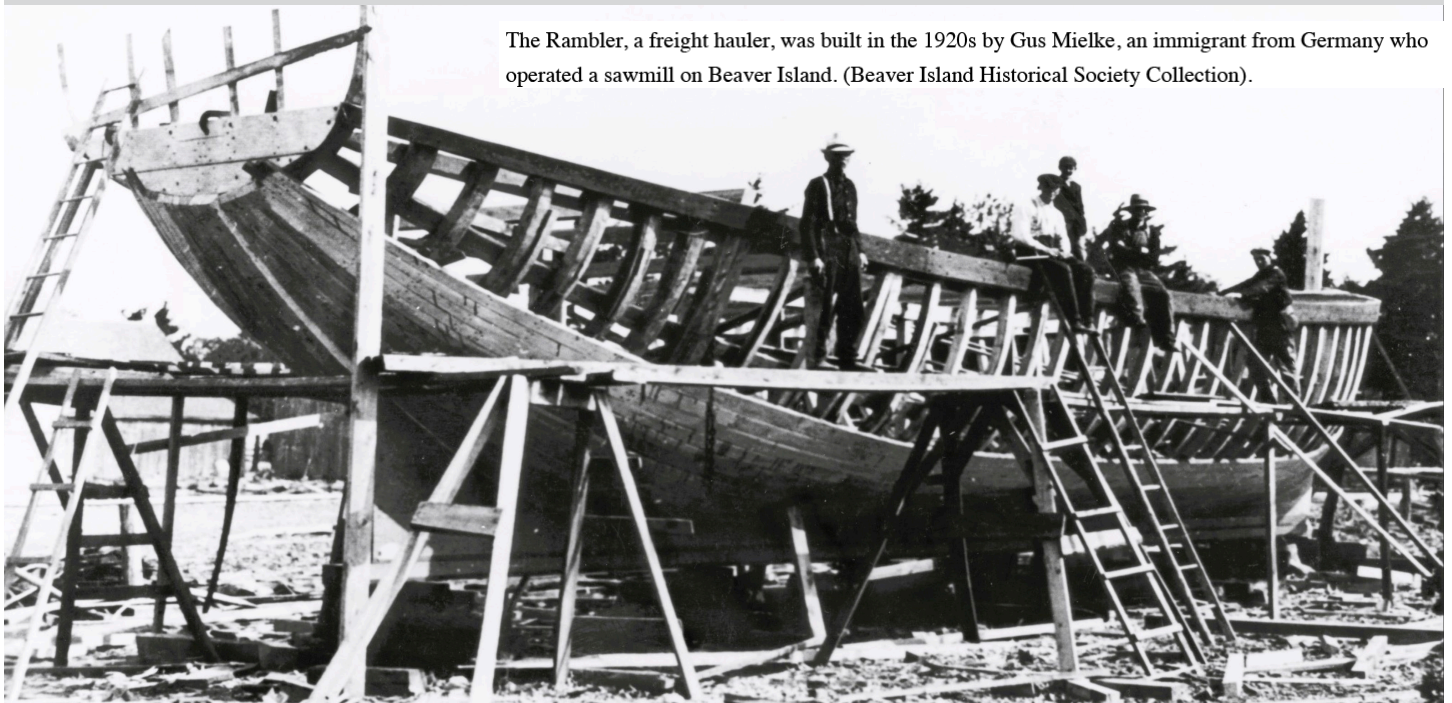


## Beaver Island Has a Rich Heritage of Boat Building

The Rambler, a freight hauler, was built in the 1920s by Gus Mielke, an immigrant from Germany who operated a sawmill on Beaver Island. (Beaver Island Historical Society Collection).



When immigrants from elsewhere first set foot on Beaver Island, they discovered simple truths the Native Americans had known for a thousand years. The soil was poor, and the hunting was limited. But the waters of Lake Michigan were teeming with fish, so Mother Nature decreed that the sea would be the primary livelihood of the island.

Fishing required a boat, and, at first, boats could not be bought, they had to be built. Over time and with the passing on of knowledge from father to son, Beaver Islanders developed the know-how and skills to build Mackinac boats, sailboats, small package freighters and, most importantly, fish tugs.

Fish tugs, which evolved from the smaller, open motorized boats that had replaced sail-powered vessels, were the primary boats used by commercial fishermen on the Great Lakes in the early 20th century. Designed and built to meet the specific needs of gill net fishing on the Great Lakes, the enclosed boat design allowed fishermen to fish year around on wind-tossed waters that almost always were cold.

Beaver Island was home to many important – some almost legendary – boats, often built by islanders, from homegrown materials. An early success story was the *Margaret McCann*, a 69-foot-long boat with a beam of more than 15 feet and a depth of hold of 6-feet 6 inches. James McCann, a cooper by trade who first came to Beaver Island in 1860, purchased the boat in Grand Haven for his son, John. She arrived on Beaver Island in 1894 and was fitted with a power lifter two years later. Under John McCann, she operated with as many as 15 men setting 10 miles

of nets in a day, often bringing in record catches. For 10 years, the *Margaret McCann* averaged 250 tons of fish per year. Her very best year took in 395 tons.

John McCann became an eminent boat builder on Beaver Island as well, beginning with the *Grace M* in 1909. He later built boats such as the *Venus*, a 64-foot boat that was launched sideways in 1924 by cutting off the dock pilings. The *Venus* originally had an open deck but was later closed in for winter fishing by his son, Ulysses. While McCann was completing the *Grace M*, John Roen built the tug *Redwing* on Beaver Island in 1909-10. Two years later, he joined with another prominent island boat builder, Gus Mielke, to build the steam-powered *Schnoden*. She was 58 feet long with a 19-foot beam and a hold with a 7-foot depth, and her 40-horsepower engine hauled lumber, shingles and pulpwood on Lake Michigan.

Mielke, an immigrant from Germany, met Mary Allers in South Haven, fell in love, and married her when she was 16. Together they moved to Beaver Island. Gus operated a sawmill, and, having plenty of wood, began to build boats including the *Nautilus* for Ray and Lester Connaghan; the *Silver Moon* for Barney Martin; and the *Silver Star*, owned first by George Burrill and then by Erwin Belfy.

Mielke's sixth boat was the *Rambler*, a small package freighter that served the island for many years hauling goods and passengers from the mainland. In the fall of 1936, she was employed to haul gas of the *J. Oswald Boyd*, making 24 trips before she was replaced by the *Marold II*, which was destroyed

by an explosion leading to the loss of the entire crew of Beaver Islanders on New Year's Day in 1937. Even after the *Rambler* was sold to Ernie Smith in Charlevoix, she still used an island captain, Joe "M'fro" Sendenberg, on rough crossings.

Significant builders on the island included John McCann's sons Ulysses and Emmett McCann who built boats for themselves and for others. In 1922, they built their second boat, the *Idler*, a cargo vessel. Two years after launching she caught fire off the small community of Nomad on McCauley's Bay on the southeast side of Beaver Island. When she was late arriving in port, their father began to worry. He went looking and found the crew – his sons Ulysses and Emmett plus Eddie Gallagher and Frank Donlevy – clinging to the hull. The McCann brothers built several boats including the *McCann Jr.*, a 33-foot-long boat later owned by Andrew "Andy" Gallagher.



The steam-powered Schnoden was built in 1913 by Gus Mielke together with John Roen. (Beaver Island Historical Society Collection).

James "Shing" Martin Jr., descended from a big family of fishermen dating back to the middle of the 19th century, was a fisherman as well as a builder whose boats include the Shamrock. In partnership with his older brother Dan, age 25, "Shing" owned the island's first steam tug, the *Clara A. Elliot*, beginning in 1882 when he was just 18 years old. More than 40 years later, he acquired the *Evelyn M*, the last new steam tug to come to Beaver Island for commercial fishing. Built in 1922, she had a 5-ton boiler and was converted to fuel oil in the 1940s. Shing and his wife Nellie Johnson had three sons, Wilbur, John and Charlie "Snappy Jaws," who fished commercially until the fish gave out. "Shing" Martin also owned the net shed that now serves as the Beaver Island Marine Museum.



The *Elizabeth G*, a 36-foot fish tug, was built for Andrew Gallagher and his sons, Johnny and Emerald, and named for Lizzy Andy Gallagher. She was built in 1935 by Ulysses and Emmett McCann on Beaver Island using cedar crooks found on Squaw Island for her ribs. She's regarded as the last fish tug built on Beaver Island by Beaver Islanders for Beaver Islanders. The McCann's later boats were built elsewhere.

Today, with restrictions on gill-net fishing, fish tugs are all but obsolete. But you still can see the *Bob S* at the Beaver Island Marine Museum, and its sister ship, the *Evelyn S*, at the Michigan Maritime Museum in South Haven.



Photo Courtesy of the Beaver Island Historical Society