

DAVE IRISH:

A Life Spent Playing with Boats

The humble and spirited force behind the Irish Boat Shop.

BY HOWARD MEYERSON



Dave Irish, 1961



Board of directors meeting, between 1961-1965

In the resort community of Harbor Springs, Michigan, the name Dave Irish brings nods of affirmation. Accolades often follow about the 79-year-old entrepreneur who sailed into port as a 6-year-old boy with his family; who grew up working on boats in his father's shop; and who, at 24 years old, would open a boat shop of his own.

His legacy, Irish Boat Shop, is well known in boating circles as a high-quality, family-run boatyard and marina. It opened in 1961 on the sheltered waters of Little Traverse Bay on Lake Michigan. A decade later, Irish built a second location on Lake Charlevoix where he now offers dockage at two sites.

If asked, Irish admits to being a highly competitive sailor, and a man who has been involved in the upper echelons of Olympic sailing governance. But those who know him say he's not one to brag.

"I like being around boats and water, and particularly enjoy the company of people who have and use boats," declares Irish, a tall and lanky, soft-spoken man with a penchant for laughter and enjoying life. "Our customers are here because they want to play with their boats, and my job is facilitating them having a good time. I've never felt burdened doing the job I call 'playing with boats.'"

Boats to play with and things to do

Irish is sitting in his sunny, second-story marina office overlooking the waters of the bay. He is dressed in casual attire — the look of someone who is comfortable with success but without any pretense. Thoughtful and well spoken, he is known for being civic-minded, a man concerned about bettering the community. Irish served as Harbor Springs' mayor for six years. Prior to that he held a seat on City Council and helped found the Petoskey-Harbor Springs Area Community Foundation, along with the Little Traverse Conservancy — a regional land trust established to protect natural areas nearby.

Despite his age and retirement as CEO in 2007, Irish still comes into the office every day. There are boats to play with and things to do. His 25-year-old grandson, Colin Texter, the company's marketing and sales coordinator, has his routine down.

"He's in every day from 8 to 12 and 1:30 to 5," notes Texter, the youngest adult grandson of 10 grandsons — and the only one employed by the company. "Professionally, he is very wise and very conservative in his business practices, but personally he is very friendly and has a positive attitude. It's in the way he carries himself; he's not boastful or flashy."

Irish laughs when he hears of his grandson's comments. "Evil child," he quips with a gleam in his eye.

Business philosophy

Irish Boat Shop (IBS) is a full-service operation that serves boaters from all over the Great Lakes region. Its skilled staff handles power and sailboats. The company has 300 slips and more than 200,000 square feet of cold and heated indoor storage. The Charlevoix operation handles boats up to 80 feet in length, while Harbor Springs handles boats up to 65 feet.

Michael Esposito, president and CEO for IBS, says the company's technical and yard crews can handle nearly any job, from engine work to hull damage, painting and electrical, or mast and rigging repairs.

"We can provide virtually any service a recreational boat requires," Esposito notes. "With the exception of AC and refrigeration or boat trailers (where specialists are brought in), anything that needs to be done with a boat we can do."



Harbor Springs move, 1960



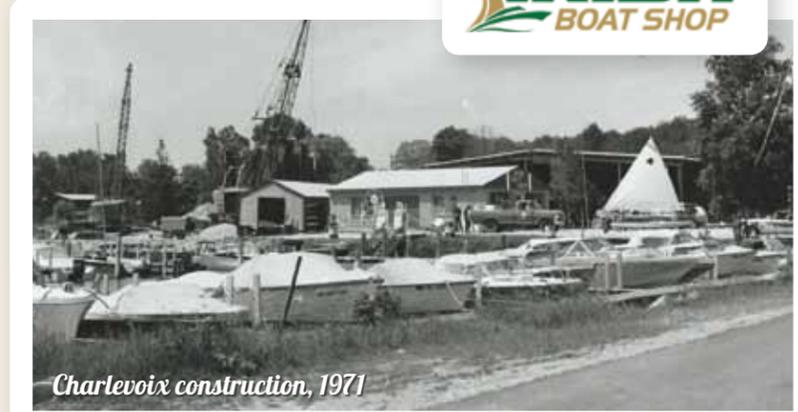
Dave sailing, late '40s



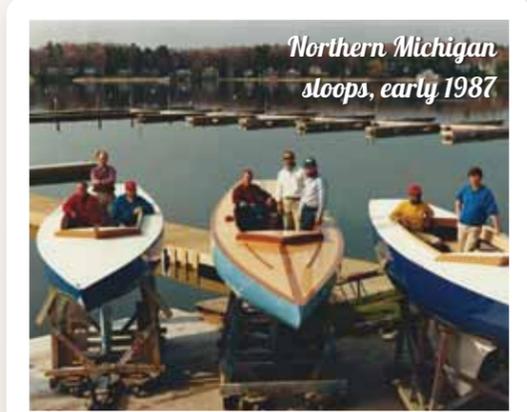
Dave sailing, 2011



Irish Boat Shop, 1962



Charlevoix construction, 1971

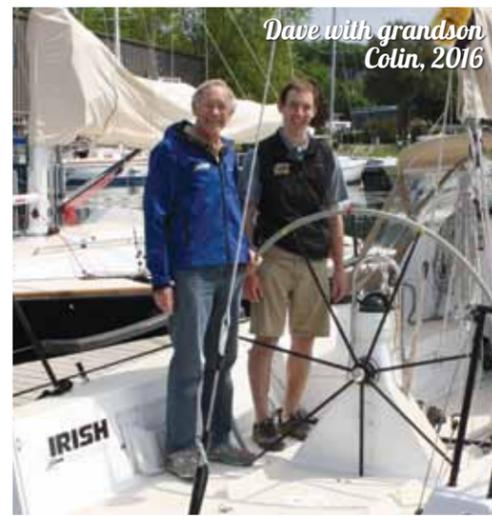


Northern Michigan sloops, early 1987

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF IRISH BOAT SHOP



The crew, 2015



Dave with grandson Colin, 2016



Dave with Dick Babcock, building a new NM boom, 2016



Charlevoix, 2015

“We really strive to be on time with our scheduling... if we don't finish a job on time, we steal the valuable and scarce time the customers have to play with their boats.”

—DAVE IRISH

Esposito took over as president when Irish retired in 2007. He began with the company in 1994 after managing a Chicago yacht yard. Starting as general manager of Irish's Harbor Springs shop, Esposito says one of his goals was to incorporate computers and other modern technology into daily operations. Doing so integrated important business functions that enabled both shops to operate as one company.

“That changed the company tremendously,” Esposito explains. “Each had developed differently, and they were run differently. It now operates more like one company with two locations. The idea was that customers could go to either [location] and feel like they were dealing with the same business. They get the same greeting on the phone and the same service.”

Esposito attributes the company's success to Dave Irish, who stresses quality. He describes Irish as “complicated, but very bright” — someone conservative in his business practices. The company operates with no long-term debt. Its growth was achieved on a cash-basis, where other companies leverage assets for expansion.

“We've operated slowly and consistently,” Esposito says. “In the early 2000s we were often criticized by peer and performance groups who said we should leverage this and buy that, but in the 2008 recession we didn't have to lay anyone off. That philosophy over 50 years has allowed us to grow in a slow but consistent pattern, and we think that is healthy.”

IBS sells J/Boats, Alerion Yachts, and LaserPerformance sailboats, Boston Whaler, Sea Ray, Nautique, Zodiac, and Sealegs powerboats. It has attained some of the highest levels of certification and recognition in the industry, according to Esposito. The company is a Brunswick Master Dealer, Mercury Marine Platinum Dealer, Authorized Hinckley Service Center for the Great Lakes Region and authorized Legacy Service Center.

“Both Harbor Springs and Charlevoix are Michigan Certified Clean Marinas,” Esposito elaborates. “That's a program that certifies boat yards on their performance meeting a variety of environmental standards and having clean operations. We're also proud that within our company we have three Certified Marina Managers, which is an international designation from the International Marina Institute.”

Irish considered opening a third marina in Traverse City, Michigan, another popular resort town, but later thought better of it. IBS had the financial resources, but the “fit wasn't good,” Irish says. The time demands would be high, and that would pull him away from the existing operations. Delivering quality is an important business pillar at IBS.

“I just wasn't comfortable,” Irish explains. “I had a talk with myself and said, ‘Irish, you can probably do this, but do you want to?’ It didn't pass the test, and the lifestyle I live took precedence. I didn't want to spend that much time driving and never have time to go on the dock and talk with customers about their boats. We really [strive] to be on time with our scheduling, where traditional boat yards always tend to be late — it's a hardwired habit — and we don't do that. If we don't finish a job on time, we steal the valuable and scarce time that customers have to play with their boats.”

Charlevoix in October

Irish grew up under the tutelage of his father, Herb Irish, a hard-drinking man who was not always pleasant. But he considers him an important mentor and gifted in other ways. The two enjoyed walks in the woods and sailing together when Irish was a boy. His mother, Edith, was a “can-do, wonderful, enthusiastic person,” Irish says.

“[Dad] was a mixed bag. When he was drinking, he was someone you didn't want to be around. But when he was good, he was really good, very capable. He could fix a transmission without any tools,” Irish reflects, laughing gently about an incident on the fateful 1943 sailing trip from Lake St. Clair to Harbor Springs, where the family resettled.

Herb Irish had been an inspector at Willow Run manufacturing complex near Ypsilanti, Michigan, where B-24 bombers were built for the war effort. A union steward overruled him after a problem with airplane engine firewalls. Failures occurred and airplanes were lost.

“He said, ‘We won't live this way anymore,’” Irish recounts. “We gave up our rental house, put the furniture in storage and put the family on the boat (a 1903, 32-foot Crosby Catboat). There were five of us: My mom, dad, two sisters and me. My parents didn't know where they were

going, but they had heard of Charlevoix. We sailed and got here October 6. The colors were just beautiful. We couldn't believe how clear the water was, and Dad said ‘I guess we will stay here.’ He tied up, and we did.”

Today, Irish and his wife, Ann, live in Harbor Springs, the homeport they love and where they raised four children. When not working, Irish still likes to mess around with sailboats. He owns an NM, an early Northern Michigan one-design, and a J/111 that he campaigns in serious competition. Over the years, he has served as president of the U.S. Sailing Association, vice president of the International Sailing Federation and director of the Michigan Boating Industries Association.

Texter fondly remembers the early sailing lessons, the Thanksgiving gatherings, and the personal and professional advice he's received from his grandfather. Today he occasionally crews for Irish on what he calls the “beer can races.”

“I remember sailing with him pretty vividly. It was probably my first time,” Texter recalls. “I was five or six and we were heeled over. I thought we were going to die — and grandpa was at the helm having a ball. That was inspirational.”

Protecting the pristine environment

Irish is known as a skipper who “doesn't yell,” which is a significant distinction among racing sailors and one that carries over to his management style in business. He is well respected by the environmental community, too. Irish Boat Shop was one of the first area marinas to attain Michigan Clean Marina Certification.

“Dave is a great community leader,” offers Gail Gruenwald, executive director for Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council, an area nonprofit group that works to keep Northern Michigan waters clean. “He's one to look at the big picture and he values personal stewardship. I've known him for 30 years. He commits himself to nonprofits and is very philanthropic. He wouldn't necessarily call himself an environmentalist, but he sees the need and value of conserving natural resources.”

Tom Bailey agrees. He's the executive director for the Little Traverse Conservancy that Irish and others founded in 1972 as an alternative to using litigation to stop development and preserve the area's beautiful natural features.

“Dave isn't an orthodox environmentalist; neither is he a hook and bullet guy,” Bailey notes. “He appreciates that this part of Northern Michigan is a wonderful place to live because of the environment here. And you don't want to kill the goose that laid the golden egg. He sees that a pristine environment is good for business...and it is in everyone's best interest to maintain a healthy balance between land development and land conservation.”

Irish chuckles now about the litigation he and others initiated in the 1970s looking to halt two large development projects that were being proposed for Harbor Springs. The litigation was contentious, and Irish said he had hoped to “run the bastards out.” But he eventually soured on using legal tactics and came to favor the voluntary approach utilized by the land conservancy.

“That was a really crazy time,” Irish reflects. “There was huge growth (here) and everything was getting sold. I'm not a ‘no-growther’ but I am a little less aggressive about desiring growth. And maybe that's because we have a comfortable business here. There is a general feeling here that more is not necessarily better. We don't need to be or want to be the biggest resort town.”

“All this”

Irish owns and tends a 500-acre wooded parcel outside of town that he is proud of. It is managed for high-quality commercial timber grown on a sustainable basis. The land was acquired in 1947 and it is now “part of the family,” Irish says. The logging trails are groomed for cross-country skiing in winter.

On his own time, Irish remains physically active. If not racing sailboats, he cross-country skis and enjoys citizen ski racing on area downhill slalom courses. He is a man who likes to push himself. He enjoys ski mountaineering and helicopter skiing in British Columbia, but laments that he had to give up European and Canadian hut-skiing last year. In 2014 he finished first in his age class while competing on the 20-kilometer cross-country ski course in the White Pine Stampede, an annual northern Michigan race.

When asked what else he does for fun, Irish smiles, looks around the office and at the marina below, then stretches out his arms and says simply: “All this.” ★

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—COLIN TEXTER