



M. Hoff & Co., Paris.  
„Onkel Adolph“  
Besitzer: Nordd. Regatta-Verein.  
Gewinner der Coupe du Cercle de la Voile de Paris  
auf der Seine bei Meulan.

# Rare vintage

In 1907, a 6-Metre from Hamburg made history by winning the first-ever One Ton Cup for boats built to the International Rule. Today she is sailing again, restored to mint condition

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS DIETER LOIBNER

**L**ake Wörthersee, nestling in Austria's southern Alps close to Slovenia and Italy, is a summer resort for the well-to-do, known as 'Austria's Monte Carlo'. It is also a hotspot for 6-Metre yachts built to the First and Second International Rule. Metre boats have a history here and are enjoying a renaissance, restored and campaigned by owners who have a predilection for timber boats, fine wine and haute cuisine. The three go together well. The ensign you'll see fluttering from the transoms here is dark blue with three golden stars, symbolizing Vela, Vento e Vino. Sail, wind and wine.

The lake's assemblage of ancient Sixes includes treasures such as *Gefion III* and *Theresa*, designed and built by Anker & Jensen in Norway in 1911 and 1913 respectively; *Margaux* (ex-*Else*), an LW Ussing design that was built by Jacob Hansen in Denmark in 1911 and restored by Joel Perrodo in France; *Rarahu* by Morgan Giles is from 1914 and was rejuvenated by Aldeburgh Boatyard, then owned by Peter Wilson; and earlier this year the 1908 Anker-built *Sonia II* was trucked down from Norway and is next in line for an extensive refit.



Adding the Second-Rulers *Star VI* and *Dimple* and the early Third-Rule *Marianne IV* easily pushes the combined age of the fleet far beyond half a millennium.

Any flotilla needs a dignified flagship and for the Sixes on Lake Wörthersee that role falls to a boat named *Onkel Adolph*. Designed by Willy von Hacht, *Onkel Adolph* won the One Ton Cup regatta of 1907 at Meulan, on the River Seine near Paris, for the German club Norddeutscher Regatta-Verein (NRV). That's historically significant, because it was the first time that this prestigious race was open to boats designed to the International Rule that had been formally adopted by the International Yacht Racing Union the year before and that would go on to define the sport of yacht racing for decades to come.

Trying to lift this trophy from the French in 1906, an NRV crew had fallen short, but the new rule fostered fresh hope among the club's officials, led by commodore Adolph Burmester, one of its founding fathers, who initiated another campaign for a boat that should bear his nickname and be designed and built by von Hacht, one of Germany's preeminent designers at the time. *Onkel Adolph* easily beat teams from England, Spain, Belgium and the host nation (see race report on page 30), taking the coveted piece of hardware back to Germany. It was a bright, but short-lived moment for this boat in the annals of international yacht racing, where planned obsolescence was part of the game. As designers learned to exploit different aspects of the yet untried measurement rule, the newer Sixes were narrower, longer, heavier and carried much more canvas. In 1908, at the defence of the One Ton Cup in Kiel, *Onkel Adolph* was already out of contention, being used for pleasure sailing and as a trial horse. Being put out to pasture, however, might have been a blessing that ensured her survival.

**FINDING ONKEL ADOLPH**

"On a scale from 1 to 10, she's an 11," says Federico Lenardon, an Italian yacht historian, designer and boat builder. Fede, as his friends call him, is an artist at heart and admiration for a fine line is what guided his approach to *Onkel Adolph's* restoration. "It's simple, really," he says. "A boat that looks well, usually also sails well." Because plans and construction details vanished in a fire along with the von Hacht yard, Lenardon had to mine historic photos, books and articles to reconstruct *Onkel Adolph* with historical accuracy. His obsession with detail and the reputation for craftsmanship of Cantiere Alto Adriatico, a boatyard in Monfalcone, Italy, that specialises in classic yacht refits, was the reason for *Onkel Adolph's* owner, Ingo Hopfgartner, to commission them with the project. Hopfgartner is an Austrian entrepreneur whose firm makes and markets safety nets and impact mitigation systems for high-speed sports. In his spare time, he collects classic cars, motorcycles and boats including *Annie*, a Herreshoff half-rater from 1895.

"Since I read about the regatta in Meulan, *Onkel Adolph* has been on my mind," Hopfgartner says. And then one fateful day he found a classified advertisement, buried at the bottom of the German Freundeskreis classic

*Opposite clockwise from top left: stripped back at Cantiere Alto Adriatico; splining below the waterline; plywood deck was a rare modern touch; crank reef for the main; blocks, no winches; showing her pace; bowsprit fitting; new Sitka spruce gaff rig; bottle screws; leather for the gaff throat; mahogany beams down below; lines led back to cleats, 1907-style*

yacht website, for: "*Vigorous, ex-Lisa, ex-Onkel Adolph*, 6-M boat launched in 1907 as an open gaff-rigged three-man boat for the Norddeutscher Regatta Verein by the van Hacht [sic] yard in Hamburg..."

The images showed a slender vessel with a cabin structure, a bermudan rig and the sail number DDR333. The advert concluded with the owner's wish to sell to someone who appreciated such a boat and might restore her to "a condition close to the original". The contact was a certain Thomas Weichenhain, who was about to hear from Hopfgartner.

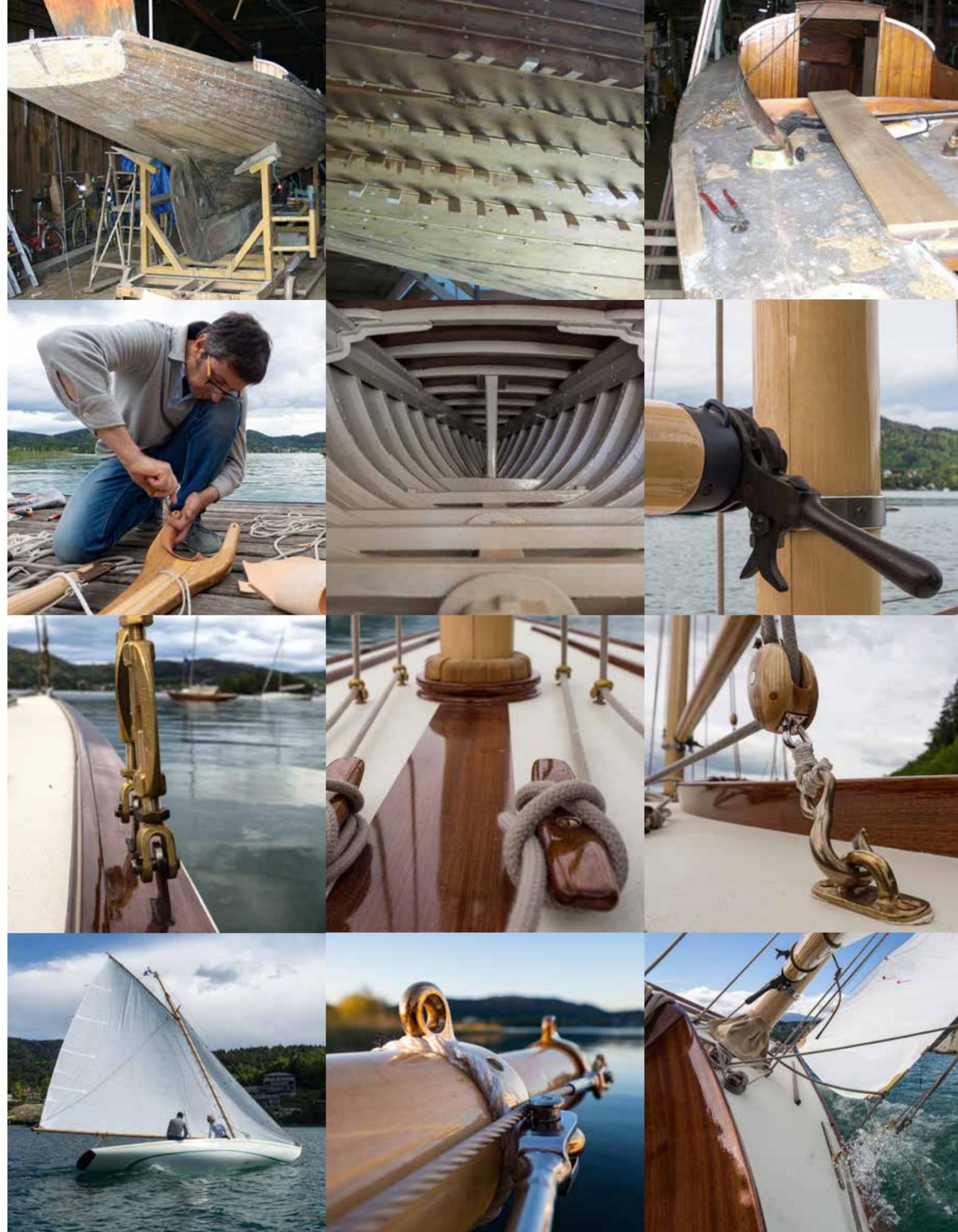
Weichenhain, an author and playwright, had owned the boat since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and kept her on Lake Scharmützelsee, 50 miles southeast of Berlin. At first, he did not quite know what he had, but digging through archives and a forensic reconstruction of the build number (305) on the builder's plaque confirmed that *Vigorous* indeed was the famous *Onkel Adolph*. The boat had been brought to Berlin from Hamburg by barge after World War I and later received a cabin top and a modern rig. It survived the firebombs that rained down on the German capital city during World War II because, as Weichenhain surmised, it was deliberately sunk in a marina on the Dahme River.

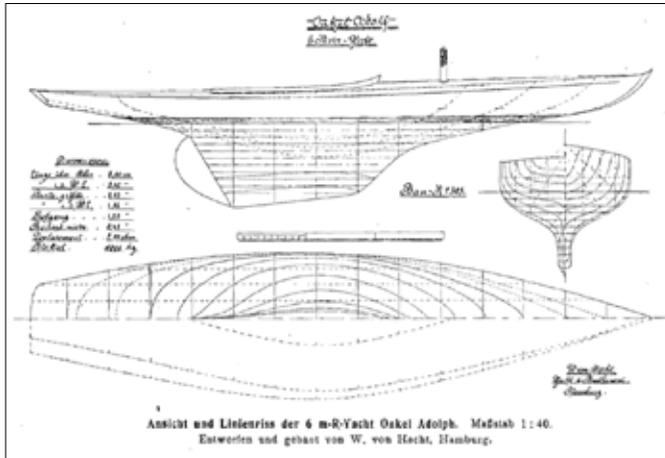
In the post-war years the Russian occupants expressed no interest in sailing, so the boat was spared abuse and was registered with the East German Sailing Federation as a 7.0 KR cruiser. Despite dire circumstances, she always received enough care and maintenance to remain under sail – often with a lot of ingenuity and improvisation. "Because paints and varnishes were of good quality in the era of the German Democratic Republic, it was possible to keep old boats in good condition", Weichenhain explains. "Another reason was certainly that it was prohibitively expensive to build boats yourself or buy them new."

But ingenuity only goes so far and soon Weichenhain was in over his head to execute the necessary replacement of the deck and repairs to the keel area. For



Restorer Federico Lenardon, owner Ingo Hopfgartner and .....





Clockwise from top left: sailing again on Lake Worthersee; *Vigorous*, as she was after her East German years; in good company on the lake with other early 6-Metres; von Hacht's lines for the first One Ton Cup held for boats designed to the then-new International Rule

four years, he says, the boat had been advertised but no serious suitors came forward. Things looked grim until Hopfgartner drove up with an empty trailer and a wad of cash.

## RESTORATION IN ITALY

*Onkel Adolph* moved to Cantiere Alto Adriatico in Monfalcone, 700 miles further south, for the timber to be assessed. "First, we had to completely destroy her before we could make her anew," is how managing director Odilo Simonit puts it while clicking through a gallery of old pictures of *Onkel Adolph*. To do that, a small group of craftsmen worked for close to six months to make *Onkel Adolph* look like the day she was launched in 1907, preserving as much of what was intact as possible. Because the original floor timbers lacked limber holes, water accumulated, causing rot in the structural keel. The Alto Adriatico crew repaired it with graving pieces and a thinner oak bit that was glued on top of it. To stiffen the hull, they had to fix a handful of broken frames with scarfed-in pieces. The planks (the class specified pitch pine, but Lenardon thought these resembled Douglas fir) were in good condition and only their seams needed to be splined. For cosmetic reasons, the hull was faired with epoxy above the waterline. Alto Adriatico also fashioned a new gaff rig from Sitka spruce to match the original. Where the yard deviated from the original was the replacement of the rotten deck. In a

## ONKEL ADOLPH

DESIGNER &  
BUILDER

Willy von Hacht,  
Hamburg, 1907

LOA  
29ft 9in (9m)

LWL  
17ft 9in (5.4m)

BEAM  
6ft 3in (1.9m)

DRAUGHT  
4ft (1.2m)

DISPLMNT.  
2 tons

SAIL AREA  
484sq ft  
(45m<sup>2</sup>)

concession to modernity and longevity, Alto Adriatico opted for ½in (12mm) plywood over fresh mahogany beams.

The restored boat was delivered to Hopfgartner just a week before a 110-year anniversary regatta in the bay of Velden/Wörthersee to commemorate *Onkel Adolph's* historic win at Meulan. Despite the tight schedule, the yacht was very much as her owner had envisaged when he first laid eyes on her and Hopfgartner also assisted Lenardon during rigging and final fit-out. After the first spin in a lovely spring breeze, a few items were added to the job list: a jib luff tensioner, a couple of teak foot braces on the floorboards and end caps on the brass tracks of the adjustable jib leads. Hopfgartner also asked Lenardon to install a custom-made rack for drinking glasses and a wine bottle, *conditio sine qua non* on all of his boats. "Back to the roots" is the owner's motto and *Onkel Adolph* is no exception. Yes, there are conveniences such as a crank reef for the main and a Wykeham-Martin furler for the headsail, but even a moderate breeze requires a strong crew, due to the vintage mainsheet blocks without ball bearings and the absence of turning blocks for the jib sheets that run through brass fairleads and are made fast on horn clamps.

Surrounded by her First and Second Rule sisters flying the blue VVV-ensign, *Onkel Adolph*, of course, was the star of the regatta that was held on a perfect Saturday in

May that packed a lively breeze. Granted, the traveller track was a bit of a spoiler and forced her crew to pull in the reins halfway through the race. But it was no big deal, because that mishap left more opportunity to sample some splendid wine, something that would have resonated with the NRV lads who sailed *Onkel Adolph* to victory at Meulan, seeing as the 1907 race report explicitly mentioned their skill and superb crew work, and the fact that they were fortified by some delectable ‘Château’ which had been stashed in the forepeak.

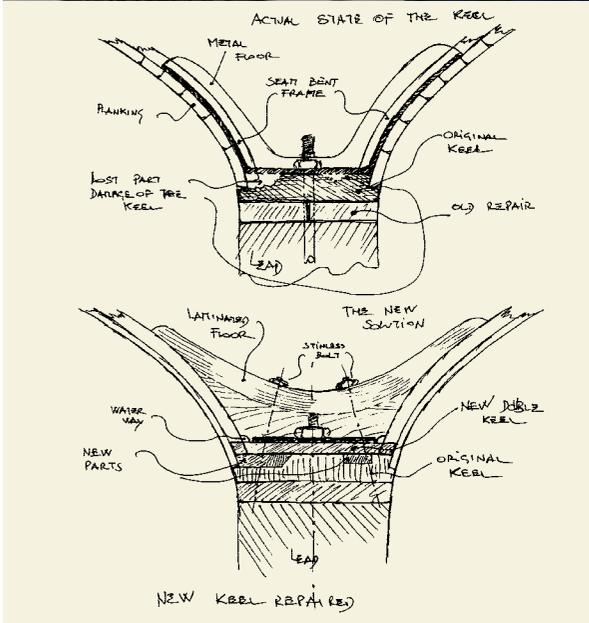
The rejuvenated yacht found her pace during her first season and made appearances in races on other Alpine lakes and in the northern Adriatic. Sadly, she will miss the NRV’s 150th anniversary in Hamburg this year [coverage forthcoming in *Classic Boat*], but that’s not a problem for her previous owner Thomas Weichenhain. “Von Hacht sold many of his Sixes to Austria and the Nofretete [Nefertiti bust] is not on display in Cairo, but in Berlin,” he comments, satisfied that *Onkel Adolph* was indeed expertly restored as he wished and found a good home in the Lake Wörthersee fleet, with a skipper who appreciates her and with plenty of other Sixes of similar vintage for company.



## The One Ton Cup goes metric

The Coupe International de Cercle de Voile de Paris was endowed in 1899 for small racing yachts with amateur crew. Because these boats measured 1 ton in the Godinet formula, the prize became known as One Ton Cup. After failing to win it in 1906, the Germans were reluctant to go home empty handed again, but they were aided by the fact that in 1907 the race was held for the first time in 6-Metre yachts designed to the International Rule. This was new for everyone, so nobody had much of an advantage. It also drew more competitors - boats also were entered by Spain, England and Belgium. The German skipper was the highly experienced Fritz Kirsten, who brought with him Waldemar Tietgens, a successful rower, as main trimmer and Hans von Eicken for jib and foredeck duties. Willy von Hacht, who had built his reputation with fast Sonderboats, was commissioned to design and build the new yacht. However, the man in charge was NRV commodore Adolph Burmester, a respected and ubiquitous official whose commanding presence was enhanced by his Darwinesque beard. For that reason, everyone, including the sailing-crazy emperor Wilhelm II, simply called him ‘Onkel Adolph’.

The first team to win three races took the cup and the first race seemed to confirm von Hacht’s belief that the Germans had the fastest boat, as *Onkel Adolph* sailed to a five-minute win. The Germans were ecstatic, but their mood was dampened by a measurement protest lodged by the second-placed Brits. That protest kept dangling above their heads until the end of the regatta. Meanwhile in the second race the win went to French boat *Yvonne*, with *Onkel Adolph* beaten by just 4.5 seconds. In the third, the fleet was hit by a squall. “The mate quickly repaired under deck forward, immediately followed by the main trimmer who brought an already open bottle of Château with him,” the regatta report reads of *Onkel Adolph*. “Our captain didn’t say anything, but as the pouring rain started to drip out of his moustache onto his beloved cigar stump, he thought he needed to execute a gybe and called his mates out of their dry hide-away tavern. They showed no interest so old Kirsten had to continue without a gybe, still bringing *Onkel Adolph* home for her second win.” In the final act, *Onkel Adolph* tiptoed away again and secured the decisive third win by a whopping 12 minutes. “We now had done our duty and patiently awaited the announcement of the results,” Kirsten’s report says, hinting at tense moments, with the decision in the protest room still pending. But the club’s commodore stepped in front of the waiting crowd and announced: “Messieurs! Les Allemands ont gagné notre Coupe, alors buvons leur santé!” The champagne flowed freely. In all this, the German delegation did not forget to notify the folks at home. The first telegrams with the good tidings went to emperor Wilhelm II and, of course, to “uncle” Adolph Burmester.



Above: Lenardon and his team brought her back to top condition; his drawings for the new keel