



Crossing the cover line

Old-world craftsmanship crosses over to a new-world niche when Lohmann Sails & Covers Ltd. provides for the boating community.

By Jeff Barbian

Soon after it completes its plunge from the Alps, the Rhine River broadens and forms Lake Constance before resuming its 820-mile meander to the North Sea. At 40 miles long and nearly nine miles wide, the Lake Constance watershed offers striking vistas from all directions. If you were afloat in the middle, you'd see the Swiss and Austrian Alps rise in the south; to the north are the rolling hills of southern Germany.

Chris Lohmann, who hails from those hills in a town called Tutzing, just south of Munich, points to a telling feature of Lake Constance: Most of the boats moored along its banks are blanketed by a cover, no matter the season. Hop over to a neighboring lake, however, and you'll see very few fabric-covered vessels.

After touring Europe to research the market for all-season boat covers, Lohmann concluded that this simply is a matter of supply and demand. "I went to Holland, northern Germany, Italy and France, and I realized that boat covers are used only if there's someone in the area who makes them," he says. "The areas where there's nobody to offer this, the boats are either uncovered entirely or tarps are hastily put over them."

In the Lake Constance area, Lohmann says, at least six or seven well-outfitted boat cover makers service the region with all-season covers. With the bulk of its boats covered, Lake Constance is a microcosm of Lohmann's vision in which luxury boats of all sizes—from Bayliners®, powerboats,

Schooner sail boats, Grand Banks® yachts and Catalina cruisers—are equipped with all-season fabric covers for protection from the elements.

These boats, after all, are beloved toys to their owners. Why subject them to rain, dust, air pollution, UV rays or the tyranny of birds when a cover can keep the paint job fresh, the upholstery pristine?

In fact, Lohmann would like to see boats rolled off the assembly line already equipped with a custom cover. "I try to convince boat makers," he says. "It will cost a bit more in the beginning, but the boats will have protection from the start. People put thousands of dollars into a boat's electronics, and with the 30- to 60-foot boats, a cover is one percent or less of what the boat is worth when you buy it new.

"With the UV index rising all the time," continues Lohmann, "the cover's going to preserve the plastic and fiberglass. I know people who have their boats polished by professionals three or four times a year. This costs more than the cover, which would reduce the need for waxing, anyway."

Happy sails

Lohmann Sales & Covers Ltd. has been in business for more than six years, but Lohmann has been making boat covers since 1979. He got his start as a sail maker, beginning with an apprenticeship in 1972 while still living in Germany, where he earned the rank of master sail maker. "I tried everything before that," he says. "Then my mother finally said, 'this is your

Left: This Martinac boat was built in 1926 at the Martinac Boatyard, Tacoma Wash. The four-part cover, completed in 2002, has about 180 yards of five-foot wide 600 denier polyester fabric.

Right: The Martinac boat fully covered.

last chance." Getting into sail making seemed logical; he and his family were big sailors (his brother missed making the 1976 Montreal Olympics as a member of the German sailing team by one point). But those early years of sail making were challenging, and Lohmann found competing with the established big fish a daunting task. Then the local boat cover maker retired, leaving a void that Lohmann eagerly filled. He began to make specialty transport and mooring covers for racing boats (Dragon, Star, 11m one design, Fitchell, H Boat, and so forth). "I was the only one, more or less, who was making these covers that go around the whole boat," says Lohmann.

When his mother died, he sold his business to a friend and moved to Canada, where his sister had been living. With his wife and two sons, he

settled on Salt Spring Island—the largest of a group of islands nestled in the Strait of Georgia between mainland Vancouver and Vancouver Island, B.C., Canada. Salt Spring has a reputation as an "art town," where artists, farmers, chefs, mechanics, romantics and retirees come to smell the mild northern air. Now, though, it's more or less a playground for the wealthy, Lohmann notes, adding that that's not exactly bad for business. Initially, Lohmann and his family built a log house and invested in a bed and breakfast; he was pretty much retired from marine

fabrication. But when the family's finances were stretched thin, his hiatus came to an end.

Realizing there was no market in the Pacific Northwest for the sort of boats he dealt with in Germany, he searched for a niche market where he could implement designs that would improve on existing winter boat covers. "I tried to do the bimini boat tops, which are a big market here, but I couldn't compete. It's too precise."

According to Lohmann, his competitors didn't exactly perceive him as a threat. "They were laughing when I



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This Grand Banks 42 Europe is wrapped in a total winter cover with a five-foot width of 600-denier polyester fabric making up about 200 square yards. The cover consists of three parts with five supporting posts.

arrived," he remembers. "They were thinking, 'who's this crazy German thinking he can step right into this, on Salt Spring Island, no less?'"

When Lohmann decided to go back to making full boat covers there was only one business in the Richmond area that provided that service. "I thought his asking prices were ridiculous," he says. "I figured I needed to find a cheaper way to do them."

He set up a 1,000 square-foot workspace in his garage, complete with a plotter and sewing machines and a 30-foot-long cutting table. At first, Lohmann tried using cheaper materials, starting with a nonsolution-dyed polyester fabric. He's since switched to Nidema 600 Plus, a polyurethane-coated 600 denier solution-dyed UV-resistant polyester. Three years ago, there were two or three suppliers of this fabric, Lohmann says. Today, there are ten or more, which has driven the prices down.

Bits and pieces

Lohmann's current process is to pattern the boat, mark the outline, cut the fabric and then sew it. To do jobs where he's not physically working on a client's boat, Lohmann simply finds a sister vessel in the local area with the same specifications. Often, the job calls for a cover on the exact make and model of a boat he's worked on before. Eighty percent of the time, he

says, the cover is a precise fit, which isn't a problem, considering that part of the service plan is to send the cover back after one year for Lohmann to make adjustments and check on wear and tear. Approximately 30 percent of his covers are exported into the United States (of these, 30 percent go to the East Coast).

Because of its soft, pliable material, the cover can be stuffed nicely into a bag without folding. On a Grand Banks 42 Classic yacht, for example, there are no sand bags or water bottles used for leverage and weight. Instead, the cover is attached with 30 webbing straps and buckles. The fabric runs from the rail at least five feet and is tucked under the swim grid or the upright dinghy and then secured by a drawstring that can be tightened at the front and back. "Sandbags are old fashioned and heavy," Lohmann says. "A 40-foot Trawler cover in Tofino [Vancouver Island] has easily withstood 80-mph winds."

As for set-up and take-down, after five tries two people will be able to install the cover in less than 20 minutes, while taking it down will take 10 minutes.

Family affair

Lohmann Sails & Covers is a small operation. Working with only three other employees, including his two sons Marius, 24, and Nico, 22 (both



Lohmann at the IFAI Canada Expo in February, 2006 in Vancouver, B.C.



Lohmann's workshop on Salt Spring Island. Lohmann would like to upgrade his next workshop to at least 5,000 square feet, where he'd be able to lay out the material for boat covers indoors rather than dealing with the elements.

getting their apprenticeships from their father), by late spring of this year, Lohmann already has fabricated more than 100 boat covers. Having his sons on board is a welcome surprise. "We bought them a house in Victoria [on Vancouver Island] to go to school and work but now they've come back. My older son [Marius] says to me, 'yeah, dad, it looks like it's a good way to make money. Easier than filmmaking.' I don't mind. It's fun to all be together."

While he doesn't have a monopoly on the boat cover market, Lohmann is amazed at how little competition there is—at the moment. "Okay, I have maybe two or three competitors around here who do it, but they don't advertise and they don't even put a label on them," he says. "They don't want to. The normal upholsterer doesn't want to deal with upgrading a shop to accommodate covers."

Convinced that the market for boat covers will grow, Lohmann doesn't rule out franchising or waiting for someone big to buy him out. But first, he says, it wouldn't hurt if his craft was more widely acknowledged. He tells how he recently solicited some contract work from Harken Inc., a manufacturer of sailboat hardware and accessories based in Pewaukee, Wis. "I contacted them,



Marius Lohmann (top) drapes himself in a project at his father's workshop while Nico (bottom) does edgy work on a boat cover. The brothers proved to be a quick study in the cover trade and are invaluable members of the family team.

and I hear nothing," he says. "This is my biggest problem. Nobody thinks that this really is a business. They think, nobody has ever done it, why you?"

If his sons want to stay with the business, Lohmann is happy to keep it in the family. "Then I wouldn't have to look for someone to buy it," he says. "One thing is for sure, it would be a waste if nobody kept it going. Nobody is copying me—yet."

His material buying is minimal—he requires the fabric, buckles, some thread, webbing and rope—which makes it easy to outsource. "My three guys had never touched a sewing machine before, and they are all pretty good now after half a year. This is all very simple, actually. Don't tell anybody," he laughs.

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