

# CANIM

STORY & PHOTOS: NEIL RABINOWITZ



Living up to her Native American name meaning “Big Chief’s Canoe”, *Canim* loyally served the Navy and loftily entertained many celebrities.



The lake is frozen solid, embedded in ice and snow. Outside there is a small hole sawn through the ice and a die-hard fraternity of mid-winter fishermen fixing bait, passing the flask, huddled in hope that the fish will bite, the liquor will last, and the ice will hold. It’s biting cold and they’ve got a tiny wooden slatted shack – the last stop for many a Perch, Northern Pike and Walleye – for shelter against the howling wind. Just a few hundred yards to shore, through a blizzard of white, rests *Canim*, hibernating through Lake Michigan’s brutal winter in the cozy confines of a custom craftsman-built boathouse. The steam is rising in warm billows where *Canim* is swaddled in padding, comforted with heaters, water circulators and a caretaker who each night tucks in this stately fantail cruiser – a pampered testimonial to an era when classic wooden fantail cruisers were the megayachts of their day.

“I was born to own this boat,” exclaims Martin Sutter with a smile. That’s the truth. “My passion in life is to restore *Canim* to its original state, preserve and operate it in the manner for which it was created.” That was Sutter’s gospel for the past few years of his recent ownership and now after an unstoppable pursuit to purchase and rejuvenate, *Canim* is just about perfect. After a long life of shifting home ports and multiple owners – some devoted, others misguided – *Canim* finally belongs to Sutter, who has collected nautical artifacts of all types his entire

life and assembled a near-museum of historical treasures with *Canim* as the culmination of his possessions.

When life began for *Canim*, America had lots of haves and have-nots and even a few in-betweens. In early 1929, the joints were jumping with roaring good times, jazz and booze, and luxury in America took on a class of its own. After the crash, the joys of life were rising from the ashes when renowned naval architect Ted Geary – with the inspiration of one of his top designers Ed Monk Sr., leading the projects – drew up a series of four elegant 96ft fantail cruisers to be built at Seattle’s Lake Union Drydock. These narrow, 18ft-beam, slender cruisers – with a plum stem and fine entry – featured an abundance of portholes and thick panels of teak and mahogany seasoned with brass and flat glass. There was nothing to rival these beauties afloat for luxury, speed, boat handling and pure lines, and soon Geary’s office produced eight fantails including *Canim*, which was commissioned for the Seattle Times publisher, Col. C. B. Blethen of the same family who still produces Seattle’s flagship paper today.

Just a few decades earlier in those same Pacific Northwest waters, native tribes plied icy waters in large cedar canoes, so *Canim*, meaning “Big Chief’s Canoe” paid homage to the coastal Chinook tribe’s famed craft.

Since 1930, *Canim* underwent three name changes, from *Polaris* to *Cano* and back to *Canim*, and survived nearly a



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dozen owners including Natalie Keaton, wife of Buster Keaton back in the 30s when Hollywood celebs enjoyed her cruises. She served the Navy during WWII, performing coastal patrol and picket duty. *Canim* also adventured the Mexican coast on star-studded marlin expeditions and was eventually purchased by Clessie Cummins, who replaced her 150hp twins with twin 850 cubic-inch Cummins diesels and chartered the Inside Passage from Seattle to Alaska for decades, often hosting Julie Andrews and husband Blake Edwards – both passionate fishermen.

When Gary Norton purchased the boat in 1983, he loved the vintage style of workmanship and gunk-holed along the Inside Passage, restoring a little each season. “I bought a boathouse for it, hired 22 craftsman out of the Seattle wooden boat shops and these dedicated wooden boat enthusiasts ripped into it heavy for 6 months. We removed all the machinery, stripped the decks, and cut the roofs back to the house, replacing tarred felt and wire mesh with a solid membrane. We removed the rotten overhangs, ports etc, and then we proudly paraded in Seattle’s Opening Day Parade.”

The next year they dropped in on British Columbia’s prestigious Victoria Classic Boat Festival and swept all the awards for restoration and class of vessel.

Before Norton could do all he intended, he had another 130-footer (ex-*Yecats*, later *Atessa*) that required his attention,





and he reluctantly let *Canim* go to famed EST founder Werner Erhardt, who stationed the boat in Sausalito's houseboat row at the foot of the Taj Mahal look-alike. He rebuilt the hull planking and structure with good intent. But once Erhardt began tiger striping the teak and installing modern spa tubs in the master stateroom along with a crinkled lead motif, Italian

marble showers and lizard skin ceilings, Norton bought *Canim* back to restore her vintage pride. "I missed the boat and once I got rid of *Yecats* I wanted it back. It was one of the most graceful cruisers ever built with too much beauty to see it transformed to a comfortable lounge palace not in keeping with the original creation. I had to have it back and restore a little respect for the design," he said.

The boat eventually went to two other owners, one of whom brought her to Philbrooks Yard in Sidney, B.C. where *Canim* underwent another facelift and was then taken to the Caribbean for a life of reggae, rum and island running. *Canim's* old-world charm and finish faded in the tropical sun and the boat's joints and classic canoe form longed for the cool air of northern seas. "I'd been scouring North America for years looking for an old Trumpy design when I was vacationing in BVI and saw *Canim* cruise past," said Sutter. "I went wild...it was the finest looking classic wooden yacht I had ever seen so I hopped in my dinghy and circled it frantically until it was embedded in my mind."



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Sutter was relentless. He grew up on the Great Lakes and lived in Texas as an adult boating in everything from 12ft skiffs, Sea Rays, and a 52 Hatteras, as well as Hobies and Catalinas among others, from California to the Texas lakes.

Back in Michigan, a few months after sighting *Canim*, he saw an ad for the boat and quickly reached an agreement that would keep her from going back to the west coast.

Harbor Springs on Lake Michigan seemed a perfect fit for *Canim*, so Sutter brought her 2,800 miles from Boston through the St. Lawrence because her stack loomed 27 feet off the water making the Erie Canal route impassable.

In 78 years, *Canim* had spent many winters in the cool, sweet waters of Seattle’s urban Lake Union and Lake Washington, running to the remote glacial runways of the Inside Passage each summer; hosting college football fans at waterfront Washington Husky stadium in the fall; holding out through the wet, but mild Northwest winters.

“The Great Lakes are good to *Canim*,” explains Sutter. “There is a real history of classic motor yachts of that era that plied these waters as private luxury yachts, ferries or commuters. It’s humbling when we tie up at some harbor, the townspeople come down the dock just to see this big wooden boat...if we anchor out, they immediately start circling us in their small lake boats.”





On tour, invited guests to this private Great Lakes celebrity discover the surrounding warmth of Burmese teak, the distinctive sprawling fantail complete with heaters and an enclosure if desired. The main saloon features an open-beamed ceiling, leather Chesterfield-style furnishings with bookcases and an amidships fireplace creating a men's club atmosphere. Forward is a viewing lounge or dining saloon with panoramic windows forward at deck level. Below decks is a master and two double cabins all restored with teak, brass, mahogany and wainscoting, and forward is one more double cabin in the raised forepeak. The pilothouse is small, but provides a commanding view and originally may have been a step or two lower. This height however, provides great visibility for the captain and guests – who have a raised settee – while the nav area provides an ideal working space for electronics that might be the only things that betray an authentic consistency on board.

Sutter and his captain Luther Hall, who has been with the boat for years and has nearly the same devotion to *Canim*, will be cruising all the cherished spots around the Lakes, from the dazzling shores of the Chicago waterfront to charming Mackinac Island. Her seasonal route includes the famed marinas of Charlevoix, the Lakes' marine parks and the Les Cheneaux "snow" islands en route to the North Channel's 15,000 islands bound by Canada and Michigan's Upper Peninsula, where rocky outcroppings, wooden shores and pastoral coves will provide all the gunk-holing *Canim* will need after a lifetime of coastal adventures.

"There is nothing in life I enjoy more than piloting a boat through places like the Georgian Bay near the North Channel," explains Sutter. "Unlike modern designs, these older cruisers





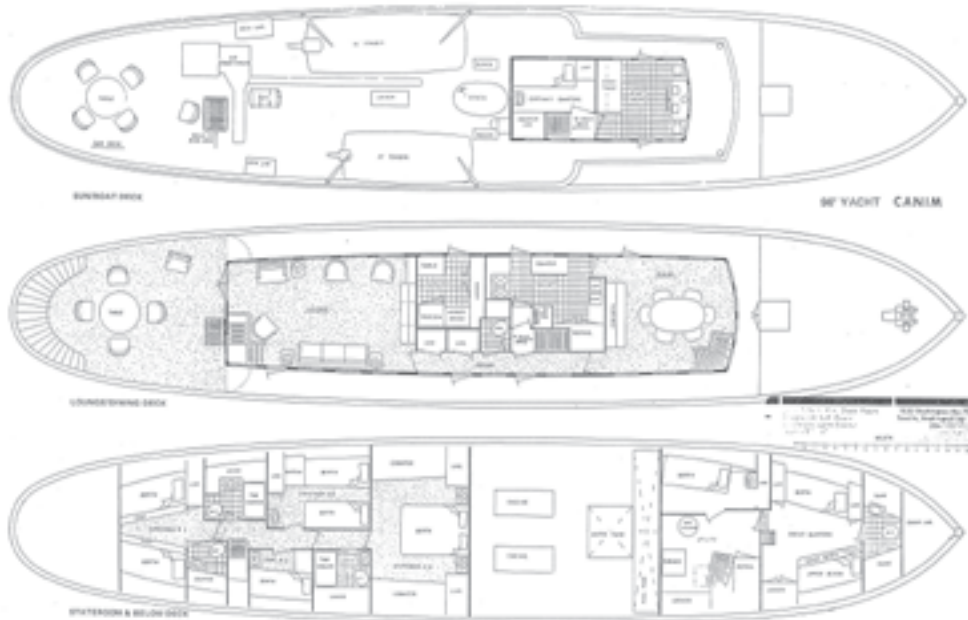
savor the open aft deck where people would pass the cruise on the fantail with panoramic views and smooth, quiet running. Imagine people like Anthony Quinn grinning on the fantail, puffing cigars with others personifying an era that enjoyed *Canim's* fantail as the ultimate in luxury.”

The Great Lakes has a long history of stately private yachts frequenting ports before coastal roads were developed. *Canim's* summer home in Harbor Springs has been a “go-to” destination for 170 years. Cars have never been allowed on the residential peninsula, home to blue bloods like the DuPonts and the Fords and other residents, who, according to tradition, still have to take a horse and carriage to their front door. One yacht of *Canim's* vintage was the *Delphine* (BI USA #37 Dec 2003), built in Detroit for Horace Dodge (of car fame) and a reminder of what furniture aficionados have known for a century – that some of America’s finest woodworkers have made Michigan proud. Along with a notable wooden boatbuilding school and the renowned Mertraugh Boatworks, who have brought wooden boats to life on the Lakes, the wooden boat show held each August in Hessel, MI, displays the Lakes’ finest and continues since America’s very first Chris-Craft dealer was on Lake Michigan. One hundred and twenty years ago, Hessel and other towns were simple Native American fishing villages that



Modern electronics in the bridge may be the only things that betray an authentic consistency on board.





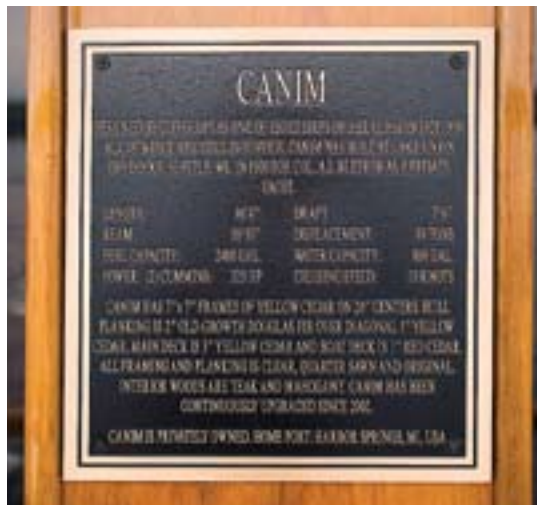
Historic GA rendering, no formal updated drawing exists.

became thriving lumber ports filled with wooden schooners that launched the wooden boat heritage that the region now proudly claims.

“Who knows how many fortunes have been spent on *Canim*,” says Norton. “Everyone seems to throw at least a million bucks into it out of passion for the boat. It has the prettiest fantail of them all, built to yacht grade double-, now almost triple-planked, with a raised forepeak. I used to run it at 11 knots at 11 gallons an hour; pretty economical, but if you plan on running offshore it could potentially roll like the devil and bury that fine bow entry into the head seas.”

Cummins did just that on one Alaskan cruise, burying the bow so deep, green water rolled aft and caved in the forward dining saloon bulkhead that has since been aluminum-reinforced.

*Canim* has been labeled a modern megayacht cloaked in original beauty. With grace and classic good looks, she was built to perform and provides luxury, doing a better job of that today than many larger, and more sophisticated modern craft that are loaded with toys and every trapping of shore. Designers and boaters of that era knew the answer was not to devise a design that could accommodate all the savories from home on board, but to leave them behind and selectively include only the most rewarding contributions from daily life. Cruising with speed, great views, and fresh air when needed, *Canim* has an atmosphere no modern boat can achieve. It is more than history preserved, it brings to life an era when boats were not a smothering extension of life on shore, burdened by the comforts of home, rather an adventurous escape aboard a craftsman’s sculptural link to adventure, unique travel, and an uncorrupted experience on the water. That is the mystique *Canim* has provided to seduce a near century of boat owners who passionately nurture this graceful vessel that modern boatbuilding has been unable to recreate. |



*Canim* is one of the eight fantails designed in 1929 by Ted Geary and his team, reflecting an exciting era for her first owner, Seattle Times publisher, Col. C.B. Blethen.

## SPECS

- LOA:** 96ft 4in (29m)
- LWL:** 89ft (27m)
- Beam:** 18ft 10in (5m)
- Draft:** 7ft 6in (2m)
- Displacement:** 89 tons
- Engines:** 2 x 325hp Cummins/Aquadoc Marine/Bridgeway Cummins
- Propellers:** 40 inch, 3-blade bronze
- Speed (max/cruise):** 12.5/10 knots
- Fuel capacity:** 2,400 gallons
- Range:** 1,500 nautical miles safe range
- Windlass:** Island Rigging and Hydraulics
- Bow thruster:** 50hp 5-blade hydraulic
- Stabilizers:** 2 to 3ft hydraulic
- Generators:** 2 x 25kW Onan
- Watermaker:** Sea Recovery 1,400gpd
- Water heater:** 140-gallon diesel
- Freshwater capacity:** 800 gallons
- Sewage system overhaul:** D.N. Kelley & Sons
- Security/Monitoring system:** Maritron
- Air-conditioning:** Cruisair
- Communication/Navigation electronics:** 4 VHF, single side band, weather fax, Sea Tel satellite, sat phone, radar, autopilot, depth sounder, 4 GPS, 3 networked computers, variety of hand held phones, Nobeltec/Noreast Marine Systems
- Entertainment system:** 46in plasma TV, Bose surround-sound stereo system
- Owner and guests/Crew:** 8/3
- Tenders:** 12in Whitehall custom-made sail; 18ft 60hp Boston Whaler; 16ft Castoldi diesel
- Tender-launching system:** Hydraulic davits, port and starboard
- Lifelines:** Richardson Rigging of Tortola
- Exterior canvas:** Doyle Sails
- Paint:** Awlgrip (two part)/BVI Painters
- Construction:** Yellow cedar and douglas fir
- Classification:** N/A
- Yacht management:** N/A
- Naval architecture:** Ted Geary
- Exterior styling/Interior design:** Ted Geary
- Interior soles:** E&S Yacht Maintenance
- Builder/Year:** Lake Union Drydock/1929
- Maintenance & restoration:** E.J. Mertaugh Boat Works
- Contact:** Canim Harbor Springs, LLC. 329 East Bay Street Harbor Springs, MI 49740 Email: info@canim-yacht.com www.canim-yacht.com