

# Brice Prairie native returns from Alaska with unusual home-built watercraft

By DARIN ZANK of the Community Life staff Oct 17, 2003 0



*Fritz Funk guides his 27-foot "Sneakeasy" through the backwaters of Lake Onalaska during a sunny afternoon last week. Funk built the boat based on designs by Phil Bolger. Funk's sneakeasy glides smoothly through water as shallow as a few inches deep, which allows him to explore parts of the lake and rivers few other boaters can get to. (Photos by Darin Zank)*

**F**ritz Funk grew up on the waters of the Lake Onalaska and Black River area. The Funk family always enjoyed hitting the river when they lived in La Crosse, and later they moved to a home on Brice Prairie overlooking the backwaters.

And Fritz knows boats. Between his time spent exploring local waters and his time as a fisheries biologist with the state of Alaska's Department of Fish and Game, he has ridden in many different kinds of boats. He also has built a half dozen of them, and he lived on boats while residing in Seattle and Alaska.

But one boat in particular has struck Funk's fancy. And it's quite the attention-getter anywhere he goes with it, whether it be in the water or on a trailer traveling down the highway.

The boat is called a sneakeasy, or a "power sharpie." It's 27 feet long, 4 feet wide, and looks like something that would have been seen during the days of Prohibition in the south, running illegal hooch through gator-infested backwaters.

Funk built the boat from designs created by Phil Bolger of Massachusetts about four years ago. "It was a winter project," Funk said. Bolger, an elderly gentleman who has designed several similar boats, "thinks very differently" when it comes to watercraft, Funk said. And many boat lovers like his line of thinking.

"He has a bit of a cult following," Funk said.

Funk hasn't met Bolger, but he has communicated with him through e-mail in recent years, picking his brain on construction techniques and other boat-building topics. And several Web sites (such as <http://boats.backwater.org/Sneakeasy/index.html>, [www.carlson-design.com](http://www.carlson-design.com), and [www.ace.net.-au/schooner](http://www.ace.net.-au/schooner)) are dedicated to sneakeasy-style boats and those who design and build them. "It's like a little community," Funk said of sneakeasy fans.

The sneakeasys are built mostly out of plywood. They have a flat bottom, forward storage space, a 6-to-1 beam-to-length ratio, and a "wave-piercing" hull, Funk said, that helps them part waves with amazing ease. The design allows the boat to reach speeds of almost 20 knots with relatively small motors. Funk has a 15 horsepower motor on his boat, and it cruises easily through water shallow or deep.

"It just slides through the water," Funk said. The flat-bottom design displaces very little water, so there is no suction-drag created, as when most motorized boats accelerate and the front end creeps up out of the water.

One of the few hitches in navigating the sneakeasy, Funk said, comes when trying to turn the boat around in tight places.

Nonetheless, Funk said, he's been in a lot of styles of boats in a lot of conditions, "and I've never felt anything like this. ... This boat can go through water shallower than any of our flat-bottomed boats."

Funk and others also get a kick out of the unique appearance of the boat. "I love the way it looks," Funk said. And while either taking the boat (and this reporter) for a ride on the lake on a beautiful fall afternoon, or while driving down from Alaska last month with the boat on a homemade trailer behind his truck, every duck hunter, fisherman and fellow traveler turns and takes a long look at the unusual craft

"People stare at this thing like crazy," Funk said.

He added that while driving down from Alaska, he had so many people approach him during pit stops and ask about the boat that he half-thought about printing up informational flyers that he could just hand out.

Funk said the boat was easy to build, and cost him about \$1,500 for materials. And it could be done cheaper. "You could build one of these for a few hundred dollars if you were a good scrounger."

Funk estimates that only a couple dozen sneakeasies like his exist, although he had heard of another one somewhere on Lake Onalaska.

Funk, who still lives in Alaska, said he tries to come back to the Coulee Region each fall to enjoy the changing of the seasons. He's not necessarily an avid fisherman or hunter, so he uses the boat mostly just to explore the backwaters and go where few other boaters can. Which is exactly what he hoped the boat could help him do.

"It's exceeded all my expectations for a river boat," Funk said.