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Sea Bright Marina Celebrates Three Decades on the Shrewsbury

Story and Photos by Art Petrosemolo

SEA BRIGHT – His driver’s license reads Lance Cunningham but the man answers to Chick – and he has done so for six decades. “My mother’s best friend named me before I was born,” Chick Cunningham says, “and it didn’t matter if I was a boy or a girl. I was going to be Chick.”

Cunningham is a Jersey Shore waterman and this year celebrates two milestones. He has been married to his wife – the former Nancy Smith of Middletown (they have two grown daughters) – for 35 years and he has owned and operated Carriage House Marina on the Shrewsbury River for 30. He’s extremely proud of both.

Everyone who has owned, operated or lusted over a boat in the Two River area has probably met Cunningham somewhere along the way. At Carriage House, tucked behind apartments, just south of the borough center, Cunningham has in-water slips for 40 boats for the boating season and can store some 200 boats on the hard during the winter, but that’s the easy part. Cunningham and a small staff – with his golden retrievers Clam and Oyster supervising – troubleshoot and repair engines, as well as repair, clean and paint boats all year. They haul and launch boats up to 50 feet with a 25-ton lift.



The historic carriage house was once part of a Sea Bright estate.

The Carriage House name refers to the historic building at the center of the yard built as part of a late 19th– to early 20th century Sea Bright seaside estate. The frame, shingled building once housed a hayloft, tack shed, washing area and stables. Today, it’s the center of yearlong boating operations.

When the Super Storm Sandy surge in 2012 sent 7 feet of the Shrewsbury River into the Carriage House, Cunningham was watching it all from the second floor. “The wind wasn’t as bad as we expected but the size of the surge surprised us,” he said. Every one of the stored boats at Carriage House, some upwards of 40 feet long, were lifted from their cradles and stands and deposited around the yard, many sailboats with their masts extending through power lines. Cunningham got a 150-ton crane on-site in four days and, with his staff, put the 3-acre yard back together and helped his customers evaluate damage as visits from insurance adjusters became a daily occurrence. He was busy for months preparing estimates and working to get boats repaired and ready for spring launch.

Cunningham, like everyone in the marine business at the Jersey Shore, has seen a drop in boating in the area since Sandy. “Many people collected insurance money from destroyed boats and ran,” he smiles. “They never got back into boating.” Cunningham says that there has been a 30 percent drop in state boat registration.



Carriage House Marina

Managing a full service marina isn’t a desk job, Cunningham explains, but he wouldn’t have traded it for one. He believes he was destined to work on boats.

Cunningham got started in the boating business as a kindergarten student. A Rumson native, he was dropped off at school that was housed in the Presbyterian Church on Rumson Road. He remembers, “And when the car drove away, I hustled down to Paul’s Boats on the Navesink and spent the day messing around and learning what I could.”

Cunningham says, “That didn’t go on too long before it was discovered and I joined my classmates in school.” Cunningham’s boating escapades had to wait until his age caught up with his interest.

Cunningham is a fixture in Sea Bright in both its borough – he chairs the planning and zoning board – and boating life. He ran Lance’s Sailing Center in the 1970s and 1980s renting surfboards and boats and then, with partner Bill Bergin, opened Sandy Hook Yacht Sales (SHYC), originally in Atlantic Highlands, but now a go-to site for new and used boat sales on Sea Bright’s Ocean Avenue. In 1985, Cunningham purchased the historic carriage house that now houses his marina business and surrounding yard. He continued as part owner of SHYC for a few years before focusing all his energies getting his hands dirty in the full service marina business.

Cunningham has sailed one-design boats to large racers throughout his career. He keeps a historic Wood Pussy one design at Carriage House and still sails it in local events as much as he can usually in the fall. He does get on the water in his 36-foot picnic boat – T’ Punch – whenever he can, usually around work hours during the summer.

When asked about the state of boating at the shore, Cunningham says he sees a drop in the traditional, large, powerful, inboard boats that had dominated the sport fishing industry for years. “Today, we are seeing sleek and swift, 30-plus foot outboard craft powered – some with as many as three 300-HP engines on the transom. They get people out to the fishing grounds and back quickly,” he says.

For the sailing industry, Cunningham isn’t optimistic. “It’s still shaky and I am not sure if it ever will come back all the way,” he says.

Carriage House’s season is about to shift into high gear, especially if the early spring continues. “Our recreational boaters want to be in the water in late April or early May,” he says. The marina crew, even wearing heavy sweatshirts in chilly, windy conditions that are normal in March, already are uncovering boats and beginning the commissioning process for their 35th season.