



# HOWARD PERCIVAL JOHNSON

By Allison Blake and His Old Time World

Howard Percival Johnson Jr. stood at the end of his stunningly well-organized workbench holding a Chock Full of Nuts coffee can labeled “knobs.” Knobs of every description spilled forth: an old MG stick shift knob, a chrome button of indeterminate origin, and a white plastic knob scavenged from an old fan. After all, when you restore old mechanical stuff for a living, you never know when a spare knob might come in handy.

Attention to detail is one skill Johnson brings to his 40-year career as the self-styled Antique Doctor. What began as a furniture restoration business in 1969 evolved in the early 1990s to focus on Johnson’s first two loves, boats and cars. Furniture’s not entirely out of the picture, but, as Johnson puts it, “the boats have taken over.” No mystery there. Johnson spent his childhood weekends on the Chesapeake and her rivers with his parents, and by the age of seven was helping his dad restore a boat. Now he harbors a special love for rescuing pleasure craft hailing from his post-World War II childhood, such as Chris Craft classics and

the Cocksவில்-built Whirlwinds.

“I was held prisoner on an antique boat as a child,” he joked, describing long weekend afternoons he spent with his parents aboard the 22-foot Maine-built skiff *Nona*, then, later, a 32-foot 1929 American Car & Foundry ACF Sport Cruiser called *The Leda*.

Johnson’s mechanical expertise seems almost pre-ordained. His grandfather taught steam engineering at Baltimore Polytechnic High School, and his father ran a large truck repair business in Baltimore where Johnson worked off and on until he was 25. But there’s another reason he gravitated toward using his hands—childhood polio.

“I couldn’t play ball,” he says. “Dad had a workbench. I was good with my hands. I made a motorbike in my basement. One day, I went by the baseball game on the motorbike I had built—and it stopped the game.”

His clients find themselves caught up in his passion, since Johnson prefers they work along with him during their boat restorations at his sprawling hillside operation just

south of Annapolis where boats and cars are stored in two barns and in a large building he calls “The Arena.”

“He’s got an insatiable appetite for knowledge,” said client Jim Holler, a fellow member of the Antique & Classic Boat Society’s Chesapeake Bay Chapter. “When you talk about that in reference to restoring old boats and old cars, he has a real appreciation of those yesteryear kinds of things and is just keenly interested in preserving them.”

Client Tracy Coleman, a mechanically-minded soulmate, certainly relates. Some years ago, his father-in-law gave up his old Whirlwind, a boat similar to the one Coleman spent many happy days cruising on the 1950s and ‘60s Severn River. He took it to his shop, where it sat for a long time. “Finally,” Coleman said, “it dawned on me I needed inside help. I contacted Howard, and we just seemed to hit it off. Then the true danger in restoring boats developed. I wanted a nice-looking boat. I didn’t want a show queen. But once you get into it, you’re in.”

As the restoration progressed, the pair took the Whirlwind out on test drives, would make little adjustments, and fix them. “You’re always liable to get some dribble here and there,” said Coleman. “Howard ended up keeping it, what, six months? We went riding and had fun, came back, and wanted to do something else.” The duo had so much fun that they are now working on another boat, a 16-foot 1928 Welsh Brothers Gentleman’s Racer, a classic that Coleman bought from Johnson. That’s because the Antique Doctor also buys, sells and rescues old boats—often phoned in from a friend, perhaps a fellow member of the Antique & Classic Boat Society.

Take a tour through The Arena and climb aboard a 42-foot, triple stateroom Owens, built in 1948 in Baltimore. She’s a good-looking relic with a dubious past. Having sunk in one night in 2000, the boat lounged nearly gunnel-deep in Middle River. Once she was raised, it took a year for the boat to find a home with Johnson. She’s a beauty, but it’s taken time and much labor to make her so.

Cleaning a boat, says Johnson, is step number one in a successful restoration. To say that was a challenge in this particular case would be an understatement. “I threw out 15 trash can loads of things, including the refrigerator,” he says. “But I was still thrilled with the design of the boat.”

Leading a tour through the boat, Johnson pointed out the details. “Look at the quality of the materials,” he says. Beautifully varnished, large mahogany panels line the main cabin. All of the plate-glass windows slide open. “It has a lot of curves,” he says, pointing to the wooden edges of the front windshield frame. “Only a skilled person can make a curve.”

The rounded shapes came in after World War II, he explained. Chris Craft led the way with this type of design emphasis. “Everybody copied them,” said Johnson.

That’s just one typical snippet of boat history that fills Johnson’s head.

“His insatiable appetite for knowledge lends itself to his research on these old cars and old boats,” said Holler. “It helps him to know how they were made or built so he can duplicate that.”

As a result, you will find a few more classic Chris Crafts or Whirlwinds cruising the Chesapeake and her rivers. Or, better yet, check out the 20th annual Antique and Classic Boat Festival in St. Michaels at the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum June 15, 16, and 17. Johnson and others from the 250-member Chesapeake Bay Chapter of the Antique & Classic Boat Society have long been involved with putting on this excellent event—[www.cbmm.org](http://www.cbmm.org). Or go to Johnson’s website—[www.oldtimeworld.com](http://www.oldtimeworld.com).

**About the Author:** Allison Blake is a freelance writer with credits for submissions to *National Geographic Traveler*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Washington Post*, *Baltimore Magazine*, and others. She is the author of *The Chesapeake Bay Book*, a *Great Destinations* guidebook now in its sixth edition. For information on the Chesapeake Bay Book—[www.countrymanpress.com](http://www.countrymanpress.com).