



**Hope Floats**  
The Argonaut Jr.  
has buoyed the  
Jacksons' dreams.

For this Tulsa couple, that sinking feeling is a good thing.

DOUG & KAY JACKSON

# THE BUILDERS

IT WAS ONE OF life's unexpected, character-revealing moments for Doug and Kay Jackson. Friends and family had gathered around a launch ramp on Lake Tenkiller in eastern Oklahoma to witness the maiden voyage of the couple's precious baby: a 7-ton, 14-and-a-half-foot-long submarine they'd built with their own hands and named Argonaut Jr.

Having spent the previous eight months consulting with engineers, monitoring mini-sub forums on Yahoo, studying photos of an 1894 wooden submersible (the original Argonaut Jr.,) designed by inventor Simon Lake, and laboring for countless nights and weekends in their backyard workshop in Tulsa, the Jacksions had achieved the unthinkable. They'd turned 70 sheets of plywood and 60 gallons of marine epoxy into a wooden vessel that doesn't float but...sinks.

Or at least that was the plan. That day in May 2010, the couple backed their blue '89 Suburban up to the water and began easing the Argonaut Jr. into the lake for the first time—slowly, slowly, until snap! Their trailer's hitch broke, sending the sub barreling down the ramp and into the water like a horse galloping back to its barn. After a few gasps and screams, there was laughter—and then a scramble to wrangle the beast.

"My dad trained me for that moment," says Doug, who grew up with a feed store-owning father who had a knack for finding the humor in precarious predicaments. "I've seen trailers come off multiple times, one with a load of hogs in it. Once, we lost a boat on a highway, and he was just laughing hysterically about it."

A second tense moment occurred later that day, after the Jacksions had successfully situated the Argonaut Jr. on the murky lake bottom.

Because the sub is pressurized, water won't penetrate an open hatch when the vessel is submerged—in theory. "Undoing those latches and pushing that hatch open 25 feet below the surface? That," says Doug, "was nerve-wracking."

The 50-year-old database administrator and his wife are wholeheartedly dedicated to the crafting of vessels. In fact, Kay recently spent two weeks in Central America on a Chinese sailboat called the Nuttin Wong that the couple plans to replicate. Their recent triumph with the Argonaut Jr. was a result of having poured an arduous seven-years-and-counting into a still-dry-docked aluminum sub they call The Seeker. The knowledge they accumulated in that time was key.

"I already knew about ballast tanks and vents, flooding, air pressure, and Boyle's law. And I had the carpentry background," says Doug, who put himself through college doing woodwork.

Still, the question remains: What would prompt this couple to build a submarine from scratch? For the Jacksions, it wasn't one impetus but many that inspired the project. Decades ago, a stubborn 12-year-old Doug skipped church to watch Disney's interpretation of the Jules Verne classic, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, and never forgot the Nautilus' famous tangle with a giant squid. A few years later, in a high school marine biology class, Doug met his future wife, Kay. And some 20 years after that, the couple decided to sign up for a scuba-diving course while living in land-locked Phoenix.

Perhaps the project was simply meant to fill the hours the two gained when they gave up television four years ago. "It was either watch TV, play golf, and die," says Doug, "or dump the TV and follow our dreams."—*Katherine Lagomarsino*