



# Sitka Maritime Heritage Society



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## Gearing up for Winter

What a FANTASTIC summer we had at SMHS!

The season was chock-full of events, work parties and planning. And a lot of it continued on into the fall, as we just can't seem to stop ourselves from cleaning and organizing the boathouse, or taking action on our upcoming projects.

In this issue of our newsletter, you will find a great story by Rebecca Poulson giving an overview of the old Sitka Marine Railways that used to be on Jamestown Bay, updates as to how we spent our summer and what the winter season looks like, and a story about Terry Perensovich's current boat project. And on top of all of that, we are announcing the search for a new Executive Director!



**WANT TO WORK  
WITH SMHS?**

**HERE'S YOUR  
CHANCE!**

**SMHS is currently seeking  
a new Executive Director.**

Sitka Maritime Heritage Society seeks an Executive Director to develop maritime heritage programs including the rehabilitation of the Japonski Island Boathouse as a working boat haul out and maritime museum. Position is 20 hours/week, \$25,000 DOE. Full job description available on our website: [www.sitkamaritime.org](http://www.sitkamaritime.org) Interested applicants may contact [sitkamaritime@gmail.com](mailto:sitkamaritime@gmail.com) or call (907) 747-3448 for more information.



## Sitka Marine Railway: Building Boats on Jamestown Bay

by Rebecca Poulson

Photos courtesy of Robert Wheeler, Jr.

In 1943, Seattle shipwright Robert Roy Wheeler arrived in Sitka aboard the *SS North Sea* to build a boatyard. He brought his family, tools, and a 3/4-ton Ford pickup truck, a gift from his parents. He had purchased a 99-year lease on the property that is now Allen Marine, and began building a shop and then marine railway, mostly by hand. His son Robert remembers his dad sluicing the beach in preparation for laying the railway, in the dark, by himself. That Ford pickup truck, a hard-to-get item during wartime, was used, among other tasks, to pull roof trusses into place. He next built a machine shop, and eventually had a floating vertical lift and a dock, that came from the military installation at Old Sitka.

This past August, Wheeler's son Robert Raymond Wheeler visited Sitka for the first time since he left as a teenager in 1951. He gave an interview by phone before his visit, which will at some point be broadcast on KCAW Raven Radio.

How was it that a person could start a business in the middle of a war? As it turns out, boat building and repair were a priority during war time, necessary to support the fishing industry.

Wheeler had long dreamed of and planned his own boatyard. He had married into a family of boatbuilders in Seattle, and learned the trade working at Vic Frank's yard. He put aside money by rebuilding cruisers on his own, that his family would use for the summer, then sell. His father-in-law Earnest "Mac" McDonald, a partner in the Prothero McDonald boat yard on Lake Union, helped him set up his Sitka yard.

Earlier in 1943 he had scouted Alaska for a suitable location, and settled on Sitka. His partner, boyhood friend Wally Sims, was in the business side of the operation and was not a boatbuilder.

The Sitka Marine Railway opened in November of 1945 at Jamestown Bay. Right away the yard turned out several fishing boats on the "Pacific Fisherman" design by Ed Monk, a prominent marine architect of the day. Four boats were documented in 1946: the *Myrth* was built first for Rudy Sarvela (his wife *Myrth*, the boat's namesake, eventually became Sitka's first female mayor). *Her Highnes*, *Junior*, and *WRJ* were also documented in 1946, followed by the *PT. Craven* and *Alrita* in 1947.

The *Myrth* and *WRJ* have the same register length (stem to rudder post) of 37 feet, and the *Junior* and *Pt. Craven* are about a foot longer. The *Alrita* is a little larger, and the hard-chine *Her Highnes* smaller. (Hard-chine means that the hull, rather than being round, has a v-bottom and a hard angle where the bottom meets the sides.) The *Her Highnes* was built by Earl MacDonald at his home. The *Stephanie* (now the *Chuck A Nan*) was built at Jamestown Bay in 1955, and is also a hard-chine design.

Six or eight men worked at the yard the winter of 1946-47, but later fewer worked there. The yard did mostly repair work and built seine skiffs, according to the late Al Rottluff, a fisherman who worked for the yard in winters. Sitka Marine Railway became the primary repair yard in Sitka; Andrew Hope and George and David Howard preferred building to repair.

Robert Wheeler's Alaskan dream, like so many, ended in disappointment. Al Rottluff said that the Sitka Marine Railway simply could not compete with the Puget Sound builders — wages were higher, and materials more expensive here. They also had to wait on all services that had to be done in Seattle. He said Sims and

Wheeler had to put things into hock to pay the workers while waiting for the yard to get paid, especially on insurance work. Wheeler's son says it turned out Sims and a local banker were borrowing money from the business, which came to light when they got another bookkeeper. And, the nation experienced a post-war slump in the late 1940s.

Sims left, then Wheeler divorced his wife and left, in 1949. Wheeler's wife's uncle Earl McDonald, who had taught boatbuilding at the Puget Sound Naval shipyard, ran the yard after Wheeler left.

From Sitka, Wheeler moved to Juneau with his second wife, and managed a hotel, and did some boatwork, then went back to the "States" and did engineering for a hotel.

McDonald sold the yard in

1955 to machinist Ray Woodruff, who sold the yard to someone else, who sold it to Bob Allen in 1967. The Allens put in the fill—the tide used

to come right up to Sawmill creek Road—but one of the old buildings is still standing, with fill coming right up to its pilings. Part of one of the railways is also still visible.



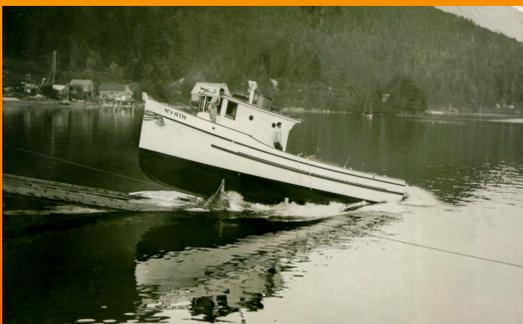
Robert Roy Wheeler at Sitka Marine Railway

As for the younger Bob Wheeler, he left Sitka to join the Air Force, even spending some time flying in Alaska. He and his daughter visited Sitka in August and were able to connect with the Allens and old timers who were here in the 1940s, and donated scans of a cache of wonderful photos of the yard and 1940s Sitka, which can be seen on the SMHS website.

Of the boats built at Sitka Marine Railway, the *Myrth* and the *Chuck A Nan* are still around; perhaps our readers know whether any others survive.



Sitka Marine Railway  
Ford pick-up truck



Launching the *Myrth* at  
Sitka Marine Railway

## DONATION THANK YOU!

This summer Lynne Chassin donated a print of an E.W. Merrill photograph of the Tom and Al, a halibut schooner, on the beach at what is now Katlian Street. The print was one made from the negatives of Sheldon Jackson College a number of years ago. The photo is from some time after 1907, which was when the radio towers visible in the background were constructed.



SMHS had the image scanned and you can see all of the fun details by visiting our website: [sitkamaritime.org](http://sitkamaritime.org)

## Reviving the *F/V Myrna D*

Story by Ashia Lane



The *F/V Myrna D* hasn't been fishing for the past 17 years, but she will soon be back at it, thanks to the efforts of Terry and Joanna Perensovich.

The *Myrna D* was originally built in 1955, near Ballard, WA at the Hansen Boat Co., a family-run company founded in 1928, known for constructing high quality commercial fishing boats with a proven design and great seaworthiness. The *Myrna D* is a 43' double-ended vessel that had proven its reliability and seaworthiness fishing tuna off the coast of Washington and trolling salmon throughout Southeast Alaska when it met with disaster... on land.

One chilly evening in the late 1990's, Halibut Point Marine boat yard manager Bob Jacobi received a call reporting a fire onboard the *Myrna D*, which was in the yard—owner Chuck Crenna had the boat hauled out for maintenance and repairs. The fire had begun in the boat's fo'c'sle through faulty

extension cords powering various devices. The fire crew was able to extinguish the fire, but not before serious damage had occurred, ruining the entire house and all mechanical systems, as well as some decking and structural elements. The boat, as far as the insurance company could tell, was a total loss.

But the owners and shipwright Terry Perensovich saw the boat for more than its monetary value or present condition. They saw the beautiful lines of the boat, knew its fishing history, and recognized it as a good sea boat; They wanted to see the *Myrna D* back in the Sitka fishing fleet.

Terry had taken boat design courses in Kennebunkport, Maine, and had worked with local Sitka shipwrights for many years. When he acquired the *Myrna D*, he had a solid 20 years of shipwright experience under his belt, and thought the project would be worthwhile, if not lengthy. He saw the *Myrna D* as representative of the local fleet, in

that it had an efficient design, was a safe boat, and as a double ender, could be depended on to have a gentle ride. Terry steered the boat from Halibut Point Marine to his own Jamestown Bay boathouse from the troll pit, and slowly approached the work, working weekends and evenings whenever possible. The boat had a bit more damage than his initial assessment, but he and partner Joanna forged ahead, removing the burnt fo'c'sle and outlying areas of damage, and rebuilding the engine and replacing the fuel tanks.

Slowly but surely, a new foredeck deck was put in place as well as a continuation of aluminum bulwarks from midships forward (Chuck Crenna had replaced the original wooden bulwarks from midship back to the troll pit before the fire). The Perensovichs sold the boathouse, and the *Myrna D* was moved to Eliason Harbor. Eventually, Terry closed his shipwright business and started building a house for himself and Joanna, taking an estimated five

## UPCOMING EVENT:

### SMHS Annual Meeting & Discussion Panel

SMHS is tossing around topic ideas for our annual discussion panel. We've been thinking a lot about SUBSISTENCE, especially with the current momentum and interest in our local foods network, CSF fish subscriptions, and community garden.

But we are also open to your suggestions, and would love to hear what YOU would appreciate during our winter meeting. Past topics have included Women in the Fisheries and Herring to name just two. Please email [sitkamaritime@gmail.com](mailto:sitkamaritime@gmail.com) with your ideas!



Women in Fisheries panel 2013.

Photo James Poulson

## Merchandise On Sale



*Worn out your favorite SMHS shirt or cap? Order another through our email: [sitkamaritime@gmail.com](mailto:sitkamaritime@gmail.com) or check out our hats at the Daily Sitka Sentinel.*

Members receive a 20% discount!



## *Myrna D*, continued from page 6

year break from the *Myrna D*. The boat sat covered in the harbor during this time, getting hull work in alternate years, while Terry focused on the carpentry skills required for home building, with a bit of shipwright work on the side.

After their house was ready for occupancy, Terry turned his skills back to the *Myrna D* in her new stall at Crescent Harbor. The boat gained a new wheelhouse, with red cedar outside and a yellow cedar interior, complete with traditional-style vertical staving and ventilation holes. While Terry had studied boat design, he was at liberty when it came to replicating the original design of the *Myrna D*, having only an old photo to garner loose parameters and dimensions. He researched by looking at other fishing boats, and taking measurements of similar design elements. As Pacific Northwest ocean vessels typically have a distinctive look, Terry was able to imitate the original while adding personal preferences to the lines. And this past June, he and Joanna were able to remove the long-time visqueen cover and see the *Myrna D* as an almost-complete boat.

A lot of work remains, including adding the mast and rigging, as well as the mechanical systems, including hydraulics and electrical wiring. But Terry seems unfazed—boats always need work, we all know—and is taking it a bit at a time. The *Myrna D* is a classic, dating from the apogee of design and construction of beautiful, seaworthy hook-and-line fishing boats. Terry is doing his best to match restoration efforts to the original period, and reinsert the *Myrna D* into the local Sitka fishing fleet. Keep an eye out!



The F/V Myrna D is located in Sitka's downtown Crescent Harbor-- Take a look!

