We are a nonprofit dedicated to preserving maritime heritage and to sharing that rich legacy with the public, especially children and youth.

Sitka Maritime Heritage Society

Staying the Course Together

“I can’t change the direction of the wind, but I can adjust my sails to always reach my destination.” – Jimmy Dean

While so many things can happen outside of our control, SMHS’s steadfast dedication and work preserving and sharing maritime heritage hasn’t wavered. As we progress with planning for our Historic Preservation Fund grant for the Boathouse and collecting stories and objects from the past, we are carrying out our work with, as always, our mission at the forefront. We are still moving forward and, where necessary, have just “adjusted our sails” in how we deliver some of our programming to better reach the community.

Our website was already a comprehensive archive of oral history videos and maritime history resources and is now being expanded even further. New resources are regularly being added online, such as our Water Safety Checklist (developed with the help of AMSEA), and our new History Blog (see page 2). We are also developing some online events (like Virtual Trivial!) and are excited to try out these new platforms so we can continue to come together and celebrate the maritime skills, knowledge and stories that make our community unique.

As our online offerings grow, we look forward to your input and value your feedback. Please let us know what you’d like to see! Do you have an interesting family story that would make a good blog post, an idea for the next newsletter topic, or some photos that can be shared online? Let us know what you’d like to contribute, and we’ll find the best way to share it together.

The winds are always changing, but SMHS keep moving forward with the same unwavering commitment to preserve and share maritime heritage!

• sitkamaritime@gmail.com • (907) 623-8054 • www.sitkamaritime.org •

Virtual Trivia

Tuesday, May 19 at 7:00pm
Online via Zoom

Competition. Banter. TRIVIA!

Can you name all the shore boats?

What was original color of the Japonski Island Boathouse?

How many gurdies can a power troller have?

Answer fun maritime trivia, win prizes, and maybe learn some new local facts!

Sign up for SMHS’s Virtual Trivia Night by filling out the form on our website: sitkamaritime.org/trivia
Building a Troller at the Kitchen Table…

When we offered free toy boat kits to families in Sitka, we actually only had 7 kits on hand... little did we know the incredible response we would get! In 3 days we heard from 21 local families requesting kits for 39 kids around Sitka!

Not wanting any kid to go without the fun of building their own toy troller, SMHS board member Joe D’Arienzo got to work fabricating parts for additional kits. We also took on the task of properly cleaning each and every piece of the kits and organizing no-contact pickups at the Boathouse parking lot.

Families have been sending in photos of their completed kits, so please keep an eye on our website and social media to see more photos of the final at-home creations!

SMHS History Blog - A Must-Read!

Our first History Blog series details the ups and downs in the daily lives of a Norwegian Fox Farmer - Fisherman’s family living around Goddard in the 1920s and 1930s. This unique blog series immerses the reader into the life and times of the Jackson family, through the peak and decline of the fox farming boom (when fox farmers turned to fishing!). Cher Easley, whose mother was one of the Jackson kids, shared these unparalleled stories, research and photos. The true tales of this real family, told with incredible detail and wit, will transport you back in time. Enjoy exclusively on the SMHS website.

2020 Annual Business Sponsors – THANK YOU for your support!

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- Sitka Vision Clinic
- ALPS Federal Credit Union

Navigator Level ($100):
- Alaska Coach Tours

Our Annual Business Sponsors help us to cover the core costs of operating SMHS and allows us to continue our important work, preserving and sharing Sitka’s maritime heritage.

For more about becoming an Annual Business Sponsor, see the Join/Donate page of our website, or call (907) 623-8054.
Object Donations

Over the past year we have accepted several donations of objects for our collection. We wanted to highlight just a few of these objects and encourage you to check out website for more images of videos of our collection.

The most unique feature of this hand screw clamp (donated by Harriet McClain) is that not only the jaws but also the actual screws of the clamp are made of finely carved wood.

This Pharaoh Salmon label was donated to SMHS by Karen Hofstad. Pharaoh Salmon was a product of Pyramid Packing Co., which operated on Katlian Street (where Fishermans’s Quay is now located) from 1918-1967.

LEFT: This innocuous looking box is actually an antique rotary fog horn. Donated by Connor and Valorie Nelson, this horn amazingly still works. Check out our website or social media to see a video of it in action...but make sure to turn your speaker volume down first!

ABOVE: This bevel board is a treasure for our collection. Made and used by shipwright Robert Modrell (who ran the Boatshop on Japonski Island for decades) and donated by John Modrell, this tool is marked with Robert’s name and would have been used to measure precise angles, such an essential part of building and repairing boats.

LEFT: This compass plane, marked “RJM” also comes from the collection of Robert Modrell’s tools donated by John Modrell. Also known as a circular plane, the curve of the steel sheet can be adjusted with the turn of a knob and is used by shipwrights for planing inside curves.
Close Calls & Lessons Learned

Suddenly the boat is taking on water faster than we can get it out. The waves are too high for us to turn around. The dinghy flips and we are suddenly swimming in ice cold water. The 2020 Annual Meeting was on “Close Calls and Lessons Learned,” not only an interesting topic, but time-(and potentially life-) saving, when we don’t have to learn those lessons in the usual manner! The full video is available from the sitkamaritime.org website, along with a printable safety checklist.

The “Seven Steps to Survival” from the Alaska Marine Safety Education Association (also available on the SMHS website) are Recognition, Inventory, Shelter, Signals, Water, Food, and Play, or maintaining a positive mental attitude, which strengthens the will to survive.

Emergency preparedness has significant mental health benefits, no matter what sort of unexpected change we experience. In addition to whatever planning ahead we’ve done, we can reduce fear and depression, in a boating emergency, divorce, or pandemic, by recognizing our situation, which includes accepting that an emergency situation can happen to us. Taking inventory of what we have that is working for and against us gives us control over our situation. Staying healthy so that we are in a position to help, looking out for our neighbors, and knowing our neighbors are there for us, all promote a healthy sense of agency over our lives. And, laughter is a great aid to survival. We hope you enjoy a few highlights of this year’s meeting, which have their share of humor!

John Stein began the evening with a story from the 1950s, of when his mother Harriet and father Tom Stein were out on the family’s metal cabin cruiser the Teirrah (“Harriet” spelled backward). Harriet was at the helm but was distracted by Tom, working on the heating unit at her feet. Suddenly they ran up onto a rocky island at Olga Strait north of Sitka, and Tom, and his tools, plunged into the foc’s’le. Harriet threw it into reverse, getting the boat off the rocks but unfortunately fouling the propeller in the skiff’s tow line. Then all was silent – except for the yelling – fortunately, there was only a trickle of water leaking in from a cracked welded seam, and they were soon on their way. Lesson learned? Avoid helmsman distraction!

Jerry Dzugan was working as a surveyor in a cove in Frederick Sound, and was leaving the beach in a 12’ metal skiff. When he put the boat on step, the bow went up. He turned to adjust the choke as he throttled down – the choke control was actually a coat hanger – and found himself suddenly in the water, the boat upside down. Having just taken a boating safety class, he knew that small boats are made to float upside down and climbed on top. Fortunately, the tide was coming in, and 40 minutes later he had drifted back to the beach. Lesson learned? “Know your boat. And don’t go out with funky outboards with a coat hanger for a choke.”

Caven Pfeiffer told about his first day fishing the Floretta, built as a seiner in 1913. After a magical day of pulling in king salmon and seeing whales bubble net feeding, he anchored with other boats in China Cove on Coronation Island. During the night, the weather came up and the anchor dragged. He set it a few more times then finally followed the other boats out into the night, and 12-14-foot seas.

Caven had spent a few months working on the boat; all the planks needed through-bolting, which was why he had gotten the boat for free. But the huge mast on the boat was not well stayed, something he had noticed, but not done anything about. The roughly 2000-pound mast was now slamming into the back of the wheelhouse. Caven sent his partner on deck to see what the matter was. One of the trolling poles was broken, and their gear all in the water. They pulled the gear aboard, but the huge, heavy mast swinging with every wave meant things were being thrown from galley shelves and smashing. Finally, a nerve-wracking four or five hours later, they made it across Sumner Strait, and anchored in Pole Anchorage, and slept. Lesson learned “Whatever you feel back of your mind – that you haven’t dealt with – that will get you in trouble.”

John Linnborn, a former U.S. Coast Guard Rescue Swimmer, and now Casualty Investigator, used reports from the sinking of the FV Masonic, a 62-foot longliner built in 1929, in May 2019. This is a fascinating and well-told story, with an abundance of helpful information. Like all of these, the video of the evening is recommended.

“Mayday, vessel Masonic going down. Mayday, vessel Masonic going down.” This chilling message was the
only communication received, at 2:30 am May 7.

The Masonic had left Sitka at 4 the previous afternoon headed to Ketchikan for a sablefish study. The crewman on watch had gotten up at 3 that morning, to drive to the airport to fly to Sitka, and fell asleep on his feet. He had been up over 24 hours; another problem was that the watch alarm was not functioning.

The boat grounded hard in the Spanish Islands off Cape Decision and rolled to port, with catastrophic hull damage and flooding. As the crewman was calling the Mayday, the boat heeled, throwing him down and ripping the mic cord out of the radio. The crew could not de-water the boat. They put on survival suits and got in their raft.

The Coast Guard helicopter was in the air just a half hour later, spotted a light the survivors had and began hoisting at 4 am, and were “on deck” again at Sitka at 5.

Lessons learned? The main one of course is to watch out for crew fatigue. Most of the lessons, though, were what to do right. The Coast Guard knew where they were because the Masonic had AIS, Automatic Identification System, which sends vessel id and location to the Coast Guard and to other equipped vessels. (An EPIRB also notifies the Coast Guard with this information. Everyone on board should be able to give a complete Mayday call.) All of the crew did emergency drills, were trained how to get in their survival suits, and, they had a light, which was how the helicopter spotted them quickly.

John also told how VHS radios have a “DSC” button, that, if you set it up, when pushed, sends your identity and location to the USCG Command Center, which then calls the phone number you have set up, to someone on shore, to confirm the situation. A bit of preparation that could save a life!

Bill Foster’s story has its own song, “Kalinin Bay” by Dave Estrem, released in 1981. Bill went with fellow teacher Richard Teague on a Friday after school on his boat the Palco to Kalinin Bay, on the north end of Kruzof Island, to go beach combing on the outer coast at Sea Lion Cove.

The next morning, they took a skiff around to Sea Lion Cove, in water rough enough that Bill was puking. Rich Teague anchored in a bight at the south end of the Cove and waded ashore. Bill was going to do the same – he had on a “Farmer John” sleeveless wetsuit - when a wave turned the boat end-over-end, fortunately missing hitting Bill, ending up upside down.

As the song has it, Richard Teague urged “Come on Bill, we gotta keep on moving or we’ll die. We’ve got a mountain we must climb, it isn’t very high, Come on Bill, you still can hear the breakers as they pound . . . we’ve got to make Kalinin Bay, before the sun goes down.” Bill said that Rich indeed kept telling him, come on Bill, because he was not in as good shape as Rich was, and was cold and wet. Kalinin Bay was 2 ½ miles over a trail, it was snowing and windy, and they would have been in trouble if they couldn’t get back to Kalinin Bay and back onto the Palco before it got dark.

But once they made it to the beach at Kalinin Bay they still had another problem: how to get aboard their anchored boat. On the eastern side of the bay were ruins of some buildings. Rich found some wide boards and some nails, and, using a rock for a hammer, made a raft. Using another board for a paddle he got to the Palco, fired up the engine – music to Bill’s ears – and picked him up. The next day some friends came out to get the skiff, which had been flipped right side up again by the waves.

Lessons learned? Bill now always has a ditch bag, which doesn’t have to be waterproof but has to float. It has a radio, tools, and first aid kit. He takes one when boating or kayaking and has another kit for hikes.

One of the most memorable audience stories was from Kathy Kyle who shared a story that included the origins of the Sitka Maritime Heritage Society itself. She and Ward Eldredge had anchored Ward’s schooner Merlin in Still Harbor, on the south shore of Whale Bay south of Sitka on Baranof Island, in flat calm water. They went out kayaking, and when they returned, the boat was gone. They could see only the tops of the masts above water. Divers later found a five-foot diameter hole in the hull, yet nothing disturbed inside.

They got a ride to town, and Ward met Bobi Rhinehart on the docks. He told her, “how about starting a Sitka Maritime Heritage Society, and I’ll donate the boat.” Bobi and others thought that was a good idea, and they raised the Merlin, and brought her to the yard for repair. There they found chunks of whale baleen caught in the broken plank ends of the hole: The Merlin had been sunk by a whale.

Lesson learned? “Sometimes things just happen.”

The Merlin was eventually donated to an organization down south, and the Sitka Maritime Heritage Society moved on to focus on the Japonski Island Boathouse.

All these stories are online, and we’ll do another round – barring emergencies – next year!
2020 Membership • Sitka Maritime Heritage Society
Sitka Maritime Heritage Society - P.O. Box 2153, Sitka, AK 99835 - (907) 623-8054 - www.sitkamaritime.org
We are a nonprofit dedicated to preserving maritime heritage and to sharing that rich legacy with the public, especially children and youth. Members are added to our newsletter mailing list and receive a 20% discount on SMHS merchandise. Thank you!

You can also become a member online at www.sitkamaritime.org

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☐ I want to get my newsletter by email (instead of regular mail)
☐ I want to join the SMHS events & updates email list
☐ I am interested in volunteering for SMHS

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