Annual Meeting: “The Slime Line”

The Sitka Maritime Heritage Society 2019 Annual Meeting, “The Slime Line: Stories of Loading, Processing, and Packing Fish” will be Wednesday, March 6th at the ANB Founders Hall. In the first part of the program, a panel of Sitkans, moderated by Eric Jordan, will share their stories of the work of fish processing in Sitka over the years. After the break, audience members are invited to participate with their own stories and questions. The SMHS will also have drafts of the new Boathouse exhibit for comment, historic photos, and snacks. T-shirts, caps, and prints of photos by Jana Suchy will be for sale. Doors open at 6 for snacks, mingling and viewing photos, with the program from 7 to 9 p.m. All are welcome.

These programs are always interesting and humorous, and great for learning more about our fellow Sitkans. This is an opportunity too to renew memberships for 2019-2020, which is essential for supporting our work.

Construction This Summer

The SMHS was awarded a Historic Preservation Fund grant for $25,000 to support work this summer to build the shell of the addition, and to restore the wall of the Boathouse that faces Airport Road.

We have advertised and selected Weiland Construction for the work to “dry in” the addition, which will entail building walls and roof and the subfloor, and to attach to the original building’s wall.

Rebuilding the Boathouse wall will be done in large part through volunteer work parties this summer. This will be done the same way as the short wall of the east wing, rebuilt last summer, and will involve taking the wall apart, and putting it back together adding insulation, vapor barrier, infiltration barrier, plywood sheathing, and reinstalling siding with breather strips for air circulation, and trim. As much of the original wood siding and trim will be reused as possible.

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The goal is to have the wall look and feel like the original but with more efficiency for heating. The windows have all been restored in a project in 2014, and will ultimately have interior storm windows installed.

**Capital Campaign**

A major activity this winter and spring is to develop a capital campaign to raise funds to complete the building. Remaining work includes insulating and rebuilding walls, insulating the floor, installing remaining electrical, a sprinkler, completing the addition interior and porch, and adding plumbing. Stay tuned!

**Display at City Hall**

Check out our new display at City Hall, which features some recently donated objects with photos and information about who used them and how.

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**Winter Events**

The Sitka Maritime Heritage Society held a toy boat building activity for kids, on December 1 at the Japonski Island Boathouse. It was really fun to see the involvement and satisfaction of our young boat builders, and their creative products!

We held a **Pub Talk** in early February at the Baranof Island Brewery, called “Tall Ships Night.” Laurent Deviche shared stories about his time on the Lady Washington and about tall ship technology in an entertaining and clear way. The audience now knows what a baggywrinkle is and the difference between a capstan and a windlass, and many other intriguing details.

A **Pub Talk** on February 25th also at the Baranof Island Brewery, was titled **Arctic Sails,** on the topic of what it’s like to sail far into the Arctic for science, discovery and advocacy. Sailors Erik de Jong and Krystina Scheller shared their experiences aboard.

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George Howard was a boat builder, one of several Alaska Native fisherman-boat builders in Sitka in the first half of the last century. Many of their vessels are still in use.

George Howard died of tuberculosis in 1956, at the age of 55. But he made an effort before he died to pass on his skills and love of boats to his sons; his son Glenn Howard shared some of his memories of working with his father, in interviews in 2009 and 2016; both are accessible from the sitkamaritime.org website.

Glenn's father George Howard had probably learned to build boats from his own father, also named George Howard, and from his uncle Peter Simpson. These two men had begun building boats at the Cottages soon after the turn of the century. Both had attended Sheldon Jackson School, a Presbyterian mission school for Native children, and had married sisters, Lottie and Mary Sloan. The Cottages was a model settlement for former Sheldon Jackson students on Kelly and Metlakatla Streets, next to the Sitka National Historical Park.

This first George Howard, Glenn's grandfather, built his own home and boat shop at the north end of Katlian Street around 1913, where he built and repaired boats with his sons, David and George. He died some time before 1940, when his sons rebuilt the shop as the large, sparsely-built structure many Sitkans still remember, that stood until 1990.

Glenn Howard was born in 1934, the third of sixteen children. He remembers his father stood only about five foot eight, but was remarkably strong - Glenn tells how, even as a big young man of 17, he still could not keep up with his father caulking boats (pounding caulking into the boat's seams). He remembers his father "lighting his Camel cigarettes saying, 'hurry up, hurry up, the tide's coming in," because Glenn was still three rows behind him.

He never met his grandfather, but remembers Peter Simpson, who he called Grandpa, coming often to the shop to talk to his father. Simpson would also teach the children about the Bible, and the importance of good manners.

George Howard was mainly a fisherman, and his sons were his regular crew. In those days before hydraulics Glenn says “you worked.” They fished for halibut in May, “out among the albatross,” where the only land they could see was the tip of Mt. Edgecumbe and Mt. St. Elias. Power for winches was by chain drive from the engine, but they would sometimes have to pull their lines by hand. Seining in the summer was also a lot of work, with long nets and a dozen or more sets in a day.

The boats Glenn remembers include a 46-foot cruiser his father took down to the keel then rebuilt. Glenn would clean up after school, and would find pennies in the shavings between the ribs. He later figured out they had been put there for him to find, which explained the grins on the faces of the men working there.

During World War II, when he was quite young, Glenn went with his father by shore boat to caulk barges and do other work for the Navy on Japonski Island. Everyone was frisked and Glenn had his pocket knife, which he used to cut oakum (a heavy-duty caulking material), taken away.

Glenn also remembers later going to “break out” his father from the Alice Island TB sanitarium (opened after the war, replaced in 1950 by the Mt. Edgecumbe Hospital). He and his brother had been instructed by their father to meet him after dark, with a skiff, and they took him home.

Glenn tells how his brother Louie was also diagnosed with TB at age 14,
and had to leave school. He was fortunate enough to recover, after spending a lonesome spring and summer among the islands, and drinking “gallons” of a medicinal tea their mother made from plants like devil’s club and Hudson Bay tea.

Most of the materials George Howard used were Douglas fir and oak that came up on the steamer, but Glenn remembers one yellow cedar bow stem he worked on after school. His father rouged it out and “had that adze really sharp,” so that it was “easy” for Glenn to follow his father’s lines. Glenn would also put the caulking bevel on planks, which “had to be just right.” His father told him a good boatbuilder would use 2/3 of his wood in the planking, in order to have good lines of planking. (If you tried to use a straight board, in order to get the most out of your wood, it would make a crazy line on the curved hull of the boat. The board has to be cut into a curving shape in order to make a nice line on the boat.)

The June K was a 48-foot seiner built for Charlie Bennett of Angoon, launched in 1945. Glenn says his father and his crew worked 18-hour days to finish the boat in just 18 months because “the guy wanted to go fishing!” That boat is no longer around, but the Jenny, a 37-foot troller, was until recently, fishing out of Sitka. The Jenny was built in 1947 for Nestor Laakso. The boat was later purchased by George Sarvella, after the boat was found washed up at Sinitsin Island. Glenn’s brother George, in a 1988 interview, said Oscar Isaacson completed the boat when their father was too sick to work on it. Isaacson or Laakso stacked and restacked the planking as he treated it with diesel, a technique Glenn still uses. “So it smells – it lasts a long time.”

The Göta is also still in Sitka - a 40-foot troller built for Oscar Isaacson in 1950. According to Glenn’s brother George (in the interview in 1988) she was completed by Richard Peters, again due to George Howard’s illness, and the builder’s certificate is signed by Andrew Hope. Andrew Hope, a prolific Sitka boat builder, was married to George Howard’s sister Tillie, and had his own shop, which is still standing, south of Murray Pacific.

Most of George Howard’s boats were built from carved red cedar half models. Glenn remembers the half model his father carved for the Göta’s hull. His father cut it into sections, one section for each foot of the actual boat, which is quite a bit more than is usual. He made patterns for all the ribs on the floor, and steamed the ribs and clamped them to molds there, also an unusual technique. George Howard also built twin 27-foot cabin cruisers in the shop, the Lucky Lady and the Danny Boy. Cabins were built by eye.

The shop was built in 1940, replacing a much smaller one. The Princeton Hall was built in the new shop in 1941. An extension had to be added on for this 65-foot yacht, built as a mission boat for the Presbyterian Church and Sheldon Jackson School. Andrew Hope signed the builder’s certificate, and he was also building a boat in his own shop at the same time. Other workers included Sheldon Jackson School students, including Roy Bailey, who worked on the boat half-days as part of their vocational training.

Other boats built before Glenn was old enough to participate include the New England, 1935; the Betty K, 1940; and the Denny Jo, some time in the early 1940s.

George Howard tried to teach his son about boat design, pointing out how the bow waves and wakes of boats they would pass indicated the hydrodynamics of the hull shape. “You see that one is pushing the ocean. You could put a million horsepower on it and it would never catch up to its own bow wave.” His experience halibut fishing probably informed his preference for deep-draft boats. He told Glenn a boat with 25 percent of the boat under water was not seaworthy. He said fifty percent of the boat under water gives you a 50 -50 chance of making it in bad weather, the ride depending on the shape of the stern. He preferred double enders or horse-shoe sterns, for more control in a following sea. He said the “cut-off” or square stern dragged water. He also told Glenn the boat needed to have a v-shape on the bottom, and not a “bathtub” shape, so that it would “cut the water.”

Glenn remembers what may have been his last project at the shop under his father, which was to add flare to the bow of a troller for Tommy Jackson. They used threaded rod and bolts to force the ribs into the new shape, then replaced the ribs and planking. The flare keeps the bow from plunging as far in rough seas.

They hauled and launched boats on a wood cradle, made of 12x12 timbers, up a heavily–greased wooden skid. There was also a tidal grid alongside the shop.

Glenn inherited his father’s love of building boats, and built his own boats in the shop after his father’s death. He built the 25-foot Captain Kidd using all hand tools, just because he preferred using his “hand and arm.” He also built the 35-foot Miss Howard after his shifts at the Alaska Lumber and Pulp mill – coming home at 10:30 or 11 knowing exactly what the next piece of wood would look like. (He says he made his wife into a “boat widow.”) He has also built six 16-foot plywood skiffs, and four 8-foot punts that he could build in just four hours. He also built cabins on boats - one friend told him years later the cabin he built “made it look like a boat.”

Most of his work he did for himself or friends, who would buy the plywood. Glenn did do some work for money but found that “it’s hard to get the money from some guys.” So he did it for friends, not for money. “I feel like what goes around, comes back – I like to see them smiling – looking at me, trying to figure out what I’m thinking.” In 2008, he built a cabin on a friend’s boat, in his yard on Merrill Street. “You want to make something that’s stronger than what’s put on by the factory – something my dad showed us. How to do it.”
their sailing vessel Bagheera, and their project to build an adventure boat here in Sitka. They have also offered to host an open house aboard their vessels this spring—stay tuned!

Looking ahead, in addition to talks on 1700s sea otter trade, building boats and other topics, we are planning workshops on knots and repair of wood dinghies. We will be starting volunteer work parties in the spring.

Thank You Edie

This winter we are privileged to have Edie Leghorn working on development and programming. We will miss her when she returns to work at the Forest Service this summer!

New Exhibit

The Sitka Maritime Heritage Society is putting in our first historical exhibit, in the former store room, the east wing of the Japonski Island Boathouse.

The project is spearheaded by museum intern Andrew Gianotti, who is headed this fall to a graduate program in Cultural Resources Management at Durham University, in England.

This exhibit will be open to the public for the summer 2019 visitor season. It won’t be fancy, but we want it to be intriguing, satisfying in content, and responsive to Sitkans’ ideas about our identity and history. We want it to cover the kind of questions visitors have about this place, and help connect Sitkans and visitors alike to this place and its story.

We are looking for your ideas on what should be in the exhibit and ideas for specific displays. Go to the website to the Maritime Heritage/New Exhibit page, take the Survey, leave us a comment. You can also go to that page for updates.

A few ideas for exhibit content: historic photos, hands-on exhibits, oral history video, and artifacts and their stories.

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Japonski Island Boathouse Rehabilitation

The Sitka Maritime Heritage Society is working to restore the historic Japonski Island boat shop as a working boat repair facility and museum. Your support also leverages grant funding.

As a member, you will receive the newsletter and a 20% discount on t-shirts and other goods, and you will be a part of preserving Alaska’s maritime heritage.

The SMHS is a 501(c)3 nonprofit so your donation is tax deductible.

If you would like to join or renew, please fill out the form below and return it, along with your check, to:

Sitka Maritime Heritage Society
P. O. Box 2153
Sitka, Alaska 99835

or, use your credit card using this form, or online at www.sitkamaritime.org

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In addition to my membership I would like to make a donation of $_____________ to the building fund.

Thank You!

Sitka Maritime Heritage Society
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