Toy Boats

In December, instead of holding a toy boat building event for children, we distributed an amazing total of 89 kits to families. (In May, we distributed 39!)

This was only possible with the effort of board member and volunteer Joe D'Arienzo, aided by other board members and by volunteers Greg Watchers and Asa Dow, handcrafting each kit. Soon we will be sharing images of kid-built vessels on our website and social media!

New Maritime Heritage Resources

Our website was already a useful archive of oral history videos and maritime history resources and is now expanded even further. The 2020 annual meeting was recorded and is now on line.

Stories at the meeting inspired our Water Safety Checklist (developed with the help of AMSEA), including tips that could save your life.

We also have video interviews with the late Sitka boatbuilder Glenn Howard, with Liz Howard, who grew up in Sitka with her grandmother, a panel recalling the 1964 Earthquake, a talk by the late Richard Nelson and our own Josh Wisniewski, and historic boatbuilding photos from the Modrell family.

Fox Farming at Goddard

A big project this year was our History Blog, featuring two...
An Interview with Caven Pfeiffer, F/V Sword and F/V Caribou

By Laura Bennett

When Caven Pfeiffer, a local commercial fisherman, first came to Southeast Alaska, his experience was somewhat akin to that of a time traveler. “Having grown up on the Great Lakes, stories of wooden ships and commercial fishing are a distant past. Most commercial fisheries have given way to invasive species. Wooden boats do not last long in freshwater lakes (salt is a natural preservative). So, when I showed up in Southeast Alaska, I felt like I was living one hundred years in the past.” Pfeiffer, having come to the region with only a backpack and a fishing rod, did find his place amongst those historic wooden boats and embraced their inherent challenges, training as a shipwright. He remembers “Big, beautiful wooden boats sat on the marine railway at Petersburg Shipwrights and a couple of young shipwrights took me under their wing. The teamwork necessary to replace shattered bows and drive new ribs made hard work manageable. Working for fishing captains was an added challenge! It quickly became my favorite type of work.”

Many will recognize Caven alongside the Sword, which he has owned and fished for the past 15 years and is the namesake of his company Sword Seafood. The Sword is a historical wooden vessel, built in 1927 by “Honest Johnson” in Tacoma. She was built from the same trees as her sister ship, the recently lost Masonic. According to Pfeiffer, “Johnson would build a large schooner and a smaller schooner at the same time. The large schooner (Masonic) would cover his costs and the small schooner (Sword) would make his profit.” The Sword is an important boat to Pfeiffer, having personally completed the boat’s most extensive rebuild – including refastening the entire hull, replacing the foredeck, rebuilding the break beam and half a dozen other beams, installing a new mast, new shafting, and a new forward half of the cabin.

Pfeiffer describes the experience of running a wooden boat as a dynamic one: “I find it exciting to be thinking how the boat and planking are responding to the weather.” He also recognizes the responsibility that comes with running a historic vessel; one must be sure to keep the boat “healthy and looking respectable.” The payoff for a well-kept wooden vessel is great, as they can be highly resilient. Pfeiffer recalls a time when his wooden boat was tested and proved its hardiness: “One time involved running out South Inian pass with a storm on the ocean and an ebb tide pushing me at 16 knots into three tidal waves that were taller than my sodium light (thirty feet above the water). We rose to the top of each wave and then free fell off the backside. Landing was the loudest ‘crack!’ sound. I was sure all of the planks had broken out from under us. But the wood is old and the wood is good. It held.”

For Pfeiffer, being out on the water is also a family affair. He describes the experience of having family onboard as “challenging and humbling.” For example, most captains do not have to strictly ban peaches from the helm. Pfeiffer explains the incident that lead to the unusual rule: “…my mother-in-law screamed, ‘Are we sinking?’ The Sword keeled over as I accidentally drove up one side of a rock and down the other. Very vividly, I can remember answering ‘I don’t know!’ as she instinctively bundled our eight-month-old baby Ivy into warm clothes. It was Ivy’s first time to eat canned peaches and she had been too precious for me not to hold. Luckily, the Sword sustained very little damage and now we have a ‘no peaches at the helm rule!’”

Pfeiffer faced another challenge when his family had outgrown the Sword’s accommodations and he found that four months fishing away from his wife and children was simply too long for him. So, what is a shipwright and fisherman to do when his family doesn’t fit in his boat? Find a boat that will fit the family, of course! That right fit is what Pfeiffer has found in his newest vessel, the Caribou, a wooden boat built in 1961 that is 50’ at the waterline. The vessel benefits from an extensive rebuild by Juneau’s shipwright Mike Svensson “The Swede,” and provides more space to accommodate his family.

Along with the intersection of family, fishing, and adventure, wooden boats also represent a promise kept. “About 40 years ago, my grandfather made me swear not to own anything other than a wooden boat. I still think he’s right. A healthy wooden boat has the best ride on the ocean!”
never-before-published narratives of fox-farming fishing families of the Goddard area in the 1920s and 1930s.

Fur farming was the third largest industry in Alaska in the 1920s, behind fishing and mining. The popularity of fur farming on southeastern Alaska islands, which farmers leased from the U.S Forest Service, forced many Alaska Native families off property they had owned for countless generations. This injustice must be remembered as part of the story, as well as the ancient, rich Lingit traditions, place names and stories associated with this place near Shee At’iká T’aay X’e, or the Shee At’iká (the islands around Sitka) hot springs mouth.

Thank you to Cher Easley, who compiled the history of her mother’s family, the Jacksons, and to Larry Calvin who passed along the memoir of Helen Mills, whose recollections were typed up by her niece Greta Bellamy.

The two families were very different, and offer a unique and comprehensive perspective of this unusual community.

Thank You, Laura!

We have been privileged to have Laura Bennett as our Executive Director 2019-2020. It’s hard to measure the impact of her work, in fearlessly attacking administrative and logistical challenges, putting the SMHS on a much better footing, especially related to the pandemic situation, and, among other things, producing three excellent newsletters this year.

Laura has had to move on due to the slowdown caused by Covid. We will miss her organizational genius and cheerful can-do attitude as our leader. Fortunately she is continuing to be involved as a member and volunteer. Thank you, Laura.

Construction Work

Our Historic Preservation Fund grant, by the Alaska Historical Commission, is now extended through 2021. We downsized work parties to provide ample social distance. Those work parties are ongoing; if you are interested, please contact us!

We are rebuilding the wall facing the Channel to look and feel like the original while meeting modern standards. To date, we rebuilt doors and doorways and made new yellow cedar door jambs so door swing and width meet code for a museum. We took delivery of an order of spruce siding in late summer, delivered thanks to the generosity of the MV Otter. We have now stacked all of it under cover in the marine ways bay.

Annual Meeting 2021

Our annual meeting will be on line, but should be a good mix of live story telling, video, and interaction from the audience. Our theme is tentatively Rise Again, about moving forward and dealing with adversity, which is something fishermen know something about!

Walking Tour

We will be rolling out a Sitka Maritime History Walking Tour this spring. An outline of the background material is now on our website, including the little-known “real” story of Alexander Baranov and the relationships and conflicts between the Lingit people and the Russians. The tour narrative will be vetted by Lingit knowledge bearers and historians.

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Sitka Maritime Heritage Society
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We are a nonprofit dedicated to preserving maritime heritage and to sharing that rich legacy with the public, especially children and youth. We are restoring the historic Japonski Island boat shop as a working boat repair facility and museum. Members receive the newsletter and a 20% discount on SMHS merchandise. Thank you!

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

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