

Latitude 38

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WE GO WHERE THE WIND BLOWS



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REBIRTH OF *EROS* —

If you own a boat, you've undoubtedly got a project list. Because, as every sailor knows, doing maintenance and installing upgrades are inescapable aspects of boat ownership. Some of us, however, become embroiled in bigger projects than others. Take, for example, Bill and Grace Bodle, who, for the last 18 years, have been involved with a stem-to-



TOM BRICHTA

Wearing a full suit of sails, the newly completed 'Eros' glides effortlessly across the Bay during a recent shakedown cruise.

stern refit of *Eros*, a 103-ft (LOD) staysail schooner. With a mind-numbing list of rebuilds and upgrades now complete, they'll head out the Gate this month so that this 70-year-old thoroughbred can stretch her legs once again out on the open ocean.

To non-sailing observers *Eros*' acres of gleaming varnish, perfectly laid teak decks and the exquisite joinery of her cabinetry might simply appear to be cohesive elements of a floating museum piece. But fellow sailors have a deeper appreciation. From personal experience, they can imagine the endless hours of planning and meticulous handiwork — not to mention the money — that must have gone into this spectacular rebirth.

Experiencing this 1939 classic gliding

across the Bay with the easy motion of a bird in flight transports you to an era when hand-crafting fine yachts was truly an art. Indeed, at the end of a recent shakedown cruise, one enraptured guest thanked Grace profusely, saying with utmost sincerity, "Thank you so much. That sail was practically a religious experience."

Fine old boats with polished brass, flawless brightwork and traditional lines have that effect on some sailors. Bill and Grace succumbed to such old-school enticements way back in 1967, when they fell under the spell of their first big schooner, a 72-ft Gloucesterman named *Nordlys*, whose design was reminiscent of the famous Canadian yacht *Bluenose*. Then only 33 and 27 respectively, they took delivery of her at the St. Francis YC docks, and soon took off out the Golden Gate, bound for the sunny Caribbean.

By the time they got to Puerto Rico, though, their engine had quit, their sails were wearing out, and they were running out of cash. That's when they were introduced to the fledgling charter industry in the nearby Virgin Islands. *Nordlys* was soon one of the queens of the fleet. Long before futuristic megayachts ruled the roost in the international charter trade, elegant schooners were in high demand by well-heeled vacationers.

At the end of the first season, they crossed to the Med for the summer, establishing a pattern that they'd follow season after season. After chartering *Nordlys* for three years — including five transatlantic crossings — they bought a 98-ft schooner in Greece that they renamed *Grace*. Nine transatlantics later, they upgraded to a 117-ft schooner of a similar Alfred Mylne design, named *Panda*. Both boats were built of Burma teak by Camper and Nicholson.

By this time they'd built a devoted clientele who were eager to sail in different waters, so Bill and Grace set off on a three-year circumnavigation, doing charters along the way. In '82 they brought *Panda* to the Bay for a refit, then eventually took off again for the Caribbean. Their chartering days ended, however, when, in '84, *Panda* burned before their eyes in a

Martinique harbor. "After that," says Bill wistfully, "we came back to the Bay Area and swallowed the anchor."

Not long after their return, a friend encouraged Bill to take a look at Stone Boat Yard in Alameda, which was then for sale. He resisted the idea at first, but when he started poking around the historic yard with its vintage machinery, he was, as he puts it, "smitten," and bought the place.

This is where *Eros* comes into the picture. Then called *Fair Sarae*, she was



TOM BRICHTA

AN 18-YEAR RE-FIT

eventually berthed at the yard, because her then-owner, Lucy Bancroft, was a distant relative of Bill's. In 1991 she sold the aging schooner to a German businessman named Christian Thesenfitz. Before taking a single voyage aboard her, he contracted with Stone Boat Yard to restore her to "as new" condition. From the beginning it was obvious that this would be no simple undertaking. But before we delve into the blow-by-blow account

Right: Cap'n Bill is one happy guy now that all the heavy lifting is done. Below: From stem to stern 'Eros' is a work of art.



LATITUDE / ANDY

of the refit, let's travel back to the late 1930s when this graceful schooner was built.

Back then, as Bill explains, it was normal practice in proper British society for rich and powerful people to own large, prestigious yachts. So it was fitting that after a wealthy American named Henry Von Berg married an English lord's daughter, he commissioned a renowned yard at the mouth of the Thames to build him a showpiece. Her designer was a prominent Scotsman named William McMeek.

Von Berg's attempt to score points with his in-laws — the White family



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— backfired dramatically, however, at the boat's formal christening. The story is that Lord White was renowned for his prized hounds, so Von Berg chose a name for his new yacht that he thought would surely honor both the family and his father-in-law's passion. When the drapery was pulled off the transom, the name was revealed: *White Bitch*.

Little did the American know, that it was considered exceedingly bad form to name a yacht after either one's family name or avocation. A second christening branded her with the name that she bore when launched, *Jeanry* (a safe amalgam of the multinational couple's first names: Jean and Henry.)

After *Jeanry* was returned to the White family in 1945, they soon sold her to a wealthy Greek named Stavros Niarchos, who named her *Eros* after the Greek god of love and passion. In the '50s he built the first supertankers, which soon made him a billionaire and earned him the nickname the Golden Greek. If boats could talk, we're sure *Eros* would have plenty of wild tales to tell about the Niarchos years. He was, after all, a billionaire contemporary — and business rival — of Aristotle Onassis, the flamboyant second husband of Jackie Kennedy.

When Bay Area socialite Lucy Bancroft bought *Eros*, she renamed her *Fair Sarae*, and brought her back home to the Bay Area. The fine old schooner was 52 years old when Lucy sold her to the German, Thesenfitz, in 1991. She had plenty of miles beneath her keel, although she'd never been around the world.

To understand the task of putting this vintage beauty into 'as new' condition, it's important to understand the way she is structured. She was built using "composite construction," which in the 1930s meant steel frames, floor beams and backing plates overlaid with Burma teak, and attached with Admiralty bronze fastenings. The British owned Burma back then, of course, and thus controlled the sole source of one of the only woods, if

not *the* only wood, that is impervious to worms and does not rot. A fascinating side note is that after British ships brought these prized teak logs to England, they were weighted down and sunk to the bottom of rivers to age for up to 40 years! So it's believed that *Eros*' original teak is over 100 years old.

In any case, after a thorough survey, it was determined that the boat's most challenging problem was substantial corrosion between the steel frames and the planking. And the only way to get at it was by gutting the interior, removing every plank, re-



LATITUDE / ANDY

A consummate hostess, Grace is looking forward to doing a bit of charter work again. That accidental profession was good to her.

conditioning the steel and putting the whole puzzle back together again.

Thesenfitz wanted the job done, so Bill soon had 30 men focused solely on the refit. Just removing the interior walls, cabinetry and furnishings was a colossal job, not to mention labeling every piece and finding a place to store it.

Once that was done, with the planking still on, the exposed steelwork was sandblasted, then triple epoxy coated. Next, 20,000 bronze fastenings had to be removed so the 3-inch-thick planks — which were in remarkably good condition after a half century of wear — could

Today, the refurbished main salon is almost identical to the way it was when this grand schooner was launched in 1939.



ZAC TURPIN

She was originally rigged as a "knockabout" schooner, meaning she had no bowsprit. But Bill wanted a broader foretriangle.

Unfortunately, Von Berg's bad luck didn't end with the naming incident. On the very first day of her first local cruise, *Jeanry* had no sooner anchored at the Isle of Wight when a British naval launch approached. An officer sternly gave Von Berg the incontestable news that the Navy was taking the vessel, then and there, for the war effort.

During the war years she served as a coastal patrol boat, and brought troops home to safety during the evacuation of Dunkirk. Meanwhile, Von Berg went back to the U.S., enlisted, and became a B24 fighter pilot. He died a hero over Germany like so many other brave young men.



TOM BRICHITA

AN 18-YEAR RE-FIT

be removed piece by piece. On average, each plank is 38 feet long and weighs roughly 300 lbs, requiring at least four strong men to lift it into place. Needless to say, the higher up the hull they went, the more tedious the process became.

The work was slow, but was progressing well, when, after about a year the regular installment payments stopped coming from Germany. At that point the decks were still off, but the ribs had all been refurbished and about half of the planking was back on.

With 30 men on the refit team, Bill was more than a little concerned, and it wasn't long before he was on a plane to Hamburg to meet with Thesenfitz and find out what was up.

According to Bill, when he visited the German at his lovely estate, the two men initially shared small talk and a bottle of Dom Perignon. But when pressed about the unpaid bill, which had grown to roughly \$300,000, Thesenfitz told Bill he was tapped out, and simply couldn't continue the project. Not long after the meeting he flew out to the Bay with his surveyor, complimented the excellent work and signed the boat over to Bill. (They later learned Thesenfitz had been involved with some questionable dealings in Eastern Europe after the Berlin Wall came down, which eventually landed him in jail.)

"Grace was furious," Bill recalls. "She wanted nothing to do with it, and was convinced I'd somehow orchestrated the whole thing."

Taking possession of the old schooner was anything but a coup. In her disassembled condition she was virtually worthless, as it would clearly take a small fortune and countless man-hours to finish putting her back together again. Plus, she was taking up a huge section of

the boatyard.

"The whole thing became an embarrassment," admits Bill. "I was the one who'd taken her apart, and

I knew that if I didn't put her back together again, I would be the one who had ruined her." He was determined not to let that happen. But the 30-man

crew was immediately reduced to two, and when the yard got busy, even they were pulled away to work on more urgent projects.

Five years later, in 1997, *Fair Sarae* had been completely replanked and caulked, so she could finally be put back in the water, where additional work continued slowly.

At some point afterward, Bill and Grace decided to sell Stone Boat Yard, find a new home for *Eros* and finish her off as a retirement project.

In 2000 they found a buyer and used the money to develop a dilapidated stretch of waterfront on Richmond's Santa Fe Channel, across from KKMI. The

"Grace was furious," Bill recalls. "She wanted nothing to do with it."



Called butterfly hatches due to their look when opened, each section can be lifted independently, with a choice of height adjustments.

happy memories.

Niarchos undoubtedly kept the boat well maintained, but there were a few things he did to her that Bill detested, such as installing a sunken cockpit aft, and an "ugly" oversized deck house that blocked the helmsman's view.

So when the decks were put back together, these pieces were eliminated.

In their place, Bill and a small crew installed an elegant deck-level cockpit and dining table, and a smaller house that melds perfectly with the other deck features. These and two sets of classic butterfly hatches were put together with old-style mortise and tenon construction, and not a single fastening. Some of the wood for these elements was salvaged, but a lot of it came from a serendipitous deal Bill made

years ago to buy an entire container full of Burma teak.

When he knew her in Greece, Bill always thought *Eros* could use a bit more canvas, so he extended her mainmast by 20 feet, which created a bigger slot for a fisherman to be flown above the main stays¹. He also added a 17-ft bowsprit, where there had been none before.

Although you'd never know it, many of the bronze winches are now powered — Bill claims three people can run the whole boat in a pinch.

When we toured the hull two years



The new deckhouse and hatches were all put together without a single metal fastening. New gratings were made to match the originals.

Sugar Dock — so named because C&H Sugar vessels used to berth there — became the ol' schooner's new home.

Lying beneath massive fabric-covered arches that resembled Conestoga wagons from a distance, the long-disassembled classic slowly became whole again. Bill and Grace chose to rename her *Eros* because they had often come across her in the Med during the Niarchos years, an era that still brings back



REBIRTH OF EROS

ago there wasn't a stick of cabinetry or a single wall section below decks, other than the four watertight bulkheads. Today, though, there are four elegant double cabins, each with a private head, and one even has a Jacuzzi. The main salon is said to be exactly the same as when Von Berg first stepped aboard 70 years ago — except for the piano. Grace sewed all the cushion coverings and other fabric accessories herself.

Accommodations for six crew are found forward of a thoroughly modern galley, which Grace designed. In their early days of chartering, she attended a Cordon Bleu cooking school in the south of France and still loves to whip up exquisite dishes for dinner guests. And yes, the boat also has a washer-dryer these days.

"She's actually got most of the modern electrical stuff now," Bill confides, you just don't see most of it.

In addition to her 350hp Detroit diesel, she has a bow thruster — which



LATITUDE / ANDY

There's plenty of load on the primary winches when sailing in 20 knots on the Central Bay. But most winches now have a powered option.

is a godsend when docking — and two modern generators for auxiliary power.

Bill reinstalled the helm in its original position, aft, and it can now be bypassed in order to use an autopilot that

is controlled from the helm with a discreet joystick. An integrated chart plotter is also part of the helm station now, complete with AIS.

Why does *Eros* need such state-of-the-art equipment? Because now that they've *finally* got her all together, Grace and Bill plan to do a bit of voyaging. Where? When they tell us that they really don't know, we believe them, but for now she'll most likely remain on the West Coast. "We'll probably do some chartering too," says Grace. And why not. They've certainly got the boat for it.

It's nice to think that 42 years after heading out the Gate with their first big schooner, this salty couple will soon be slicing through the wavetops again, and creating new memories to replace those that have faded. We just hope that between *Eros'* stints of traveling she'll continue to call the Bay Area home.

— latitude/andy

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