

The Thirties Are Twice Fifty

By David Kiremidjian
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I first met Willie Wolf – Captain Willie Wolf – sometime in 1976. *Ibis* was hauled for her yearly week of maintenance at a yard in the South Bronx not far from his home on East Tremont Avenue. And she was for sale. Willie was bent deep in the amidships bilge, extracting the floor-to-frame bolts. They were the original finheads, and had given up. An unlit half-smoked cigar in his mouth, he seemed unmoved by this latest trivial instance of the slow steady corrosive cumulative annihilation of time. The task was the worse for the circumstance that the bolts, some 7/16” in diameter, were no longer straight: the part within the frame end had been hauled north by the strain from the rig, the part within the floor hauled south by the immense leverage of the 4-1/2 ton lead ballast. The section between the two had simply stretched and bent slightly, so the axis of the bolt was no longer single and continuous but now double and parallel, one maybe a quarter inch from the other. The holes in the oak timbers had to have enlarged somewhat at the juncture, so he knew it would also be necessary to drill for a larger fastener. I learned a few years later what his favorite endearment for the boat was, especially when heeled down in 20 knots, and speculated whether or not at that moment also he was calling the boat his sweet bitch.

Nearly twenty years before, Willie had had the hulk of the *Ibis* dragged off the mudflats of New Rochelle, a few miles east of City Island, just off the facility of the New York AC. The Thirty had been wrecked in the hurricane of 1938, and salvaged by John Rodstrom and Eddie Quest. They installed her first engine, gave her a doghouse in place of the original rectangular trunk cabin, and changed the rig from the original gaff sloop to Marconi yawl. In 1945 she went to John Hurley of New Jersey, and in 1952, now *Huntress*, to Morton Engel, who raced her successfully for two years. Then she sank in 90 feet of water during Hurricane Carol, was again salvaged and auctioned to Jack Pomeroy, who needed her main spar, ballast, and gear for a 60’ Alden ketch he was fitting out. The hulk was then laid up in Mamoroneck, and four years later acquired by John Caulfield, a college student, for \$400. Caulfield floated the hull, was refused a mooring at the NYAC, and anchored it over the mudflats. Capt. Wolf, otherwise employed by the Sanitation Department of the City of New York collecting garbage, knew quality when he saw it, bought the derelict from Caulfield for \$100 and moored her off the Throggs neck Bridge for the winter. Knew quality twice, uncannily enough, for after he had researched just which boat this was, he recalled a bright morning years before, when, at age 16 in 1946, working as a camp counselor just east of Sag Harbor, he saw “the most beautifullest boat” anchored south of the Cedar Point lighthouse. *Ibis* was then under the

brief ownership of John Hurley of New Jersey. Willie rowed out and spent some hours with him, and here he now was, the owner himself.

It took him some seven years to rebuild the boat and fit her out once again, but as a familiar in the life of City Island in the late nineteen-fifties, he knew wood boats well and was in the best place to pick up good stuff cheap. Broken frames were sistered, not removed whole and replaced. Much of the hull was refastened and the horn timber replaced. The tired tongue-and-groove decking was overlaid with quarter-inch plywood and glassed. There is a letter from L. Francis Herreshoff advising him to have the new keel cast at a foundry – piecemeal would result in seams and gaps - but Willie managed a continuous pour in his backyard anyway. Decent gear was assembled; another marconi yawl rig scavenged up from the luxurious plenty ^{left behind from} of the last wood boat building decade ^{at} of a legendary place where taste flowed towards funding the newer designs, as it usually does, while the older boats were fast becoming invisible. Yacht club money, notably New York Yacht Club money, was not yet flowing towards historic preservation.. Willie never offered an estimate of what it cost him (in cash outlay) to go from derelict to well-found, but it was not much. Afloat again and sailing out of City Island, *Ibis* became a talisman of the many Thirties that had once raced in these waters, an object of intense pride to the whole family. But by 1980, with his seven kids grown, and the boat still up for sale, Willie donated her to ^{the} restoration group I had conjured up and was operating out of Long Island. Three years later he skippered her back to Sea Cliff from a rendezvous in Oyster Bay with two other newly restored Thirties (*Cara Mia* (then *Lightning*) and *Anemone* (then *Aquila*). He was enthusiastic about the new gaff rig and replica trunk cabin complete with varnished coachroof, but you could tell he felt it wasn't the same boat.

That is probably not a typical story of the survival of a particular boat; in a culture such as our own, ~~if we see very concretely~~, there may be very few typical stories, but there is certainly a history. Very different kinds of people kept the Thirties going between the tag end of the class racing days and roughly 1980, when full scale restoration of the design began to become a strong possibility. They all had different motives: the boats were lovely; they had a romantic tradition, they weren't plastic, they could be gotten cheap and sailed hard, even old as they were; it was a high ego trip to become the savior of one of them. But one idea certainly remains valid, as voiced by a man who raced on *Cara Mia* when H.A. Calahan owned her in the late thirties and forties: he thought it was not the design as such that was responsible for their distinction, but the extraordinary people who owned and sailed them.

The Question of the Design

Was the unusual destiny of the class somehow cast in the design itself at its origins in 1905? Perhaps not, despite the repeated celebration of the contract between Herreshoff and the NYYC. The basic model had already been set down, as the 41'9" custom one-off sloop *Bambino* of 1904. The Thirties are quite similar, drawn out another couple feet, and a foot beamier (when *Bambino* sailed out of City Island in the fifties and sixties, she was often mistaken for a Thirty). We should be able to assume that

Herreshoff must have been familiar with the performance of this boat, since he was experimenting (as he was always experimenting, really) in manifold ways with the new Universal Rule which he had been instrumental in developing. But the new 626 class nevertheless received the same short bowsprit as well as a very short maststep: the first resulted in severe weather helm (the ferocity of which got ^{fully} very gentle references in the early write-ups), the second in severe leaking when the boats were driven to windward. Almost all the boats went back to Bristol after the first season for longer sprits and longer reinforced maststeps. Additionally, the boats were really very small; serious yachtsmen, among which were several in the new owners' roster, generally owned much larger yachts; the Thirties may have been a fall-back boat for many of them who found themselves betwixt and between larger yachts and therefore without a vote in the club (ownership of a 30' waterline vessel required to vote). Then too, the records show the new boats changed hands very often during the initial years of racing among the same group of members, a given man often out of the class for a few years only to buy in once more.

And the reason for the appeal of the hulls is also elusive. Commonly now, the hulls are simply called sexy, and that is hardly surprising in a time when bloated dinghies fill the marinas, but to call them sexy certainly under-treasures the maritime eroticism of the turn of the century whose sublimation benefited yacht design immeasurably: compare (just one of many) the 85' waterline, 135' on deck design of William Gardner that appeared in one of the issues of *Rudder* in 1900, complete with fin keel and spade rudder, of which five were built at Shooters Island. The Thirty's low stern overhang, for example, seems short in relation to the long and relatively higher forward thrust of the bow; the later International Rule generally produced a boat whose ratio of waterline length to overall length worked out very close to the Golden Section (about .62; a Thirty is .69), and therefore the lines of a classic Meter boat of the period 1928-58 seems much more resolved and balanced, with a neutral helm upwind. And yet this very dissonant tension may be the reason why the hull of a Thirty generates such great dynamic variation and power. And it is interesting that a dimensional analysis of the hull and rig of a design generally agreed to be beautiful will contain not only near approximations of the Golden Section, but agreements with the Fibonnaci series as well. Nevertheless the Thirties endured through the competitive profusion of the extraordinary design activity of the post-World War I era; the current legend began to build then, and gave plausibility to the restoration of so many of the surviving boats.

Each of the surviving boats carries its own anecdote, and these seem to distinguish two basic motives for undertaking a Thirty: either the pleasure to restore, or the pleasure to sail. The story of *Bambino*, though not a Thirty, is worth recording here because she was the first of the type to receive a complete keel-up restoration. She was to be sailed to Florida in 1976 by a young couple hired by her owner; she was blown ashore in a bad storm at Beach Haven, New Jersey; the couple was rescued from the surf and the hull left to batter itself to pieces. It somehow did not, and the following day a friend of Louis Off, a local orchid grower, told him of the boat and that he might be interested in it. Off hired a helicopter to take a look, and seeing the hull sitting upright and apparently intact in still rough surf, resolved on the spot to restore her. The fin, ballast, and much of the backbone had been ripped out of the shell, but Off didn't know that until a few days

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later when he had the hulk lifted out of the slurry. He went ahead anyway – decisions like his are seldom influenced by subsequent evidence of near folly - and recruited one of the retired Jersey shore shipwrights who did a superb job on the boat. The complicated process occupied him for two years, and he said it exercised the main organizing principle of his life during that time. (“The motorcycle [read: boat] you’re always working on is yourself,” said Mr. Pirsig.) He sailed the boat for only a year after she was launched; sailing the shallow Jersey bays was not the most convenient thing with six feet plus draft, but in any case, his interest had clearly been in the restoring, not the sailing. But for many others, it was indeed the sailing, and more emphatically, the racing.

On their own: The Thirties wander, 1940-1980

Three boats went out to the Great Lakes, *Alera*, #1; *Amorita*, #9, and *Neola II*, #12. No Thirty has been raced as hard and as often as *Neola*, renamed *Minx* in the twenties. Clancy Shaffer acquired her in 1951, and brought her to Mentor, Ohio. She was a yawl then, with a 70’ main spar; the deckhouse, inevitably it seems, had been replaced by a doghouse. In thirty years of racing, he reports, she won some 400 pieces of silver, and 660 blue flags, including a win in the Mackinac that established a ten-year elapsed time record. In 1961 the boat was structurally redone: extensive strapping, refastening (Clancy claims 18,000 fasteners went into the boat), an entire sheathing in three layers of glass, removal of equivalent ballast. In 1970, the mast was moved 3’ aft, a sloop rig designed, and a new 60’ state-of-the-art spar flown in from Proctor of England. The winning went on. When he retired from racing the boat in the early 1980s, he distributed the 400 pieces of silver to his racing buddies and his many crewmembers. *Minx* herself went to a partnership formed among his most recent young crew, Scott Alexander, and John and Ginny O’Donnell, but demands of career and family muted the call of tradition. Then too, the boat was showing age and wear, and despite Clancy’s claim in the listing form that “no rot was ever discovered in the boat,” she was indeed rotting beneath the glass almost everywhere the wood wasn’t long leaf yellow pine. In 1994 a windstorm toppled the boat from her poppets, staving in two planks and breaking the spar. Another donation, and #12 came back east. Despite the now healthy interest in mounting complete restorations, *Minx* was a hard sell for a makeover with even the long leaf pine compromised by the rebuild. A local man has done some of the necessary work (removal of glass, plank repairs, a new doghouse), and she is again in the water.

Amorita, now, is certainly among the most celebrated of the Thirties, but she had an indifferent career on Lake Erie. She was owned at first by Jay White, who continued the parade of doghouses (could *no one* brook rebuilding the original elegant deckhouse???) and repaired some planking. Then Shaffer persuaded another member of his club, Dr. John Roberts, to purchase her, but he too was unable to quite match Clancy’s enthusiasm, and by 1975 or so the boat was abandoned in the club storage yard. It was then that Gordon Group, the surveyor hired to do the appraisal, deemed the boat unworthy of destruction and persuaded a friend to do some basic cleaning up and

or
maybe
they wanted
to be able
to stand
up in a
43' boat)

refurbishing. After a brief time afloat in Cleveland, she was donated in 1979, and then passed to Adrian Pearsall, to become the first of his three very distinguished restorations.

There is not much documentation about *Alera*. She was on Lake Ontario at least as early as her two sisters, owned by Art Mason of Niagara Falls. She passed in the seventies to Pierre Belcourt of Toronto, who did some rebuilding on the hull at Gillingham's yard in Ontario-on-the-Lakes in between trips to the Pacific Northwest on logging jobs. He dropped out of contact in the early eighties, but may have taken the boat west; in any case there has been no word since then.

About *Phryne*, #17, little information survives. She went out to the west coast, was owned in 1939 by a Dr. Teusler in Tokyo, and spent WW II in a shed in Japan. She made her way back to the west coast, and Maynard Bray reports receiving a letter from one Collister Wheeler who reminisced about sailing her in the Pacific northwest in 1951, and includes an account of a "Herreshoff NY 40" being dropped from slings and broken in half around 1975 or 76, from a surveyor named Harold Huycke; the boat was owned at the time by Victor Beck and had been renamed *Vixen*. The facts here are uncertain, however, since anyone not familiar with waterline length denomination would not accept a 43' boat as a "30," though Huycke's report seems pretty definitive. But then, in the mid-eighties, Paul Stubing, who had already done the work on both *Cara Mia* and *Anemone*, reported that he had been contacted by a man on the west coast who had found the boat and wanted to restore it, but nothing further ever materialized.

Two boats which had remained east, and were very curiously linked, were modified in somewhat similar ways during the nineteen-fifties, but for very different purposes. *Carlita*, #8, renamed *Variant*, acquired by Joe Reinhardt, the head draftsman in Phil Rhodes' office, and *Pintail*, #5, renamed *Cockatoo II*, by Lloyd Bergeson. Bergeson had sailed *Variant* to the Chesapeake in the nineteen forties, when she was owned by a Coast Guard captain in southern New Jersey. She then came up to Staten Island, where Reinhardt lived with the Atlantic all around him, so *Variant* was essentially reconstructed into a CCA ocean racer. The hull was refastened, the freeboard increased 6" amidships and 7-1/2" at the ends by the addition of a second sheer plank, a grand set of six bronze floortimbers placed under a new maststep, a bronze-strap-reinforced 3/4 ply deck, another doghouse, and the whole sheathed in mighty layers of glass, virtually no one, back then, having yet realized what fiberglass would do to a wood boat (although it should be said that the glassing done on various Herreshoff boats, including the New York 40 *Marilee*, was much more successful than those done on boats not planked in rot-proof long leaf pine). A wheel replaced the tiller, a double-head-sloop rig replaced the original. The whole job took him some seven years. I do not know if Reinhardt made any ocean cruises, but he could have for the strength he built into her. After the short ownership of Michael Fenn, the boat was donated in 1989, and on a blustery fall day with my son at the wheel, she was hit by a freak gust and knocked flat, ripping the slides from the foot of the mainsail, but otherwise she came back up with hardly a shrug. *Variant*, however, proved an easy lady to sell and attracted an able and willing man who engaged Taylor and Snediker to do the job. All Reinhardt's work was undone, the hull stripped

back down to planking, framing, and fin. A change in fortune leaves her waiting once more.

Lloyd Bergeson approached the work on *Cockatoo II* with hard racing in mind. The success of Reinhardt's *Variant* convinced him to proceed similarly with *Cockatoo II*. The hull was rebuilt, the stern bobbed a few feet for the rating's sake, and then the whole glassed with the canny sophistication of the recent experiments. The original house, however, was retained. He experimented with number of Marconi sloop rigs and was very successful racing. In 1977 he did sail across the Atlantic to his family's native Norway, a tale well documented elsewhere. The later history of this boat is surely among the most interesting of all the Thirties.

Cara Mia, #14, was probably the most well known of the Thirties during this period because of her presence in the popular sailing books written by H.A. Calahan of Mamaroneck, her long time owner. He celebrates the boat in each of them, and the evolution of the boat from its original gaff rig to an effective marconi sloop is well traced. He maintained the boat very well, as he was also a manufacturer of innovative marine products. After his death the boat went to John Ohl of Sands Point, who donated it in 1964 to the Sea Scouts. Bill Yaro bought her next, for \$3,000, and took her to Greenport where some rebuilding was done in the early seventies. After a hitch in the Navy and another in law school, Yaro sold her to me in 1978, for \$4,000. She was still in quite good condition, complete with her varnished coachroof, but needed extensive re-timbering, which we had started to do in the Fall of that year, when Ted Okie and Bill Hubbard, looking for a swift older boat to restore and compete in NYYC regattas (the attempt to install the NY36, a half tonner, as a club boat had not gone well at all), happened upon her. Paul Stubing in Mystic did the restoration in 1979-80, and in the next few years, with a 70' marconi sloop rig, the boat did exceptionally well, particularly in light airs. Hubbard then bought out his partner, converted to a yawl rig, and eventually sold her to Alfred Slanetz, who completed a second, and complete, restoration in 2001.

A less happy story is that of #13, originally *Minx*, then *Phantom* from the late twenties onward. She was owned for many years by Gustav Steffen, the historian of the class, and sailed out of City Island. After his death, she fell on some bad years; I first saw her forlornly at anchor off a dock in City Island sometime in the mid-sixties; learned that she was owned by two Greek chaps who had her out for charter from Battery Park to anyone willing to pay the \$10 a day fee. In the Fall of 1968 she was in one of the decaying marine facilities marked for extinction around the perimeter of Staten Island, in company with L.Francis Herreshoff's spectacular canoe-stern 80' M-boat *Sabre*, ex-*Istalena*, which somehow disappeared from the face of the earth during that ensuing winter. Then she was rescued by Maja Trigg and her husband, who planned to sail her South and live aboard. (Many large wood boats, especially the larger schooners, had such ambitions lavished upon them during that decade.) They got to Delaware Bay, encountered some bad weather, managed to limp down to Deltaville, Virginia, where the boat was hauled and advertised for sale in an Annapolis newspaper. The ad was spotted by Barbara Shields of Arnold, Maryland on the Maggothy River, who went to Deltaville and saw "a thing of beauty," as she describes it, and bought the boat in the Spring of 1973. But again, the requirements of family and profession did not give the boat much

privilege, and she was donated in 1980. The boat had lost some of her shape: the topsides had become pinched and flattened between the mast and the cockpit, the deck camber settled, and the original house had dropped correspondingly. A restoration was planned after the sponsored project on *Ibis*, but the sponsor moved from the east coast to Texas and left a number of not-for-profit projects high and dry. *Phantom* was auctioned by the yard in 1986 and broken up for scrap.

Oriole, #11, was owned and raced by Dick Wagner of Manhasset Bay and was in original condition, except for her marconi sloop rig. She was acquired by John Quincy Adams in 1955 and taken to Maine. She had much the same structural problems as *Phantom*, which Adams corrected over a period of a few years, although the original house, alas, gave way to a longer trunk cabin extending forward of the mast. He sailed her regularly for over 40 summers, and the boat is now in another restoration.

Dahinda, #6, was not so lucky. Sometime in the early sixties, she was intended to be taken south to engage in the charter trade, but the partnership disintegrated and the boat laid up in Manhasset Bay. There she was found by Bud Keithline, a teacher in the local schools, who bought her for the yard bill and sailed her hard and extensively out of both north and south shores of the Island, and down to the Chesapeake, usually with a boatload of jolly folk. He participated in one of the first ^{was open} Around Long Island Races, sponsored by the paper *Newsday*, a race that ^{was open} could be a grueling 200-mile slog from Sheepshead Bay in New York harbor to Glen Cove on the north shore. He was dismayed in bad weather at night hours after the start, and with the engine inoperative, was being blown seaward when he was able to signal a freighter in the shipping lanes, which stayed with the sloop until the Coast Guard arrived the following morning. But the boat had the usual structural problems that *ad hoc* remedies could not cure, and by 1980, with two recent sinkings, Keithline had lost heart and cut the boat up in Freeport. u

Tobasco, #7, was laid up in lower Connecticut in the sixties as well. She had been converted to a yawl, then donated to the Sea Scouts, and more or less languished. A man named Edward Lee Park picked her up sometime in the seventies, and was convinced that the way to proceed was to spline the planking and epoxy saturate the hull; many boats had been successfully treated with this technique, including all the older wooden eight meter boats collected in Toronto. Park traveled about some; the boat was transported to various places in New Jersey, and the work went slowly. Last communication from him was sometime less than a decade ago, when he said he was about to launch and hoped to attend a rendezvous in Bristol, but there has been no contact since then.

Amil Gargano undertook a complete restoration of *Anemone*, #18, in 1980. The boat had been laid up (right alongside a Burgess one-design eight meter) in Portsmouth, Rhode Island, in the late seventies, owned by William Sink. She was, as Paul Stubing later called her, "a virgin," with intact house (!!), short maststep, and gaff rig, and quite innocent otherwise of anything to reverse her deterioration. Sink sold her in late 1979 to Paul Karolides, a young man with wife and young child, who resolved to sail her to his home in Florida. The family started out in mid-November, and were caught by an early snow squall and severe winds off Glen Cove in western Long Island Sound which nearly sank the boat. They managed to make it in, and the boat was hauled. Karolides made odd week-long trips up from Florida during the winter, attempting to deal with the many

cracked frames by nailing short pieces of treated two-by-fours alongside the gaps. Nothing availed to persuade him of the futility of this, and he refused to part with the boat, but help was on the way: I had met Amil while haunting City Island yards around that time; he had been fascinated by the forms of sailing vessels since his boyhood, but had learned to sail only recently and now, after owning a few catamarans, had resolved to buy a larger boat. I do not know how much was required to prise *Anemone* away from her owner, but as the head of a successful advertising firm, Amil had an implacable appreciation for the aesthetic and cultural importance of preserving historic examples of unique design. So he embarked on the restoration, entrusting the boat to Stubing who had completed *Cara Mia* only two years before. *Anemone*, renamed *Aquila*, was sailed from Little Neck Bay for a few years before being donated to Bristol, where it again awaits another restoration.

Nautilus, #16, has been relatively free of such brushes with death. She was owned by Bruce Morgan, a competent sailor, in West Palm Beach, who wanted to have her properly restored. Eventually he sailed her to Newport and sold her to the Brothers McCaffery at Narragansett Shipwrights, who were able to preserve the boat until Bill Pedersen, fatally struck with the beauty of such hulls as L. Francis Herreshoff's *Quiet Tune* and Starling Burgess' *Chips*, and the owner of a Luders 16, agreed to undertake the job only four years ago. *Nautilus* now sails happily out of Coecles Harbor on Shelter Island, New York.

The Difficulty of the Future

Writing on the occasion of the Thirties' 20th anniversary, and looking ahead, one admirer conceded how extraordinary such survival was, but that to arrive someday at the 30th, or even the 35th, that would surely be a miracle. Here we are now at the 100th, though we certainly have some difficulty anticipating miracles, or even identifying them. Nostalgia always assumes that home – the origin – is always a good place to return to; and it certainly seems preferable to where we now are, in any case. It is a tempting illusion to believe that the restoration of an object of a prior age, transformed metaphorically into a living symbol of an incomparably more graceful reality, can overcome or even undo the deadly predations of history and time, no less our own fragile mortality. We serve the belief that historic preservation can extend life-giving values into the ugliness and peril of our current folly, or that beauty alone can brave time. Our rational minds accept this optimism, and smuggle into it the less generous ambitions of our vanity and immediate pleasure as well. Embedded deep beneath those factors might well be the awareness that to restore that first reality as originally created is also not enough, that it were better that nothing at all of the aboriginal conditions had ever been disturbed.

The survival of these boats shows a simple pattern, really. The evolution begins in the service of the grandly sporting interests of the wealthy at a particularly expansive period in our history, with all the more broadly cultural ambitions they followed; people comprising a temporary breed whose members would ultimately respond to the light of the new materials and designs dazzling the eyes of those determined to remain on the

cutting edge of what is named the new and the novel. It extends to the struggles of people without the money needed to maintain a sailing yacht, but who had their longings to follow, their competencies to exercise, and their passions to satisfy. It was a unique and successful mix.

Whereto now? Perhaps the survivors may all be gathered together to race as a class once more . . .