

# Restoring Old Boats: Many in Number, but Which to Choose?

By THOMAS G. LEDERER

**F**ROM a distance, the old boat swaying gently at a berth in East Creek Marina appears to have retained her seaworthiness and structural integrity. But get close to the Little Jennie and the 114-year-old wooden ketch's rotted bowsprit, cracked deck, discolored wood trim and rusted metal fittings betray her age and deterioration.

It's especially discouraging that the Little Jennie, all 61 feet of her, underwent a major restoration only 12 years ago.

"I really don't know what has happened to the Little Jennie," said William T. Perks, a Centerport resident who owned her until 1993 and supervised the overhaul in the mid-1980's. "I do know that she's in trouble and

Deeming a boat worthy of saving relies on the eye of the beholder.

in desperate need of attention."

The Little Jennie is not alone. Long Island, rich in maritime heritage and the money to preserve it, is home to dozens of old sailing vessels.

"My guess is that there are probably 50 to 100 historic boats on Long Island," said Steen Melby, a Patchogue boat restorer and a past president of the Antique and Classic Boat Society, an international group.

Restoration experts say some of the old boats are significant, some not, some ripe for repair, others ready for the scrap yard. But there's never enough money to go around, even for the high-priority projects. Old boats offer the starkest evidence of the truth of the saying that "a boat is a hole in the water into which you pour money," and even Long Island's wealth cannot keep all of these vessels in good repair.

What ensues, then, is a special kind of sailboat race in which the competitors vie for the affection of the wealthy individuals, corporate contributors, municipalities, maritime experts and volunteer workers they need to stay afloat.

The answer to why some boats are restored, rebuilt or revered while

others are abandoned is elusive. The Antique and Classic Boat Society defines a historic boat as having been built before 1919. But the historic designation doesn't automatically make a vessel worth saving, Mr. Melby said.

"Age itself does not make a boat significant," he said. "What a boat was used for, where, by whom, and how are important factors as well."

Peter Stanford, the founding president of the South Street Seaport Museum in Manhattan, believes that either the charisma of a boat or its heritage as a working vessel can make it seem equally "sexy" in the eyes of the particular community that might adopt and restore it.

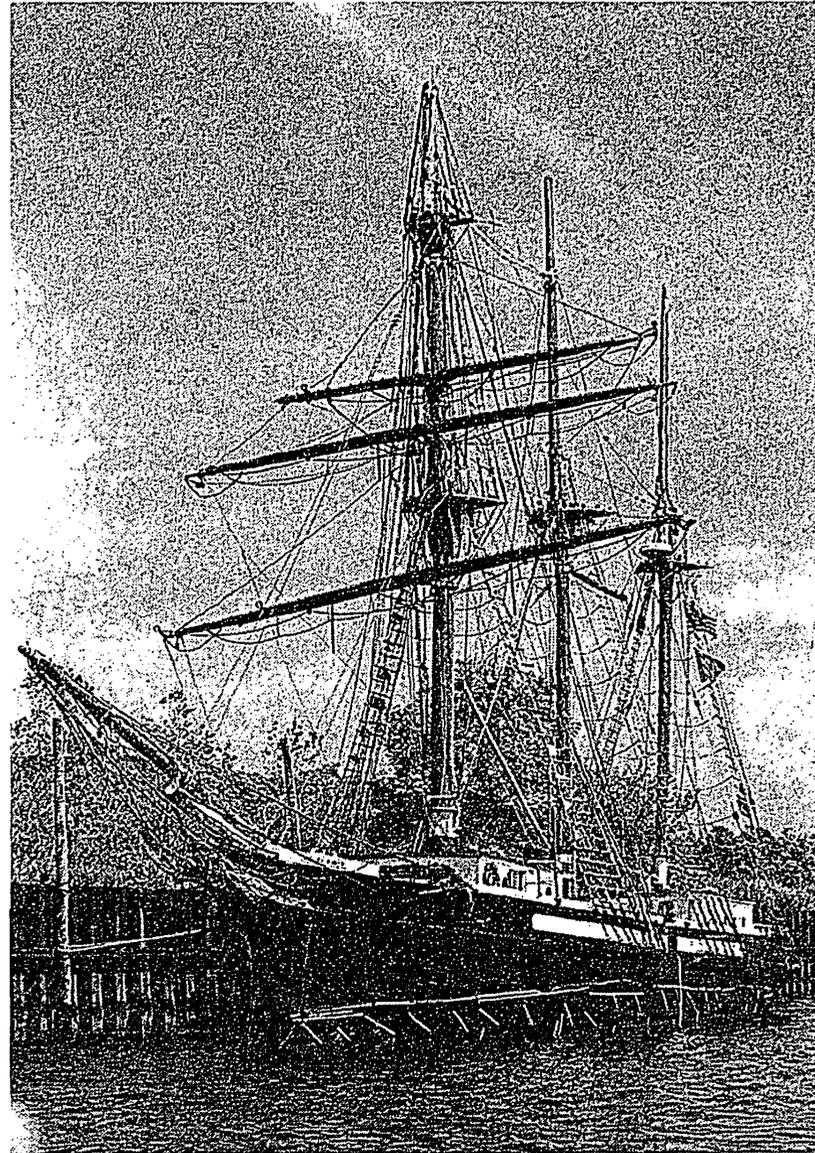
"Deep-sea vessels, ocean-going square-riggers, your archetypical Treasure Island redux attract some people, while there is another kind of romance about a humble, shallow-draft work vessel with a strong family or local history," said Mr. Stanford, who is now president of the National Maritime Historical Society in Peekskill, N.Y., and editor of Sea History magazine.

The Regina Maris, the current poster child of maritime restoration on Long Island, fits Mr. Stanford's first category. The 90-year-old, 139-foot three-masted ship is one of two surviving wooden-hulled barkentines in the world. As late as the 1970's she was sailing round the globe. Adding to her mystique are unconfirmed accounts that she transported Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution.

After falling into disrepair in the 1980's, she was bought by Save the Regina Maris Ltd., a foundation set up for her preservation, and was brought to Greenport.

But the restoration effort did not keep pace with the aging process. Gifford Full, an eminent ship surveyor, examined the Regina Maris this year and recommended that she be scuttled at sea. Nevertheless, Glen Cove's Mayor, Thomas Suozzi, pledged his support for the Regina Maris's resurrection, and last month the vessel was towed from Greenport to Glen Cove. She is currently staying afloat in Hempstead Harbor with the help of a huge plastic wrapper affixed to her deteriorating hull, and multiple bilge pumps working around the clock.

Mr. Suozzi envisions the Regina Maris as the jewel of his waterfront revitalization product, and said that restoring her will cost between \$2.5 million and \$5 million. He said that companies in Denmark, where she was built, have pledged contributions such as paint and rigging rope, but



James Estrin/The New York Times  
The Regina Maris, one of two surviving wooden-hulled barkentines in the world, is in need of restoration. She is at dock in Hempstead Harbor.

that fund-raising will not begin in earnest until a research project to ascertain the ship's role in the Holocaust is completed.

According to Mr. Melby, the kind of adoration that might inspire the investment of exorbitant amounts of time and money into such projects can actually undercut preservationist values.

"Questions arise about when a restored boat is no longer the original boat, when, by using modern technology and material, it assumes a new identity," Mr. Melby said.

He and Douglas Shaw, administra-

tor for the Long Island Maritime Museum in West Sayville, both said that more replicas of old boats are now being built to avoid that controversy. After the Regina Maris was hauled away, the Greenport Village Board pledged \$100,000 as part of a half-million dollar project to construct the Lady Stirling, a replica of a schooner built at a local shipyard.

Nonetheless, numerous restorations are attempted on Long Island, some more visible than others.

Two of the most significant restorations are the Christeen, a 38-foot sloop built in Glenwood Landing in

1883, and the Priscilla, a 34-foot schooner built in Patchogue in 1888. Both boats, along with the Little Jennie, are listed in the International Register of Historic Ships, published by the National Maritime Historical Society.

Before being taken out of the water for restoration, the Christeen was thought to be the oldest American vessel still operating in the United States.

The boat, which is currently being rebuilt from the keel up at the Jakobson Shipyard in Oyster Bay, is expected to play a central role in that community's \$12.5 million waterfront revitalization plan, and will ultimately serve as a sailing classroom and laboratory.

The cost of restoring the Christeen is expected to exceed \$250,000. Beyond raising small amounts of money through bake sales and oyster fests, the nonprofit corporation set up to rebuild the Christeen has received two \$50,000 matching grants from the New York State Department of Parks and Recreation, which will administer the park planned for the village's western waterfront area.

Like the Christeen, the Priscilla has a strong local connection. She spent most of her days oystering in Long Island and Connecticut waters and had an extensive overhaul in Greenport in the 1960's. Now part of the Long Island Maritime Museum's collection, she sits, masts unstepped, at a dock at the museum while it seeks grants to fund the restoration, which is expected to cost between \$150,000 and \$200,000.

Mr. Shaw, the museum's administrator, said that a grant application is pending with the National Maritime Historic Trust and that grants will be sought from governmental agencies funding educational and environmental projects.

The Little Jennie has been a winner at this same game, but may soon wind up a loser unless she can find a savior.

She was built in 1884 in Maryland. During her early years, she dragged for oysters on Chesapeake Bay and hauled wheat up the Anacostia River. During Prohibition, she is reported to have been a rumrunner, her twin Liberty engines helping her outrace pursuing Coast Guard cutters.

In the 1940's, she was utilized as a charter fishing boat and in the 1950's came north to New York, where she could be found on Long Island Sound, serving as a pleasure yacht.

In 1972, she was purchased by a Huntington Bay resident, Jerry Pif-

fith, whose attempt to rebuild her was aborted due to cost overruns.

In 1984, Mr. Perks encountered the Little Jennie as she was about to be scuttled after 10 years in drydock. He bought the boat from the Knutson Shipbuilding Corporation in Huntington for one dollar, intending to restore her in time to participate in the 1986 "Operation Sail," part of the New York Harbor celebration of the Statue of Liberty centennial.

A full-length documentary chronicling the successful restoration and participation in the tall ships event was aired in the late 1980's on various PBS television stations. Mr. Perks said the price tag was more than \$250,000.

"What Bill Perks undertook, the odds that he overcame, and what he accomplished in the end was an extraordinary feat," Mr. Stanford said.

But after her participation in the New York Harbor tall ships celebration, efforts to include the Little Jennie in various local maritime heritage projects were hindered by assertions that boats with Long Island pedigrees were more deserving of support. In 1993, the Little Jennie was sold for just over \$90,000 to the Long Island Maritime Heritage Society, a Riverhead group that had overseen the restoration of several wooden boats indigenous to the region.

The Maritime Heritage Society used the Little Jennie for on-the-water educational programs as well as for recreational cruises. But last year the Coast Guard mandated that the Little Jennie undergo a \$100,000 hull refurbishment and the vessel has not sailed since.

"We ran into a Catch-22 situation where we couldn't carry passengers without the repair, and we couldn't afford the repair if we couldn't carry passengers," said Linda Dieterich, the Long Island Maritime Heritage Society president. "We've explored various alternatives but we've reached the heartbreaking decision that we have to sell the boat."

Ms. Dieterich said that her group has received offers for the Little Jennie, some from Maryland, some from others who would like to keep the boat on Long Island. Meanwhile the boat sits at the dock on Great Peconic Bay, rotting. If a new rescuer can be found, she may sail again; if not, she will likely die in obscurity.

"The successful restoration projects get a lot of attention," Mr. Perks said, "but seldom do we hear about the disasters, the good money after bad, when the boat ends up getting bulldozed."