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# RIGHTING THE SHIP

THE PLANK-BY-PLANK JOURNEY TO RESTORE  
THE SOUL OF THE WESTERN FLYER

In 2013, the fishing vessel *Gemini*, a purse seiner built in 1937, was hauled up from the bottom of the Swinomish Channel in the Pacific Northwest. The event wouldn't have drawn much attention had this old wooden fishing boat not had such a storied past.

In 1940, the novelist John Steinbeck and his friend, marine biologist Ed Ricketts, chartered the sardine fisher under the name *Western Flyer*, embarking on a six-week voyage to the Sea of Cortez to collect specimens and document the flora and fauna of tide pools along the coast. The duo recorded the trip and co-wrote the travelogue/research catalogue *Sea of Cortez: A Leisurely Journal of Travel and Research*.

Luckily, when the boat sank for what was the third (or maybe even fourth) time in her history, she was not far from Port Townsend, the Northwest's hub of wooden-boat restoration. The *Western Flyer* soon found a home at the Port Townsend Shipwrights Co-Op, and her new owner started a nonprofit foundation to oversee an ambitious—and expensive—restoration project.

The goal is not only to restore the old boat with as much historical accuracy as possible, but also to fit her out for modern marine research carried out by student scientists.

#### 'WORTHLESS, YET PRICELESS'

John Gregg, the marine geologist who purchased the *Western Flyer* in 2015 for \$1 million, has said the boat is "worthless, yet priceless." The entire boat will be rebuilt plank by plank at a cost twice that of the purchase price. An additional \$2 million will be needed to equip the boat with the latest research equipment, bringing the estimated total to \$5 million.

For Gregg and many others, this endeavor is well worth the cost. Chris Chase, a former co-owner of the Port Townsend Shipwrights Co-Op, is a prime example. After his yard began work on this restoration, Chase left his position as a head shipwright to become the full-time project director for the *Western Flyer* Foundation.

And he's far from the only one to sense there's magic in this salvage. In a *Northwest Now* segment that aired on PBS in November 2017, Chase says that even from the early days, interest in the boat has been substantial, with 10 to 30 people visiting the shop each week just to get a glimpse of the corroded hull. As the project progresses, Chase posts video updates to the foundation's YouTube channel, showing the process step by step, from sourcing the timber to chiseling the rabbet line into a particularly persnickety wedge of purpleheart.

By purchasing the boat, Gregg not only saved the *Western Flyer* from the depths of the Swinomish, but also from her

After being retrieved from the bottom of the Swinomish Channel, the *Western Flyer* found a home at Port Townsend Shipwrights Co-Op (top), where a dedicated crew, including Peter Stein (bottom), works to painstakingly to recreate the vessel as she was in 1940.

previous owner's plan of building her into a Steinbeck-themed restaurant. The *Western Flyer* Foundation's plan to create a proper research vessel, closely following the original design and construction, honors the legacy of the Sea of Cortez expedition.

The student voyages to come undoubtedly will be quite different in tenor than the original trip (and are unlikely to rival the crew's most prized count, not of specimens collected but of, as Steinbeck reports, "2,106 individuals of two species of beer" consumed). Yet, they will be undertaken in a similar spirit of inquiry, building on Ricketts' pioneering ideas of ecology that have become the norm in the field of biology, focusing on habitats and relationships between organisms within similar environments rather than separately studying taxonomical families of species.

"The fact that this boat is old and wooden—and smells old and wooden—is important to the experience that kids will have out on it," Gregg says in a promotional video for the project.

Though he doesn't elaborate on the inherent value of mustiness, it's hard to argue with him as I flip through *Cannery Row*, Steinbeck's novel featuring a fictional character closely based on Ricketts. A 1963 edition, it's been in circulation 20 years longer than I've been alive. If there's a tangible representation of my love of reading, it's this: the slightly mold-tinged smell of an old library book, which not incidentally smells much like an old boat.

Maybe it's a similarly indescribable feeling that compels the crew to embark on the audacious, years-long task of restoring this wreck. For many people, it seems there is something



Archive photo (top): Tom Burton Collection, Whatcom Museum



Stein wrangles the purpleheart (this photo); Lachlan Carlson (top left) takes a quick pause from the restoration work; Unlike Steinbeck and Ricketts, who famously drank little water on their trip, the restoration team keeps it professional by hydrating with seltzer (middle); The view from the original fish hold (bottom) shows beams being put in for the new deck.



essential within the barnacle-covered salvage that cannot be recreated by even the most precise replica.

#### 'A WOUNDED BOAT DOES NOT HEAL'

If anyone would understand the impulse to properly rebuild this boat, it would be Steinbeck. He believed a boat was not simply an object, but instead a tool with which we as a species identify so completely that in many ways, the boat itself becomes an extension of ourselves.

As he wrote in *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*: "Some have said they have felt a boat shudder before she struck a rock, or cry when she beached and the surf poured into her. This is not mysticism, but identification; man, building his greatest and most personal of all tools, has in turn received a boat-shaped mind, and the boat, a man-shaped soul. His spirit and the tendrils of his feeling are so deep in a boat that the identification is complete. It is very easy to see why the Viking wished his body to sail away in an unmanned ship, for neither could exist without the other."

This sentiment is not new to most of us boaters, of course. We identify with and personify our boats—even using female pronouns to refer to what others see as inanimate objects. Steinbeck goes further, equating a boat's sinking with a crime: "Only the trait of murder which our species seems to have could allow us the sick, exultant sadness of sinking a ship, for we can murder the things we love best, which are, of course, ourselves."

If intentional sinking is murder, then the accidental sinking brought about by neglect of the *Western Flyer* must surely deserve a charge of manslaughter. A passage from *The Pearl*, a novel based on a folktale Steinbeck heard in Mexico during the trip, suggests that in some ways, though, the wreck of a boat is more spiritually bankrupting. Steinbeck writes, "The killing of a man was not so evil as the killing of a boat. For a boat does not have sons, and a boat cannot protect itself, and a wounded boat does not heal."

Then again, the crew at Port Townsend Shipwrights Co-Op is out to prove this last part wrong. With the proper treatment, this boat can be healed.

#### THE SHIP OF STEINBECK?

While we know that providing medical care to a person altered by physical injury does not change who she is as a person, what does it mean when what is "healed" is an inanimate object? Can we extend Steinbeck's idea of a "man-shaped soul" to claim that the *Gemini* is indeed still the boat that Steinbeck and Ricketts chartered as the *Western Flyer*—and that her overhaul is akin to the painstaking rehabilitation of a distinct spiritual entity?

For Chase, the project he is leading is indeed a restoration



Portraits of Steinbeck (left) and Ricketts on display in the Western Flyer Foundation office in Port Townsend. Bottom left: Western Flyer surrounded in scaffolding. Column below (top to bottom): Distinctive red-orange primer is used to seal end grain; The freshly replanked transom; Preparing for installation.



More than the spirit of any of the participants, it may be the ‘dimension and tone’ of their brief trip that is contained within the hull of the *Western Flyer*—an idea that will live on as generations of students turn over stones in tide pools along the ever-changing coastline.

of the boat, a more authentic preservation distinct from replication.

“Of course we could build a replica of it, and it would be a replica of it,” he says. “It might be more accurate than the one that’s there. But it wouldn’t be the *Western Flyer*.”

He continues, “And we could stick a couple of pieces of wood from the *Western Flyer* in the new one, and it still wouldn’t be the *Western Flyer*. It wouldn’t be the boat that they walked on, that they stored their specimens down in the fish hold, that they sat up on the flybridge and drove across the Sea of Cortez. It wouldn’t be the boat.”

His reasoning makes intuitive sense. Yet, it’s estimated that at the end of the project, only around one-quarter of the original planks will remain in the refinished hull.

For me, this reality brings to mind the ship of Theseus thought experiment, in which a boat is maintained as a tribute to a Greek war hero, with planks being replaced one by one as they wear out, so that by the end of a 1,000-year period, not a single original piece remains. Is this object then still the ship of Theseus?

A variation complicates the question: Say that each time a plank is removed, it is brought to a shipyard, and these planks are then assembled over the same period of time into a replica of the original ship. Of these two boats, which is the real one?

These questions feel like exactly the type of metaphysical puzzles Steinbeck and Ricketts would enjoy debating, sitting on deck in the evening with the crew, drinking whiskey and beer.

#### ‘A JOURNEY IS A PERSON IN ITSELF’

Even with all the talk of boats with souls and men inhabiting their boats, it’s important to note that the *Western Flyer* was never owned by either man—Steinbeck and Ricketts only chartered the boat for six weeks of more than 80 years of her existence. And even in the realm of metaphysics bordering on mysticism, that’s likely not enough time for the *Western Flyer* to have developed a Ricketts-and-Steinbeck-shaped soul.

Yet, she no doubt embodies the spirit of the journey they took together, one made even more poignant given Ricketts’ tragic death right before they were to depart for their second

charter of the *Western Flyer* to Alaska. If Steinbeck believed boats contained the spirits of men, he also believed that a voyage—a journey, an expedition—had its own spirit, separate even from those involved.

He describes this idea in a later work, *Travels With Charley*: “Once a journey is designed, equipped, and put in process, a new factor enters and takes over. A trip, a safari, an exploration, is an entity, different from all other journeys. It has personality, temperament, individuality, uniqueness. A journey is a person in itself; no two are alike.”

Steinbeck writes of the Sea of Cortez journey using similar language: “What was the shape and size and tone of this little expedition? We slipped into a new frame and grew to be a part of it, related in some subtle way to the reefs and the beaches, related to the little animals, to the stirring waters and the warm brackish lagoons. This trip had dimension and tone. It was a thing whose boundaries seeped through itself and beyond into some time and space that was more than all the Gulf and more than all our lives. Our fingers turned over the stones and we found life that was like our life.”

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#### ‘WENT A LONG WAY AND BURNED A DEEP SCAR’

In the first chapter of *Sea of Cortez*, Steinbeck describes the *Western Flyer*: “She was seventy-six feet long with a twenty-five-foot beam; her engine, a hundred and sixty-five horsepower direct reversible Diesel, drove her at ten knots.”

In a tribute to his late friend that Steinbeck included in the second edition of the book, he essentially does the same for Ricketts: giving his friend’s “specs” in a scant paragraph that sketches out his basic biographical facts: birthplace, schooling, military service, died at age 52.

“Within that frame,” Steinbeck writes, “he went a long way and burned a deep scar.”

The same seems true of the *Western Flyer*. ❄