



YOUNG MEN AND THE SEA

How a Family and a Boat Changed Fishing History

by Ross Haldane

Images courtesy of the Haldane Bros collection.

Stroll the boardwalk of any fishing hamlet and it's hard not to reflect on past times: boats arriving with salty fisherman, rusty hooks and fish scales drying in the sun. Canvas drumming in the wind, bending to the heavy air of southern chill; wet, cold salt on a sun-carved face.

Along the Moyne River waterfront, among the black bluestone of the riverbanks, Port Fairy hides a true story of the sea. Faded plaques around Griffith Island hint at the story. "Haldane's Landing", a wooden structure like a flash-card into the past. In the town itself, a lone fibro shed.

The riverside was once the domain of the unfortunate class of townsfolk. Not so today. The waterfront luxury dwellings are a far cry from the humble weatherboard fishermen's cottages of a past era.

Then, it was the rabbit works, the smell of rotting fish, the hiss of steam trains arriving at Wishart's Wharf, the fishermen's shed full of men spending a windy afternoon sitting on wooden fish boxes, the distinctive smell of pipe smoke and retold stories, young boys lounging like big-eared kelpy dogs in a woolshed, hanging on every tall tale. Once, sturdy couta boats lined the river with drying cotton sails, crews scrubbing the decks, bucket in hand, the thudding of couta against hulls or the ring of the boat builder's hammer as the copper rivets are dummied home. Planks that sprang to the shipwright's eye and heavy keel timbers that emerged from the forest to be shaped by the swing of the shipwright's adzes.

Now listen me boys, I have a tale to tell.

This journey begins with a twenty-one-year-old youth arriving at the isolated lighthouse on Griffith Island, joining his father Hugh Ross Haldane, Harbour Master.

William Haldane, eldest son of Hugh and Rebecca, along with his four other siblings, were to call the lighthouse home for another twenty-five years. Bill had just finished his apprenticeship as a carpenter, but the great depression had hit Australia hard. The only jobs were as crew on one of Port Fairy's forty Couta boats, the 28-foot *Petrel* or on a road gang crushing rocks. An easy choice for the young adventurer. He and his two younger brothers Alan and Hugh signed on as crew aboard Port Fairy's couta fleet, a long way from their first tin canoe in Melbourne's muddy Yarra River.

At the time, Victoria's shark fishing industry was just expanding and promising results were being achieved with bigger boats. The boys saw an opportunity, and in 1935, at just twenty-two, Bill took on the task of building their first boat, a 39-foot shark boat called the *Amaryllis*.

This was not without its challenges. The 40-foot keel log, the foundation of any wooden craft, had to be taken to the island by rowboat, where it was thought a good idea was to roll the log into the water and float it ashore. The unseasoned bluegum log immediately sank in fifteen feet of water; so the boys dived, retrieved the log, dragged it up the beach and over the sand hills.

Three years later, the forty-foot *Dolphin*, modeled and lofted by young Bill, took shape alongside the lighthouse quarters, a boat for the Southern Ocean and Bass Strait. Seventy-five years later, the *Dolphin* still works fishing for rock lobster from Beachport in South Australia. Their first boat, the *Amaryllis*, went on to be a part of the war effort, travelling to Darwin and transporting supplies to the Snake Bay airfield in 1944.



In Port Fairy, barracouta had given way to shark. However, warning bells were starting to ring. In 1942, young Bill wrote to the Victorian government warning of the potential demise of the shark fishery through indiscriminate fishing, and suggested measures to preserve its future.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Australia was importing half its seafood and the scientific belief was that its waters were a marine desert. But in the 1940s the CSIRO's Stanley Fowler flew over the blue emptiness of the Great Australian Bight. Fowler had, like his inland counterparts, recognized the advantage of aircraft as a tool – in Fowler's case spotting fish from the air – and during the war he hitched rides on RAAF reconnaissance flights.

High over the Bight, instead of spotting submarines, Fowler looked down on the astonishing spectacle of enormous shoals of tuna, mackerel and pilchards stretching to the horizon. With masterful understatement, he described his discovery as "a significant untapped pelagic resource." He knew that to harvest these fish, bigger vessels were needed, and one such vessel was starting to take shape in a shed alongside the Moyne River in Port Fairy.

Following their successful shark boats, the Haldane boys were thinking big: a multipurpose boat capable of sharking, purse seining and trawling. At first the idea was to continue in the shark industry to access fish further from port. The Haldane boys' boat, however, presented Fowler with his platform

At left: *Tacoma steaming on Boston Bay, 2010. Photo: Ian Doyle*

Below: *Hugh and Bill Haldane building the wooden mast with adzes, watched by Bill's youngest son, three-year-old Ross. Often, when the saws were not big enough, it was easier to knock down a log with the adze.*

Below: *Tacoma with mast alongside, ready for the final rigging.*





Left: *Tacoma* loaded, heading for home – acrylic and oil by Ross Haldane. Image courtesy of the Tacoma Preservation Society collection.

to expand Australia's fishing industry. With photo in hand, he visited the boys (then aged thirty, twenty-seven and twenty-five) in their shed. The lack of government response to Bill's earlier concerns about the shark fishery gave the Haldanes the impetus to move on and tackle Southern Bluefin Tuna, a species that had been neglected by most fishing nations because of its poor shelf life and roaming habits. This was an unlikely start: Southern Bluefin were considered too dark a meat for the American market. But like the ugly duckling, it would eventually be highly prized in the Japanese market, following the introduction of specialised 60-degree onboard refrigeration in the 1970s.

Within decades, the catch peaked at \$2.4 billion and 80,000 tons. Today only around 12,000 tons are taken by ten nations under International Convention. The Commission for the Conservation of Southern Bluefin Tuna (CCSBT) is the intergovernmental organisation responsible for the management of Southern Bluefin Tuna throughout its distribution.

But that was a long way off for the boys in their Port Fairy shed. The Haldane brothers set out to build a boat to the lines of American purse seine tuna clippers. The 120-ton boat was to be the biggest vessel ever constructed in Port Fairy. Their two previous boats, the *Amaryllis* and the *Dolphin* had been crafted in the sand hills alongside the lighthouse quarters on Griffith Island. With youthful enthusiasm, the brothers figured they could complete the new 84-footer in

just two years. They would build the hull, go to the bank and borrow the finance for the expensive machinery. In between time, when fishing weather was good, they'd fish to feed their growing families.

The keel logs came from the Otway Ranges, selected from the tallest, straightest bluegums. One had its first branch at one hundred feet. The five logs, weighing a total of twenty-five tons, arrived by train in Port Fairy. Using block-and-tackles and old crab winches, the boys jimmied the logs off a flatbed freight car and rolled them onto a truck. They then proceeded along Gipps Street to the family's vacant waterfront block on the west bank of the river. There they set to work squaring up the logs over six months, using the time-honored broadaxes and adzes, with a polished cross-cut saw. The keelson and the four sister logs were bolted together, and the 84-footer was underway.

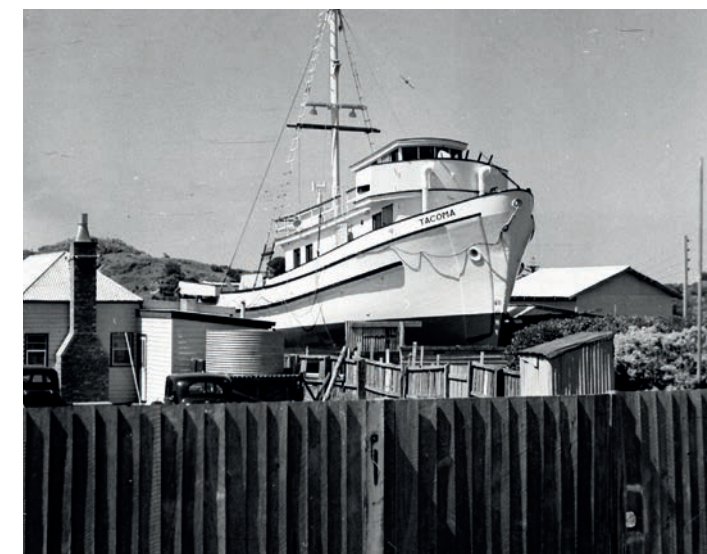
At every step Hugh Ross, the Haldanes' shipwright father, made sure the boat could live up to his Scottish heritage of being "Clyde built". All the while, sturdy arms beat the caulker hammer, musically threading the cotton and red orca into the hull's seams. But before launch day many challenges loomed, including scarcity of materials, delays occasioned by the post-war coal strike and capital restrictions on overseas machine acquisitions, let alone money from any source to complete the boat. Australia had lost its seafaring past and with wool in full control, all capital looked inland rather than towards empty blue seas. Banks were unimpressed with watery adventures.

Without financial support and little capital left of their own, construction continued slowly until 1948. The Commonwealth Development Bank refused finance because of "the experimental nature of the venture." The federal government said no because, despite Fowler's findings, it saw "no evidence of suitable fish stocks". Frank Moorhouse, the chief fisheries officer in the South Australian government, was one of the few who knew of the work being done by the purse seiners on America's west coast. With that knowledge, he saw potential in the boat the boys were building in the shed in Port Fairy, Victoria. He recommended that the South Australian government lend £20,000 to the Haldanes to finish the boat.

The Haldanes' loan was approved on 7 September 1948, but it came with conditions. On completion, *Tacoma* (as it had now been named in recognition of the friendship between the Tacoma, USA-based Petrich family who freely provided the valuable plans for the boat) had to fish in South Australian waters. The three Haldane families would have to be based 700 miles to the west of Port Fairy at Port Lincoln, on the south-eastern tip of the Great Australian Bight. Once there, the vessel was also to be used for fisheries research. The Haldanes were up a creek without a paddle – they had no option but to accept. The Victorian government stepped in with a belated attempt to keep *Tacoma* in Victorian waters, but Victoria had literally missed the boat. Not only were the three Haldane families to leave Port Fairy, but their departure would inspire many other Victorian fishing families to move west and help build Port Lincoln into Australia's biggest fishing port.

Work restarted on the tuna clipper, full-time and in earnest, in 1948.

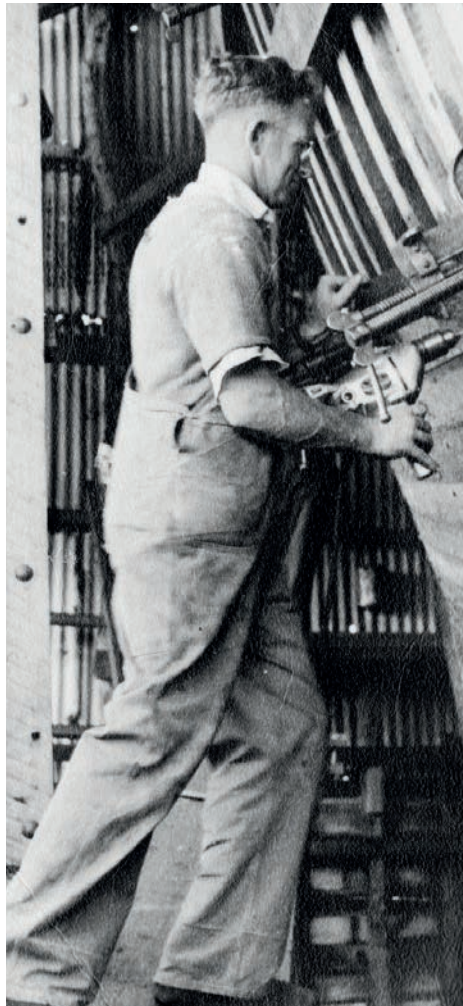
Tuna clippers, along with their earlier sailing sisters the clipper ships (for example



Above: *Tacoma* in the back yard, November 1951, ready for launching. The shed on the right still stands amongst the waterside villas of Port Fairy.



Above: *Early tuna poling; Bill Haldane waist deep in the racks.*



Above: Alan Haldane drilling the planks ready for the youbang fastenings to be hammered home, 1946.

the *Cutty Sark*), were the envy of the boating world – always white, always fitted out to a standard befitting the queen of the sea and crewed by the elite of fisherman, the Portuguese and the hardy Norwegians.

Tuna clippers were the American west coast's unique answer to Hollywood glamour, with names like *American Girl*, *Lucky Star*, *Uncle Sam* and *Sun King*. From Seattle and Tacoma in the north to San Diego, San Pedro and Monterey further south, the inspiration for Steinbeck's *Cannery Row* and *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* meant tuna clippers were every fisherman's pin-up. With elegant lines, from the racks on their sterns to the curve of their bows, men would do true battle with tuna.

The west coast tuna industry boomed. Decks were awash with fish. Warnings in the 1920s about the need for regional organisations to conserve and manage tuna, and the prediction by George Roger Chute in 1930 about the development of a world-wide tuna fleet, all came to fruition during the second half of the twentieth century. There is a darker side to these glory days of hundreds of clippers and tuna longliners that were sliding down the ways in the Pacific nations post-World War II.

Tacoma was launched on 5 November 1951. In January the following year she set out for Port Adelaide and on to Port Lincoln. She arrived with the three families, a dog, a cat that had kittens during the trip and eighteen-year-old twin brothers Keith and Jack Bellamy from Port Fairy.

On arrival in Port Lincoln, the reception was mixed. Local fishermen, many of whom had never set eyes on a vessel of her size and power, a super-trawler of her age, thought that the oceans would be emptied, leaving nothing for them.

They need not have worried. Early on things did not go smoothly for the Haldanes. Purse seining, using heavy cotton nets, had brought limited success on the west coast of the USA in catching tuna, and in Port Lincoln initial efforts in rocky areas caused damage resulting in six weeks of lost fishing time to do repairs.

Troll line fishing was tried, but the resulting six ton per day was not enough. On *Tacoma*'s first trip in February 1952, she steamed 190 miles southeast to Kangaroo Island, trolling only forty scattered individual tuna. The brothers' resources were at low ebb. But on 25 February 1953, *Tacoma*'s luck changed when, off the northern end of Boston Bay near Port Lincoln, she set her purse seine around a small school of tuna. Fourteen tons of tuna were hauled aboard, the first Southern Bluefin purse seined in Australian waters.

Twenty years would pass before the technique of purse seining was deemed a success in Australia, because southern waters do not have a thermocline (as found in most of the Pacific tuna fisheries), which acts like a 'glass floor' in the ocean. Australian tuna fishermen had to develop a two-boat fishing stratagem to chum the fish up

and stop schools from sounding under the net. Hydraulic power blocks and nylon nets were developed. Bill was adept at recognising the skills of others, and worked to bring experienced American tuna fishermen to Port Lincoln to demonstrate the technique of using bamboo poles with a line attached to a barbless hook, known as pole fishing or 'poling'. Finally, in 1956, brothers Chris and Svere Jangaard flew from San Diego to Port Lincoln to show them how it was done.

Steel racks were fitted around the stern to put the fishermen close to the water. With no safety gear other than a hard hat, the poling fishermen relied entirely upon their sea legs and their youthful agility. On Thursday 15 March 1956, with the Jangaard brothers aboard, 25 tons of tuna was poled into the boat.

The first of Port Lincoln's several tuna booms was underway. The Haldanes' shared experience greatly accelerated the development of the South Australian tuna fishery, positioning it for later years when it would come to dominate the Southern Bluefin fishery and change the fortunes of a sleepy town at the bottom of South Australia's Eyre Peninsula.

DIAMONDS and FURS

When a ship goes down the ways, those who board it are looking forward to years of fishing. But the boat-builder looks at the empty ways, wondering when the next job will come. For the Haldanes and their Tacoma, diamonds were not to come from tuna but an unlikely fishery on the southern coast of Australia – prawns. On 28 February 1968 Tacoma left the blue of the Southern Ocean, the never-ending rafts of petrel, the majestic albatross and the diving gannets.

There was a belief that, like shark before it, tuna were now in trouble. Governments seemed unable or unwilling to tackle the challenge of a troubled fishery found half way round the southern part of the world and fished by global fleets.

In 2003, after a career spanning fifty-two years fishing for tuna, salmon, pilchards, shark and prawns, Tacoma retired. Now on the Australian Register of Historic Vessels, she is based in Port Lincoln under the care of the Tacoma Preservation Society, a community-based organisation whose volunteers keep her in working order. Tacoma was gifted to the Australian community, with a substantial cash gift by the Haldane family, and she now serves as living history.

Tacoma now goes to sea twice a year with twelve crew. Guests pay to cruise aboard one of Australia's living treasures. Tacoma's story is not just about workmen, shipwrights and fishermen – but about fish and our attempts to understand our impact upon them. Southern Bluefin Tuna have been reduced to 5% of their original breeding biomass and are listed by the Australian Fisheries Management Authority as 'overfished'.

Right: The three brothers; Hugh, Alan and Bill, 1956.



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