



MEDIA RELEASE

27th April 2011

TACOMA returns to Port Fairy – almost!

The historically significant 84 ft wooden tuna clipper MFV Tacoma recently attempted to return to Port Fairy, sixty years after it was launched but poor weather and rising seas made the task too difficult. The Tacoma was built by brothers Bill, Alan and Hughie Haldane on the banks of the Moyne River.

The MFV Tacoma intended to call into Port Fairy on its way back to Port Lincoln after spending a week in Hobart as one of the feature vessels in the 2011 Australian Wooden Boat Festival.

The vessel has been restored over the past 3 years by a group of dedicated volunteers, all members of the MFV Tacoma Preservation Society.

“We were disappointed not to be able to return the vessel to Port Fairy as planned however it will happen in the not too distant future. It would have been a nostalgic time for all onboard and when it happens, it will bring back a lot of memories for some of the older residents of Port Fairy to see her again,” Ross Haldane, son of boat builder Bill Haldane and President of the Tacoma Preservation Society said.

It took the Haldane brothers seven and a half years to build the MFV Tacoma. It was launched on the high tide at 0338 on the morning of Monday November 5th, 1951. A bottle wrapped in blue and white ribbon and filled with salt water from what was to become her homeport in South Australia, Port Lincoln, was broken on her bow.

An important chapter in the history of the Australia fishing industry began with the launch of the MFV Tacoma. It was the first purse seine vessel in Australia and it pioneered the multi-million dollar tuna fishing industry in Port Lincoln. Its design was based on vessels being used in the expanding tuna fishing industry in the Pacific North West.

“The plans for the vessel came from the Western Boat Building Company in Tacoma Washington in the US. The company was very helpful in providing support for Dad and his two brothers in the difficult time following WW2. As a result the brothers decided to name the vessel Tacoma,” Ross Haldane said.

There were sixteen people on board on Sunday January 6th 1952 for the MFV Tacoma’s maiden voyage to Port Lincoln: the three Haldane brothers, their spouses and seven children. Also on board were all of their household possessions including wardrobes, bikes and beds, Hughie Haldane’s Alsatian dog *Wolf* and two cats.

Other crewmembers were cook Tom McDonald and identical twin brothers Jack and Keith Bellamy. They lived near the Haldanes and watched the vessel being built. Later they assisted constructing the boat. On completion the Bellamy boys were asked if they wanted join the crew. They jumped at the chance of a new adventure at sea. Their mother was less enthusiastic and reluctantly agreed to let them go. The twins celebrated their 18th birthday on the voyage to Port Lincoln.

Keith Bellamy was tragically lost at sea from the MFV Tacoma in February 1959 when he was poling for tuna off the south coast of South Australia.

On board the Tacoma for her yet to be completed historic return to Port Fairy were four of the original crew and passengers who sailed on the maiden voyage from Port Fairy to Port Lincoln in January 1952.

The crew of eleven in 2011 included the sons of the three Haldane brothers, Ross, Andy and Robin and seventy-seven year old Jack Bellamy. The other crewmembers are from the Tacoma Preservation Society and an ABC TV Landline crew.

The Haldane brothers were fishermen at a very young age at Port Fairy. Before the Tacoma, the boys had demonstrated their boat-building prowess by constructing three smaller fishing boats, Petrel (23ft) Amaryllis (40ft) and Dolphin (40ft). Their father Hugh Haldane had been a shipwright on the River Clyde in Scotland. He had taken a job as Lighthouse Keeper and Harbour Master at Port Fairy and provided useful advice during the construction of the Tacoma.

The massive blue gum keel logs, the largest of which was 70 ft (21 metres) and weighed 8 tons, were felled in the Otway Ranges and delivered to Port Fairy by rail in 1944. They were hand shaped using adzes and cross cuts saws.

They were fishing and building at the same time and ran out of money during the construction. Requests for assistance from the Victorian and Commonwealth Governments were ignored. The Victorian post war Cain government didn't respond to correspondence, the Commonwealth couldn't see any defence possibilities for the new boat and the Commonwealth Bank considered the whole venture too big a risk. However the South Australian (SA) government under Premier Playford wanted to develop a new purse seine fishing industry in SA and provided the Haldane brothers with a 20,000-pound loan. The loan conditions included the three Haldane families moving to SA from Port Fairy, the Tacoma being based at Port Lincoln and the fish they caught were to be marketed through SA fish markets.

When the loan arrangements with the SA Government were made public, the Victorian government, then under Acting Premier McDonald, attempted to intervene and encourage the Haldane brothers to change their position and remain in Victoria. The decision became something of a political football and was widely reported.

The arrangements however had been completed and while every pound plus interest was repaid, without the SA government funds, the Tacoma was likely to have ended up as a huge white ant feed.

"The impact the Tacoma had on the South Australian fishing industry and Port Lincoln was significant and long term. Our parents were true fishing and boat building pioneers," Ross Haldane said.

The Tacoma story is on ABC TV Landline on Sunday May 1st at 12 noon.

Ross Haldane
Tacoma Preservation Society
M: 0467 488 554 P: 08 8682 1124

Ian Doyle
Producer ABC Landline
0417 819 189