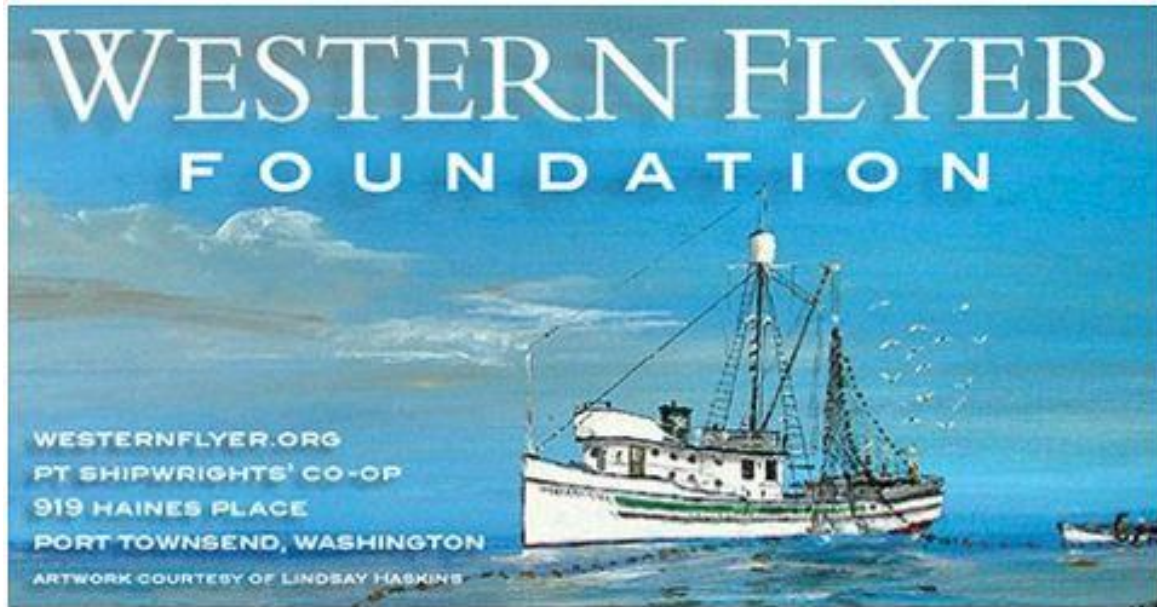


A New Life for the Boat Immortalized by John Steinbeck

Sitting in dry-dock, covered in barnacles, is the Western Flyer, a piece of literary history that has been threatened by time, the sea, and a restaurateur. No more.

By Patrick Hutchison Wed., Mar 18 2015 at 06:23PM



The *Western Flyer* launches at Western Boat Builders in Tacoma, March 4, 1937. Courtesy of the Petrich Families Collection

John Steinbeck's expedition aboard the *Western Flyer* was the basis for his non-fiction novel, 'The Log From the Sea of Cortez.' Photo by Daniel Berman.

"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 this 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."

—John Steinbeck,

The Log From the Sea of Cortez

It is well after dark by the time I make it to Port Townsend. The clock on the dash of my car glows 8:03. Pulling up to the city's south-side boatyard, no gate or guard station bars my entry into the maze of gleaming sailboats and rugged tugs, all dry-docked, dark, and quiet. I navigate among their hulls toward the back of the lot, looking for a boat I know but have never seen. Then, around the corner of an imposing warehouse, bathed in the artificial glow of industrial lights, sits the boat they call the *Western Flyer*, held up on all sides by stout steel supports and looking as if it had just washed ashore after a natural disaster. It looks like a boat that has been through hell and back twice, ready for the junkyard. Unless there were a reason and a person to save it.

If I were approaching the *Western Flyer* 75 years ago, the boat would have been bobbing leisurely in the Sea of Cortez. Instead of pulling up in a station wagon, I would have been gliding across the water in a dinghy driven by Ed Ricketts and his good friend, John Steinbeck.

In 1940, amid the chaos of fame that followed the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*, the celebrated author needed a break. Luckily, his best friend Ricketts needed one too, embroiled in his own relationship difficulties and, reportedly, a bout with depression. They decided to take a voyage—to rent a boat with crew and travel, starting in Monterey, Calif., down around the Baja peninsula. The official reason for their trip was to collect marine specimens for Ricketts, a biologist who operated a lab in Monterey that sold the specimens to various educational institutions. But the spirit of the journey was one of adventure and escape. Along with them was a small crew—a captain, an engineer, and a couple of deck hands, plus Steinbeck's wife at the time, Carol. For six weeks they sweltered in the Mexican heat, spending endless days upturning rocks, searching for all manner of marine life, and visiting with locals in tiny beach towns and fishing villages. Each night, they would return to their boat, the *Western Flyer*.

Eleven years after their trip, *The Log From the Sea of Cortez* was published, chronicling their journey. It remains today a cult classic among marine biologists and those who find value in the romantic idea of a boat trip to a distant land.

After Steinbeck's voyage, the *Western Flyer* went back to work as a fishing vessel, experiencing the rise and fall of Pacific fisheries as it was passed from owner to owner, up and down the West Coast. The boat's decades of history are chronicled in the book, *The Western Flyer: Steinbeck's Boat, the Sea of Cortez, and the Saga of Pacific Fisheries*, to be released March 23, by Seattle author and former NOAA scientist Kevin Bailey. According to Bailey's book, the boat was present for, and contributed to, the overfishing of the Monterey sardine industry before moving north to do its part in the boom and bust of Alaska's crab fisheries and Puget Sound's salmon fishing.

During that time, the *Western Flyer* went about its work anonymously. If new owners knew of the boat's past, they didn't care much, or at least didn't broadcast it. In many ways, the *Western Flyer* disappeared until the mid-'80s, when family members of the original crew that had worked with Steinbeck tracked it down.

For Steinbeck fans, the boat was a romantic symbol of a beloved story, and many wanted to see it returned to Monterey now that its useful fishing life was coming to a close. But the associated costs proved a daunting obstacle. Over the past 30 years, the saga of restoring the *Western Flyer* has been dramatic and sometimes tragic. Neglected and often considered a hopeless pipe dream, the boat's destiny was nearly sealed in destruction when an unlikely hero arrived to purchase it, adopt all its problems, and return the boat to its former glory. It is this man, geologist John Gregg, whom I am here to meet.

Gregg was 10 when he first read *The Log From the Sea of Cortez*. His father's government job moved the family around a lot, so Gregg was used to small doses of travel and exciting new places, but he had never read anything like this. "I fell in love with the adventure of it all," he'll tell me. "Sailing down to

Mexico with your best friend. I was hooked.” Gregg gobbled up other works by Steinbeck and became a lifelong fan.

Gregg had eyed the boat for a while, earnestly looking to buy it for about 10 years before he got his first real chance. When a man named Gerry Kehoe bought it in 2010 and announced his plans to essentially disassemble it, Gregg started making calls.

“Once a month, I would call and just say ‘Hey, how about this boat?’, and I just kept getting denials. I couldn’t even get past his business partner. But then I started mentioning numbers. He’s a business dude, so I knew I was going to get the wrong end of the deal. Once I accepted that, I just decided to pay him too much and be done with it, which I knew was going to happen.”

Reports since the sale, which closed in mid-February, reveal that the final price was a cool \$1 million—not a bad profit for Kehoe, considering he’d bought the boat for the price of a decked-out Camaro.

Now Gregg has the chance to give something back to his childhood heroes: to restore the vessel that took Steinbeck and Ricketts on their infamous voyage.

I park my car in the shadow of the *Western Flyer* and get out. Gregg and I exchange brief introductions over handshakes and stand for a moment in silence. Our breath puffs away like little smokestacks as we gaze up at all 93 tons of hulking, rotting beast. Gregg turns to me and asks, “You want to get up there?”

“Absolutely.”

He climbs into a forklift and uses it to position the stairs. Then we climb up to the messy deck of the *Western Flyer*.

<image002.jpg> *Tony Berry, Frank Berry, and Martin Petrich. Courtesy of the Petrich Families Collection*

Though most closely identified with Monterey, *The Western Flyer* is actually a product of the Northwest. It was built in Tacoma in 1937 by a Dalmation Slav immigrant named Martin Petrich in his shipyard, the Western Boat Building Company. At the time, Puget Sound was one of the biggest centers of wooden-boat building in the country, if not the world, and the Western Boat Building Company was among the top in the industry. Designed to be a purse seiner—casting wide nets and dragging them through the water to catch schools of fish—the *Flyer* immediately struck out for the sardine-rich waters of Monterey, captained by a man named Tony Berry, whose father had helped Petrich build the boat.

Among the crew that helped Steinbeck and Ricketts along their journey were Captain Berry and Horace “Sparky” Enea. Years afterward, Sparky would write a book of his own, revealing behind-the-scenes details of the cruise. At the time, Steinbeck and his wife Carol were not doing well—not sharing

a room, in fact, during the entire voyage. At port towns, they would go their separate ways; on board, Carol was frequently seen giggling and chatting with crew members.

Bob Enea, the nephew of both Sparky and Tony Berry, who were connected by marriage, remembers the tease of Sparky's stories as a child. "I come from a Sicilian family, and we had spaghetti and meatballs every Sunday with all the uncles and aunts and cousins. After the table was cleared and coffee was served, someone would always say to my uncles, 'Tell us a story about the *Western Flyer*'. And that's when my mother would make all us kids go outside," recalls Enea with a chuckle. Years later, when Enea was in his 40s, he asked his uncle Tony where the boat ended up. All Tony recalled was that he had sold it to someone in the Northwest. So Enea started looking.

It took a fair bit of sleuthing to track down the boat—then called the *Gemini*—but he found it in 1986 in Anacortes, owned by a salmon fisherman named Ole Knudson. Enea had one idea: to buy the boat, restore it, and sail it back into Monterey with his Uncle Tony at the helm. Knudson was willing to sell, but Enea didn't have the money.

<image003.jpg>*The Western Flyer on one of its earliest outings. Courtesy of the Petrich Families Collection*

A few years later, a likely financial source surfaced. A new Steinbeck Center was being built in Monterey, with a budget large enough to include restoration of the *Western Flyer*. Enea, a board member, made sure the project was included. But when construction of the Center ran over budget in 1998, the *Western Flyer* lost its funding. Enea went back to the drawing board. For the next decade he kept track of the boat, which remained floating and running in Anacortes. In fact, according to Kevin Bailey's research, Knudson began to considering restoring it himself, not for love of Steinbeck but for love of the boat. It wasn't until 2010 that Enea made another big effort, hosting a fundraising dinner that raised \$10,000—about a quarter of what it might cost to buy the *Western Flyer*, and not nearly enough to fully restore it. But Enea also raised something else that evening, attention.

In an article in a local Monterey paper shortly after the fundraiser, the case for the restoration of the *Western Flyer* was made public. But when local businessman Gerry Kehoe read the story, he had his own idea.

Not long after the fundraiser, Kehoe bought the boat from Knudson. At the time, Enea and his partners at the nonprofit he had started, The Western Flyer Project, simply didn't have the resources. And yet they felt slighted, as though the boat had been bought out from under them. When they found out what Kehoe wanted to do with the boat, their misgivings morphed into hatred.

Kehoe's plans were varied and tragic. He wanted to turn the *Western Flyer* into a restaurant attraction, floating in an indoor moat or chopped up and used as a bar in Salinas. His ideas brought public outcry and misgivings from historical societies and Steinbeck's own family. Enea recalls hearing the plans. "We were just devastated and then we learned what his plan was. It was absolutely ridiculous."

Meanwhile, the boat was dying. Clinging to life under a patchwork of blue tarps, the *Western Flyer* sat in Anacortes, neglected.

In September 2012 it sank—not due to some adventurous grounding or rough-and-tumble storm, but from basic, destructive neglect. One plank simply broke, and the boat eased into the matte-grey waters of Anacortes' Twin Bridges marina without dignity or even a hint of drama. What little fuel and oil remained on board seeped into the water, and armies of federal and environmental agencies swarmed the *Flyer* as Kehoe paid an estimated \$100,000 to have it brought back to the surface and mended. But the fix wouldn't last long. Four months later, it sank again in the same spot. Only this time it stayed down, bathing in the waters outside of Anacortes for a solid six months. Finally Kehoe paid to have it brought up again, and onlookers came to watch the ocean pour out of its hull.

The second sinking did far more damage than the first. Railings fell off, wood was rotted out, and marine life did its best to make a long-term meal out of every imaginable piece. To Kehoe's credit, he then towed the boat to Port Townsend and had it dry-docked, with continued plans to eventually have it restored. But those plans remained just plans. And then Gregg came calling.

<image004.jpg>Photo by Daniel Berman

Not a square inch of the *Western Flyer* looks normal. To wander around inside is to enter a sort of mind game. It feels as if you are underwater, exploring the wreckage of a long-abandoned ship.

At the back of the pilothouse, the floor is covered in scraped-off barnacles that give one the sensation of walking on a bed of Frosted Flakes. Through the small rear door is the *Western Flyer's* galley.

Under a blanket of dried sea sludge, it's still possible to make out the important features: a small stove, a sink, a table. Through the room's portholes, the orange glow of outside lights gives the illusion of a dawn sunlight, barely illuminating the room.

Gregg points out the captain's quarters, where Steinbeck's wife Carol slept; the original folding map table and small desk are still intact. The Honduran mahogany interior was once a rich shade of light brown that would have glowed in the sunlight. Now those surfaces are a dismal grey. The brass fixtures and handles of drawers and cabinets, once smooth and bright, are now corroded to a pale turquoise and rough to the touch. To simply say that the boat is covered in barnacles and mud does not do the degradation justice; instead, imagine that a boat originally built of barnacles and mud now has a minor infestation of wood and metal. Yet the cupboards still swing on their hinges, the floor feels solid, and tiny details still hold strong. A small latch on the door leaving the wheelhouse still delicately catches its corresponding hole, sliding into place with a smart click.

In the belly of the ship sit two massive diesel engines, predictably covered in dehydrated marine creatures and appearing as some kind of industrial fossils. Toward the back is the boat's fish hold, where Ricketts and Steinbeck kept the specimens they collected and where countless fishermen after that stored their own catch. Even after all these years, you can still smell the lingering aroma of fish, engine oil, and grease.

Gregg admits that this purchase was not meant as an investment. Rather, it's a personal endeavor—a project that a person would have to be inspired take on beyond the promise of monetary gain. It's one reason he believes the boat wasn't easy to resurrect. "I was surprised by a lot of people in Monterey who got so emotional about the boat but weren't willing to sign a check to fix the problem," says Gregg. "But it was clearly a bad deal. I thought it was just a vanity project that only I would care about at first, and then I saw the outpouring of support people had for me. It's been nice." He estimates that it will take \$2 million to fix the boat, though he says with a chuckle, "I just kind of made that number up. I actually think it'll take about a million, but that's the thing with boats—they always cost more than you think." He should know. As the owner of an expansive drilling and excavating business with operations up and down the West Coast, Gregg is no stranger to big vessels. In fact, he owns a boatyard where industrial craft used for offshore drilling operations are maintained and serviced. Despite this, he's a self-proclaimed "dumb guy" when it comes to working with wooden boats.

Luckily, plenty of helpers are ready and willing. For research and restoration planning, he'll have Allen Petrich, whose bloodline runs straight to the heart of the *Western Flyer's* hull. It was, of course, Petrich's grandfather Martin who built it in 1937. Born the year that Steinbeck and Ricketts set sail, the younger Petrich had plenty of stories to hear. "As a kid, you grow up and hear stories of your uncle so-and-so, or your grandpa that did this or that, and you appreciate it, but we grew up around a lot of stories," Petrich says. "The *Western Flyer* was just one of the stories we heard about as kids. ... At the time, we just wanted to play, go to the movies, go to dances, and party."

Try as he might to forge his own path independent of the family business, Petrich could not distance himself from his heritage. Nearly 75 years old and retired, he has been working for a decade on an ever-growing, all-encompassing history of West Coast boat-building. Part of that research led him to Gregg and back to the old boat his grandfather built.

"Allen probably knows more about this boat than anyone," says Gregg. When the two met, Petrich regaled Gregg for hours about intricate details of the boat's construction—including little secrets, like the common practice of placing a St. Christopher medal underneath the mast. Those memories, along with the old documents and photographs in Petrich's possession and his extensive knowledge of wooden-boat building, will help ensure Gregg can bring the boat back to its original self, or as close as possible.

Gregg also plans to utilize the skills of Port Townsend's wooden-boat builders. Drawing on their decades of experience and local institutions like the Northwest School for Wooden Boat Building, Gregg can think of no better or more poetic place to restore the *Western Flyer*. After all, it was born in Washington. It makes sense that it should rise from the grave in the same place.

Bob Enea will be helping out as well. While his own dreams of restoring the boat never came true, he is working with Gregg to return it to Monterey after it is restored. And Gregg is on board.

What the old boat's new owner doesn't want is for the *Flyer* to fade into history as a simple decoration. "My fear is that some of these boats end up doing sunset cruises and whale-watches, and haulin' dead people's ashes around. I don't want to whore it out like that. I want kids to pull plankton nets, and there'll be a lab in the hold and microscopes over there," he says from within the hull of his project. "If you put a hundred kids on this boat, two of them will get into marine science by the time they're in college. That's the hope."