

Port Fairy historian MARTEN SYME takes a look at the return of the Tacoma to Port Fairy after almost 60 years.

Sixty years later

THE 84 foot motor fishing vessel, Tacoma, is expected to arrive at Port Fairy on Friday or Saturday, February 18/19.

This will be the first visit to the port by the vessel since it was launched in the Moyne on November, 5, 1951.

The Tacoma will be en route to its home port, Port Lincoln, after taking part in the Australian Wooden Boat Festival in Hobart last week. The vessel has been carefully maintained, with few changes to its form when it was built in 1951, despite its conversion from a tuna fisher to a prawner.

In the last year, members of the Tacoma Preservation Society and volunteers have made sundry alterations to align with the appearance when originally launched, such as the reconstruction of the masthead "crow's nest" for spotting the running tuna. It will be open for inspection over the weekend for a gold coin donation.

The Tacoma is a big vessel, measuring 84 feet (25.6 metres) in length and 21 feet 6 inches (6.6 metres wide) and it was built by the three Haldane brothers, Bill, Allan and Hugh, on land just north of the Angling Clubrooms in Gipps Street, and launched by the brothers digging a slipway into the river. Their father, Hugh (senior) had come to Port Fairy as the Lighthouse Keeper and Harbour Master in 1929 and the boys were good fishermen and also built two earlier



fishing boats on Griffith Island between 1934 and 1940.

The Haldane family had no doubts about their capacity to build this very large fishing craft, even during World War 2. The plans for Tacoma were obtained by mail from the Western Boat building Co. of Tacoma, USA, and they got Eric Haylock to bring five blue gum logs from the Otway forest, weighing 25 tons and the largest 70' long, in September 1944.

With no crane, the brothers used their ingenuity to build the vessel and install the 19 ton engine on the Moyne riverbank. There were a few locals who opined "you'll never get it finished".

That was almost the case, as, after building the hull from their own financial resources, the banks, State and Commonwealth governments would not advance any funds to allow the fit-out.

The South Australian government, however, advanced a loan, conditional upon the vessel moving to a South Australian port and developing their

fishing industry. The brothers completed the vessel, and to launch it, they spent two months digging a trench and laying ways to get the huge boat into the river, which finally occurred at 3.38am on November 5, 1951. The hull displaces 161 tons, far bigger than anything in the river.

After trials, the families filled the vessel with their furniture and sailed for Port Lincoln on January 6, 1952. A veteran crewman was Jack Bellamy, who joined the Haldanes in Port Lincoln and will be with Tacoma on the visit.

Jack's brother, Keith, was sadly lost overboard while tuna fishing on Tacoma in 1959, and Ray ("Slim") lives in the town.

Ross Haldane, skipper and chair of the Tacoma Preservation Trust, has managed the re-furbishment of the "old girl", and assembled a crew to take the boat to Hobart for the Australian Wooden Boat Festival last week — her first public outing since retirement several years ago. He was accompanied by cousin Robin, who has been a regular visitor to Port Fairy to voyage in the lifeboat and whaleboat in the last decade. Tacoma called at Portland for fuel on the way to Hobart, and her distinctive profile stirred a few old fishermen on the jetty who could remember her. It will be her first return berthing at Port Fairy, 60 years since she was launched.