

ships—force him to plan projects well in advance, which he said may actually be a good thing. Also, a new strategy has volunteers and staff joining forces to make progress on a targeted priority for a particular ship when needed.

Some ships will survive, and some will not. Anyone who takes on the task will face such triage decisions. One question might be, why? Why save any of them, with their ongoing problems? Some would say old ships have outlived their day, they produce nothing, gain nothing, at great cost. By that definition, music is the most worthless thing we have. But, like the impulse to foresee the future and save and understand the past, music is one of the things that most makes us human.

*Tom Jackson is WoodenBoat's senior editor.*

## Tuesday "Boat Night" at the Dolphin Club

by Tom Jackson

The Dolphin Club in San Francisco (WB No. 155) has a fleet of Whitehall-style rowing craft, many of them pushing a century of age. The boats all appear to be in excellent condition, and one of the main reasons is that every Tuesday evening is "Boat Night" at the club. Members volunteer their time to maintain and repair boats under the supervision of boatbuilder Jon Bielinski, and later they sit down together to eat a meal cooked by Jan Adkins, an artist whose work shows up in these pages from time to time.

Curious about Boat Night, I called

ahead to Jon and asked if I could come over on the last night of a 2010 San Francisco visit that included the San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park (see above) and the Spaulding Wooden Boat Center in Sausalito (see page 40). We arranged to meet at the club, and when I arrived, Jon right away asked if I'd like to go for a row. It doesn't take much to get me to set aside the tape recorder and office paraphernalia in favor of a tool or an oar, so I readily accepted. Donning a borrowed windbreaker, I was surprised and delighted when Jon picked for our excursion the flagship of the fleet: JOHN WIELAND, a 40', coxed, six-oared, sliding-seat rowing machine built in 1887 and restored by Jon and his helpers for a post-centennial relaunching in 1997.

Setting out in this boat for a sprint along the San Francisco waterfront is no light undertaking. There is an almost military precision in its handling even before it hits the water. Rolling the boat out on its purpose-made dolly to a specific point on the pier, swinging wide to make a turn, the crew then lifts her carefully while others roll the dolly away. They work together in a unison that tells of long practice, the consensus of necessity, and care for the boat. The power ramp lowered, the boat got afloat, the crew followed Jon's clear instructions—which for the new guy meant a reminder of where not to step.

The rowing was a delight. On a bright afternoon with the wind whipping up a chop as it will do on the Bay, she responded to the oars with a lively pleasure. We worked in close to a marina, practicing tight maneuvers despite the wind and current—this for my benefit, so Jon could point out

a fleet of distinctive and well-kept Monterey fishing boats moored there. After our last leg, we dodged swimmers in the inner harbor near Hyde Street, then executed a perfectly orchestrated landfall using the wind to advantage to turn the boat athwartships to the ramp to prepare for haulout.

Back in the boat shed, on cue to prove that it's not all play and no work, boat towels instantly appeared, having been laundered and readied by a volunteer. The whole crew went to work to wipe down the hull inside and out. One friendly fellow

(whose name I have forgotten, my notebook having been set aside, my duties ignored) explained that water droplets form lenses that concentrate sunlight in ways that damage varnish—something I've not heard before but that makes sense to me. Only when the boat was properly put to bed did we move over to the workshop. Here, one man was already at work repairing sliding-seat tracks; there another was getting out a new stern knee for a boat undergoing restoration; here another was refinishing a seat back with the name GOOD LUCK neatly carved into it; there others were scraping and sanding, scraping and sanding. On the wall is a varnish record for 20 boats, each marked with the month the work was completed. The record showed that work had been done every month of the calendar but one.

To prove that it is not all work and no play, Adkins emerged from the galley to tell everyone what would be for dinner. Jon walked through the workshop answering questions, then took me through the boat hall to point out one boat or another. Best described as a museum of small craft, this collection stands apart by being no static exhibit: these artifacts are put to use routinely, and have been year upon year, decade upon decade.

There is a genuine camaraderie at these Boat Nights at the Dolphin Club. Spirits are high. This is a friendly and welcoming place. A community of distinct personalities has united around wooden boats that themselves have names and personalities. It's work, to be sure, but many hands and the right attitude make it light. The work gets done. Those who join in not only learn what it takes to keep boats in prime condition but also will pass along their skills and the boats themselves, which no doubt will become the focus of other joint efforts and the source of other friendships a hundred years hence.

*Tom Jackson is WoodenBoat's senior editor.*

## The Northern Michigan Class

by Matthew P. Murphy

The Northern Michigan One-Design (NM) Class is a fleet of lucky boats. These 32' sloops have sailed from Little Traverse Bay, Michigan, since 1934, when the Russell J. Pouliot Boat Works completed the design (after a concept



TOM JACKSON

"Boat Night" on Tuesday evenings at the Dolphin Club in San Francisco brings stalwart volunteers together to maintain boats that have been in active use for decades, some of them for more than a century.