

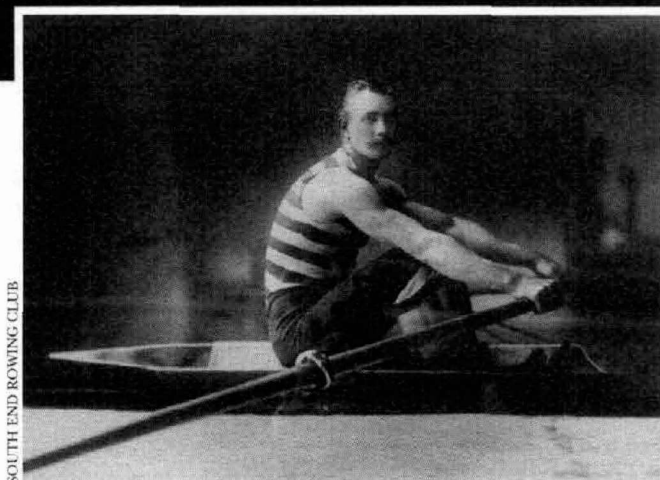
THE LIVING LEGACY OF SAN

The South End Rowing Club and the Dolphin Swimming and Boating Club—located adjacent to each other on the San Francisco waterfront—maintain a long heritage of competitive rowing on San Francisco Bay. At each club, a core of traditions has been preserved through the generations.

At the South End, the strongest traditions are reflected in the jumble of racing shells and barges stored in the rafters of the club building, silently bearing witness to past triumphs. A four-oared shell from Sims and Sons, of Putney, England, built for the glory days of the 1920s, sits astride two columns. A shell by Towne of Sydney, Australia, lurks in the back boathouse. A strange hybrid craft has as its stern section a portion of a four-oared shell from the 1880s. A cup inscribed "Victory" commemorates the South End's defeat of their arch-rival, the Ariel Club, in three of five annual races in the late 1880s.

The Dolphin Club started as a swimming club, but like the South End its heritage is reflected in its collection of boats, which are used not only for recreational rowing but as pilot boats for swimmers venturing into the Bay. Each of the clubs has its beautiful and utilitarian Whitehall pulling boats, some built as early as the 1920s. Each club has its flagship: the JOHN WIELAND of the Dolphin Club and its counterpart SOUTH END. The WIELAND was built in 1887 as a memorial to one of the club's founding members, and SOUTH END, a slightly heavier craft than the WIELAND, was built in 1915 to celebrate the Panama-Pacific International Exposition.

Two boatbuilders, Jon Bielinski and Jeremy Fisher-Smith, enable the clubs to maintain their connection with the rowing traditions of the past. Bielinski led the painstaking reconstruction of the WIELAND (see companion article, page 37) for the Dolphin Club, built two new Whitehalls, and reconstructed several of the club's lapstrake doubles. Fisher-Smith restored a fine Whitehall single for the Dolphin Club and rebuilt the double-sculled craft VIKING, which is akin to an outrigger gig. For the South End club, Fisher-Smith constructed three Viking-class boats. His crowning achievement so far,



SOUTH END ROWING CLUB

During the 19th century, San Francisco's best oarsman was Henry Peterson, posing here in 1888. The son of a German Whitehaller, Peterson was a member of the Ariel Boat Club, and had an international reputation as a top-rate oarsman. His rowing shell survives at the Police Athletic Club in San Francisco's Hunter's Point.

worthy of the innovation of the boatbuilders of old, is a remarkably well balanced and extremely fast Viking-class single named THOR. At perhaps 50 lbs lighter than a comparable Whitehall, THOR can be handled even by those who are not big male brutes: the women and older men who reflect the club's changed demographics.

Bielinski is the boatbuilder for the Dolphin Club, yet much of his responsibility involves maintaining the fleet. The South End club has hired Fisher-Smith to

build boats, but has not hired him to provide regular professional maintenance. Their fleet is showing the absence of that level of commitment—its dedication to proper boat maintenance has been spotty in recent years.

The original South End club was founded in 1873 by "several muscular residents of the southern portion of this city," as a contemporary newspaper reported. Rowing's popularity exploded nationwide after the Civil War, especially among the working class. In San Francisco, seven rowing clubs were established between 1870 and 1874. All of these were in the densely populated working-class neighborhoods of the south end, where the waters of the Bay were protected from high winds off the Pacific.

Contrary to popular belief, occupation seemed more important than ethnicity in determining club membership. The South End Rowing Club, originally called the South End Boat Club, contained quite a few Whitehall boatmen, men like Peter McAvoy, Thomas McNamara, and Charles West. McAvoy and Richard Landers migrated to California from Maine, Landers bringing a rowing shell built by Stephen Roberts of New York. They were soon joined by a Whitehall boatman and fellow Maine native who rowed under the name Charles Brown while in San Francisco. After a reasonably successful season in 1874, Brown left San Francisco under a cloud after his last race to compete as a professional in the more populous East, which offered far more opportunities. Rowing under his real name of Fred Plaisted, he had a very long career and left an impression still remembered in Philadelphia today.

In addition to its predominantly

BY BILL PICKELHAUPT
PHOTOGRAPHS BY BENJAMIN MENDLOWITZ

FRANCISCO'S ROWING CLUBS

TRADITIONS PRESERVED, TRADITIONS UPDATED

working-class identity, each club had a saloon-keeper as a member, ready to slake the thirst of "the boys" after a good row. Each club also needed the skills of an expert boatbuilder to build and repair boats. Not only was the boatbuilder paid, but if his design was stroked to victory by his club's crew, his reputation could be enormously boosted. The tradition of having a boatbuilder associated with a specific boat club, nourished by competition, was a strong one.

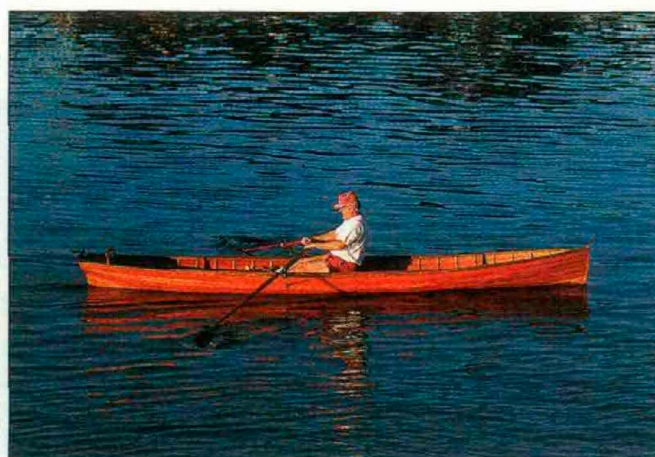
The South End, which was reorganized in 1881, had primarily an Irish-German membership, with several from Canada. John Twigg was its boatbuilder. He had emigrated from Ireland and worked in New York before moving to San Francisco, setting up shop at the foot of Third Street in a block occupied by several small-boat builders. Although Twigg's greatest fame as a boatbuilder came from his construction of gasoline



Above—VALHALLA (22' x 42' , 250 lbs) was the first of three boats Jeremy Fisher-Smith built for the South End Rowing Club along the lines of the original VIKING. A new wave of highly competitive South Enders commissioned her in 1978 for match racing with their Dolphin rivals.

Below left—THOR (18' x 36", 175 lbs) shows her fine entry. Note the steam-bent inwales blind-mortised over the frameheads, a common 19th century construction detail.

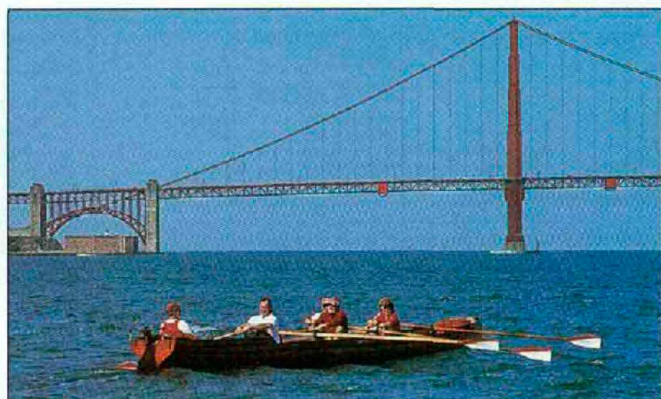
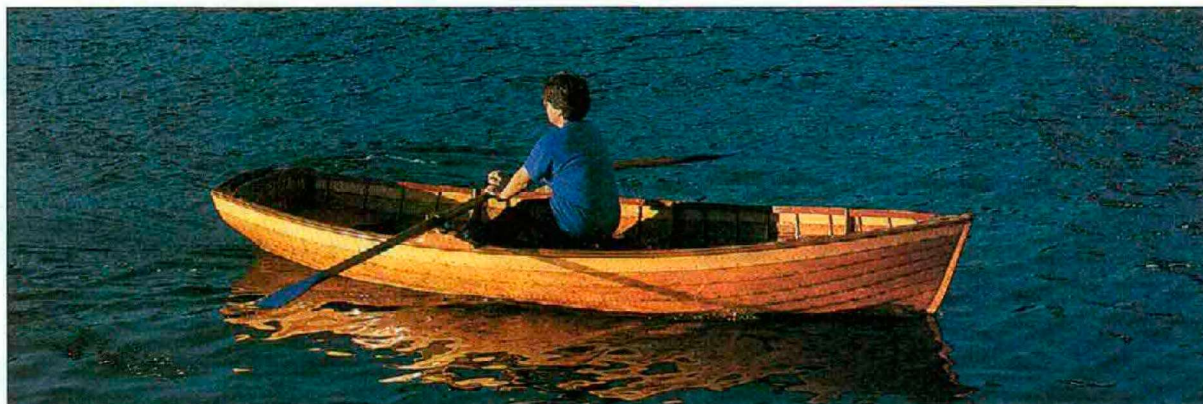
Below right—THOR's profile shows her to be a small single-sculd progeny of the Viking class.



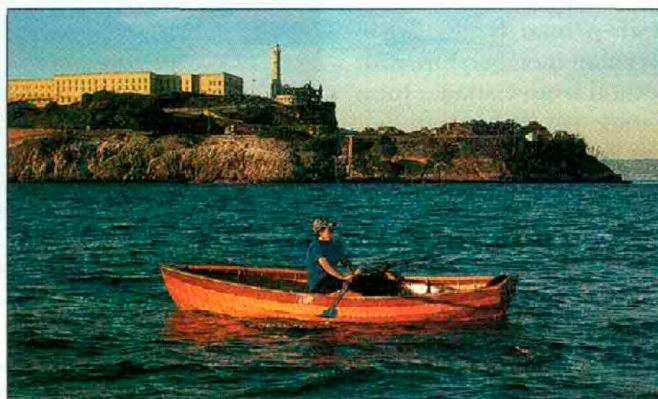


Left—Launching day, 1915, for SOUTH END, flagship of the South End Rowing Club.

Below—The DON BAGGIANI was built at the Dolphin Club in 1948 by retired ship's carpenter Bill Richards. She is light and seakindly, with tremendous reserve buoyancy, and has sliding seats.



Above left—The 40' six-oared barge SOUTH END has the scantlings of some gigs half her size. Still largely original, she was built by Al Rogers 28 years after he built the JOHN WIELAND (see page 37).



Above right—Jon Bielinski built the JOE BRUNO and her sister single CECCO in 1988 in the same boatshop where Bill Richards worked in 1948, following the design and construction details of the BAGGIANI, which have stood the test of time.

Below—The Viking-class gig VALKYRIE is planked in Port Orford cedar. The old club builders seemed to prefer soft pine planking, but today, Port Orford cedar is the standard, although Spanish cedar, white oak, Honduras mahogany, and spruce are also commonly employed.





The DINO LANDUCCI's spoon oars, absence of outriggers, and full sections are typical of most Dolphin boats. If need be, a oarsman can haul a faltering swimmer into the sternsheets and then row to safety with all the speed that the boat's sliding seat enables.

Brewery and held a controlling interest through a rapid expansion—and by the late 1800s, the brewery he led had become the West Coast's largest. A charter member of the Dolphin Club, Wieland died in a fire in 1887.

Through the 1890s, competitive rowing in San Francisco was limited to the

launches in 1897 for Tom Crowley, Sr.'s tug and launch company, his shop was only a few paces from the South End Boat Club, which he helped to revitalize.

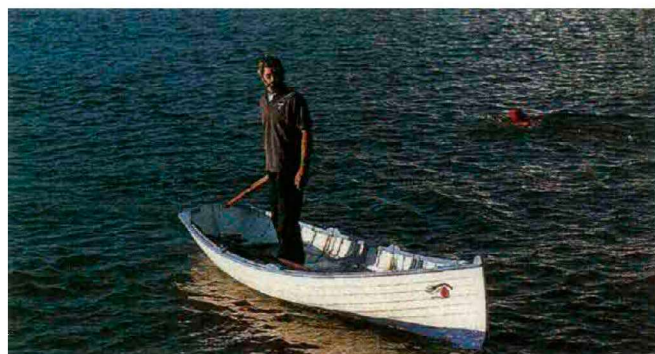
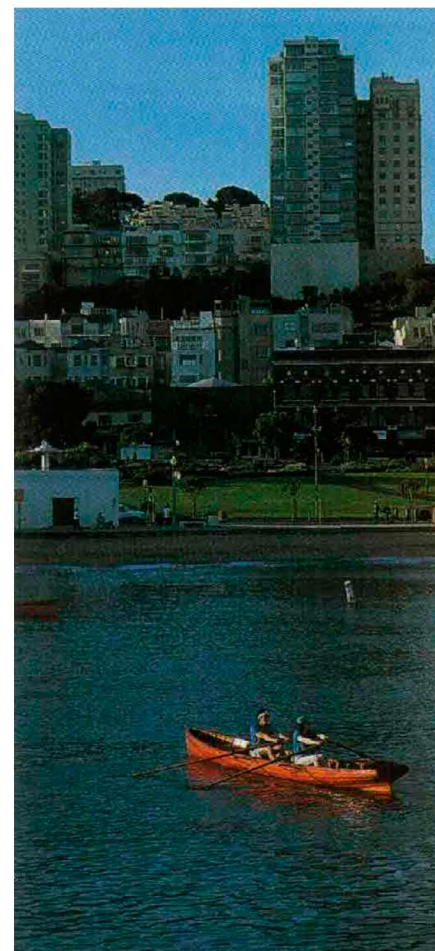
Railroad expansion forced the South End club to a new location farther south in 1903, and a port expansion forced another move in 1908, when the club's fancy boathouse was barged five miles around to the city's north end, just west of the Dolphin Club boathouse.

The Dolphin Club was started in 1877 at the north end primarily by men of German heritage whose first interest was swimming. Because the area is exposed to winds that whip through the Golden Gate, it is less agreeable for shell rowing than the south end. The club, however, needed boats to assist its swimming program. It even had a boatbuilder, Thomas R. Keenan, who built recreational Whitehalls and repaired the flagship, the JOHN WIELAND.

Long swims and polar-bear events in the winter are still part of the Dolphin Club's activities, as they are for the South End. The club maintains a fleet of more than a dozen Whitehalls to provide a measure of safety for out-of-cove swims, and its rules require one boat, kayak, or surfboard per three swimmers. The oldest of the Whitehall fleet dates back to 1917 but has been rebuilt since its original launching. The club's flagship, like many of its boats, was named as a memorial to a member: John Wieland had come to California in the Gold Rush days and later turned to business. He bought a share of the Philadelphia

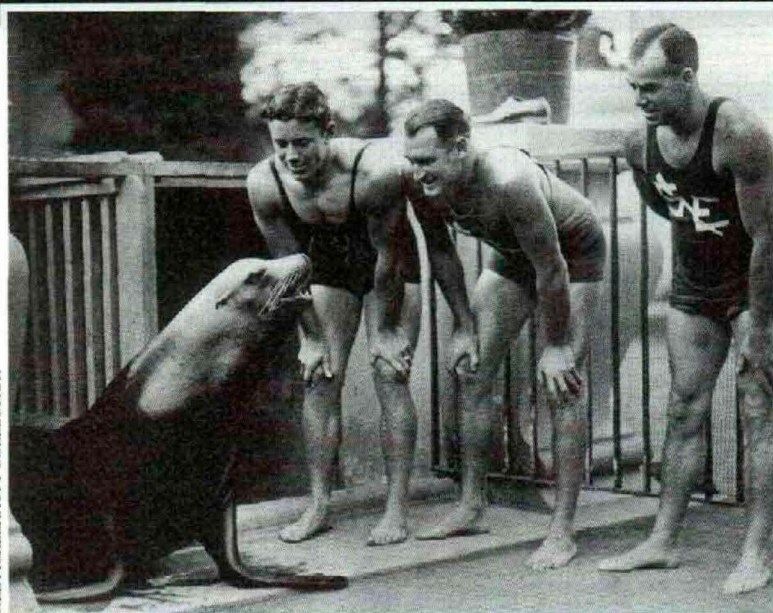
clubs. After World War II, collegiate rowing expanded with athletes attending universities on the G.I. Bill and quickly outstripped the city's old clubs. At the South End, handball came to the fore after rowing declined, helping to keep the club vibrant through the 1950s and '60s.

In the 1970s, big changes took place, including the acceptance of women as members. Recognizing the unique fusion of old and new that the two clubs exemplified, the city government proclaimed the clubs "living historical cultural assets." Swimming dominated the sports scene for a time, but oarsmanship slowly made a comeback, with members like Jim Flack and Scott Ellsworth leading the renaissance. As always, each club today has its own identity: the Dolphins are considered more intellectual and white-collar, while handball players help the South End retain a dose of its old working-class flavor. The South also offers



Left—Jon Bielinski paces a swimmer by sculling SPECTRE, a 13' fixed-seat Whitehall built in 1974 by Ray Speck.

Right—VIKING, built in 1915 by craftsmen whose day job was building cable cars. Jeremy Fisher-Smith rebuilt her in the 1980s, then built the South End's VALKYRIE and VALHALLA to her lines.

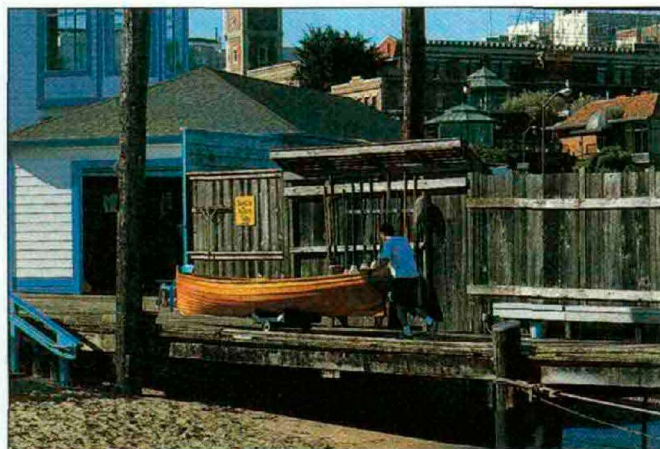
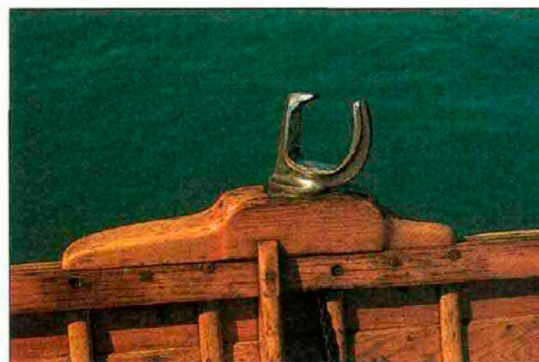


Above—Swimming has long been a club focus. Here, South End members ham it up for a 1930 publicity photo.

Right—In 1938, Dolphin president Lawton C. Hughes designed the 18' double that now carries his name, giving her ample beam, high freeboard, a full run, and gunwale-mounted oarlocks. He later added sliding seats. In the late 1970s, Dolphin President Gordon Cook commissioned a fixed-thwart double from D.E. Haynes in Stillwater, Minnesota, shipped her to San Francisco, and converted her to the sliding-seat single GOOD LUCK.

recreational rowing and keeps its competitive rowing tradition alive with an annual regatta, including a 10-mile row to the Golden Gate Bridge and back. In the 1990s, the Dolphin Club rediscovered the club tradition of long-distance rowing and nearly every year for the past decade has rowed at least one boat, and sometimes as many as four, the 90 miles upriver to Sacramento.

As in earlier times, San Francisco's changing ethnic makeup and demographics are reflected in the membership. Newcomers are from Ukraine, Belorussia, Iran, Syria, France, Italy, England, Germany, Mexico, Croatia—the list goes on and on. A remarkable number of the members are septuagenarians and octogenarians. Oarsmen from the 1930s still belong. Phil Hunter of the South End, a singles champion, is a member, though no longer active. Andy Camous, part of the Dolphin Club's senior crew of 1935, still takes a Whitehall out on the Bay



Upper left—The South End club recently began a volunteer "boat night" to rebuild PENAAT, one of its four out-of-commission wooden boats. Dolphin work parties of the past 16 years have kept that club's 17 wooden boats in use.

Left—A new member rolls one of the Dolphin Club's three wooden trainer boats back to the boathouse. These heavy singles take the hits until rowers graduate to finer craft.

Above—Custom machined, these bronze oarlocks pivot on a 3/4"-diameter shaft to stand up to sliding-seat rowing stresses.

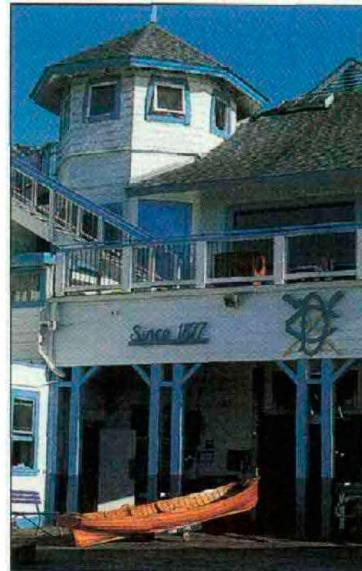
from time to time. One of the South End club's members, Charles Dullea—who was born in 1915, the same year the club's flagship was built—still swims in San Francisco Bay three times a week.

At the clubs, men and women ranging in age from their 20s to their 90s share camaraderie and a love of exercise. As the members enjoy their respite from life in a fast-changing city, part of San Francisco's heritage—and its tradition of wooden rowing craft—is passed by a direct link from generation to generation.



Bill Pickelhaupt is the author of Club Rowing on San Francisco Bay and Shanghaied in San Francisco. When not rowing a Whitehall boat on the Bay, he toils as a financial analyst for a Bay Area company

Captions by Jon Bielinski and Jeremy Fisher-Smith.



Left—Dolphin Club boats are logged in to the boathouse after use, and their condition noted.

Above—The South End logo, which decorated a building that was moved to its current site in 1908.

A Flagship Relunched: The JOHN WIELAND rows again

On July 27, 1997 a sleek, six-oared rowing boat slid into San Francisco Bay and into its second century. Completely rebuilt after 110 years of use, the JOHN WIELAND proved herself as elegant and fleet as she had been at the beginning of her first century.

She was powered by a crew of "old-timers" in their 60s, 70s, and 80s, among them Andy Camous, who built spruce airplanes for Lockheed in the '30s, and Joe Bruno, who swam the Golden Gate every year for 60 years. They brought the WIELAND to her cruising speed of six knots or so, lapped the Aquatic Park Cove, then headed out toward the island of Alcatraz. The oars could not be wrested from the old-timers. They were simply having too good a time.

Six years of painstaking and patient craftsmanship had paid off, and the flagship of San Francisco's Dolphin Swimming and Boating Club had again taken command of open-water rowing on the Bay. At 40' between

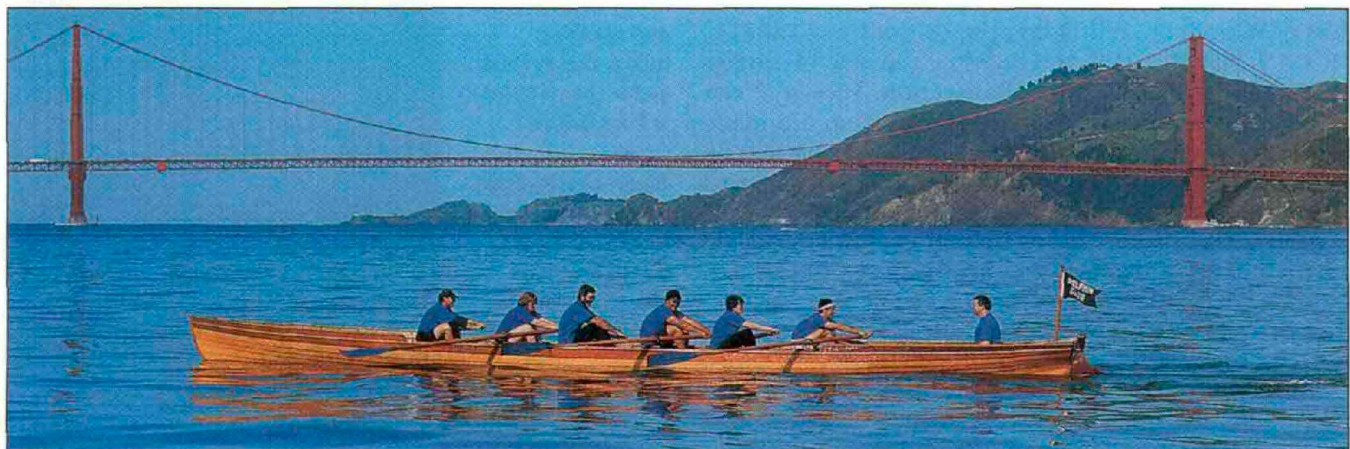
BY JOHN KORTUM
PHOTOGRAPHS BY BENJAMIN MENDLOWITZ

perpendiculars but with a beam of no more than 4'10", the WIELAND is one of a kind. "This is a rare boat," said Jon Bielinski, the club's boatbuilder, who led the reconstruction. "It's something of a pinnacle of development, a majestic evolution of a boat."

Commissioned as a tribute by the family of a founding member of the Dolphin Club who had died tragically in a fire, the WIELAND was originally built with no expense spared. The Wieland family gave the builder carte blanche, Bielinski said, "and this craft is what the boatbuilder came up with as a salute to their father."

After her launching in 1887, the WIELAND became the club's flagship for jaunts around San Francisco Bay. She served as the team bus for club members on their way to softball games on Angel Island. Baseball fans rowed her to Candlestick Park for Giants games. She contributed frequently to the public safety by keeping club members off the highways on return trips from such bayside

The JOHN WIELAND glides through unusually flat water east of the Golden Gate Bridge. In far different conditions near Benecia, she once buried her bow in a wave as far back as the first rowing station, rose out of it, and carried her crew to safety. She is a capable, graceful vessel in her 113th year of rowing.





The crew uses towels to clean and dry the WIELAND before rolling her to the boathouse. A freshwater rinse is infrequent.

watering holes as Sam's in Tiburon.

Sometimes, even the WIELAND got into trouble. On one trip to Angel Island in the 1950s, an octogenarian club president and coxswain instructed his crew to shovel a load of horse manure for his garden into the boat. No bulk carrier, the WIELAND swamped in the chop off Alcatraz. The young Joe Bruno saved the president from slipping beneath a sea of dung—or so the story goes.

By 1991, more than a century of usage had taken its toll on the WIELAND. One of her sheerstrakes had been stove in. An ill-advised 1970s keel replacement proved too stiff, contributing to cracked planking at the turn of the bilge. Worse, to make way for the keel, every frame was cut amidships, greatly diminishing transverse strength. Although her copper rivets were sound, her numerous steel, bronze, and brass fastenings had largely disintegrated. The tremendous force applied by her six 13' oars had weakened her oarlock mounts. She leaked. Observing her condition, Bielinski proposed a complete restoration to make the WIELAND fit for the next century.

Bielinski's credentials were impeccable. For his master's degree at Antioch College, he had built a 35' Block Island schooner and documented its construction, and as the club's boatbuilder he had restored the neglected fleet of Whitehalls, rebuilding the 18' doubles FARRELL, CRONIN, and HUGHES and building the new 14' singles BRUNO and CECCO. Under his direction, Tuesday "boat night" volunteers worked on everything from mundane sanding to precision woodworking. Recognizing that he had consistent help, Bielinski persuaded the club's board to dedicate \$43,000 to the WIELAND restoration.

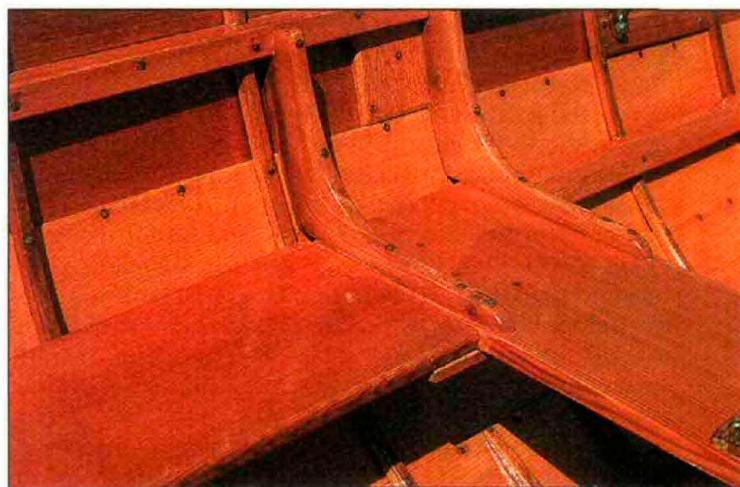
After a final row in November 1991, a crowd of people inserted the WIELAND into the club's boatshop adjacent to the Hyde Street Pier and the San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park's fleet of historic ships. No other 40' boat, save maybe a shell, would have fit through the narrow doors.

The project, expected to take two years, had begun. First came lofting on Mylar in warehouse space loaned by the maritime museum. Lofting was necessary to

develop and document the original fair lines from the hogged and roughly repaired hull. Next came wood procurement: white oak for the keel, a naturally grown crook of black locust from California's Gold Country for the stem, 20'-long 2" x 12" quarter-sawn Port Orford cedar planks from California's North Coast for planking stock. Club historian Walt Schneebeli let Bielinski loose with a saw on his Sonoma County orchard to procure naturally grown apple crooks.

Once lofting was complete, Bielinski shaped and rabbeted pieces for the new stem, keel, sternpost, and deadwood. In place of the '70s-era keel that reached extremes of 10" wide and 8" deep, the new T-shaped keel consists of a 1" x 1 1/4" oak keel topped with a 1/2" oak hog piece. Bielinski calculated that this structure would be lighter, stiffen the boat longitudinally, but flex to soften wave impacts. This single change trimmed approximately 300 lbs off the boat's weight.

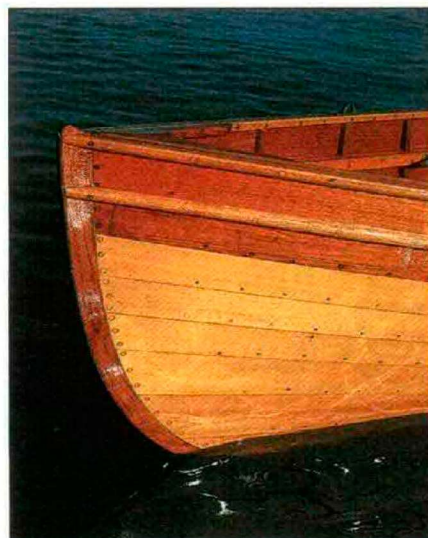
With the keel completed, ten pine molds were installed to hold the hull shape during



Above—Four grown applewood knees support each of the six thwarts. Frames are of black locust, and planking below the Spanish cedar sheerstrake is Port Orford cedar.

Right—Jon Bielinski spent a week in the forest finding a perfectly shaped branch of black locust for the stem.

The continuous grain strength of a grown stem allows a light, uncluttered, easy-to-clean connection to the keel.



reconstruction. With these in place and firmly braced, Bielinski cut away the planking, except for the sheerstrakes. Fashioning two or three flat scarfs in the cedar planking stock to make 40'-long book-matched strakes, Bielinski and crew closed up the hull plank by plank. The original Spanish cedar sheerstrakes were reinforced with graving pieces of the same wood.

Bielinski and volunteers Gabe Scurlock and Paul Gisler obtained freshly felled black locust from a state park for framing. In one long evening in June 1996, two months after this framing stock was milled, 45 volunteers installed 60 piping-hot steam-bent frames. That night and over the next several weeks, more than a thousand copper rivets were driven through the planks and frames. Ringing cacophony sounded as teams drove copper rivets, set roves, and peened the clipped-off ends. "It was like a boat version of a barn-raising," said volunteer Todd Oppenheimer, a journalist.

With the frames secured, Bielinski installed longitudinal Douglas-fir stringers. Douglas-fir also served as stock for the contoured thwarts, which were installed with a slight bow upward at the centerline to permit flex in case of a broadside blow.

Flat faces were sawn on the applewood crooks on a handsaw, then they were machine-planed. Pieces were chosen for grain structure for the pairs of knees binding the thwarts to the gunwales and sheerstrakes.

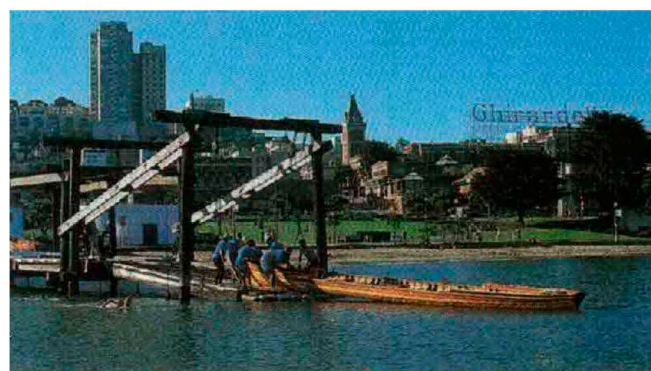
Obtaining oarlocks was no simple feat, either. Former club president Stan Hlynsky phoned George Pocock, the Washington state supplier of racing-shell equipment, for help. "I asked to speak to the company's oldest employee. They put on a guy who had worked there for 40 years. I described the WIELAND, and asked if he could take a look on the dustiest shelves for classic metal oarlocks. A few days later, he gave me a call to tell me he found 10 bronze oarlocks from the turn of the century. We got probably the last oarlocks of this type on the Pacific coast."

The layout of the sliding-seat positions required a blend of science, art, and guesswork. The WIELAND's sliding seats were probably an addition, and a haphazard one at that, so prior construction was not an ideal precedent. As the restoration neared completion, volunteers Bob David, Timothy Ballard, Todd Oppenheimer, and I researched the proper dimensions and positions. Club member Louise Bea, whose sons are competitive rowers, tapped the expertise of Stephen Gladstone, the University of California-Berkeley crew coach, for the ideal ergonomics. The WIELAND lacks outriggers, is used for long rows instead of sprints, is heavier than a shell, and is intended for the Bay's chop, so the tried-and-true formula developed for eight-oared shells had to be modified to permit high feathering of the oars to clear rough seas.

Just three weeks before launching, 21 volunteers turned the WIELAND over so her hull could be varnished. During this first acquaintance with the reconstructed boat's weight and longitudinal stiffness, Bielinski was delighted on both counts. "The boat was lighter than I expected. The old WIELAND would require 12 to 14 guys to launch. That meant some of the guys who helped launch her would be left behind. I hope we will be able to launch with six or seven people." Remarkably, the 40' WIELAND weighed less than 600 lbs. "The stiffness was

Below—"Boat night" volunteers built the sliding seats. Bronze wheels track on brass runners screwed to ½"-thick ironbark. The gangway at the right allows passage between the rowing stations. Note the diagonal brace.

Lower—The 40' WIELAND, at 590 lbs, can be launched and landed by her coxswain and crew of six. An electric winch hoists an apron at the end of the pier, together with the boat, making an easy job of returning her to the boathouse.



terrific," Bielinski said. "I think it is the gunwale-to-knees-to-thwarts-to-center-stringers-to-keelson connections," he said.

A total of 176 different volunteers are logged as attending "boat night" at least once during the reconstruction of the WIELAND; Brian Huse had the most with 134 nights. These volunteers came from many walks of life, from young to old, poor to rich, blue collar to white. Certainly, each volunteer had a reason for being there. But not to be overlooked is the fact that nearly every summer for the past decade many of them have rowed the club's 18' Whitehalls 90 miles to Sacramento—a three-day trip through stifling heat against the current of swollen rivers. A fundamental motive for helping to rebuild the sleek JOHN WIELAND, simply put, may be that the volunteers wanted a faster way to get to Sacramento. 📌

John Kortum is an attorney practicing law in the San Francisco Bay Area. Although he has crossed the Atlantic on a steam paddlewheel tug and cruised the coast of Central America aboard ketches, he goes to sea too rarely these days. He is actively involved in maritime preservation projects and so follows the wake of his father, Karl Kortum, the founder of the maritime museum in San Francisco.

Captions by Jon Bielinski and John Kortum.