

'I tell you this is the last one of these . . . Wooden boats are a thing of the past.'

— LOU MARCELLI, DOLPHIN CLUB MANAGER



PHOTOS BY JOHN O'HARA/THE CHRONICLE

AHOY: James Mason (left) and Marla McGowan (right) helped sand a second coat of varnish on the Joseph Wieland.

Labor of Love in S.F.

Volunteers restore wooden rowboat to former glory

*By Carl Nolte
Chronicle Staff Writer*

Just steps away from the tourist haunts at Fisherman's Wharf, a crew of volunteers is restoring one of the most beautiful wooden boats ever seen on the San Francisco waterfront.

The boat — named for Joseph Wieland, a long-dead beer baron — first sailed the bay 110 years ago. It is a slim rowboat 40 feet long and less than five feet broad, built for speed and pleasure, made of the finest wood and created as a true labor of love.

The boat will go back on the bay at the end of this month — and for its maiden voyage members of the Dolphin Swimming and Boating Club plan to row to Sacramento, 90 miles in a single day. It's a good test and an old tradition.

The Joseph Wieland is the flagship of the Dolphin Club's fleet of rowing boats and also the oldest. But after more than a century, it had begun to lose its shape — a process called hogging — and it needed major work.

So after a ceremonial last trip in November 1991 — a voyage from San Francisco, over to Alameda for breakfast, a row all around the island and back to the city, the boat was laid up for a total rebuilding job.

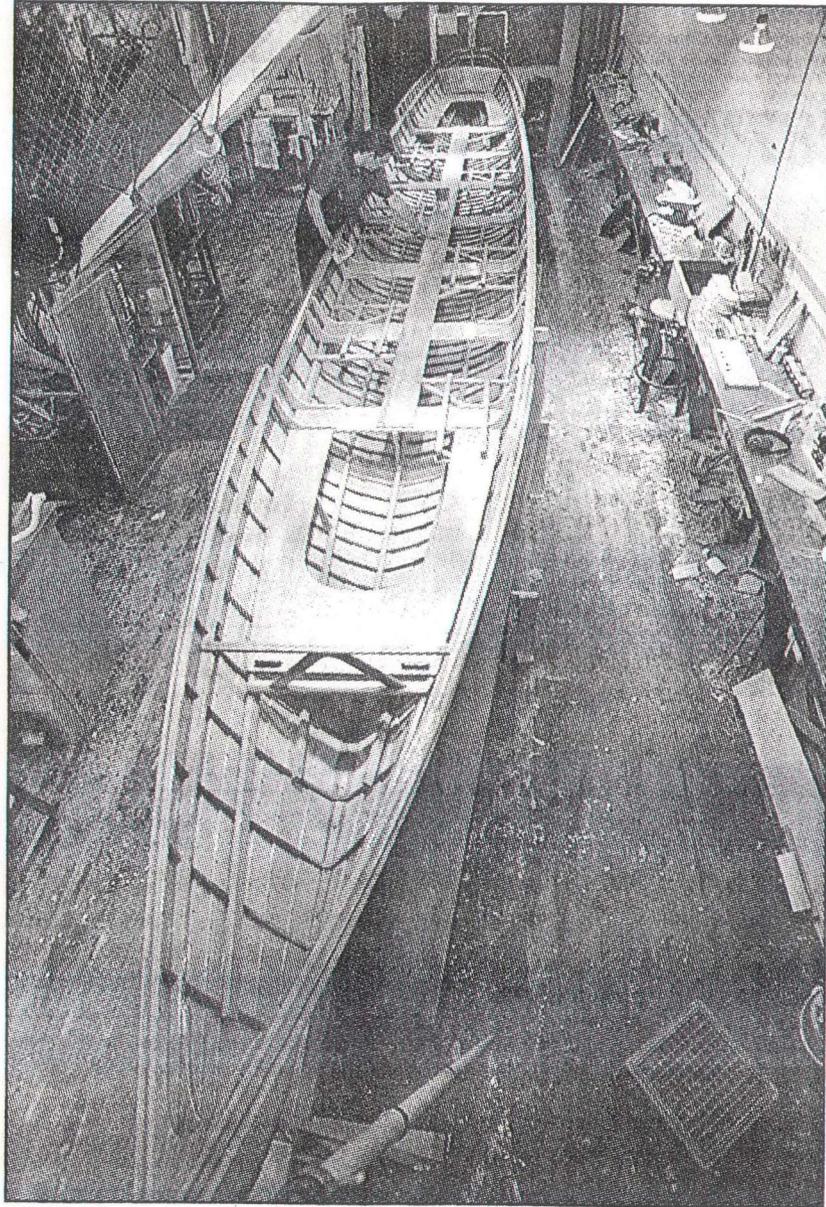
"We wanted to add a fourth dimension to the other three in the boat," said Jon Bielinski. "Time."

Bielinski is the club's boat builder, a master of an ancient and almost lost art. "What we wanted to do," he said, "was to give a cultural rowing tradition for generations of San Franciscans to come."

The Joseph Wieland, the Dolphin people say, should last for another 100 years, a gift to the future. "We'll go into the 21st century with something from the 19th century," said Joe Abbott, one of the amateurs who worked on the boat.

It took years to copy the lines of the old boat, get new wood and fittings, plan the work and do it. The volunteers — doctors, lawyers, a printer, a graphic artist and a magazine

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BOAT: Timothy Ballard worked on refurbishing the Joseph Wieland, the pride of S.F.'s Dolphin Swimming and Boating Club

PROJECT: Volunteers Restore Wooden Rowboat in S.F.

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writer — spent every Tuesday night for nearly six years on the project.

"It is a metaphor for San Francisco," said Kevin Starr, the historian and librarian for the state of California. "It is something that has kept its historical form, but has been rebuilt."

One does not have to be an expert on boats to see the beauty of the restored Joseph Wieland, which is resting on a cradle in the Dolphin Club's boathouse at the foot of Hyde Street.

The planks are Port Orford cedar, much admired by Bay Area builders, like Labruzzo and the Genoa Boat Works in San Francisco, Pasquinucci and the Nunes Brothers in Sausalito, and Siino in Pittsburg, who built who hundreds of small fishing and work vessels in the glory days of wooden boats.

Good Port Orford cedar is very rare now; the planks for the Joseph Wieland came from a private forest.

The Joseph Wieland's gunwales are of oak, Spanish cedar and Douglas fir, the knees are of apple wood, carefully chosen for angular shape and then sanded. The keel and keelson, which are the spine of the boat, are of oak and fir.

There are 82 ribs of black locust wood, picked, said Bielinski, for its strength and resistance to rot. The

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— JON BIELINSKI, DOLPHIN CLUB

ribs, like those on a human chest, give the vessel its shape.

Great care was taken with them. The club cut the trees itself, milled the wood and then soaked the ribs in the salt water of the bay for two weeks. The salt water pickles the wood, but it must be cut to size and bent to shape.

To do this, the ribs must be steamed and fitted in the hull. The volunteers built their own steam box and then steamed each rib for 18 minutes. "We had 15 seconds to get each one in place," said Todd Oppenheimer, a magazine writer who helped. It was as precise as creating a fine musical instrument.

The topside has gotten six coats of varnish. It glistens like a jewel. "Wood," said Bielinski, "is the life of the boat."

Nobody could afford such a boat. The project took thousands and thousands of hours.

"I tell you this is the last one of these," said Lou Marcelli, the Dolphin Club's manager. "Who else would do it? Wooden boats are a thing of the past."

The past is strong in this boat. Wieland owned a brewery in 19th century San Francisco and was a founder of the Dolphin Club in the days when rowing clubs were very big in the city. Only two survive

now — the Dolphins, founded in 1877, and their next door rivals at Aquatic Park, the South End Rowing Club, established in 1873.

Wieland was killed in a fire in 1885, and his heirs commissioned the boat for the club as a memorial. It was built by Al Rogers in Alameda, who also built the rival club's vessel South End in 1915.

The Joseph Wieland is powered by eight oars; a coxswain completes a crew of nine. Each rower is at work for 40 minutes and rests for 20; that's the way of it.

The boat can make six knots — "It can scream across the water," said Bielinski — but it was built for pleasure, not racing.

In recent years, the club members took it to Sam's Anchor Cafe in Tiburon for breakfast or perhaps up the San Rafael canal for brunch. Sometimes, the boat went to Candlestick Point, where the rowers went to a baseball game, and sometimes to Angel Island, where the rowers played softball. The crew could make up a side.