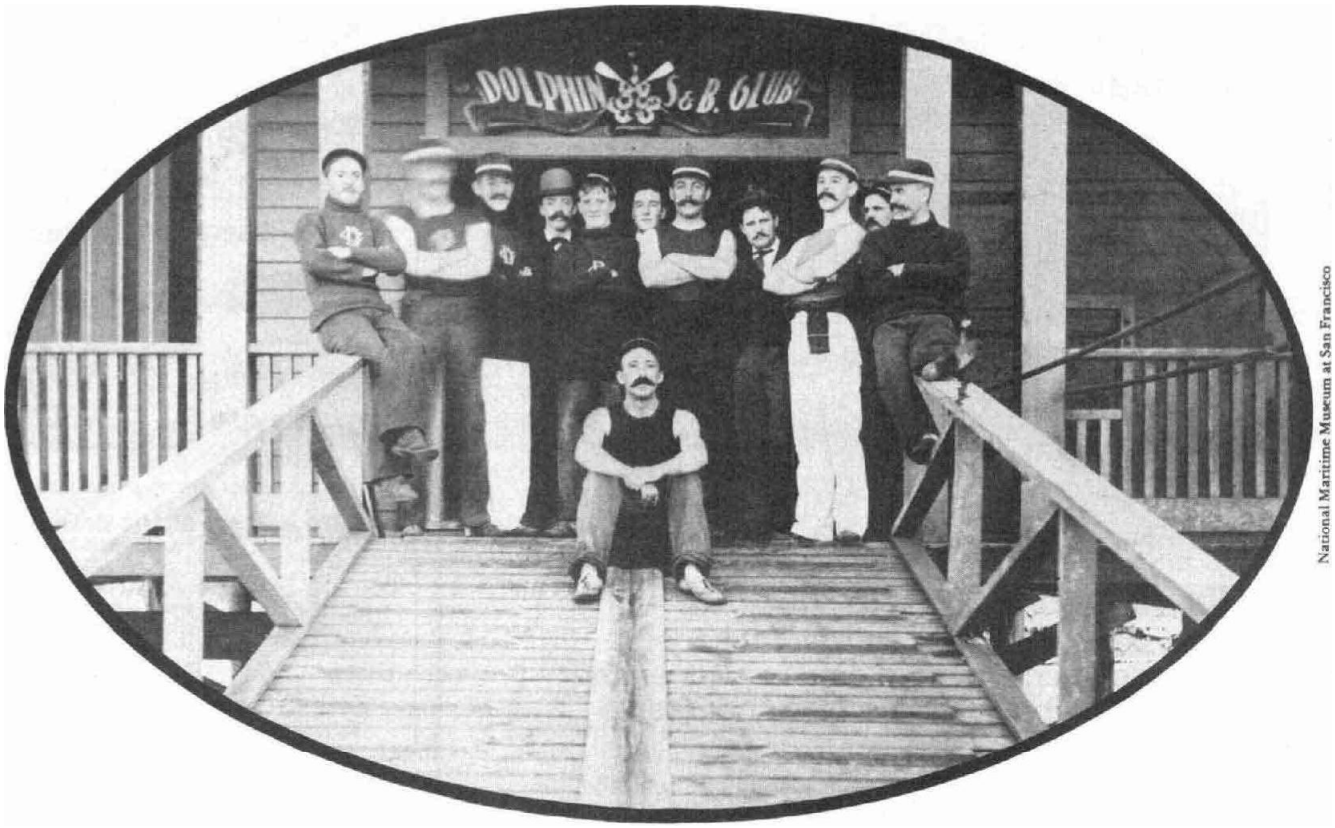

National Maritime Museum at San Francisco

SAN FRANCISCO'S OLDEST ROWING CLUBS

by John Bielinski

In the archives of the Dolphin Rowing Club of San Francisco is a photograph of Henry C. Peterson, who is sitting at the pulling station of a racing shell, hands on the oars, a look of determination on his face. The photograph was taken a moment before a race on which he had bet $2,500, three years' wages for a working man in 1888. That such a sum would be wagered by a single person at that time is an indication of the level of competition along the San Francisco waterfront and the height of the interest in that area inspired by the sport of rowing.

Inspiration is a feeling well known among people who have an affinity for the combination of wooden boats and salt water. As long ago as the early 1870s, such inspiration among boatmen was united with a desire for the wholesome, adventurous exercise of rowing boats in San Francisco Bay and with the desire for the society of people of like mind. The result was the

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founding of a pair of abundantly sociable rowing clubs on the San Francisco waterfront — the South End Rowing Club, founded in 1873, and the Dolphin Swimming and Boating Club, founded in 1877. The two clubs, which have been friendly rivals for over a hundred years now, are among the oldest continuously active rowing clubs on the western coast of the United States.

Competition is perhaps an inevitable outcome of two rowing clubs situated side by side, yet before they were founded, boat races were an integral part of the San Francisco waterfront scene. Rowing competitions were for many, many years an enthusiastically contested part of the maritime industry. For example, in the early 1800s, a spontaneous rowing race decided which pilot company and chandlery would get the business of the long-distance sailing ships as they came into the Bay after their long journey up the South and Central American coasts or across the Pacific. Approaching the coast these ships were sorely in need of stores, refitting work, and supplies, a pilot to guide them to anchorage, recreation for the crews, and myriad other services. At the first sight of one of these incoming

ships, when they were miles off the coast, the Bay boatmen launched their Whitehalls. Rowing as hard as they could, perhaps as many as five or six hearty boatmen pulled away from the different company piers. Soon they would be battling the Pacific swells after struggling with a tidal current at the Golden Gate that could reach 4.5 knots. In addition, they would often have to face a prevailing westerly that blows with determination and deal with the inevitable fatigue in the several-mile race out to the ship. The first boatman to get there landed a piloting job and a fat chandlery sales commission for his company. The other boatmen got nothing but sweat, blisters, and a long pull back to the pier in defeat. This was boat racing with a vengeance.

The Whitehall boats of the San Francisco pilots and chandlers were similar to, but not exactly the same as, the Whitehalls then common for the same purpose on the East Coast. According to a description by Duval Williams, who in 1898 was an apprentice to a leading San Francisco boatbuilder named John Twigg, the Whitehalls of the time were 16' to 18' long, 4 1/2' in beam, and 2' in depth. Howard Chapelle describes an East Coast Whitehall as being 18' long, 4'9 3/4" in beam, and having a depth of 19". Mystic Seaport has published plans of a smaller Whitehall that is 13'11 3/4" long, 3'8 3/4" in beam, and having a depth of 15". From these descriptions and from photographs of both types, it seems to me that San Francisco Whitehalls differ from East Coast models in that they are a bit narrower and deeper for their length. The Mystic Whitehall lines show no hollow forward, whereas photographs at the San Francisco Maritime Museum show noticeable concavity in the forefoot of San Francisco boats.

Unfortunately, no lines plans or drawings exist of San Francisco Whitehalls built between 1850 and 1900, the period of their development. According to Duval Williams, the builders used sectional molds, which hung from nails in the rafters of the boat shop. The molds were set up on the backbone, and the rest of the shaping of the boats was done by the builder by eye and past experience. No lofting or drafted lines were used.

By the last decade of the 19th century, the use of the oar-powered Whitehall by the pilots and chandlers of San Francisco was coming to an end because of the acceptance of launches and tugs powered by internal combustion and small steam engines. As a result—just at the time the Dolphin and South End Rowing Clubs were established—rowing was becoming pure sport, pleasurable for its own sake and quite different from its roots in maritime commerce. Rowing races were organized, captured the city's interest, and were fiercely competitive. "Rowing was like horse racing," explained Bill Walden, today an officer of the Dolphin Club. Conversations in saloons, on street corners, and at lunch breaks were alive with the prospect of an upcoming race. Bets on the outcome would tally in the hundreds of thousands of dollars if the city-wide total were known. The boats, the boatmen, and their clubs' histories of success or failure were subjects of vast concern and hours of conversation. They were the factors to be carefully considered by anyone intending to put money on a race.

With this kind of runaway enthusiasm for racing, much thought was given to making the boats faster. Whitehalls gave way to shells and one design change led to another until the boats were so long, narrow, and shoal that it was unwise to use them on the Bay at all. For example, one race came to an unexpectedly early conclusion by swamping. A photograph of the end shows the heads of the six-man racing shell crew all in a neat, straight line with boat, bodies, and oars all under water. That race more or less marked the end of shell racing on the Bay. Shell competition moved inland. Both the Dolphin and South End clubs still have racing shells, but they are now kept in a small boathouse on San Francisco's Lake Merced, where they are used in relative protection. Since the experience of the swamped shell, both clubs returned to and have remained with time-honored hulls, traditionally constructed, for use on the Bay.

One such boat is a rowing barge similar in design to a Cornish gig, two originals of which are still in use today. The Dolphin Club's JOHN WIELAND, named after a charter member of the Club, was built in 1887 and was then the fastest barge on the Bay. She is 40' overall, with lapstrake planking, six racing-style pulling stations, and 12'11" oars, one for each man. At 94 years old, she's still active at the Dolphin Club, getting out whenever a six-man crew takes an interest in rowing and gets the go-ahead from the Club's boat captain.

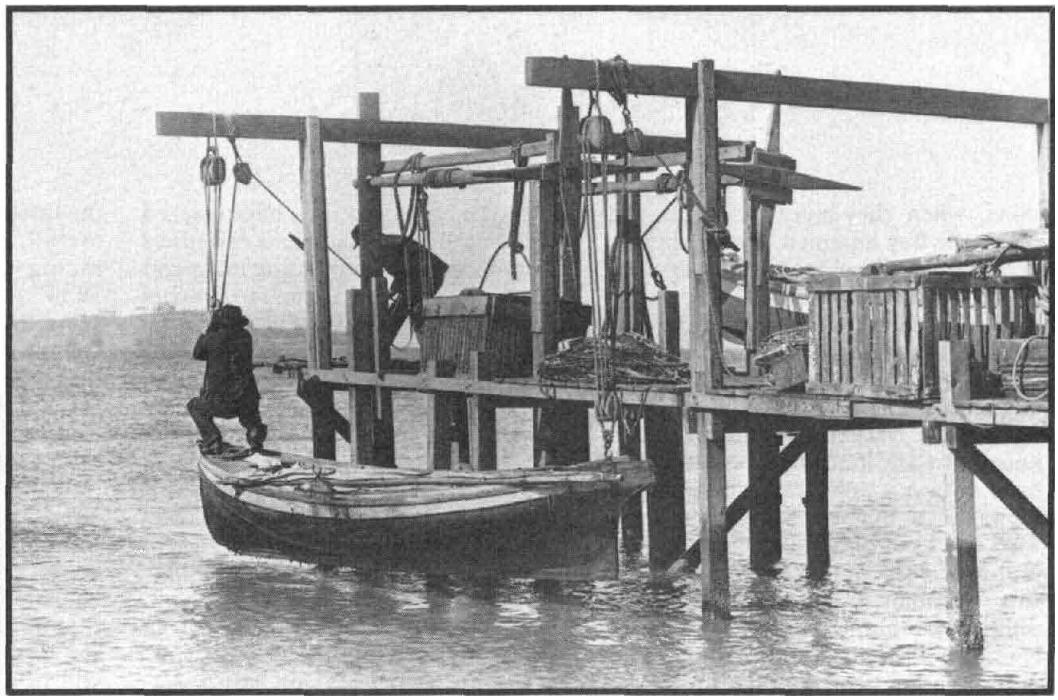
The rival South End Club commissioned their own 40' six-man pulling barge, the SOUTH END, in 1915. She was built by Al Rogers at Alameda across the Bay, and she immediately became a legitimate contender for the title of fastest barge on the Bay. Like the JOHN WIELAND, the SOUTH END is still in use and gets a workout on the Bay by club members three or four times a year.

The SOUTH END is a study in barge construction for that period. Every fitting, from the ringbolt through the stem post to the gudgeons on the rudder, is made of bronze. She has eight strakes to a side and is copper-rivet fastened at the laps as well as to her steam-bent white oak frames and floors.

As a 40' boat, her scantlings for structural members are heavy. The sheer clamp is approximately 11/2" wide by 1" thick and is the beefiest timber in the whole boat. Even the keelson is both thinner and narrower. She has a grown breasthook that looks like apple wood. Her structure appears to be more like an airplane than a boat. There are no thwarts, so for sectional strength delicate little wooden trusses are used to hold the hull's shape. At several locations along the boat's length strips of steam-bent hardwood are supported by these trusses as they overlap both the gunwales, the four bilge stringers, and the keelson, making a strong, lightweight mini-bulkhead.

Six-man barges like the JOHN WIELAND and the SOUTH END are the exception rather than the rule at the Dolphin and South End rowing clubs. Once the pure racing craft were removed to the security of Lake Merced, the bulk of the clubs' boats used on the San Francisco waterfront were confined to one- and two-man pulling boats for pleasure use and exercise rowing. The influence of competitive rowing remained, however, and resulted in the development of a hybrid boat that combined racing-

In the late 1800s, Whitehall boats were an integral part of the San Francisco waterfront scene. Here, two boatmen man the falls at the bow of their craft. Note the spar and sail lying along the gunwale. Racing in Whitehalls like this marked the beginnings of rowing competition in San Francisco.



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style pulling stations with a traditional hull design based in part on the original Whitehalls.

This boat is still used by both clubs. It is a craft that is ideally suited to the rigors of rowing in the heavy traffic, fast currents, and powerful winds commonly encountered in the Bay and Sacramento River Delta. It is safe and able in a variety of potentially troublesome wind and weather conditions, while also providing a propulsion system that maximizes boat control, speed, and boatman comfort. An additional benefit to this hybrid boat is that it offers more well-rounded exercise for the boatman, since it gets the legs into the act as well as the back and shoulders.

Most of the boats in the clubs' fleets are lapstrake cedar or yellow pine, copper fastened at the lap and also at the steam-bent white oak frames and floors. Heavy hardwoods with substantial scantlings make up the deadwood, keel, stem post, knees, breasthooks, transoms, and thwarts. Usually the frames are continuous from gunwale to gunwale. Bronze chafing gear runs the length of the keel and up the forefoot to the stemhead. These are handsome, stout, heavy, traditional small boats, carefully constructed.

Typical of them are two boats built for the Dolphin Club in the late 1930s. Both boats—the JAMES J. CRONIN and the JOHN FARRELL—are two-man models of the Whitehall type, with an extra planking strake to make them drier for Bay rowing. The CRONIN is 18'11" overall, 55 1/2" beam, and lapstrake, and her sister has similar lines.

The pulling stations in the club boats have contoured hardwood seats that slide fore and aft on wheels in tracks. Each seat and track has a stationary pair of hardwood foot supports with leather straps and lacings to secure each of the boatman's feet firmly. The oarlocks for each station are massive bronze castings with 7/8" pins that fit into the gunwale sockets. Above the pin the casting takes the shape of the oar's loom—flat on the forward face for the pull and half-rounded on the after side for the roll to feather the blade on the return stroke. The loom of the oars is D-shaped in section; the oars are built of hollowed Sitka spruce for lightness, and are long and wide bladed, with the blades subtly cupped in their width and having a pronounced curve in the last quarter of their length. The chafing gear between the rowlock and the loom is state-of-the-art: heat-shrunk polyvinylchloride. The very tip of the blade is protected with a copper or brass sheathing. The oars have a high-gloss finish of Deks Olje.

With a recent surge in interest in pleasure rowing along the San Francisco waterfront, the Dolphin Club has recently taken delivery of three new 14' Whitehalls from a builder in Dog's Hole, California. They were ordered rough, without any finish or rowing stations, to be fitted out in the club's boatshop. They are planked in Port Orford cedar over Oregon white oak frames, and are copper riveted at the laps and the frames. The stem post, forward deadwood, rubrail, keel, and clamp are white oak. The transom and after deadwood is mahogany.

For decades after their founding, both the Dolphin Club and the South End Club were located in the area of the present-day Aquatic Park, but when the bond issue for the park was passed in 1927, the clubs were forced to vacate the site. Both clubhouses were jacked up off their foundations and loaded onto barges, which were moored in the cove while the clubs searched for new land. After a while, however, the South End Club's barge sprung a leak, so they decided to beach both clubhouses side by side just a few hundred yards from where they were situated originally. This was to be a temporary solution, but has turned into a semi-permanent arrangement—the clubs are still there, in what has turned out to be an ideal location for their purposes.

Though both clubs were founded primarily for rowing, swimming is another important sport for many members. The clubs' location alongside Aquatic Park, which is on one of the few protected coves in San Francisco, makes them ideal for swimmers. In addition, over the years the clubs have expanded and diversified into other areas. Their facilities now include sun decks, saunas, galley and meeting hall, lounge and trophy room, handball courts, weight-lifting and exercise equipment, lockers, and showers. Even runners and cyclists have joined the clubs. This diversification has resulted in ever-increasing membership—a membership of 175 in the mid-1970s at the Dolphin Club has reached over 600 in the 1980s.

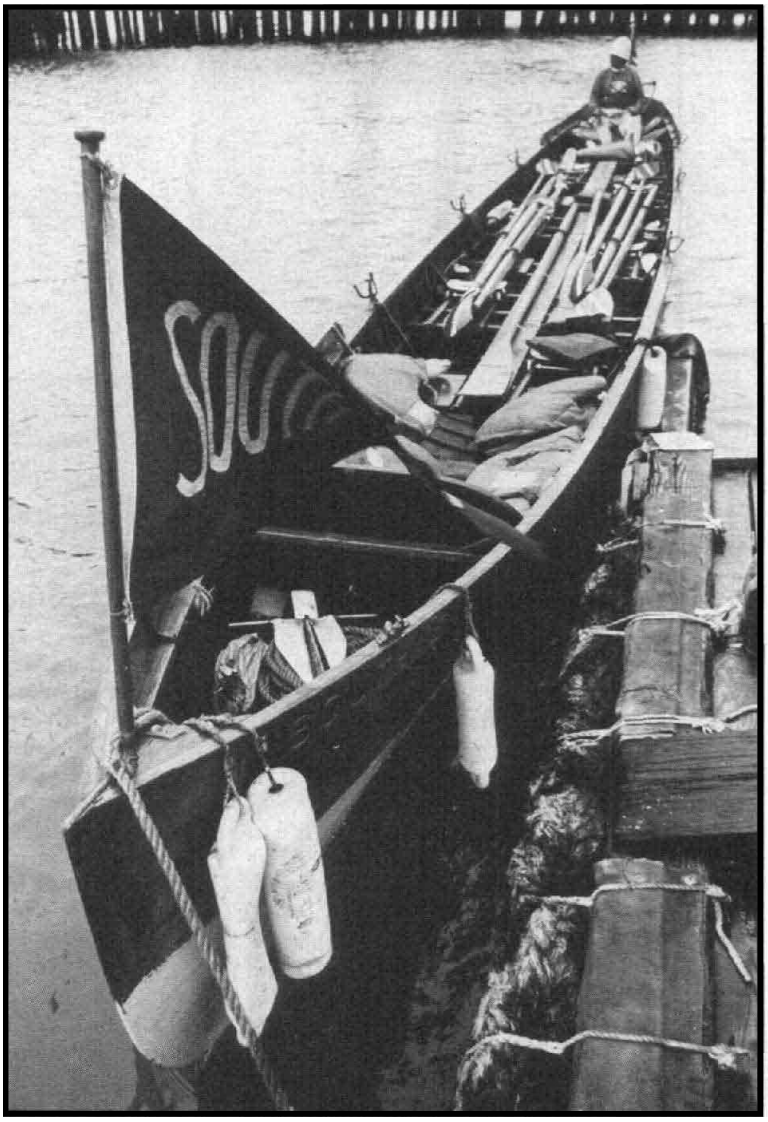
Rowing is what these clubs are about, however, and their facilities are

admirably set up for the purpose. For example, the Dolphin Club has a well-equipped boat-repair shop on the premises, converted from a handball court. It is conveniently located adjacent to the boat storage hall, which is spacious and well laid out for keeping the pulling boats out of the weather when they are not in use.

Almost from the beginning, both clubs have hauled their boats after use and stored them under cover. Each club has a small boatway at the end of the dock for this purpose. Not only is the need for antifouling paint dispensed with, but also great longevity is assured for the boats themselves, which explains why so many of the clubs' boats are older than many of the members and are still in splendid condition.

This isn't to say that the club members aren't in splendid condition. To the contrary, they are testimony to the beneficial effects of the right amount of the right type of exercise. While I was at the Dolphin Club I watched a swimmer on the beach getting ready for a bracing swim in the chilly waters of the Bay at high tide. He is 65 years old and the champion swimmer in his class in the nation. Another fellow who is now 75 years old rows once a year from San Francisco to Sacramento (a 1 1/2-hour drive by car), and he has been doing it for 20 years. The end-all, however, is a fellow on the South End dock who was launching a boat with a chain-fall hoist while I was there. For all the world the fellow looked to be, at the most, 60 years old. A club member told me he is 85 years old.

There are plenty of younger members in the rowing clubs, however. With a little inspiration and a lot of desire to row fine wooden boats on San Francisco Bay in the company of kindred spirits, no doubt they too will someday be launching boats off the club ways at 85.



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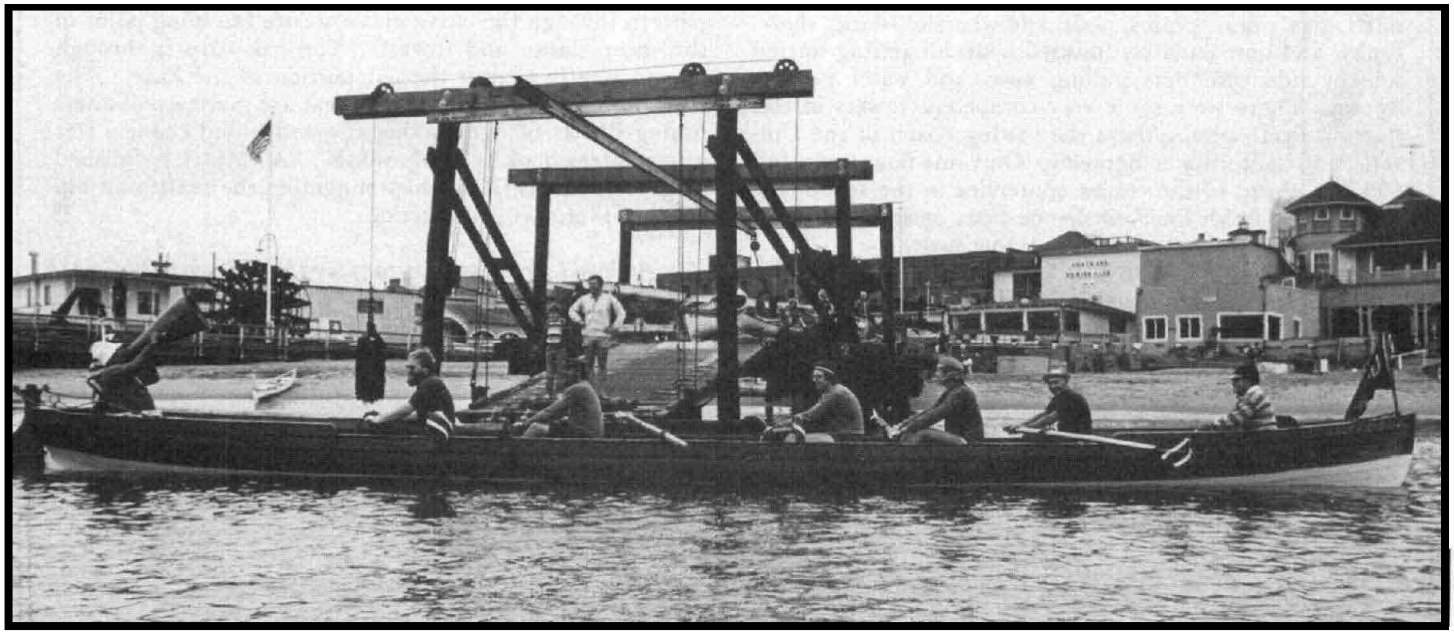
Top —The 40' 6-man barge SOUTH END, built in 1915, launched and ready for the crew.

Bottom—The SOUTH END gets underway. The launching ways and the side-by-side South End and Dolphin clubhouses are in the background. The big paddlewheel behind the flagpole sits on the Hyde Street Pier, which is part of the National Maritime Museum at San Francisco.



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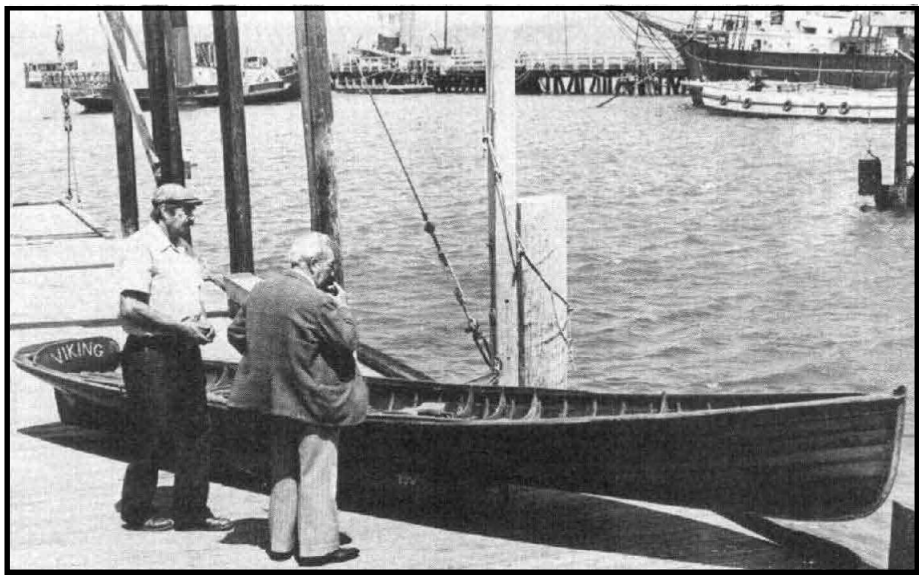

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Herman Zahler (left) and Bill Walden of the Dolphin Club look over the VIKING, the fastest boat in the Dolphin fleet of 20 pulling boats.

VIKING and VALHALLA, the Cable Car Gigs

Almost everyone knows that cable cars are used for part of San Francisco's mass transit system, and anyone who has paid his quarter and jumped aboard knows also that the benches and coach are made of hardwood fashioned by craftsmen. In 1915, two of the carpenters who worked in the car barn on Washington Street decided to build a two-man rowing boat in their spare time. She was named the VIKING and spent the first 20 years of her life in northern coastal California on the Russian River. After one of the builders—who were also her owners—died, the survivor donated the boat to the Dolphin Club.

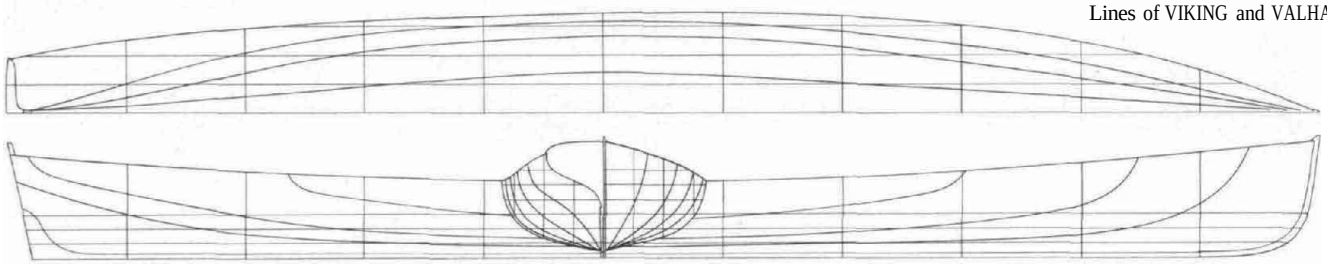
A few years ago, Bill Walden of the Dolphin Club knew there was to be a six-mile rowing race from Sausalito to the north tower of the Golden Gate Bridge and back. He also knew VIKING to be the fastest boat in the Dolphin Club's Bay fleet and put her on the entry roster. A day or so before the race Larry Payne, a boatbuilder friend, came by, and the two of them took VIKING out for a row around Alcatraz Island just to train for the race in Bill's rowing style. When the race got started 30 boats were at the line. Since this was open bay racing, any boat could join for a shot at first prize. A photograph in the local newspaper shows fiberglass boats next to plywood boats, next to lapstrake- and carvel-planked boats. There were dories, skiffs, gigs, punts, prams, pods, and wherries—long, short, funky, and immaculately finished boats all getting started side by side with oars pulling away and water rushing astern. There were some very competent rowers in this starting fleet, among them the rowing coach of the University of California at Berkeley. Only one boat was a full 500 feet ahead of the closest contender in the rest of the pack at the finish line. Only one boat crossed the finish line before all the rest. VIKING was that boat.

At 76 years old, VIKING is a pleasure to look at. Her keel, all the deadwood, stem post, and steam-bent frames look to be white oak through all the varnish. There are fully 16 grown apple wood thwart knees, a grown breasthook, and a pair of grown transom quarter knees. She is lapstrake planked, 22' long, 43" in beam, and draws a bit less than 12" of water with two men at the 60-year-old racing-style pulling stations. The rowlocks are on metal outriggers, and the distance between them athwartships is 63". The craftsmanship that went into her construction is evidenced by the grown knees, the fair graceful lines, and the delicate lattice-work foredeck that allows a reasonably dry place to sit or stow gear; any water shipped up there passes into the bilge through the diamond-shaped openings in the framework.

The VIKING is such an impressive boat that the South End Club ordered a copy of her in 1980. Named the VALHALLA, she was built by the Aeolus Boatworks in Davenport, California. ("Bill Grunwald: 26 Different Boats to Order," WB No. 37) She is lapstrake planked with Port Orford cedar on steam-bent white oak and copper-rivet fastened; like her sister, she has two racing-style rowing stations. Each straight-grained hardwood thwart knee is notched to fit neatly up against the planking. To avoid slashgrain weakness in the thwart knees, a substantial strip of oak was steamed into the inboard curve of each knee to provide the strength of a continuous grain pattern through the curve and a secure fastening point to the sheer clamp and thwart. The oak strip is through riveted tightly against the cut portion of the knee. The small foredeck and the transom seat are made up of alternating planks of light mahogany and blond cedar. Her grown breasthook is apple wood. VALHALLA is finished bright with Deks Olje, which magnifies the craftsmanship that went into her construction.

Jon Bielinski serves as Secretary for the Shipwrights' Co-Op in Sausalito (see WB No. 34, p. 36) and is building a Block Island boat there.

Lines of VIKING and VALHALLA



Drawn by Jeremy Fisher-Smith