

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

CABLE CAR DOUBLE ROWBOAT, *VIKING*

HAER NO. CA-2388

Location: Dolphin Club, 502 Jefferson Street, San Francisco, San Francisco County, California

The watercraft *Viking* is located at latitude: 37.80767100, longitude: -122.421293, which represents the Dolphin Club building. The coordinates were obtained from Google Earth in 2019. There is no restriction on their release to the public.

Date of Construction: ca. 1900

Rig/Type of Craft: Double gig

Trade: Recreation

Principal Dimensions: Length: 22', Beam: 3'-7", With Outriggers: 5'-3"

Designer/Builder: James Harris; rebuilt by Jeremy Fisher-Smith

Original Owner: Thomas W. Harris

Present Owner: The Dolphin Swimming & Boating Club

Disposition: Active: Recreation, regattas, and piloting swimming events

Significance: *Viking* is an elegant pleasure craft, made of wood, built in 1900 or a few years earlier, and still expertly maintained and rowed on San Francisco Bay.

Description:

As expected, to survive more than a century the boat required frequent repairs and a major restoration in the 1980s. The following technical description is of *Viking* today.

Viking is a gig made of wood, lapstrake planked, with two racing style rowing stations, sliding-seats, adjustable stretchers, and outriggers. The boat is 22' long between perpendiculars, 3'-7" beam width, 5'-3" outrigger width, and weighs 270 lbs.

White Oak is used for the keel, hog, frames, inwale, breasthook, rudder, stern post, transom, and name board. Planking, riser, stern sheets, and burden boards are Spanish Cedar. The foredeck is Douglas Fir and Mahogany. Mahogany is also used in the burden boards and for the stern knee, sheer cap, and rub rail. Other parts are made from Iron Bark and Black Locust.

Oars made of Sitka Spruce are 10'-4" long and 2'-9" handle to button. Nowadays some rowers choose carbon fiber oars. The scantlings of the sliding seats minimize the weight of the metal with sufficient buoyancy from the wood to allow the seats to float.

Summary of Materials: White Oak, Spanish Cedar planking, plus various woods including Black Locust, Mahogany, and Douglas Fir. Silicon bronze bolts and screws, copper rivets and clench nails, brass fittings, and stainless-steel outriggers. Le Tonkinois varnish.

History:

The Dolphin Club fleet includes over twenty rowboats, hand-crafted from wood, and the history of each is well-documented in terms of the original builder, date, place, materials, and specifications, along with a log of maintenance and restorations. However, similar information about one special boat, *Viking*, was lost decades ago along with some other club records. Only vague stories about the boat were passed down and often repeated, indeed becoming legendary.

According to the legend, in the early 1900s, several unknown carpenters working in the Washington-Mason Street cable car barn built a two-man rowboat in their spare time. It then spent years on the Russian River north of San Francisco. Upon the death of an owner, not identified, it was donated to the Dolphin Club in the 1930s, some said 1950s.

Although not totally accurate, the legend led to these details. James Harris (1847-1911) built the boat in 1900, or a few years earlier, likely with help from another carpenter, in the California Street Cable Railroad house on the SW corner of California and Hyde Streets. James Harris was a native of Pictou, Nova Scotia, Canada, who emigrated with his family in 1885. His occupation was stated as "Boat Builder" in the 1879 Pictou Directory and 1881 Census of Canada. In San Francisco he was a carpenter repairing cable cars between 1886 and 1906. James became a member of the Dolphin Club and built the boat, *Viking*, for two of his sons, William and Thomas. They were also Dolphin Club members and rowed on championship crews in the early 1900s. Their names are on several club trophies. Later they both served as presidents. William F. Harris died while club president in 1911 at age 34 from typhoid fever after rescuing a person in Richardson Bay.

In 1942 a fire destroyed the summer home of Thomas Harris on the lower Russian River at Guerneville, California. His boat, a 22-foot pleasure gig, survived, and in 1943 Thomas donated it to the Dolphin Club. Thomas W. Harris passed away in 1950 at age 68.

Possibly the name *Viking* was chosen by the Harris family, coming from Nova Scotia with its Viking past, and the design, a long sleek gig, favored for their Scottish and English heritage. *Viking* was unique, quite different from other boats in the Dolphin Club fleet which were either heavier, utilitarian Doubles or light, fragile racing boats. *Viking* soon became a much-admired craft on San Francisco Bay, but there were no others like her for competitive racing. Nearby rowing clubs commissioned replica boats in the late 1970s. As a result, a new class, the Cable Car Gig, was born on the Pacific Coast.

The story of Thomas Harris giving the boat to the club was reported in the *San Francisco Chronicle* newspaper of May 4, 1943. Records from 1943 are missing from the club archives. The first mention of *Viking* was found in Board Meeting Minutes of March 1954. The club news bulletin, *Dolphin Log*, described in-house repairs in 1958, 1962, and 1971. After winning the first Gordan Nash Open Ocean Regatta in 1977, *Viking* received more notoriety, however tales of her past were mostly hearsay.

In 1982 *Viking* was again out of service with major problems including an unaligned keel with sagging ends. A thorough restoration was needed, not another patchwork repair. The project was given to Jeremy Fisher-Smith, a young boatwright at the Aeolus Boatworks in Davenport on the coast south of San Francisco. He had already studied *Viking* in detail, built a handsome replica two years earlier, and was working on another. However, he considered the *Viking* project a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, to take apart a vintage craft, discover the secrets of the craftsman, repair damage, and reassemble something still considered to be the original boat. Fisher-Smith had to replace about fifty percent of the wood and modernize the hardware but saved as much as he could. New woods introduced to the vessel included Honduras Mahogany, Cedar, and Applewood. On June 30, 1984, the shining rebuilt *Viking* once again took her honored place in the Dolphin Club boathouse.

Like other boats in the fleet, *Viking* is available for daily pleasure rows, protecting swimmers, and occasional regattas. It is also capable of ambitious adventures such as 100-mile pulls upriver from San Francisco to Sacramento that *Viking* made in 1993 and 1995.

Forty years have passed since *Viking* was restored. The boat has continued to need periodic sanding and varnishing, of course, plus some structural repairs in 1993 and 2013. Considering the Dolphin Club's dedicated maintenance program, expert boatbuilders, volunteers, and the newer technical skills of Julia Hechanova, there is hope that *Viking* will continue to delight rowers long into the future.

Jeremy Fisher-Smith deserves special recognition for preserving *Viking* and establishing a new class of boats by building the replicas: *Valhalla* in 1979, *Valkyrie* in 1983, and *Lifthrasir* in 1985. Since 2000 Fisher-Smith has operated his own business, Marshall Boatworks, in Marshall, California.

- Sources:** Dolphin Club Board Minutes, boat shop records, publications, and membership records. These club materials are preserved in the Dolphin Club Archives, 502 Jefferson St, San Francisco, Ca 94109.
- Bielinski, Jon. "San Francisco's Oldest Rowing Clubs." *WoodenBoat* 40 (1981): 46-49.
- Jansen, Joyce. *San Francisco's Cable Cars*, Woodford Press, San Francisco, California, 1995.
- Kingman, Abner. "Viking and Her Descendants." *WoodenBoat* 220 (May/June 2011): 52-59.
- Oppenheimer, Todd. "Jeremy Fisher-Smith: Keeper of the Viking Flame." *Dolphin Log* (Fall 2007): 6-7.
- Rice, Walter & Echeverria, Emiliano with Dolgushkin, Michael. *San Francisco's California Street Cable Cars*, Arcadia Publishing, 2008.
- The Pacific Coast Chapter of the Railway & Locomotive Historical Society. *The Centennial of the California Street Cable Line*, April 10, 1978.
- The Cable Car Museum Online Publications, 1201 Mason Street, San Francisco, California, 2004-2022.
- California Street Cable Railroad Co. records, BANC MSS C-G 254, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
- Additional research used historic copies of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Call* and *Examiner* newspapers and genealogical data bases accessed on Ancestry.com and FamilySearch.org.

Project Information:

The Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) is a long-range program that documents and interprets historically significant engineering sites and structures throughout the United States. HAER is part of Heritage Documentation Programs, a division of the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. Todd Croteau, HAER Architect, manages the HAER Maritime Program.

In 2024, boat builder Julia Hechanova compiled technical specifications, generated offsets, scale lines, and created the measured drawing. Richard B. Cooper contributed historical data. Both are members of the Dolphin Swimming & Boating Club, March 2025.

Appendix: Illustrations

Figure 1: *Viking*, Photograph by Colin Gift, ca. 2005



Figure 2: *Viking* at the Dolphin Club, Photograph by Richard B. Cooper, December 14, 2016



Figure 3: *Viking* name board, Photograph by Richard B. Cooper, December 14, 2016



Figure 4: *Viking* on San Francisco Bay, Photograph by Abner Kingman, January 31, 2009

