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VIKING and Her Descendants

Carrying forward a San Francisco rowing tradition

Text and photographs by Abner Kingman

In 1977, boatbuilder Gordie Nash decided that with a resurgence in recreational rowing going on around San Francisco Bay, the time was ripe for a new open-water rowing race. Competitive rowing had deep roots here, but at the time the closest modern heir to the tradition was the Funky Boat Race in Sausalito, which was a great party but not much of a race, with participants rowing all kinds of contraptions—even mattresses lashed to shipping pallets. For the 5.5-mile

course that Nash laid out for the first Open Ocean Regatta, on April 16 of that year, 24 boats competed. “The fleet bunched up and had a great race,” Nash says. “But one boat left them all behind. It was a wonderful thing to watch. It was like a Porsche racing against Volkswagens. It was one of a kind.”

That boat was VIKING. She defied easy description, but at 22’ long and 43” wide, with two rowing stations, she was reminiscent of West Coast Whitehalls but

Above— KOHLENBERG, launched in late 2010, is the latest construction inspired by a much-admired San Francisco Bay boat that has been in more or less continuous use for more than a century.



Above—VIKING, a lean and fast four-oared pulling boat built sometime around 1900, was donated to the Dolphin Club in the 1930s. Jeremy Fisher-Smith has not only replicated the boat three times but thoroughly restored the original in 1984. **Right**—THOR, which Fisher-Smith designed as a two-oared version of the Viking class, took its place in the lineup of classic rowing craft at the Dolphin Club after being commissioned in 1986.



longer and narrower. She shared some construction characteristics with Cornish gigs but didn't match their form. "VIKING had racing-shell geometry," Nash says. "The sliding seat, the foot blocks, the outriggers, the width between the oarlocks, the length of the oars—all that's been worked out for a long time in racing shells, and they carried it over into VIKING."

VIKING was—and still is—owned by the Dolphin Club (see WB Nos. 155 and 40) in Aquatic Park on San Francisco's northern waterfront. The story they like to tell in the club is that the boat was built sometime around 1900 by two cable-car carpenters as a "gentleman's pulling boat" for their own use on the Russian River. When one of them died in the 1930s, the survivor, or a family member, donated the boat to the Dolphin Club.

Until the 1977 race, the boat had gone largely unnoticed outside the Dolphin Club, even by its next-door competitor, the South End Club. But then Bill Paine, a South End Whitehall rower who didn't relish being

bested that day, began lobbying the club's leaders to commission a VIKING replica. "He was a strong character," says one of his rowing partners, Jim Flack. "He was very competitive. He had to have that boat." At last, in the fall of 1978, the club agreed to commission a construction and approached Davenport boatbuilder Bill Grunwald, who had been making a name for himself building plywood rowboats and dinghies.

Davenport is a collection of some six dozen buildings on a surprisingly desolate stretch of the California coast south of San Francisco between Half Moon Bay and Santa Cruz, where the two-lane Pacific Coast Highway skirts beaches and bluffs without passing a single harbor. The 50-mile stretch of foggy, surf-battered shoreline even today feels completely



Above—By shaping patterns for each strake, Fisher-Smith made efficient use of his planking stock. **Top right**—For Fisher-Smith, lapstrake hull construction is all about carefully fitted planks; “they are key,” he says. **Right**—KOHLENBERG was built over the same molds used 23 years earlier for the construction of THOR.



isolated from the hordes clogging the freeways in Silicon Valley and San Jose, which lie just over the mountains to the east.

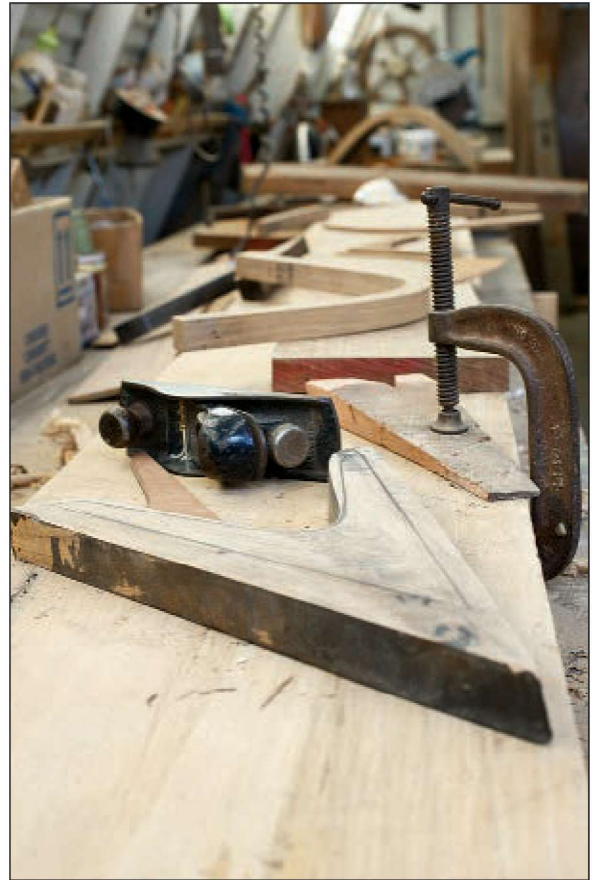
At the south end of the town, which is separated from the shore by the highway and railroad tracks, a 50' x 100' shed built on a framework of redwood poles housed Aeolus Boats, the company Grunwald founded in the early 1960s (see WB No. 37). As the rowing renaissance took hold, he was turning out a steady stream of plywood rowboats built to a variety of designs. However, Grunwald declined the club's invitation to build this traditional boat, suggesting instead that his young employee, Jeremy Fisher-Smith, take on the project.

Fisher-Smith, then 22, agreed even though he didn't fully understand what the boat's design and construction would entail. The project would be far more complicated than anything he had worked on before. Yet the replica he completed in 1979 had a profound effect on his career as a boatbuilder. During the next 30 years, he had several more opportunities to revisit the design, and his most recent construction based on the type was launched in the fall of 2010.

In 1976, when he was 19 years old, Fisher-Smith had dropped by Grunwald's shop to have a look around. Grunwald happened to be looking for help and offered him a job on the spot.

Fisher-Smith had dropped out after a year at UC-Santa Barbara, foreseeing that he would never conform to a life “in a white shirt with a tie behind a desk.” Relying on his high school woodshop skills, he was scraping by as a carpenter in Mill Valley just north of San Francisco, but he was also hanging around the docks in nearby Sausalito. “I was being drawn there. There were so many characters and so much excitement for me. There were all these young hippies building boats. They were cutting up these big chunks of Port Orford cedar and spiking them together with big galvanized spikes. It was like the 19th century.”

Grunwald's job offer came with free housing in an old carriage house behind the shop. “It was built out of vertical slats of tongue-and-groove fir that sat on the ground and got shorter and shorter as the bottom rotted off,” Fisher-Smith says. “There was no water and no electricity. The toilet was over on the old back porch



Top left—Fisher-Smith used Port Orford cedar planking, Oregon white oak frames, and a purpleheart inner keel in constructing KOHLENBERG's hull. **Left**—Careful attention to proportion, fit, and detailing pay homage to the aesthetics of the original VIKING. **Above**—A doorskin pattern has been used to mark the breasthook's shape on a just-right grown crook of Oregon white oak.



of a hotel that had burned down. To bathe, we had a 15-gallon aluminum army cook pot that we heated on a fire in the yard. Because I was lean, I could sit down in it and take a hot tub with my arms and legs hanging out. I've never taken hot showers for granted since."

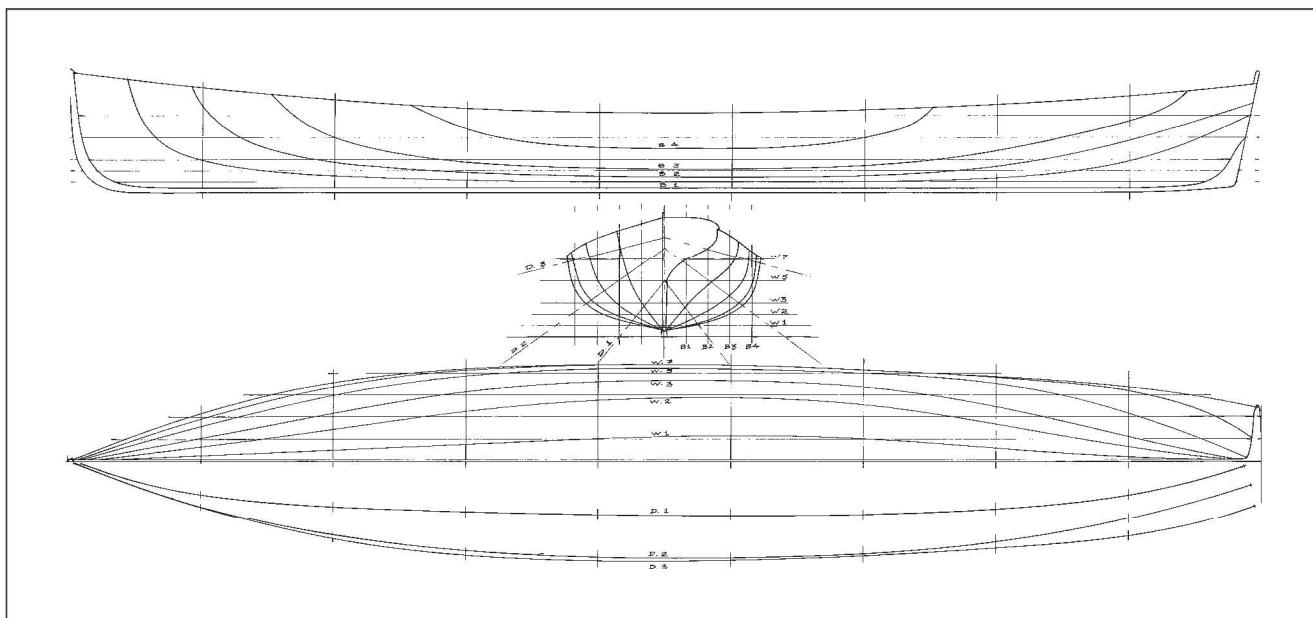
They worked six days a week. Most of the time it was Grunwald and Fisher-Smith working away, each on his own project, building one of Grunwald's designs. On Saturdays, however, they took a long lunch and welcomed wooden-boat aficionados. "Grunwald's wife would send a little loaf cake in. We'd all sit around, have a nice lunch, and eat cake, and drink instant coffee, and talk to people who came to see us. There was this little group of enthusiasts, but we weren't all of the same ilk. There were people into canoes, kayaks, whatever."

Alone in the evenings, Fisher-Smith devoured books about wooden boat building. "I'd go home in my shack and read. That's what I did. I didn't know anybody there for a long time. The books I was reading were about these old designs that were made by guys on the beach. They would go out into the forest, cut a tree down, mill it down into planks, season the planks, hand-plane them

to thickness—taking materials out of the forest and coming up with this beautiful thing, elegant, shapely, so fine. I was yearning to know that feeling."

At the time, all of Fisher-Smith's boats had been built of plywood, but within a year of starting work with Grunwald, he had his first opportunity to branch out into traditional construction. A woman brought in a dilapidated lapstrake yacht tender that had belonged to her father to ask if it could be rebuilt. It was beyond repair, but Fisher-Smith offered to build a replica. "It gave me a sense of how valuable that process could be as an education, because you have to thoroughly digest the boat in order to reproduce it," he says.

At the time of the South End Club's overture, Fisher-Smith had only recently cut his teeth on the lapstrake tender. But he jumped at the chance for another replica project. "I would say yes to anything at that point," Fisher-Smith says. "I took it on without the skills to do it. I had never done anything like it. I was totally excited. I was 22 years old. I was ready to take the 'next class'—I was going to school on



In 1986, Fisher-Smith designed a variation on the original VIKING, only this time for a single oarsman instead of a pair. The first of these long and lean boats was THOR, commissioned by the South End Rowing Club. In 2009, the Dolphin Club commissioned a matching single. The singles are 18' LOA with a beam of 3'1", compared to VIKING's 22' x 3'7".

this boat. The price I came up with was a total joke. I think I charged \$2,800."

Fisher-Smith spent an entire night in the Dolphin Club poring over VIKING, taking measurements and studying her construction. Even though the boat wasn't in good condition, it was love at first sight. "It was tired. The bottom was all out of shape. They had added frames as the old ones failed. A lot of the rivets had worn through. It was a tired old boat, but even so.... That boat has so much grace." Both clubs had fleets of a dozen or so boats, but at the time, Fisher-Smith says, "All the boats were worn out. I think racing had pretty much died out. At that point the boats were used for exercise rowing," and to accompany the club's many recreational open-water swimmers.

Still yearning after the romantic ideal of taking a project from timber harvest to launching, Fisher-Smith set off on a wood safari. He went to a Langlois, Oregon, mill that had supplied Port Orford cedar to the Sausalito hippies. "My 18-year-old brother and I drove up there in my '47 Ford pickup. I selected as many vertical-grain flitches as I could load on the truck. Coming home it was so foggy my brother was running the spotlight up on the roof."

Back in Davenport, Fisher-Smith lofted the replica on sheets of painted hardboard and set out to build a boat that would be far more complicated than anything he had yet worked on. "At that time," he says, "the shop had no power tools except one tiny little bandsaw from the 1920s, and a tablesaw, lousy little 10", with a blade angle that would constantly change while you were cutting." He had the 1¼"-thick planks resawn at a nearby lumberyard and bought and rebuilt an antique 13" thickness planer. He had his books, Saturday lunch conversations, and Grunwald's experience

to learn from, but he was otherwise operating in a vacuum. He learned by trial and error.

He had trouble fitting several planks, which even after steaming would crack as he hung them. "It takes a while to perceive something accurately," Fisher-Smith says. "I hadn't fully digested all the information that was available in VIKING. So, I went back and looked some more, and I saw things a little better." He discovered that several of the planks had been carved, not bent, to shape. "It takes a lot more work to do the planks this way," he says, "but it makes the boat more curvaceous, instead of faceted. This boat only has seven planks per side, because it's narrow, but it helps so much to have the curved planks, they make the boat look so sculptural."

After months of long hours, he completed the boat, named VALHALLA, in 1979, and Paine himself came to pick her up. "He was excited about it; he was inspired. He was competitive, and he was a brute of a guy. He looked like Bluto from Popeye. He was about 280 lbs. He was a rugby player. His legs were like tree trunks. They called him 'The Animal.'"

That year and the next, Paine, rowing with Eddie Blum, dominated open-water races all over the state. Competitive West Coast rowers took note, including those at the South End Club, where more members started reserving the boat. As the demand increased, the club concluded it needed a second replica, which it commissioned Fisher-Smith to build in 1982.

At that time, Fisher-Smith was still living in the carriage house, which remained much the same although it now boasted electricity and a rudimentary floor over the dirt. His boatbuilding skills, however, had evolved



Top left—Fisher-Smith matched the construction details and scantlings of the original VIKING's hull but gave the new boat its own identity in such things as seat details. **Left**—Following the Bay Area rowing club tradition, the new boat's name is carved into her seat back. **Above**—KOHLENBERG's quarter knees are through-riveted into place.

considerably since VALHALLA, and he approached the second replica with a more sophisticated eye. "It's a hundred percent better in the finish. It's a much finer-built boat. I did a lot of things wrong on the first boat. If you look at it, you can see it's a lot cruder in form and finish."

When Fisher-Smith delivered the second boat in 1983, South End rowers Jim Flack and Scott Ellsworth had teamed up and were training five days a week. "We just drove each other," Flack says. "You had to show up come hell or high water. We went out on mornings that we wouldn't go out on today, just because we were determined—what we called 'victories at sea,' the slamming-destroyer-in-the-North-Atlantic kind of scene." Flack and Ellsworth began winning all the major open-water races. With two new boats in addition to the original, what was becoming known as the "Viking class" had become the undisputed leader in open-water racing.

The original VIKING, however, was at the brink. Nash himself recognized that fact when he used the hull to make a fiberglass version. "I took a mold off the original boat, which meant I got its good qualities and its not-so-good qualities," he says. The boat was showing its age. "It looked great, it had a beautiful sheer, it was real seaworthy, it had a good turn of speed. It also had a little pull to port, and the ends were sagging. The keel wasn't straight." At last, in 1984, Bill Walden, the Dolphin Club member who won the first Open Ocean

Regatta in 1977, asked Fisher-Smith to restore her.

Fisher-Smith calls the project an important step in his development as a boatbuilder. "I didn't really get to know it well until I took it apart. You can feel the guy putting it together. You can see his tool marks. It was great taking it apart—scary and excellent. I was really proud of that, because restoration is a whole different game than building new. It's a great challenge to figure out how to come out with something that is still the original boat. I tried to save as much as I could."

VIKING continued to inspire admirers. Fisher-Smith built a third replica in 1985, this time for a South End Club member who wanted a boat of his own because he was having trouble getting access to the two popular VIKING class boats at the club. And in 1986, the same club took the concept one step further, commissioning Fisher-Smith to adapt the hull for a single rower, something Paine had envisioned as a natural extension of the class. Fisher-Smith was then 10 years into his career, and he knew the boat as intimately as anyone. By then, he had also designed a few boats of his own. "I think that's naturally one of the avenues of expression that present themselves," he says. "If you were playing guitar, you might want to try writing a song."

The challenge in adapting the design for a single oarsman was to match not only the look but also the performance qualities of the two-person VIKING. He drew an 18' single with a 37" beam, and he spent a lot of time making sure that the rowing ergonomics matched the ideal exhibited in the original boat. Fisher-Smith



Top left—Varnish shows the beauty of contrasting woods and fine joinery as the pieces converge at the bow. **Left**—D.S.B.C. marks KOHLENBERG as a fleet boat of the Dolphin Swimming and Boating Club, which was established in San Francisco in 1877.

Above—With attentive care, the new boat will join its predecessors in having a long life; the original VIKING was launched about 1900 and is still going strong after a 1984 restoration by Fisher-Smith.

delivered what Flack calls “obviously just the sweetest little boat ever. Anybody who likes rowing on San Francisco Bay recognizes that THOR is just the cat’s meow. It just practically rows itself. It’s just perfectly set up. It just glides. It’s very heavy in actual fact, but it’s an easy boat to row. It’s immensely easier than any other single we have, any of the other Whitehall singles.”

Before long, however, open-water racing underwent a sea change as builders adopted lightweight fiberglass construction. The Viking class’s racing heyday was over.

Fisher-Smith struck out on his own, living in Santa Cruz while working in Davenport for two more years in shop space he rented from Grunwald while generating all his own custom boat work. In 1988, Fisher-Smith decided it was time to leave. “I dropped out of college and then dropped right into this situation, and stayed 12 years. And it was total immersion, six days a week, nothing but small wooden boats for 12 years. My life was so sheltered down there, I didn’t feel well rounded. I was excited about stepping out and working on some big boats.” Since then, Fisher-Smith has worked on many boats, large and small. He married, had kids, moved to rural western Marin County, and took over a boatyard in the tiny town of Marshall on the shore of Tomales Bay.

The Viking-class boats no longer win open-class races, but they have remained the pinnacle of the wooden boat fleets at the Dolphin and South End clubs. Members spend months training in other boats to earn the privilege of taking out one of the prized Vikings. Lyrinda Snyderman, who rows the original VIKING with her husband, Neal, says, “We just love to think of the history and feel a connection with it. Also, the beauty of the wood and its seaworthiness. There’s something special about going out in the Vikings. It’s not so much a racing boat now. But the Viking is nice and seaworthy. You’ve got good freeboard, and it tracks well. And it’s rigged perfectly.”

Todd Oppenheimer and a group of like-minded Viking class devotees at the Dolphin Club bought the one privately owned Viking replica and donated it to the club. Then, after a much-loved member of the club died in 2006, Oppenheimer started a campaign to build a one-person Viking class boat as a memorial, to be named KOHLENBERG. This would round out the fleet so that each club would have two doubles and a single. The club went once again to Fisher-Smith.

Fisher-Smith says that when the order came for the new boat in 2009, he had to remember how he built the first one-person Viking 23 years earlier. “I had to



Above—KOHLENBERG's launching brought the Viking class to six boats, four doubles (two of which are seen here) and two singles. The Dolphin Club and the South End Rowing Club each have two doubles and a single. **Left**—With her rowing outriggers and sliding seat, the Viking single closely matches the rowing ergonomics of the original boat.

go back and take some patterns off the original, so in a way I was replicating my own work. I felt like I couldn't do this in my sleep. I had to be conscious."

Electing to build the boat upside-down, Fisher-Smith constructed a ladder frame out of 2x12s. "I mounted my molds, feeling glib that I still had them—blew the dust off." He had built the first boat the same way. "You get to fit the planks looking down on them, and when you lay a plank it naturally drapes on the boat instead of sagging off. On a lapstrake boat planking fits are almost everything. They are key."

He fashioned a white oak keel and inner stem, a purpleheart hog piece, and a mahogany transom. Although he still favors local woods, he finds it harder and harder to find suitable stock, while lumber dealers have ready, although ultimately unsustainable, supplies of high-quality tropical woods. Fisher-Smith says that finding stock will only become more challenging over time, and—ironically—engineered wood products might ultimately provide an answer.

For planking, he made patterns out of 3/16" doorskin. "They were easy to make and they are a very accurate way to lay out on your stock," which in his case consisted of 1 1/4" x 12" x 19' cedar boards, which were resawn to produce 5/16"-thick planks. "They have all kinds of inconsistencies. They've got knots, bark inclusions,

swirls, bad spots, you name it. And you've got to thread through those with your plank, so that when you're done it looks like it's pristine." He used quarter-sawn Port Orford cedar, which yielded planking stock of nearly vertical grain.

Since the original VIKING proved herself for many decades and her restoration took her into a new century, he aspired to match her construction standards. "It's a lot to live up to, adding boats to those collections at the clubs," he says. And given that he has invested more than 1,000 hours building KOHLENBERG and she is "worth as much as an SUV," both he and the club hope the boat will last a long time.

The days of neglect at both clubs are long over, and the chances of a boat surviving for 100 years or more are now much improved. The Dolphin Club has an in-house boatbuilder, and both clubs have a weekly "boat night" where members contribute to the maintenance of the boats (see *Currents*, WB No. 217). Reuben Hechanova, president of the Dolphin Club, says that even though members join for many reasons and quite a few are more interested in swimming than in rowing, the boats remain the core of the club's identity and their care is a source of pride. When you walk into either of the clubs, the wooden boats hold the stage, and the Vikings steal the show. 🐋

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