

The Boats CRONIN and HUGHES

A Research Exercise

March 1, 2020

The Dolphin Swimming & Boating Club of San Francisco is extremely proud of its fleet of historic wooden row boats, some over a hundred years old, one dated 1887, but still used daily. These boats are mostly sliding seat lapstrake singles or doubles and durable enough for the rough conditions of San Francisco Bay. Volunteer club members, directed by a master boatbuilder, keep alive the fading skills required to repair and restore these aging wooden boats.

The fleet consists of over twenty such boats, and the history of each is well-documented in terms of the original builder, date, place, materials, specifications, etc., along with a log of maintenance and restorations. However, two boats, CRONIN and HUGHES, have lacked such complete records. Over the years the identity of their original builder had been lost. Their stern boards display the same date, 1938. Unfortunately, Dolphin Club Board meeting minutes from that era are missing, and the publication of *Dolphin Log* newsletters didn't begin until 1949.

This article will describe a recent project to uncover missing details about these valuable boats using public sources and a few remaining club records.

Both boats are nearly identical Dolphin Club lapstrake doubles with sliding seats, each 18-foot-long, 54-inch beam, and weighing about 380 pounds. They are named for important Dolphin Club members. James J. Cronin was a member from 1891 to 1956 and club president in 1906. Lawton Hughes was a member from 1919 to 1982, president in 1938 and 1966, plus a champion oarsman and rowing coach.

The first research breakthrough came a few years ago while digging through the club's paper archives and finding a contract dated July 8, 1936 to build two boats. Technical specifications matched the two boats now of interest. However, who was this person, O. E. Irving, contracted to build them? The club's cash books, handwritten records of the Financial Secretary, indeed show subsequent installment payments being made to "O. E. Irving." City directories and U.S. Census records disclosed that an Olville Eden Irving, age 46, was living on Ashbury Street. He was a carpenter, a furniture maker, but not a hint of having boat building qualifications. He wasn't a club member, and not finding any other connection, the matter was set aside.

By chance, attention then shifted to Bill Richards, a known builder of a few Dolphin Club boats, although he wasn't thought to be involved with the CRONIN and HUGHES. William Jennings Richards was born in 1880 in Penance, Cornwall, England and immigrated to San Francisco by way of British Columbia in 1916 with his wife, Hilda. In the 1920 U.S. Census his occupation was "Porter," but for the 1930 and