

Remembering When ...

Our History

One Old Old Boat - Continued

Last week we covered the ancient history of the Francis boat.

The more recent history begins with my uncle George Francis Sheridan who was born in the Kalamazoo lighthouse in 1911. His father – my grandfather - George Henry Sheridan was at that time the keeper of the light. Last week I visited with Uncle George in Detroit. I asked George – now a spry 94 years of age – what he remembered of the Francis boat. His voice and memory clear and sharp—he smiled and launched into his recollection: “It always lay in the sand just to the east, in the low area by the old fish smokehouse. Until it was brought into town about 1930 I had never seen it in the water. The wooden parts had pretty much weathered and rotted but the metal had hardly a rust spot,” he said.

Between Uncle George’s recollections and further research the next chapter of the Francis boat history began to unfold. The Society archives contained photos and a 1973 letter from John Bird to his niece Jane Van Dis relating his recollections. John (born in 1899) was a younger brother of Carl Bird, local boat builder. John relates in his letter: “the boat was dug from the sand near the old Saugatuck lighthouse by Carl, your Dad and I and assisted by one or two Sea Scouts. In the winter of 1930-31, we skidded her across the ice on the old harbor lagoon and took her to Carl’s shop by sleigh, towed by a car, where new wooden parts were fabricated and installed. The letter also relates that Captain Leonard Britton named her the Gallinipper, or “giant mosquito” (She was actually the first of two Sea Scout Gallinippers – the second was powered and appeared about 1950 but was not the same boat). The Gallinipper was given to the local Sea Scout troop who at that time were an active group and thrilled to have the boat.

By the late 1930s the lifeboat had been converted by Carl Bird to a sailing lifeboat with a center-board trunk and steel center-board, and stepped masts creating a modified schooner rig. Due to hull design and weight she was not a great success as a sailing vessel and by the middle 1940s was no longer in use.

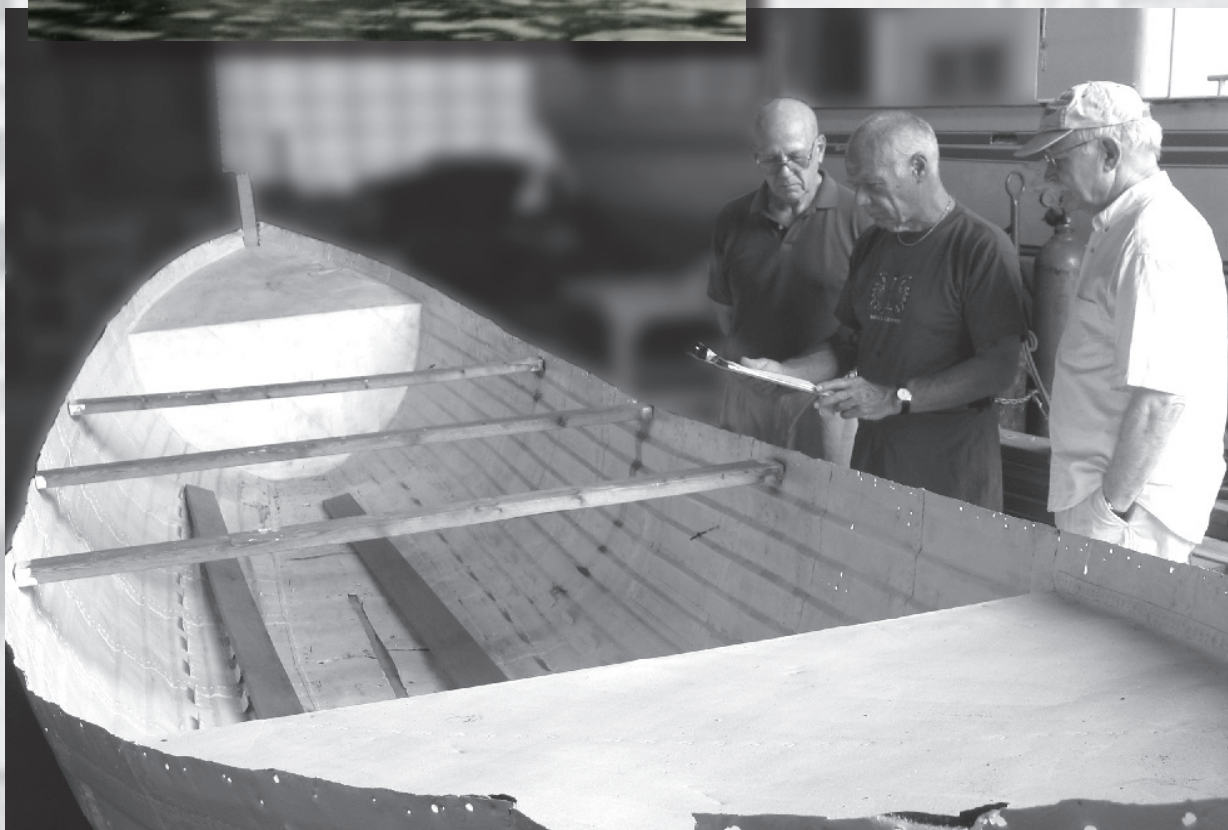
In 1958 Cary Bird and David Van Dis, resolved to restore the Francis boat again and started work. Unfortunately, Cary Bird died at the start of the project and the work was shelved for the next 45 years. Now four decades later the restoration – financed by the SDHS and interested individuals—is proceeding, and wonderful bit of our history is being preserved.

By Jack Sheridan

Top left - Gallinipper under sail ca 1939.

Top right - Cary Bird, Abbott Davis and unknown crew member on Lake Michigan ca 1939

Bottom - Dean Batchelor, Dick Lyons and Al Lyon review half completed plans July 2005.

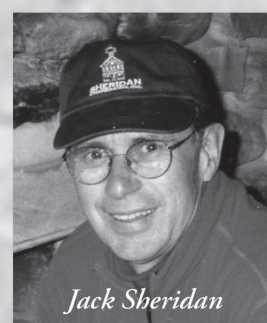


The Remembering When feature is the creation of Jack Sheridan and Jim Schmiechen of the Saugatuck-Douglas Historical Society. We remind our readers that this year’s SDHS Pumphouse Museum exhibit titled “Lincoln’s Ready-Made Soldiers: Saugatuck Area Men in the Civil War” is now open. The historic museum is located on the west side of the Kalamazoo River at the foot of Mt. Baldhead. It is open daily, noon to 4 p.m. until Labor Day, and then on fall weekends. There is no admission charge.

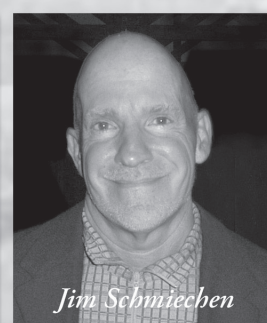
In addition, special presentations featuring various historical topics will be presented at the museum on Tuesdays and Saturdays, 11 a.m. to noon, beginning June 21.

We welcome your comments on Remembering When. Call 269 857-7901, email us at sdhistory@accn.org or write to Box 617 Douglas, MI 49406. SDHS historical images can be seen on the SDHS web site at www.sdhistory.com and all historical photos are available for purchase in print sizes up to 12x17.

Our historical image database is growing through your contributions. We scan your old photos—you keep the originals—and we then provide you with a CD of your digitized images.



Jack Sheridan



Jim Schmiechen