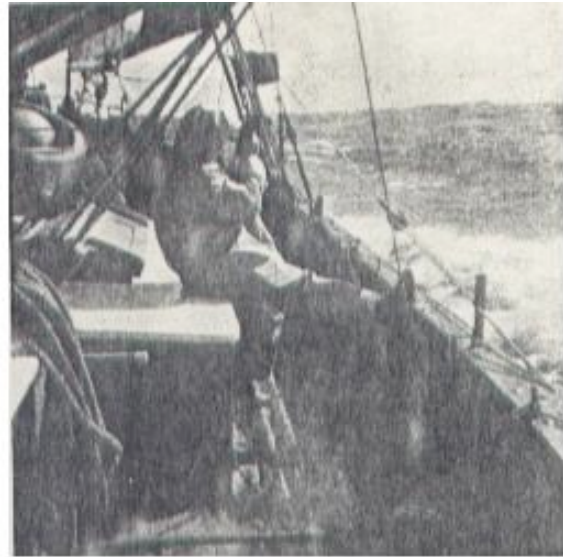


OUR BIG WOODEN BOAT

PART IV



By Dottie Fletcher

□ Three years and nine months after leaving the Pacific Northwest, Seattle, we were back in the Pacific. A bit more southerly to be sure but never-the-less a bit proud of ourselves. Little did we know what lay in store for us.

We left Taboga and headed for the beautiful Isla de Las Perlas ... the Pearl Islands, so named because of the thriving pearl industry at one time. A native fellow told us, however, that there had been no pearls since World War II when the Japanese put some chemicals into the water which killed the pearl oysters. The pearl beds are just now starting to come back.

We had a delightful time in those islands diving for shells. Our collection was enriched by so many new varieties. Four or five species of murex shells, tuns, cowries of many kinds,

trivias, wentletraps, sundials, cones and the beautiful olive shells. We waited two extra weeks for a low tide to dive for olives with a local shell collector named Zacharias. Albert did well; I never found a one.

We had lots of fish, oysters, clams, and limpets to add to our rice. Here in the Las Perlas the natives spoke Spanish so could converse a little. It was the rainy season and it certainly did rain a lot. This caused a great deal of murkiness in the water which also caused us to be much more cautious in diving as we couldn't see the sharks. We spent almost a month in these islands before we were off to Costa Rica loaded down with lots more smelly shells.

It was almost steady rain the entire trip to Costa Rica. To make it even more miserable our butane regulator went beserk and leaked out all of our butane. We foolishly had no back up

cooking equipment and our stores were mostly rice, beans, pastas and oatmeal. Prices were very prohibitive in Panama where we had planned to restock our canned goods. We discovered raw oatmeal with chopped onions and a little touch of mayonnaise was pretty darn good.

We first stopped at Golfito where we had an exciting, unexpected reunion with Mark and Marion Temple on the motor yacht *Marionette*. We had rebuilt our first boat, *Serenity*, in the same yard in San Diego as they had built *Marionette*. That was in 1969 and we had not seen them since. We also had another exciting, unexpected happening. When we went to the authorities to get our *zarpe* for Costa Rica we discovered that our pilot through the Canal Zone had not given us clearance papers.

We had not thought of them and up to that point, the management of the Canal Zone had been so very efficient it never occurred to us they could forget something that important. Thanks to Mark Temple and his fluent Spanish and personal recommendation we finally received a *zarpe*. We were invited to a lovely buffet dinner aboard the yacht *Galaxie* one evening and sent on our way loaded with coconuts and bananas from some American farmers there. We did have our fish net stolen but they probably needed it more than we as we were heading soon for sea.

A stop off at Quepos and then on to Golfo de Nicoya and first stop -- Joe Hills place Hacienda Nicoyana where we had another reunion with an old friend from Seattle, Curt Gahn on his cutter, *Sea Witch*.

We sailed to Puntarenas and did our provisioning for what we expected to be a long slow trip to California. We had decided to sail westerly several hundred miles and then head north. We weren't kidding ourselves about it being an easy trip though since the bottom of the boat was foul, our sails were near to being in tatters and the wind definitely was not in our favor. At this point our funds were not exactly overflowing the coffers either and supplies such as

canned goods were very expensive.

We purchased 100 pound sacks of flour, rice and sugar. Dry beans of every description were loaded aboard as were as many canned luxuries as we could squeeze from our budget. Butane bottles were filled (a sack of charcoal also), fuel and water tanks were topped out, and as many fresh vegetables and fruits as we could possibly use before spoiling were loaded along with some new fishing gear and we were ready for sea.

Five days short of a month, we sailed away from Hacienda Nicoyana waving fond farewell to new friends and old and started on the longest trip we had ever made in *Duen*. We certainly had no conception at that point just how long it was going to be. It was November 23, 1974 a very memorable date for us.

We motored to clear Cabo Blanco and to charge batteries and then we closed old "Perky" down. We knew we were going to have to conserve all our fuel for emergencies and harbor entrances and make the best of the very light winds we were expecting.

The first two days we caught so many fish we had to stop fishing. Just no way to keep it all. The wind was and the wind was not and we got our exercise putting sails up and down.

Our fourth night at sea we had a new experience. We

were laying dead in the water, absolutely no wind, and Albert awoke in the night to a strange scratching sound. He dashed updecks, sans clothes, to investigate and there scraping against the hull investigating us was a huge turtle. He crept silently below and awoke Michael and the two of them plotted their attack. I awoke and wondering where Albert was, got up and went above. As I stepped from the foc'sle entry I couldn't believe my eyes. The first thing I saw were two bare fannies sticking up in the air as Albert and Michael crawled on hands and knees toward the stern, occasionally peeping stealthily over the side. "What in the world," I managed to get out before two heads turned, eyes glaring and two mouths said, "Shhhh" in unison. Then I was really curious so down I went on hands and knees to join the parade. After what seemed like an eternity of waiting the opportune moment arrived and Michael gaffed the turtle through the shell and Albert grabbed the left front flipper and with a gigantic grunt and tug all three flopped over the bulwarks and into the boat. We just left it on its' back for the night and went below to bed. Turtles seem to become tranquilized lying on their backs. The next morning was spent cleaning turtle, a very bloody process but the delicious meat was well worth it.

About our fifth night out, still lying dead with no wind we had one of the most terrifying experiences we have ever had on the boat. It was 2115 or 9:15 p.m. and we were all going to bed. We were not near a shipping lane and not sailing so we retired as if at an anchorage. One becomes so attuned to the sound of sea and wind that the slightest change awakens you. At any rate Michael went up on deck for one last check and after a few minutes called down to “come up and see all the porpoises or killer whales or something.” We had all seen our share of porpoises so queried him as to the exact nature of the beasts. He said, “Well, they are spouting like whales.” We all made a mad dash up and sure enough they were killer whales. Lots and lots of them. They would get in formations of five or six and swim directly at the boat swerving away about two feet from it. They did this over and over. After about 15 minutes of watching these very organized pseudo-attacks the great animals actually surrounded the boat. They seemed to be conversing as they spouted and made strange high-pitched noises. They stayed like that for about 20 minutes, which seemed like 20 hours to us. We had, as silently as possible, been getting our survival kit up on deck, our water bottles tied to the dinghy and dinghy ready to

put over. Albert had brought up his 30-06 thinking to keep them away from the rudder if they started attacking. The book *Survive The Savage Sea* was strong in our memories. Husky as our hull was we had no doubt that three or four of these huge mammals hitting at once could easily spring a plank. As I said earlier they swam away after about twenty minutes. We were visited by them or other killer whales one other night as we sat becalmed. They never did strike the boat. Later we saw a huge pack of them chasing a big whale. Evidently that is what they thought the Duen was, a huge whale.

From the moment we left until December 27th it was a battle for every mile we made. Days were totally becalmed with the sea like a mirror. The swells made life miserable with rocking and rolling. It seemed we even got used to that. When the sea is calm one sees so much more. Packs of billfish, usually three or four, would suddenly jump and flash through the water in hot pursuit of some poor victim. Doradoes put on a constant show around the boat flashing their beautiful colors. Turtles surfaced to sun and we even saw a lone sea-snake, its brilliant black and yellow body glistening against the calm sea. That was at least 300 miles from the nearest land.

The children played in the dinghy mounted on the center of the cabin top, “fishing” from it by the hour. They never seemed to tire of playing in the dinghy though we did play tag, hide and seek, follow the leader, and just plain ran around the decks. At three and one half and five years old, the energy build-up is terrific. Every day Albert would have a drawing hour and draw a picture for each one of them of whatever they thought up. Then they would color it. By the end of the trip the main saloon was practically covered with the children’s pictures as well as their cabin.

Christmas was celebrated with light winds and a huge tray of cookies and gingerbread men that Sandra and I had baked while the children were sleeping. We had barbecued marlin, rice and turtle gravy, and jello with canned pineapple. We hung the children’s stockings and stuffed them with a few little presents we had purchased in Costa Rica. Shane’s presents included two new fishing lures. He hardly waited to unwrap his other presents but dashed up on deck to try out his new lures. He was junior Issac Walton. About 20 minutes later we heard Shanes horrified scream, “Shark, shark.” We ran updecks and sure enough his shiny new lure had attracted about a 6 foot shark.

Shane was hysterical at the thought of losing his new gear to a shark. We always figured the children were afraid to fall overboard because of the sharks. They were very careful and the sharks were always there.

On the 26th of December we had an abrupt change in the weather. Squalls, rain and wind, wind that was extremely erratic. Our poor tired mainsail ripped out. We got it down and bent on our old tiny mainsail from the days of ketch rigging. How dinky it looked. Even with that little sail we were moving on. Then on the 27th the wind died and while we were debating whether or not to take down the main it came in a gust from the opposite direction. We jibed immediately (controlled) but the little sail couldn't take it and ripped into shreds. What a mess. Pouring rain, blowing very hard, big seas rolling us around, and the ripped sail cracking like gunshots.

We finally managed to get all sails down and ran south all night under bare poles. It finally outran us and the wind died but left us with big rough seas and a lot of miles to make back. The only good thing about that hard night's run was that the speed we were making combined with rough seas cleaned most of the gooseneck barnacles from the bottom. It had become absolutely solid with them.

We sewed with that big old main-sail stretched from stern cabin to main saloon. All four of us sewed and sewed, and by the afternoon of the 28th we got our sail bent back on. What a relief not to be rocking and rolling so much.

We gathered about 25 gallons of rain water from that deluge. It was quite palatable but we saved it for clothes and bodies as we still had plenty for cooking and drinking. It was rain and wind then for awhile and we finally felt we were on our way.

During that strong wind our main halyard started to part up at the blocks by the spreaders. Due to our habit of keeping a careful watch on the rigging aloft Michael caught it in the nick of time. We got the main down and replaced the throat and peak halyards. A pretty rocky job in a good wind. We also repaired our staysail halyard and mended the staysail.

We sailed quite nicely until January 13th. Lots of rain and wind, mostly strong. Even with our little sails we managed a few days of 160 miles. Then on the 13th the wind stopped and we sat once again becalmed. On the radio we heard there were blizzards in Central USA, tornadoes in Florida, earthquakes two days in a row in California and gales in the North Pacific. So perhaps being becalmed was the better end of the weather stick.

Our navigation told us we were 28 degrees 55 minutes north 129 degrees 30 minutes west and that was a long way from California after 51 days at sea.

We were, at this point, rationing our water and our food supplies had been dwindling fast. We were down to rice, sugar, two cans of tomato paste, pink beans for one meal and instant coffee. The fishing had been terrible since we hit the colder climates. Being becalmed in cold weather was definitely a bit different than in the tropics.

Finally on the 18th of January we got wind and a fish. What a feast we had with our 7 pound albacore. With the wind lots of rain squalls making our watches cold and miserable. Since the 13th of January, eating only two small bowls of rice per person per day, we had true cause for celebration when on the 20th we caught two more fish. By the morning of the 22nd we figured we were about 800 miles straight out from San Diego and we had exactly 15 pounds of rice left and not too much water. With the two little children aboard we were all very concerned about their health to say nothing about thoughts of our own starvation.

At this point we had not seen a ship since before Christmas but Albert made the decision we would stop one and ask for supplies if one came along.



Dottie and Albert pose by this proud but unfortunate catch. The marlin hooked up to the ship's trolling line.



Kids will be kids, even at sea. Duen had more room for such games than the average cruising yacht.

Miracle of miracles. Not 30 minutes after his decision as I sat on watch I saw a huge pillar of black smoke on the horizon, for us immediately.

Even then we challenged our own decision. Should we or should we not try and stop it. It was such a defeating thing to do knowing we just did not have it together. But ego and vanity took back seats to health and appetites and we shot off our daylight flares, made a smudge pot of rubber swimfins, hoisted our flag upside down and fired 10 rounds from the 30-06. The ship crossed our bow so close we could read the name and kept on going. We simply couldn't believe it. I ran to log the position and name ready to report it if we ever made land. Then it started turning. No easy job to stop a ship at sea.

We immediately got our dinghy over the side and Albert and Michael started rowing for the ship. By the time they approached, made fast and climbed the long jacob's ladder, Albert who had rowed, nearly passed out from exertion. Our nine day rice diet had weakened us more than we realized. When the Captain and the engineer realized the seriousness of our plight their generosity was overwhelming. We offered to send them full payment on our arrival in the States but no bill was ever forthcoming.

Albert and Michael rowed back to the *Duen*, which Sandra and I had motored as close as was safe. Then Albert did a marvelous job of standing off beside them with long lines holding us loosely while they lowered

water hoses and filled our tank and started lowering provisions. First off the cook made and sent to us delicious turkey and beef sandwiches with real lettuce. Boy, how we gobbled those down! When the seamen, who lined the railings, saw the children, apples and oranges started coming down. Shahla and Shane sat on the cabin top eating both at once so excited were they with fresh fruit. The generosity of that ship, *Hawaii Bear* belonging to the Pacific Far East Lines, was unbelievable. It was so overwhelming that Sandra and I stood receiving it all with mingled tears and laughter. The men of the crew made up a separate contribution of such luxuries as candy bars, cigarettes, two fifths of bourbon and even bar soap.

Though it was humiliating to think that it had become a necessity, it was heartwarming to know that the law of the sea was upheld with such generosity.

The Captain confirmed Alberts' navigation which was almost exact and informed us we were surrounded by gales and tropical storm "Lola." They figured we should have wind real soon. They then steamed up their engines and were off leaving us sitting still totally becalmed.

What a celebration then. With water on board we all took chilly baths on deck and even washed our hair in fresh water. Then we proceeded to have a feast.

Whatever happened to all that wind we will never know. There we sat for 4-1/2 more days and then came the wind. True to tradition it came in gale form. At least a Force 8 we figured with waves breaking over the decks and saturating most everything below.

Immediately four mast hoops broke and the shiv in the top block of the gaff jaws came loose and went flying. We managed to get the sail down and replace the block and refasten the sail with some quickly spliced rope hoops.

Until the 30th it was wind, squalls of rain, rough seas and cold. The afternoon of the 30th the winds started getting fluky and then stopped. Sails down and up again with light breezes. We

should have known by then something strange was going to happen. I was at the helm when the winds came and how it ever happened I will never know but I allowed an accidental jibe. Michael got his hand smashed but luckily the swinging boom just missed his head. Albert was on the ratlines and I let out a scream. He hung on and didn't get hurt when the boom swung hard against the shrouds but our tired old mainsail again ripped into shreds. We finally got it down and unbent and sailed with an old red canvas jib. The winds stayed strong -- we reckoned Force 7 to 9 -- so even with no main we were moving along. My night watch that night was the hardest steering watch I have ever had. And to top it all off a huge ball of St. Elmo's fire came flashing out of the east. Albert got out of his bunk and joined me as it was my first experience with that phenomenon and I was edgy to say the least.

On February 1st having been 69 days at sea, we hoisted up our tiny mainsail from our old ketch rig which we had sewed and patched beyond recognition. A funny looking sight I'm sure we were, but thankful we had any kind of sail. From February 1st to the 7th it was extremely light winds and we thanked God many times for our food from Hawaii Bear. The winds were S & SE when we had them

instead of N & NW reported on our pilot charts. So the landfall was changing from San Diego to Santa Barbara and then to Port San Luis which is an official port of entry.

On February 7 it was drizzly rain, hazy and a tremendous amount of phosphorescence in the water. Albert figured we were about 70 miles from Port San Luis. We started seeing jet planes, ships and seals and then the fog came. At 0530, February 8, 1975 in dense, dense fog it was "Land Ho." Michael was on watch and heard the breakers before he saw the shore. Out with the direction finder and Albert figured we were just north of Morro Bay.

Around 0800 fog lifted a bit and we spotted Morro Rock -- right on! We decided to go right on past to Port San Luis and clear customs but SE winds came up and there was no fighting that, so over the bar and through the entrance to Morro with huge breakers rolling in. We tied up to a fishing boat, ran up our yellow flag and took a long look at the good old U.S.A.

The children had gone below to get their "shore-duty" clothes on and their outfits were priceless. Shane wanted to know what island it was. California was just another island to him.

As we sat waiting for some officials to clear us he started playing in the dinghy and after 78 days at sea we practically had to drag him ashore.

It was definitely the experience of a life time. The old China clippers made it from New York to China in 77 days (the record of course) so to come from Costa Rica to California taking 78 days had to be a record one we would just as soon not claim.

We found that with good fishing gear we could catch fish most of the time. On that trip we caught over 1000 pounds of fish. That included two huge marlin. Next time we would be better prepared to preserve some. The lessons learned in that length of time with three generations living on a 50-foot boat were unforgettable. The fact that the trip ended with all on board having become more patient, tolerant, loving relatives and,

best of all, close friends is proof to me that the hardships of a long sea passage are well worth the effort. Hopefully we will never again have such a slow trip as the main lesson learned was the Duen urgently needed a new rig. California was to prove the best place to accomplish the next metamorphous of *Duen*.

