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The wood trunnels fastening the Duen's lower hull planks are visible in this June 30 photo of the boat in Ketchikan



The gaff-rigged ketch Duen departs Ketchikan on June 30 to continue its voyage in Southeast Alaska.

After nearly 60 years at sea, this boat is still...

Duen just fine

By Scott Bowlen
Daily News Staff Writer

It was launched in 1939 and worked three decades for two Norwegian brothers who fished for cod and prawns in the far north Atlantic Ocean.

Then its stout pitch-pine clad hull spent many more years plowing through the oceans of the world.

The odyssey of the 50-foot gaff-rigged ketch *Duen* continued late in June when it arrived in Ketchikan on its first voyage to Southeast Alaska.

Although far away, Southeast Alaska is not unlike the *Duen's* former home in Norway.

"In a way, it's coming back to similar waters" said Michael J. Hobbis, the *Duen's* current owner and operator. "This is the first time up here and I'm just incredibly excited."

Hobbis' own sailing history is closely linked to the *Duen*, and he enjoys telling her stories.

The *Duen* was built and launched at Norway's Flekke Fjord in February of 1939.

The two brothers who owned the then sloop-rigged boat sailed it to the Lofoten Islands in the far north of Norway above the Arctic Circle.

They fished there through the 1960s, when oil was discovered off the Norwegian coast.

In an effort to modernize the fleet, the Norwegian government tried to buy out the old wooden fishing boats, said Hobbis' wife Manon.

Most of the boats bought by the government were sunk at sea. It was a testament to their solid construction that dynamite had to be used to sink some of them.

The brothers refused to sell the *Duen*, however, and lost their fishing permits as a result.

Enter Albert and Dottie Fletcher, a California couple who worked with a Norwegian man who knew about the *Duen*.

Although non-sailors, the Fletchers were looking for a change of lifestyle. They heard that the brothers were getting on in age and might be willing to sell the *Duen*.

An arrangement was struck in 1971. The Fletchers sold everything they had, bought the *Duen* sight-unseen and then traveled to Norway to take possession of the boat, said Manon Hobbis.

The Fletchers re-rigged it themselves and learned to sail there in Norway- two processes that resulted in more tales than can be told here.

They then departed Norway for years of sailing the world's oceans. Ignoring modern electronics, they navigated entirely by sextant.

In 1982, Michael Hobbis found the Fletchers and the *Duen* at an atoll in the South Pacific Ocean.

Hobbis had been hitchhiking from boat to boat while working

on a thesis about long-distance sailing. He was deeply impressed by the Fletchers, the *Duen* and their sailing lifestyle.

"Right then, I knew what I wanted to do with my life," he said.

The Fletchers later hired Hobbis as a tutor for their son, and then as first mate of the *Duen*.

And then they remained in contact after Hobbis left to run a sailing training program for at-risk youths on the East Coast. They were to meet again, this time in the Caribbean.

At the time, Hobbis was looking for a traditional boat to use in the sailing program, and he found that the Fletchers were looking for a change.

Perhaps it was fate that Hobbis ended up buying the *Duen* in 1986.

The boat he purchased is a tribute to the shipwright's art.

It's outer hull is 2-1/2 inch planks of pitch pine fastened with trunnels (hickory wood nails) to 9-inch frame pieces. The inner hull is formed with 2-inch planking.

Such strong wood consecution makes for a heavy boat. Hobbis said the *Duen* weighs in at more than 50 tons.

Counting the bowsprit and gaff, the *Duen* measures in at 72 feet in overall length and 50 feet on the deck. It's beamy at 18 feet, and draws about 8 feet.

The Fletchers had transformed the boat from a sloop rig to a gaff-rigged ketch. It now carries 2,400 square feet of sail, controlled by one-half mile of line run through 58 hand-haul blocks, said Hobbis. The standing rigging was traditionally wormed, parceled and served.

And when the sails aren't up, diesel power is supplied by an old British Gardner six-cylinder engine chugging away at up to 800 RPM.

On-board accommodations include four private double cabins for guests, plus an aft cabin for crew.

It's a far cry from the sleek mega-yachts laden with gizmos and collector art.

Yet what the *Duen* does have in abundance is the honest authenticity of a working boat that's proven its worth time and again.

The name *Duen* is Norwegian for dove. Hobbis said the boat was so named because of the doves' habit of always returning.

After buying the vessel, Michael and Manon Hobbis used it for a youth sailing program, making three-week voyages through Montreal, New York, Bermuda and Haiti.

In 1987, the couple brought the vessel through the Panama Canal and arrived on the British Columbia coast the next year.

Their company, Duen Sailing Adventures Inc., is now based in Brentwood Bay near Victoria.

They currently use the *Duen* in sail training programs for youngsters during the spring and fall months, said Hobbis.

In the summers, they take passengers on wildlife explorations in the Queen Charlotte Islands, the west coast of Vancouver Island and Canada's inside passage.

New this year is the Southeast Alaska trip.

"We're really, really excited about being here in Southeast Alaska," Hobbis said, as the boat prepared to depart from the Casey Moran Float in Ketchikan.

In a later telephone interview, Manon Hobbis gave a glimpse of what it's like to have a boat such as the *Duen*.

"It's been a challenging time to own a boat like that because it needs a lot of maintenance," she said.

"But it's very dear to our hearts," she added. ❁



Michael Hobbis and his 5-year-old daughter Odette share a moment at the helm of Hobbis' 50-foot ketch *Duen* while the boat was moored June 30 at the Casey Moran float in Ketchikan.