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# Working-Class Hero

*Greetings from the bottom of the world!*

Before she's lost to decay on the West Coast, former Antarctica researchers in Maine want to save their storied *Hero*.

BY DAVID SVENSON

**BEFORE:** *Hero* served Palmer Station scientists for two decades, beginning in the late '60s.



**AFTER:** Sun Feather LightDancer bought *Hero* in 2008 and keeps her at his dock in Bay Center, Washington.

COURTESY CHARLES LAGERBOM

In 1968, as the 125-foot research vessel *Hero* slipped into the waters off South Bristol, the shakedown crew had no idea that after two decades of polar exploration, *Hero* would be left to the ebb and flow of a mucky Washington-state inlet.

"She's just moored there at the dock in Bay Center, sitting in the mud," says Charles Lagerbom, Northport, Maine, resident and president of the Antarctic Society.

The Pacific Northwest winds are a far cry from Gamage Shipyard, though the distance from Maine to Washington pales in comparison to where she's been. The 760-horsepower, diesel-powered, two-masted modified trawler, ketch-rigged, had "her ports of call in the Falkland Islands and Cape Horn," Lagerbom says. "She resupplied Palmer Station [the American research center in Antarctica] and hauled scientists around. A lot of the marine biology studies conducted onboard were cutting-edge. The late University of Maine professor John Dearborn made a name for marine biology from the *Hero*, and he sailed with the shakedown crew to Baffin Island."

*Hero* was the ideal trawler to navigate ice-strewn, frigid waters, with sharp lines that the current owner, Sun Feather LightDancer, the half Blackfoot Indian concrete handler/musician who's owned her since 2008, was first attracted to. "I saw her 15 years ago when she was a floating museum in Newport, Oregon," LightDancer says. "I let her go about



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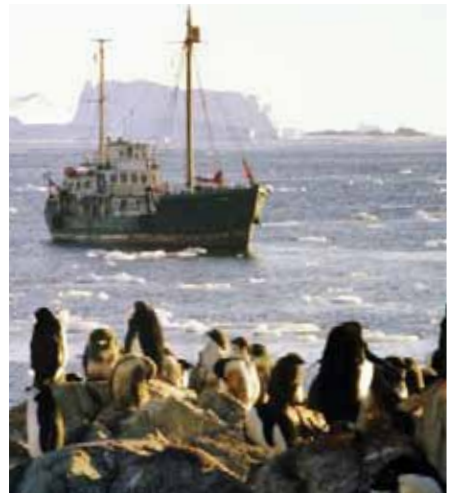
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four times before I bought her. I'm trying to sell her for \$50,000—that's how deep in the hole I am."

LightDancer has always felt drawn to strays. "I spent my childhood in Alaska, where everyone has a junk yard. One day I came across an abandoned, white Indian Chief. It was left by a Hell's Angel. That same winter I saw a white moose and buffalo. I can't help but think there's significance in all that. My father built power plants around the world; when we were in Pakistan, I fell in love with 1960s Rolls-Royces." Saving the ruins of the future "has been a dream I've been chasing since."

After 44 years and 13,896 nautical miles, from Maine to the Antarctica Peninsula, through the Straits of Magellan and the Beagle Channel, to its current dock in Bay Center, the *Hero's* accumulated her share of sea spray. "It took me a year to clean the trash off," says LightDancer. "She's simply in a Band-Aid state right now. The body has a few bad spots on the deck, noticeable from underneath, but her bones are in really good shape. Her power train went to crap from neglect. Harvey Gamage was one of the best boat builders." Built from greenheart wood, "She's like a Sherman tank."

Perhaps this is why she's lasted since her began swapping owners in 1984.

"When the National Science Foundation wanted a U.S. station on the Antarctic Peninsula, you needed something to withstand the

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ice," Lagerbom says. "Ice slices steel. Sure, wood can splinter, but the greenheart of *Hero* takes compression much better than steel. Another wooden schooner, Donald MacMillan's *Bowdoin*, made similar trips, and she's still around at Maine Maritime Museum.

"In the '80s, there was talk of replacing *Hero* with newer icebreakers and science supply ships—like the *Polar Star*, *Polar Sea*, and *Polar Duke*."

But, of course, once you've experienced *Hero*, there's no going back. "I remember a comic strip where Superman is asked, 'What makes you so super?' He says, 'A hero brings out the best in people,'" LightDancer says. "I was at a Santana show a few years ago, and he was saying the same thing about 9/11. That's what this boat's done. She brought the best out of the people who journeyed aboard her."

Back in Maine, *Hero*-less, there's still chatter on the preservation radio of the Antartic Society.

"The historian in me wants to preserve her," Lagerbom says. "She has a wonderful connection to Maine. But as an actual working vessel? There are better cost-effective platforms. But I've been scanning slides, and the more I see of *Hero*, the more I learn how wonderful she is."

As the years go by, and the value sinks farther into the Washington mud, how does Maine get back its *Hero*?

"I'm treading water," LightDancer says. "I've been praying for wisdom, and what's come to me is to save what I can, like the compass, wheel, and sails, and let her die. But the whole history is right here. The blueprints and records are right here in the boat. There was even an antique map signed by Richard Byrd and 65 other men that should have been in the Smithsonian, but it 'walked off.'"

How do you get a 300-ton trawler with two dead engines back to Maine? "It could be towed or piggy back on transport boats, like the USS *Cole* did from the Middle East," Lagerbom says. "Rail might be another way, too. She's not abnormally long, but very heavy, so ground transportation may be an issue. I think she should come back, maybe to Boothbay Harbor or Penobscot Marine Museum. If the *Bowdoin* can be brought back to life, it's possible for any vessel." ■

For more, visit [portlandmonthly.com/portmag/2012/10/hero-extras](http://portlandmonthly.com/portmag/2012/10/hero-extras).



(l to r): David Mitchell, Christopher Rogers, Lauren Schaefer-Bove, Zara Machatine, Steve Guthrie, Dana Ricker

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