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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 Antarctican 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 shake-down 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
Ahead Full at Fifty:
50 years of Collecting at Maine Maritime Museum

On view November 10, 2012 to May 26, 2013

To celebrate its 50th anniversary, Maine Maritime Museum presents an exhibit showcasing the “best of the best” from its vast collection, spanning more than 300 years of Maine history. This retrospective exhibit connects the stories of the past to a new generation.

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 she 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
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 Antarctic 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.

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