

ALONG THE WATERFRONT

Reprieve granted for rare old treasure

Walter Schulz turned the key to the 1939 Elco with some trepidation.

The 57-footer's twin Detroit 671 diesel engines hadn't run in six years. The fuel smelled like insect repellent and he could only imagine what sort of sludge lurked in the 68-year-old fuel tanks.



Bruce BURDETT

Jolted to life by a bank of batteries and a portable generator, the engines burst from their long slumber with a roar and a startling cloud of black smoke.

"I was really afraid that the fire department would show up at any moment."

But the engines kept rumbling, the smoke slowly cleared and Mr. Schulz and crew eased the boat from its slip and set a course from the derelict boatyard down the Virginia creek, out into the river and toward the Chesapeake.

The boat, built for the late Howard Johnson of ice cream and restaurant fame, is the latest and greatest restoration effort by the Tiverton resident and his Shannon Yacht Co. in Bristol. Over 35 years he has brought 14 other wooden classics, among them a 50-foot Elco, back to life. He already knows this job will dwarf any of those.

"I call it my swan song, but I've said that before."

Just getting it here was the first challenge. "This was no pleasure cruise, believe me," Mr. Schulz said. Non-stop tension, from the moment they left Calleo in southern Virginia to arrival in Brewer's Sakonnet Marina (north) in Portsmouth, was more like it.

Other times he calls it "my strange saga" ... "500 mile nightmare" ... "month of trauma."

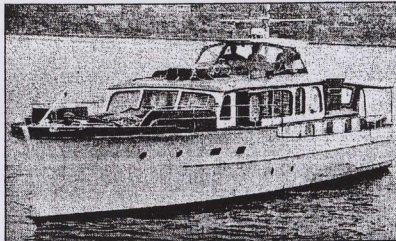
He and his two crewmen, both Shannon employees, had scarcely set out when the boat "began shaking like it was going to pull itself to pieces." They had to throttle back to 5 knots and limp 50 miles to the first marine railway big enough to haul a boat this size. A worn out cutless bearing was replaced.

Just miles into the voyage the starboard engine overheated. Debris had to be cleaned from a clogged cooling water intake. Then a rudder strut worked loose and opened up a seam. That one required Mr. Schulz to take an hour and a half dive — "left me with a mild case of hypothermia." The other rudder strut soon followed.

All along the way, "it leaked like hell." Since they didn't dare use the boat's ancient electrical system, pumps were wired to a portable generator they had brought. Seams opened in earnest during a stretch off Cape May, N.J. when they encountered four foot swells.

"The whole trip we worked it out that someone would give a bow-to-stern inspection every hour on the half hour," Mr. Schulz. "And just about every time some new calamity turned up."

The old diesels sucked up oil — they had to feed it four to five quarts every five hours. But the



Walter Schulz steers the 1939 Elco into Brewer's Sakonnet Marina (north) Thursday afternoon at the end of a weeks-long saga.

Detroit 671s (which he still believes are among the best engines ever built) sipped fuel — at 9 knots they burned 8 gallons of diesel an hour. "It was a footrace to see if we would burn more oil or diesel fuel — it was close."

Departing marinas along the way was an adventure.

"Every time we'd start the engines after a rest they belched out these black clouds," Mr. Schulz said. "That doesn't make you very popular when you're parked in next to these gleaming yachts. Plus, until you got



Walter Schulz

some headway and some breeze, the fumes in the wheelhouse were so thick your eyes burned. So we got out fast and didn't look back."

Still, when the smoke cleared there was much to admire in this old boat. Its history alone makes it well worth the effort, he believes.

Fresh from the Elco shop, this first of their 57-footers (and now one of only three survivors) was somehow trucked to the 1939 World's Fair in Flushing Meadow, N.Y., and put on display in the reflecting pool.

"My father worked on construction at that World's Fair so I imagine he walked by and saw it," Mr. Schulz said.

Howard Johnson, the first owner, named it *HoDo* (for Howard and Dorothy — his wife at the time). He owned it until 1943, keeping in Quincy, Mass., in the summer and down south in the winter.

In 1943, "like a lot of other yachts it was grabbed up for Coast Patrol. They painted it battleship gray, put a machine gun on deck for show and sent it out to hunt for submarines." It found a couple — one of which a Navy patrol boat supposedly managed to sink — and earned an award of four chevrons from Admiral Halsey.

After the war, a Florida restaurateur bought the boat, fixed it up and kept it for 42 years.

"That is the miracle about this boat. He kept everything original which is very rare," Mr. Schulz said. "Usually boats get upgrades which mean all the old stuff is stripped out. But this is like a time capsule. Every little fixture is still there."

In 1988, a small charter outfit bought the boat, re-named it *Encore* and used it mostly up and down the Hudson River.

"It was downhill from there. They didn't put a dime into it."

Which, in a way, was also a blessing. Maintenance was ignored but the boat was spared the usual charter fix-ups.

Now Mr. Schulz admits he's got his work cut out on the boat he will now call *Howard J.* The cedar over oak hull is relatively sound and most of the Honduras mahogany trim is intact, but the worklist is daunting. "Most of it we won't even know until we open it up."

He does this for two reasons, Mr. Schulz said. First, "there's a penance involved."

As a young man at a time when fiberglass boats were taking over, old wooden boats were being destroyed. He was assigned to operate a boatyard crane that dropped concrete blocks onto some of these boats, smashing them. "It was happening all over the place ... and it still haunts me."

He also believes these restorations as a training tool are second to none. His young employees learn what it takes to build a sturdy boat "beyond popping something out of a mold" and he learns a thing or two about his employees' abilities.

"These boats give us a sense of what we are doing here, they are my link to the Phoenicians."

He guesses this restoration will take two or three years — and then? "Well that's the funny thing this time. Maybe it's my age, maybe it's this boat, but I've actually thought for the first time that I might keep this one. That could all change but right now, I could see that happening."

But first, "I've got to figure how to get this thing over to Bristol."

Boating safety course

The Narragansett Bay Sail and Power Squadron will present a boating safety course from 6:30 to 9 p.m. on five Thursdays, Oct. 25 and Nov. 1, 8, 15 and 29, at Mt. Hope High School, Chestnut Street, Bristol.

The course covers boat handling, required and recommended equipment, rules of the road, aids-to-navigation, adverse conditions, personal watercraft and marine radio.

Teenagers born in 1986 or later are especially urged to participate, as the current R.I. Law applies to them.

The textbook fee is \$35, payable to the Narragansett Bay Sail and Power Squadron. Registration begins at 6 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 25. Contact lead instructor Paul Sanromá at 253-4475 or e-mail Paul@Sanroma.org. E-mailing or calling in advance will assure you of a seat and course materials for the course.