

OUR BIG WOODEN BOAT PART III



Duen charges under her new rig

By Dottie Fletcher

□ Partings are so sad. We decided we wouldn't tell a soul when we were leaving. The day before our planned departure, however, our decision seemed cold and heartless. How could we leave all our good friends, Tonnes and his family without a "Goodbye?" No, we had to tell them.

By three o'clock in the afternoon I'm certain most of the islanders knew our plans. The people started coming. It was incredible as friend after friend and acquaintance after acquaintance arrived; some people we didn't know at all. Many came bearing gifts as well as heartfelt friendship and love.

The women were not ready for me to go sea. All right for a man but not a woman. Most of the island women were afraid of boats and they cried and hugged me like I was taking off for the very rim of the earth.

The procession of people lasted until 3:00 a.m. and our plans were for leaving at 4:30 a.m. following Tonnes through the rocks as he went to the fishing grounds, which were on our way. It saved us many miles but was much too treacherous for anyone not island-born and reared to attempt. So we stuck to our plan and on the chilly morning of May 3, 1972 we started up our old one cylinder Rapp semi-diesel engine and puffing out black smoke rings we ka-chonked ka-chonked out of Sevlandsvik harbour, our home for one year and five months.

We left a dock filled with waving friends even at that early hour. Needless to say quite a few tears rolled down my cheeks and even Albert stood, unabashed, crying the same as I. Perhaps some day we shall go back but whether we do or not, the island of Karmoy and its' wonderful people

will always remain in our hearts.

Sentimentality behind us, we were on with the journey. But we already had committed a cardinal mistake of cruising. We had begun exhausted.

Our first landfall was Helgoland, a postage stamp-size island in the German Bight. This took us three grueling days and nights. Grueling for many reasons. We started out tired; we had no wind a great deal of the time which necessitated motoring; our navigational skills left a lot to be desired; and fog plagued much of our journey.

To add to that list I took us completely off course the second night. It was pitch black, I was dead tired when all of a sudden, in front of me, loomed the lights of a huge city where only the seas should have been. Panic is hardly the word for how I felt. In fact, the "city" was hundreds of fishing boats from Norway, Germany, Denmark, Holland, and

Belgium, all with their different lights. I actually think I circled one poor fishing boat twice before I had the good sense to awaken Albert, who had just fallen asleep. He calmed me down, put me back on course and fell exhausted back into bed. Well, he thought he had put me back on course but when he came on watch I had completely missed three buoys and a light-ship! We made our landfall just fine but definitely “by the Grace of God, not the steering of stupid.” Words from a tired Captain.

I must say it was exciting, that very first landfall. A small harbor with just a couple of yachts, some fishing boats and two beautiful, extremely modern German Coast Guard boats. We hauled up our yellow quarantine flag for the first time and customs was fast and efficient.

The next morning after a luxurious nights sleep we watched the town boats start coming. They anchored out and big shore boats were busy for hours hauling people ashore. We were so excited. Tonight would be our first experience in a German Hofbrau drinking beer, eating sausages, listening to all these people singing German drinking songs. The vision was so very clear. That’s why we were totally unprepared when around 6 p.m. all the people went back to the boats and departed. The

sidewalks practically rolled themselves up and peace and quiet descended. It seems Helgoland is a duty free port and every weekend it is invaded by people from the mainland for one day only purchasing duty-free goods. Mostly liquor and cigarettes. Disappointment! Ah well, maybe the next landfall would be gayer.

After three days we finally got a weather report of wind and off we went headed for Oostende, Belgium. We had wind for about three hours and then it died. I was beginning to wonder if perhaps sailing was not for us. Along with the calm came fog.

Oostende was a bit of a fiasco as there was no place for us to tie up. We spent two day’s and nights tied to the fishing boats while a Force 8 gale howled. Then the port authorities said we must move and go to the yacht club. A real joke as it was very small and crowded and we knew we would not attempt to put our 50 tons of *Duen* on one of their small docks in such wind. So we got our passports stamped and made ready to leave. The customs men looked our boat over and agreed she looked strong enough but as we pounded out of the harbor against huge waves rolling in, we wondered if we had lost our sanity. Once in the Channel, though we managed to get

our sails up and short-rigged as we were we passed a couple of freighters like they were standing still. I think that was our very first sailing thrill as many of the freighter’s crew came on deck and waved us on.

We put in next at Cherbourg, France and after our hectic stay in small, crowded Oostende we anchored in the huge outer roads of Cherbourg harbor. How glorious we thought; no crowds, no danger. We rowed ashore the following day, cleared customs and purchased our first French wine. Lucky we had that treat for on our third day there, being poor seamen and not checking the weather, we were caught in a severe Force 9 gale. It came so quickly we didn’t get moved and after it started we were afraid to try moving with our old temperamental Rapp engine, for we were much too close to the sea wall. For five days and nights we tuned to BBC shipping reports only to hear again and again: “Severe Force 9 gales” for our area. When it was over we moved to the small inner harbor where we should have been all the time. Learning the hard way really is hard.

We remained in Cherbourg for three weeks during which time my mother, Edra Riehl, arrived to join the boat. I had such grandiose dreams of a luxury vacation for her. I’m afraid dreams turned into nightmares on more than one occasion.

Her first boat trip (eight days long) was out the English Channel, past the Channel Islands (past because the Coast Pilot Book and giant tides seemed just too much for us to cope with at that point in our experience) and across the Bay of Biscay. Lady Biscay showed us all her moods from dead calm to the most giant rollers we have yet to experience. Up, up, up we would go and down, down, down 'til it was a wall of water on each side. I'll admit it: I was scared to death. After a while, however, dear *Duen* seemed to go up and down with the greatest of ease and my fears abated somewhat.

We had a delightful visit in northern Spain up a Spanish fjord to Santa Eugenia de Riveira. A marvelous sail down the coast of Portugal stopping twice. Both stops were interesting and enjoyable. On to Tangier, Morocco and the fabled Casbah; Ceuta and Gibraltar. Gibraltar was our first English speaking port in 18 months, and that English was for me, though it was as difficult to understand at first as was French and Portugese.

Most of the month of July was spent cruising the Spanish Mediterranean coast, with a few sidetrips inland. Then off to the Balearic Islands. We thoroughly enjoyed our stay visiting all the small coves of Ibiza and Majorca.

Mother flew home from Palma, Majorca on Sept. 4th, by now a thoroughly tried and true galley slave. She was glad she had come, but also glad to leave I'm sure. Galley-slaving isn't all that glamorous one soon finds out.

In Palma we met the man who was to teach us our celestial navigation. My self-teaching is not progressing any too swiftly.

We left the islands and back to Villajoyosa, Spain where we arranged to haul out our boat. We did all the usual work plus added a yardarm and squaresail. Undoubtedly a bit ostentatious on our fishing boat but we thought she was beautiful. We also figured we would use it a lot on our Atlantic crossing. It got a true test after leaving Alemaria when we got hit with a strong levante, or east wind. We were zooming along at eight and one half knots with nothing more than the square sail. In fact, for a while, we couldn't get it down or in.

We provisioned in Gibraltar for our crossing and fueled in Ceuta. I might mention that we sat for six days in Ceuta in a Force 7 to 9 levante which closed the harbor and made nervous wrecks of all yachters trying to keep their boats in one piece. We were constantly changing chafing gear on our lines. We witnessed four men saved

by a helicopter air-sea rescue. One man at a time and in those strong winds, and that was quite a feat. One last stop in Tangier where we were entertained in a lovely Moslem home in the Casbah, then off for the Canary Islands on December 3, 1972.

We left in fairly strong head winds and the straits were really kicked up. But we hoped the winds would veer a little to the north and we would start out on a good long sail. We didn't hope hard enough. For five long days it was up sails, down sails, light breezes, no breezes or wind dead in our face if it blew. It seemed we were sitting still or tacking back and forth making no headway. Then we were hit by the worst weather we have ever been in and I can truthfully say I was not too frightened. By then the seaworthiness of our big old hull was firmly entrenched in my brain.

Never having been in such a situation before we did exactly as Norwegians had instructed us if we had sea room. We lowered the sails, laid ahull, battened everything we could and went below. Green water swept over the decks and found its way through cracks we never knew we had. We actually put on our oilers while below. We never calmed down enough to sleep for any length of time but would doze off to come awake with a start as a big one would pound down on

the deck and skylight over our heads.

We were thankful for the aluminum plates we had made to fit over the sky-lights for weather just such as this. But water came in and everything was soaked. It lasted three days and two nights. When it finally abated and we started to put things in order, we could not believe the sight on deck. Our bulwarks were caved in on the windward side, our brand new canvas awning which we thought we had sufficiently gasketed had washed away, and lines were a tangled mess. We were weary and a bit dejected but more experienced seamen to be sure. Speaking of dejected -- we figured we were about where we had been seven days earlier.

Another six days and we finally arrived at Arrecife, Lanzarote, a terrible harbor filled with at least an inch-thick coating of fish grease. We sat out three more days of strong gales with a few traumatic experiences such as waking up in the middle of the night to gale winds, a dragging anchor and bearing down fast onto a row of boats in the tiny harbor. Albert, stark naked except for big rubber boots, trying to get old Rapp started was a sight to behold. We had to have the engine going to run our five ton hydraulic winch to get up our 250 pound fisherman anchor and chain. Our anchor had finally gotten caught in other anchor

lines slowing us down but not stopping us. It was four times up and down with the anchor before we got it free of lines. By then we missed two boats by a coat of paint and a third we sort of skinned past to go onto a rocky reef sticking out into the harbor. Albert managed by some pretty slick maneuvering of that old pitch-propeller to get us off and we finally got re-anchored.

We headed for Las Palmas, Gran Canaria, where we spent the holidays. This included a New Years Eve Party in the third story apartment of the marina construction manager whom we had met. Not a word of English was spoken. All the neighbors joined the party and Albert got his hair cut, which was the real cause of the celebration in itself. Though the Spanish loved Albert they could not quite accept his long hair. We left Las Palmas loaded down with salomis, cheese, slabs of bacon and wine jugs filled by our good amigos on the fishing boats. They all climbed to the seaward side of the break-wall and waved us out of sight.

A stopover at Santa Cruz, Tenerife, where we took on last minute supplies and barrels of sand for the new crew member, a present from Alberts' "barber" in Las Palmas, whom we named Carmen la Gata. She was definitely Albert's cat,

only deigning to acknowledge me if she wanted something to eat or drink.

On January 13, 1973 we started the great adventure across the Atlantic. It was a calm, peaceful, slow trip. Totally enjoyable and the least frightening of any of our sailing exploits. Our navigation was quite accurate and Barbados showed up just where we thought it should.

As we pulled into Carlyle Bay we had our first argument of the trip -- where to put the anchor down. With a sarcastic, "Welcome to Barbados," Albert stomped back to the pilothouse. It must have been end of the journey nerves and was over immediately but it was another experience behind us, another lesson learned. We kissed and made up, really looked around and welcomed each other to Barbados, the beginning of our Caribbean adventure.

Our Caribbean experience lasted for one year and eight months. It was such a fantastic period. *Duen* herself went through a complete metamorphous. At anchor in Admiralty Bay, Bequi, Windward Islands she lost her pilothouse and mizzen mast. She had a topmast added and became a sloop? -- a cutter? Not long after, back in Barbados, she lost five tons of internal combustion. Yes, old Rapp our semi-diesel, gave up the ghost.



San Blas Indian woman poses wearing a mola.



Mike and Shane at Barbados

The removal of “Rapp” and installation of ‘Perky’ -- a 16 year old 6 cylinder Perkins diesel is quite a story in itself. A sad loss to Albert -- a glad loss to me. Rapp was fine for a work boat but for a yacht it was just a dirty, greasy mess.

The removal gave us a grand new stern cabin with double and single bunks, new head and sink plus a lot of storage. Also - when we re-ballasted we improved *Duen’s* trim. We spent five months in Barbados working on her, hauling out and sneaking in a few charter parties, a “no-no” in Barbados.

On October 3, 1973 my son, Michael, his wife, Sandra, and their two children Shane, 2, and Shahla, 3, arrived for a two week vacation and ended up staying for almost two years. It was a real growing experience with three

generations living together on a 50 foot boat and making it work.

We moved on to St Lucia where we successfully day chartered for nearly 10 months. We did a few long charters also but really preferred day chartering. Our guests were as impressed with our family scene as they were with the wonderful time we showed them. I can honestly say we never had one complaint. A boast to be sure, but one I am proud of.

In August of 1974 we decided we wanted to see new places and faces so off we went to the American Virgins via all islands enroute. A great trip. In St. Thomas we registered our boat and decided to call Charlotte Amalie our home port.

Then it was off for Panama planning a non-stop trip. We sure were living right

because when we left the Windward Islands two hurricanes ripped through Venezuela affecting places as far north as St. Lucia our old home port. When we left St Thomas a hurricane went through the north Caribbean passing behind us.

Good winds but calamity struck! Our gaff jaws broke. After checking what wood we had aboard we decided to try and beat to Aruba, one of the Dutch Antilles. It was a hard trip but we finally made it and safely wended our way through the reefs into Oranjestad harbor with no charts. A bit on the hairy side that was.

Aruba was very good to us, and the people were helpful and kind.

We were entertained in homes almost every night we were there and transportation was provided whenever we needed it. New, stronger gaff jaws were made. When we took up our anchor to leave we pulled up some chain with a beautiful 65 lb. Danforth anchor* on it besides our own anchor, so Aruba was good to us to the very end of our stay.

Off for the San Blas Islands with good winds. True to form they didn't last. Seven, mostly windless, days later we put the anchor down in the San Blas Archipelago. Fantastic! Just what I had always dreamed of sailing to. As we approached we first saw only palm trees rising out of the water. As we got closer we saw the low atoll type islands and when we were very close we saw the grass huts under the palm trees. Just how much more romantic could it be?

Well, they weren't natives in grass skirts but they were pretty spectacular Kuna

Indians. The women in their many layered, cut-out patterned molas, bright print wraparound skirts, bracelets from knees to ankles and gold rings in their noses. On festive occasions they add massive gold necklaces and bracelets. The men were dressed in western attire.

Diving in the San Blas Islands was terrific if you could overcome your fear of sharks. They were everywhere. We had to give up using our fish net as the big sharks put huge holes in it every time we set it. We snorkeled a lot and got a beautiful collection of helmet and conch shells. I love shell collecting but the stench is something else again.

Upon our arrival in the Panama Canal Zone the admeasure and customs man was not quite ready for the smell of our shells. I think we had become a bit inured to the odor but did hastily put them over the

side in gunny sacks when we he was acting like we had the plague or some such thing.

We spent eight days on the Caribbean side of the Canal. Several of them tied to the dock at the Cristobal Yacht Club. A nice treat for the children as they could run a bit on the land. By now, however, they were totally boat oriented and any land was just another island to them and after a couple of hours they were always ready to go back to the boat, a fact which never ceased to amaze me.

We transited the Panama Canal on Sept. 24, 1974, side-tied to the tugboat Harding. A wonderful way to go. It was exciting, extremely interesting and very beautiful. We had made the trip across first on the train just to see the Canal Zone and Yacht Club on the other side. It was full, so after transiting we went directly to the island of Taboga. Great cause for celebration: We made it ... back to the Pacific! ❀

* In 2004 the same Danforth anchor was lost in the Canadian Gulf Islands.