

The African Queen - A History

Legacy in Key Largo Part III

By Jimmy Hendricks

Once again the Coast Guard took center stage and with the first of their inspections they focused on the machinery and discovered that the new Semples Boiler was not ASME certified nor was the steam engine approved by the ABS (American Bureau of Shipping) nor was there anyway to get her existing equipment approved after the fact. So it off to England dad I go to investigate what the old girl would have had in her when she was built in 1912.

Ed Langley of Shoreham England built us the Sisson steam engine, which was originally produced in England in the 1800's by a factory in Gloucester and is genuine steam launch equipment from the turn of the century. The boiler would have been and now is a Kingdon type boiler patented in England in 1881, since the boiler required the ASME certification we had it built at Dixon Boiler Company in Los Angeles. The engine did not require the ASME certificate but did require the ABS seal of approval, however there London office was happy to approve the plans and monitor the construction.

Ed with his wife, daughter and the new engine in tow came to Key Largo to help install the new engine and boiler. With new engine installed it was now up to the Coast Guard to inspect and pass the Queen. After performing a simplified stability test using bags of charcoal for the weight, doing a hydrostatic and operational test on the boiler and engine, and let's not forget the safety equipment. On Dec. 4,

1990 the African Queen was now certified to carry 15 passengers and two crew, almost ten years to the day when dad first laid his eyes upon her and knew that the old girl had to come to Key Largo and there is still more to come for the old girl.

In 1990 the African Queen was invited back to



The African Queen in the English Channel with the RNLI in the distance.

England, by the London Daily Express to open their new boat show in Plymouth, which dad thought would be exciting to visit the home port of the Mayflower. However for one reason or another that show never happened but the Daily Express said to come over anyway that they would find plenty for us to do.

The first event that dad attempted was the 50th Anniversary of Dunkirk. Dunkirk which occurred in the spring of 1940 when Hitler's Nazi German Wehrmacht swept across Belgium and France sent retreating 337,000 British and allied troops to the coast of the English Channel there were

they faced certain death or capture. For twenty two days from the end of May until Mid June the British Navy and a fleet of "little ships" made up of boats of every size, shape and description, took on the unpredictable waters of the English Channel and the onslaught of Hitler's troops to rescue their fallen

countrymen and their allies. My grandfather had fought in WWI and dad and his brother Bill both put college on hold to serve in WW2 so this event was very much a part of our family history and dad could not refuse when the African Queen was invited to participate in the reenactment which was to take place on May 24, 1990 the fleet was to cross the Channel from Dover to Calais a twenty two mile trek crossing in open water then follow the coast eastward for another twenty miles to Dunkirk.

With seventeen, fifty pound bags of Welch steam coal aboard the African

Photos provided by Jimmy Hendricks

Queen they departed Ramsgate harbour at seven am. On board was dad, the Engine builder Ed Langley, Richard Head Commodore of the Little Ship Yacht Club (no connection to the little ships event) and photo journalist Jim Legget. The winds were a bit stronger than predicted instead of 10 to 15 knots, the were more like 20 to 25 knots which would put the thirty foot open boat in 4 to 5 foot seas for a crossing that dad estimated would take 5 hours and then another 5.5 hours along the coast. Dad figured he had enough coal and fresh water for the boiler onboard for 33 hours. Among other added safety equipment was an inflatable tube attached to the starboard side which with the windy conditions and the blunt end of the tube facing the sea it actually allowed a considerable amount of spray into the boat so the crew deemed it unnecessary and cut it away. Unfortunately the cantankerous African Queen was not up to the challenge this day, after three hours they were twelve miles out and approaching the busiest shipping channels in the world and the wind seemed to be picking up, when what was thought to be a engine bearing started to groan and shortly after the engine stopped altogether, it was at that point that Ed told dad that feed pump was not pumping water from the hot well fast enough back into the boiler. So the first thing they did was to disconnect the chain that drove the feed pump, thinking that the pump was malfunctioning and causing the engine problem. When they reopened the

valve to allow steam into the engine it would operate with low pressure the engine would run however when they tried to increase speed the engine would again lock up. Still not knowing with any certainty what was wrong they decided that it would be the prudent thing to turn around and head back to Ramsgate as the wind was increasing they were losing valuable fresh water without the feed pump having to rely on the steam siphon to put water back into the boiler and they were headed into the busiest shipping lanes in the world, with a less than reliable engine. As they approached the Channel that would lead them back into Ramsgate Harbour they realized that would put them beam to the high seas and could possible swamp the boat and the engine was still giving them problems and they would not be able to increase power if needed.

It was at that point Commodore Head looked Dad in the eye and Dad knew they weren't going to make it back without assistance, Dad put out a securite which is not a mayday but a call for assistance, the RNLI (Royal National Lifeboat Institution) answered and told them that they could not determine their exact location so they dispatched a RAF helicopter to search for the Queen and her loss crew. After what seemed like an eternity and Jim Legget and Ed Langley succumbed to sea sickness they spotted the RAF helicopter low on the horizon and far to south of their location after some more communication with the RNLI the RAF helicopter spotted them, and the RNLI dispatched a boat to their position. Upon their arrival Jim Legget requested to be transferred over to the RNLI vessel and then they discussed their options, it was

decided that the Lifeboat would put a towline to the bow of the African Queen and then the Queen would use what power they had to keep the bow into the sea while they were being towed, kind of like an airplane crabbing into the wind to land. Needless to say they arrived back at Ramsgate Harbour a little shaken but not stirred.

The Little Ship Club Magazine had each member of the crew write their own version as to what had happened, Dad's report more less read the least excitable as just another day at sea, Ed Langley's merely reported it as a spot of trouble with the engine, while Commodore Head's and Jim Leggett's version reflected that they were battling for their lives. It was later determined as check valve being installed improperly caused the engine to hydro-lock and the conditions in the channel made it impossible to not only diagnose the problem let alone make repairs at sea, and thus ended the African Queen's first attempt to cross the English Channel on her own hull. The Queen did make it to Dunkirk that day but it was aboard the ferryboat Sally with the Queen sitting safely on top of her trailer.

Look for continuation of this article in **The African Queen Part V** in the Coconut Telegraph March Issue

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Exhibition of Fine Art and Sculpture. Open daily 10 a.m. - 6 p.m. Key Largo Library Community Room, MM 101.4 Overseas Hwy., Key Largo. 852-7494.

Sun., Feb. 25 - Sculpture Key West. Outdoor contemporary art exhibition in three historic settings. Fort Taylor opening reception 3 - 6 p.m. Park entrance fee waived. Ft. Taylor State Park, enter at Southard & Thomas Streets, Key West. 295-3800. Visit sculpturekeywest.com for details.

Mon., Feb. 26 - March 4 - Jim Salem. Opening reception 5:30 - 8:30 p.m. Gingerbread Square Gallery, 1207 Duval Street, Key West. 296-8900.

Festivals

Sat., Feb. 3 - Sun., Feb. 4 - Florida Keys Art Guild Outdoor Art Festival. Free. Lorelei Resort, MM 81 Overseas Hwy., Islamorada. 289-7656.

Mon., Feb. 5 - Red Barn Theatre "Five Course Love Dance Party." Eat, drink, dance with Barry Cuda and his band and local vocalist. Food from around the world and an open bar. \$60 advance, \$65 door. 7 - 10:30 p.m. Red Barn Theatre, 319 Duval St., Key West. 296-9911. redbarntheatre.org

Thur., Feb. 8 - Sun., Feb. 11 - Friends of Fort Taylor present Civil War Heritage Days. Living history demonstrations, battle re-enactments, candle light tour. Ft. Zachary Taylor State Park, entrance at Southard & Thomas Streets., Key West. 292-6850.

Sat., Feb. 10 - Sun., Feb. 11 - Pigeon Key Art Festival. Juried outdoor art show, music, food. \$7. 10 a.m. - 5 p.m. Marathon Community Park, MM 49, Overseas Hwy., Marathon. 942-1105.

Sat., Feb. 10 - February Festival. One-day plant, baked goods and "used treasures" sale along with educational booths to promote Florida Friendly gardening. 10 a.m. - 4 p.m. Marathon Garden Club, 5270 Overseas Hwy., Marathon. Call 743-4971.

Mon., Feb. 12 - Key West Pops Beach Club Celebration. Cocktails, food, entertainment. \$100. 6:30 - 9 p.m. Vera Schiff's residence, 1500 Atlantic Blvd., Key West. Reservations 296-1520.

Fri., Feb. 16 - Tues., Feb. 20 - Trinidad Joe presents Key West Mardi Gras Fest. Costume contests, walking parades, food, music drinks and more. Various locations, Key West. 292-5691. mardifest.com.

Sun., Feb. 18 - Key West Symphony presents "Enchanting Dreams Auction." Westin Key West Resort, 245 Front St., Key West. 292-1774.

Sat., Feb. 24 - Annual Red Cross Humanitarian of the Year Dinner. 6:30 reception, 7:30 dinner. Casa Marina Resort, 1500 Reynolds St. Key West. 296-4033.

Sat., Feb. 24 - Sun. Feb. 25 - Key West Art Center presents 42nd Annual Old Island Days Art Festival. Exhibitors from across USA and Canada. Water-color, oil, acrylics, metal and glass sculpture, photography. Free admission. 10 a.m. - 5 p.m. Whitehead and Caroline Streets, Key West. 294-1241.

Sat., Feb. 24 - Sun., Feb. 25 - Key West Art & Historical Society Key West Antiques Show and Sale. \$6. 10 a.m.- 7 p.m. Sat/ 10 a.m. - 5 p.m. Sun. East Martello Museum, 295-6616. ext 16. kwahs.com.

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