One Of A Kind

A GOOD OLD YACHT GETS BETTER

Story And Photography By ROBERT M. LANE

We found her!

For months, readers of PMM had sought the whereabouts of a classic Art DeFever-designed steel trawler. Bill Parlatore, editor-in-chief of the magazine, had aided the search for the 68-foot, ocean-capable cruiser by publishing a photo and an appeal for information this past fall.

Eventually, email messages from readers and phone calls pointed to a hideaway in my backyard, and I got the assignment.

After a long, winding drive through the woods of Bainbridge Island, which lies in Puget Sound a few miles west of Seattle, I parked in front of a classic Pacific Northwest-style home on the shore of Port Blakely and walked around back to find a pier stretching far into the water. And there she was, moored to a float at the end of the pier: the massive 45-year-old yacht that DeFever had designed fairly early in his career, the craft that for a short time had been our mystery boat.

There is no mistaking DeFever’s hand. The curve of the bow, the stance of the raised pilothouse, the shape of the windows, and the no-nonsense styling from a designer first influenced by the heavy, wood fishing vessels that cruised from his home port of San Diego more than half a century ago—all are DeFever hallmarks.
Our Island's pilothouse has everything but a steering wheel. Some gear is original, but all equipment is in excellent operating condition. The view is good over the helm, and pilothouse doors provide quick access to the side decks.

While the hallmarks are strong, the design is not entirely DeFever's. In speaking with a friend of the 89-year-old architect, I learned that the California builder of the 68-footer "borrowed" the lines of a small boat it had built earlier to a DeFever design and enlarged them for a customer seeking a bigger boat.

DeFever was not personally involved in the design or construction of the larger boat and therefore has no records of her in his San Diego office. There is no question, however, that the basic design is his. The non-DeFever work mostly is in the lengthy extension of the saloon.

Working through his friend, I asked DeFever what he would change in that old design for today's cruising. Not much, was his reply. He might rake the stem a little more and give the bow more flare for a drier ride.

Michelle and Bill Bressler are the boat's fourth owners.

It's nice to report that she couldn't have found a more loving and caring family.

The Bresslers bought Carmen Maria in July 2005 from Frank and Robin Miller of Long Beach, California, and after a three-day survey, the signing of purchase papers, and some time getting ready, Bill and a crew of friends ran her six days nonstop to her new home port of Port Blakely, on the east shore of Bainbridge. That's got to be a tribute to the care given by her former owners. Not many boats of her age would be up to that kind of trip.

Over the next two years, the Bresslers devoted thousands of hours to refurbishing, remodeling, upgrading, and improving. In the summer of 2007, they set aside table saws, routers, band saws, and sanders and cruised to Southeast Alaska, a trip that lasted 134 days and covered 3,588 nautical miles.

They now live aboard, alongside the floating dock at
the end of the pier. I found the boat impeccably clean, with few signs of work in progress. At the end of my tour, Michelle explained that she and Bill had stowed their tools because I was coming. I expect they were back at work as soon as my car disappeared up the wooded lane.

Their efforts so far have focused on lower-deck accommodations (staterooms, heads, and storage spaces) and on work in the engine room and pilothouse, including construction of a stairway to the flybridge. The saloon and galley function well but clearly are the results of a 1970s restoration. How else would you explain an orange carpet and blond oak trim? Bill and Michelle have plans in mind for a saloon and galley refit, but they estimate it may be 18 months before that work is complete.

Coming up: a grand tour of the boat, including a visit to the “hardware store” and a look at a most amazing engine room.

HERE WE ARE

While those of us at PMM were searching for the yacht, which had been identified by readers Susie and Rick McWilliams of Ventura, California, as Carmen Marsa, Bill and Michelle were having a good time in Alaska, unaware that editors, writers, and readers were looking for their boat.

Homeward bound in the fall, they took the boat, which they’ve named Our Island, into Tofino, on the west coast of Vancouver Island in British Columbia, to escape a storm. They learned about our search when...
another boater ran down the float waving a copy of the magazine and shouting, “Your picture’s in PassageMaker.”

Bill called PMM in Annapolis, and soon messages arrived in my office in Anacortes, Washington. The essence: tour the boat.

She is a one-of-a-kind small ship: 68 feet 3 inches overall, a beam of 19 feet 6 inches, and a draft of 8 feet when she’s full of water and fuel. Our Island displaces 88 tons. My first surprise was that Bill and Michelle handle the boat themselves. They don’t need a crew. “It’s a piece of cake,” Bill said.

The Bresslers have owned other boats, including a 44-foot Chris-Craft, and have significant boating experience. Both are adept at handling their small ship. Maneuvering around marinas and other tight areas is simplified by the use of two-way, duplex-frequency Eartec radios that eliminate the annoying loss of words typical of a voice-activated radio and the awkwardness of fumbling for a transmit button. Whoever is handling lines from the cockpit or side deck can communicate easily with his or her mate at the helm, with no shouting.

The couple first came across Carmen Maria when they were nearing retirement and were looking for a boat to live aboard. “We fell in love in five minutes,” Michelle said. But with jobs and kids still in school, it wasn’t time.

After retiring as western division manager for Honeywell, Bill called the Millers and struck a deal.

They bought quality. The 68 was built by Skillerud & Sons in Wilmington, California, a yard noted for constructing heavy, strong, seagoing workboats and yachts. Bill said ultrasound testing of the yacht’s 1/4-inch-thick steel plating found it to be fit. In only one spot did the meter note a thickness less than .25 inch—and it was .23.

Since launching, the yacht’s hull has been protected by a USFilter CAPAC system, an automatic “controlled, impressed current-protection system” that emits electrical pulses to prevent corrosion. There are no sacrificial anodes to replace. “It works perfectly,” Bill told me.

She is powered by a pair of Caterpillar D333 diesel engines, which Bill says “are in perfect condition.”

For serious cruising, the round-bottomed small ship
Above: An original steel-frame shower was removed to make space for a home-style tub and shower. The door leads to an enormous walk-in storage locker. Top right: A splash of sunlight highlights the king-size bed. New and refinished cabinetry of sapele and an overhead of poplar and sapele illustrate the style of finish that will be used throughout the yacht. Middle right: The all-new head features mirrored cabinets and granite countertops. Below right: A completed guest stateroom illustrates the owners' woodworking skills.

was equipped with Naiad stabilizers, each 9-1/2 square feet in size. Adding to stability in heavy seas is the weight of fuel (6,000 gallons) and water (almost 5,000 gallons) deep in the hull.

For her size and weight, Our Island is fuel efficient. On the long trip to Alaska and back, Bill said she averaged 1.14 nautical miles per gallon of fuel burned. Her average speed was 6-1/2 knots. Earlier owners had taken her to Hawaii three times, Alaska twice, and Mexico numerous times, and it's obvious that fuel was not a worry, even on that long Pacific crossing.

The Bresslers had sought a steel boat when they were looking for a craft to live aboard. "We figured steel would be easier to repair in distant places," Michelle said. "Bill can weld, and we can grind and paint." Bill added: "With steel, we feel super safe."

To improve safety, they installed a "shark fin" on the stern of the boat just below the waterline. It is a sturdy, stainless steel fin that can break or push aside the driftwood that is common throughout the Northwest. "We hit an 8-inch log and snapped it," Bill said.
The engine room is so spacious that it's hard to get both engines in one photo, even with a wide-angle lens. This Holy Place houses a pair of D333 Caterpillar diesels and a huge inventory of other equipment and still provides plenty of space for walking around.

DeFever contributed to safety, too, by calling for heavy skegs under each propeller. They provide protection from debris and grounding.

Heavy DeFever yachts probably are few in number, and they are coveted. Susie and Rick McWilliams, who pointed us toward Our Island, own a sistership designed by the San Diego icon of boatbuilding, Nekton, a 52-foot steel yacht, was built "side by side" in the same shipyard, Susie reports. Serving several owners, Nekton has transited the Panama Canal multiple times and has been to Venezuela and Nova Scotia, and to Alaska at least 10 times.

In an email to PMM, reader Martin Goldsmith recalled cruising with Nekton in Mexico. On one occasion, they celebrated a birthday in La Paz by serving dinner for 16 in Nekton's saloon.

Martin also sent us a copy of an old magazine article about Timina, a 58-foot wood yacht designed by DeFever, showing how he had been influenced by the styling and construction of heavy West Coast tuna boats.

All of this history talk reminds me of my interview with DeFever a decade ago (see PMM Winter '98). We walked a dock at Shelter Island in San Diego to look at his new stylish, 71-foot yacht but stopped to admire a 47-foot DeFever fantail yacht that had been built from wood 50 years before. Her big bow, Portuguese bridge, and massive stern were classic design elements DeFever used so well.
Martin Goldsmith summed it up: “The influence of Arthur DeFever on passagemaker design on the West Coast cannot be overstated.”

**ONCE AROUND THE BOAT**

Because she stands tall, a step is needed to board our Island. Once aboard, broad side decks lead forward to the pilothouse and foredeck and aft to the cockpit, which is enclosed by a screen of fabric and clear vinyl. The upper deck shadows the side decks and the cockpit, offering weather protection.

Bill greeted me in the cockpit, and as we stepped into the saloon I met Michelle and Sparky, the boat dog. Spacious and brightly lit by sun flowing in through many windows, the 18-foot saloon has room for a crowd. The Bresslers have plans to give it a fresh interior, with new cabinetry, flooring, and overhead, without violating DeFever styling. The U-shaped galley is to port and forward of the main saloon, and a large pantry, with a huge 35-cubic-foot freezer, sits between the galley and pilothouse.

Stairs on the aft starboard side of the saloon lead below to the master stateroom and head. Beautifully finished, the master cabin offers a preview of how the saloon will look sometime soon.

Old carpet in the heads has been replaced with flooring of hickory and pecan. Bill laid the solid-wood flooring and cut the plugs that fill the screw holes. Michelle, a retired vice president of Western Wireless, finished a lot of the new wood. Sapele, an African hardwood that resembles mahogany, was their choice for cabinets, drawer fronts, paneling, and accent trim throughout the boat. When paint was needed, Michelle picked up the brush.

“A milestone was getting the drawers and cabinets in,” Michelle said. “The boat has 98 doors on lockers and cabinets, and 88 received new fronts. Michelle finished them all. Her brother, Sam Stern, a master shipwright at Lake Union Yacht Center in Seattle, crafted much of the interior woodwork and the acrylic tub surround. He also offered excellent advice along the way.”

V-grooved poplar boards (painted white) with contrasting sapele battens are on the overhead. (Poplar also will replace the acoustical tile in the saloon overhead someday soon.) Stateroom cabinetry was refurbished and additional storage space was added, as was an entertainment center. All the time work was under way in the stateroom, Bill and Michelle lived out of duffel bags and sleeping bags.

When the day finally came to store all that gear and...
move into the stateroom, it was time for celebration.

"The first night in sheets was heaven," Bill said.

The adjoining master head is all new. An old shower was rooted out; Bill said he went through 12 Sawzall blades cutting away the steel shower framing to make space for a bathtub. The toilet was moved, and new cabinets were installed. Behind the unmarked door in the aft bulkhead is a treasure space: a huge, L-shaped walk-in closet that runs along the back of the head and then bends around one side. It has space for clothing, parts, tools, and a collection of 312 charts, all stowed in numbered tubes. And it's not full. Yet.

Similar improvements are in progress in the guest staterooms and heads forward. Space for crew in the bow now serves as an office, with room for a computer, file cabinets, printer, and one berth. A hatch in the overhead provides an escape route to the foredeck.

When the Bresslers bought the boat, she was heated with 240VAC space heaters. She carried three generators, which also powered air conditioning equipment, but they have been replaced by a pair of Onan generators.

Our Island was given a new heating system: a 105,000-Btu boiler with individual temperature controls in each stateroom. It was a home-style burner adapted for marine use. Cables for TV, satellite television, and Internet were installed. Getting Wi-Fi to work deep inside a steel hull is difficult, Bill reported.

We emerged from the nearly finished lower spaces and climbed steps to the pilothouse, which is a work in progress. Poplar strips are overhead. A ladder and new ceiling hatch, functional but not yet finished, lead to the flybridge.

New yachts without steering wheels are not uncommon, but it was a bit of a surprise to see this 1963-vintage boat sans wheel. Normally, Bill and Michelle steer and change course with autopilot controls. There is a small "tiller" handle where a wheel ordinarily would be; it is used for docking.

Some of the gear is old, perhaps original, including a large Sperry compass and autopilot ahead of the tiller handle. Our Island also has up-to-date satellite navigational gear.

Single-lever engine controls are air operated. Push
Q&A WITH ART DEFEVER

Art DeFever’s first boat was a derelict 15-foot gaff-rigged sailboat he found on the beach near his home in San Pedro, California. He was 15 years old, and that find came nearly 75 years ago.

Since then, the San Diego-based designer has built an amazing record, with thousands of boats made to his plans, including commercial and pleasure craft ranging from 32 to 225 feet in length.

Before World War II, he worked for a San Diego shipyard, designing and working aboard tuna boats that would go to sea for 90 days or longer. During the war, he designed ocean-going tugs and lighters for the Army and Navy.

His first production pleasure boat came after the war. It was the Hollywood Cruiser, a fast gasoline-powered boat available as a 32- or 35-footer. Many of his first yachts bore the lines of the tuna boats he built. His boats became more contemporary as his career developed, but nearly all were trawler-type; many had raised pilothouses (so popular today), and all were built for serious cruising. Many crossed oceans and others ranged the nation’s coastal waters.

Today, DeFever continues to do custom design work for individual clients and is working on a 63-foot yacht and discussing manufacture with several builders. His personal yacht also is a 63.

Away from the office, but not leaving the sea, DeFever has served as commodore of the San Diego Yacht Club and as a trustee for the San Diego Maritime Museum. He is on the board of Hubbs-Sea World Research Institute.

I first met DeFever in 1998 when I flew to San Diego to interview him in his Treasure Island office—the office where he has worked daily for 55 years—for an article for PW. I spent a long and fascinating afternoon in his office talking boats, looking at boat plans and artifacts, and touring the yacht he cruised then, a 71-footer.

We decided to revisit Art DeFever and his career while developing this story about Our Island, a 68-foot pilothouse trawler whose construction was inspired by another DeFever boat, Akbar. At this time around, I interviewed DeFever with the help of Grant Huber, a longtime friend of his and an Annapolis-based boat broker. DeFever preferred to work with written questions, and the answers came back via fax in his own handwriting.

Q: Our Island, under her original name of Carmen Maria, has cruised to Hawaii several times and to Mexico and Alaska frequently. Was it your intent to build ocean-capable boats?

A: Yes, most all of my yacht designs have this capability. Even one of my 45-foot, steel-hulled, single-screw yachts made two crossings to Hawaii. Others have gone through the Panama Canal and across the Atlantic to Europe.

Q: Why did you choose steel for Carmen Maria/Our Island? How long will a steel boat last, with normal maintenance and use?

A: Gordon Dunn, who I designed Akbar for, saw my own 45-foot steel hull and liked it and selected Skallerud & Sons to build it. So far as Carmen Maria is concerned, I guess they saw my designs and wanted one like it.

With proper maintenance and design, her life would be for many years. Fishing boats that I worked on in the late '30s are now 69 years old and still going. I also want to refer to the Star of the Sea, the San Diego Maritime Museum's three-masted sailing ship that is 125 years old this year and still going. We take her out sailing twice a year and I have been at her helm many times since 1974.

Q: If you were asked to design a 68-foot offshore cruiser today, how would it be different from Carmen Maria/Our Island?

A: The only differences today would be a little more room to her stern or bow, with more flare to the bow lines, plus a more modern superstructure.

Q: What kind of boat would you suggest for a family planning coastal cruising today?

A: A nice size would be in the 60-foot range with twin screws and two generators and fully equipped with navigation instruments such as GPS, radar, fathometer, etc.; stabilizers; a good shore boat; and safety equipment.

Bear in mind, however, that many of our 44- to 50-foot boats have had enjoyable trips down to Mexico and to Alaska.

Q: How will world concerns, dwindling oil supplies, and global warming affect boat design in the coming years?

A: I believe engine manufacturers will come out with better fuel-economy designs, fuel additives, and possibly electric power with solar power panels.

For what it's worth, my favorite DeFever designs include the 46-foot Alaskan by Grand Banks, a wood boat built in the 1960s and early 1970s, and the classic 49 DeFever, a fiberglass production yacht that came along later and resembles the Alaskan. Both are fine cruising boats.

Art DeFever will be 90 years old in June. It's time to thank him for his huge contributions to pleasure boating and to say, "Happy birthday." He also will be an honored guest at Trawler Fest in Anacortes. Come meet a legend.—Bob Lane
OUR ISLAND

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<th>Item</th>
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<tr>
<td>LOA</td>
<td>68' 3&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>LWL</td>
<td>59' 2&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>BEAM</td>
<td>19' 6&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>DRAFT</td>
<td>8'</td>
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<tr>
<td>DISPLACEMENT</td>
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<td>BRIDGE CLEARANCE</td>
<td>38' (antenna up); 33' (antenna down)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ENGINES</td>
<td>Two 255hp Cat D33s</td>
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<tr>
<td>GENERATOR</td>
<td>Two B&amp;W Onans</td>
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<tr>
<td>FUEL</td>
<td>6,000 U.S. gal. in six tanks</td>
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<td>WATER</td>
<td>4,650 U.S. gal. in three tanks</td>
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<td>HOLDING TANK</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>RANGE AT CRUISE SPEED</td>
<td>6,156nm with 10% reserve at slow cruise [1.14mpg]</td>
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<tr>
<td>DESIGNER</td>
<td>An DeFever</td>
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<td>BUILDER</td>
<td>Skallerud &amp; Sons</td>
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one ahead and listen to the pshhh of the air shift. Built by Westinghouse decades ago, the system was checked out and praised by a technician. His only advice, Bill said, “was to keep the air dry.”

An inclinometer above the helm gives you the bad news in heavy seas. In one violent blow on their Alaska trip, it registered a roll of 40 degrees, Bill said.

“It was a very slow roll, and I did not feel the boat wouldn’t right itself,” he told me. They were running in beams seas that switched to quartering seas. While Our Island held together, a 700-lb. tender lashed to its mount on the flybridge lifted and turned sideways, then settled down.

“That was our first heavy weather, and we learned a lot.” Bill added.

Visibility is excellent from the helm and from the guest settee across the aft wall of the pilothouse. Bill enjoys steering from the flybridge in sloppy seas. He likes to see Our Island’s bow knife through oncoming waves and to watch spray fly by.

MARVELOUS MACHINERY

A door forward in the saloon opens to a ladder down to the engine room. It is a full-height, walk-around, wave-your-arms kind of engine room. Despite the amazing array of machinery, it is a comfortable place to be, with good access to all of the equipment.

The yellow Cat diesel engines seem toy sized among all the gear: a pair of Onan generators, a bank of 16 house batteries, the oil-fired boiler, an air compressor, two water heaters, a watermaker, an extensive bank of 10 filters through which every drop of fuel travels before reaching the engine, a fuel polishing system, electrical panels, two sea chests (one for incoming sea water and another for discharging waste water), a new Aft Engine Room type II marine sanitation system with a 56-gallon holding tank, an additional 35-gallon holding tank, storage for parts and tools...and more.

A quick note on the MSD unit. This is a commercial unit that is popular on tugs and crew boats in the South (it is made in Louisiana; aheadtank.com). Bill says that because the boat was originally built as an ocean-going vessel, waste was just pumped overboard and the double hull was primarily used for fuel and water storage rather than as a holding tank. While they could now install a holding tank in these spaces, their needs are met by the new MSD unit plus the additional holding tank.

Bill obviously pays attention to detail. He performs engine checks every half hour while under way, and to make the examinations easier, he has placed labels on every spot on engines and gearboxes that he hits with a remote infrared thermometer. Each label identifies the spot and shows the proper temperature. Even a less-informed crew member can make the engine room inspection and sound an alarm if a thermometer reading disagrees with the posted number.

The same thoroughness shows in the electrical system. Every outlet is marked with a number that indicates the breaker that feeds it. Go to the panel in the engine room and find that breaker, and you will find the outlet number, too. If that breaker is for a pump, it also indicates the sea chest valve number that needs to be opened or closed.

Other labels show when engine oil last was changed and when the next service is due.

The boat is rigged so that the engines can be started and stopped only from the engine room. At first, Bill thought that would be a nuisance. But now he praises the arrangement, because it forces him to take a good look around before cranking the Cats to life.

The DeFever has a dry exhaust, and the engines are keel cooled. Shortly after buying the boat, the Bresslers replaced the twin exhaust stacks that exited vertically directly above the upper deck. The 18-foot-long, 6-inch-diameter replacement stainless pipes jut up and out in a wishbone pattern so that specs of soot are carried away, instead of dropping onto the upper deck or onto the pair of 15-foot Boston Whaler tenders up there.
Engine coolant circulates through the keel, not through a grid of piping attached to the bottom or keel. Bill said the system holds 112 gallons of coolant.

In the lazarette further aft is Our Island’s hardware store. In countless bins are myriad items, from crimp connectors of many sizes to uncountable bronze pipe fittings, nuts and bolts and screws of nearly every dimension and material, paint supplies, spares. Without a doubt, Bill has more useful boat stuff in his hardware store than do many marine chandlers.

MORE TO COME

When we talked, Bill and Michelle had one immediate goal: to finish improvements on the lower deck and return to Alaska for the 2008 cruising season.

“We had so much fun in Alaska, we want to go again,” Michelle told me. “We want to go back, maybe to the Kenai Peninsula, and maybe spend a winter there.” Kenai is far beyond the usual Southeast Alaska cruising grounds. I would recommend they steer a course to Prince William Sound, a lightly cruised but beautiful area. It’s far north of Southeast, 400 miles across the Gulf of Alaska, but for Our Island, it should be a piece of cake and tremendously rewarding.

“We’re talking about going to Mexico and the Sea of Cortez,” Michelle added. “Bill is thinking about the South Pacific and Hawaii, but we’ll decide about that later.”

This year, however, they will circumnavigate Vancouver Island in British Columbia.

The lessons learned here are obvious: this kind of project takes enormous dedication; the Bresslers say they work on the boat 8–10 hours a day, six days a week, except for the summer break in Alaska.

It takes far longer than expected to do a good job—and the work I saw on Our Island ranks with that done by professionals—and it no doubt costs a lot more than first budgeted. I’ve spoken with others building or refurbishing boats, and they all seem to experience those time and money issues. Many have difficulty sustaining their passion.

Bill and Michelle obviously love their old boat. The excitement of cruising and the sense of accomplishment that comes from a project well done must spark enthusiasm for getting on with the next job on the list. I suspect, however, that one project of this scope probably will be enough for them.

Our Island is a handsome and capable yacht, and cruising with her would be a splendid adventure. Bill and Michelle, thank you for letting us find you and your boat.