IN THE WAKE OF LEGACY

THE STORIED WESTERN FLYER RETURNS TO THE SEA AS A FLOATING CLASSROOM.

BY TOM BENTLEY

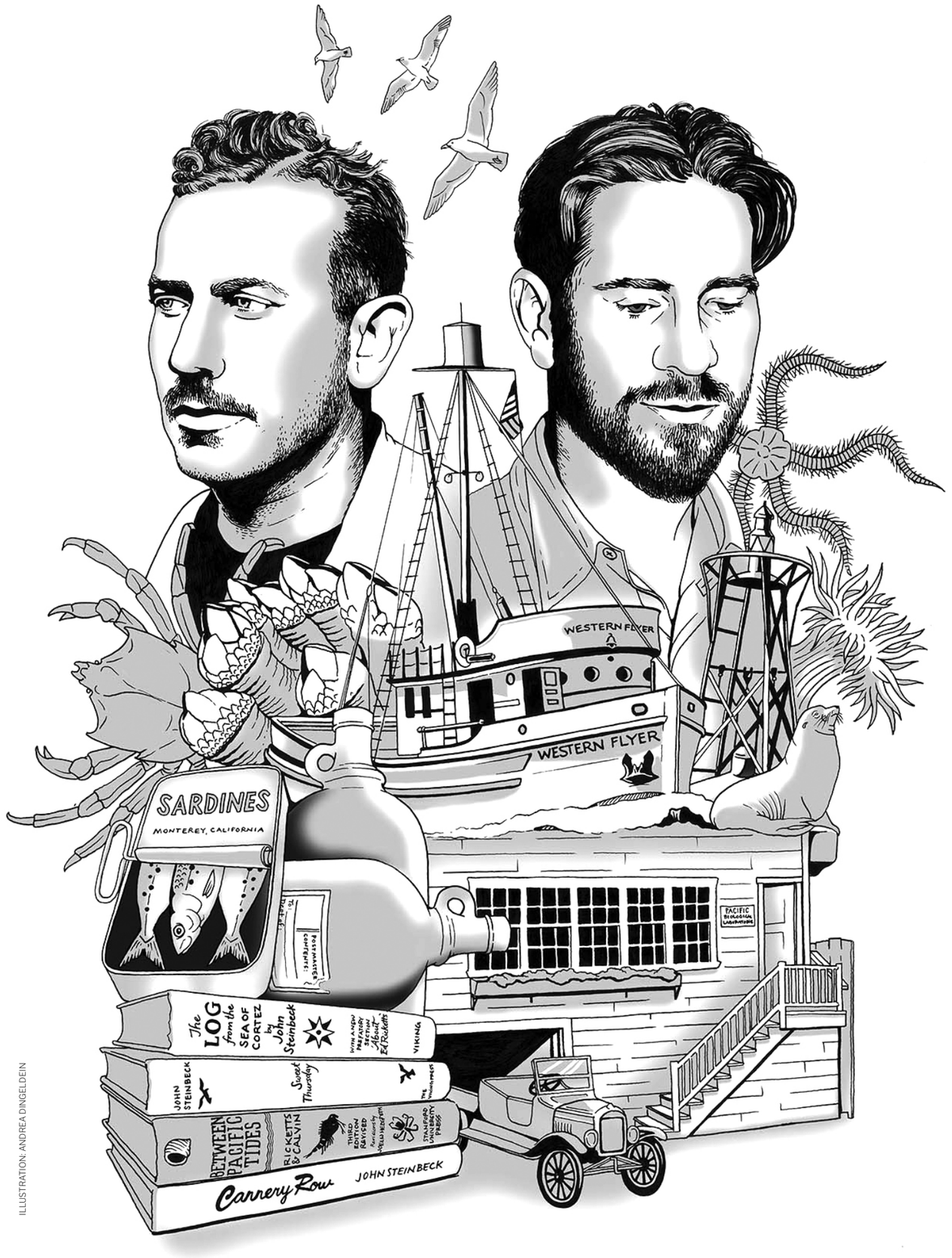
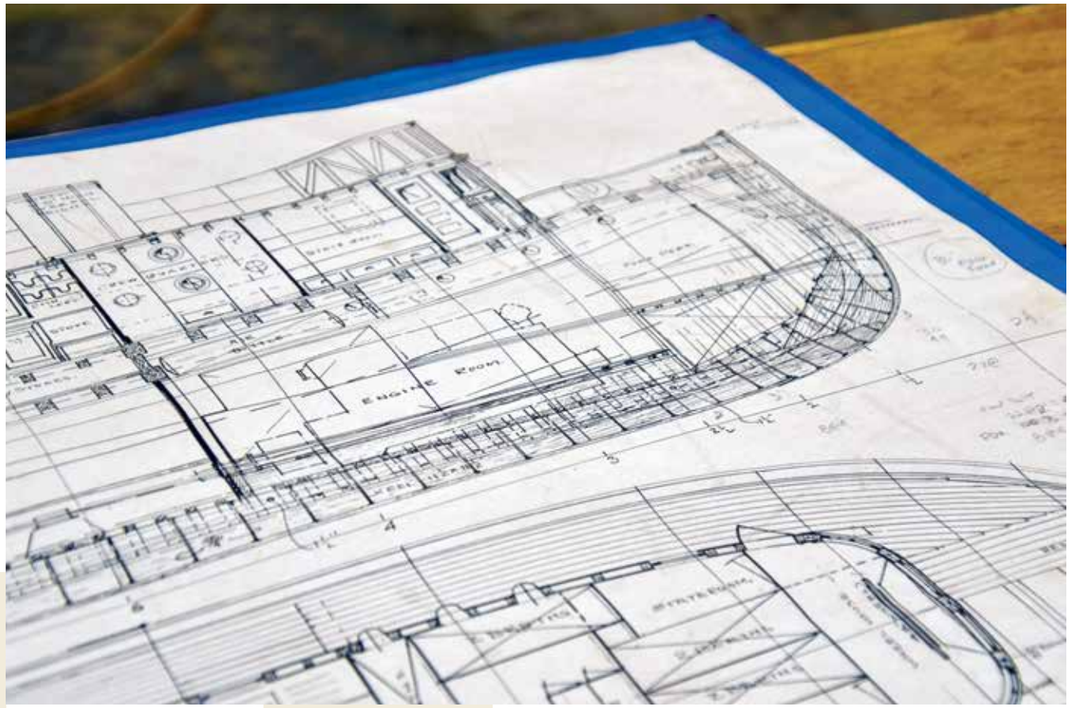


ILLUSTRATION: ANDREA DINGELDEIN

It took an experienced and innovative crew with an incredibly diverse set of both cutting edge and traditional skills to literally bring Western Flyer back from Davey Jones Locker.



History comes in many shapes, from an insect trapped in ancient amber to a meteorite made of celestial time. History is also sometimes shaped like an old sardine boat—a boat with at least as many lives as a cat. The boat in question is the *Western Flyer*, a 77-foot purse seiner built in 1937 and taken on a 4,000-mile journey in 1940 by the novelist John Steinbeck and Ed Ricketts, the legendary marine biologist.

Steinbeck, Ricketts and crew were collecting intertidal marine animals, as well as sights and stories, all recorded in *The Log From the Sea of Cortez*—a book connecting straight marine biology to cause-and-effect philosophy to enthusiastic beer drinking. The *Flyer* bore all for the six-week voyage, then returned to her stoic work as a fish finder and deliverer for various charters along the Pacific coast.

As history does, time knocked the *Flyer* about, so much so that the second time the seiner sunk in 2013—after having lost her original name to the lackluster "*Gemini*"—she remained underwater near Anacortes in Washington state, undergoing six months of rot and ruin. However, stories seep into things like seawater does: the founder of the Western Flyer Foundation (WFF), marine geologist John Gregg, was enamored of the story of Steinbeck, Ricketts and the *Flyer*. Gregg bought the boat and had it towed to Port Townsend for its refurbishing. The task took multiple years and multiple millions.

Over eight years, the Port Townsend Shipwrights painstakingly recreated the boat's hull, bulkheads and decking, fashioning templates from the original, barnacle-encrusted wood. A hybrid diesel-electric engine was installed in Seattle, and in early November 2023, the gleaming *Flyer* returned to its spiritual home in Monterey Bay.

But a staid historical exhibit, the new *Flyer* is not.

Executive Director of the WFF, Sherry Flumerfelt, says the legacy the Foundation wants to live up to is found in a quote from *The Log From the Sea of Cortez*: "Let's go wide open. Let's see what we see, record what we find, and not fool ourselves with conventional scientific strictures." In that spirit, the *Flyer* is being outfitted to be an advanced marine research

FROM SEA TO SHRED

If the refurbished *Western Flyer* has life anew, so does the old–but in the form of surfboards, snowboards, musical instruments and more. That renewed life began, as many good things do, by happenstance: David Dennis, the co-founder of Ventana Surfboards, gave a talk in 2016 at the Monterey Aquarium on sustainable business practices. After the talk, an Aquarium volunteer working on refurbishing John Steinbeck's first house asked Dennis if he was interested in some old-growth wood from the house's foundation. The first wave of a magic wand.

Dennis' partner, Martijn Stiphout, made a surfboard out of some of the wood, and later spoke about it at the Steinbeck Festival, attended by John Gregg, who was there speaking there about the *Flyer*. Dennis introduced himself and the surfboard and asked about old wood from the *Flyer*. Gregg and Chris Chase agreed to donate the first load of *Flyer* wood in 2016. Serendipity!

Stiphout has a special connection to the *Flyer* in that he kayaked a good portion of the Cortez voyage with his father in 2010. Ultimately perhaps 500 pounds of white oak and Douglas fir arrived from the *Flyer*. And Martijn Stiphout went to work. Using *Flyer* wood and other upcycled wood from Ventana partners, Stiphout shaped many striking hollow-body surfboards and other items from the bounty.

"Some of our boards have a lot of *Flyer* wood, some have less" says Dennis. "We have created handplanes for bodysurfing entirely out of *Flyer* wood, and we've also done some artist collaborations where we made two portholes for a stained-glass artist from the hull wood. Another highlight for us was building a wooden hawksbill turtle from hull planks that has now been inlaid into the deck of the *Western Flyer*," he says. "Many of our customers have a special connection to the book or to Steinbeck."

Not much of the reclaimed woods go to waste at Ventana. Stiphout has also made many *Flyer*-sourced bookmarks, whistles and bottle openers. He's currently working on building two handcrafted dories to sail the entire distance with his brother after their completion–and some *Flyer* wood will be floating those boats. "Having this all come full circle with wood from the *Western Flyer* incorporated into our surfboards and other products has been the highlight of our work over the last several years. Using that wood along with other meaningful materials that have connections to the Monterey Bay gives our customers something truly special, and diverting those materials from the landfill makes it even more meaningful for us," says Dennis.

Ventana believes that what goes around, comes around: they donate money back to the Western Flyer Foundation from their sales. Regarding things coming and going, it's clear the *Flyer* in its various incarnations will be going for long years to come.

What wood and hardware could be saved–was saved. What couldn't was painstakingly duplicated, creating a tough and modern yet thoroughly antique research vessel. We can only wonder what Steinbeck and Ricketts would make of her today.

and educational vessel, designed to inform and captivate young minds with the drive and curiosity of her famous former pilots.

"Everything we do is about getting students and adults alike curious about oceans, marine life and the natural world in a way that is holistic and interdisciplinary—living into that legend of Steinbeck, Ricketts, and their friendship," says Flumerfelt. "We don't want to create some structured, cookie-cutter curriculum that all students must follow. We want to create settings that invite curiosity, and we want students to be able to follow their own curiosity, wherever it might take them."

That curiosity will also be seeded with copious data from multiple collectors, courtesy of a grant from the U.S. Navy's Office of Naval Research, in conjunction with help from Monterey's Naval Postgraduate School and Stanford University. The *Flyer* is now being tricked out with instruments galore for its shipboard oceanography program: measurements from a CTD (conductivity, temperature and depth) device will include salinity, temperature, pressure, oxygen, fluorescence and pH. "We can get a vertical profile through the water column from the surface to whatever depth we deploy it, which tells us how those parameters are changing with depth," says Dr. Katie Thomas, science program manager for the WFF.

The device will be set up to relay live information on changing conditions at various depths to on-deck monitors, as well as record the dynamic information to a hard drive. "We're going to have a flow-through system on board that continuously pumps in surface water from the ocean through a bunch of those sensors on board the ship," says Thomas. "We also have a scientific echo sounder that is tuned for telling you, for example, that if there's a huge school of anchovies under the boat, you can see the distribution and size and locations of different animals within a beam under the boat."

Thomas says the instrumentation (which also includes a sophisticated meteorological sensor array to measure atmospheric gases, wind speed and much more) and frequent sampling can provide knowledge of how different masses of water are moving around during the year and how that might affect fisheries and other animals. Testing across years might show climate change effects, with linked pieces of data giving stronger pictures

Car enthusiasts might call her a 'resto-mod'. Generations-old hand-hewn wood and hand-pounded nails were replaced and plenty of modern technology was added. The result? A resplendent new Western Flyer is now ready for research.

of what's happening in the ocean ecosystem. And what's happening in that ecosystem will be looked at, dipped deeply into, and assessed by students doing research projects on the *Flyer*.

Dr. Rebecca Mostow, education program manager at WFF says, "The goals of this program are to expose post-secondary students, especially those in community college, to careers in marine science, maritime technology and oceanographic research aboard the *Western Flyer*. Students in the program will have a chance to collect and analyze data using all of those instruments."

Jason Adelaars, an engineer with the Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute (MBARI) is contracting with the WFF to install, integrate and maintain much of the research equipment on the *Flyer*. And he's delighted: "This is absolutely thrilling to know that its continued mission is going to be education and outreach—it brings together engineering, art, science and history all rolled into one," he says.

A test program with Stanford students earlier in the year on a local whale-watching boat was a big success. Students learned to fly the program's small observational ROV to do species identification, as well as deploy the other instruments. "Our goal is to have students collecting data along the same transects (i.e., the same sites) in Monterey Bay," says Mostow. "Their data will be part of the development of a long-term monitoring dataset available to scientists and teachers alike, and the students will have the opportunity to compare data either between time points or between sites."

John Gregg is working with WFF on building a full-size ROV, funded by the Naval Research grant, to supplement the mini-ROV. Student projects will encompass the long-term monitoring of Monterey Bay, and projects up and down the coast; the *Flyer* is destined to return to Baja waters as well, to glean data with devices that Steinbeck and Ricketts could have never fathomed. But their work is a catalyst for what's to come: "There are so many different ways that people can feel a connection to this boat," says Katie Thomas. "With its history, and the way that it brings people in with all different kinds of backgrounds. It opens up the world of opportunity for sharing all these things that are really amazing with more people."

Steinbeck, who grew up in Salinas, California, was a writer of many lives: his novels moved through the comic to the polemic, the narrow through the epic, the subtle through the blockbuster. But his work and ambitions always moved forward, despite some stumbles. Like Steinbeck, the *Flyer* has had many lives, and despite some stumbles, she hasn't used them up. She continues to float through time—and new stories are sure to follow. ❐