

On Living Aboard

by Gene Henson



It was one of those popcorn days of autumn: cool but not cold, breezy but not windy, a day when you drag out the warm and treasured wool shirt with the frayed cuffs and give some thought to heading to the storage unit for some warmer clothes. When you live year round on an old wooden boat, you think of things like this long before normal people do. And at this time of year, there's a lot of shaking heads when people find out that you actually are going to be spending the winter aboard a boat. Of course, there are the questions like "What do you do for heat?" or "How come you don't head south?" After three years of answering questions like this, you would think that it gets pretty old. Not really, I mean, after all, we're living many people's fantasy.

Heat aboard *Patty 'O*, our 54-year-old Huckins sedan cruiser, is an old Shipmate coal stove. It's in storage right now, but when it's hooked up, it does a marvelous job keeping us warm and dry. I chose coal for fuel due to its availability and the fact that heat from this thing will dry out even the most saturated sleeping bag in no time flat.

I certainly would love to head for a warmer climate in the winter like so many other live-aboards do, but this is the real life, and so one

must compromise. I was sitting in one of the cockpit chairs, gazing at a spot on the deck way back in the corner where some of the caulking in the teak deck was beginning to come out, thinking that I'd have to get to that pretty soon, when I heard the cell phone ring. Our cell phone, well, mine anyway, is always somewhere where I'm not. In this case, it was on the forward vee- birth, about as far from where I was when I first heard it as you can get on a 40-foot boat.

"Hey, sport!" my wife, the Blonde, said on the voice mail. "Put on your pretties; we're going out tonight. Call me." I hung up the phone and carried it back to the cockpit. We've been married long enough to know when one of us gets a bit out of the norm, and this was out of the norm. It's not that we are hermits or anything. Just because we live on a boat doesn't mean that we are recluses, but there was an edge in her voice that had me wondering.

I carried the phone back to the cockpit chair and looked again at the caulking that had spit out of the teak seam. I added that to the mental list of things to do before the snow flies.

"Two-nine-three," the Blonde said, repeating her extension number.

"Hey, what's cooking?"

Like most married couples, we do have our own phone protocol, which must be followed.

"Wanna meet me at Josie's? I'll be leaving here about six."


"Sure," I replied. "What's the occasion?"

"I'll tell you when I see you. Gotta go." And with that cryptic explanation, the line went dead.

So I cooled my heels for the next four hours. The Blonde is the one in the family who has a real job. She's an architect with a pretty good firm. She's well-liked and on the fast track. Having been there once myself, I can appreciate what she's doing.

At quarter to six I was at the bar in Josie's nursing a drink and thinking about the other Friday evenings that I was here. In another life, I wore a tie every day and played the corporate game. Not that I still don't on occasion; I do a bit of consulting once in a while just

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to keep my hand in, but I'm really a confirmed boat bum and that suits me just fine, thank you.

"Hey, Sport, buy me a drink, will ya?" She gave me a poke in the ribs and laughed at the astonished look on my face. The clock said five minutes to six. This lady has never been on time in her entire life. I carried our drinks to a booth near the back and we spent a couple of minutes asking the obligatory questions about each other's day. But I couldn't take it any longer. "Okay, give," I said. "What's going on?"

She gave a fluff to her hair and took a sip of her chardonnay. "You're not going to believe this..."

"Try me," I said.

"Well, you know I've been with Ackerman for a long time." Actually, it was the first big job she'd had.

"Yup. Must be eight years, huh?"

"Yeah, well... today they offered me a full partnership."

"Hey, that's terrific!" I said. "Wow, that goes to show ya that all those rumors of a glass ceiling are baloney." But she wasn't smiling. There must be a catch.

"Yeah, but in order to accept, I've got

to head up the Albuquerque office."

"That's as in New Mexico?" I asked.

"Yup."

We sat there, each with our own thoughts. Albuquerque is about as far from anything I could imagine. "Big raise?" I asked.

"You bet," she said.

In spite of all the thoughts running through my head, this was one of those times when it's best not to say a thing. Albuquerque. Wow! She obviously would have to move there. And, if I valued our marriage, so would I. A thousand more thoughts flew in and out of my mind.

She smiled and said, "Let's get something to eat, ok?"

"That works," I said. And then, I had to ask the question. "Whadja tell them?"

She played with her napkin and looked down at the tablecloth. "I said I'd let them know on Monday."

"Okay. Monday it is. You know I'll go along with whatever you decide. We've got the weekend; let's enjoy it."

We got back to *Patty 'O* about nine, and without saying anything, I lit off the engines and got us under way. The Blonde did her thing and stowed lines and joined me on the bridge as

we made our way down river. It was about one in the morning when we anchored in Choeckle's Cove, on the south side of Shelter Island.

It was a pretty good weekend. We swam in the warm fall water, walked the beach and ran into Sag Harbor for dinner on Saturday, spending about the same as we would have for three dinners back in Connecticut. And all too soon it was late Sunday afternoon, and I was thinking about getting under way. We sat in *Patty 'O's* cockpit and I looked again at the teak where the caulking was coming out. Was I seeing things or was it even more ratty looking?

Neither of us had mentioned Albuquerque, but I knew it was time to ask. "Whatcha gonna tell 'em?" I asked.

She looked at me and smiled. "What, and leave all this? Hey. I was looking for a job when I found this one." We clinked glasses and toasted the setting sun, and all was well in our world afloat!



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