

Sparkle in their eyes...

"What held this boat together? Memory?" Pretty much, but she had a hell of a history, and is now enjoying a renaissance as 'the boat to beat'

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Back in the 50's and 60's, *Sparkle* was known as "the boat to beat" in sailing circles in Southern California. Nowadays, *Sparkle* is known as "the boat to beat" in sailing circles in Port Townsend, Washington. She might not be sailing at all today were it not for an impulsive purchase by a young crewmember of the tall ship *Lady Washington* on a trip along the California coast in 1997.

Brian McGinn had joined the crew of the *Lady Washington* a couple of years after graduating from high school in Port Townsend. It was while on the *Lady's* nine-month "Voyage of Rediscovery" down the coast in 1997 that he found an old wooden boat tied up to the dock in San Diego with a sign on the front that read, "For Sale: \$3500 plus a good car (or \$5000 cash)." The owner had purchased the boat, named *Sparkle*, at a Navy auction just six months before. "It leaked pretty badly," recalls McGinn, "but I was looking for a boat and the price was right."

McGinn, with the help of two friends who apparently didn't know what they were getting into, sailed up the coast to San Luis Obispo on a trip that included the rudder falling off and floating away (it was retrieved, fortunately), a dead motor, a bilge full of oil, and a "deflatable" dinghy. They wisely put the boat on a truck in San Luis and sent her the rest of the way to Port Townsend by land, where some much-needed repair work was done. After being relaunched, *Sparkle* went out to take first in the 1998 Shipwrights Regatta. In the next outing, the Port to Port Race, McGinn recalls, "We started half an hour late. Everything we touched on the boat broke. And when we finished, we discovered the boat was half full of water." But they won. This was a "magic" boat.

McGinn's friend Guy Hupy, an architectural designer who had crewed for McGinn on a number of races, offered to buy into the boat as a partner in order to help McGinn do a much-needed rebuild. As a veteran racer, he could tell that the boat had great lines—and deserved to be saved. He convinced McGinn that it was time to get the boat out of the water for a major restoration effort. With the boat hauled out for three years at the Point Hudson Boat Shop in Port Townsend, the co-owners worked evenings and weekends to replace frames, floors, stem, and cabin sole, put on a new deck, and rebuild the cockpit. They discovered that due to deteriorating fasteners, many of the floors were no longer attached to the hull and pulled right off in their hands. As Hupy puts it, "What held this boat together? Memory?"

They drilled out and put in new fasteners where possible. Some were so badly corroded that they just plugged them and put in new ones. A new rudder was built, to replace the one that had floated away on McGinn's first ill-fated trip. McGinn, who was by now working as a rigger at Port Townsend Rigging, added new standing and running rigging. Because of all of the old rusty fasteners, it was impossible to keep the white topsides clean, so they painted the boat black.

Deciding that they wanted to have the boat in the 2001 Wooden Boat Festival, McGinn and Hupy took time off from work to put their full effort into the project. With two weeks to go, they still had to redo the bottom, splines, and topsides, fix the muffler and fuel system, and step the mast. Miraculously, they prevailed. "We just barely got her rigged in time for the Sunday Sail-by," says McGinn. "We were actually sewing the slides on the sails after starting."

The 40' wooden sloop that McGinn had purchased in San Diego turned out to have an interesting history. *Sparkle* was designed and built by Alex Irving in 1946, with help from friend and coworker Norman Schwartz. Both were aerodynamics engineers at the Jet Propulsion Lab in Southern California, doing work for NASA. Many who see the boat remark on its similarity to the Ben Seborn designed *Twinkle*, but there is no connection, save the coincidentally similar name.

Irving started building boats at a young age. His first was a 15' sailboat that he built while in high school. "I graduated from boat to boat," he recalls. "I built four boats that were at least 27' long, including a 28' schooner." Reminiscing about his younger days, Irving concluded, "I had a pretty keen life."

Intrigued by books on the whaling days, Alex decided to build a sailboat based on the lines of a double-ended whaling boat. "The whaling boats were pulled at such a high rate of speed after harpooning the whales that I figured they must be fast and sturdy. I got the lines of the hull from a whaling museum in New Bedford and lengthened them to 40'. The boat had a long waterline (36'), which was unheard of in those days." With the help of Schwartz, the design was modified slightly, including widening the waterline aft so the boat wouldn't "squat" at high speeds and would attain a planing action.

Irving built the boat in his backyard with the help of a professional builder. "I did about half the work myself, including pouring the lead keel. It took us about a year and a half. Since it was just after the war, we couldn't get bronze, so we had to use galvanized fasteners."

The boat's construction was Port Orford cedar planking on white oak frames; fir for the stem, keel, and deadwood; canvas-covered decks; and teak trim. The spars were Sitka spruce, and the hollow mast sported a $\frac{3}{4}$ masthead sloop rig. With a 5,000-pound lead keel, the boat's displacement was 14,000 pounds. Long and slender, the 40' hull had a beam of 8' and a deep 5'6" draft. A 9'6" cockpit allowed plenty of room for maneuvering.

The boat had a full interior, with berths on each side, a head forward, and a galley back by the companionway. Headroom under the cabin trunk was 5'11". The exterior was finished with white topsides, green bottom paint, and a red stripe. "I hauled her twice a year for new paint...had to if I wanted to be competitive," explain Irving. His wife came up with the name *Sparkle*.

The boat was launched in 1947, and Irving, a member of the Balboa Yacht Club, started racing in San Pedro under the Cruising Club of America Ocean Racing Rules. *Sparkle* quickly proved herself to be a worthy competitor. With Irving at the helm, and using borrowed sails, *Sparkle* represented the Cabrillo Beach Yacht Club in the Sir Thomas Lipton Trophy Race at Newport, California, on March 27, 1949--and won, beating thirteen of the area's best racers. With the prestigious Lipton Cup under her belt, *Sparkle* would dominate the Southern California racing scene for the next twenty years, competing against such luminaries as Humphrey Bogart on his yacht, *Santana*.

"We were racing against boats with lots of money behind them," says Irving. "I was just a working guy." Of course, that "working guy" and his crew of seven coworkers all happened to be aerodynamics engineers, giving *Sparkle* the advantage of sailing with a "boat full of geniuses." Irving recalls that his crew was always looking for ways to go faster. "The fellows in my crew developed a lot of "go-fast" things such as traveler rollers and backstay tweekers. A lot of little goodies. These guys pretty much knew what made a boat go."

And they sailed the boat hard. The lazarette, where the crewman stood to crank the winches on the genoa, was nicknamed the "hernia hole."

Sparkle's speed quickly gained the attention of the sailing community, and other designers set out to "beat Sparkle." Her long waterline, double-ended hull, and fin keel started a trend and had a major influence on boat design.

Making the boat's speed even more remarkable was the fact that it was not stripped down like modern racing yachts. "We had to have lifelines, an inflatable, and safety gear to comply with the offshore racing rules," says Irving. "And I usually had my lobster traps and diving gear aboard," he laughs. On weekends when he wasn't racing, Irving would sail *Sparkle* twenty miles offshore to Catalina Island.

Irving sailed *Sparkle* for 32 years before selling the boat in 1979. He sums up his experience in a few words: "I had a wonderful crew. It was a joy to race." Unfortunately, *Sparkle* didn't fare so well with her new owners. As Irving commented when he saw the boat many years later, "She looked so bad, I figured that it was best if I didn't look her up anymore." But that would change.

In 1999, Port Townsend sailor Anne Greer saw *Sparkle* and immediately recognized it. In fact, her father knew Irving. She put McGinn and Hupy in contact with him and, after the rebuild, they invited Irving to visit and join them for a sail, leading to a *Sparkle* reunion in October 2001. The then 88-year-old Irving traveled to Port Townsend, along with eight of his crew. "They were great," says McGinn of the elder sailors. "They just walked down the dock, got on board, and started putting the sails up—one guy even pulled some yarn out of his pocket and started sewing on telltales. We had a great time sailing with them--they spent two days laughing, joking, telling stories, and singing *Sparkle* songs." Irving even sent along a Martec folding prop (that he had helped design) for the boat as a gift to McGinn and Hupy.

Irving and his crew enjoyed hearing about the work that the new owners had put into *Sparkle* and were delighted to have the chance to sail on her once again. After the reunion, Hupy and McGinn received notes of appreciation from the boat's designers: "It was a pleasure to see you guys living the kind of boating life like Alex and I had," wrote Norm Schwartz (who recently passed away). And from Irving, "What you two nice guys have done and are now doing with *Sparkle* is giving me such joy."

Since then, *Sparkle* and her crew have become a mainstay of Port Townsend's races and regattas, formal and informal. Hupy and McGinn have proven to be a perfect match as tactician and driver. It is rare for them to not be in the lead, no matter what the sailing conditions. With the recent addition of a new mainsail by local sailmaker Sean Rankins, they've become almost unbeatable.

Sparkle is McGinn's and Hupy's pride and joy, and they sail her whenever they get a chance--typically two or three times a week during the spring and summer and anytime the weather cooperates in the fall and winter--and with anyone who wants to climb aboard and go along for the ride.

Their future plans include additional restoration work—including replanking the hull and finishing the interior--and someday taking *Sparkle* back to San Diego to race on her old home turf, where she will undoubtedly maintain her reputation as "one of the fastest boats around."