

taproot

INSPIRATION FOR MAKERS, DOERS & DREAMERS



ISSUE 47 :: SUSTAIN



COVER ART BY MEERA LEE PATEL

PHOTO BY JACK SULLIVAN

A woman wearing a black t-shirt, a yellow hard hat, and safety glasses is working on the deck of a boat. She is using a blue power tool, possibly a sander or drill, on a wooden surface. The background shows the rigging and ropes of the boat.

SAILING ON

PRESERVING MAINE'S
WINDJAMMING TRADITION

BY LISA MILLETTE
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JACK SULLIVAN



There is something intrinsically fascinating about moving by wind power. It is literally physics. It doesn't matter if it's a 150-year-old schooner or a catamaran, it's magic.

—Noah Barnes, captain and owner of the *Stephen Taber*

In January 2019, I decided it was time—time to stop *wishing* I had a romantic companion and do something about it. I signed on to an online dating app where the woman makes the first move, and just after Valentine's Day I went on a date with the deckhand on one of Midcoast Maine's wooden schooners. A few days later, I went out on a date with someone else whom I "matched" with: he was a deckhand on a different wooden schooner. They knew each other. It was slightly awkward, and yet this is not a story of dating in Midcoast Maine. Rather, it is about how I came to know and love our state's windjammer fleet, develop a deep appreciation for the craftspeople who keep them afloat, and realize how truly special they make the area where I live.

Unlike cruise ships, the vast majority of the windjammer fleet weren't built for passenger travel and exploration. Before 18-wheelers, even before steam engines, our country's cargo vessels were wind-powered wooden ships. For Maine, with its many islands and peninsulas to get to, sailing remained a viable way to distribute mail, packets, and cargo even well into the age of steam. Thus the boats, and those with the skills to run and maintain them, retreated up to this part of the country and became part of the fabric of Midcoast and Downeast Maine. These regions have become the country's *de facto* training ground for wooden boat builders and big-boat sailors because there are so many who live here.

In 1936 Captain Frank Swift tried using a two-masted cargo schooner as a passenger vessel, charging \$32 and \$60 for a one- and two-week cruise respectively. According to an early brochure, the schooner was "not to follow an exact itinerary but to use the winds and tides to make the cruise most interesting." Captain Swift's vision is alive today in Camden and Rockland, where passengers can adventure around Penobscot Bay's islands and inlets during a multiday cruise aboard these same wooden schooners, hosted by the hardworking crews that care for, repair, and rebuild them.

I did end up falling for one of the deckhands I met through that dating app. Our relationship started during the off-season, which in his case included sanding, stripping, patching, and varnishing many pieces of the *Ladona*, the schooner he worked on, as well as the small boats attached to her. As it was his second season with the fleet, he was already familiar with much of the off-season maintenance and with ending the day covered in sawdust or flecks of rust or smelling of varnish.

In March and April, fit-out on the windjammers begins, and crews spend much of the day on their boats, most of which

overwinter right in their harbor, their decks covered from the elements with white plastic. This plastic also affords the crews semi-protected work sites during Maine's unpredictable spring weather.

Dating a sailor and living only one city block from Windjammer Wharf in Rockland sometimes meant throwing on foul weather gear and running with my partner down to the docks at 10 p.m. to secure lines and retie covers in a storm. It meant him popping down on a Sunday to check the status of a project and report in to the captain before our date night. It meant hearing about what was going well but mostly what wasn't. It also meant adding to my friend circle the *Ladona's* crew, Anna the cook, and captain JR as well as getting to know the other boats on the docks and their captains: Daniel of the *Bufflehead*, a smaller day sailboat; Sam of the *Victory Chimes* (she's on Maine's state quarter); and, at the time, Katie of the *J&E Rigg* and Noah Barnes, captain of the *Stephen Taber*, who describes running a windjammer as "a nineteenth-century amount of work."

From Noah I learned about the history of the boats, and how when he and JR bought the *Ladona* six years ago, they never imagined she would be in need of the rebuild she underwent. The crew started at the top—with a chainsaw—and worked their way down to the keel before realizing that it would be a very serious rebuild, more serious than they thought: she was in terrible shape.

Noah and JR brought in Mike Rogers as the principal builder and shipwright and Simon, a local talent who Noah claims would be the last man ever to say, "I am good at boatbuilding." All in all, they ended up with a crew of eighteen shipwrights, all at various stages in their careers. Their "systems guy" came up from Maryland, but local ruffians made up the rest of the crew—some of them very, very talented and some just learning the craft. A few of the greenhorns went on to work at local boatbuilding shops after. One is now a naval architect. Looking back, Noah reflects that at that time it was probably the most interesting nautical boat build project on the eastern seaboard.

Some are born into Maine's sometimes anachronistic wooden boat world. Others, like Noah's parents, just fall passionately head over heels for the fleet and the sailing experience. They visited Maine in the '70s and sailed on the *Lewis R. French* (who still sails out of Camden). Arriving back in their home state of North Carolina, they developed a two-year plan to leave their professorships and buy a schooner of their own. In 1979 they relocated to Maine and acquired the *Stephen Taber*. Noah was seven years old.

Three years later, Noah's parents hauled the *Taber* out of the water for a rebuild, and Noah's dad, Ken, forged much of her new ironwork. Perhaps that is why Noah plunged ahead with *Ladona's* rebuild: because as a kid he had seen how the right craftspeople for the job seemingly just walked



Maine's woods to restore a schooner. Even though many years had passed, he trusted it would happen and it did. Maine's windjammer fleet remains strong and our state has continually attracted and fostered the people with the knowledge, skills, and eccentricity to boats such as the *Stephen Taber* and *Ladona* to their beauty and seaworthiness.

Boats that continue to look good either have owners at the shipyard to do the work or, more often, have a crew who learn to paint, carve wood, and mend old leaf. Captains already know or quickly learn carpentry, plumbing, and electrical and have a clear understanding of what they can and cannot do. The camaraderie among the fleet's captains and area shipwrights is strong from the spring fit-out all the way through to winter—there isn't anyone in the sailing community who won't stop what they were doing to help out another boat on having a tough day. They are endlessly there for support and encouragement.

For the *Stephen Taber* marks 150 years of continual restoration. In an age when some things we buy fall apart in a matter of years, I am in awe of the work and the people who have kept her to this moment: from those behind her original construction to the captains and crew that maintain her, to the passengers who keep her a working vessel.

My love affair with *Ladona's* deckhand, that was enduring, but I smile knowing that the romance of windjamming tradition has many years to come.

THE WORK OF THE ISLAND INSTITUTE

Windjamming in Maine owes its success not only to the craftspeople who run and maintain the fleet but also to the fabric of coastal and island communities through which these legendary crafts sail. For many, coastal Maine evokes a sense of stability, tradition, simplicity, and beauty. Yet Maine and its coast, like the rest of the world, are facing challenges as our climate quickly changes. Sea-level rise and storm surges threaten waterfront businesses, homes, and roadways. Warming waters threaten groundfish and shellfish species and those who rely on the catch. Look behind the postcard image of the Maine coast, and you'll see a place grappling with real-world challenges. We can turn a blind eye to it, or we can be a part of the solution.

The nonprofit organization where I work, the Island Institute in Rockland, Maine, has been working proactively and collaboratively to sustain Maine's island and coastal communities by helping these areas tackle the most pressing environmental and socioeconomic issues they face. From sea-level rise and climate change to clean energy solutions, the working waterfront, and intersections between state and federal decisions, the Island Institute supports informed conversations—with communities, businesses, governmental entities, and others—and helps provide those who are impacted with the tools and resources to address these issues.



Maine's year-round island and coastal communities are filled with people who exhibit a certain amount of grit, a strength of character, and the courage to persevere and meet challenges head-on. This reputation is earned from long hours of laboring to make a living, exhibiting the resourcefulness to endure or thrive in cold winters that bring more dark hours than light, yet with the ability to adapt to and welcome the overwhelming number of visitors who flood Maine's communities every summer. As resilient as these folks are, their towns are very small, which means that residents often need to wear many hats, taking on the additional role of selectperson, community theater director, volunteer firefighter, and/or local committee member in addition to their primary roles as parent, caretaker, and friend.

For almost forty years, the Island Institute has addressed a variety of needs in Maine's island and coastal communities. We fostered the creation of an outer-island teaching and learning collaborative. We teamed up with local organizations to train over ninety individuals (mostly lobsterpersons) to grow seaweed or shellfish to diversify their skillset and income. The Island Institute's store, Archipelago, returns about 55 percent of sales revenue to the cohort of Maine artists and makers whose wares stock its shelves. The Island Fellows program matches young professionals with small communities with vision and drive but who need capacity and technical assistance. All the while, the Island Institute has been slowly building networks among

Maine's islands, coastal communities, and beyond. We will now work within these networks to find solutions for the next round of challenges we all share, such as connectivity through broadband access, renewable energy transitions, and sea-level-rise preparedness.

Maintaining strong, resilient, and vibrant year-round island and remote coastal communities is hard work, and it is work that many community members lovingly take on. It is my job and the job of my coworkers to find ways to lighten the load and make their work easier, by connecting them to resources, training, and other folks with similar experiences. It is also our job to get their stories and the realities of Maine's islands and small coastal towns in front of local and national decision makers, to bring people to the table and then facilitate conversations, often between groups who each believe the other doesn't care about what they think or know. We know strong community leadership leads to a resilient coast, but only if community leaders are supported as they tackle today's most critical issues and are given the tools they need to thrive and be examples of sustainability. This is exactly what the Island Institute aims to do.

Year after year, these communities have shown continued grit and perseverance—all for the love of the place where they live, the people they surround themselves with, and the lifestyle that can only be found here. If they aren't giving up, how can we? ✨