



First Quarter 9/7



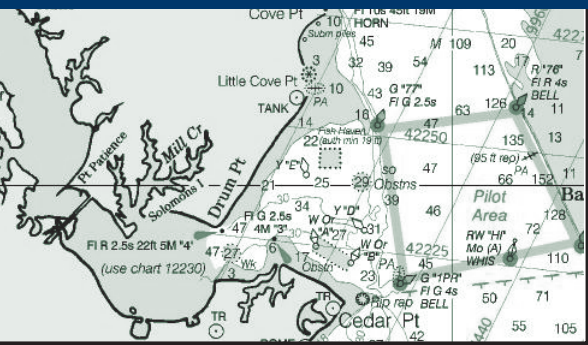
Full Moon 9/15



Last Quarter 9/22



New Moon 9/29



# Home Waters

CHESAPEAKE & MID-ATLANTIC

SEPTEMBER 2008

## RELAUNCH OF 1888 YACHT IS A LESSON IN PATIENCE



By Douglas A. Campbell

SENIOR WRITER

Time was running out for Rick Carrion and a squad of volunteers, preparing on the banks of a Chesapeake Bay tributary for the scheduled 4 p.m. relaunch of Elf, a yacht that was first splashed exactly 120 years before. Time was running out and so was the patience of at least one squad member — a wiry fellow with a shaved head and a scowl — who was beginning to cuss loudly, despite the gathering crowd of men, women, children and dogs around the pretty, white hull with the clipper bow and the full, red keel.

There was no reason, the bald man insisted as he wrestled to install the stuffing box around the prop shaft, that this launching couldn't take place a month from this Friday in April. And, he suggested with some colorful adjectives, with much yet to do, there *were* reasons it *should* be delayed.

High on the list of problems were the dozen inch-in-diameter stainless steel bolts meant to hold the 11,000-pound lead shoe on the bottom of the keel. The bolt holes that had been cast in the lead were in the wrong place. It had taken the prior four days to redrill holes in the keel, the only original wood saved after the restoration of Elf was begun 17 years before. Now, less than two hours before the launch, some of the volunteers were tightening the bolts, still unsure if they were seated correctly.

But the champagne — maybe a case



Rick Carrion raises a glass to celebrate the culmination of 17 years of restoration work with the launch of Elf, his 120-year-old, 38-foot Lawley-built yacht.

of it for the 100 guests and volunteers — was chilled and waiting. Reporters and a video crew swarmed like spring gnats. Relatives and friends arrived in a constant stream. Everyone had something to say to Carrion, or a question to ask.

And so as he was being wired for sound by the video crew, Carrion, who bought Elf in 1971 and formed a charitable non-profit corporation in 1982 to raise restoration funds, was convinced the show had to go on. He had donors who, over the years, had contributed

more than \$500,000 to the Elf project. He had set this deadline for the launching and invited them to attend. "If I'm going to make this thing work," he would say, "people like to see progress."

Luck had blessed Carrion with the first hot, sunny day of spring. The sky

LOCAL NOTICES: 9

C.G. RESPONSES: 14

CALENDAR: 15

### Trouble on the water

**4** The kids were in the boat. The parents were in the water. The wind was blowing 25 knots in one direction, against a running tide.

### Summer's in swing

**5** Unpredictable weather July 4th didn't keep the Maryland marine police or local tow operators from having a busy holiday weekend.

### Purveyor of sail cloth

**6** Marilyn "Dixie" Bacon, who owned a well-known Annapolis sail consignment shop, remained an active business woman right up to her final days.

### Little boat, big ideals

**12** Scott Blais, a Tennessee sailor, enjoys time on the water with the same passion he has for saving endangered elephants.

DEBORAH ALBERS

was cloudless over Long Cove off the Chester River. The smell of oil-based paint drifted in a slight breeze, greeting the growing crowd of short-sleeved shirts and occasional Bermuda shorts. Many hands held cameras that clicked images of the star of the show.

Elf, at 38 feet on deck, was built in 1888 by George Lawley & Sons in Boston. Lawley's reputation as a yacht builder was second only to that of Nathanael G. Herreshoff, according to yachting historians. (The only existing small yacht that is known to be older than Elf is Clara, a 37-foot cat yawl on display in the Herreshoff Museum in Bristol, R.I.)

As each new wave of well-wishers arrived for the launching of Elf, Carrion found himself repeating the story of his romance with the boat. "It's etched on my frontal lobe," he says.

He was working for a marina on the Sassafras River, near his home in Earleville, Md., in the summer after his freshman year in college when the yacht, then named Flying High and rigged as a yawl, came up the river. Carrion fell in love with her body, knowing nothing of her soul.

"I kind of watched it that year and kept making sure the bilge pumps were operating," he told Soundings three years ago. Then, in almost the same words he now was using to tell the story to launch guests, he told Soundings that at the end of his sophomore year at Salisbury State



**Elf under sail about a year after her 1888 launch; the deck is quarter-sawn Douglas fir with tung oil; the hand-carved cherry tiller depicts a howling banshee, modeled after the original.**

College, he told his boss at the marina he was planning to make an offer for the boat.

"My mother was friends with the people who ran the yard," he said in 2005. "They insisted that my mother approve of this. They didn't think it was a good idea."

But Aline Carrion, now 81, approved of his purchase of the boat. He paid \$1,500 to the owner — who had planned to decommission her with a chainsaw — and then sailed the motorless yacht back to college, where it became his dormitory room for his final two years.

His growing intimacy with the boat showed him her decrepit condition. But at one point, while scraping paint in the forward cabin, he found her documentation number. "I sent them off and then didn't hear anything back until 1973," he told Soundings. The eventual response revealed this was Elf and gave him her year of construction.

Two years later, having graduated from college and taken a job teaching science, Carrion decided he should sell Elf. He placed an ad in Soundings, listing her pedigree. "Donald Street Jr. [a venerated cruising sailor] called me and told me I should consider not

selling the boat," Carrion says. Street told him Elf was the oldest existing small yacht in the nation and perhaps in the world.

Carrion took Elf off the market. When he saw photographs of her original towering sloop rig, he was inspired to restore the yacht. He formed the non-profit and created the Classic Yacht Restoration Guild, a membership organization designed to raise money for the project. With federal and state grants and the sale of guild memberships, he accumulated \$40,000 in 1991, and Elf was hauled and brought to his farm a mile from the Sassafras. It was then that he met master shipwright Graham Ero, who he hired to oversee the carpentry for the project.

"Rick was the project manager," says Ero, who was the only paid worker involved in the restoration. "He was basically the general contractor of the project." In addition, Carrion "did a lot of chain sawing. We reframed her in black locust which came off his farm," says Ero. "He was pretty much my carpenter's helper."

Ero and Carrion worked when there was money. The fund-raising took a lucky turn a few years ago, Carrion says, when the nephew of a former owner of Elf went on an excursion on New Jersey's official tall ship, the A.J. Meerwald, and overheard a passenger offer financial support for that vessel.

*See Elf, Page 10*

(FROM LEFT) COURTESY YACHT RESTORATION GUILD; DOUGLAS A. CAMPBELL

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The nephew struck up a conversation with the passenger, Peter Kellogg, and mentioned Elf. For the next two years, Carrion says, the non-profit received a total of \$20,000 from Kellogg, who has funded several other antique boat projects.

Then Kellogg, who had financed the construction of replica sandbaggers at Philadelphia's Workshop on the Water, asked the workshop's director, John Brady, to inspect Elf. Carrion says Brady's report to Kellogg prompted the financier's offer to pay for Elf's entire rigging and lead ballast keel, bringing his total contribution to \$190,000.

By the end of the summer of 2007, Ero's work on Elf was completed and he passed the work of interior carpentry on to Bill Hamilton, a college professor who was raised in a family of wooden-boat builders and who had signed on as a volunteer for the Elf project "because [it] was an incredibly historic boat."

Hamilton was on hand for the launch. His only duties were to attach the feathering propeller.

Earlier, Hamilton had been involved



In June, Elf makes 8-plus knots in a 10- to 12-knot breeze on the Sassafraz River.

in the work of replacing the ballast keel. "We removed the iron keel ... two years ago," he explains. An iron keel had been installed during World War I, replacing a lead keel that supported an impressive, tall sail plan. The lead was melted and turned into bullets, Hamilton says.

"They had to cut the rig down for iron keel," Hamilton notes. "It was

quite a project getting [the iron keel] out from under the boat. It was sent up to Rhode Island and was used as a model to make the lead keel."

Once the lead keel was cast, it was shipped to the marina on Long Cove to await the arrival of Elf. "When it was delivered, I noticed it didn't look right to me," Hamilton says. "The first 18 inches appeared to have sagged" during the casting. "Looking at it and looking at the bolt holes, we assumed we could make it fit. We could always shim it and plane it," he says. "The question was left unresolved as to how we wanted to bed the keel bolts. We knew it was going to take on water no matter what we did."

And so on launch day, between interviews and hugs, kisses and handshakes from his friends and family, Carrion was crouching under the curve of Elf's bilge, using an electric planer to shave into shape a long strip of wood — a strake of sorts — that had been fastened over the joint between the lead and the wooden keel.

On the other side the hull planks, inside Elf's belly, volunteers were still adjusting the nuts on keel bolts. The fellow with the shaved head was shouting questions from inside the engine compartment to volunteers outside as he attempted to fit the packing gland.

When a mechanic's questions couldn't be resolved, a crowd of volunteers gathered around Carrion, seeking direction.

A reporter pulled Carrion aside, needing an interview. Over his shoulder, the video photographer aimed his camera, recording the moment for a documentary with which Carrion was cooperating.

Volunteers scrambled up and down an aluminum ladder propped on Elf's side. One man lay on his back on the gravel under the yacht, daubing a slurry up into the bolt holes in the lead keel, now painted red. Others with buckets of red paint moved along the hull, sweeping their brushes loaded with red bottom paint, giving Elf a final coat.

Just before the diesel engine of the 20-ton Travelift rumbled to life, Carrion, still in a sweaty T-shirt and chinos,

climbed a step ladder and mounted Elf's carved figurehead: a varnished, wild-eyed creature that he said was, in fact, an elf.

Then, with the Travelift on its way, Carrion muttered a joke about going to see Clark Kent. When he returned, in a fresh Elf shirt and shorts, Elf hung in the Travelift slings as a few last brushstrokes finished her bottom painting.

Now the crowd migrated to the launching rails, near a canopy where the champagne had been chilled. With Elf poised over the water in the slings and Carrion standing before her, facing the crowd, he received the compliments of friends and admirers. Seventeen years of restoration was nearly completed. The champagne was poured. Toasts were offered.

"Well," Carrion said finally, "we're going to get the boat wet." With that declaration, the Travelift engine rumbled to life. Carrion was told in advance how the launching would play out. Because the marina was involved in the salvage business, Elf would not be able to spend the night in the slings, swelling her seams shut, as would normally be the case with a wooden boat. The yard wanted to be able to launch its salvage vessel with a moment's notice.

Now Elf began to descend to the water, and Carrion and three other men, including Ero, stepped aboard as a fiddle player began sawing on his strings.

Elf settled into the water, her bow riding high, perhaps because she had not yet acquired her 17-foot bowsprit or her rig. A small tow boat took Elf along its side and swung her stern-first into the nearest slip as Carrion and the others readied lines to secure her to the pilings.

Suddenly, Carrion could be seen scurrying toward the companionway and gazing down. Then he raced to the bow, shouting to the tow boat, which had drifted away: "We need to get back in the slings! We need to get back in the slings!" Standing at the bow, he grabbed a coiled line and threw it back to on-lookers standing on the Travelift rails. His aim was off, so he retrieved the line and threw again, this time reaching outstretched hands. With the line and the help of a boat hook, Elf was pulled back into the slings, her floorboards awash. The water was gushing through the bolt holes and through wide checking in the old, original keel timbers.

In the days that followed, a scheme was devised to fill the holes with tallow and white lead and then to soak Elf's wood until it swelled properly.

"My problem was I set the deadline and we were going to have the party," Carrion said later. "I guess I'm oriented to try to meet some deadlines."

In less than a week, the leaks seemed to have been plugged, and Elf was preparing to head for Philadelphia, where her spars awaited her. Then, Carrion said, a summer spent cruising in New England was on the itinerary. He mentioned no deadlines. ■



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