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The Story of the Mad Viking *by Charity Winters*



The Mad Viking has been a fixture in the Seldovia harbor for as long as some people can remember. Almost 21 years ago, Red Kvarford completed his dream to build a boat and fish and settled in Seldovia with his business. On August 9, 2006 the Mad Viking retired from commercial fishing and was taken out of the water for the first time after all those years. Now it sits quietly in the boatyard, awaiting the coming of spring and its new season as a pleasure boat for Red and his family.

The big day came on a cold and rainy August 21, 1985 at the Pickworth dock in Anchorage. A friend had set up a “freebie” to get the Mad Viking in the water. A few days earlier, the cabin had been removed and the pieces had been driven down to the dock area where it was reassembled. The boat was then strapped up to a crane and lowered into the water. Red was sure those raggedy straps were going to give out before his boat hit the water. The whole ordeal was “traumatic” – Red was very stressed out and hadn’t been able to sleep for several days. Once the boat was in the water, the work didn’t stop there. Red was determined to get in on the last period of halibut fishing for the summer to help pay off the taxes on his boat. He and John Jr. (then 15) immediately began their trip down the inlet to Seldovia. It was quite the trip. For one, Red hadn’t purchased the navigation equipment yet. He planned on using the shoreline as his guide and thought that they would pull into Seldovia before nightfall. However, the seal around the engine was too tight and didn’t allow water to pass back and forth around the seal to cool it off. Because of this Red had to idle the whole way to Seldovia and spent a lot of time



Born in Chicago , IL and raised in California , John Kvarford (or Red, as most know him – a nickname from his shock of red hair in his youth) moved to Alaska in 1963 to pursue his love of hunting and fishing. He lived and worked in Anchorage for a few years before he met Marilyn Morten at Pacific Western Lines where they both worked. Originally from Michigan , Marilyn had relocated to Alaska with her first husband and 3 children in 1959. Red and Marilyn were married in 1969 and had one son together, John Jr.

Meanwhile, Red began to get interested in boats and fishing. His first boat was a small cabin cruiser that he and the family used for pleasure. A friend mentioned that a little commercial halibut fishing could help pay the taxes on the boat. After one weekend of halibut fishing in Whittier , Red had the year's taxes paid off and began looking for a commercial fishing boat. A deep passion for both boating and fishing was slowly taking root...

Red began to spend most of his summers in Homer, commercial halibut fishing with a friend in the lower Cook Inlet . They soon discovered Seldovia and began using it as a rest stop to refuel, shower, etc. Red decided almost right away that Seldovia was the place for him. One Fourth of July, the boat broke down in Seldovia. Marilyn came down to stay while the boat was being fixed and 2 weeks later they owned property.

Around 1980, Red's wheels began spinning as he dreamed about building his own boat. He figured he would be able to finish it in about 2 years for around \$20, 000. With Marilyn supporting him all the way, he bought a set of boat plans for \$200 and set to work. The process was slow and the Kvarfords paid for every bit of the boat out of their pockets as they went, relying heavily on Marilyn's work for funding. Red had damaged his wrists after years of working on drillings, but he refused to take time away from finishing his boat.

The boat began in the backyard of one of their children (Marilyn laughed when she explained that they didn't have enough room in their own backyard for the project!) and got the whole family

flushing the seal in the hull of the boat. When darkness hit he used the lights along the shore to guide him and when there weren't any lights he followed the car lights from the highway! Red was so exhausted and sleep deprived that he was sure he saw UFO's in the sky. He was so convinced that he almost got John Jr out of bed to see them. He found out later that it was burning gas on the oil platforms. "It's a miracle they didn't run aground!" exclaimed Marilyn. But they did make it and they got their fish ticket and paid off \$10,000 in taxes on their boat that first summer.



The family moved to Seldovia in 1986 and John Jr. graduated from Susan B. English. Both Marilyn and Red were retired and spent the next 15 years running a halibut charter business with their son. Since the boat was paid for as they built it, the stress of having to "pay off the boat" didn't exist. The family had the luxury of slowing things down a little when they were getting tired. And they never had any trouble getting customers. People from all over the world have taken trips on the Mad Viking. With hardly any advertising, most of their business came by referrals, word of mouth and repeat customers. When other businessmen offered to send more their way they often said, "we don't need anymore!"

Another big part of their business consisted of harvesting octopus. It began as a means of bait for fishing and slowly evolved into an artistic pursuit. Octopus ink is a highly coveted medium for many painters. Red himself took to using it on a variety of artwork that he sold around town. It was also sold to several artists who used the ink in their work. The ink can be watered down to create an endless variety of shades in sepia tones, providing a unique and

involved. First a wooden structure was built to shape the hull of the ship. After that, layer upon layer (around 7-11) of fiberglass was laid on the outside of the boat. The boat was then flipped with the help of a crane, the wooden frame removed, and the process was repeated on the inside. When I asked how Red knew how to build a boat he laughed loudly and said, "I had the boat plans!" The boat "evolved", as Red put it, piece by piece. There were days when the evolution process came to a halt. It was on one of these days that the Mad Viking got its name. Red just couldn't decide what to do next. It seemed that everything hinged on everything else. He spent the entire day pacing around the boat, talking to himself, and pulling out his hair trying to figure out what to do. It was because of this day that he chose the name the Mad Viking. Since then the family has collect a variety of items displaying their logo. John Jr. bought the first for Red for Christmas that year – a small figure of a Viking. The figure still stands glued to the dashboard of the boat.

Finally, 5 years and \$60,000 later, the 36ft boat was finished. I asked Red why he continued when he realized that the boat was taking longer and costing more to finish than planned. "Well, I figured I already invested \$200 in the plans and so I had to keep going!" Marilyn was very proud of her husband for sticking to the job until the end saying she was very glad that it "didn't end up like one of those projects that just sits in the garage."

beautiful medium for artists.

Life has begun to slow down a bit now that the Kvarfords have retired from the charter business. They have bought a camper and plan to take a road trip to the lower 48 this winter. This will be Red's first time out of Alaska in almost 43 years. Many of his friends joke that they'll be back in a week! Red will miss his fishing but he has other hobbies to keep him busy – "hunting and tramping" are tops on the list. He and Marilyn are really looking forward to a change of pace and a chance to spend time with some of their 4 children, 19 grandchildren, and 6 great-grandchildren. They're not sure when they will return – "We'll see if we make it out first!" was Red's reply. But they do plan on being back in time to put the Mad Viking back in the water this spring – like an old family friend, they will never say goodbye to it forever.







Retirement Day, August 9, 2006 - Andy Anderson and Manfred Kirchner helped Red haul out the Mad Viking. Other than work on the grid, the ship has not been out of the water since the day it was launched, 14 years ago.

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