

Intrepid Spirit

by Jill Ocone

One of my favorite things about writing for this magazine is being able to connect with topics in which I am keenly interested. One such example is my innate, yet unexpected, love of sea vessels. I've always enjoyed watching them at the Manasquan Inlet, despite not being raised in a boating family. Trawlers and clambers, speedboats and pleasure boats...no matter what kind of boat fights the current, I lose all track of time just sitting at the Inlet, watching them come and go all day long.

Some of the first pictures I snapped, when I got my very first Kodak camera, were of the powerboats screaming through the Inlet during what at that time was called The Benihana. I have such vivid memories of my uncle taking me to the speed boat races and related activities, like the years when the Clydesdale Horses would visit Point Pleasant Beach to celebrate race week.

The vast collection of photographs I've taken probably amount to over a thousand vessels of various types. Many are no longer in service, with some meet-

ing their tragic fate on the bottom of the Atlantic, and others enjoying a purposeful retirement by becoming a home for sea life as a part of New Jersey's Artificial Reef System.

Researching articles has provided me with a greater understanding of the harrowing conditions mariners face no matter the era. In 2018, while researching about John Dorsett's cabinet (made from wood salvaged from twenty-six different shipwrecks), New Jersey Shipwreck Museum director Dan Lieb told me that wherever I put my foot in the ocean along the Jersey Coast, I am less than one mile from one of the five thousand known shipwrecks off our shores.

In the days of old, the barren and winding Jersey coastline, with its natural dunes, obscured sandbars, non-existent landmarks, ever-changing tides, and unpredictable currents, could confuse even the savviest seafarer. But throw in a good squall or nor'easter and confusion could become a matter of survival, a life-or-death situation for passengers, crew, and the life-savers on shore.

The vantage may have changed, but the perils, they certainly remain.

When I am at the beach, I often find myself looking over the waves at the horizon and envisioning the stately and impressive tall ships of yesterday dotting the sea.

Last September, I finally had the opportunity to see a tall ship at home when the *A.J. Meerwald* visited Point Pleasant Beach. She was heading to Maine for repairs and spent the last stop along her journey moored to a dock along Channel Drive near the end of Baltimore Avenue.

Built in 1928, the *A.J. Meerwald* is an oyster dredging schooner and is New Jersey's official state tall ship. She was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1995 and serves as a traveling classroom with her home port at the Bayshore Center at Bivalve, New Jersey's only environmental history museum, in Port Norris (on the Maurice River off Delaware Bay in South Jersey). The

two-masted gaff schooner measures 85' on deck (and 115' when fully rigged) and offers public, charter, and education sails along the Delaware Bay and River areas of New Jersey.

I awoke before sunup on Labor Day, my last day off before returning to my classroom, and headed straight to the Inlet with a hot cup of coffee and my notebook. The colorless sunrise melted into a gray, overcast morning, but my spirits weren't dampened.

While I waited for the *Meerwald's* scheduled departure, I journaled about a simpler time when we collectively encompassed a more intrepid sense of adventure, and when stars would provide us with the direction we needed.

Between each sentence I wrote, I looked westward in anticipation—and suddenly, there she was!

Her two masts appeared behind the homes on the curve at the Inlet, and then she moved into full view and listed eastward. What a beauty she was, quiet and magnificent, her hull splitting the current as she majestically sailed past towards the open ocean. She turned left after passing through the Inlet's mouth. Her masts, extending above the Manasquan side's jetty, became smaller as she sailed northward and eventually out of view. Filled with childlike wonder and awe, I felt like I was watching One Eyed Willie's ship sail into the sunset at the end of *The Goonies*.

The seafaring spirit lives on, undaunted and boldly voyaging towards the mystical, blue ocean. I wonder what amazing experiences could be waiting for us if we find the fortitude to raise our anchors and yield to the currents?



The A.J. Meerwald.

Jill Ocone

Jill Ocone is a high school journalism teacher and senior writer for this magazine. She recently completed her first book, "Chapter One - A Novel." For more information about Jill, visit www.jillocone.com.