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Skipjack Yankee Pedler to stay in Oxford

By BETH SCHUCKER Special to The Star Democrat
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PHOTO BY PAUL CREELMAN The Yankee Pedler is pictured in Town Creek, decorated for Christmas.

OXFORD Things stay pretty much the same in Oxford and that's not all bad. Consider Yankee Pedler, the lighted skipjack that bobs Christmas wishes at the head of Town Creek. It's been drawing visitors from both shores for 42 years, ever since Curtis Applegarth built it for Alice and Steve Zalik, then residents of Delaware, now of Cambridge. The boat has always been in Town Creek and has always been owned by the Zaliks.

When this story began in 1966, the Zaliks were newlyweds living in Wilmington, Del.

"We had no money, no furniture, we didn't know how to sail but we knew we wanted a boat," Steve said.

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A friend suggested they visit Oxford. Passing by the Applegarth Marine Yard, they were drawn to Little Jack which was out front and up on rails.

"I knew immediately I had to have one," Alice said.

Famous for building skipjacks for pleasure boating, Applegarth impressed them. The threesome bonded and a deal was made for \$4,000. Applegarth modeled their boat after Little Jack, which he had built in 1959 for his daughter, Cheri, and which was later given to the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum. On July 4, 1967, they launched Yankee Peddler.

Steve chose the name Yankee Peddler simply because he liked it. But Alice worried because boats have been endowed with feminine gender for centuries. Would linking a lady to peddling suggest disrepute? Steve finessed Peddler would buck tradition and be a "he."

Meanwhile as Applegarth painted the name on the bow sprit, he ran out of room, so he left a "d" out of Peddler, a clever solution he thought. For the Zalik, it personified "Applegarth's endearing sense of Eastern Shore practicality." They kept the name, giving Yankee Pedler the distinction of being miss-gendered and miss-spelled for 42 years.

Alice became a D.C. lawyer and Steve pursued corporate management in Delaware, rendezvousing with Yankee Pedler in Oxford on weekends, going out for day sails and occasional overnight adventures, but always in the Tred Avon with one exception. In 1987, Pedler needed rebuilding from the hull up. Applegarth had retired so Jim Wagner, who had worked on the Pride of Baltimore, did the repairs and Pedler won the Maritime Museum's "Best Restoration Award." The Zalik sailed him home from St. Michaels.

"Oh, what excitement," Steve recalls. "Imagine the 18 foot Pedler outracing a storm in the Poplar Straits."

Asked about Yankee Pedler's long-time Christmas stardom, the Zalik chortle.

"We weren't around in off-season and it was 14 years before we knew anything about it," Alice said.

"That was typical Applegarth," Steve said. "He didn't tell us because he always maintained some sense of ownership in his boats, even after he sold them."

Using the boat less and less of late, the Zaliks donated Yankee Pedler to the Oxford Museum. The fact that Applegarth had been a founder and two-time president of the Museum, made it a most fitting gift. But where would the Museum put him?

The community rallied, starting with the Oxford Community Center. With a perfect spot on its front lawn, which coincidentally is across the street from Curtis Applegarth's old family home, the Center's Board invited Yankee Pedler to be a year-round resident. The next question was maintenance.

Henry Hale, realtor and Museum Board member, knew that Diane Flagler of Oxford was searching for a memorial for her late husband, Dr. Nick Flagler, a beloved obstetrician in Talbot County and an avid sailor.

"I was thrilled about the opportunity because Nick loved wooden boats, skip jacks and Oxford," said Diane Flagler. Her memorial fund will care for Yankee Pedler in perpetuity.

The last hurrah required brawn and Pedler's buddies showed plenty of that. Tom Campbell, owner of Campbell's Boat Yards and in charge of Pedler since 1995, oversaw dry dock planning. Larry Murray, sailor and neighbor, led the sanding, varnishing and painting team. Having dabbled in sign-making during retirement, Steve Zalik, did the name without the "d." Campbell donated labor and materials for Pedler's cradle and stairs so that kids can climb aboard.

"We used pretreated lumber and galvanized bolts. This will last a long time," he said. "It's been a great community effort." So things are still pretty much the same. Yankee Pedler has moved down the street and greets people coming into town and bids farewell to those leaving ... and he'll still be lighted at Christmas.

From 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 17, the Oxford Community Center will hold a Fall Festival. At noon there will be a dedication of the Yankee Pedler. Curtis Applegarth's daughter, Cheri Fisher, will be in attendance, as will others who have been involved in the project. The day includes music, food and activities.

For details, call 410-226-5904.