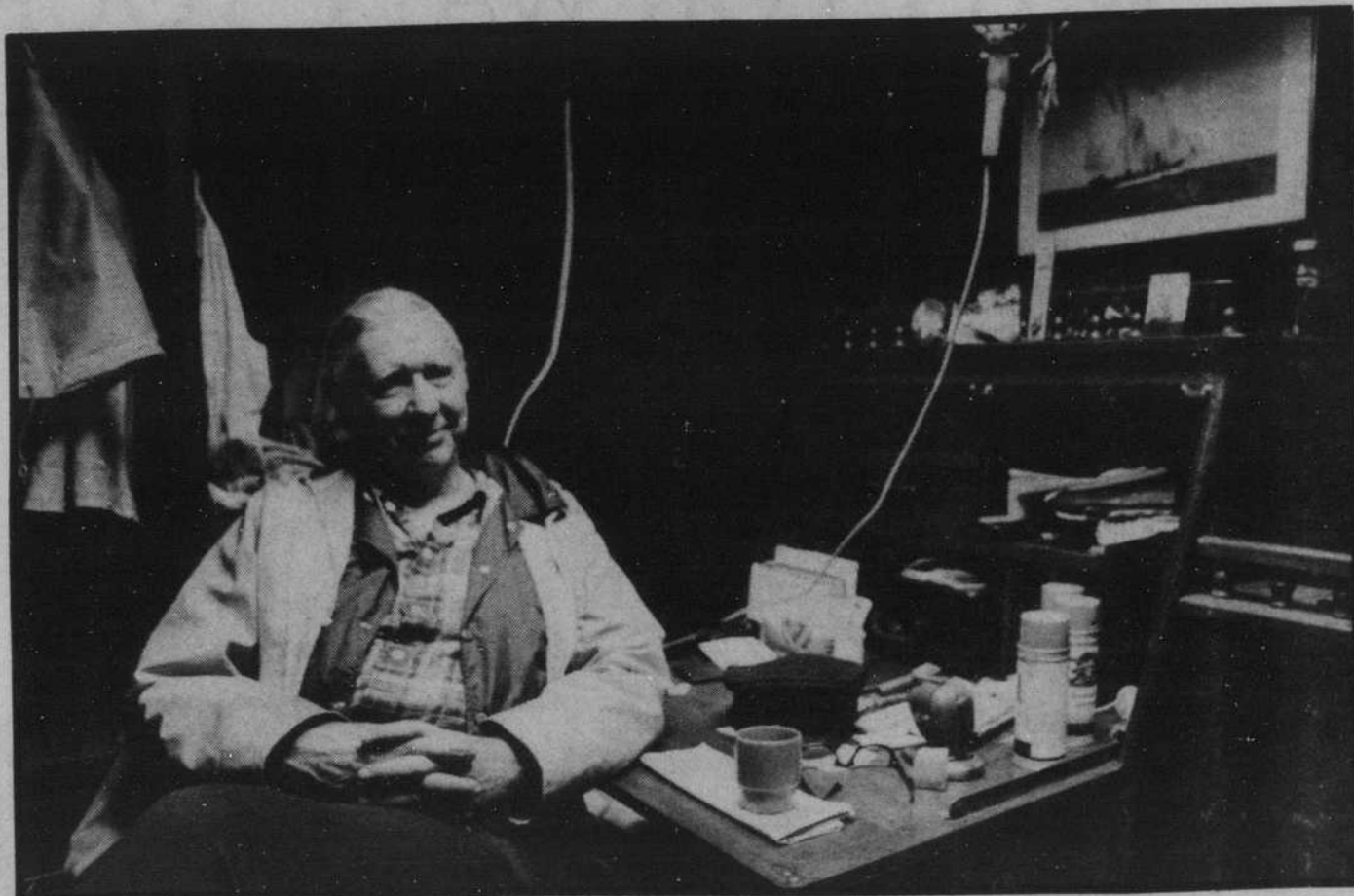




Sea Star Trek

After a lifetime of dealing with surly canal officials and grass-skirted natives, David McMichael has dropped anchor in our corner of the world. "I've been to a lot of places," he says, "and believe me, most of them look better from a distance."



For 45 years David McMichael has circled the globe, alert for the perfect place to call home. He thinks he's found it.

Tahiti? Nope. Pago Pago? Guess again. Mapleton, Oregon? Bingo.

The folks of Florence, Oregon were also surprised last March when McMichael guided his 90-foot schooner, the Sea Star, over the bar of the Siuslaw River and up to the dock. The sleek vessel would seem more at home battling waves around the Horn, or weighing anchor off Borabora. But here she sits, moored at a vacated wharf 60 miles east of Eugene. Her skipper's taking the time to catch up on

Story by John Crowley
Photos by Patrick Sullivan

some business and plan his return to the high seas. "I've been to a lot of places, and believe me, most of them look better from a distance."

McMichael, white-haired and rugged of face, looks every bit the sea captain. Former maritime academy cadet, merchant ship skipper and nuclear vessel consultant, he speaks with gentle authority about the many ports he's visited. "I've seen very few places I'd consider settling down in. Oregon is one."

Specifically, Mapleton, eight miles up the Siuslaw River from Florence, has captured the skipper's fancy. Last year he bought Tom Hoxie's farm, a six-acre spread featuring a barn, a meadow, and

most importantly, 500 feet of deep-water frontage. Soon he'll build a dock there to moor the Sea Star between voyages.

"Even in a life at sea," McMichael observes, "you spend a lot of time on land. A man needs a place to store all the things he can't get on his boat. If it's a beautiful place, so much the better. And if the neighbors are friendly, well, that's perfect."

McMichael, 65, searched diligently before settling on the sleepy village in Lane County. He scouted waterways in Texas, Florida, Georgia, Washington and Oregon before his search led him up the Siuslaw to a home base eight miles from the Pacific.

The skipper was born far from the sea, but by age two David McMichael had moved 1,000 miles closer to the warm waters of Long Beach, California. There he fell in love with the sea; at 14 he built his first craft, a 15-foot sailboat, and he's been living the seaman's life ever since. "I'd always wanted to go to sea," he remembers, "so I did."

He graduated from the California Maritime Academy in 1935 and soon began steaming across the oceans in merchant ships.

In his years with States Marine Lines he guided many freighters to exotic ports of call including the USS Savannah, the first commercial nuclear-powered merchant ship. McMichael believes in the nuclear program, and serves as a consultant to the Maritime Administration's nuclear ship safety commission.

He took a leave of absence in '65 to join the crew of the Ondine, a racing boat, and before going back to work McMichael's skippered a 130-foot schooner (at no charge).

To keep his seniority with States Marine Lines, the skipper reluctantly returned to work the next year as a company representative in Southeast Asia. While in Singapore he decided to have a boat built.

It took a "good ol' gang" of expert Chinese shipwrights two years to build the Sea Star. They took their time, and it shows. The keel and frame are made of Malaysian Chengal wood; the rest is rich teak. The masts are Tacoma, Washington Douglas Firs that top out 105 feet above the water line.

McMichael hasn't determined how he'll get under the Mapleton Bridge, but he'll cross under that bridge when he gets to it.

The cost? McMichael won't say. "It's unrealistic," he insists. "The difference in cost of having something like this built in Singapore compared to the U.S. really obscures the meaning of cost. Let's just say it wasn't cheap."

Actually, nothing about the Sea Star is cheap; her careful craftsmen have seen to that. Every beam is carefully joined by hand, each cut precisely nestled against the next. "It took one man a week to make this door," McMichael says, pointing to a hatch exquisitely crafted from matched teak slats. The ship is a collection of painstaking individual labors synergized into a breathtaking whole.

Unlike the 19th century schooners after which she's patterned, the Sea Star uses a 175-horsepower GM diesel engine when the wind peters out. With an 1,800-gallon fuel capacity, the ship can chug along at 9 knots for 3,000 miles (that's 1.75 mpg). But she's a sailing rig first, and with a stiff breeze she can glide along at 10 knots. Under full sail she can make 180 miles a day.

McMichael supervised the rigging of the craft, using only hand tools, amateur help, and a "marvelous maritime library in Singapore."

Sea Star's eight berths can accommodate up to 12 crew members comfortably, more with some mates on rotating watch duty. There's a fully-equipped galley and dining area, where crew members socialize when not sleeping or swabbing the deck. Four "heads," two with showers, provide that touch of comfort so welcome at sea.

The Sea Star pulled out of Singapore for her first cruise in 1971. With an amateur crew McMichael set sail westward, heading for the Cape of Good Hope. They made the crossing at Christmas time, "the least bad time" to make the dangerous passage. After a leisurely cruise the Sea Star tied up at Galveston, Texas, where for the next two years McMichael worked again with the Maritime Administration's nuclear ship program.

In 1974 McMichael could no longer resist the sea's call, and he sailed the Sea Star through the canal and back into the Pacific, all the while looking

for that perfect place to call home base. Interrupting his search, he left his ship in the care of a California yachtsman to travel (overland) to Old Mystic, Connecticut, for more nuclear ship consultation. And he didn't mind the drive.

"I enjoy crossing the country every year or so," he says, "if only to see how the other half lives and when I observe how most people live, how their lives just stay in the same rut, I have to think what a deadly bore it is. Land life gets monotonous. I've never been dissatisfied."

But McMichael did get bored, and with great enthusiasm he returned to his Sea Star and his search for a place to plant his mailbox. That quest brought him to Mapleton last year, to a place to call home.

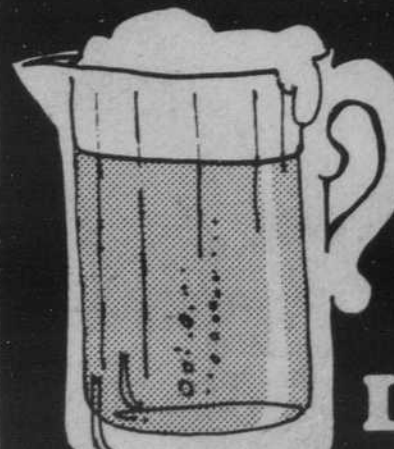
Don't worry about the skipper disappearing into the Oregon green, though. McMichael still plans some leisurely travel to places he's yet to see — the Trust Islands, Easter Island, and Pitcairn, among others — and some spots he yearns to revisit.

Butartari, one of the Gilbert Islands, qualifies as one of the latter. As a young man, McMichael was wandering around the island with the skipper of an Australian ship when they spotted some native women wearing some honest-to-God grass skirts — and nothing else. The sailors tried communicating in English with the

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From the Florence wharf, McMichael casts his gaze island-ward. The 90-foot schooner remains parked, but ready for his next voyage should the skipper start feeling too landlocked. With a fully-equipped galley and sleeping accommodations for 12, the Sea Star's next crew will cruise in comfort.



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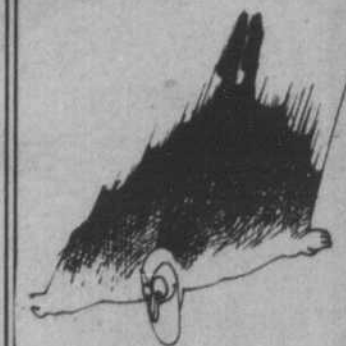
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