Growing up on a Boat: Memories of the Pal

by Johanna Caridi Fay

These memories start at Shellbank Creek in the early ’20s. My father, Vincent “Jim” Caridi, bought his first boat with his buddy, Paul Sabatini. They called it Pals and kept it at Page’s Boat Yard on Knapp Street.

This 26 ft. custom built boat was made by Irwin Page. It was mahogany with white painted sides. It had a large fantail painted gray. The cabin was mahogany unstained pine color, varnished. It was rounded with one porthole on either side. The interior had one narrow bunk on either side with horsehair mattresses. It had a six-point mahogany steering wheel on the port side. Later a roof was added for protection.

My dad was married on September 10, 1922 to Esther A. Caridi. My brother, Joe, was born October 10, 1923, and I was born on July 18, 1926.

Dad, with his family, used the boat more than his friend, Paul, so he bought out Paul’s half and simply dropped the “s” off the end of the name and it became Pal.

Our family slept on the Pal weekends. Dad and Mom slept on the bunks and Joe and I slept on the floor between them. We used a pail for the “head” and another for washing dishes. We had a one-burner stove for heating food. Dad made fuel for the stove by packing a wick of asbestos in a tin can with a cover. He soaked the wick in wood alcohol, lit it with a match, and then covered the can when he wanted to put it out. It was less expensive than Sterno. We ate on the motor hatch cover and sat on folding stools. The Pal had a 4-cylinder gray marine inboard motor.

The Pal was kept on a mooring off Page’s dock as were several other boats. We rowed to and from the dock in our rowboat. When Dad first kept his boat on Shell Bank Creek, there was his boat; the Red Wing, owned by Eddie Levine; and a third boat, possibly the Edith, owned by the Olson family.

I recall a large floating dock about 15 X 20 ft. (I was 3 or 4 years old and little for my age.) It had a ramp about 12 ft long and 2 ft wide to the shore and Page’s Boathouse, the first structure on that side of the creek. It was a long, narrow weathered wooden building about 25 ft long. Lockers were on both sides and a door at each end. There were no windows except for the dressing rooms, one at each end and poorly lit.
I recall a nostalgic wood odor mixed with a salty musty smell. A very special odor all its own. In the early 1930s, Sutter Brothers Boat Yard moved in next door to Page’s.

I recall being awakened during the night. We heard heavy motors rumbling and the sound of shots. I was afraid. Much to my mother’s dismay, Dad crept into the stern to have a look. We were indeed fortunate that we were unharmed. We learned the next day that rum runners were unloading “booze” on the Gerritsen Beach side of the creek. I will never forget it.

On the Knapp Street side of the creek was Roader’s Beach. It had a restaurant and played music. In early years a sewage disposal plant was also built on that side. The Tamaqua Yacht Club was near the end of the creek on the Gerritsen Beach side.

In 1933-34 my parents bought the Pal II. It was a 26 ft Elco, the same length as the first Pal. It was modern, wider, and there was much more room on board. She had 2 lower bunks and 2 upper bunks that dropped down to make couches. There was a galley in the cabin with an alcohol stove and a sink with a hand pump with fresh water from a 50-gallon tank. There was also an ice box. The head housed a stool and a sink with pumps, both operated by hand. The cabin was mahogany with 2 square windows on port and starboard. It had a small bow cockpit and a large stern cockpit with windshields and a roof over it with drop-down canvas curtains to keep out the rain. Our family spent summer vacations living aboard that boat.

As children, Joe and I would row across the creek to play with other children in Gerritsen Beach. We left the rowboat at the end of Devon Avenue. Mom used a megaphone to call us when it was time to come home.

Mom used to row across the creek to buy vegetables from the “Vegetable Man” who came by with his horse and wagon. It was then that Joe met Herman Stuedly and I met Ruth Stuedli (different spelling) who were cousins living on Ira Court near Devon Avenue.

About then, several boat owners approached Jim Mooney and advanced him money to build docks on his property on Devon Avenue and Ira Court. Jim Mooney was married to Mabel Montgomery, a famous actress of the day.

With the new docks, we moved the Pal II across the creek. It was much more convenient. Dad could take the Gerritsen Ave. bus to the subway and go to work. There were grocery stores on the avenue. Joe and I met many more children there, such as: Helen Heye, Dolores Feeney, Helen and Fred Luik, the Olson boys, Phyllis and Gordon Schultz, and Gloria Smith to name a few that come to mind.

As the family grew, so did the boats. A few years later, Dad turned the Elco in for a 36 ft. Chris Craft. The interior cabins were about the same. The galley and head were on opposite sides. The bow cockpit had a large cushioned seat in it. The stern cockpit was the same. Dad had a streamlined enclosure put on the deckhouse with a couch. This replaced the drop-down canvasses.
Pal III was a beauty and a gracious lady. This Pal stayed in our family for four generations! Pal III went up and down the East Coast from New York to Canada and New Jersey, around Long Island and to Block Island and Martha’s Vineyard.

In 1985, my husband, John, and I motored the Pal III down the inland waterway to Madeira Beach, Florida. We came from east to west through Lake Okeechobee. It took us a month, with hours of boredom and moments of terror.

I married John Harry Fay on January 5, 1947. We had five children: Karen Jeanne, 10-23-47, Donna Joyce, 7-12-49, David John, 5-14-54, Coral Joan 7-2-55, and Janice Kim 5-16-59. We have been married for 53 years, have 13 grandchildren and 4 more through double marriages.

I am still in touch with girls from Gerritsen Beach. In 1997 we had a get-together at my home in Madeira Beach with Helen Heye Olson and her son, Lloyd, and his family, with Fred Luik and Helen Luik Dwyer and her son, with Ruth Stuedli Giuglianotti and with Raymond and Trudy Olson.

In 1998, the Shell Bank Girl Scout Mariners had a reunion in Gerritsen Beach hosted by Frank and Estelle Cangley Witkowski at their home. Gloria Smith McCusker and husband, Miles, from Queens, Paul and Virginia Holmes Powell from Oklahoma, Jackie Ross Christie, Alice Witkowi and husband Siggy from Long Island, Catherine McCusker Sullivan from Gerritsen Beach, John and me from Florida and members of the Witkowski family.

Most of these girls were also in the St. James Lutheran Church Cadet Band. The Shell Bank Yacht Club sponsored the Mariners. My dad was a retired commodore of the yacht club and my mother was secretary for 25 years.

The Mariners met at the Shell Bank Yacht Club, a small cabin built on top of a barge at Sutter Brothers’ Yard. It was there for 30 years or more until the barge sank and the yacht club was forced to relocate at the foot of Gotham Avenue. These are nostalgic memories for me forever.

My parents moved to Madeira Beach in 1969. This home is on a wide body of water. They bought it for the Pal. Dad kept his “pal” in A-1 condition. It was his pride and joy. They enjoyed sitting on the dock in later years. It was almost as good as being on the Pal without all the work of the ol’ wooden craft. John and I took the Pal over there in 1970.

Captain Jim passed away in November 1982 at the age of 84. That Christmas I drew a picture of the Pal on a card and wrote this poem:

PAL III

This gracious lady, a pal, a friend since 1935
Gave comfort, joy, adventure, as she came into our lives.
Her sturdy hull was kept ship shape through care and dedication.
Her cruising years are starting on the 4th generation.
Happy memories, nostalgia each of us have had.
We cherish this faithful Pal -- she’s the essence of our Dad.

We moved here to assist Mom in later years. She lived ten more years and died at 94 1/2 in December 1993. We decided, too, that after we reached 70, the dear old Pal was too much work and too expensive to keep. so we sold her in 1992. We all felt that we had lost our friend, the Pal. She was in our family for about 60 years.

Other Pictures of the PAL III (from Richard Bartholomay):