

Derelict tugboat still enchanting, after all these years



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ANACORTES — After the plywood mill burned to the ground, hardly anyone in this city of nearly 17,000 ever ventured onto the tiny, rocky beach that overlooks Fidalgo Bay.

That all changed in the summer of 2000, when an old World War II-era tugboat named The Enchantress mysteriously appeared 300 yards offshore, its hull skewered on a charred creosote piling that's held the boat in place ever since.

Photographers and artists have beat a steady path to the beach to capture images of the tug that's become a local icon in this maritime city with a decidedly Bohemian bent. On a clear day, Mount Baker provides a picturesque backdrop despite the rising smokestacks from a nearby petroleum refinery.

But The Enchantress could well be headed for the scrap heap, even though residents have launched an impassioned campaign to save the wartime relic. Keeping it afloat “just doesn't mesh” with the state's larger goal of cleansing Puget Sound of industrial contaminants, restoring marine habitat and ridding waterways of derelict vessels, all by 2020, said Sandra Caldwell of the state Department of Ecology.

Today, Port of Anacortes commissioners are expected to award a contract for the tug's removal, which could cost up to \$421,000, even as they await a report on The Enchantress' historic significance from the state Department of Archaeology & Historic Preservation.

“They're planning on tearing her apart ... and loading her onto a barge like she was trash. She deserves better than that,” said Bill Mitchell, a local historian and artist who is spearheading efforts to save The Enchantress.

Sentiment vs. practicality

The Enchantress — first named LT 495 — was one of 61 Miki-class tugboats commissioned by the U.S. Army during World War II. Most of the oceangoing fleet of workhorse tugs were built by shipbuilders in Seattle and San Francisco, but 10 were built on the East Coast, including the LT 495, which was completed by New York shipbuilders in November 1944.

Nothing is known of the tug's military service, but after the war it was renamed the John Michael by the Baltimore towing company that purchased the boat. Sold again in 1950 to an Alaskan oil company that soon ran into financial trouble, the tug was seized in Seattle's Lake Union by government officials and auctioned off. Purchased by Foss Tug and Barge in 1951, the boat was renamed the Leslie Foss and spent 17 years plying the waters of Alaska and Puget Sound.

The 120-foot tug was sold and renamed at least four more times before ending up moored at a Ballard dock in the late 1990s. By then, it had been purchased by Richard Carnes of Sedro-Woolley.

Carnes, who dabbled in various business ventures, is suspected of abandoning both The Enchantress and a 118-foot tuna seiner called the Ronnie S. in Anacortes in July 2000. The following year, Carnes was fatally shot by his business partner in a dispute involving Skagit County timberland. The business partner later committed suicide, The Associated Press reported at the time.

The Coast Guard spent roughly \$160,000 to remove diesel fuel and oil from both boats soon after they were abandoned, according to The AP. Though the Ronnie S. was later removed from nearby Guemes Channel, The Enchantress remained in Fidalgo Bay.

"I'd like to see her sit right where she's at — she's not hurting a darn thing," said John Benthien, of Tacoma, who authored the book "The Forgotten Fleet of Sixty-One" about the U.S. Army's famous fleet of Miki tugboats.

"There were only 61 of these boats built ... and there's only a handful left," Benthien said.

Though some in town might consider The Enchantress an eyesore, Benthien, who grew up in Anacortes, said the old tug is the first thing he looks for when he comes home.

The Enchantress "draws a lot of attention, a lot of curiosity," and there seem to be far more people in favor of keeping the tug than scrapping it, Benthien said.

That may be so, but The Enchantress' lead paint and sunken hull are environmental hazards, said Caldwell, of the Department of Ecology. The department has identified eight sites in Anacortes for cleanup and restoration under Gov. Christine Gregoire's Puget Sound Initiative, created in 2005. As part of the state's 2007-09 budget, lawmakers last year approved a \$238 million investment package to remove toxic contaminants, repair shorelines and protect the Sound's marine habitat.

One of the state's "priority sites" in Anacortes is the old Custom Plywood Mill, the site of various mill operations for nearly a century, Caldwell said.

Part of the mill, supported by creosote pilings, stretched out over the water before it burned in the early 1990s. It is there that The Enchantress sits, impaled on a piling.

"The tug removal is a small part of a bigger plan up in the Anacortes area," Caldwell said.

Caldwell said she doesn't know how The Enchantress could stay in Fidalgo Bay given the need to remove the creosote pilings along with in-water sediments and industrial contaminants from the shore.

For love of the vessel

On Friday, Mitchell and fellow artist Jacques Moitoret headed to the edge of Fidalgo Bay with a couple of visitors. Mitchell, who was paralyzed in a car crash in his 20s, veered off a waterfront trail in his 1954 Autoette, a three-wheel electric cart he uses to get around.

With Moitoret steps behind him, Mitchell bounced down a little slope to the beach, just south of the charred remains of the old plywood mill.

"Look at her — she is your classic tug boat right there," said Mitchell, 58. "Before that tugboat arrived, nobody bothered to take pictures of Mount Baker from here. She just happens to be sunk in the right place to be photogenic."

While Moitoret isn't yet ready to admit that saving The Enchantress is a losing battle, he said the presiding sentiment "in town is that it's a done deal, but love of the boat is unanimous."

If the tug has to be removed from the bay, Moitoret, 60, would love to see The Enchantress put on blocks alongside the WT Preston, an old stern-wheeler that sits in a city park outside the Anacortes Museum. But so far, no one has stepped forward to fund the tug's preservation.

"Anacortes doesn't fully appreciate its history," Mitchell lamented.

"And," Moitoret said, "a lot of it is slipping away."

Historic information in this story comes from "The Forgotten Fleet of Sixty-One" by John Benthien.

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