

# IMMORTAL WORDS, HISTORIC BOAT



THE PURSE SEINER CELEBRATED IN THE NOBEL PRIZE-WINNING LITERATURE OF JOHN STEINBECK RETURNS FROM DERELICTION TO WORKING LIFE.

STORY NORRIS COMER

**T**here are images in this world where one experiences a novel-worthy story at a glance. Among these images is that of a lone derelict wooden fishing boat rotting into the sea.

Such was the state of the *Western Flyer* when John Gregg found her in 2015 on Swinomish Indian Reservation land in Washington state. The 76-foot vessel was barely intact after two recent sinkings. There was nothing outwardly special about the *Western Flyer* to separate it from the thousands of other ingloriously dying workboats of the world, but Gregg knew he had to save the boat, no matter the time or cost.

He knew the *Western Flyer* is the boat that author John Steinbeck, with his marine biologist friend and colleague Ed Ricketts, chartered to the Gulf of California in 1940. The expedition is the subject of Steinbeck's book *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, part of a body of work that won Steinbeck the 1962 Nobel Prize in Literature.

Eight years after finding and buying the *Western Flyer*, Gregg—as founder and CEO of the Western Flyer Foundation—has overseen her restoration to better-than-new condition. The boat is currently being

THE PORT TOWNSEND SHIPWRIGHTS CO-OP  
BEGAN THE RESTORATION IN JUNE 2015,  
BRINGING TRADITIONAL CRAFTSMANSHIP  
TO THE TRADITIONAL BOAT.



outfitted with as a research vessel and education platform, to be used in her original working waters off California.

“As much as we can control anything, it’s moving along,” he says.

#### HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

Gregg, who is also founder and president of Gregg Drilling & Testing Inc., has been in the geotechnical field for more than 30 years. His work includes projects such as foundation design for wind turbines. “About ten or fifteen years ago we reverse-evolved, and I crawled back into the sea and started doing projects over water.”

Now based in California, Gregg grew up in rural Georgia. “At that time in the Sixties, Jackie Kennedy had this program where if a town didn’t have a library, they’d send these book-mobiles. I would always pick something adventure-y, Joseph Conrad or something about an aggrieved whale. Anything adventure-y and ocean-y, I liked.”

One day, he saw the cover of a book with a boat in a stormy sea. It was *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*.

“I grabbed it thinking it’d be a Jules Verne kind of thing,” Gregg says. “I was 10 and didn’t understand barely a word of it, but I did understand that these guys were going with their buddies on this voyage. They were pretending it was work and



Top: The Western Flyer during the major renovation phase at the Port Townsend Shipwrights Co-Op. Notice the sorry state of the cabin structure in the upper right. Above: Brett Snow, president of the Ballard-based Snow & Company that is undertaking systems installation of the Western Flyer at the time of this writing.

science, but it mostly seemed like fun and drinking and adventure. I thought, If that's a job, I'm interested in that job."

He has kept an eye out for the boat from the time he was in college, and paid about \$1 million for the *Western Flyer* after finding her in 2015 on the Swinomish Channel of Washington in 2015. The once proud steed of Steinbeck and Ricketts was on its last legs under the name *Gemini*. And he knew, going into the project, that it would be overbudget the whole way through. He just didn't care.

"None of it [his *Western Flyer* plan] makes sense, so it didn't matter that it was overbudget because it was always overbudget," explains Gregg with a laugh. "I was never locked into some belief that we were going to get out of there in two years with \$2 million or something like that," he says. "I knew it would have its own path, and I'd just need to be there to help it on its way."

The nearby Port Townsend Shipwrights Co-Op began the restoration in June 2015, bringing traditional craftsmanship to the traditional boat. "You see the shipwrights with mallets and chisels, not out of nostalgia, but because they are using the tools they know work best," Gregg says. "They were clearly artists and craftsmen."

During the seven years of work, the *Western Flyer* was added to the National Register of Historic Places, in February 2017. Gregg's interactions with the shipwrights were often an amusing clash of pragmatism versus artistic perfection. "They took a lot of pride in it. When I'd say, yeah that's great, but can we hurry it up a little bit? They'd just look at me and ignore me. So now I have a piano."

The boat launched this past summer, on the morning of June 29, before a crowd of onlookers. Before touching the water, she was rechristened the *Western Flyer*, and family members—namely, Reverend Perry Petrich, the great-grandson of the original builder, Martin Petrich, Sr—were invited to participate. Croatian lavender (the Petrich family is from Croatia) and fossilized shark teeth were thrown into the water as offerings.

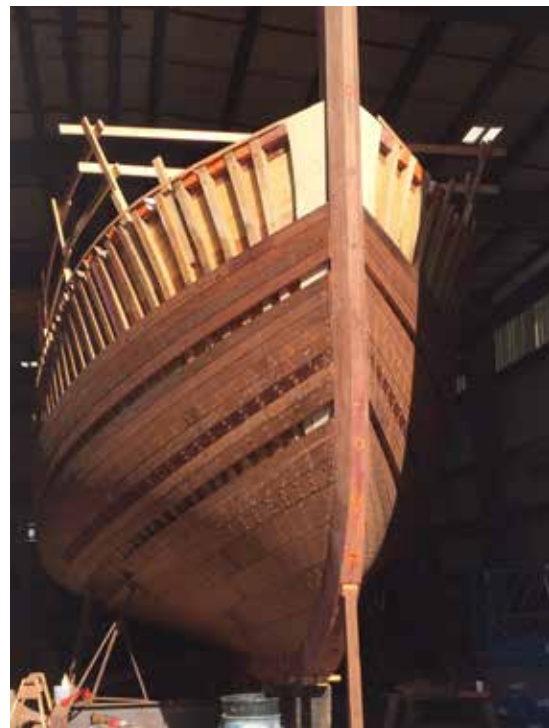
"It was nice to see people who are like-minded all together," Gregg says. "There was a palpable sense of accomplishment for the workmen and everyone there."

#### HISTORIC HULL, MODERN BOAT

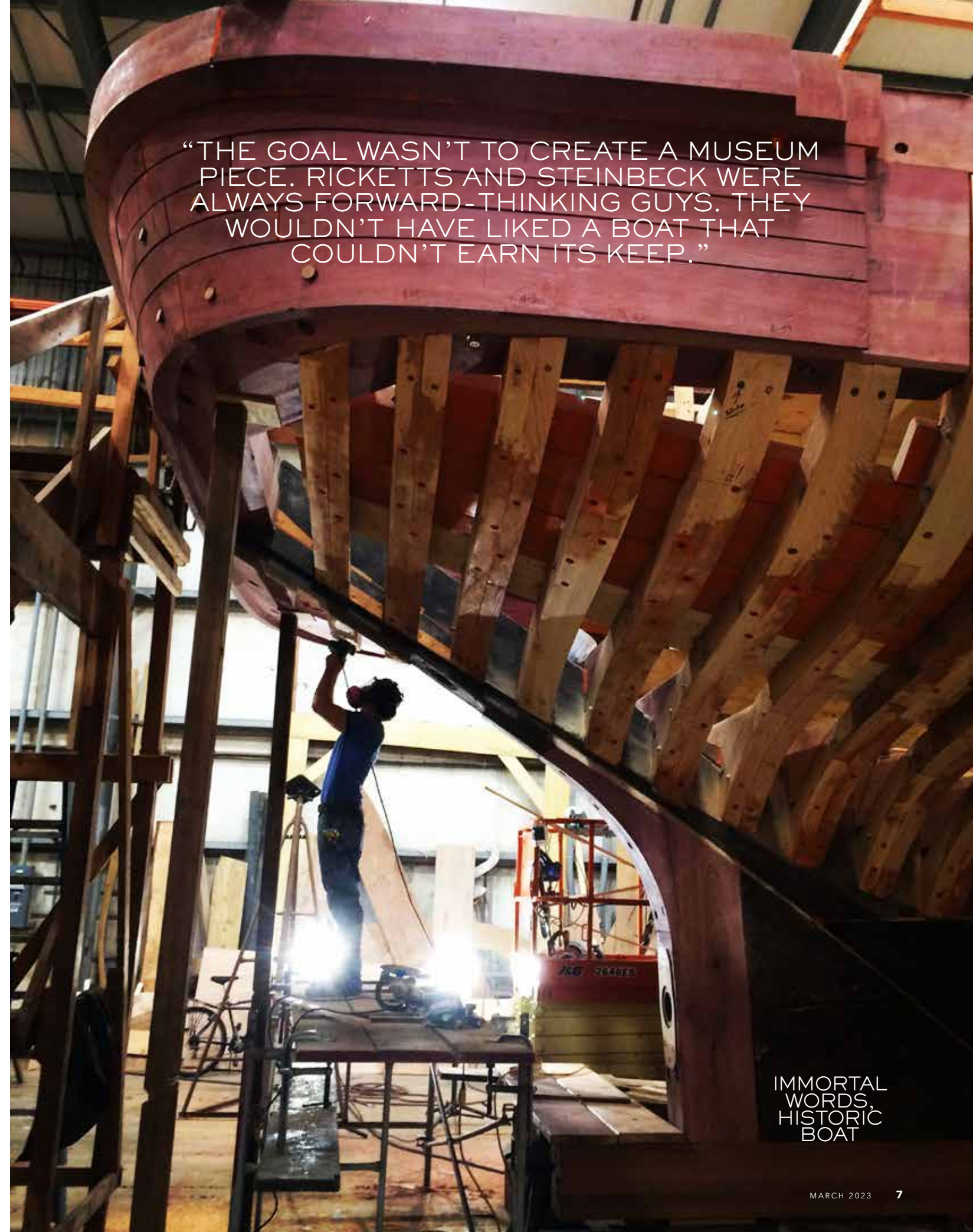
Technically speaking, the *Western Flyer* is now a modern boat. As of this writing, Snow and Company in Ballard, Wash., is installing systems and scientific equipment to allow for research underway. The original 160-hp Atlas engine that weighed 10 tons is gone, replaced by a 3,000-pound, 425-hp John Deere diesel mated to a Transfluid unit that will let operators switch between diesel and electric propulsion.

"When they explained that they were thinking of a hybrid system with this boat, I thought, What a great boat to do it with," says Brett Snow, president of Snow and Company. "The shape of the vessel is great to move through the water extremely efficiently."

The Transfluid unit is basically a box, about the size of a washer and dryer, that hooks on where the transmission would normally be. "So it can use the diesel engine as its primary force, or switch to an electric motor," Gregg says. "A clutch disengages and then an electric motor turns the drive shaft. Behind that box, everything is the same. And if you added enough batteries, you could run completely off the electric motor."

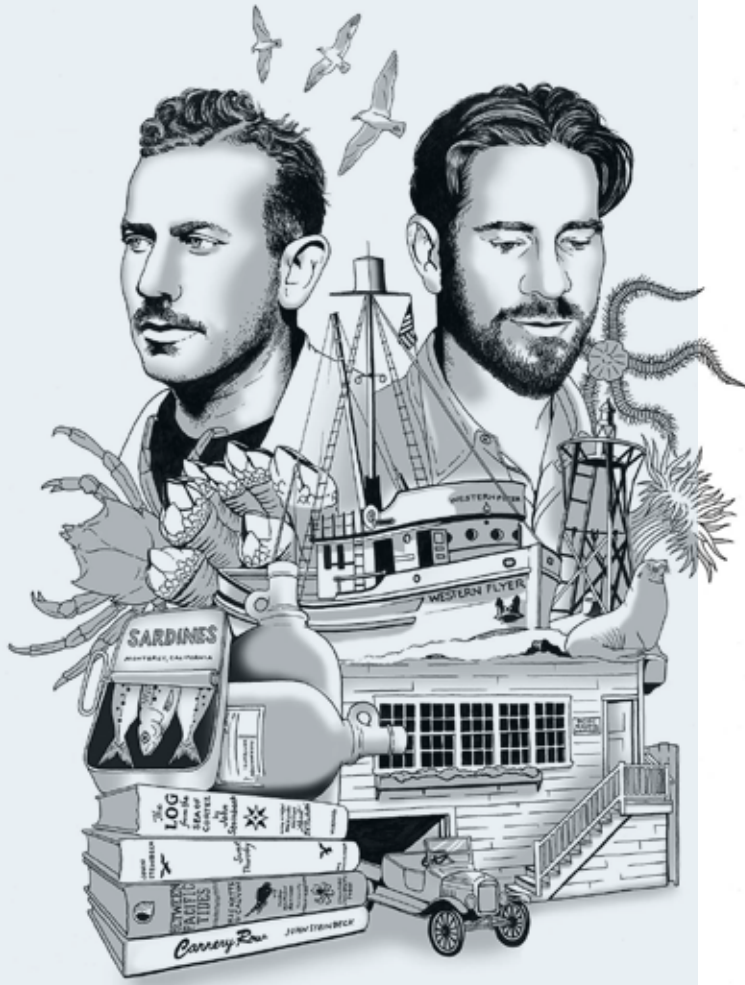


All Images: Scenes from t



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## OF SARDINES & STEINBECK

THE WESTERN FLYER LAUNCHED IN JULY 1937 AS A COMMERCIAL PURSE SEINER, BOUND FOR THE BOOMING SARDINE FISHERY OUT OF MONTEREY, CALIF. THE BOAT HAD A FIR KEEL WITH WHITE OAK RIBS.

Skipper Tony Berry ran the boat until the fishery's collapse just after World War II. The *Western Flyer* was then sold to Armstrong Fisheries in Ketchikan, Alaska, from 1951 to 1952.

John Steinbeck chartered her during the sardine off-season, for six weeks in March and April 1940, round-trip from California to Mexico. On paper, the purpose of the charter was to "collect marine animals in a remote place on certain days and at certain hours indicated on the tide charts."

When reading for the first time, one quickly realizes that this is no simple adventure story. It is an ambitious work that swings for the answers to life's big questions on every page. Between the relentless focus on the connection of all things, lamentations of observed overfishing and passion for lifeforms big and small, the book that resulted from that journey was an early champion of the field of ecology decades before environmentalism became American mainstream.

One good thing about all the years spent on the restoration is that battery technology and affordability has improved. The project's original battery budget was around \$1 million. It's now \$100,000. "We'll have enough to run four, five or six hours without turning the engine on, which is enough to do what we're trying to do," Gregg says. "Get it to help paddies and other places where we want to be quiet in the water and not disturb anything we're looking at."

### NEW LIFE

The Western Flyer Foundation's stated mission is to inspire deeper appreciation of marine environments, see the world through the lenses of science and art, and understand the place of communities in a larger world.

"All along, the goal wasn't to create a museum piece," Gregg says. "Ricketts and Steinbeck were always forward-thinking guys. They didn't like dusty old remembrances. They liked things that were looking forward. They wouldn't have liked a boat that couldn't earn its keep."

The plan is to do research with the U.S. Navy and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. For the next decade or two, the boat is expected to take readings along the Pacific Coast that haven't really been done in the past.

"It's about that spirit of Ricketts and Steinbeck, and working on getting real research done," says Sherry Flumerfelt, executive director of the Western Flyer Foundation, who previously was with the Monterey Bay Fisheries Trust. "We will work with kids and people who might not normally get access to these kinds of things.

Snow agrees. "Would I love it if a bunch of kids came through the shop and became boatbuilders? Absolutely. But what would be more important to me is if a bunch of kids came to the shop and decided that they could do anything, and went after it with a passion."

It's still uncertain when that programming will begin, but Gregg is pondering a nature-inspired timeframe: "We're thinking the leaves will either be really red, or there won't be any leaves at all, but no green buds. No cherry blossoms. Maybe a straggling leaf or two."

As the reborn *Western Flyer* prepares to return to the Pacific Ocean for her new working life, one cannot help but draw a parallel to the conclusion from *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*. Steinbeck and Ricketts depart the sun-drenched glory of their Mexico expedition and reenter the gray fog and foul seas of the Pacific and mainstream America. They grasp for the meaning of the expedition—and life itself—in prose, contracting and dilating their lens from the nucleus to the universe. They invoke the jars of sea creatures in formaldehyde, but we're clearly not exploring the confines of marine science or beer-fueled antics anymore.

The story hints that the answer may be less a statement and more a divine unifying musical note. A fitting way, to be sure, of thinking about the boat that Steinbeck described so poetically in his day: "The *Western Flyer* hunched into the great waves toward Cedros Island, the wind blew off the tops of the whitecaps, and the big guy wire, from bow to mast, took up its vibration like the low pipe in a tremendous organ. It sang its deep note into the wind." ❁



THE WESTERN FLYER IS NOW A MODERN BOAT WITH A STATED MISSION TO INSPIRE A DEEPER APPRECIATION OF MARINE ENVIRONMENTS.



IMMORTAL WORDS, HISTORIC BOAT

Top Left: View from inside the

IMMORTAL  
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HISTORIC  
BOAT

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