

people to know

MARRIED TO THE SEA

Building things on land has helped a California fabricator pursue his passion of building things for the water.

DAVID OLSON is by no means a landlubber.

A native of the Bay Area, the CEO of Olson and Co. Steel (an AISC member and certified fabricator/erector in San Leandro, Calif.) has been around boats and the water his entire life. When he was 12, his father bought a sailboat kit and the two of them built the vessel and sailed it on San Francisco Bay. The experience clearly made an impact on Olson and sparked a lifelong love of restoring boats. Heritage may have had something to do with it as well.

“Apparently, some of my Swedish ancestors were shipbuilders, so I guess it was in my genes,” he laughs.

Olson has bought and restored more than 30 boats over the past 25 years, many of them one-offs with interesting stories. For example, one project was a racing boat called *Teaser*, which in 1925 raced the 20th Century Limited—the fastest train in the world at the time—from New York City to Albany. The *Teaser* made the 300-mile journey up the Hudson River in 2 hours, 40 minutes, while the 20th Century Limited made the trip in 3 hours, 13 minutes—by rail of course.

Olson’s shipbuilding heritage may have influenced his career choice, as he has been in the steel fabrication business—and with the same company—for 43 years, his entire professional life. He took a job creating blueprints for the company in college (it had a different name at the time and became Olson in 2002) and over the years worked his way up to CEO.

Olson has transferred his planning and management experience to his boat projects, serving as a project manager of sorts for most of them, though he sometimes performs manual labor himself. Over the years, he has sold all of the boats he’s restored or donated them to museums, including the Tahoe Maritime Museum, of which he is one of the founders.

“I realized that I wasn’t a collector,” he says. “I was more interested in the restoration process itself.”

And then came *Acania*. Built in 1930, the 136-ft-long diesel-motor luxury yacht would be Olson’s biggest project yet. His plan was to completely restore the boat within three years.

However, the project is ongoing.

“When I bought it in 2008, I thought I’d be semi-retired by this point,” he says. “But the economy ended up going south, so I’m not quite there yet.”

One of Olson’s main reasons for acquiring *Acania* was its colorful history. The boat was once owned by the Walgreen family (of the pharmacy chain) and also served as a military vessel during World War II. Perhaps *Acania*’s most alluring aspect is that it was rumored to have been built for none other than Al Capone.

“The boat has a 6,000-gallon water tank with two valves that lead to nowhere, suggesting that it was built for smuggling alcohol during Prohibition,” explains Olson. “Even if it wasn’t owned by Capone, it was almost certainly built with smuggling in mind.”

When it comes to the structural portion of the restoration, Olson’s day job has definitely come in handy. Unlike most of the boats he has restored over the years, *Acania* is made of riveted steel instead of wood.

“We laser scanned the boat to get all of the precise dimensions, then detailed and fabricated the replacement steel in our shop,” he says. “Then we delivered it to a shipyard in Alameda and fit up the pieces there.”

Also unlike his previous boat projects, Olson plans to keep *Acania* for personal use and travel and hopes to charter it a couple of weeks per month to offset the restoration and maintenance costs.

And he’s almost there. Olson estimates that the restoration, which has essentially been the boating equivalent of a gut rehab, is 95% complete and hopes to finish it up this summer. Besides replacing structural elements, the project also includes adding architectural details, woodwork and furniture that reflect the boat’s Prohibition-era splendor—with a few modern perks.

“There will be a flat-screen television set, but it will be hidden from view,” he says. “Once the project is finished it will be a real time capsule.”

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◀ *Acania* in various stages of restoration and Olson on the bow. In addition to working on buildings and boats, Olson was a juror for the 2013 IDEAS² Awards, the winners of which will be featured in the May issue.