

The Birth Of The Valiant

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The Dabney's "NATIVE SUN" sailing off St. John, U.S. Virgin Gorda

We learned to sail on Puget Sound. Like so many other people who live and cruise the Pacific Northwest, we were happy to be on our summer cruise in August ... it is the best of the best of cruising. The days are light. The sun is out nearly every day, and the air is so clear it turns the sky the most amazing color of blue you'll see anywhere. In the background are craggy snow-capped mountains. It is a place of the ultimate primal alliance ... a nearly perfect cruising ground ... a place where islands and bays stretch for endless miles. The last week of August is our favorite, and we always laugh when we say, "Wednesday during the last week of August is always Perfect." It was always a good rule of thumb.

A taste of reality. It must have been a Thursday or Friday of that last week in August, 1972, when we were crossing the Straits of Juan de Fuca, sailing toward Victoria B.C. where we hoped to dock in front of the Empress Hotel in time for afternoon tea. All sailors who have been to the Empress for tea, tell all of the other sailors heading toward the Canadian Gulf Islands, that this

is a tradition you must not miss. We were looking forward to participating in this tradition and discussed what the proper attire would be, as we thundered along under full spinnaker in our Islander 36', "Amalia". The wind was building and it was time to reef.

Where it started. In 1969, as young corporate kids, just a few years out of college, Xerox sent their Marketing Team leaders to the Virgin Islands for a week of rest and relaxation and a little bit of



Sylvia aboard the first boat that she and Stanley sailed in the Virgin Islands in 1969. This was the "beginning of the beginning" of Valiant Yachts

work. It was a gray and dreary day in April, when we left Seattle on that trip and as it turned out, it changed our lives and the lives of many others, forever. We stayed at a 100-room hotel on a small island called Water Island, in the middle of Charlotte Amalia harbor in Saint Thomas, in the Virgin Islands. We had spent 4 days snorkeling in unbelievably clear turquoise water, basking in the sun, fishing and then we decided to try sailing. We have always believed that your life can change in an instant and you can't see it coming, therefore it's important to live life fully, enjoy one another and enjoy every moment. Those two hours we spent sailing, because of an almost mystical and spiritual experience, turned all of our dreams, goals and

thoughts about the future, upside down. That night we laid awake for hours and by dawn, the die was cast.

As usual, it was gray, overcast, damp and dreary in Seattle when we returned. We had turned the car lights on to go to work and at 5pm we had headlights on to come home from work. At 7pm, we were hunkered down in front of a fireplace talking about how that very moment, in the islands, the sun was blazing, people were on the beach and people were sailing! Three days after we returned to our Corporate jobs in Seattle, we gave our notice. It's hard to explain unless you are a sailor to whom this has happened, but it seemed to us we had a calling...we even romanticized that it was an ancient calling from deep inside...it may have been, but we knew we didn't want to live as we had been living, that it was certainly better for us to "do" than to "have" and that we wanted to spend as much time together in our lives as we possibly could. Remember, it was also a time of adventure, escape and great excitement, as 1969 proved to be a seminal year of change for a lot of us "sixties types"!

The following weekend, with stars in our eyes, we bought a new Ericson 23', named her "Amalia" after the first place we had been sailing and signed a contract for an Ericson 27' which was still on the drawing board. The day we took delivery of the Ericson 27' "Amalia II", we ran into the dealer for Islander Yachts and we actually signed a contract for an Islander 36' for delivery the following summer. We were a yacht brokers dream. We were young, impulsive and driven by a dream, the sirens call of sailing adventures and it was 1969 and we were hooked big time!

We had made the transition from a camping style "learn to sail boat" with only crawl around headroom, to what we believed was the boat to fulfill our dreams, the same dreams many of us have when we "discover" sailing. We fantasized about translucent turquoise lagoons where the mahi-mahi would just jump into the cockpit, of rum and cokes at sunset anchored by the palm trees, of anchorages at secluded tropical islands, of sailing across calm purple oceans, of white beaches that no one else had yet discovered, of our youthful bodies all tan and lean from hours of snorkeling on glorious reefs. We were filled with the cocky confidence that we could sail the oceans of the world with what we knew and with the boat we had...we were, so very young!

Reality grows with the wind. Throughout the afternoon, the wind continued to rise and "Amalia", continued to charge forward and then surge to the left and surge to the right, later we would find out this violent motion was called "death rolls" and by this time we were so out of control we couldn't shorten sail, so inexperienced that we knew we had a lot to learn about sailing and ourselves and so it was that afternoon, we realized that as much as we loved this boat, she was not suitable for us, for long distance, bluewater cruising, living aboard nor for fulfilling our sailing dreams. The Islander 36' continues to be one of our favorite boats. It has beautiful lines, sails wonderfully and we know of 2 couples who have sailed to Hawaii and back, but that day, we made the decision to buy a true bluewater passagemaker, whatever that was. We also started planning for the liveaboard lifestyle, which included more knowledge of sailing, more experience and a boat with more storage for a large compliment of tools, parts and gear and a boat that was conceived, designed and built for bluewater passagemaking. But what were our choices in 1972...there were very few alternatives.



Nathan Rothman and Stanley Dabney "the first sail"

And then came Valiant. Westsail was just coming into being and was even featured on a cover of Time Magazine and after we called the California office, a factory rep came to our house in Seattle to show our father, Nathan and us the lines and to tell us about all the plans they had for this new boat. It was nice, but like shoes, it simply just didn't fit us.

Around this same time, a mutual friend who knew of our sailing passions, introduced us to Jay Benford, a local yacht designer and Ferrocement guru, who was designing Ferrocement boats in Seattle. After the Corporate escape, we had established a printing and publication company and became the printers of Jay Benfords design books. It was just wonderful to see the designs, reviews and new drawings he brought to us for printing and we were enthralled with the "new" concept of Ferrocement. Remember, this was the era of the great escape and we became one of the group who actually considered a "concreter"...it made sense to us at the time and afterall, there were not too many alternatives at that time. During the Seattle Boat Show, sometime around 1972, Jay Benford invited us

to come to the show and see a "real live" Ferro cement boat being built. As it turned out, this was the first time we met Nathan Rothman who had recently arrived from New York, where he was selling buttons on the street with John Lennons photo on them and working at various City Island boat yards. Nathan was now working for Jay Benford, building production Ferrocement yachts. Next to Nathan, inside this huge chicken wire cage, smearing concrete, was Bob Perry, who was working for Jay Benford as an assistant designer.

Nathan, his significant other Linda, Bob and we, instantly became great friends, after the show that night, over great big bowls of Spaghetti at the recently opened Spaghetti House in Seattle...gourmet dining for us in those days. It was just one of those special relationships where we did a lot of dreaming, laughing, talking and we spent endless hours together. Nathan's girlfriend Linda was unemployed, so I got her a job with my brother in a plant shop in the University district of Seattle and Bob who was then batching it, soon moved aboard our Islander 36' at Shilshole Bay Marina. We all spent a lot of time onboard our Islander 36' and in the cafes around the Seattle marinas, drawing on napkins, what would be our dream boat...a good livable bluewater yacht. We talked about berths, galleys, storage and performance. After a 3 month cruise to Alaska aboard a ketch rigged Sea Spirit 32', essentially a smaller version of a Sea Wolf 41', we really started defining what our concept of what a liveaboard cruising yacht was, what performance was, what comfort aboard meant (primary issue were a few less leaks) and what for us, would be the ideal layout above and below decks. Of course, every time we found what we thought was a suitable boat, Nathan would tell us it was not right for us. Up to that point, most offshore cruising boats were heavy and slow and not all that fun to sail.

The "U" shaped galley was a must on our list, the proper forward facing and really usable navigation station which would hold a large compliment of navigation equipment, was also at the top, as was a real double berth on which fitted sheets could be used. We wanted a traditional layout and Bob's concept of performance was critical, as it fit our desires like a glove. All of these ideas eventually evolved into the Valiant 40.

With the collapse of the "concrete era", both Nathan and Bob soon found themselves unemployed. Nathan suggested the we have Bob Perry work all of our ideas into a design, as we all had the same thoughts and dreams. Our parameter for performance was that it had to sail equally as well as our Islander 36'. Hull shapes were tossed around, other Seattle friends, Mary and Bill Black, Steve Murphy and Darryl McNabb started hanging over our shoulders looking at the ensuing plans and we began hearing "yes, we would also be really interested in this boat". So it was that all four of us were interested in the same type of cruising yacht!!! Bob was young, hugely creative in his yacht designs and a great friend. We had talked about what had disappointed us in other boats, threw ideas around and spent so very many hours aboard our Islander 36 and a few local cafes, drawing, erasing, talking, laughing and never thinking Valiant Yachts would be born!

Having been influenced by Scandinavian fishing boats and other double enders which we were used to seeing in the Pacific North West, some of which were off the board of another great local yacht designer, William Garden, we were greatly impressed with the cover of a Soundings magazine that Nathan brought to the cafe one morning. Nathan asked if we would be interested in a boat that looked like this. It was beautiful !!! "Holga Dansk" was the name of the boat and she had the most beautiful hull design we had ever seen. We were struck with lightening it seemed, we had the inside lines we wanted and now there she was, a hull design and styling we just had to have...now we had a decision to make...that was easy, but how and where do a bunch of kids build a boat. (Later at the Miami Boat Show in 1975 I think, where Nathan, Stanley and I were introducing Valiant to the world, we had some "big time boating big whig" come to our booth, where we had drawings and a projector with slides of what we were doing in the boatbuilding industry! His comment, which we



Our first "race" ..Bob Perry on the helm, Sylvia & Stanley Dabney & Bill and Mary Black

have never forgotten was that we were the "cutest kids I've ever seen, the boat looks pretty nice, but you will never make it...you can't just start a company like that!!!). Back then, we didn't know better. Nathan was unemployed at the time, Linda, Nathans girlfriend was working at my brothers flower shop for low pay, Jay Benford's Ferrocement production company was out of business, and Bob Perry was unemployed as well. We all were pretty motivated to take some action.

Since Nathan's great love and experience was in boatbuilding and since he was out of work and also knowing we were in the market for a good offshore yacht, he asked if he could build a boat for us, and as we

were totally tied up in the printing business, Stanley said "yes, wonderful, why not", since we had all talked so often about what constituted a good boat and we were all kindred spirits, we knew it would work! Because of the recent oil crisis at that time, the big question was where would he ever get resin, an oil byproduct? It was the height of the oil shortage by this time, a time when we took turns filling each others cars up in the gas lines, a feat that sometimes took all day, if we were tending to three or four cars. The oil shortage meant of course, no resins for fiberglass boats...something that impacted our lives greatly over the next few months.

Being a native of Seattle and an avid sailor by now, Stanley suggested that since there were so very many powerboat builders in the Northwest, who were not currently building many fuel guzzling powerboats, that Nathan should visit some of them such as Bayliner, Tollycraft, Reinell and Uniflite and see if they would sell resin to us. Uniflite had in fact built sailboats in the past, the very beautiful and famous yawls for the Annapolis Naval Academy.

Nathan took out his earring, got a haircut, put on a suit, shined his shoes, and then hit the road looking for resin. He went only 90 miles north of Seattle, but he was gone for several days. We were worried, excited and VERY apprehensive, thinking that all those companies might not have the resins we needed. Nathan had no luck until he hit the Uniflite factory. Nathan phoned with the "good news AND the bad news". Yes, Uniflite had resin, but rather than sell us the resin, they wanted to build yachts for us. That was better than good news, we were elated. The bad news was that Nathan had signed a contract with Uniflite to build 12 of these yachts. Remember, there were only three for certain, and possibly a fourth who wanted a boat built. That he had signed such a contract wasn't just bad news...it was just terrible news. Now funding had to be found and a whole bunch of "never before seen boats" had to be built and sold.

A meeting was arranged with all of us. Having been a marketing Manager for Xerox in his "Corporate life", Stanley's background was in product and marketing development. Originally, the name Voyager Yachts was chosen. Nathan had a couple of very artistic friends, Michael and Marsha Burns, who drew up the logo of the VY with the star in the middle and we all loved the logo. We were really dismayed when we found out that name was already taken, so it was decided that we should keep the logo, it was pretty and looked good from both sides of a sail, so we had to work a



"NATIVE SUN", middle boat, in the production line at Uniflite. The light Grey boat to the left is "GREBE" and to the right is "AMERICAN EAGLE"

name around it. Nathan suggested and it seemed suitable, to name this beautiful yacht after an America's cup boat and VALIANT YACHTS was born.

We opened a tiny office on Lake Union in Seattle, Nathan moved to Bellingham for a year to oversee the building of the tooling and boat production He would be the President of Valiant Yachts, Stanley would become the Vice President and would take over marketing and sales and Stanley would take Wednesday off from our printing company every week and come

into this tiny office, write ads, put together brochures, which we would print in our printing shop and try to sell the other nine Valiants. For funding, we turned to a mutual friend, Jeff Brotman, who was able to secure an S.B.A. loan. Later Jeff founded COSTCO, so undoubtedly we had gone to the right source for startup advice and help. With the completion of the tooling and the launching of the first boat, the prototype, Stanley came to work as the Vice President full time, later selling our printing company and we all then became totally immersed in the boating business.

Soon after leaving Benfords, Bob found work in the environs of Dick Carter near Boston, Massachusetts, whose design and yacht building organization was the hot design house of the era, having his designs win world one-ton championships, as well as impressive wins on the SORC. Bob was confident that he could incorporate the current performance design parameters of the time, within a comfortable performance cruising yacht. It still had to sail as well as our Islander 36! Thus, the era of the performance cruising yacht was born. And Interestingly enough, the Valiant 40 hull form, that today is called the Valiant 42, is exactly the same hull form that was originally laid down by Bob Perry in 1973, with the exception of an evolved keel design. The Valiant 40 became an instant success and we had eight boats on order by the time the first Valiant was launched. It is said that the Valiant 40/42 has been in non-stop production longer than any comparable yacht, a true testimony to its timeless design.

By 1978, we were selling and building some 50 Valiants a year, including the Valiant 40, Valiant 32 and the Esprit 37, which later became the Valiant 37 and then evolved into the Valiant 39. With the



We removed the old deck from "NATIVE SUN" and bought a new deck...another story to come

success of this new performance cruiser, Valiant became the hot cruising boat of the era, attracting enthusiastic fans and supporters. During that time, there was a man, who continually came into our Valiant office in Seattle. Remember, our only goal had been and was, to go cruising, so we were ready for some changes and what followed was the perfect opportunity for us to get on our way. Dane Nelson (he had 13 children), had come into the office repeatedly and asked us to build a Pilot house Valiant. Stanley's constant response, tongue in cheek, was that "it will never happen unless you buy the company". As it turned out, sometime later, he and his partner, Sam Dick, did buy Valiant and the name of the company became, Valiant Yachts, owned by Sam Dick Industries. Uniflite was still building the boats, except for the Esprit 37. After 10 Pilot House Valiants were built and both Sam Dick and Dane Nelson each owned a Pilot House Valiant, Sam Dick Industries then sold to Uniflite, later to become Chris Craft. Somewhere around 1982/83, Valiant was bought by the present owner. He built several Valiants somewhere in South Seattle and then moved production to

Texas. By then, we were out cruising, chartering and brokering boats until we took a direct hit from Hurricane Hugo in 1989.

After Hurricane Hugo, we shipped "Native Sun" to the Valiant Factory for a proposed six month remanufacturing. The owner of Valiant yachts asked Stanley if he could help Valiant with marketing and sales, and so it was, that through 1994, once again, Stanley was the Marketing Manager of Valiant Yachts and I was asked to become Manger of Customer Services. It was wonderful watching Valiant grow again and change for the better and we enjoyed the excitement of once again meeting with fellow Valiant owners and lots of the old owners who came through the Valiant doors. After four and a half years in Texas, we realized that a lot of valuable time had slipped by and we realized we needed to be back by salt water. We moved our company back to salt water and opened Offshore Atlantic Yachts in Annapolis and Florida. We were Valiant factory dealers up to 1996 and in 1997, after a bad winter, with five feet of snow in our driveway, we decided to move back to Florida, a much more salubrious climate, where we once had our Valiant office, some 18 years ago.

"NATIVE SUN" is a "Good Old Boat" as a work in progress. With current technology and access to every part we could ever imagine to build a boat, we know that though she is 25 years old, she is a timeless classic. We continue to schedule projects on her as time and money allow. We are only one story of so very many we see every day in our office and in our marina. There are a lot of stories and a lot of "Good Old Boats". The reasons people continue to love and work on these boats are as varied as your imagination. Ours is a story of the love of our boat, a hurricane and a long term commitment. Others, are being able to buy a boat which would be unaffordable to an owner as new, to invest time and sweat equity to realize a yacht which will take them anywhere they dream, others are family boats with years of memories and there are many more stories yet to be told.

Our Valiant story is about how a group of young, idealist and enthusiastic people can come together with a lot of creative energy and can develop something "special". In the beginning, we had no idea that this new and "radical boat" would become known as a "classic", 25 years later...truly a "Good Old Boat".