

Scowman Ron Spins a Tale

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By Ron Wilkinson and Peter Tait

All Ron Wilkinson wanted to do as a boy was go sailing. At the local Tauranga Yacht Club he sailed Zeddies, winning the club champs in 1937 and 1938. But there was more to it than that. He wanted to earn his living at sea, and after long discussions with his Dad (at the time the mayor of Tauranga), and after completing a printing apprenticeship he finally got permission. His career took many twists and turns, around the New Zealand coast, through the Pacific and during WW2 but rather curiously both his first and last seafaring jobs were on scows under sail.



Ron today - nearly 80 yrs old

In colonial times before the days of good roads, the flat bottomed sailing scow carried all types of produce and supplies up and down the coast. Ron's first job was on one of the last of these little sailing ships, the 'Lena Gladys' on the Auckland - Tauranga run. And just before retiring from the sea, Ron was on another scow, the 'Owhiti'. She had served her days as a working boat in the Hauraki Gulf but after a revamp finished her career as a Hollywood star making movies in the Bay of Islands and the Pacific. Ron lived on board for a time as watchman and general hand and becoming well known for his habit of doing the shopping at Opua on a windsurfer. The locals report that it was very unusual for anything even the daily paper to get wet!

Shortly after getting the OK from his father Ron signed up on the 'Lena Gladys' as a 20 year old Ordinary Seaman on the Auckland to Tauranga run carrying a deck cargo of petrol. His duties included taking watches, cooking meals, taking care of routine engine maintenance and generally help where needed.

Now, 60 years later, Ron describes one of the early voyages on the 'Lena G'.

"Loading commenced at 8.00 and was carried out by hand from the 'Atlantic' jetty in Beaumont Street near Westhaven. The crew consisting of me (the OS) an AB and the Captain all turned out to load the cargo of drums filled with petrol. The drums were loaded by a single derrick and stowed on deck. Great care was taken in stowing the drums. Every available space from the cabin aft to the anchor windlass forw'd was tightly filled. Just enough space was left to operate the hand cranked windlass should the anchor be needed. The potential for disaster was always present with so much petrol aboard but I don't recall overmuch concern even with sparks from the stove flying around.



Glamour scow 'Owhiti' on the Waitemata

By 3 pm lines were cast off and the voyage commenced via the Waiheke Passage heading towards Cape Colville. With a south westerly wind this was a pleasant sail. As the OS on the 4 - 8 pm watch I had to both steer and cook up the evening meal. I soon discovered that I could stretch out into the galley adjacent to the helm, steering with one foot and stoking up the ti tree fire in the Shacklock Stove at the same time. Fortunately I wasn't a bad cook. The potatoes were soon boiling nicely and the sausages sizzling loudly in the pan.



My first seafaring job aux. Scow "LENA GLADYS"
Auckland to Tauranga service - deck cargo petrol

'Lena Gladys' with a cargo of petrol drums

The skipper took over the helm while I mashed the potatoes and served up. The others ate below at the table while I dined 'al fresco' at the helm with all sea views. Up ahead Channel Island off Cape Colville was looming larger. I often gazed around in wonderment - I was at last afloat, under sail and getting paid for it. Sausages and mash had never tasted so good!

At 8.00 pm the AB starts the 8 - 12 midnight watch. One last job remains for me before turning in. That is to assist in close hauling the canvas in preparation for the overnight offshore breeze as the new course is set and we head for the 'hole in the wall' off Mercury Bay. At midnight the skipper takes over and then at 3.30 am I get a shake and tumble out on deck to a spectacular sky filled with myriads of stars.

I wash a sleepy face and stir the banked up fire to life with a hand handful of split pine. The two of us share a just-what's-needed cup of tea before the skipper goes below and I take over the watch.

The sky begins to pale in the east as the scow ploughs nicely along. To port the rising sun is lighting up the multi coloured cliffs of the Red Mercurys. To starboard the high hills of the Coromandel are like a giant sleeping dinosaur. As a young OS I feel a great sense of well being in knowing that my two shipmates were sleeping peacefully in their bunks with no qualms regarding my ability to pick a path safely down the coast.

As dawn breaks the seaworld comes to life around me. Numerous seabirds commence the search for breakfast. Turbulence on the surface indicates ever present shoals of kahawai and the occasional flying fish makes a shimmering flight. A marlin leaps from the sea descending again in a graceful arc. Then suddenly dolphins which have been cruising stealthily by the rudder just a metre below my feet suddenly blow and startle me into thinking about commencing breakfast. Breakfast wasn't to be fish as you might expect in such a fish paradise. Scowmen had for years lived on kahawai stewed with potatoes and onions and they had had enough. It had to be bacon and eggs!

At 7.30 the sleepers are brought to life with a cup of freshly brewed tea. On deck its more one-foot-steering as breakfast sizzles on the stove and the smell of bacon and eggs wafts about. Left-over mashed potato gets fried up as well and bread toasts on the hottest part of the stove top. A touch of ti-tree smoke adds to the flavour. Nothing ever tasted so good. The memories make my mouth water as I write.

A change of watch means ships chores to be done. Shake the mats, sweep the floor then descend to the motor where I'm the engineer as well. I attend to the lubrication of various bearings etc. Back on deck it is morning smoko and another cup of tea is required. Then I can have an hour and a half to myself

before the noon meal needs serving up. A big pot of stewed mince and vegetables has been slowly simmering away on the back of the stove. By now it's well cooked and delicious.

We have made good time and at 2.30 we take an early smoko as Tauranga is not far off and sails must be lowered and stowed and lines cleared for tie up. Soon we are alongside. Unloading is completed by noon the next day and I have a hurried run ashore to purchase some fresh meat and bread. Back loading drums is a speedy operation because the empty drums are so light.



The Coromandel East Coast

Then it is all hands on deck to let go lines. Sails up and 'Lena Gladys' responds with a good turn of pace, relishing the unburdening of the heavy cargo. After clearing the harbour entrance at The Mount I am back at the wheel, the spuds have been peeled and the pot is bubbling on the stove. The meal of fried mutton chops and mash is just right after a hard days toil.

The return trip is a reversal of routine. A fresh breeze from the south west means good progress but off Mercury Island at dawn the wind falls away and the motor is used to hurry things along. We are at Cape Colville by 7 am but there is still no breeze. Unlike the earlier scows the 'Lena G' is fortunate that in a flat calm she can use her 52 hp auxiliary to motor into Auckland unhampered. The sails are stowed and it's time to tidy up the person. 'Channel fever' takes over. Out come the razors, soap and towels and sluicing commences. There is heavy demand on the galley for buckets of hot water. We always had to look our best when arriving back in Auckland. All that salt sea air made us frisky and you never knew who you might meet!

As we approached Auckland with the tide helping us along, the noon meal is leftovers from the mince stew that we had going down the coast. This has now become curried mince stew. Big appetites all round mean nothing left in the pot and by 2.30 the scow is tied up back at the jetty. The lightweight empties are unloaded in time for knockoff at 5.00. The skipper has his suit on and is homeward bound for Tamaki but the OS and the AB are respectably attired and headed for the nearest watering hole to quench the thirst. In this case it was the Rob Roy, a pub often patronised by scowmen. After a few pints the conversation got going and I overheard the AB extolling the virtues of the new cook. "I have never been on a scow with such a varied menu and do you know he even washes his hands all the time!"

Since those days in a lifetime afloat I have rarely experienced any ship from which I experienced so much pleasure as the 'Lena Gladys'. My association with scowmen was equally satisfying. They were a very special breed."

Footnote:

The 'Lena Gladys' was built by D M Darroch at Omaha near Leigh and launched in 1910. Length, 63 ft x 18 ft beam, 3 ft 7 in draft. The crew of three consisted of Captain (the Skipper), an able seaman (AB) and an Ordinary Seaman (OS).

She continued to work the coast until WW2 when she was commandeered into service to ferry supplies around in the shallow lagoons of the Solomons for the American forces. She finally came to her end on a reef in Papua New Guinea.

Today (1999) Ron is still fit and well. He owns and drives a car, reads a lot, enjoys spinning a story and maintains a good sense of humour. His last boat was a 2.4 metre FireBug which he built himself, famously inside in the hallway at home and later kindly donated to the Ngaroto Sailing Club. His health is reasonable he says but with a wry smile adds that he always enjoyed a smoke and a drink and probably should have given up both a bit sooner!