

Life on the Waterfront

A Profile of William Olesen

by Paul F. Irving

Facing the old ferry building from the corner of Harbor Boulevard and 6th Street, one must think back more than 30 years to remember that this used to be the center of San Pedro. For here is where bus lines converged, the railroads stopped, taxis parked, and boats tied up. People were everywhere.

The ferry was an important part of the center. It took you to Terminal Island, to the shipyards and boatyards, the canneries, and municipal berths, the road to Long Beach and its shops beyond. It is fitting, then, that the old ferry building now houses the Los Angeles Maritime Museum.

Inside the museum is one staff worker who volunteers much of his time. His name is Bill Olesen and he is himself a treasure to the San Pedro community. A man who, along with others, is responsible for the restoration of the Point Fermin lighthouse and the saving of the ferry building and consequent development of the Maritime Museum, Bill Olesen is a man who says he is "the happiest kid in San Pedro."

Bill first came to San Pedro in 1912, at the age of eight. He had traveled overland with his mother by train from Oakland, where the

family had moved after the devastating 1906 San Francisco earthquake. They were to meet up with his father, who was the master of a schooner making runs from the north coast to deliver lumber.

Bill's father was from Denmark, having come 'round the Horn on a British, four-masted, square-rigged bark. He had run away from a Danish ship and a half-crazed captain that left him and a shipmate down with scurvy in a

Belfast, Ireland hospital. "Fate," Bill says. "It's all fate, our lives are all fated." He recounts that his father slipped from a yard-arm during the hazardous, two-week rounding of the Cape. He slipped, but was saved by a shipmate. "I wouldn't be here if he hadn't been saved," Bill smiles. Later, ashore in San Francisco, Bill's father wrote to his sweetheart in Denmark and Agnes Victoria Johannessen sailed to the New World. She would become Bill's mother.

When the family moved to San Pedro in

1920, Bill began work at Al Larsen's Boatyard, then in Wilmington. But he was relegated to tending the boiler and shoveling wood shavings. Although good with a saw and hammer, he says, he found out there was a lot he didn't know. So, he returned to high school where he took up boat building, navigation and design drafting. His desire was to some day build boats and have his own yard.

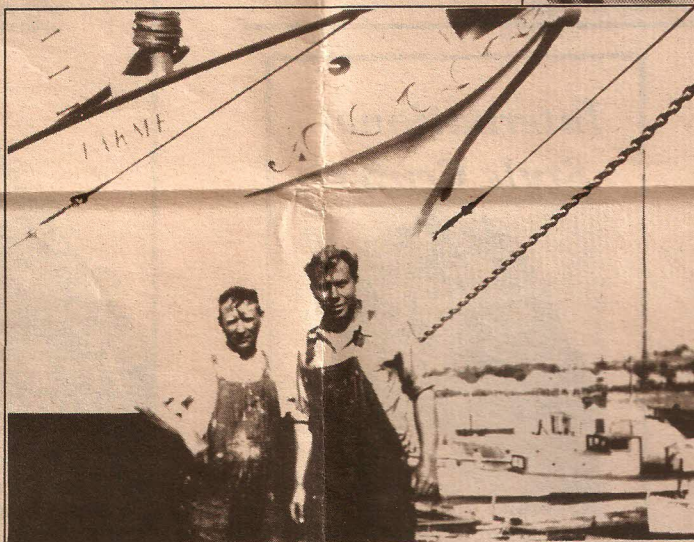
After a stint at fishing, on his first small boat, Bill ended up working with his dad on the coastal lumber schooners where he was quartermaster and ended up teaching crewmen how to steer a vessel. These were young men hired out of what was known as the "fake hall." It was

no buyer for the *Lakme*. So Bill and his father, whose company was reeling from the effects of the market crash, outfitted the *Lakme* for sword fishing in the summer of 1932. But there were other boats built and fish caught and voyages made over the next decades with time out during the war when Bill worked as a foreman at Wilmington Boat Works.

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Bill Olesen inside the Maritime Museum.
Photo by Victor Carvellas.



Standing in front of his ketch *Lakme* in 1931 with his father, Thorwald (left), Bill Olesen, then 27, is still around ships. The Official Harbor Historian is quick with a smile and volunteers much of his time at the Maritime Museum.

a hiring hall for unqualified sailors and others, set up by the Waterfront Employer's Association to get men to go to sea in a time when there was a dearth of manpower on the waterfront. These were the times of kick-backs and underhanded hiring practices that eventually led to the famous San Francisco longshoremen's strike of 1934.

Bill's desires came to fruition when he built a 40-foot cruising ketch that he named *Lakme* after a lumber schooner his father had commanded. But the year was 1929 and there was

they tied the knot, Bill cautioned his younger wife that she wouldn't want to have to push him around in a wheel chair at some later date. "Oh, bosh," she told him. "You don't know anything about what's going to happen."

"That's where fate takes a hand," Bill says. "Fate has a hand in everything. We each come with a blueprint and you can't alter that blueprint, no matter what you do." It was a short, five-year marriage; his wife died of cancer.

In the late '60s, Bill made a trip to New England and was impressed with the preservation of historic old houses. In Southern California, he thought, anything that is over 30-years-old seems to be torn down and built new again. So he returned to San Pedro all fired up with historical preservation ideas. And it so happened that the Point Fermin lighthouse was getting to look more and more

COMMUNITY CLOSE UP

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no buyer for the *Lakme*. So Bill and his father, whose company was reeling from the effects of the market crash, outfitted the *Lakme* for sword fishing in the summer of 1932. But there were other boats built and fish caught and voyages made over the next decades with time out during the war when Bill worked as a foreman at Wilmington Boat Works.

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dilapidated as time went by. The top portion of the lighthouse, including the lamp, had been removed during the war in order to install a structure that contained a radar unit. "It looked like a chicken coop," Bill said, jokingly. After the war the lighthouse, under the jurisdiction of the Department of Parks and Recreation, fell into disuse.

Bill, peeved with all the talk of urban renewal at the time, felt that one of the most significant historical structures in San Pedro was wasting away. So he started a campaign to restore it. But, aware that no one knew him, he figured he needed credibility and hit on the idea of writing a series of articles about his early experiences since coming to San Pedro. Bill's articles began to appear in the newspaper. The original 10 or so accounts that he had committed to paper expanded to 40 over the years from 1969 to 1976. So, between the writing and the hookup with a kindred spirit, John Olguin, the red tape battle for restoration was won and Bill began the renovation of the lighthouse to its original specifications when it was built in 1874.

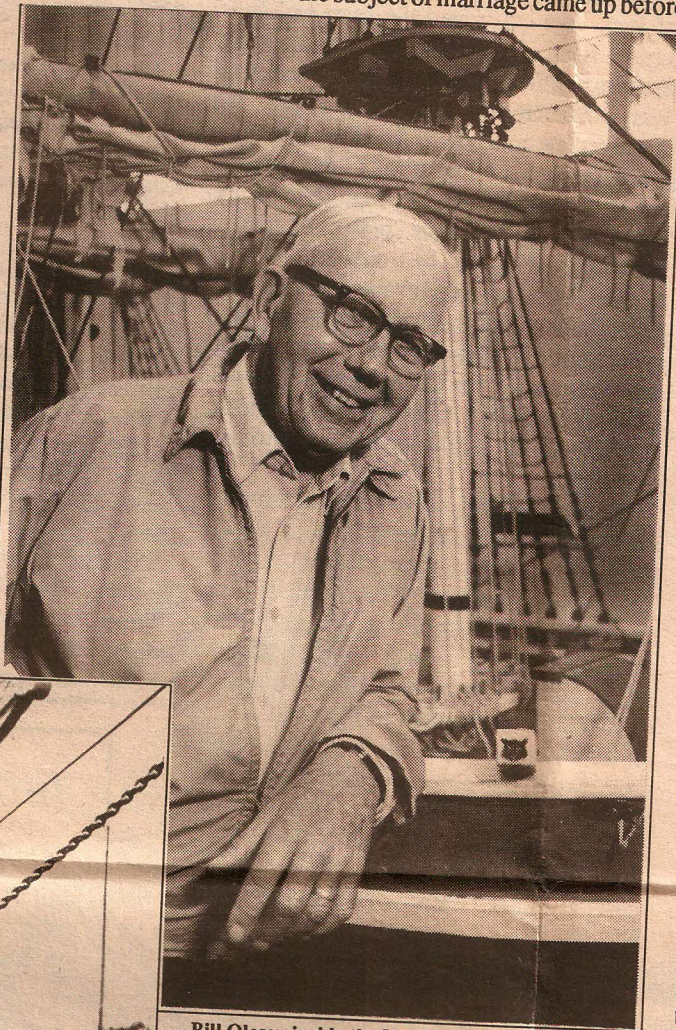
While doing the work, Bill became acquainted with Edward Hauck, with whom he would work to fight for the ferry building to house the museum. The ferry building had been slated for demolition as had happened to its duplicate on Terminal Island, directly across the Main Channel.

Bill praises Ed Hauck for all his hard work and achievements as he does many others about whom he speaks. It is clear that Bill likes people and is quick to point out their strong points and accomplishments. When he talks, there is a levity in his voice that imparts his positive outlook. He was born lucky, he says, "born with a golden spoon in my mouth and the winds have blown fair for me." In his long life, he has survived personal tragedy, yet one senses his calmness, a steadfastness, that carries him on and readies him to accept the next challenge. With a smile and a little laugh, Bill draws you in as a friend he's happy to have.

Bill Olesen must reflect on his own life as he has with life around him. He has kept a journal since 1923. Events have dovetailed, he says, using his woodworking metaphor, by fate, by that blueprint that has been laid out for us all. It is fitting then, that he was designated, on his 85th birthday in 1989, as Official Harbor Historian by the Los Angeles City Council, in recognition of his lifelong involvement with seafaring and boat building—as an authority on local waterfront history.

Bill had something to say on this subject in the beginning of an article he wrote in the *News Pilot* on Dec. 1, 1970.

"Even though a person may fail to achieve many of life's goals, eventual success as an old-timer is assured, because all it takes is time and presently he becomes an authority on the past." That, from "the happiest kid in San Pedro."



Bill Olesen inside the Maritime Museum.
Photo by Victor Carvellas.

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