



“PERFECTION ON THE CHESAPEAKE”

by
Joan Wenner, J. D.

The 1926 luxury yacht *Miss Ann* lies gently tethered to her Carter’s Creek dock in Irvington at The Tides Inn’s 5-bell-rated marina on the Rappahannock River, hard by the Chesapeake Bay. Here she remains in active seasonal service cruising with guests and drawing Northern Neck visitors back to the bygone days of the guided age. When I first wrote about her in 1999 for *Woodenboat*, she had just

been placed on the National Register of Historic Places, one of a select few vessels to be so recognized.

If ships could talk, what a story the 127-foot *Miss Ann* could tell. According to a written record of her maritime history, she was commissioned in 1924 by John H. French, a Detroit banker, industrialist, and yacht collector who wished the most stable, deep ballasted yacht that the best naval architects of that time could design. Fifty inch bronze propellers were turned by 5-inch cold rolled steel shafts powered by two 300hp Winton 6-cylinder diesel engines.

There was a reason for the size and stability requirement beyond the mere

showing of opulence. French’s wife, Elsie was said to be terrified of drowning and detested water voyages. A shipyard in Wilmington, Delaware with an established record for building fine steel ships was awarded the job of constructing the yacht so that “Elsie would think that she was in her own home.”

April 10, 1926 was the christening and launch date of the *Siele*, her name an anagram of Mrs. French’s first name. By all accounts she delighted in planning the elaborate interior décor of the *Siele*, spending over \$20,000 on custom furnishings, which Mr. French’s personal records reveal was ten percent of the cost of the entire yacht.



Four months later, on her maiden trip from New York harbor, though the Great Lakes and home to Detroit, Elsie's worst fears were nearly realized - at least in her mind. The story goes that Mrs. French was sitting comfortably on a couch on the starboard side of the main salon when a strong Great Lake Blow came up. Waves and wind both caught the ship's side, caus-

ing her to broach. The narrow-beamed and deep ballast hull quickly righted itself as it had been designed to do, but unfortunately this quick motion catapulted Elsie to a similar seating arrangement on the port side! When the *Siele* was later safely berthed, Mrs. French and her private maid quickly disembarked and never came aboard again.

Apparently as a result, John French used the *Siele* only once or twice for the next ten years. With her top notch mechanicals (windlass, steering gear, and refrigeration are still electrically operated by generators driven by gasoline engines) she was sold to Robert H. Wolf of Columbus, Ohio, and renamed *Sea Wolfe*. In 1941, as World War II loomed, the cherished quarter-inch Norwegian steel-plated ship was turned over to the U. S. Navy in Charleston, South Carolina for the war effort, serving as a naval research vessel where she was used in experimental work with radar, mines, and underwater communications. Now commissioned the *Aquamarine* Pyc-7, her exquisite walnut paneling inside, along companionways, and gracing her massive wheelhouse, as well as her two-inch teak deck (packed with cotton and caulked with a black rubber compound) were all repainted the standard battleship gray and outfitted for government duties. She operated primarily in the Chesapeake Bay and Potomac River, although she occasionally served brief



stints in other Atlantic coastal waters, Florida, and in the Bahamas.

At war's end she was transferred to the Maritime Commission's War Shipping Administration for removal of the wartime equipment and disposal. After five more years under private ownership, Ennolls A. Stephens, longtime innkeeper of The Tides Inn, purchased in 1952 what was essentially the skeleton of her former self for \$15,000. It took four years and extensive restoration to return her to Bristol condition, but Stephens and his 22-year old son Robert persevered. Now named after Stephens' wife, the *Miss Ann* spent winters in Florida and docked in Irvington during the warmer months.

From 1960 to 1990 the Stephens family had a running legal battle with the Coast Guard over certification since there were frequently "passengers" entertained on the *Miss Ann*. In 1991 they agreed to a total overhauling in nearby water-ringed Deltaville to meet U.S.C.G. regulations. This accomplished, on December 31, 1992 she was again launched. On April 9, 1993, clearance was given to carry paying passengers - nearly 67 years to the day since the launching of the *Siele* and 52 years to the day after Navy duty. Two days later the grand lady headed out on the tide, turning back time yet again.

The ship has been meticulously maintained at no small cost by the sumptuous resort's new owner since 2001, Arizona-based Sedona Management Company. General Manager, Larry McAfee says they are committed to "keeping the historical integrity of the ship" for their many guests and would-be mariners of all ages (if only for a day or two) that request charters and passage on regularly scheduled luncheon, dinner, and special event "voyages" to savor the ultimate "Bay by boat" experience.

Also noteworthy, he said, is that John H. French III, grandson of the original owner, arrived at the property last year donating a ship's log, original blueprints, dinnerware, nostalgic photographs, and other vintage memorabilia, which the resort prominently showcases next to its gift shop. Don't miss taking a look, should you visit. The chic Tide Inn, listed by *Leading Small Hotels of the World*, is promoted as "a Chesapeake Bay tradition." And the *Miss Ann* has steadily gained speed to take her rightful place as another.

For information: The Tides Inn, www.tidesinn.com, (804) 438-5000, 460 King Carter Drive, Irvington, Virginia 22480.

Joan Wenner of White Stone, Virginia is a longtime boating writer for major publications such as *Chesapeake* and *Wooden Boat*. She also writes on Civil War history and historic sites.

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