

# The Rites of Spring

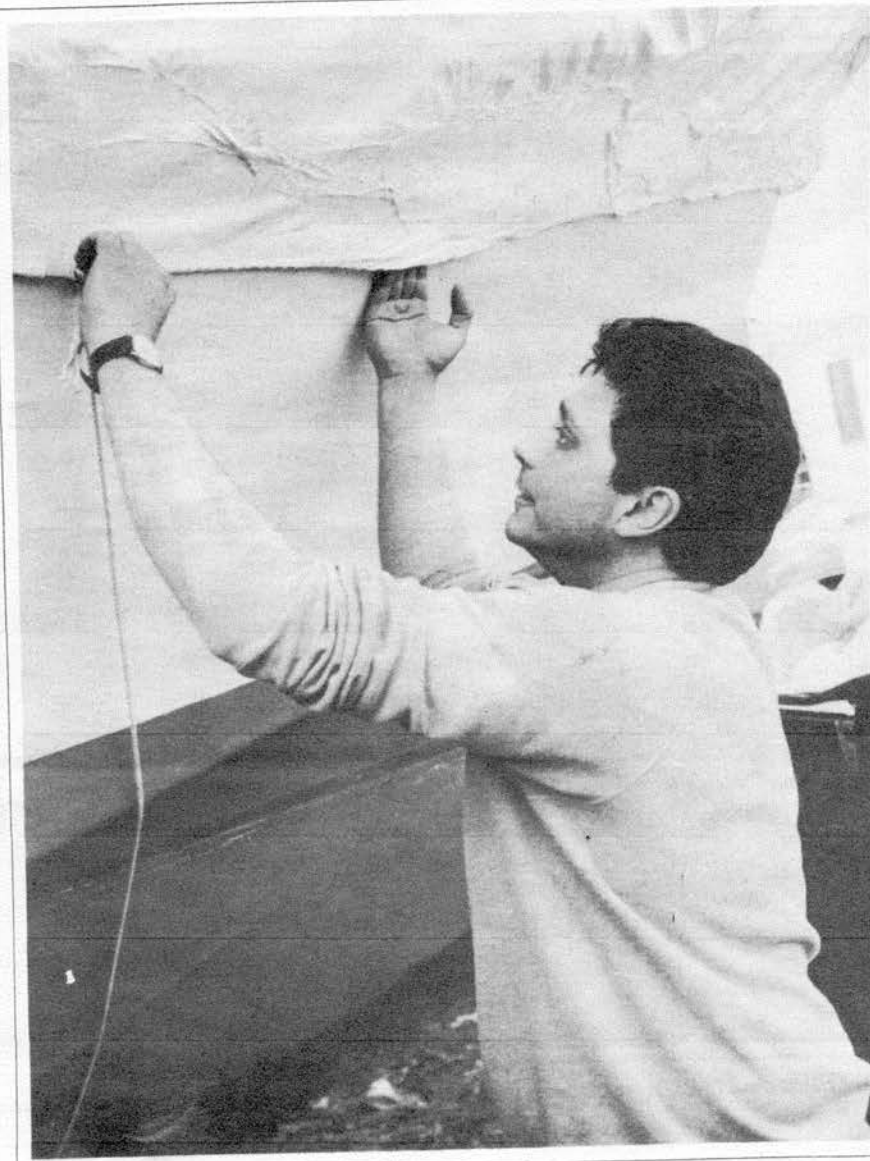
BY BETSY HAGGERTY

*Sand that bottom,  
wax that hull,  
get a little drunk,  
and . . .*

**"I**t's a ritual," John Mahoney guffaws. Heads turn as his booming laugh shakes the silence of an early spring afternoon on the Eastchester Bay shoreline, and a dozen or so of his comrades-in-arms at Pelbamar Boatyard in the northeast Bronx stop working long enough to give him a nod and a knowing smile.

It's the first 60 degree day of 1987. The snow hasn't fully melted and the mud is ankle deep. But the yard is alive with men and women scraping paint, repairing teak, replacing fittings and shooting the breeze, mostly shooting the breeze.

It's the same every year, says Tom Ward who's made the yard his home since his father, Tom, Sr., bought it in 1955. "First nice day, everybody's out. Some of 'em won't come back again until June, and others will be here day and night until their boats are launched." Young Tom, as he's called by the old-timers, is now in charge and knows everybody's routine down to the last step.



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Mahoney (even his wife calls him that) is famous at Pelbamar for being long on talk and short on work. He's one of the June launchers. And if somebody says, "I pulled a Mahoney today," you know what happened.

This particular Saturday is typical. Mahoney arrives at noon carrying a bag with sandpaper, a protective face mask and two six-packs. He dons a hat, gloves and mask and attacks the anti-fouling paint on his keel with coarse sandpaper and first-day-out zeal. After about ten minutes, he's worked up a sweat and covered himself with bright blue paint dust.

"Time for a beer break," he says matter-of-factly, puts a ladder against his C&C 25 and climbs aboard to find an

opener. "C'mon, join me," he says, "and tells me how it's a ritual."

"Ritual!," exclaims Dave Wilder, shaking his head. "To me a ritual is something you do over and over again, and that's my problem with this. It seems that all I ever do is go to the hardware store. Every time I start a new job, I discover a screw missing or a tool I need and I have to go back to the store. That's really frustrating."

Dave and Sharynne Wilder started work on their 24-foot boat on the first February day the temperature went above freezing. "I had boating burnout this year," Dave says, apologizing for what he considers a late start. Last year the Wilders braved ice and snow to re-

pair the ravages of Hurricane Gloria.

Mahoney, unsettled by such industry, offers the Wilders some beer. "Can't do it," says Dave. "Got a lot of work to do here."

Pelbamar, a no-frills yard in the no-frills Bronx, is tucked away in a corner of Eastchester Bay, about a mile and a half from the Throgs Neck Bridge, where Long Island Sound begins. It winters about 90 boats—all, save one, sail. "We've always had sail boats in the family," Tom Ward tells me, "and it was easier to specialize." Pelbamar's boats range from daysailers to 40-footers; most are in the 28-foot range.

Next door, Carl Evers and his son Charlie provide a home for power boats.



**RING FEVER:** Paul Noia, right, pulled his tarp on Valentine's Day for an early start on this year's fishing.

Carl, who celebrated his 80th birthday sometime back, pays no mind to his age. He's just returned, tan and healthy looking, from a winter in South America and is searching for some new adventure. Africa, maybe.

Boats don't interest him all that much, he admits, pointing out that Charlie, who's hard at work somewhere in the yard, is the real boat man in the family.

"I never really intended to run a boatyard at all. I bought this place in '38 or '39 for my planes," says Carl, an aviator who prefers talking about how he rented planes to Howard Hughes and taught Katharine Hepburn to fly. "But when the war (W.W. II) came, flying didn't pay, so I took in a few boats."

They still fly seaplanes out of Evers, and, Carl tells me, Hepburn still comes by to say hello once in a while, but today the chief business is boats. "Boats pay the rent," says Carl, seeming disappointed by the turn of events. "We've got about 200 of them here, almost all power. Power boats are easier to handle," he explains, "you need special equipment for keelboats."

A chain-link fence separates the yards, forming a symbolic boundary between rag territory and stinkpot turf. It's the kind of fence that poet Robert Frost once wrote about, the kind that makes good neighbors. A fence that acknowledges differences but walls nothing out. Boaters talk to one another through it, the way neighbor farmers, tending different crops, might trade stories over the stone wall between their fields. It has a large open gate which everyone uses to get to the tiny Sea Anchors Yacht Club, which is nestled between the yards on a renovated, beached barge.

I'm sitting in the cockpit of Mahoney's sailboat sipping a beer. (Ritual, you know.) The sun is warm and I can see the whitecaps in Long Island Sound to the east. Mahoney flips on the VHF and we hear NOAA weather radio telling its usual lies. Never mind that we are high and dry, the boating season has begun and I taste the promise of the months ahead.

Standing on the cabin top, I'm able to survey the boatyard activity. Evers is oddly empty. Paul Noia is alone, finishing up work on his 15-foot MFG runabout.

"I don't understand where everybody is," he says later when his partner returns with supplies. "When you enjoy the sport like I do you want to get out there as early



**STRAIGHT AND STEADY:** Frank Stagnolen sticks to his work and skips the partying. Colleagues predict he'll be the first in the water.

as you can. I love doing this, you get so much satisfaction when you see the finished product." He pulls out before-and-after pictures and, chest swelling with pride, shows me the improvements he's made since he started work on Valentine's Day. He looks around the yard again and shakes his head.

"I'll be history by the time these guys show up," he predicts and promises he'll be catching flounder by the next week.

Back at Pelbamar, Charlie Rios is stroking the hull of his 30-footer and talking about the sail-off-into-the-sunset fantasies he gets every spring. "Professionally, I'm a machinist," he says, "so I work with my hands all the time. But it's different here. It's like making love to a woman."

"Better not let your wife hear you talking like that," Frank Slagmolen chides from

the next boat. Frank's been scraping beneath the layers of paint, so that he can start with fresh paint and launch early in April. The remark is his only comment of the day. He's too busy for chit-chat he says, and he declines an invitation to Sea Anchors when the rest of the crew heads off.

"This is an accredited yacht club," commodore Larry Tiernan tells me as I enter the houseboat/clubhouse. "We were listed in Lloyd's when Lloyd's still published a yacht club register." But Sea Anchors is a far cry from the blue blazer clubs up the Sound. "We're a blue collar club," Larry says proudly. "We have both power boaters and sailors here." Larry is a fisherman with a 32-foot Luhr's; his vice commodore is a sailor.

What's important at Sea Anchors is how well you throw a dart and tell a story, not how you choose to propel your boat. And on this balmy Saturday, the bar is crowded with people who have come to gather courage and prepare themselves psychologically for the arduous task of fitting out.

Everybody has a job he or she hates, a nightmarish fear and an old war story to tell. They relish playing can-you-top-th-

"The worst job," says Jeff Ricciardi, "is fixing the head. You know it isn't working right in the fall, but you don't do anything about it. Then you have all winter to think about how horrible it will be. It's happened to me twice, and what do is work on it in January when everything is frozen and you can't smell anything."



**ALL WORK NO PLAY:** John Mahoney has found an easy balance in 15 minutes work and a day-long beer break.

"But my biggest fear," Jeff continues, "is that they will drop the boat, or that it won't stop at the waterline when they put it in. I have this nightmare that it's going to go right down to the bottom. I've never seen this happen, but somehow I have this thing that it's not really going to float."

Tom Winslow, who fits out at a yard on the Hudson, has seen that happen—almost. "I always try to get there before they launch my boat," he says. "One year they told me they would put it in at two. I got there at ten, just to be sure. It was already in the water and I noticed the stern was low. When I got into it, the boat was one third-full of water. I'd had some engine work done and someone had left a sea-cock open and forgot to attach a hose. The boat would have been sitting on the bottom if I hadn't got there when I did. You should never let anybody launch your boat without you; they'll sink it on you."

Winslow, who is a licensed captain and professional sailing instructor, has scores of stories, many about mistakes he's made himself over the years. "There is nothing embarrassing or unusual about having trouble getting your boat set for the season," he says with authority. "Anybody who tells you they never had a problem is lying. It's that simple."

There were no liars apparent at Sea Anchors that afternoon and there was an abundance of hearty laughter as the boaters spun stories between rounds of darts, but it was laughter that echoed the tears of seasons past.

"I guess the worst thing happened to me was a couple of years back," Holger Asmus recalls. "I'd spent days sanding down the railings and bow-sprit. I had just finished varnishing them when the guy in the next boat dropped his fire extinguisher. It exploded and sprayed a fine powder all over my wet varnish. There wasn't a thing I could do about it. I just had to start all over again. It was the biggest laugh of the yard that year."

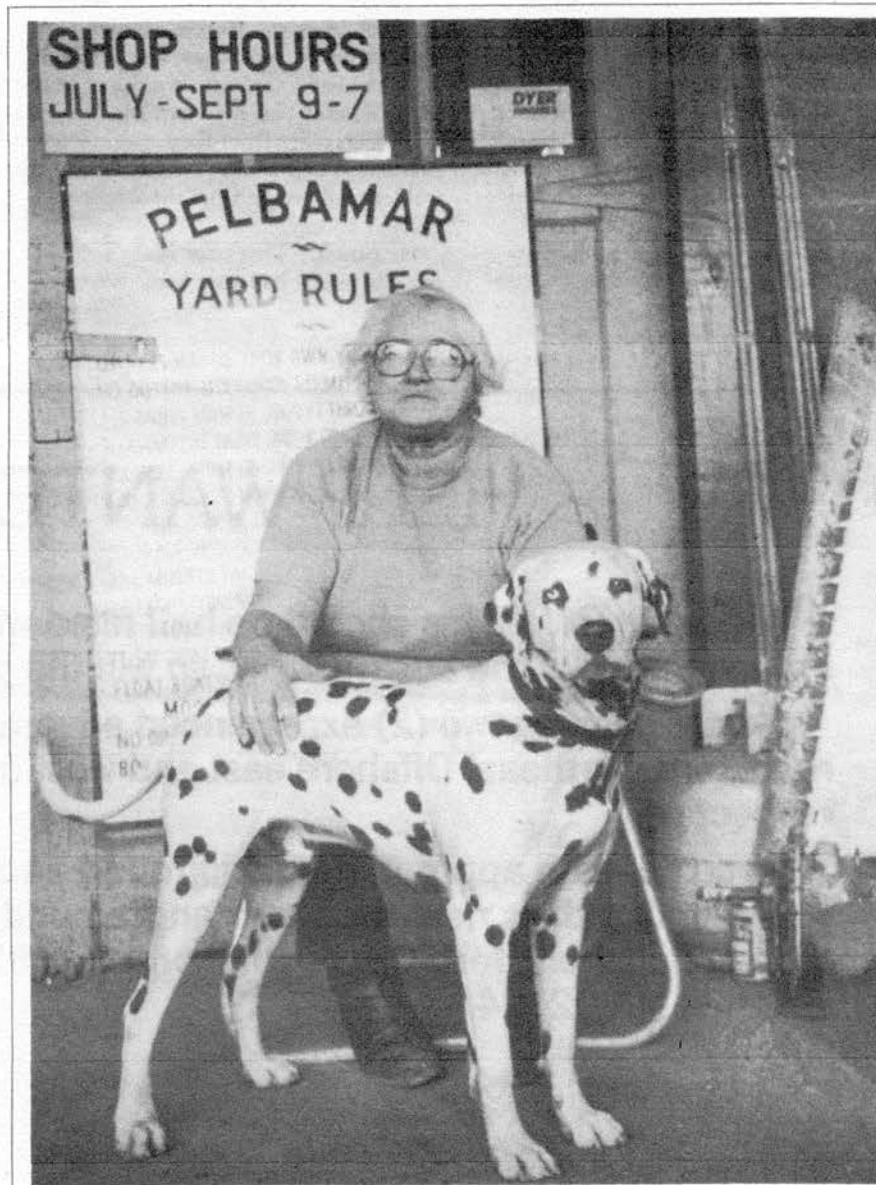
Two years ago, Jeff Ricciardi was the joke at Pelbamar. "I was completely obsessed," he says describing the 1,000 man-hours he and his crew put in to turn his boat into the "perfect" racing machine. "I had four people working two days a week, eight hours a day for eight weekends and I brought lights and worked alone every night after work. I lost 25

pounds. My waist went from 38 to 33. About six weeks into the effort, I touched my shoulder and wondered where all that muscle came from. It was from wet-sanding. It was a great exercise program, but I became the laughing stock of the yard. People used to come over and stand there and drink beer and ask, 'What the hell are you going to do next?'"

In the beginning, Jeff was a watcher himself. "The first year I had no idea what to do," he says. "I didn't know the first thing about waxing or sanding, I didn't know what was important and what wasn't

important. Most of the people who launch boats seem like they have been doing it forever and know just what to do. They're usually pretty free with their advice but as an outsider, I felt like the uninitiated in a secret clan and I didn't want to keep asking questions."

"There was a guy next to me who had the same size boat I did, so I watched him. Whatever he did, I did. What brand of paint he bought, I bought. Whatever varnish he'd buy, I'd buy. I tried to be a little surreptitious about it and things were fine. Then we got almost to the end and



**MINDING THE SHOP:** Betty Freeman and Tucker keep pleasant company through days of toi

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## THE RITES OF SPRING

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e didn't show up for two weeks. I didn't know what to do. I had to wait for him, so I didn't get the boat in the water until the middle of June."

At Pelbamar, it's okay to ask questions. There is always someone to help you," says Penny Bowers, who is one of the few woman skippers at the yard. It's one of the reasons, she keeps her boat there. "I do a lot myself," she explains, "but if I want to hire someone to do the jobs I can't do or don't like, I know it's going to be done well and efficiently. I call this place Camp Pelbamar," she confides. "The people here are terrific. I can always find someone to tell my troubles to, and I end up feeling a lot better about everything."

Whether by design or by chance, Tom Ward and his staff maintain a down-home, backyard ambiance at Pelbamar. The office/workshop/marine supply store is more like a country kitchen with an attached tool shed than a marina office. In cold months there's always a fire in the potbellied stove and a kettle with hot water

for tea or coffee. Kay Freeman, who runs the shop, keeps a dish of cookies or a bowl of potato chips on the counter. Dogs and cats wander about at will. Advice is plentiful and free.

The ramshackle atmosphere makes Mel Boudrot's high-tech boat—a 36-footer he's getting ready for the Marion-Bermuda race, look out of place. But Mel says the yard suits him perfectly. He first came to Pelbamar with a tiny daysailer and has stayed because, like Penny, he values the quality of the yard work and the people he meets there.

"When I first got a boat," he recalls, "I drove along the shoreline looking for a place to put it, and I came across this. I felt like I had found a little piece of Maine in the Bronx. This is a boatyard, not a marina. Boats range from ocean racers to small character boats and we have sculptors and welders and people from the whole spectrum of society."

He pauses. "That's not really true. We don't have any bad guys here. We talk

about boats and harbors, and there is a mutual respect for anyone who is a sailor. Nobody cares what anyone else does the rest of the time or what kind of boat they have."

The dart game at Sea Anchors heats up as the afternoon wears on. People start making excuses about the work they haven't done. "You have to work up to this," someone says.

Larry Tiernan takes another look at the cover on his Luhr's 32 and says. "I guess this will keep until next week. I was going to open her up today, but I hear it may snow Tuesday."

Jeff Ricciardi checks his keel on the way out of the yard. Sure enough, the rust he noticed in the fall is still there. "I had a real Mahoney of a day," he laughs. "I did about 20 minutes of work, talked to Dave and Sharynne for 45 minutes and played darts with Freddie the rest of the afternoon. I don't really have all that much to do, though. I think I can wrap it up in a couple of weekends." t

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