

The Power of Rust

A Houseboat Tale
(of zen and old ferryboats)

“The story behind the story”

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Socially the nineteen twenties and thirties bohemia world influenced the nineteen fifties beatniks – who, in turn, had a profound effect on the hippies of the sixties. From Hippie to yippies to today’s mainstream society, - this social chain is commonly accepted as a major US cultural movement. Where this chain was fused, link by link, was aboard the retired ferryboat “Vallejo”.

Since the turn of the century Richardsons Bay, in Marin County, California, just across the Golden Gate Bridge, has been a haven for floating homes of all sorts. At the end of World War II when the Marin Shipyard was abandoned, a dynamic new era of houseboat living began. The Yard, built over what was Waldo Point just west of Sausalito, was left filled with wartime surplus including a flotilla of obsolete metal barges that used to anchor anti-air-attack balloons of the type we see clustered over harbors in old war flicks. The balloons were secured by cables to the voluminous metal barges which had to be quite sturdy to withstand the fickle elements.

In the late forties and early fifties touristic Sausalito, which somewhat resembled an Alami coastal town, supported a small Underground artist/political movement that started to grow; first, because the mudflats of the abandoned shipyard offered refuge to the prototype “new bohemian”. And secondly, because the cheap and plentiful balloon barges made a perfect platform from whence to build houseboats. Soon a fantastic jazzlike community rose like a Jackson Pollack painting where every type of floating object was put into service to create catwalks, studios and living quarters. Walking through it was like being inside a Charlie Parker improv, kaleidoscope of color and the rhythm formed by resurrected landing ships, wheezy old tugs, barges and the odd Chris Craft. Three retired ferries were brought in and nudged into the sludge to become recycled cathedrals in honor of

the individual, (or maybe Count Bomarzo – because the huge edifices only floated at high tide, while at low tide they rested in the sludge and the decks were often at such angles that one felt tipsy just walking on them.)

The Westcoast workingman's houseboat communities from Lake Union and the Duwamish in Seattle, to the Willamette River in Portland, and just below Long Beach harbor down south, watched their sister community on Richardsons Bay radically transform into a sophisticated social experiment, fueled not by the traditional idealistic working class Comrades but by their spiritual sons and daughters, contemporary utopians, cut from the same mold but with new visions to explore. An interesting magnetic fix was the name Waldo Point which suggested the idealism of another era popularized by the experiments at Waldon Pond, by Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson's young Charge. (Ironically Waldon Pond exists; the actual Waldo Point was dredged out of existence around 1914 to make way for the construction of the Shipyard.)

Meanwhile, flamboyant Artist Jean Varda, a celebrated member of the bohemian world centered in Paris, followed his close friend Henry Miller to Big Sur. (It was said that the prodigious Varda was the only artist who had painted more pictures than Pablo Picasso – another one of his close friends.) The colorful Varda or "yanko" (Uncle), as he was called, moved up to Sausalito where he, artist Gordon Onslow Ford, and Architect Forest Wright, went looking for suitable digs. Their search brought them to a scrapyard on Sausalito's waterfront, where Gordon purchased the ferryboat "Vallejo".

At the scrapyard several dilapidated ferries were tied to the quay, brought there for dismantling. They had serviced the military bases on islands in upper San Francisco and San Pablo Bay but now were considered surplus scrap. According to her documents, the "Vallejo" had a wooden hull, thus was dirt cheap – in other words the right price, so the deal was struck and the trio went down the dock to accept

their purchase. Berthed next to the Vallejo was the more costly, metal hulled, "City of Seattle". It was well understood at Sausalito that metal hulls, like the balloon barges, were far better suited for settling into the muck, at Waldo Point. Legend has it that the trio switched nameplates with the City of Seattle and had their prize quickly under-tow. She was berthed by the old West Gate or east end of the shipyard. Shortly the car deck was transformed into three apartments and with the trio ensconced the "Vallejo" quickly became the pulsating heart of the colorful floating home community.

The "legend" can be disputed because the Vallejo had a metal hull that was covered in wood. But the switching of the nameplates was revealed to me by people who should know. The original documents of the Vallejo don't match up with the actual vessel. They match the configuration of the ferry, now called, the City of Seattle. This is verifiable because the City of Seattle (or the old Vallejo) was saved from the scrapyard as well, and is presently docked at the "elegant" west end of the Waldo Point community. More on this later.

In the late fifties Varda became the unofficial Patriarch of Waldo Point, not so much because he was older than his associates and neighbors and harked from the earlier bohemian era, but rather because of his colorful paintings, his entourage of beautiful women, and especially for his bacchanalian parties frequented by every type of social cast and outcast. Such luminaries as Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac were frequent guests and eager listeners of Yanko's stories of his bohemian past.

After a few years Gordon Onslow Ford moved onshore and the celebrated zen philosopher Alan Watts moved into the apartment next to Varda's. Alan was a wild esthetic, a spiritual hedonist, so to speak. A kind of spiritual soul mate – a contrast to the earthy celebratory Varda. Alan's study and practice of zen and of exploring the universal spirituality had a profound influence on many people. He died in 1973. His legacy is alive in his numerous essays and books. (The Alan

Watts Society owned the “Vallejo” for a while.)

I attended a couple of Varda’s parties in the early sixties and vividly remember the joyful madness. Over twenty years later, in 1986, I retraced my brief moments aboard the Vallejo. Peter Kraemer, the present tenant of the Varda pad, led me aboard at the Watts apartment. I hadn’t known that Alan Watts had lived there and was completely baffled because the place was so plain and elegantly simple, (befitting a man of zen.) Peter told me about Alan as he led me to a little trap door that entered into Varda’s kitchen. He revealed that years ago that the door didn’t exist. But that another secret door existed between the two apartments. It entered Varda’s bedroom. Once through, the world of Varda, as I remembered, exploded through my senses. The joy and gaiety is still there, for in honor of Varda, very little has been changed. The earlier trapdoor, as with the existing one, was a link between the two totally different realities. As I think Alan Watts would have agreed, this was an example of a zen Yin/Yang situation. (His apartment, like Varda’s, is preserved and looks like it did when he lived in it.)

During the fifties, as Peter Kraemer was growing up, he would accompany his artist mother aboard the Vallejo and for several years was exposed to her heady world filled with fantastic personalities of the beatnik era. Later in the early sixties he entered the University of San Francisco, in the Haight Ashbury section of the city, and quickly got involved in the new ideas that were being discussed on and off the campus. He took up the guitar as well as experimented with prototype light shows. With his rich knowledge of art, poetry, jazz, drugs and access to the underground movers and shakers of the period, he quickly became a leader. Shortly he formed the first “psychedelic” rock group the “Sopwith Camel”. The “Camel” was the prototype acid rock group that initially defined the style around which the identity of the Hippie generation of Haight Ashbury evolved. The hippies, in turn, influenced and changed the Beatles puppy love shleppy first offerings into a deeper musical experience starting with the Rubber Soul and Revolver

albums. This “new” sound reverberated with the bohemian spirit, that was absorbed by Peter aboard the Vallejo and passed on to a whole generation that has matured and is now a major part of mainstream culture today. The Vallejo provided the environment for this to happen. Not bad for a spent derelict just barely saved from the scrap heap.

Today she is in worse shape than ever, with her once sturdy metal hull rusting through just above the waterline in enough places to cast a glimmer of daylight over the thoroughly rusted Pittman engine. Her decks and gunnels are in need of very major repair. To the east and north below her shabby but still graceful contours bobs sterile plastic sailboats moored in straight arrow lines that seem to pen the old ferry in. To the west floats the stalwart houseboat community, now with formal docking, electricity and sewerage.

Atop the “Vallejo” this colorful world can be fully appreciated with the fantastic Christopher Roberts designed houseboats looming over the others. (Unfortunately his masterpiece, the massive Madonna and Child creation burned down.) Looking west over the community one can barely see the tall smokestack of the “City of Seattle”, perhaps the real Vallejo bobbing ungainly on her barge – her wooden hull having rotted away long ago. She is very well kept up, prim and proper, in stark contrast to the forgotten “Vallejo”. It’s been suggested that the torch has been passed to her, and that she is now the flagship of the future. West of her a new style of houseboat grouping has been built. Ones that reflect her primness, in other words, designer built. There’s nothing out of place over there, the owners make sure it’s that way by keeping their walkways locked! That’s not the spirit of Waldo Point. What do they fear? Fear was never a part of this community! (Another sad development affects the liveaboards who went out in Richardsons Bay to anchor and live a peaceful life. They are now threatened by proposed legislation that would force them out of the Bay completely.)

Sadly the community’s spirit seems to have gotten a bit dif-fused of purpose after Varda died in 1971. Back in the sixties he was

crowned the King of the community and on New Years eve he would embark from the Vallejo and lead a flotilla of some of the most wildly decorated craft ever seen around the Bay. The spirit appears to be just a memory . . . Oh the community has honored Varda all right, calling the mud where the Vallejo is berthed 'Varda Landing' but they ignore the motherlode, the old Ferry. She is the one they should honor. Varda was just one of her offspring!

Today Sausolito has more than prospered. Richardsons By has attracted a whole new generation of successful peoples nurtured and schooled by concepts of freedom and celebration acted out on her decks. (Literally, for Marian Saltman also lived for awhile aboard her, she was a prime innovator of adult games that have also had a profound effect on our culture.) These new Sausolitans should understand and appreciate the contributions of this old ferryboat, the Vallejo/City of Seattle, and preserve her.

Peter and some of the concerned people who have lived through these epochal times discuss ways to restore her. They revealed the switched nameplate caper to me and showed me the ships documents because they had the impression that Seattle people preserve their ferryboat heritage. In other words, in their way of thinking, if the people of Seattle realized that the "Vallejo" was actually The City of Seattle then maybe Puget Sounders would help pay for her restoration and upkeep. (I was amazed, they should see the condition of our state-ly San Mateo ferry that was in Lake Union and was spirited away by Canadians at night. Or comprehend the exile of our beloved Kalakala! Not to mention the struggle liveboards are having across from the city in Eagle Harbor to maintain their lifestyle!)

Still I would love to be totally convinced that the Vallejo, the mothership of our contemporary society and a core icon of the wild celebratory bawdy San Francisco Bay area is in reality the "City of Seattle" – (named after the neat and prim Scandinavian souled Queen City of the Northwest!) Because, yet again this is another example

of the Yin/Yang principle of zen harmony that Alan Watts searched for. Perhaps he knew of the switched nameplate, and understood the significance of the many ironies of this wonderful ferryboat. For her real secret is she is a living example that the power of opposites, existing in harmony with each other, can influence and literally transform whole cultures.

UPDATE: 1993

I just visited the Vallejo and found out that Peter Kraemer was gone and that the Vallejo is being turned into a condo. Varda's and Watt's apartments are gone. Richardsons Bay will never be the same.