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Greenman with Laura Ellen

(Staff Photo By Thomas Slater)

Little Laura Ellen — A Pint-Size Tall Ship

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Feature Writer

The tall ships came. First appearing no larger than small specks on the horizon. Then, under prevailing winds, they grew. Soon their sails loomed high against the sky of Hampton Roads and wooden hulls lay massive in harbor waters.

"Watching those ships develop before your eyes made you realize why they're called tall ships," said William Greenman who stood on the deck of his own *Laura Ellen* and viewed the parade.

"It was easy to imagine yourself living a hundred years ago."

Now, as the early nip of fall creeps into the morning mist, the tall ships have all but gone. One by one they came. And one by one they've left on tides that beckon them seaward, to open waters that will carry them to home ports around the world.

As brigantine and sloop, square rigger and schooner returned again to the spray of sea wind, the little *Laura Ellen* pitched and rolled on gentle swells and lofted her sails in salute.

Although toy-like beside the visitors, she, too, is a tall ship. Her sleek 36-foot hull and 18-foot boom might be tiny but her heredity gives her a heart every bit as big as her larger sisters.

"A pint-size tall ship," said Greenman. "We were about 20 feet off the starboard quarter of *Bluenose II* and the captain recognized her as a schooner. He asked where she was built and acknowledged he knew the designer. 'An oldie, but a goodie,' came his shout."

The *Bluenose II* skipper should have recognized the *Laura Ellen*. Launched as the *Glad Tidings* in 1937 from the New Bedford shipyard which gave Nova Scotia the legendary *Bluenose*, she embodies the essential features of her illustrious predecessor in tabloid form.

Her gentile lines classically etched in wood and brass are content to remain in the relatively still waters of the Chesapeake and answer her master's ego.

"Sailing is therapetic," the 58-year-old Hampton home-builder says.

"And *Laura Ellen* is so beautiful that she's good for my ego," he confided with certain delight.

"People might not recognize her as a 'Bluenose Junior' but she's always seen as a classic. Even youngsters come alongside to get a closer look."

The Laura Ellen is pampered and coddled, but Greenman, unlike her previous owners, feels like today she's more than a dockside beauty. When the Greenmans purchased her in 1968 even her blocks were as shiny a piece of newly-finished furniture.

"I haven't gotten much information as to her activities, where she's been and how far she's sailed," Greenman said. "William Roue, designer of the original *Bluenose*, obviously intended her for long ocean passages. Bunks are rigged for long tacks and there were lots of water tanks."

These days, however, it's the Chesapeake Bay. Year-round weekend trips and impromptu outings. Greenman believes a man could spend a lifetime just covering the bay and its tributaries.

"A nice thing about the *Laura Ellen*," Greenman went on much like a proud father extolling the merits of a child, "is she handles well, is fast enough to keep up with most of those modern, fiberglass sailing machines, and will come about on a dime."

And like his boat, Greenman too comes from a background of seamen. Many years were spent in Annapolis while his father, a Navy officer, served three tours at the Naval Academy.

"Used to play hookey time after time just to visit the harbor and look at those sailing ships,"

he recalled. "Old schooners, skipjacks, sloops, you name it, were there. Even the smells got to me."

In 1940, when Greenman was working in the local shipyard during a summer vacation, the sight of a four-master at anchor awaiting a load of coal at Newport News' C&O piers was too much a temptation.

"Seeing that schooner with the shapely hull and tall masts was too much," he remembered. "I dropped my tools and ran."

Some 31 days later the schooner Helen Barnett Gring entered Barbados. Greenman's hitch as a merchant mariner ended in time for him to return to Virginia and the fall term at Hampden-Sydney College.

The master of *Laura Ellen* is, like all seamen who'd rather feel wood than fiberglass beneath their feet, a jack of all trades. A carpenter, a caulker, an engine mechanic, a rigger and sailmaker is he who mans the tiller.

"Someone of a different temperament wouldn't have her. She's always threatening to get ahead of me in maintenance," he said. "Right this minute she's in pretty fair shape."

"But she does have some age and there's probably some rot spots. Still it's a good bet she'll be holding her head up long after I'm gone."

For a few minutes William Greenman spoke of the Classic Yacht Club and weekend rendezvous with other boats and men who share a love of sail and wood.

"Now before anyone gets the impression I'm only interested in antiquity," he protested, "I want you to know that my last boat was built in 1927. So, as you can see, I am getting more modern all the time."

The *Laura Ellen* simply rocked gently as if she'd over-looked that last remark.