

## The Long Journey of the Voyageur I



As *Copper Queen*, or *Voyageur*, this hard-working boat earned her keep all her life. MARK NYMAN COLLECTION.

## Venerable Vessel Stirs from its Long, Deep Sleep

By Patrick Lapinski

In the gloaming, a boat speeds along the channel, sending a fine, silver spray flying from its bow, showering the darkening water like white-hot sparks. In its churning wake the receding sun sinks behind the hill that forms the northwestern border of the harbor basin. Twilight is arriving on the lower estuary of the St. Louis River, northern Minnesota's largest tributary into Lake Superior. A daylight diminishes on the upper

river, shapes along the basin here begin their gradual transformation toward night.

In the harbor, the simplicity of nature is replaced by a complex symmetry of man-made shapes and lights. As the sunlight wanes, the shoreline comes alive with reds, yellows, blues and greens cast from a variety of waterfront lights. The waterline gradually dissolves into a pulsing display of luminance

produced by the varying degrees of color temperature and electrical frequency. Up close, the lights appear harsh and garish, humming like cicadas on a hot summer night. But from a distance, the city and the port of Duluth-Superior sparkle and shimmer in the cool autumn air.

This is home for Mark Nyman. Now his small craft makes a quick turn up the 1,500-foot long Hughitt Avenue slip on the Superior side of





the harbor. Halfway up the slip, the throttle is pulled back and the boat's bow drops into the water, now gliding silently forward. It is here, along the weedy shoreline, where Mark sees the shape of a hull that intrigues him.

Though its details are obscured by the gathering darkness, the boat's shape is outlined by artificial light from above and behind. This is the perfect light in which to see the boat, its shape silhouetted against the sky, the essence of its builder's vision revealed. With a keen eye trained on its trim lines, Mark is instantly in tune with the boat. And what began as a simple, late-season boat ride is turning into the beginning of a much longer journey.

Mark's penchant for owning old boats began years earlier when he bought a broken down 32-foot Richardson. Now, he is always on the hunt for a few scraps of wood that, when pieced back together, will float again with amazing grace. "If you buy them when they have one foot in the grave, the price is right," he says. On the night of Mark's fateful boat ride, the Hughitt Avenue slip was a fertile hunting ground, littered with the remains of numerous boats, some still serviceable, others only derelicts in various states of decay.



Mark Nyman has undertaken a formidable restoration project. MARK NYMAN COLLECTION

A little bit of inquiry soon led Mark to the identity of the boat — the once proud *Voyageur* — and the boat's owner, Stanley Sivertson. Yet, in spite of the boat's condition of advanced decay, Stanley had no real interest in selling it. His refusal was nothing personal but was rooted in Sivertson's long-held reluctance to sell his old boats. Sivertson told Mark that selling one of his boats would be like "selling the wife." Ironically, it was Stanley's wife,

Clara, who later persuaded him to sell the old boat to Mark. Assured that Mark would attend to its restoration, Stanley finally relented. This is reputed to be the only boat that Stanley Sivertson ever sold.

### Restoration

Mark has learned to appreciate the craftsmanship still evident in the remains of the *Voyageur*. "When they built the boat they worked their ass off, and it was built with a





Boat builder Waino Wiinikka Jr.

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lot of hard, hand labor and also built very carefully," Mark says now. "Everything was fitted together very, very nicely."

The quality of the original build inspires Mark to honor the legacy of its builders. He began his work on the *Voyageur* with a careful examination of the hull. The bottom portion, below the waterline, was still in pretty good shape, but much of the planking on both the starboard and port side-forward was in need of replacing. Additionally, 12 feet of the keel, just behind the stem, and 12 feet of the keelson at the stern were rotten. The boat's keel, made of white oak, was an exception to the standard, less durable red oak typically used on Lake Superior fish tugs. On the inside, many of the original oak ribs were in need of replacement as well.

The original hull planking was made of cypress. The use of cypress in small boat construction along Lake Superior was common practice. Finding old-growth cypress to use instead of second-growth wood was one of early challenges Mark would face in the restoration of *Voyageur*. Mark hit the jackpot when he came across a good supply

of straight-grain virgin cypress staves salvaged from pickle vats in an old factory south of Duluth. With his supply of nearly 150-year old wood in hand, it was time to begin the transformation.

Replacing pieces of an existing boat means taking the old ones off before new ones can be put on. Mark came to appreciate the difficulty of undoing a well built boat. The planks were attached to the ribs with nails clenched on the inside frame. In clench nailing, hot-dipped galvanized nails are driven through pre-drilled holes in the plank and rib. After the nail is driven through the hole, it is bent over on the inside, clenching the plank to the rib. Clench nailing was a technique prevalent in the construction of wooden fishing tugs in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

Making a conscious effort to carefully cull as much of the original planking as possible, Mark meticulously drilled out the existing nail heads so he could slide the planks he planned to re-use from the framing. "It came to be a time consuming process. To replace a plank, start to finish, if it's a straight

'It was built with a lot of hard, hand labor and also built very carefully'

section, took about a full day." By resisting the urge to hack and rip, Mark was able to save many of the bottom planks along the bow and close to the keel.

Replacing the old planks, some up to 12 feet long, and putting new ones on would require bending the wood to make it fit along the curvature of the hull. This two-step process begins with steaming the wood — heating it in a contained space under high heat and humidity to make the wood pliable. Once the wood is pliable, it is then placed in a custom-made jig to achieve the proper curvature to fit the hull. Until he began restoration of the *Voyageur*, Mark had never steamed a piece of wood. With a little



Commercial fisherman Charlie Kauppi, aboard the *Copper Queen*. DON KILPELA COLLECTION





The *Voyageur* worked hard so others could play. MARK NYMAN COLLECTION

ingenuity and Finnish determination, he learned how to fashion his own steaming box and bending jigs.

When it came to replacing the original two-by-two oak ribs, if he wasn't replacing the entire rib, Mark was creating shorter sections to splice with the original one-piece ribs. Initially, he used a three-piece lamination, but after some experimentation Mark switched to a two-piece process of laminating the pieces together. It was tedious and painstaking, every step of the way providing challenges and, with the lingering smell of long-dead fish, a more than subtle reminder of *Voyageur's* past.

To keep the hull sealed, Mark is using a mixture of traditional techniques combined with newer methods and materials. "I'm staying with the old cotton and seam compound in the seams above the water," he says. "And in the seams below the water, still the same

cotton but with a urethane caulk, which is much more flexible. And then, in all the planks below the water, extra fasteners. And then stainless steel wood screws will be added to those to keep it tight."

The final stage of the restoration will be the boat's interior. A combination of teak and Philippine mahogany were originally used to fit out the berthing and seating areas. One of Mark's main objectives is to restore the aft passenger cabin that was gutted when the boat was converted to a fish tug. Tragically, all the drawings for the boat were destroyed, so Mark will rely on a collection of old photographs to exact the details he will need to craft this portion of the boat. Mark is excited to restore the graceful lines he has seen in the old black and white images, and to create a cozy, watertight cabin.

### The Copper Queen

As the restoration progressed, Mark began learning about the origins and the history of *Voyageur*, a story he took in with great interest and satisfaction. *Voyageur* was not only a beautiful boat, but it also had a fascinating life.

The boat's story begins in the mid 1930s on the Keweenaw Peninsula in northern Michigan with commercial fisherman Charlie Kauppi. To supplement his income from fishing, Charlie began carrying passengers to Isle Royale, eventually establishing the Isle Royale Boat Service and also providing full passenger service along the Keweenaw.

Following the creation of Isle Royale National Park, in 1931, Charlie envisioned growing his passenger business to the island and needed a larger boat, one that didn't have the lingering, distasteful odor of fish about it. Working from a vessel design drawn up by William



B. Gertz, a professor at Michigan Tech University and amateur boat designer, Charlie presented the plans to boat builder Waino Wiinikka Jr. sometime over the winter of 1936 with the intent of having Wiinikka build the boat.

The Wiinikka brothers were well known boat builders in the Upper Peninsula. Their business began around 1910 in Chassell, Michigan, when Waino Wiinikka Sr., a Finnish immigrant, put his boat building skills to work to along the Keweenaw waterway. The earliest Wiinikka boats were open, double-ended craft, referred to by the local fishermen as "reefboats." Reefboats were typically 28 to 30 feet long and of shallow draft for working trout nets close to shore along the rocky Keweenaw Peninsula. They were powered with small, one- or two-cylinder gas engines. The construction and repair of vessels for the local commercial fishing industry quickly became the mainstay of the Wiinikka business.

In 1923, the Wiinikkas began building larger fish tugs. These tugs, with an enclosed cabin for protection from the weather, ranged in size from five to 12 gross tons and were more suited for working on the open lake. By the 1930s, the operation became a full-fledged family business, with sons Waino Jr., John, Omni and Sulo heavily involved in the daily operation of the Wiinikka Boat Works.

Kauppi's familiarity with Wiinikka and their reputation for quality boats made it a natural fit. Records compiled by historian Robert Grunst note Charles Kauppi already owning at least one Wiinikka boat, the seven-ton fish tug *Water Lily* (1928). After a steady diet of fish tugs, the Kauppi contract was a welcome change in the boatyard, and a chance for the Wiinikka family to showcase their craftsmanship.

As the new boat, to be christened *Copper Queen*, neared completion, Waino Wiinikka Jr. posed for a photograph with the boat. In his photo, Waino Jr. is captured inside the boathouse,

## Upon taking delivery of *Copper Queen*, Kauppi used the vessel for small excursions, primarily in the waters around Copper Harbor and the Keweenaw

leaning against the starboard planking, his massive arms folded across his chest with an air of satisfaction. Later that summer, to celebrate its completion, the Wiinikka family took the boat on an overnight excursion to Isle Royale.

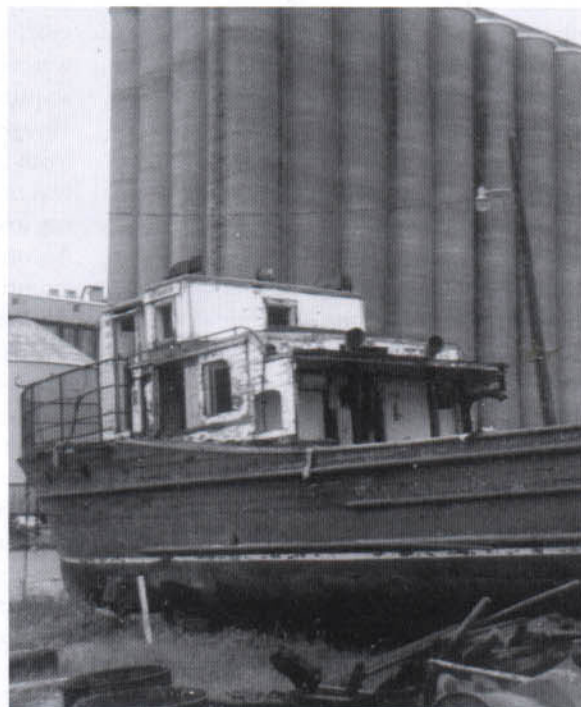
Upon taking delivery of *Copper Queen*, Kauppi used the vessel for small excursions, primarily in the waters around Copper Harbor and the Keweenaw, awaiting the official certification from the Bureau of Marine Inspection to carry passengers to Isle Royale. Getting the vessel certified to ferry passengers on a regular schedule was not going smoothly. It was, in fact, proving to be a rather difficult process.

In May 1938, U.S. Supervising Inspector C. W. Willett found the vessel to be well constructed and suitable for rivers, harbors, bays and protected waters, but unsafe for the open waters of Lake Superior. A stability test, conducted in June 1938, gave rise to some serious concerns about the vessel's ability to safely handle heavy seas. The marine inspector's report specifically identified

several deficiencies in *Copper Queen*, citing the boat's "underbody lines, small deadrise, light draft, light superstructure [and] open cockpit," as contributing to: "too much beam for the length and too much stability with a consequent quick period of roll." *Copper Queen* was restricted from operating more than three miles offshore until the stability issue was resolved.

Whether the roll of the boat was so severe that its use should be restricted became the center of a controversy that continued for the next decade. Changes in district boundaries for the Bureau of Marine Inspection gave life to more attempts to certify *Copper Queen* for service to Isle Royale, entangling Kauppi with local inspectors from Marquette and Duluth along with regional and national inspectors from Cleveland to Washington, D.C. In spite of some temporary success, the result remained the same, leaving Charlie Kauppi with a lifetime of bitterness and resentment toward the inspection process.

Kauppi registered and operated *Copper Queen* as a private yacht



When Mark Nyman found her, the *Voyageur* was still rich with the lingering smells of long-dead fish. She was put on shore for the final time in the 1970s. MARK NYMAN COLLECTION





As the *Copper Queen*, she survived near disaster at Copper Harbor. As the *Voyageur*, she made regular trips to Isle Royale for Stanley Sivertson.

MARK NYMAN COLLECTION

until the spring of 1953, when he sold it to North Shore fisherman Stanley Sivertson. The sale took place on May 12, one day after the steamer *Henry Steinbrenner* sank in a powerful storm off Isle Royale with a loss of 17 men. The same catastrophic storm nearly put *Copper Queen* under the water at its dock at Copper Harbor. Following its narrow escape from disaster, *Copper Queen* was towed to Isle Royale, escorted in one long farewell run as far as Rock Harbor by Charlie Kauppi, before ending its journey in Duluth to begin its new life as *Voyageur*.

Sivertson knew boats and, working with the local Duluth vessel inspectors to get his certification, he added a pilot house atop the main deck to slow down the roll of *Voyageur*. For the first time since its construction in 1937, 15 years after it was built, the former *Copper Queen* was making regular trips to Isle Royale.

In time, *Voyageur* became a well known part of Isle Royale lore,

working in tandem with the steel-hulled *Winona*, hauling supplies and fish in the spring and fall and visitors to the islands during the warmer months. In 1969, Sivertson acquired a newer, larger boat, *Voyageur II*, for Isle Royale. Retired from its passenger duty, *Voyageur* was then converted for use as a fish tug and renamed *Voyageur I*. According to Sivertson lore, it wasn't a sentimental change of duty. "Upon leaving Grand Portage for the last time," relates Mark, "they chain-sawed the aft cabins and were throwing them over the side as they pulled out of Grand Portage Bay on their way down to Duluth."

Sometime in the mid-1970s, Stanley put *Voyageur I* on shore for the final time, at the end of a fall fishing season. Sivertson felt that the vessel's useful days had reached an end.

### Honoring the Wiinikka Legacy

As another long day draws to a close, Mark Nyman takes a moment to lean against the starboard planking of *Voyageur*, arms folded across his

chest, mirroring the pose Waino Wiinikka Jr. used nearly 60 years ago. The flicker of a camera flash fills the shadowy curve of the hull and captures the mortality of this man's enduring dream. "In the winter time I'm here every day, all day," he says. "Depending on what I'm doing, it could range anywhere from 56 hours to, you know, 70 hours. It depends on what I'm working on."

Mark doesn't know when *Voyageur* will return to the water. Old friends just wink and smile when he mentions a date. "It'll go in when it's ready," they say.

Each passing winter brings Mark closer to his goal. Yet, because *Voyageur* has been out of the water for so long now, he estimates that even after it is re-launched it will take several weeks for the boat to find its natural shape. Until that day, *Voyageur* waits inside a cocoon-shaped housing of lathe, tarpaper and plywood, enveloped in the smells of wood, resins, paint and time, waiting to emerge from its state of hibernation.