

# Historic fishing boat Avalon documented by Gig Harbor BoatShop



Credit: Guy Hoppen courtesy photo | for Gig Harbor Life

An image of the Avalon dry-docked in Gig Harbor, taken by Guy Hoppen in the spring of 1990. From left, brothers Vince and Antone Skansie take a break while painting the hull one last time before selling the boat.

Photo provided by Lita Dawn-Stanton.

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FOR GIG HARBOR LIFE

One of the best-known fishing boats ever built in Gig Harbor has met a bittersweet fate. Earlier this month, the purse seiner *Avalon*, built in the Skansie shipyard, was dismantled in Port Townsend. But even as was torn apart, every board and bit of hardware was documented by the Gig Harbor BoatShop.

Earlier this year, the *Avalon* was declared “derelict” by the Department of Natural Resources after it sank in the Hood Canal. Derelict boats are usually demolished and, essentially, tossed into the dumpster. When he heard about the *Avalon*’s sad fate, BoatShop founder and Executive Director Guy Hoppen contacted DNR. “I said ‘It’s too bad we don’t have a way that historic vessels like the *Avalon* can be taken apart thoughtfully so we can recover possible artifacts that could go to museums and similar places,’” Hoppen said.

As it turned out, DNR’s archaeologist was already looking into that. “When we get a derelict vessel that’s in some way historic, the state requires that our archaeologist review it,” said DNR’s Kyle Murphy, who oversees the derelict vessel program. “Our archaeologist said the *Avalon* warranted further study because the boat had not been modified since it was built in 1929, so it was historically important. “A lot of those old boats don’t have any written plans or drawings that show how they were built,” Murphy added. “So this documentation gives us a record.”

The *Avalon* had a rich history and was considered by many as one of the iconic Gig Harbor-built boats. According to documents at the Harbor History Museum, the *Avalon* was built by Mitchell Skansie and his crew at the Skansie Shipyard in the winter of 1929-30 for Mitchell’s brother Andrew. Except for one year when he chartered her for herring, Andrew skippered the *Avalon* from 1929 until he retired in 1934. In 1940, Andrew’s son, Antone, took over as skipper and Antone and his brothers, Vincie and Peter, fished together on the *Avalon* until 1987.

In 1990, the Skansie brothers sold the *Avalon* to a fisherman in Bellingham who skippered it for several years. After that, the boat changed hands several times. Museum records show that it was used as a fishing boat until at least 1995, but after that the ownership-trail ends.

Fast forward to 2014.

According to the DNR’s Murphy, the latest owner intended to repair the boat and get it back up to fishing status. “He planned to fix the engines and so forth, but he was having trouble getting

moorage in the Hood Canal area,” Murphy said. “So he just had the boat anchored out in the Canal and was moving it every month until he could find someplace to work on it.”

One night, as the boat was being towed to a new anchoring spot on the Canal, it ran aground, and as the tide went out the boat rolled, took on water and sank. “The owner had already had invested quite a bit of money into the boat, but once a vessel goes down, there are fuel leaks and so forth, which means that DNR, the state Department of Ecology and the Coast Guard get involved,” Murphy said. The boat owner was given 30 days to come up with a specific salvage plan, which he couldn’t produce, so the Avalon was declared derelict and towed to Port Townsend.

DNR put out the call for bids for her disposal.

Enter Hoppen and the Eddon BoatShop board of directors. “In my opinion, the Avalon was the most recognizable boat ever to be built in Gig Harbor,” Hoppen said. Hoppen quickly got in touch with the Port Townsend Shipwrights Co-op about possibly combining forces to restore the boat. “But she was in such horrible shape we just couldn’t afford it,” Hoppen said. “She’d been on the bottom and had been stripped of almost everything of value. Even all the bronze hardware and the builder’s plate and the wheel were gone.” It would have taken somewhere around \$500,000 to restore the boat, and that was “just too much to take on,” Hoppen said.

“The law allows us to dispose of any derelict vessel the best way we see fit,” Murphy said. “We can sell it, but we’re very cautious about that because we don’t want to have the boat sink again. And there’s usually a big cost to restore a vessel.”

So, instead Hoppen and his BoatShop colleagues were contracted by DNR to slowly and carefully dismantle the Avalon and document the boat for posterity. It’s the first such documentation project DNR has undertaken, Murphy said. “We captured the lines, the layout, construction details and that type of thing,” Hoppen said. The drawings were done to the specifications of the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) so it can eventually be placed in the Library of Congress. The documentation is “... the next best thing to restoring the boat,” said BoatShop board member Stephanie Lile, who is also director of education at the Washington State History Museum in Tacoma. “This gives us the opportunity to save key parts of the boat and offer them to appropriate repositories. “And it might actually be better than having the boat intact in one place, because preserving large objects is difficult. Sometimes taking something apart and documenting it as you go is the best way,” Lile said. It also will be

helpful because there will be photographs and carefully drawn plans as a result of the documentation process.

“Many boats built in the Northwest are unique to the Northwest,” Lile said. “Having the plans and photographs and other documentation can be very helpful to boat building schools. Plus we now have some of the actual, tangible pieces.” Most museums have Object Files that contain such artifacts, she added. “It’s really very valuable to have the historical data and the actual objects.”

For Lita Dawn Stanton and other longtime Gig Harbor residents who are still part of the town’s historic fishing culture, the fate of the Avalon is a sad one. “I can remember Antone and Vincie Skansie sitting by their netshed painting the hull of the Avalon. They were painting it bright red. It was probably the last time they painted it because they were getting ready to sell her,” Stanton said. “Thank heavens we have pictures of them and their boat. And thank heavens for the BoatShop’s documentation.”

The Avalon project is the first of many historic Northwest vessel documentations the BoatShop plans to do, Hoppen said. The BoatShop recently launched a new program called “Northwest Fleet” in collaboration with the Center for Wooden Boats and other local, regional and national organizations. “It’s a very exciting and important program,” Lile said. “It will show how a small little boat shop in Gig Harbor can do something that is very significant in the history of boat building.” And, added Hoppen, the Northwest Fleet program will expand the BoatShop’s and Eddon Boatyard’s identity as a cultural maritime center. DNR’s Marshall looks forward to working with the BoatShop on future documentation projects. “This is the first time we’ve had a partnership like this and it gives us an option when we find another boat that warrants historic documentation,” he said. “Otherwise, these boats are just forgotten.”