

Brian's Boatyard

Passing Cloud, His Masterpiece

by Shirley Hewett

For Brian Walker experiments with wood boats began as a child on the family farm at Hythee, Alberta. One of his first craft, fashioned from boards stripped off a shed, sank in the farm pond. As a teen on Saltspring Island, he commanded a dugout canoe. Often part of a family effort, he helped his dad in their James Bay backyard boatshed. From those early years sprang a lifetime of boatbuilding for Brian McQuilan Walker. This master shipwright died last October at home in Victoria, B.C., a few yards from his beloved boatyard.

In the late '40s, Brian and his brothers fished, salvaged and rebuilt boats around Ucluelet, Estevan Point and Nitinat. Brian worked at the Yarrows and Willbay yards then, in the early '50s while full-time at Victoria Machinery Depot, he bought a small boatshop and ways in Victoria on the Gorge Waterway.

Three decades of fishboats constructed in the 35- to 40-foot range are recorded on the west wall of the shop, some names scratched or scrawled in dripping bottom paint, others neatly stencilled: Bob Beer's **Bobola**; Fred Scott's **Myrna S**; **Rosan**; **Sinback**; **Alhena**. For his brothers, Turlough and Dermid, Walker built **Valdez** and **Auriga**. Many, like **Galleon**, were Frank Fredette designs. **Valkyrie**, his first big vessel, still fishes upcoast.

Brian Walker's boatshop reflects his ingenuity. "He thought nothing of building a machine out of bits and pieces," says veteran shipwright Ted Knowles, a long-time associate who is staying on to maintain and use the boatshed. An aircraft starter motor was converted into a winch with a home-made clutch. "A great little winch," notes Knowles, "we use it all the time for hauling logs up." Brian brought his collision-totalled Model A Ford home. With the body removed, the motor was mounted outside and the frame inside, with the rear axle and driveshaft modified to power the big bandsaw, joiner, planer and blower, all off different drive belts. "I'm the only one left who can monkey-wrench that machinery," smiles Ted.

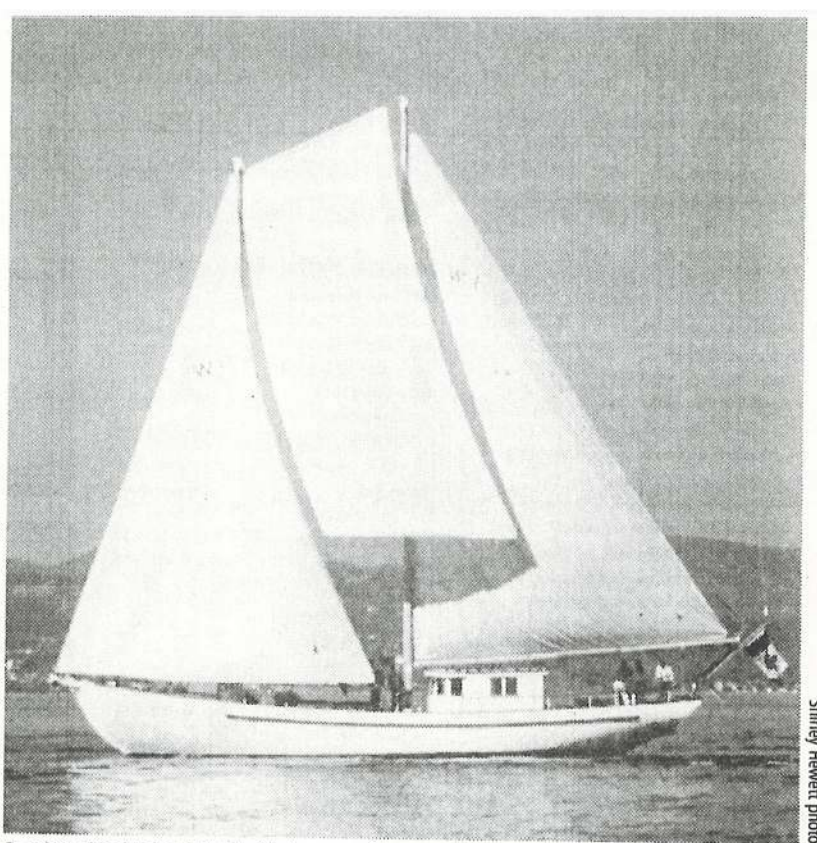
Knowles continues, citing Walker's talent for conceiving and thinking in mathematical terms, even though he had little formal schooling. "Brian could see how things fit together to the second, third, even sixth power. He could talk about squares and cubes without really knowing what they were." He manufactured hooks and devices of the simplest, smallest design necessary to do the job and tested things "to destruction" all the time.

Walker's instinct for proportion, combined with his zest for salvage and a passion for innovation, culminated in his "masterpiece," **Passing Cloud**. The schooner would be the last vessel constructed below the narrow, high windows under the shed roof.

After World War II, this 67-foot design #165 by Wm. Roue, architect of the **Bluenose**, won a Columbo Plan competition for design of a working/fishing vessel for use in countries torn by the second war. Acquiring the plans, Brian Walker also envisioned a working sailing vessel, capable of coastal freighting or fishpacking. He would be able to handle the ship with his wife, Dora, and daughters, Fern and Tara. He reckoned the forward boom would make a good cargo boom to load freight through the main hatch. So he modified Roue's original design creating more hold volume and altered the schooner rig.

Without one drawing, Walker changed the sail plan from gaff to marconi. A two-foot scale model was tested in the boat pond on Victoria's Dallas Road. With a big, single headsail, the rig balanced the same as the original drawings, retaining the excellent sailing pedigree of Roue's **Bluenose**.

"He got the rig absolutely right," recalls Ted Knowles. "I've never been on a more powerful boat, although I've sailed on larger vessels. Frank Fredette liked to take the helm because "it felt good. "We had an



Shirley Hewett photo

Passing Cloud under full sail with the powerful marconi schooner rig that Brian Walker installed. The foremast was moved aft to compensate for removal of the bowsprit in Wm. Roue's original plans. Greg Sager of Victoria now maintains *Passing Cloud* as a charter vessel.

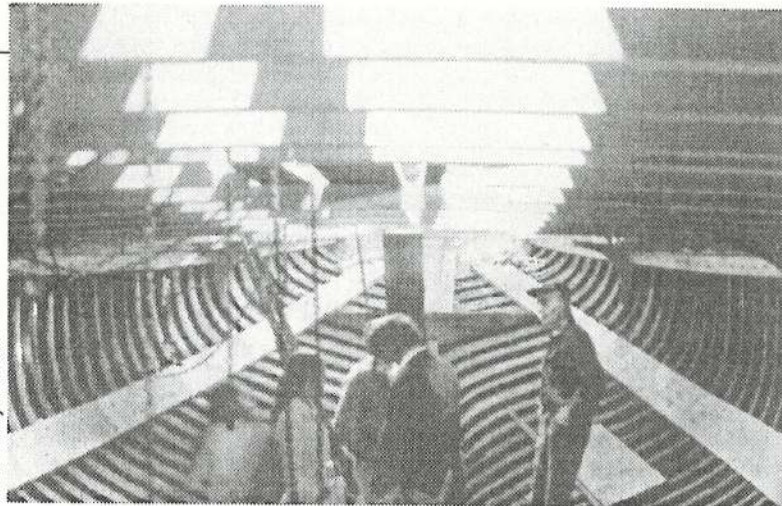
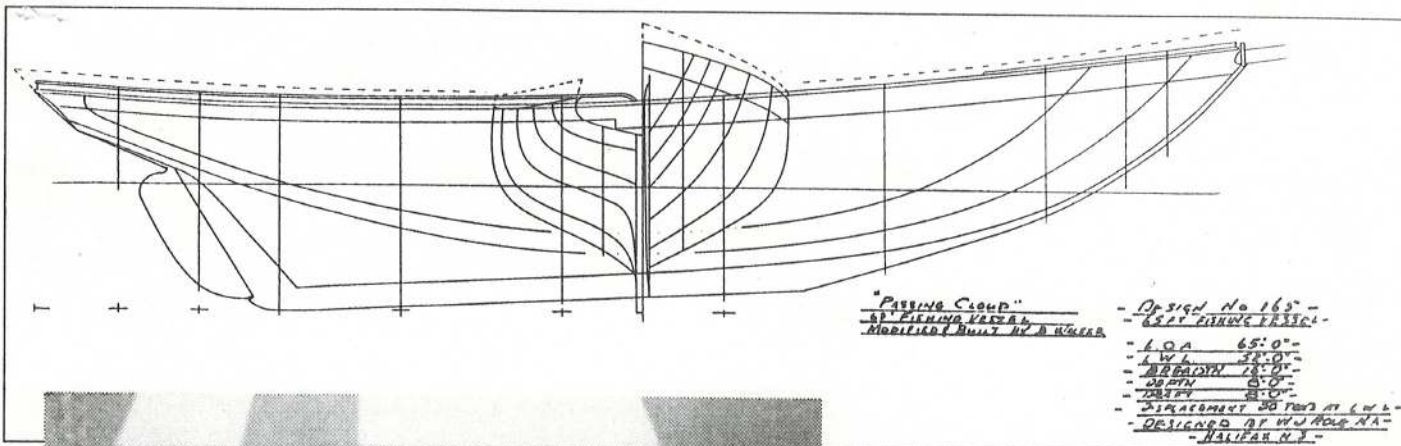
incredible sail to San Francisco in 1984, the family and myself, when we won the Master Mariners' trophy," adds Knowles. Indeed, **Passing Cloud** had started in the final group of 115 competitors in the 1984 Johnson and Joseph Clipper Perpetual Trophy race off San Francisco. Over the 16 1/2 mile course she passed them all, completing the course in two hours and 40 minutes elapsed time. It was the first time in 117 years that the trophy had left the U.S.A. Like her famous predecessor, **Bluenose**, **Passing Cloud** could "smoke the competition to windward." She won every major trophy in the Pacific Northwest schooner racing circuit in the early '80s.

Brian fabricated everything — fairleads, halyard winches, anchor windlass, a warping head. He took his wood patterns to Smith Brothers Foundry for casting in bronze or other metals. When the **SS Cardena** fetched up at Capital Iron to be scrapped, her first growth, Burma teak decks were slated to be burned off. Brian got busy. From a truck axle he forged a special cutter which would slice through the steel bolts that fastened the teak planks to the steel deck. For **Passing Cloud's** recycled deck, he plugged the bolt holes with teak scraps.

Other materials for **Passing Cloud** were assembled in Walker's typical, methodical fashion. To prevent rot and beetle damage, Brian often submerged lumber in the Gorge mud outside the boatshed. White oak from the eastern United States was quite black by the time it was steam-bent for the ribs. Clear, Vancouver Island Sitka spruce was laminated into a 71-foot mast. Planking is two-inch Douglas fir, while stem, bulwarks and stringers are yellow cedar. Knees are arbutus from Walker's property.

The five-year building process frustrated Walker somewhat. He was used to turning out a fishboat in eight months. **Passing Cloud's** dimensions overpowered the boatshed, with the transom extending 15 feet beyond the shed roof. Since the boatyard adjoins the house, the stem had to be poked through above the back door into the attic. Nonetheless **Passing Cloud** was launched in 1974 and set off on her first of two South Pacific voyages in December, 1977 because Brian, intrigued by the Robert Louis Stevenson poem, wanted to spend "Christmas at Sea."

After the voyage, the mast, originally stepped on deck, was lengthened with a scarfed section and re-stepped on the keel. Tat called for more

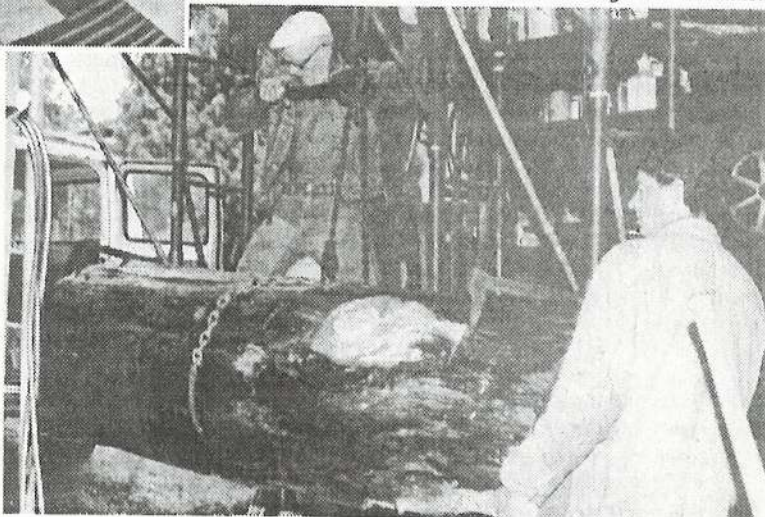


Walker family collection

In his modifications to the original Wm. Roue plans, Brian Walker eliminated the breaks in, and increased the height overall of, the sheer fore and aft. It was raised a foot-and-a-half at the bow, one foot at the stern, enabling installation of the deck beams to provide seven-foot clearance in the hold for hanging dinghies and stowing freight and gear. Walker also installed a vertical to allow swinging room for the 120-hp Penta auxiliary diesel's big prop.

Passing Cloud under construction. Yellow cedar bilge stringers and deck beams, oak ribs and arbutus hanging knees combine in beauty and strength.

Brian Walker and Ted Knowles ease a cedar log into the boatshed.



recycled materials — a piece of iron bark which Fern salvaged from the **Maid of Orleans** wreck at Cockatrice Bay near Port Hardy. The former slave trader was sheathed in iron bark for Arctic cargo work and finished life as a self-propelled shingle barge.

Into his seventies, Brian Walker was wiry and very strong. He would scramble up **Passing Cloud's** shrouds with his hands or crawl cat-like along the boom. Until a month before he died, he would join Ted Knowles in the boatyard, planing wood, helping with projects.

Brian Walker has passed on, but his ingenious boatshop machinery still hums along and **Passing Cloud** is a breathtaking sight under full sail, the legacy of a gifted West Coast shipwright. ⚓

*Shirley Hewett is a Victoria-based marine writer who feels privileged to have known and sailed with Brian Walker. Ted Knowles recently passed her a chunk of Cardena's three-inch teak decks (now **Passing Cloud's**), which she may well have scampered across as a child as her family travelled the coast.*

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