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A Thing for the Thirties

Tiburon's Dave Olson believes he belongs to a long-ago decade.

BY JIM WOOD

ONE LOOK AT Dave Olson and you'd never know. He's 6-foot-1, about 200 pounds, drives a big red Ford pickup, and most of the time he's smiling, if not laughing. But there's a side to him that's baffling: he's convinced he had a previous life in the 1930s. "I just love the looks of things from the '30s," he admits as another smile crosses his ruddy face. "The cars, boats, even houses — the designs of that era have a hold on me; I can't help myself."

As the retired founder and former president of Olson Steel of San Leandro, one of the top steel fabricating and

construction firms in Northern California, Olson has the time and wherewithal to follow his compulsions. At last count, he has at one time or another owned 25 boats, many cars and homes and one house trailer, all designed and built during his beloved erstwhile decade.

Besides his wife, Lynn, and the growing families of their two sons, Olson's pride and joy is *Acania*, a cruising yacht launched in 1930 and reportedly once owned by the mobster Al "Scarface" Capone. "Sure, you could say she's my magnum opus," Olson admits, walking through his rusting-on-the-outside, immaculate-on-the-inside warehouse in a Sausalito shipyard where many of his treasures reside. "It took me six years and way too much money to restore her, and there's not a harbor in Marin deep enough to accommodate her, so she's tied up at Oakland's Jack London Square."

Regarded by classic yacht enthusiasts as one of the most, if not the most, beautifully restored boats on the West Coast, the *Acania* has a colorful pedigree. Ostensibly built for a New York banker, the craft has a steel hull that displaces nearly 300 tons and measures 136 feet long with a beam of 24 feet and a draft of almost nine feet. "Ship," not "boat," might be the more appropriate description. Regardless, the interior is a glamorous combination of fruitwood cabinets (some of them with false fronts), intricate tile and marble work and Egyptian fabrics. "That's how she looks now," Olson exclaims. "You should have seen her six years ago."

In 1934, soon after Capone was convicted of tax evasion and transported by train through Marin County and by barge to Alcatraz, the *Acania* was sold to the Walgreen drug company family and cruised up and down the East and West Coast until the U.S. Navy seized it for World War II antisubmarine duty. After being returned to the Walgreen family, the cruising yacht was quickly sold to a well-connected Texas oil tycoon, who owned it until 1957. Then, for three decades the *Acania* was a Canadian-registered yacht belonging to a close friend of Bob Hope, and "that's when Bing Crosby and Walt Disney spent many hours aboard," Olson says. In 1987 began several years of charter cruises in the Caribbean, and the craft was barely above water in Miami in 1995 when an adventurer named Miles Davis (not the musician) purchased it, did needed repairs and piloted it back across the Caribbean, through the Panama Canal and on up to San Francisco Bay.





"Her name then was *Star Fjord*," Olson says. "I first looked at her in 1995, couldn't get her out of my mind and finally bought her in 2008." Immediately he restored the boat's original name. Why *Acania*? After considerable research, Olson concluded that it is a compilation of the words Al Capone mania. He also rewired and replumbed the then-80-year-old yacht and added two 600-horsepower diesel electric engines. "Essentially," says Olson, "she's a brand-new yacht in an old shell."

Acania isn't Olson's only Al Capone connection or cherished 1930s object. Occupying a prime spot in his Sausalito waterfront warehouse is a canary-yellow 1934 Packard touring sedan, complete with 12 cylinders, a 140-inch wheelbase and suicide doors, originally owned by Capone's Chicago crime syndicate. Olson's first car was a 1930 Model A Ford and he has also owned a 1939 Packard wood-paneled station wagon and a rare 1935 MG race car.

As for boats from the 1920s and '30s, Olson's past involvements include restoration of several Garwoods; Chris Crafts; a 1933 80-foot yacht; a 1930 pilot boat built by San Francisco's Anderson Christofferany and, possibly most famous of all, the 39-foot speedboat *Teaser*, which beat the 20th Century Limited, then the world's fastest train, in a race from New York City to Albany along the Hudson River in 1925. "Over the past 25 years, I've owned and restored more than 25 classic wooden boats," he says.

Olson (and his wife Lynn) even sleep in 1930s nostalgia. The part-time but longtime Lake Tahoe residents recently sold their 1930 log cabin compound there and purchased a 1936 lodge on the North Shore they're now in the process of, here's that word again, restoring. He not only physically works to return the past to the present, but also tries to see that others do the same. Olson is past president and currently on the board of Thunderbird Lodge Preservation Society and

chairs the board of the Lake Tahoe Maritime Museum. “As for my interest in preservation of significant items, whether it is an old cabin at Tahoe or a vintage car or yacht, I often think I’ve been reincarnated from the 1930s,” he admits, adding, “In a significant way, I feel I am a caretaker of these treasures — if only for a certain period of time. The truth is, I just don’t want to see them lost to history.”

