

Q & A WITH VOSKI SPRAGUE

TWA members and others are talking to writer Sharon Babcock about enduring inspirations, life lessons, and perspectives from their experiences on the working waterfront.

This month is the third installment in the series: Voski Sprague, whose lifelong love of the sea began in England at age 4 and led her to Tacoma Youth Marine Center's gig, Verité (meaning truth in French).



Voski Sprague rows weekly on the Foss Waterway aboard the Verité, the 38-foot replica of an admiral's gig that requires a most elegant demonstration of teamwork and cooperation.

Voski and crew command the Verité's 18-foot steering oar and the 10 oars ranging from 14 feet to 18 feet, rowing from the opposite side of the boat in traditional gig manner.

The original boat belonged to the frigate La Resolve, sent out of Brest, France, against the British in 1796.

Q: Who gets up close to the Verité?

A: It is one of the training vessels youth use in the Tacoma Sea Scouts program. Besides providing an ultimate rowing experience, it is rigged with three sails--dipping lug fore and mainsail and a standing lug mizzen (spanker) sail. Each week when the weather allows a group called Women on the Water (WOW) take it out onto Commencement Bay and beyond, help with repairs, and raise funds so that youth have access to the waterway and the skills involved in navigating this boat. There is no competition in this effort; the boat personifies collaboration and community. You practice and become more aware. The beauty and uniqueness of the boat attract curiosity.

Q: How did the Verité come to Commencement Bay?

A: The boat was built by community volunteers at the Tacoma's Sea Scout Explorer Base in its previous location on Dock Street under the direction of shipwright Phil Lantz. It was launched from Owens Beach on April 4, 1998. The second I saw her, I became protective of her and in awe of her sleekness and beauty.

Q: How did you come to your maritime Tacoma efforts?

A: After four years in England, I grew up in Cashmere, Washington, a landlocked place. Every year throughout my youth, my family went to Whidbey Island where we had been given a house to use. The best part for me was endlessly leaning over the bow of a rowboat fixated on the sea below. The worst

part was killing the fish we caught; I loved to clean them but hated to kill them. I'd play games so the fish wouldn't get hooked.

I married a longshoreman and began to raise my family. When my son was in the 4th grade, we bought a 16-foot Lowell Swampscot rowboat with a tombstone transom. My son and I spent four summers living out of the boat. I apprenticed myself to boat builders to learn the craft. I discovered that these people are comfortable sharing stories and listening. Much later, I discovered the history of the Puget Sound's Mosquito Fleet at the Working Waterfront Museum (today's Foss Waterway Seaport) and was fascinated. I decided to visit the fleet's 26 dock sites in Pierce County by wooden boat, and I wanted to build the boat.

Q: And then ...?

A: I decided on using an Arctic Tern Pygmy kayak and started to build it in my boat shed on Carr Inlet in 2003 with help to finish the intricate joints. Using string to figure out the time and the tides, I mapped out the Mosquito Fleet dock sites and visited them between June and September of 2005, paddling up to four hours each day from my home, getting a tow home, and keeping a journal of these travels.

Q: What did you learn?

A: How massive the water changes are in each 24-hour cycle of the sound—really the magic of the sun and the moon. That there are islands in the sound to be discovered—Pitt, Schultz, Gertrude, Eagle, Cutts. That nature always wins. How alert I am if I unclutter my mind. How to be expectant with no expectations. That between 1890 and 1920 three Mosquito Fleet steamboats—The Sentinel, The Sophia, and The Bay Island--made daily stops at 20 locations in Pierce County. How to prepare one's environment and then step back to see what happens. How water illuminates my limitations. How to redefine what success is for me without depending on goals.

Q: How do you apply those learnings?

A: I am passionate about where I live. Some of my best experiences are looking at Mt. Rainier, having my family around me, rowing out into Carr Inlet in a dory named Djembe (after an hourglass-shaped drum sacrificed to get the boat) and diving off the bow, towing the boat back into the dock. One day three right whale dolphins joined me in that dip, staying for 45 minutes. Then they did the same thing with my son for 45 minutes, circled the boat, and took off. I've learned to try to fix things less; to simply make adjustments to things and do them in a new way; to create a space between what I know and what might be coming.

Q: What surprised you on these voyages?

A: The special locations of some of the docks—at places called the likes of Sunnybay, Warren, Seneca, Point Evans, Titlow, Tacoma (a distinctive deep water destination), Cromwell.

Q: What are your hopes for the future maritime activity in the region?

A: I would like to see the connections emerge in Puget Sound that the Mosquito Fleet demonstrated, with people engaging in history and co-operation. The sound is our glue.