

Lady Karla...

From California to Washington

By Robert Huston, 1991

I had spent the Winter looking for a larger boat for our family, we had spent four years on a 36' Chris Craft and were looking for more space and privacy. My search took me to Oxnard California in December of 1990 to look at a 49' Island Gypsy. It was a big beefy boat with a lot of room but it was a single engine and was in real poor condition. I could tell it was more of a project then I wanted to take on in California but I got to spend some time with a knowledgeable yacht broker and he vowed to keep looking for me. We kept in touch by phone and fax and just after the first of the year a 46' Alaskan came on the market and he sent me all the information. As I read and learned about the Alaskan and this boat in particular we decided that it would be a great boat for our needs. A deal was struck and we became the proud owners of the 1971 46' Alaskan "Lady Sylvia". We had a local mechanic service the engines and began to prepare the boat for the trip up the West Coast to Seattle.

After several weeks of checking out all of the systems and running the boat on short day trips we decided it was time to head North. I had been up and down the West Coast many times in fishing vessel's working in the Salmon and Tuna fisheries and felt that by watching the weather and running hard through the night when we could that we should be able to get to Seattle in the nine days I had off from work. My long time friend and fishing partner "Virg" and I loaded aboard the last of our provisions and departed Oxnard on Saturday afternoon feeling good and hoping we could pass Point Conception before night fall and really start heading North. The weather was warm with maybe 15 knots of wind from the West and a gentle sea. As we headed up the Santa Barbara Channel the boat started to feel the ocean swells and we were all smiles about how she shouldered the swells and moved through the water with control and purpose. We engaged the auto-pilot and settled back to enjoy the ride. There was as you would expect considerable traffic on the VHF radio so we tried several times to get a radio check to check our transmitting capabilities. It soon became apparent that we had only low power (1 Watt) capability on the transmitter. The wind and waves were building as we continued out the channel and the auto-pilot was having considerable trouble holding us on a course with the seas on our port quarter. We decided that a stop at Santa Barbara would be necessary to facilitate repair of the Radio and to check out why the auto-pilot was having such difficulty holding a course. We altered course slightly and headed into the harbor and tied up at the transient dock at the head of the pier. The Harbor Master gave us a couple of names and phone numbers for electronics repair and we got on the phone to see if we could get someone to check out our problems. One of the Technicians was in the Harbor working on another fishing vessel and stopped over to see what our problem was.

It was quickly decided that the VHF antenna was faulty and would need replacement, the auto-pilot was a little more difficult to diagnose and as he got to checking it out it became apparent that he would at a minimum need to do some cleanup of the compass head itself. Our "new best friend" the radio technician headed out with what he could carry and we cleaned up to go out to dinner. It was well after

noon by the time our "new best friend" found his way back down to the boat harbor, but we were not complaining at least he was there on a Sunday! The Antenna was replaced with a new Shakespeare 8' whip and the auto-pilot was re-assembled and checked out the best it could be at the dock. It was found that the liquid within the compass head had turned to jelly and by shaking it up really good we could get the card to react at a speed that should keep the boat on course. We thanked and of course paid our Electronics Technician and headed out of Santa Barbara into the setting sun.



It felt good to be underway again we had used up two days and we were only a little more than 40 miles from where we started. As the sun set into the Pacific we were again feeling the swells and making a solid 8 knots to the West. After four hours we were within 4 miles of Point Conception and the weather conditions had changed considerably. We had 30 knots of wind right out of the West and the seas were building to 12' as we slowed our speed to minimize the effects of the building seas. It was approaching midnight and we were concerned with the weather reports of even more serious weather North of Point Arguello. The radar showed our progress on Point Conception, the VHF was working good and we were warm and well in the pilot house, I decided to check the engine room and try to get some rest so I could come back on watch in two hours. After about 45 minutes of sleep Virg woke me up to check a target that had come up on the radar. As I checked the radar we had a good strong target right on our course at about 6 miles and closing at about 20 knots. I peered through the binoculars but could not yet make out any lights. I expected with the good echo I was getting and the closing speed it was likely a larger vessel and I should be able to see the running lights or shape. I tried several times to call the South bound vessel off of Point Conception on VHF channel 16 without any reply. With the target at about 3 miles I could still not see any lights, I had kept my course to the West and was confident that we would pass Starboard to Starboard but I still could not see any lights or the shape of a vessel through the binoculars. We were about 5 miles West of Point Conception when we came abeam of the South bound target about 1 mile inside of us. As I stood on the Portuguese bridge and looked through the binoculars I could see the forward sail of a 50' sailboat surfing South on the 12' to 14' swells without a light on anywhere. As we turned Northwest into the full force of the wind and swell I felt envious of the South bound sailboat making in excess of 12 knots. It was time for my watch to start so I let Virg head down to a bunk and we continued on up the coast keeping about 5 miles out.

As morning came so did the rain, we continued on making about 7 knots into the heavy swells. I ran the generator to make some breakfast and really got a workout trying to maintain my balance in the heaving galley. The food tasted good but we were starting to feel the fatigue of being rolled around by the heavy swells. Every once in a while a very large swell would swallow up the bow of the boat and we would get washed down with green water over the front deck. This would cause the ships bell mounted in the back of the salon to ring, thus being named a "Ringer" as we slogged on. The Onan generator that had been running to power the stove and cabin heat suddenly shut down. I switched the AC power over to the cruise generator and headed to the engine room to

take a look. The engine room was not well lighted and I needed to use a flashlight to get some light on the generator, with both main engines running the noise and heat were considerable. I quickly needed to loose some clothes in order to spend any time evaluating the problem with the generator. The flashlight was taped to the overhead and I braced myself in place to try to get an assessment on our generator. After about a half hour of trouble shooting I narrowed it down to a faulty solenoid on the emergency shut-down circuit. We could start and run the generator but I would have to bypass the shut-down system thus exposing us to serious damage should low oil pressure or high engine heat occur. After getting out of the engine room and drying off we decided to use the cruise generator as much as we could and only run the Onan when our power needs required it. Virg went down to get some much needed sleep and I settled in to my watch at the wheel as we slogged on up the coast. By mid day the starboard main engine had shut down twice. The first time I just re-primed the injection system with the manual lift pump and she started up again.

The second time I changed the primary fuel filter, not an easy job at sea in a hot and rolling engine room. It did not seam to be overly dirty in the filter or the site bowl but once it was finished she started up and I felt confident that we had the problem under control. By evening the problem was back again. Each time the engine would shut down we would wait about 30 minutes and then prime the injector with the lever on the manual lift pump and she would start right up. After doing this several times I was getting a bad bruise on the middle of my chest where I would have to lay over the engine to operate the manual pump and bleed the fuel system. We were getting two to four hours between shutdowns on the starboard yet the port main was running without missing a beat. We decided to make a port call at Monterey Bay to try to solve the fuel supply problem and get some fuel filters and much needed sleep. By midnight when we arrived at the outer harbor we were on only the port engine and could not get the starboard started. I worked our way through the fishing fleet anchored in the outer harbor and tried to get the feel of maneuvering at docking speed with only one engine. As we entered the inner harbor I needed to make a hard turn to port to get to the transient pier. I was able to turn to port only by using reverse on the port engine, it wasn't a pretty landing but we got tied up and plugged into shore power.

If you haven't spent time on the ocean being constantly banged around in heavy swells you just can't understand how it fatigues your whole body. After 10 hours of sleep we felt re-born though we had some serious bruises on the palms of our hands from bracing ourselves on the rails as we had moved around the pilot house. We found some of the fuel filters we wanted and set to work changing filters and bleeding the air out of the fuel system on the starboard main. By mid afternoon we had things buttoned up and headed back out into Monterey Bay as we departed I wished we could have stayed and spent some time in this wonderful seaside town. The weather had moderated and we felt we were flying with both engines running good and making a solid 8 knots across Monterey Bay. We settled into our routine of 4 hour watches and kept an eye on the radar as we approached the busy shipping lanes off San Francisco Bay. As we passed inside the Farallon Islands and headed toward Point Reyes we crossed paths with several large ships and numerous fishing vessels. We were making good time and felt good about the repairs we had made in Monterey. As the morning grew lighter the weather deteriorated and the wind began to build out of the NW. As we approached Point Arena we were again slogging into heavy swells and 25 knots of wind right on our nose. We were close enough in to get some pictures of the Point Arena Light House

with a telephoto lens as we passed. North of the point the wind and swells moderated and the running was again quite comfortable until the starboard main again shutdown. We stared at each other in the strange silence of only one engine as we wondered what could be the problem causing just one engine to starve for fuel. As the boat settled into the reduced speed of only one engine I headed down to the task of bleeding out the injector system and getting the engine running again. I was getting pretty tired of smelling of diesel fuel and the bruise on my chest required that I fold up a towel and place it on the valve cover of the main to pad my chest as I worked. We seemed to get about two hours between shutdowns now and some times it would take an hour to get the engine running again. I was just frustrated that we could not solve the problem with the fuel supply. We had just passed Fort Bragg when we decided that with the weather again building we did not want to spend another night pushing into these seas on one engine. I called the Coast Guard at Fort Bragg to get a bar report and to tell them our situation. We switched to channel 22 on the VHF and I told them that we had engine trouble and would like to enter Fort Bragg, they reported the bar conditions as rough but the bar was open to traffic. The Coast Guard also volunteered to send a 42' vessel out to meet us at the Sea Buoy and escort us in across the river bar. If you have not ever been to Fort Bragg it is a very narrow entrance through the rock shoreline where the Noyo River empties into the Pacific. The entrance is made even more difficult by a large wash rock on the South side of the channel and the jetty's lined with people fishing that seem to close in on you and put your boat handling abilities on display as you pass so close you can hear them yell and wave as you pass. I primed up the starboard main and decided that we would start it just as we headed in the buoy line in hopes that it would give us the added maneuverability to safely make the bar crossing and the sharp right turn just inside the highway 101 bridge that crosses the channel. The 42' USCG Search & Rescue boat was at the sea buoy and started to lead us down the buoy line, I started the starboard main and everything seemed to be going good. With the Coast Guard about 300' ahead of us we committed to the bar crossing and set our speed so the large swells just pressed pass us as they raced toward the rock beach.

About the time we were beyond any chance of turning around alarms started to sound in the pilot house and the gauges indicated that the Port engine was seriously overheated. I was faced with the decision of keeping the port main running and risking serious damage or shutting it down and hoping that the starboard main would keep running and carry us through and into the harbor. I called the Coast Guard boat and informed them that I had just lost one engine and was proceeding on the remaining starboard engine. They slowed their progress and kept just ahead of us so they could quickly get a tow line on us should we lose our remaining engine and require assistance. We passed across the river bar and under the bridge without further incident and then had to negotiate that hard turn to Starboard to continue up river. I used the skills I had learned in Monterey to turn the boat and we proceeded on up to the boat basin and got tied up at a slip assigned by the Harbor Master. By the time the Coast Guard boarding party showed up to inspect our vessel and fill out their report I had calmed down considerably but my hands were still shaking. The Skipper of the Coast Guard 42' vessel that had escorted us said "he couldn't even tell I had lost one engine, the way I maneuvered the boat" but when I told him that the engine I lost was the one that had not given us one lick of trouble he totally understood my distress.

After a good dinner and a nights sleep I again tore into the fuel problem determined to solve it once and for all. As I traced back through the fuel supply plumbing I found a small manual lift pump in line before the primary fuel filter. I took this

apart and found the body of the assembly packed solid with sludge and tank rust. I was able to take the entire assembly out since the filters were well below the tanks and plumb the system back together with a short section of copper tubing. We decided to top off the fuel tanks to minimize the sloshing affect on the fuel and install a new solenoid on the Onan to put it back in full operational condition. We stayed a second night in Fort Bragg and got a good nights sleep before heading back out. Since it was now Friday morning it was becoming obvious that we were not going to get to Seattle in the time I had off from work so we had to come up with a alternative plan. As we proceeded up the coast the weather varied from poor to fair but we were making good time and both engines were running and we were warm and our watches were not interrupted by any unusual occurrences. We settled into the routine of four hour watches and in just over 24 hours we were making our approach to Crescent City. I had used Crescent City as our home port during our years commercial fishing on the West coast so we felt like we were coming home as we passed Round Rock and entered the outer harbor and made our way into the confines of the very protected and modern inner boat basin. We were assigned a slip that we would be welcome to stay in for a week and we tied up and connected to shore power.

I flew home from Medford Oregon on Sunday and returned the following Friday evening to continue our journey North up the coast. We left Crescent City in the dark with calm seas and a full moon to light our way. We headed West and gave Point Saint George reef a wide berth before we turned up the coast. It was a lovely night and we made good time with both engines and all systems working. As we worked our way around Cape Blanco on Saturday we continued to be blessed with calm seas, this can often be the worst piece of Ocean on the West Coast. The currents and weather systems often converge on this point of land and make it impassable for boats such as ours. On Sunday morning just after we passed Newport we went through our procedure of shutting down each of the engines to check and add oil. When we tried to restart the Starboard engine it would not start. I went down and checked things out and bleed the air out of the fuel system and it would still not start. We continued on with one engine and about one hour later we tried again to start the starboard main and it started right up. Just after we passed Tillamook head we again shut down each of the engines to check and add oil in preparation to crossing the Columbia River bar. Once again the Starboard engine would not restart. We had calm seas and slack water on the bar so we continued on in to Ilwaco on one engine and tied up in a slip assigned by the Harbor Master. I again had to return to work so my brother in-law picked me up and we drove on up to Seattle.

On Friday after work I drove back down to Ilwaco, Virg had had a local mechanic look at the engine during the week and he found the fuel injection rack stuck in the shutdown position. This was when we learned that the fuel injection pumps on our Ford Layman's had their own oil reservoir and that the recommended oil change interval was every 100 hours of operation. It didn't look to us like the oil plug had ever been removed from either of the injector pumps. We departed late on Friday evening and crossed the bar on a calm ocean with a gentle ebb tide. I had invited another friend along on this leg of the trip so the watches were split three ways. The weather continued to be great and we made very good time working our way up the coast. Late Saturday afternoon we were making our approach to Cape Flattery the winds were about twenty knots out of the NW and the tide was nearing the end of the ebb. As we turned pass Tatoosh Island the swells built up to about 20' large fishing vessel's traveling West were completely lost

from sight as we dropped down between the swells. After about one half hour of the large swells it calmed right out and we got a great push by the flood tide coming up the Strait of Juan de Fuca. As we entered Puget Sound and the City Lights came into view it was a great feeling of accomplishment to have made the journey from Southern California safely and without any serious damage to the boat or its equipment.

Lessons Learned:

- Be sure to run a boat hard for 24 to 48 engine hours before you depart on an extended coastal trip. this will likely turn up most of the equipment problems and allow you to have them corrected.
- If you are going to run through the night a crew of three allows for a much better schedule of watches and you don't get so fatigued if the weather is poor.
- Never have a Mechanic recommended by the Sellers Agent inspect or repair your vessel!

I hope you enjoy our story, we continue to cruise the waters of the Northwest in the Lady Karla.

Rob & Karla Huston

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