

## Fourteen Years Before the Mast Submitted by Jerry Tinsley, August 22, 2023

If you happened to pick up a copy of the Green Valley News on April 26, you would have seen Unit 5's Harry and Marge Mitchell pictured on the front page casually standing on their sailboat *Whalesong*, a 46 foot Monk design cutter, in 1985. A very handsome couple they were, and are.

As the article well describes, they were in the midst of a 14 year odyssey from 1983 to 1997 exploring the South Pacific Islands before traversing to New Zealand for five-six months each year while living aboard. They bought *Whalesong* in 1981 in Seattle, spent a year in San Diego outfitting her for their long-planned voyage, and nine months in San Carlos, Mexico exploring and taking care of health, visas and other preparatory issues, before embarking on their exciting adventure.

Beginning the Coconut Milk Run from Manzanilla, Mexico across the Pacific to Hiva Oa, in the Marquesa Islands, in one of the worst El Niño seasons ever, took Harry and Marge 26 days from March 17 to April 11, 1983. They encountered two terrific squalls which made them wonder why they ever began such an adventure. Here is a graphic excerpt from their log on April 6, 1983 in Harry's inimitable writing style:

6 April 3 am. (Why is it bad things always happen at 3 am?)  
I was asleep and Marge was on watch.  
I heard her call me urgently to come up on deck quickly.  
I jumped out of the bunk half asleep, without anything on,  
and ran above. It was dead still and pitch black outside. When I had gone  
below the stars were out and visibility was good, albeit no moon.  
The boat was sitting motionless and the darkness was ominous.  
I thought "*squall*" and started forward to pull down the jib. I didn't make it.  
A gust of wind, which I estimated at 50 knots, struck us, lying the boat on its side,  
and ripping the seams in the sail from end to end.  
Somehow I hung on and was able to pull down the tattered jib.

Harry is such a good writer it is no wonder, he joined the Quail Creek Writer's Club when moving here in 2015. His (and Marge's) fascinating memoir, *Seeking Paradise: 14 Years in the South Pacific*, which tells tales of their 14 year journey sailing the ocean, and their 17 years owning *Whalesong*, is available to borrow from Harry and Marge by any Unit 5 friend.

Harry and Marge encountered several smaller surprise squalls over the next 400+ nautical miles before reaching their first destination of Hiva Oa, with no more hazardous results. On Hiva Oa, Marge was able to use her sewing skills to temporarily repair the torn sails which served them until months later when they could find a professional sail-maker in New Zealand.

Harry learned from the close-call experience to find more weather information from various sources in the islands. He ultimately became well-known by South Pacific cruisers for his own daily weather forecasts over ham radio. He became so adept in his weather knowledge that his article about South Pacific weather patterns was later published in *Ocean Navigator* and very well received by all Southern hemisphere yachtsmen.

The *Coconut Milk Run* encompasses all the Eastern, Western and Southern Pacific Islands from the Galapagos to New Zealand. During their 14 year odyssey, Harry and Marge cruised from the Marquesa Islands to Tahiti and Bora Bora in the Leeward Islands; to the several Cook Islands, Fiji,

Samoa, Tonga, and later New Caledonia, Vanatu, and the Solomon Islands, just to name a few of their many stops. Most islands stays for Harry and Marge were from four to six months.

Some of their noteworthy memories include:

- Enjoying the friendliness of the various island people who, though poor, often invited them for feasts and entertainment, especially a variety of island drums and dances.
- Experiencing local work, leisure and daily activities, e.g. wood carving, fishing, and meal preparation
- Learning about different beliefs and traditions among island cultures
- Swimming to explore a haunted underwater cave that no local islander would go near
- Spending an unscheduled month helping rebuild Ahe Atoll after a hurricane
- Installing a single sideband radio for a church in the Solomon Islands
- Developing short-term and long-term friendships with other cruisers from all parts of the world
- Enjoying the camaraderie of other boaters taking refuge in New Zealand ports during cyclone season
- Finding themselves in the middle of **two** *coup d'etats* in Fiji
- Developing hobbies of collecting small special shells and discovering wood carvings on each island
- Following the route of Captain Cook
- Visiting the grave of Paul Gauguin
- Driving an RV for a nine-month exploration of Australia in 1992
- Playing Bridge with fellow cruisers from around the world

As mentioned, Harry was fortunately a very experienced ham radio operator which was the favored means of communication among boaters and authorities in the islands. Marge also became adept in radio operations with the call sign, KL7JW, well-known as *Just Wonderful* throughout the South Pacific in those days. They taught new boaters the rules, regulations and skills of ham radios and then administered the licensing test to them as volunteer examiners.

A favorite story: One of their student couples, who became good friends, were George E. Smith and Janet Murphy from New Jersey. George worked for Bell Labs where he was a pioneer researcher in semiconductors. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics in 2009 for the development of the charge-coupled device which enabled the creation of digital cameras and many other optical devices. Harry and Marge still laugh when telling the story of how they had to flunk the couple on their first ham radio test! They remain friends to this day.

Some background:

After Harry graduated from Silverdale High School near Bremerton, Washington, he found a job with Western Electric, which led to a three year enlistment in the Army Signal Corps in Alaska during the Korean Conflict. This, in turn, enabled a thirty-plus year career with Alaska Communication Systems where he supervised telephone installations throughout Alaska.

Harry and Marge met (in Rita's Bar, where she was too young to be served!) in her home town of Tok, Alaska on New Year's Eve, 1960. After a whirlwind romance they were married five months later on May 20. They lived most of the subsequent years in Anchorage where they raised three sons, all of whom still reside in *The Land of the Midnight Sun*. They also have three granddaughters in the Frontier State (Alaska), of whom they are very proud.

How they ended up in Quail Creek:

When the time came to leave the semi-paradise of the South Pacific they ran into someone who offered to trade a ranch in Montana for *Whalesong*. Never ones to turn down a new adventure, they exchanged the rolling seas for the mountainous West. After a few years, they found the need to care for Marge's parents in Oregon. They sold the ranch and moved further west.

Ten years or so later they were on another RV trek, this time through the American Southwest. When they visited a friend in Green Valley, they discovered Quail Creek. They moved here in 2015 to 590 W. Sweet Heather Way.

Both keep busy with several hobbies and play bridge as a couple several times a week. Harry is still active with ham radio friends. He spends many hours wood carving, a hobby he picked up in Polynesia. Their home is full of collected wood carvings, and his own well-crafted creations, and many small South Pacific shells. Marge is a member of QC Quilters and specializes in Quilt Art, which is beautiful.

Stop by and see their handiwork. While there, pick up a copy of their story in the Green Valley News. The memoir, *Seeking Paradise: 14 years in the South Pacific* by Harry and Marge Mitchell, is available too.

## CONCLUSION

The poet in me would like to share one more beautifully written poetic paragraph from Harry and Marge's memoir which Marge says was penned by Harry.

There were times when we really enjoyed the time at sea. Sometimes at night a magical scene would unfold. The swell would be low, and the night would be cloudless with no moon. We would have only the stars to guide us. Sometimes, there would be no wind, and the sea would be glassy smooth. The stars would be reflected so that it was impossible to pick out the horizon. It would seem like we were sailing through the universe with only an occasional midnight visit from a sleepy dolphin or turtle come to break the paramnesia state such a night engenders.

Well done Harry Mitchell.

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