

Bill Nance is only the fourth known person to ever sail alone around the world via the three great capes, which he did between 1962 and 1965. The book, *The Circumnavigators*, says he was "...one of the boldest and most competent, but least known of the circumnavigators on the tiny 25-foot Cardinal Virtue". In this conversation, we mostly talk about that voyage, the adventures he had and the people he met, but we also cover how he ended up in Port Townsend and a little bit about what he has done since arriving here in 1979. This interview was recorded in April of 2023. I'm Jim Heumann. I conducted most of the interview, but Bill's wife, Marie Dressler, and my wife Karen Sullivan, were also in attendance and you will hear them from time to time as well. Here's the interview.

Jim:

What was it like growing up in Australia? You had a big family, right?

Bill:

Yeah, I think five sisters and one brother. The brother's easy to remember, but five sisters, I'm not sure. [laughing] There were a bunch of us.

Jim:

I'd like to talk about your brother some, but later in the interview because he was quite a sailor too, wasn't he?

Bill:

Yes, yes.

Jim:

Is he still alive?

Bill:

No, he died about three years ago. He was in the boat business down in Ft. Lauderdale, Nance and Underwood - rigging and sails.

Jim:

So were you on the water much when you were in Australia?

Bill:

Not at all. No. I lived out in the bush. We were quite isolated because it was in a forestry area for Melbourne's water supply, so it was closed to the public. But we lived in this little place. There were about four or five houses there and a crew of men, we used to call them the huts. They lived in during the week and worked in the bush. Weekend they went home, a lot of them went home. Some stayed, but a lot of them went home.

Jim:

So then you get to be like 18 and decide you want to take off and see the world?

Bill:

Yes, that's true. I worked there. I finished school at 15 and there was no secondary school up in our area, so there was no way for me to continue. In fact, I finished the last four years of schooling by correspondence. I went to the local school that went to the eighth grade and did this every week. My lessons used to come in from the state government. The Victorian state government ran this program for isolated kids. And so you did your work each week, mailed it in the end of the week and corrections came back the following week.

Jim:

Then you decide you're going to go to the UK and...

Bill:

I worked for three years there in the bush. Earlier than that, I decided I wanted to go off traveling and I tried to get a job on ships, and they laughed at me because I was small and I looked probably about 12 years old [laughing]. So I had determined the only way I was going to travel was to pay my way. So that's what I did. I saved enough money to get buy a passage on a ship to England. In those days, the ships were going to and forth with immigrants from England and other parts of Europe, and so there was lots of traffic. I went off to England and my idea was, I was a keen cricket player and I thought, "Well, I'll go to England, I'll play cricket there in the summer and then in the winter I'll go to South Africa." My father was a South African, so there were family down there and that was where that idea came from. Of course, when you get out and about a bit, things change.

I'd been in England probably six months, thereabouts. I worked on construction sites for a construction company there doing concrete work. Anyway, when it was time for me to go to South Africa when winter was coming on, I went to get permission from the South African embassy in London. And when I was there they said, "Well, they have this program, where you can go out there and work on the mines. They pay for it, you go." I thought, "Well that sounds pretty good." So I signed up for it and went out to Johannesburg and shuffled out there to one of the mines and went through their mining school. It was about a 18-month course and I worked on the mines for three years in South Africa.

Jim:

And I read that's where you first started sailing was when you were working?

Bill:

No. But that's where I got the idea to go to sailing, because I read a book by Edward Allcard. By the way, he died not too long ago. He was 104 years old. But I read this book that he wrote about his trip across the Atlantic. I sort of was captured by the idea, that was something I would like to do. So anyway, I moved from South Africa to Northern Rhodesia, and I had a job when I went there to work on the copper mines. And it was there that I first got to sail. Because near the town where I worked, there was a lake behind a dam, a small dam that was ... The town there was Kitwe, it was the biggest town on what was the copper belt. And this was water supply for the town and the mines and so on.

And it wasn't very big, but it was enough room for a small sailing club. So I had a friend that I worked with, he was a geologist from Canada, and he had a Firefly dinghy, if you know Firefly, it's an English designed dinghy. And anyway, I sailed with him on the lake there. He moved back to South Africa. So another friend and I bought the boat, and we sailed it there and that's how I learned, just a rudimentary part of sailing anyway.

Going on in my mind at that time was what I wanted to do. So that was all part of the of program that I fell into there. So I was saving enough money while I was there to go and buy a boat. And I think I was there for two, two and a half years on that mine. But then I moved on to England, went back to England, which wasn't very easy at the time because there was a lot of unrest in Africa at that time. You know, remember...? There's rioting in Africa. There was a lot of that, they weren't allowing people who wanted to leave to take money out. But what happened, in my case, it was families that they wanted to retain. They didn't want

families to leave. Single men were kind of superfluous, so they let me go. I managed to take the money to buy the boat.

Jim:

So you make it back to the UK and you've got a boat in the back of your mind. You want to buy a boat.

Bill:

That's right. And I had to get as much experience as I could at the same time. So I went up to the East Coast where the Thames Barges worked. Most of them were motorized at that time. They'd all taken the rig out and put engines in for the most part. And I got a job working there on a motorized barge between London and the East Coast ports up to probably as far as Yarmouth, I think. But it's difficult conditions out of the Thames and up through the sandbanks and up the coast there. So I had the luck then to find *Cambria*, which was a barge that was still sailing and trading under sail. And she belonged to Everard Steamship Company. But they maintained this barge, which was 90, 91 feet, I think 90, 93, somewhere around there. And so I ran into the skipper of the *Cambria* and asked him for a job, and he gave me a job.

Jim:

So did you learn a lot about sailing from that job?

Bill:

Oh yes.

Jim:

And it applied to a small boat as well?

Bill:

Yes. It was really good experience. And he'd sailed small boats down the Atlantic and out to the Pacific. So he knew what it was like. But he was kind of naturally an old-fashioned conservative sailor. He didn't want anything except a old-fashioned rig. The sloop was still something that he didn't want to have much to do with.

But it was really interesting sailing on that barge. The sailing barges used to be the place where English seamen were bred because that was where young men went and when they got out after that and they had a grounding in the barges, then

they looked at other things like the bigger sailing ships. But yes, it was great experience. And Bob Roberts, the skipper, when I thought I'd found a boat [to buy], which was after the first transatlantic race, David Lewis, who owned the *Cardinal Virtue* at the time, he sailed that boat in the transatlantic race and when he got back to England, he put it up for sale and it was just sitting in a yard at Burnum on Crouch. So anyway, naturally I used to look through all the magazines for boats for sale. When I had the opportunity, I go and look and see, and then when I saw this one, I knew this was a good boat, so I got the skipper to come down there and look at it with me and he thought I'd probably do all right with it.

Jim:

Did you meet David Lewis?

Bill:

Oh yeah, I knew David quite well. Eventually he came here. He was here for a while.

Jim:

In Port Townsend? When was that?

Marie:

In the early eighties.

Bill:

Yeah, it must have been-

Marie:

'84.

Bill:

He had a boat that he was sailing, they brought it from the East Coast. It came from the East Coast, didn't it? Cyrano de Bergerac was the name of the boat. Anyway, it was a fairly large boat, and he was going up to Alaska and they were going to go from Alaska across to Russia with something to do... David always had some scheme going. That was to take some Aleutian people back to where they hadn't been. They hadn't been in Russia because of the separation at that time and was still the Soviet Union. This was a big deal for them because they had

relatives there that they hadn't seen in forever. So that was his scheme at that time. He had lots of others too. But yeah, he was here. He got the boat, had the boat, some work done out here I think, didn't he?

Marie:

Oh, right.

Jim:

So when you got *Cardinal Virtue* though, you took the engine out?

Bill:

Yeah, because of what I wanted to do. I didn't think that the engine was going to be a great benefit to me. It turned out a lot of times I wished I'd had it, but I needed a water supply. So where the engine was, I put a big water tank in there ... I needed a lot of space because I didn't have money to have a tank made to fit well. So this was just a big rectangular tank that I fit in under the bridge deck in the...

Jim:

Do you remember how many gallons of water you carried?

Bill:

I don't remember what that was. But I never ever ran short water. I had that water supply and I carried quite a bit of water in jugs and so on, plastic stuff. So it was never a problem for me.

Jim:

So you eventually got down to Cowes, right? Then you did some work on the boat there?

Bill:

Yeah, when I started out from Burnham, I actually did quite a bit of work on the boat at the boatyard there. My first real trip outside the river there was, I left. It was on my way. So I got to Cowes because I got caught in a gale down there on the south coast. It wasn't my intent to be going into any of those little ports along the way. So I tried to get into the Solent. So anyway, how I ended up in Cowes was I ran aground. I got myself off when the tide came back and got off after the

weather had calmed down and so on. So I sailed on into the Solent and anchored off Cowes and I thought I'd better check on the bottom and the rudder. So I had to get the boat hauled out and while I had it hauled out had I decided to get some cabinets put in. So I'd already learned that a lot of the stuff I had in there was not going to make it if I didn't do something.

Jim:

And did they invite you into the yacht club there? Into the Royal Yacht Squadron at Cowes? Did you get to go into the castle?

Bill:

No. I was just another fool on a little boat.

Jim:

Maybe when you got back, they would've invited you in, huh?

Bill:

Yeah, maybe, but maybe not. But anyway, that was the reason I went into Cowes.

Jim:

And did you leave right from Cowes for, was it Madeira?

Bill:

Well, that's what I hoped to do, but going down the coast of course there's a lot of traffic, it's pretty hard to keep going. You've got the tides to deal with and the traffic and so on. So I had to anchor a couple of times along the way there. So eventually I left from Brixton down there in the south.

Jim:

You didn't really know how to navigate at that point, is that right?

Bill:

That's correct. Not celestial navigating. I bought the equipment I needed, and I did reasonably well at that except that I couldn't afford to buy the best of things. So I ended up with a surplus Navy deck watch to give me time. Turned out the deck watch at sea didn't have a constant rate, it changed. It wasn't really very good. So I had this little radio, one of these little transistor radios that I could pick up time

signals from the BBC. So I used that for time, the deck watch and that. But I had to correct the deck watch. But I had, you probably know it, Mary Blewitt's little book on navigation which I thought was just terrific and I had all the tables and so on to go with it. So taking the site was the real thing that I had to learn how to do it.

Jim:

And were you aiming for Madeira when you left?

Bill:

Yes.

Jim:

And you got there okay?

Bill:

I got there. It's a great moment when the ... Madeira's a high island, so the head shows up.

Jim:

And so did you have a full set of charts for where you were planning to go?

Bill:

I don't know that I had the full ... I had the set of charts for a certain part of the voyage at that time because my intent was to go back to Australia. That was when I left England, that's where I was going. So I had charts probably to get me that far.

Jim:

And were you nervous when you left? Were you excited? Were you both?

Bill:

No, I don't really remember how I felt, but I was probably both nervous and scared because I had a friend who was a skipper on a small racing boat there and he knew the area ... and the banks out there quite well. So he gave me the directions which buoys had to hit to go out and find your way down to get out of the Thames Estuary, which was the hardest part. And to do that was a pretty scary experience, I guess, for a guy who didn't know anything.

Jim:

Well and you don't, and you don't have an engine.

Bill:

Right. But that's one thing you learn on the barge too. See they had no engines either in the sailing barge and you did everything by sail and so you got to know how to use your anchor, when to use your anchor and that kind of thing. So with that barge we used to go into the London docks, the big Royal docks that existed at that time.

Jim:

Really?

Bill:

They're all gone now, and you weren't allowed to sail in there. So we had to do the whole thing towing with the rowboat.

Jim:

You towed a 90-foot wooden boat with a rowboat?

Bill:

Yeah. And we'd also to get in ... sometimes we were well into the docks, and they had a winch with a light wire on it that we'd row out and fasten that somewhere and winch yourself up there when you had to go to windward.

Jim:

Interesting. Okay, so you're in Madeira and then you leave for Buenos Aires.

Bill:

That's right.

Jim:

And I read that your wind vane or your self-steering wasn't working really well?

Bill:

No, it wasn't. It was a very heavy, in lighter wind it was pretty ineffective. It was the same vane that David Lewis had used crossing the Atlantic and coming back.

Jim:

So were you hand steering a lot then?

Bill:

Yeah. In the light weather. But when you go down from the English Channel going south, there's a lot of wind on the beam, not too much on the wind. And I can make that boat self-steer with sail trim on the wind.

Jim:

Oh really?

Bill:

Yeah. You had to be careful because it got knocked off. But it was relatively easy to balance out on the wind, I would say.

Jim:

And how did you sleep offshore? Did you do short bits or?

Bill:

No, once I got out of the shipping channels, and I was a long way offshore anyway. For the most part I'd sleep for a couple hours.

Jim:

And just let the boat go?

Bill:

Yeah. I mean, it is the opposite of good seamanship, I know, but what are you going to do? [laughing]

Jim:

Right.

Bill:

Sometimes you run into a fishing fleet out there in that part of the world, so you have to be up and about watching it. It'd be really easy to get run down.

Jim:

Did you have any close calls with falling asleep and coming close to shore?

Bill:

No. I was always on deck if I was close to shore.

Jim:

And the boat was leaking a lot during that passage?

Bill:

Yeah, it did. Not leaks from the hull, but leaks from on deck. The deck covering was just tongue and groove pine planks covered with canvas and that canvas was pretty well-worn. So it had been on the boat for a long time and so it developed quite a bit of leaks.

Jim:

So you got free showers in the bunk?

Bill:

Yeah.

Jim:

So you get to Buenos Aires, and I looked on the chart and it looks like a nightmare getting in those channels in Buenos Aires. Did you sail up those narrow channels?

Bill:

Well, when you say narrow channel, Buenos Aires is on the River Plate, and you can't see across there. It's that wide between Buenos Aires and Uruguay. It's really wide. It's not all navigable because there are areas where there are banks and so on.

Jim:

Yeah, it looked like it was really shallow in a lot of spots there.

Bill:

But there's a big, dredged channel up there because ships go up the river quite a ways up there. But it wasn't any trouble getting up there other than it's a long way and you got to pretty well stay awake.

Jim:

Right.

Bill:

I remember when, I think it was the first time I went in there, that I was so tired. There'd been a blow, they had these Pamperos, these storms sweep up the coast. And it comes as a big squall front. I don't know whether you've ever experienced that, down in Australia they have the same thing, the southeaster that comes up the coast there. But anyway, it blew pretty hard there and I was tired, and it was pretty close to the channel and it seemed like I was going downhill. Everything sloped down. It was the strangest thing, like hallucinating.

Jim:

Oh really? Interesting.

Bill:

But anyway, it wasn't difficult really-

Jim:

Okay, so you could just tack your way in there.

Bill:

I went up further later on to the Argentine Yacht Club up on the San Fernando River. And even that wasn't all that difficult.

Jim:

And on that passage down to Buenos Aires, you got stuck in the doldrums for a long time?

Bill:

Yeah, I did. See there, it's not like today where everybody knows where so many boats have crossed there and written about, and you can get directions. I had to use the sailing ship directions because that was all that was available. The Admiralty used to have this publication, Ocean Passengers of the World, I think it was called. And that was written for big square riggers, not for small ones. I could have found an area where I would've had less problems crossing the doldrums than I did then, because I really approached it in the wrong area where it was quite wide. I had one day during that, where I had a good breeze and I tacked in the wrong direction, really. If I'd been on the other tack, I would've got me closer to getting through, but those were all things...

Jim:

Did you have books to read?

Bill:

Yeah. I read a lot.

Jim:

Did you get frustrated? Or were you happy out there?

Bill:

Oh no, I enjoyed it. Yeah. And even in the doldrums, apart from the rolling, everything's slapping around, it wasn't too bad at all. I did some swimming, you probably remember yourself, it was like, you go over there with 3000 fathoms or something down there, you go down in the water. It's strange.

Jim:

So you got up to the yacht club there, the Argentina Yacht Club, and they helped you out with some of the repairs?

Bill:

Well no, I had to pay for the repairs, at that time, and I think, still, they probably have the same thing. They have a yard there. It was a commercial operation. It's not part of the club itself, although they're within the club ground, and they have quite a number of shipwrights and so on there.

Jim:

Okay.

Bill:

They did then, and they were a good bunch. I mean, I think they treated me quite fairly. I got on well with the workers in the yard. We used to have barbecues, or salads as they call them.

Jim:

Were people pretty surprised about what you were doing?

Bill:

Yeah, they were, they were. The club members were really, really good to me, the people there. I made a lot of friends there, while I was there, because I was there for quite a while. They're really nice people. I enjoyed my time there.

Jim:

Okay. So then you take off for Cape Town from there?

Bill:

Yes.

Jim:

Was that Christmas at sea during that passage? It sounds like you got to Cape Town...

Bill:

No, no. I think when I got to Argentina. Christmas must have come while I was there, I believe. This must have been after, I think, I can't remember.

Jim:

Okay. So navigation was going okay? You'd gotten that all figured out and no problem?

Bill:

I had that down by then.

Jim:

Did you have any big adventures on that leg?

Bill:

No, it wasn't too bad on that leg. That was a time when that the island down there, the volcanic island had gone up and they'd taken all the people off and took them to England, Gough Island. I thought I might see that while I was down there, but I did not, I passed a bit to the north of it. But otherwise, it was pretty uneventful, that trip, until I got to Cape Town itself where it blew like hell.

Jim:

And did you see a lot of sea life back then? Did you see whales?

Bill:

Occasionally, I saw a whale, but that was very occasionally. The sea life was mostly bird life. There wasn't much in the water there, not like in the tropics where you've got the flying fish for the show.

Jim:

Did you fish while you were out there for food?

Bill:

I did in the south, but I gave it up because I was towing a lure behind the boat. That turned out to be a pretty nasty deal because I didn't have the weight to keep the lure below the surface. The speed of the boat would bring it to the top and it'd just skip along the top, and the birds were going after it. An albatross got hooked, and so I had to haul him on board to get him off the hook. I think his wing was damaged. I thought, "Wow, I'm not going to do this anymore," so I didn't.

Jim:

We had a similar thing happen up in Alaska. We were towing a line and an eagle came down and grabbed it. Luckily, he let go and we didn't have to tow him aboard. But yeah, that'd be tragic if that happened. Okay, so you do 40 days, 3000 plus miles down to Cape Town and you're still happy on the boat. You're not bored?

Bill:

Yeah. Well, it was on the way going down the Atlantic, I read this book by Felix Reisenberg about, it was called Cape Horn, He goes through the history of various ships that discovered Cape Horn, named after a Captain from Horn in Holland, I think, and all that kind of stuff. I thought that, "Boy, I'd really like to go down there," but this is in my mind all the time.

I was only in the south because I didn't want to go through the Panama Canal to go to Australia. I thought it'd be better for me by myself to go south. But anyway, to get home to get to where I was heading for, Melbourne, I have to cross the Indian Ocean, of course. I thought the boat was doing pretty well at that time. So I had family in Cape Town, so I spent a lot of time with them.

Jim:

And did they think you were crazy?

Bill:

No, they didn't. I don't know why not. At least I didn't think so. They might have said things behind my back, yes. But it was interesting in Cape Town because there were a few other people ... I'd never met anyone that had been sailing long distance before. There were a few people there, and I can't remember all their names now, and a South African group that was leaving to go up to the Caribbean. It was an interesting time there.

There was a fellow there, Jerry Trowbridge. He used to come year after year to Port Townsend after he left the water. Yeah. But Jerry was there, he sailed out to South Africa, I think was on this *White Seal*, I believe he called the boat *White Seal*.

But he had an American wife. He was a South African, he had an American wife, and they had these two very small children on the boat, and they weren't sure how this was going to work out. They had just sailed down, the first trip at sea with the kids from Durban to Cape Town, and had a pretty rough trip, I think.

But I remember Marie saying that she had all these toys and things for the kids to keep them amused and everything. She said, "All they wanted was some *grass*," you know, American accent... But when I left Cape Town, they came out with me to see me off, just the one boat, and Marie had cooked up a big stew, which she'd put into a canister. It must have been a coffee canister or something like that. They handed that across to me with a fishnet, a dipping net, as we parted.

Jim:

And speaking of parting, yeah, you leave Cape Town and now it sounds like some excitement happens. You're out for maybe 30 days or so, and it sounds like you had some big weather.

Bill:

Yeah, on that passage across there, the latitude I was sailing at was just around 40 degrees south. There are a couple of islands north of that, St. Paul and Amsterdam.

Jim:

Right, and now you're heading for Melbourne, right?

Bill:

Yes. And the weather had been pretty good. Every now and then, you got a gale come through and so on, but then I had some really bad weather, and I was running up before the gale from southwest to the northeast direction, just running ahead of that. It was just huge seas, the distance between them, you could only see it a few of them because they were so far apart.

Jim:

And you had no way to get weather, right? Could you get any weather on your little radio or anything?

Bill:

Nothing. No, you just watched the barometer and know that this is going down ... but you don't know. You have no idea what it is. So anyway, I spent a night, a really awful night, but I think I probably had a little jib up. I'm not sure how that was going, but mostly, I was scared to go on deck because you had to crawl around. But in the morning, I got out there, even though the seas were huge, they didn't appear to be dangerous to me. They weren't huge, breaking crest and so on.

I got the boat moving there by steering, hand steering. I knew the island was out there ahead of me, but I hadn't had a sight for two days, I think, because there was the cloud and I could never see this island, but I knew it was there. And sure enough, it was right ahead of me when it shows up.

So I have to get off to... I went to the north side. I was steering with just a jib, that's all. I almost passed the island. It's a volcanic crater, no trees on there, just grass and rock. I don't know exactly how far I was offshore, but not too far, I was steering downwind when I heard this huge roar of breaking water behind me, and before I could even turn to look at it, it all came down on top of me, rolled the boat over...

Jim:

Oh, you rolled the boat?

Bill:

[I went] over the side, I had a tether on. When I got back on board, the mast was broken at the lowest spreaders, it's a two-spreader rig. It was laying in the water alongside. So I had to get all that sorted out. Yeah, that was quite interesting.

I had to make up my mind what I was going to do. The Amsterdam Island, which is north of St. Paul by maybe 60 miles, I'm not sure what that is, but I couldn't see it. But it was inhabited by the meteorological station people from France, but there's no anchorage or anything. They have a dock built out there that is one of these places where when you can, you lay alongside and they take stuff off quickly, and get out.

So I thought, "Well, if I go there, maybe I could get there, but I'd lose the boat." I thought, "Well, in the end, it was going to be impossible for me to get there because I was going off downwind and I didn't have the capability of going upwind anymore," so it would've been impossible. So I headed off for Fremantle.

Jim:

But you had to do a little construction project before that.

Bill:

It wasn't too much because I had about 15 feet, I think it is, of mast standing up there. I had on board, courtesy of David Lewis, he'd left ... an old lifeboat sail, which he used as a tri-sail, so that turned into my main sail, and I had to cut down a headsail. I put up a forestay because the rest of my gear was gone. That section of mast was held up by the two lower shrouds on either side. That was all the rigging that I had. I put this fore stay up and cut a sail down to fit it.

Jim:

This is still in pretty rough conditions; you're doing all this?

Bill:

Yeah, I mean, it quieted down quite a bit, but it was kind of fun, actually. I enjoyed that because you weren't just going with the sea, you were actually doing something that was really helpful to the effort. Yeah, it took me about two and a half days, two and a half to three days by the time I got everything cleaned up. All this sail, I had to do quite a bit of sewing with the sail and get it all together. There wasn't any boom for what was my main.

Jim:

Oh, so you lost the boom?

Bill:

No, the boom was still there, but I used a... because I was going downwind pretty much, I used to pole that out with a pole I had out there, strap it down.

I didn't mind that so much, once I got over the shock of... It's kind of devastating when you sit there in the cockpit, and I'd hurt my leg. I didn't know what happened to that. I'd hit it on something as I went over. Damage to the boat...you look around, it's kind of devastating at first, but once you get things sorted a little bit, as I say, "It's no good calling out for mama, she ain't coming."

Jim:

Well, and today, people would pick up their SAT phones and...

Bill:

Oh, I know.

Jim:

... but you didn't have much choice.

Bill:

No, no. I entirely disagree with that approach to going to sea. People who go to sea with the notion that, "Well, if I get into trouble, I'll call the coast guard," or whatever. I think if you go out there, you go out there, you look after yourself. That was my approach. I didn't want anyone to come help me, or whatever.

Jim:

So you're under jury-rig for 2000 plus miles?

Bill:

Yeah, yeah.

Jim:

Hand steering the whole time?

Bill:

Yes. I could make the boat, depending on the weather, the wind direction, I could make it steer itself on a general course to a general direction I'm going, it doesn't matter whether it's 10 to 20 degrees off this way or that way, you are going to the east, plus, if I wasn't able to steer, I was sleeping, then the way the sails were, if it got too far off course and there'd be some flapping and banging there, it'd wake you up. But I managed to sail, I think around 100 miles a day with that rig.

Jim:

With the jury rig, you were doing that many miles?

Bill:

Yeah, but you've got to remember that there's a lot of wind and it's blowing in the right direction.

Jim:

And were people pretty amazed when you showed up in Fremantle?

Bill:

They were. It was an interesting day, as I passed the Rottnest light, Rottnest Island is offshore there, at night, and I was running down the latitude because I didn't have any correct time at all. I was running down the latitude. So the island appeared pretty much when I thought it would.

Jim:

How do you just run down the latitude?

Bill:

Just by taking noon sights.

Jim:

Oh, okay, because you can get your latitude, but not your longitude.

Bill:

Yeah, I knew my latitude, but I didn't know exactly where I was in terms of longitude. When you're approaching land like that, you have to be pretty alert. You have a big incentive. Going into Fremantle, I passed Rottnest Island, and I didn't have a good chart for a Fremantle because I had no intention of going there originally. So I only had this large view - Fremantle is there on the chart, so that's where we're going.

But when I passed Rottnest Island, there was an Army boat coming from Rottnest to Fremantle. I thought, "Well, these guys..." because I was going down wind onto this lee shore, and I wasn't sure where the entrance was going to be. I thought, "Well, I'll get these guys to give me a hand." So I waved to them and they just waved back. So I thought, "God, they must be looking at that and what do they think? There's a boat with jagged piece of mast sticking up there." But anyway, off they went.

Jim:

Oh wow.

Bill:

So I had a general idea where the entrance was, and when I got down there, I managed to hit it correctly and get into the harbor because it was blowing hard. It was blowing so hard that one of the big passenger ships there that were supposed to sail, postponed the sailing because of the bad weather.

So I got in there and the best I could do was just hit the first dock I could make it to. It was on the lee side of the harbor.

Marie:

But you left out Murray Shaw...

Bill:

And Murray had a job there in the harbor as a launch operator for this company that ran boats, small boats around the harbor. When His boss saw my boat tied up there, he was on the opposite side of the harbor and saw this, and he said, "Go over there and see if you can give that guy a hand with his boat," because he realized it wasn't a good place or a small boat to be tied on.

So Murray came over there and towed me up to the other side of the harbor, which was more protected from the prevailing wind there. And then he said, "Can I do anything for you?" He was a guy about the same age as me. I said, "Well, I'd really like to get a shower if I could," because I'd been wearing the same clothes now for weeks on end. They were really bad, I tell you, really bad. In fact, while I was away from Western Australia, the guys from the yacht club burned them all.

Jim:

Really?

Bill:

So he took me home. He was living with his mother, and I think a couple of brothers and sisters or something, but it's all hazy in my mind now about what actually happened. Yeah, I went home, I stayed the night there. They fed, gave me a shower and fed me. Then I didn't ever see... Murray had to go back to work before I left the place. And by that time, the newspaper people were all over the place and wanted do interviews and this. I never saw Murray again because I went upriver and to Perth. Interesting thing about that was that a few years ago-

Marie:

2015.

Bill:

Yeah. We have a friend, Pam Wall, I don't know whether Pam, she and her husband sailed around the world. But anyway, Pam used to come up here and talk at the Wooden Boat Show. She had written something that mentioned me, and she got this letter from Murray Shaw. He said, "Is that the Bill Nance who sailed Cardinal Virtue?" And she said, "Yes," he said, "He'd know me," and he told her what had happened. That's how we got in touch with him. Murray called him on the phone, and he was just flabbergasted.

Jim:

Wow, I bet that was cool.

Bill:

Yeah, it was. I'd said to Marie a couple of times, I said, "That guy who helped me out there, I felt so bad about not seeing him before I left because he had gone out of his way to help me." I said, "I'll probably never ever see him again or hear of anything."

Marie:

It was actually afterwards because you said to me with tears in your eyes, "I never thought I would get the chance to thank him." That was really emotional for me too.

Bill:

Yeah, and now we heard from his wife last year.

Marie:

This year, I think.

Bill:

He got dementia.

Bill:

He has early dementia.

Bill:

And he went on to have a great career on the water. He was a skipper of a survey vessel.

Bill:

So I got a tied up there [into Freemantle] and people would come down, "Oh, where you'd come from?" "Cape Town." "Whoa!" So it was a big event at the time.

Jim:

Were you in the newspaper?

Bill:

Oh yeah, TV and newspaper.

Jim:

Wow. Well, because you're Australian too and you're sort of coming home to Australia.

Bill:

Yeah, well, I mean, it was entirely different. They'd never had people coming there from somewhere else on a small boat Yeah. It's strange, back in those days, they were very... It was only just a handful of people who were out there sailing, just maybe more on the trade wind routes, but not from the south.

Jim:

So it sounds like the local yacht club sort came to your rescue?

Bill:

Yeah, there were quite a few yacht clubs on the Swan River, and they were just great, those people. The next day, by that time, word had gone around that I was there in the harbor, and they came down with a boat and towed me upriver to Freshwater Bay Yacht Club. I was there for quite a while, through the winter.

Jim:

Well, there was a lot of work to do.

Bill:

Yeah, there was.

Jim:

Did you do a lot of that yourself?

Bill:

Yes, I had a mast made by a professional mast builder, but anything else on the boat, I did it myself.

Jim:

I mean, you'd probably been doing work on the boat all along, but you were just learning by doing at that point?

Bill:

Yeah, yeah.

Jim:

Did you have to replace planks at that point?

Bill:

No. I did in Western Australia, but that was down in the south.

Jim:

That was the next leg?

Bill:

Before I left England, I'd had to replace planks because the boat had an electrolysis problem in the planks in the very bottom of the boat there. They have metal floors in the bilge that holds... It has these large frames and then smaller ribs, two small ribs between each frame, I think. And on the frames, they have these galvanized iron floors in there that attached to the keelson and hold everything together, the copper fastenings, which were between the galvanized iron and the planks [caused] electrolysis, that's common in boats around that time.

Jim:

So you did that yourself too, replace the planks?

Bill:

I did not. That was done by shipwrights in the yard.

Jim:

Because that's not a simple task.

Bill:

No, that was beyond my capability.

Jim:

Okay. But you gained those capabilities later on?

Bill:

Well, I did. I don't know how good I was, but you can do those things if you have to.

Jim:

So you spend a bunch of time in Fremantle, and you fix up the boat and then sounds like the Government is wanting you to pay a bunch of money to bring the boat in.

Bill:

Those days, the way it worked in Australia, they tried to make people buy things that were Australian made. So if you wanted to bring something from overseas into Australia, [there were] huge taxes, and boats were no exception. I think, if I remember correctly, to pay what was due according to their calculations was 83% of the value of the boat that they wanted. And they did the valuation. So I couldn't do that, so they gave me six months, at which point I had to leave. And this was through, we went through our local member of Parliament where my family lived, and he got them to make this concession. So I had six months and I had to be gone or pay the tax.

Jim:

Okay. So you get the boat all fixed up and then it's on to Melbourne.

Bill:

Yeah. After I rounded Cape Leeuwin, which is on the southwest corner of Western Australia, the weather was pretty bad down there. And I was just past the turn of Albany, I guess, heading into the Great Australian Bight, and had a real bad blow there. So a wave hit the boat in the top sides and spun it completely around. It was going in the opposite direction, and it smashed in the foredeck. The framing was broken in the deck and the frames in the hull itself were broken. There was no hole through everything, but it was all broken and loose and so on. I remember going into the forepeak and looking to see what had happened there. And you could see right through - all the cork and everything was gone. You could

see the daylight. So every time a wave washed up on the boat, water was falling through.

Jim:

And this is a week after leaving Fremantle, is that right?

Bill:

It must have been about that, I suppose.

Jim:

So you get the boat all fixed up and a week later... Was that pretty discouraging?

Bill:

Yeah, it was to a degree. But anyway, I made my way back to Albany.

Jim:

You lost the boom? Did you lose the boom?

Bill:

I lost the boom, yeah, I lost the boom and a sail, but I made it back in. On that boat I roller reefing. You remember the roller reefing? Horrible [laughing]. But anyway, that's what I had. So I went back to Albany and there was an old boy there who was a shipwright. He did the repairs for me and doubled up frames and repaired everything for me. I think he had to add one plank and a piece of plank on the top sides. Once that was done, I set off I again for Melbourne.

Jim:

Then you make it to Melbourne. It sounds like that was relatively uneventful at that point?

Bill:

Yeah, except for the last bit because there was fog for days and I was in Bass Strait approaching Port Phillip. There's a cape down there, Cape Otway, and in the daytime you could actually see the sky above you, but at a certain level there you could see nothing. And I could hear, after a time there, I could hear surf on the beaches and there was almost no wind there for that period.

Jim:

That's scary.

Bill:

Yeah. I turned into a nervous wreck there, I tell you. And you could hear ships' foghorns out there. And on the Cape itself, when I passed the Cape, I could hear what sounded like rockets being fired off. But I don't know whether they did that to warn shipping or what it was. But it was really, really odd.

Jim:

So you couldn't have gotten any sights around then, so you didn't really know where you were?

Bill:

No, I didn't know. I had some notion of where I was but not accurate. How far was I offshore? I don't know.

Jim:

You must not have slept well at that point.

Bill:

I did not. No, I think that the fog was worse than bad weather.

Jim:

Really?

Bill:

Yeah, it was more worrisome to me.

Jim:

Well, and you were close to shore.

Bill:

Yeah. It's always, like my old skipper used to say, he said people who work along the shore, they're scared out of their whits if they get out of sight of land. And people who make their living offshore, when they sight land, that's when...

Jim:

That's when they're scared, yeah.

Jim:

So did eventually the fog lift and you figured out where you were?

Bill:

Yeah, it did. And I got into Port Phillip Bay and made my way to Melbourne.

Jim:

Where you were from. So your family was there?

Bill:

Well actually, nobody was there because they all lived up in the bush.

Jim:

Oh, they didn't come down and see you in?

Bill:

They didn't know I was coming.

Jim:

That's true. That's right. Because...

Bill:

No cell phones.

Jim:

Yeah. But they must have known that you had been in Albany, and you must have contacted...

Bill:

Oh, yeah. And I went home from Perth because when they see their son all over the TV and newspapers and so on, because then they wanted to come and interview my family.

Jim:

So it was a big deal all over Australia?

Bill:

I suppose so, yes. It was in all the newspapers there and they wanted me to do TV interviews and so on.

Jim:

Were the girls coming down to the dock to meet you?

Bill:

No, no. That didn't happen. [laughing]

Jim:

No? So you spent some time with family.

Bill:

Yep.

Jim:

What did they think about you taking off for Cape Horn?

Bill:

I think they probably weren't very happy about it. I know my mother said that she would never let herself believe that something would happen to me. They never ever tried to talk me out of doing it.

Jim:

And was your brother at home at that point?

Bill:

He was, yes.

Bill:

He came over to Western Australia for a week or two [to help].

Jim:

Had he started sailing by that point?

Bill:

No.

Jim:

So you were his inspiration, were you?

Bill:

I guess so. Actually how that happened was in Western Australia... Not Western Australia, in New Zealand, he came over and we sailed around a little bit.

Jim:

So this is where you stopped in New Zealand after leaving Melbourne?

Bill:

After leaving Hobart.

Jim:

Oh, right. You went down to Hobart and then Auckland and that's where he came to visit you?

Bill:

Yeah. So there was a family I met up in the Bay of Islands [New Zealand], I think. He'd built a steel boat and they were going to set off to the United States. I think the wife had this burning desire to get to the United States. So they asked my brother if he would sail with them, and he did. He quit his job in the bank and went off with them. But they got wrecked up in the islands there somewhere, not far from Tahiti. They ran on a reef. Steel boat banging up and down on the reef there for a month or more. They got it off.

Jim:

Okay, but back to your journey here. So you leave Melbourne and go to Hobart, spend some time there. And did you just go there because you wanted to see it? Or was there some specific purpose?

Bill:

No, I think that I went down to Hobart because the Sydney-Hobart race was about to happen. And I got there I believe the day before the race boats came in. I've never much been involved in racing. I did a little bit in England before I left, with a fellow... Do you know of the Stella class boats? They're like a Folkboat, but an English design. Nice little boat. But I sailed with him, they had the Wednesday night races...

Jim:

Okay, so then you head across the Tasman to New Zealand?

Bill:

Yeah, around the north end of the island.

Jim:

And was that a good passage? That's a nasty piece of water.

Bill:

Yeah, I don't remember any difficulty about crossing that. I don't think I really had any bad weather.

Jim:

Well then you land in Auckland, and you spend what, close to a year there in New Zealand?

Bill:

Well, at least eight, nine months I think, probably. But I did get involved in racing when I was there and raced up to Noumea. They had a race, the first Auckland-Noumea race...

Jim:

But not on your boat?

Bill:

Not on my boat, no. I raced with a guy, Peter Spencer, who owned... a Sparkman Stevens, 38-40 foot boat, I think. Cotton Blossom. They're well known, or they were well known people in racing in New Zealand. But anyway, I crewed on Cotton Blossom around the races in the Gulf there through their season. And then

he was going to this race, so I went up there with them as well. The interesting thing that at that time, that was before New Zealand racing people were known all over the world. I was on the boat, and they asked Magnus Halvorsen from Australia to come over and navigate, which he did. So they had two Australians on it, and there were a lot of complaints about all these, bringing in these foreign people to race on their boats.

Jim:

So you're like ringers...

Bill:

Yeah, that's exactly what somebody's said [laughing]. But then shortly after that, this is a few years after that, they start to show up in the US, racing boats all over.

Jim:

So you work there, you race, you get the boat ready to go, and then it's off to Cape Horn.

Bill:

I had the boat tied up to an old ferry in Westhaven. In those days Westhaven, the big marina, wasn't there and there was a little marina over in the corner that belonged to the yacht squadron, I think the New Zealand Yacht Squadron. But otherwise there wasn't much there. But Bailey's was one of the shipyards here that allowed me to use their place. They let me work on my boat at their yard there. So I actually had it hauled out in the shop and I was permitted to do... They were doing some work. I had a new hatch built and they built that for me. And so I was allowed to work on my boat. They were really good. And in the course of this work, I put both my hands into a planer.

Jim:

A wood planer? Both your hands?

Bill:

See my fingertips.

Jim:

Oh, look at that. You shaved the end of your fingers off.

Bill:

And of course, they were terrified that I would sue them or something - wasn't a part of my makeup. It was kind of interesting because I got involved in the New Zealand medical system. It's all free, but they had to do a skin graft on the ends of my fingers. I was getting ready to go off to sea. So my brother came up. He was actually there, I think, when this happened. And it was on a weekend, and he had to get somebody to come and take me off to the hospital. It was quite difficult because both hands had... You can 't hardly even put your shirt on, or button up. And I had the mast out of the boat, and he was helping put everything together. There was little, what do you call them? Where it's like a crane, but it's just a small thing with a pulley on it, you can haul stuff up. I was putting the mast back in the boat.

Jim:

With your fingers all bandaged up?

Bill:

Yeah. And I had are the lines wrapped around my arms and hauling it. I remember Bob, he wanted to, "Well, let's get someone to help us do it." I said, "We can do it. We can do it." We did it. So we got it in there and a few weeks later I left.

Jim:

A few weeks later? Were your hands...

Bill:

Yeah, on these two fingers I had these metal thimbles that I put on there, tapered on there, so that it would protect the ends of my fingers. The others, there had been a couple of stitches in each one of my fingers and they healed up pretty quickly. It was a pretty tough time there, getting all that put back together. And then the Government didn't want to let me go.

Jim:

The New Zealand Government didn't want to let you go?

Bill:

Yeah. I had a big problem with them. They'd had some problems with boats there. I think there was an accident where a number of people drowned on a race boat

that was racing down by Cook Strait somewhere. These people all drowned. So they weren't letting boats go that didn't have all this, that, or the other on them. You had to have all kinds of life rafts and safety equipment. And this guy said he wouldn't give me a permit. And I said, "Well, I'm not a Kiwi boat. I'm a British-registered boat." He still wouldn't do it. And he said, "You go see this other department."

And so I went off to see them and the guy said, "You go back and tell him that there's subsection such and such." They said, "We don't have the jurisdiction over you." So their beef was that if something happened to me, they'd have to put the money into a search and all that sort of stuff. So I had to sign that I was on my own. There was to be no looking for me. I found that in New Zealand and Australia that anybody in authority there was very likely to be so bureaucratic that everything was by the book. If the rule says this, you've got to stick with it.

Jim:

You got the permission to leave New Zealand and headed for Cape Horn.

Bill:

Yes.

Jim:

And as I calculated it, you did 5,000 miles in 37 days.

Bill:

Yes.

Jim:

120 miles a day?

Bill:

Yes.

Jim:

How did you make that little boat go that fast?

Bill:

Well, by that time I was really into pushing the boat as fast as I could make it go. And I had pretty near perfect weather and wind. It was a little bit slow earlier on because out of Auckland you have to go down past the East Cape. You're not really into the westerlies yet. But once I got into the westerlies, I never got headed by the wind and the whole way across the Pacific, it was always somewhere aft of the beam. The boat was just able to go, and I carried the spinnaker.

Jim:

So you were running a spinnaker most of that time?

Bill:

No, not most of that time. But when the weather lightened up, I used it.

Jim:

And that was a symmetric, I assume, with a pole?

Bill:

Yeah.

Jim:

So that took management to keep that thing flying...

Bill:

Well, it was a shaky business, yeah. Deciding when to take it down was... Yeah, it was a pretty shaky business. [laughing]

Jim:

But you're in race mode now. You've got the racing bug.

Bill:

That's right. But it made a difference, pushing the boat along as much as you can. Because in reality, if you're in an area where the sea can be dangerous, the faster you get through it, the better off you are. That's why these fast boats that go down there now, they're not there very long. They go through on a couple of weather systems and then out of it. But yeah, it's a risky place to be, especially in a real small boat.

Jim:

How far south did you get on that passage?

Bill:

Well, furthest south was when I was actually near the Horn because mostly then, I suppose obviously you get past the Chatham Islands and you're down below 40, 45...

Jim:

Did you see icebergs?

Bill:

No. It went really well going across the Pacific until Christmas day. Then the swivel part at the end of my boom broke ... I can't remember exactly what that was. Somebody had given me a bottle of booze to celebrate Christmas. And I was just about to have my Christmas celebration when this thing went bam. I had to fix that. But otherwise, when I got to Cape Horn, I think on the 7th of January, it was only maybe a week out from the Horn that I had any real trouble. I was in a pretty strong blow that came up quickly, damaged myself steering, broke the tiller. I was having to steer the boat and when the boat started to run off, it's going down wind, sometimes it was really hard to pull it back. And in the course of doing that at one stage, the tiller just broke off.

Jim:

Just right in your hand?

Bill:

Yeah. So I had to lie ahull in these big seas. I had a spare tiller, but it was under the cockpit, and I was afraid to open the cockpit seats and delve in there and get it out, because of the way the sea was. So I had to wait until it calmed down. And it did. It actually wasn't a long blow. So although it was very strong for a short period of time, it didn't last and so I was able to get it all fixed up. But further south would've been, I sighted Diego Ramirez Islands down there. I don't know just how far away I was, but that's about 50 something there.

Jim:

So that damage, you were able to just repair underway?

Bill:

Yes.

Jim:

And the wind vane too?

Bill:

The wind vane, I did what I could with it. In New Zealand I changed wind vanes and I had a Hassler steering vane, and he uses a hollow, a stainless steel tube. The vertical part of it, that bent. Not too much, but it bent, and I tried to get that straightened out, but I couldn't really do it because I didn't have the wherewithal to manage that. But that was the problem with the steering vane.

Jim:

So you make it around the Horn?

Bill:

Yeah.

Jim:

Could you see the Horn when you went by?

Bill:

Yeah, I was fairly close. When I got around the Horn, the weather wasn't that bad.

Jim:

Yeah. Did you jump up and down and cheer and drink your whiskey?

Bill:

No, I don't know. After I got around the Horn, heading up towards starting go north, the main halyard jumped the shiv at the top and went down the side of it. It was supposed to have had some kind of a metal lining in there, but then that didn't happen when it was built. So I had to climb up there and get that thing un-jammed, which wasn't an easy task.

Jim:

Climbed up with no safety rope?

Bill:

Nothing, just hand over hand.

Jim:

And the seas were?

Bill:

I was around the Horn, so it was a little bit sheltered. The swells come around there too, but not so bad as they could have been. So I had to get that... the trouble is when you climb up there and then you find you don't have the right tool. And you come down and go back up.

Jim:

Oh, you had to do it more than once?

Bill:

Yeah. Well, you know what it's like. You get up on the mast head, it takes almost all you can to hang on.

Jim:

Oh, yeah.

Bill:

But sailing by yourself, you have to do it. Nobody else is going to. I remember sometimes I used to wake up and I'd hear a noise and I'd think...there's something going on there, well, if I keep quiet, maybe somebody else will fix it. That would be in my mind. [Laughing]

Jim:

So you're now heading back up for Buenos Aires from Cape Horn.

Bill:

Yeah.

Jim:

And you had that adventure. Any other big events on that passage from Cape Horn up to Buenos Aires?

Bill:

No, that was pretty uneventful.

Jim:

And you're an old salt by now and these big seas and things are no big deal for you, huh?

Bill:

Yeah. They were actually quite surprised to see me back there at the yacht club. Went straight to the yacht club when I went back and, "Oh, wow!" You know how Latin's are.

Jim:

So they're cheering for you, and they know you've gone all the way around then at that point?

Bill:

Well, they had to assume that. Somebody said to me, I remember, the young fellow said, asked me where did I come from? And I said, "From New Zealand." And he looked at me, he didn't know where that was. But I did meet Vito Dumas there and Edward Allcard, too, in Argentina.

Jim:

Did you compare circumnavigations with Vito Dumas?

Bill:

Oh yeah. Because the designer of his boat and Vito Dumas invited me to have lunch with him on their boat. Vito was an emotional sort of a guy. I remember he was... I couldn't really understand everything he said, because we had lots of conversation, because we had lots of wine. But I don't think either of us knew too much about what the other was saying. He was quite emotional about the fact that it was all finished for him. He wouldn't be able to do those things anymore.

Jim:

Well that must have been special to have him there.

Bill:

Yeah, it was.

Jim:

Somebody else that knew what you'd been through. Very few people would understand that. When you crossed your path and realized you'd finished your circumnavigation, was that pretty cool? Were you pretty impressed with yourself?

Bill:

I don't think so. I don't remember anything in particular about it. But somewhere down in the South Atlantic there, I must have, before I got to Buenos Aires.

Jim:

Yeah, you probably crossed your path at that point. So then you've got to get to Miami. Well you did a little racing and so you raced on Ondine?

Bill:

Yes.

Jim:

And I bring that up because do you know who Sean Rankins is? He's a sailmaker. He's got Northwest [Sails and] Canvas down in Hadlock at the boat school. I interviewed him a month or so ago. And this was Huey Long's boat, right?

Bill:

Yes.

Jim:

And he sailed with Huey Long on Ondine Five. He sailed with Huey Long on Ondine V. He was a sailmaker for North Sails, and he sailed across the Atlantic on Ondine V over to Norway, and then I was just thinking, "Wow, two people who have sailed Ondines who I've gotten to talk to."

Bill:

This was the 50... I think a 57-footer.

Jim:

And you guys won that race, didn't you?

Bill:

Yeah. We won everything. We swept the board there.

Jim:

I was doing some research on that, and I found a little article in the New York Times from the time, but didn't mention you, but did say that you'd won the race.

Bill:

They had a great skipper on Ondine, Sven Joffs. He was a Finn. He ran the show there, but at racing, when the boat was racing, he was just one of the crew, because the rules in those days, if you had a professional onboard, he wasn't allowed to touch the helm...

Jim:

And so that was the Bueno Aires to Rio race?

Bill:

Yes.

Jim:

And then you made it back down to your boat on another, like a cruising boat or something?

Bill:

Yeah, it was a cruising boat. [Owned by the] McCalls, The Odyssey was the name of the boat. They had sailed, the family that owned the boat, had sailed up to Rio earlier. They were in Rio, were there. I knew them from the yacht club [...and they] asked me if I would come back with them, because they had to leave.

Jim:

And you get back on your boat for the last big leg, like 7,000 miles back to Miami.

Bill:

Yeah. I want to say something about it. When you get back, you've been on someone else's boat, you get back on your own boat, it's unbelievable. Coming back home. So I'd spent all this time on the race boat and then the other family's boat. And you get back, sit down in your own cabin of your own boat. I remember that, still remember that, how good that felt. I don't know whether you had the same association with your boat, but it's like...I'd talk to the boat all the time. It's like the best friend that you have. See, a good boat's going to take care of you.

Jim:

Why did you aim for Miami after that and not back to the UK?

Bill:

The reason for Miami, because I was going back to the UK, but after I'd raced on Ondine, they asked me if I would come on board, sail with them. Dick Bertram was the instigator in it, he was the one who had Bertram Yachts years ago and he was a regular crew member of Ondine. They used to haul in these people from all over the [world, they] were business people, usually, that would show up for the race, but there were three people on board who were regular crew members. They delivered the boat and got it ready and were there during the racing as well. And Dick Bertram talked me into coming up to the US and joining with them on Ondine. They were going to be going out to California for the Acapulco race. So that's what I was coming to the US for, how I ended up in Miami.

Jim:

But you didn't end up continuing to race on Ondine?

Bill:

No, Because I met a girl in Miami who didn't want me to go off racing. [Laughing]

Marie:

Wasn't me.

Jim:

Okay. And just briefly, what was that passage like up from Bueno Aires to Miami? I mean that's a big, long passage. It's across the equator again.

Bill:

Actually I came to the West Indies, English Harbor was where I stopped on the way up, and then sailed on up to where I... There must have been another stop on the way I think, in the Bahamas. And then I got to Nassau and came through Cat Key onto Miami. It was all pretty uneventful. I think I stayed outside the Bahamas chain mostly, till I crossed through from Nassau.

Jim:

So you get to Miami, this girl comes down to the dock...

Bill:

You were talking about girls coming down to the dock before. That's true. I did meet this girl on the dock [laughing]. She had friends there. Yeah, for me it was quite an eyeopener to arrive in Miami in the '60s.

Jim:

Oh, I bet.

Bill:

Mid-60s. '65, I think. To walk from the dock up to the supermarket was different than anything I'd ever seen before.

Jim:

So you ended up then selling the boat in Miami?

Bill:

Yes.

Jim:

You decided you were going to stay on land for a while, you had to go to work or...

Bill:

Yeah, I had to go to work, that's for sure. Yeah. Well, the girl that I met was in college in Miami. She graduated, I think, the next year and we moved out to Oregon. She was a botanist. Thought that would be a good place for a botanist to be. Green. So yeah, we drove across to up north, ended up there in Portland.

Jim:

In Portland. Okay. And then how do you get up here to Port Townsend then?

Bill:

Well, I built a boat in Portland, a Freya design. I built it out of steel in the front yard.

Marie:

Went to welding school to learn, too.

Jim:

I was just going to say, you were a welder then.

Bill:

Yeah, that started me on a different career. I was a miner, but I didn't want to do that anymore. And going to welding school, I'm able to have a skill where I could make a living and also build this boat. So the Freya, if you don't know the boat, was a Halverson design from Australia. Same Halverson that I sailed with in the race in New Zealand. And he wanted to get one built for me to go in that first round the world race.

Jim:

The one with Robin Knox Johnson?

Bill:

Yeah.

Jim:

You were thinking of that?

Bill:

Yeah. Yeah. I'd have had the boat for free. But again, that didn't work out with my marriage situation.

Jim:

So you got married?

Bill:

Yes.

Jim:

And she didn't want you to go off?

Bill:

So I didn't do it, but I ended up building that same design that they would've built for me. Pity in a way because that it was a good boat. It won the Sydney Hobart race three times. Not a modern boat in the sense the fin keel and that kind of stuff. It was an older design, double ender. Really, even in those days, you rarely saw them racing. But it was a good boat.

Jim:

So did you sail that up here to Port Townsend?

Bill:

No, but I sailed it up to Sydney.

Jim:

Sydney, BC?

Bill:

Yeah. My brother, by that time he was working up there. He lived on Coal Island, was on tugboats for Coal Island towing. And we went up there to visit him. Then sailed that down to Hawaii, at which time things weren't going so well with the marriage. So we were going to sail on, but it just wasn't possible. We came back to San Diego, and I sold it.

Jim:

Then do you come back to Portland?

Bill:

I worked in the shipyards down there.

Jim:

In San Diego?

Bill:

Remember, I was a welder now. So yeah, I worked on the big ships down there, welding. I can't remember exactly the sequence, but my brother had... I mentioned that the boat he went from New Zealand on wrecked on the beach there. A couple of Australians came down there to help get that boat off the reef. They had one of these Common Class 30, I think they're 30-footer. Which one of them happened to win the Sydney Hobart about the year that I was there in Hobart. And anyway, this young Australian had one of these boats built, and he and the two people with him were up in Tahiti and they helped get the steel boat off the reef. One of his crew left, and so my brother went with Andy Wall, and they sailed around Cape Horn up to Fort Lauderdale. Andy married there and had a family and built a Freya.

He had a glass hull made and finished it out there. And so he sold *Coronade*, which was this Common class boat, to me. I was sailing it off to, I think I was going to Norway. But anyway, I was going north there in June, I believe, when a hurricane started off that coast there, which is unheard of. It started out, it came as a tropical storm. But it got to hurricane strength, and I got mixed up in this, but I didn't even know it was there until it was on top of me, because I was in the Gulf Stream. Everything was going along just fine.

So I had some problems with this boat at that stage. So the rigging, the standing rigging on that boat had been there for quite a while and there were strands of the rigging started to break. And so I had to head back in Southport, I think it was, just by Cape Fear. You go in there and you can go on up to Wilmington and so on. I took the boat in there and I had to... So I went to work there, welding, at a place just downstream from the nuclear plant there. They were building a citric acid plant, and I worked there for a while and then came south again, back to Fort Lauderdale. Something was wrong with the boat that I had to get fixed. And after I'd fixed it, changed the rigging, and done several things to the boat, I headed off down to the Caribbean.

I was going to come through the Canal (this boat had an engine) [Laughing]. The steel boat I had; it had no engine either. The 38-footer.

Jim:

The one you sailed to Sydney and then Hawaii and San Diego? Wow.

Bill:

Yeah. But would've been nice to have had it. I remember I came into... One of most embarrassing things, I came into San Diego, and you had to go to the police dock there when you came in. So I come into this dock and the wind's blowing right onto the dock where I had to make a landing. So if you had an engine, you'd just motor up to the dock. But I had to sail into it, and when I let the main sail run free as I came into the dock to spill the wind, then the topping lift hooked around this light standard on the dock and yanked it right out of the dock. So they weren't very happy about that. I can't remember what happened about that. I would assume I probably had to pay for it. Can't remember.

Jim:

So then how do you end up in Port Townsend?

Marie:

What about when you worked in Antarctica?

Bill:

Oh yeah. That was in between there somewhere. Well, that was before I bought *Coronade*. Yeah, my brother when he was on *Coronade*, coming around from... But anyway, he was in Ushuaia [near Cape Horn], and this boat, a research vessel was there. It belonged to the science academy, and it was down there to do Antarctic research, the *Hero*, it was called. Anyway, he said that they worked between Ushuaia and Palmer Station down in Antarctica. So I applied for a job there and got the job. So I went down for a season. They used to run from Ushuaia down to the peninsula where Palmer Station, the American base is, with supplies, scientists, and then they do trips around the general area there out to Deception Island and places like that. Smith Island. Doing research on fish.

Jim:

But what were you doing for them?

Bill:

I was one of the deck crew, and I used to run one of the inflatables to take people to shore and the geologists or the paleontologists, whatever they were collecting, it was a great time.

Jim:

Sounds fantastic.

Bill:

I spent the winter... That was in the summer, but down there in the winter, they spent up around Tierra del Fuego. And so we went out, up into the Magellan Straits. It was really, really interesting work. We came up the Patagonian coast on the Atlantic side. Ship was dried docked for a while in Bahia Blanca. Went in where they do all the whale spotting down there, the Right whales come in. It was very interesting. I left because the next season, they had these people from, I think they were Canadian, but anyway, they were doing research on seals. So they were shooting the seals, and I thought, "I'm not having any part of that." So I left.

Jim:

So you end up in Port Townsend?

Bill:

In Port Townsend. Now, how I came to be here, because we used to come up this way when I was going to visit my brother on Coal Island. He lived on Coal Island, but on his boat. He had a boat there. Do you remember Smeeton's boat, Tzu Hang? Well, that was my brother's boat. He bought it.

Jim:

Right, I'd read that. He'd bought it from the Smeetons.

Bill:

So it was moored on Coal Island. Right near Schwartz Bay, where the ferry comes in.

Jim:

Oh, okay. Near Sydney.

Bill:

Yeah. North of Sydney. We passed through this area going back and forth there a few times. Not actually in Port Townsend, here in the general area. So when I came up here from San Diego, I went to Anacortes. I was there for probably a

week or two and didn't much cotton to Anacortes. So it was time of the Wooden Boat Festival, and I came over here to see the Wooden Boat Festival. I camped out at the fort there.

Jim:

Fort Warden?

Bill:

Yeah. Put a tent up in one of the places out there. And then I thought, "Well, I think I'd really like to live over there." So I stayed, and I got a job out at Cecil Lange's place out there on Cape George.

Jim:

Cape George? Oh, okay.

Bill:

And I've been here ever since.

Jim:

And what year was that? That you came to that Wooden Boat Festival?

Bill:

'79.

Jim:

Didn't you start or help start Townsend Bay Marine?

Bill:

Yeah. Yeah. Well, as I say, I worked for Cecil, and I worked for Admiral Marine when they were here. Worked over in Port Angeles for two years, traveled every day back and forth. And then I had met someone who was over here to look at Admiral Marine from Germany. They were looking for someone to build a boat for them. What were they called?

Marie:

Lurssen's

Bill:

Lurssen's, yeah. Lurssen's a big German shipyard. So that didn't work out because they [Admiral] went bankrupt right at that time. And because I had had the contact with these people, we were looking, what are we going to do for a living here? Everything's shut down. So I was responsible for contacting this person, and we told them, Paul Zeusche was with me, we said we've got all these people who know how to build boats and there's a facility here that we could use to do that. They came over, looked at it, and hired us all. So we all had a job.

Jim:

So that was the start of Townsend Bay Marine?

Bill:

No, that was Lurssen's yard then. They owned it. They owned that place then. But after we built the boat that they wanted, they decided, well this wasn't what they wanted to be involved in, and they sold it to us. By that time, when there were four or five...

Marie:

Five of you started it.

Bill:

Denny?

Marie:

Denny, David King.

Bill:

Yes. David was working there. Yeah.

Marie:

David Pratt, yourself, and Paul Zeusche.

Bill:

So we all went together [and bought the business].

Jim:

And were you doing mostly welding then?

Bill:

No. What happened after I started working with Admiral Marine, I was working in the fiberglass side of it, the molds, and the fiberglass, and I got very interested in the materials side of it that we used for composites. So we got to be at a really advanced, for the period, a really advanced stage of work with Admiral, because we had this guy. The Bayliner guy. Anyway, we built this big boat, *Evviva*, and I can't think of the owner's name, but he allowed us to do a lot of things for that boat a normal owner wouldn't have done. So we were able to get into, technically, into a side of materials that were still aircraft materials, and I was responsible for all that side of it. So we were probably the most advanced in building large boats at that time. In fact, *Evviva* was the largest fiberglass boat ever built in the country at that time.

Jim:

How big was it?

Bill:

160...

Jim:

Oh geez.

Bill:

It's 161, 162 feet. We launched it out of the buildings down there.

Jim:

Right here? Really?

Bill:

There were dunes out there then, before. It wasn't anything like it is now. That yard down there at the back of the buildings, that was just grass and weeds and so on.

Jim:

Really? 160-foot boat, you just roll it down the beach into the water?

Bill:

Yeah, we did. There was a railroad Y. We rolled it right out under those flats there, far out as we could get. But that was actually the owner's, Admiral's owner's, Darrell Wakefield. He was the mover behind that. He loved to move things and he could do anything. He was just brilliant at that. They took that boat out there and then there's a little gap between the seawall and the end of the railroad Y. Took it down through there and out.

Jim:

Must have been nerve-wracking.

Bill:

It was pretty interesting. Yeah, I mean it was amazing. Crowds of people there watching.

Marie:

And then it went over to Hadlock, Hadlock and the interior was completed out there.

Bill:

I built a little boat down here that it was a race boat and we made it racier. It wasn't really a success.

Jim:

I would love to hear more stories, but we're over two hours now.

Bill:

And I've got to go home and walk my dog.

Jim:

Anything else you want to say before we wrap up? Any lessons learned? Anything to tell the people who are going to be listening to this?

Bill:

Well, there was something interesting, the other... I was saying to Marie, we were invited to a farewell... Not a farewell, a retirement party this last weekend,

Saturday, it was at Cape George, over at the yacht club there. That building. And in that building, and I looked out and the view was just beautiful. You'd look out the windows at Diamond Point and the island there, and you looked through there, on Saturday it was kind of, visibility wasn't great. And you could look out in that gap between the island and Diamond Point, and it looked like you ... were going out into the ocean. And I looked at that and I thought, "God, if you were young, how could you resist looking at that and not going out there?" You could just roll on forever.

Jim:

At this point, we thought the conversation was over. However, we kept talking and the recorder was still running, so here's some bonus material. Directly after this, you'll hear Bill's wife talking about him finally getting recognition from the Australian government for his achievement when in 2019, he received the medal of the Order of Australia.

Marie:

Got a call from the consul general in San Francisco, who said that Joe Hockey, who was former Finance Minister in the Australian government, who was now the ambassador to the US, was going to be in Seattle visiting Amazon, Microsoft, and Boeing. And so he was going to present the Order of Australia medal to Bill in investiture, which took place at the Columbia Club.

Bill:

One of the reasons these people went to bat for me, I didn't really care, didn't matter to me, but was that the people who sailed around the world alone after me were Sir Francis and...

Marie:

Sir Francis Chichester.

Bill:

And Sir Alec...

Jim:

Oh, and they all got to be Sir?

Bill:

Yeah, they all got to be Sir, you see.

Jim:

And did you know the Smeeton's? Did you meet them?

Bill:

Yes.

Jim:

Okay. Up on Salt Spring, when they had their place or...

Bill:

No, I met them up outside Calgary.

Jim:

Oh, when they had their-

Bill:

Had a farm up there. Got chased by a moose up there.

Jim:

You did?

Bill:

Yes. They had sort of a game place up there, and I believe there were a couple of moose. Anyway, the moose was in rut, and my brother and I were there together. We walked out to look at them. They're out there in the open, and there's the damn moose, he's looking at us and he starts waving his horns around. His eyes are rolling. We better get out of there...

Karen:

Were you like Robin Knox Johnston who loaded up on cans of Bully Beef? That's all he had, and he would never eat it again. He had like 200 cans of...

Marie:

No, I think he had sardines. You have sardines?

Bill:

No, I had Bully Beef. Yeah. With Spam and...

Jim:

Oh, spam.

Karen:

Oh, Spam is still big, yeah.

Bill:

I had a Primus stove, just a single burner on a gimbal. So everything that I cooked...

Karen:

One pot.

Bill:

I used to cook potatoes in sea water. The nice thing about having a really small boat is you don't need pumps inside. I never had any pump for water or anything. So you just reach out the companion way, and...

Jim:

I'm already thinking of ten things that I would like to know more about. Thank you very much for your time. This has been great.

If you would like to read a transcript of the interview or see some pictures, you can find them on maritimevoices.org.