

BRICE STUMP'S SHORE HISTORY

The Victory Chimes could be coming home again

By Brice Stump

Special To Salisbury Independent

If you're in the market for a boat "super bargain," Capt. Sam Sikkema has a boat unlike any other in the world, but bring a special trailer.

He is selling the Victory Chimes, the last remaining Chesapeake Bay three-mast ram in the world. Sikkema is selling the Rockland, Maine-based 179-foot vessel, which has 21 cabins, at the jaw-dropping price of \$385,000.

Is that a bargain?

Dan Parsons of Georgetown heard it was for sale for \$1 million, then \$650,000. Both figures were incorrect.

By the time he got the correct asking price of \$385,000, he was so elated he felt like a potential winning contestant on The Price Is Right.

Buying a ram that's on the National Register of Historic Places, for a pittance, seemed within reach. His cell phone was in overdrive as he tried to find financial backers.

Parsons doesn't want it for himself. A Historic Preservation Planner for Sussex County, he is trying to put together a group of investors or to acquire grants to buy the Victory Chimes and return it to the Chesapeake Bay.

It was built in Bethel in 1900 to move freight in, out and around the bay for almost 50 years.

Parsons, along with Kevin Phillips, president of the Bethel Town Commissioners and the Bethel Heritage Museum and Historical Society, and Shelley Hastings, vice president of Nanticoke Heritage Byway, are trying to find potential investors.

"Even a business enterprise is an option," Parsons said. "We'd love to have her back on the Chesapeake Bay where it was made."

"We haven't found anyone to spearhead this project and that's what we need," Phillips said. "We have a small committee trying to get a sense of direction. Right now we are a group of friends operating in emergency mode."

"Dan has talked to a lot of people who have the means to buy it, but the first question they ask is



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Kevin Phillips, president of the Bethel Heritage Museum and Historical Society, stands beside the original wheel of the ram Victory Chimes, built in Bethel in 1900. He and others are trying to buy the 179-foot vessel now docked in Maine.

"Where is it going to be docked?" and the second question is, 'Who is going to maintain it?' And we don't have answers yet," Phillips explained.

The big issue is future maintenance needs. There's also the cost of insurance and docking fees to think about.

"The Victory Chimes was in St. Michael's maybe 15 years ago. The owner at that time was trying to sell it then and didn't get anyone

interested, so I knew this was going to be an uphill battle to get financial support. But I feel this may be the last opportunity we will ever have where Bethel has a role in getting the Victory Chimes," Phillips said.

It's all new territory for Parsons and Phillips as they scramble to determine what's next and how to make things happen.

As is usually the situation, it's all about money, and in this case,

there's not a single penny in the hope chest.

Then, too, there's the matter of the cost of bringing the ram "home."

Just bringing it to the Chesapeake Bay, to an as-yet-undetermined location, could cost another \$80,000.

"If they can get it to Milford, to the Vinyard Shipyard there, that's a lot closer to us than Maine or New York," Phillips said, laughing.

That's another obstacle for the group to overcome. The Vinyard Shipyard, which closed in 1973, built its last boat in 1951.

Though there is an effort to restore it to working order, it's a project that could be several years in the making.

Parsons is hopeful the Victory Chimes could at least be docked in Milford while a suitable shipyard for maintenance can be found.

"The Vinyard Shipyard site is the only place around here potentially large enough for the Victory Chimes," Parsons said.

He's hoping a Delaware Maritime Heritage area can be created that would showcase the shipyard, Fenwick Island Lighthouse, Cape Henlopen Lighthouse, the Light Ship Overfalls in Lewes, the Indian River Lifesaving Station and the Coastal Defense Spotting Stations around the mouth of Delaware Bay.

Challenges aside, the \$385,000 price is enticing for the little group trying to get the Victory Chimes back home to the Chesapeake Bay. Maybe they could raise the money. It has the village of 200 residents or so abuzz with excitement.

Bethel's legacy

Residents of so many different walks of life have come and gone over the decades, but most have readily embraced Bethel's unique maritime legacy. Though shipbuilding ceased in 1918, this quiet village in Sussex County remains proud of its past. Residents still enjoy bragging that they own houses built for ship captains and shipwrights.

Reminders of the glory days of the shipyard are on town signs, and the tiny park near the site keeps the past very much a part of daily life there.

Victory Chimes, once called the Edwin and Maud, was a powerhouse of a freight ship in its day, and it is the pride of the community still.

She has managed to come through the hardest of times to continue to sail. It's inconceivable to contemplate a day when the legendary ram is no more. Images of the ram can be found throughout the community, but everyone seems to associate that generic ram profile on printed material and signs with the Victory Chimes.

Phillips certainly doesn't want something unspeakable to happen to the Victory Chimes during his watch. "We are trying so hard," he said in a soft voice.

At home in Bethel, Phillips said he's finding it a "hard sell" to persuade town folk that buying the icon is a sound business venture.

"People around town aren't very optimistic. The general mood centers around the price. People think, 'This isn't going to happen.'"

Hearing that is enough to take the wind out of his sails.

Miracle needed

If only, he speculated, if only a miracle could save the Victory Chimes. But in the end, buying history comes down to money. And just like the cliff hangers on television game shows, "there's many a slip between the cup and the lip." So close and yet so far away

The Victory Chimes is no stranger to gloom-and-doom scenarios. Converted from freight to passenger service in 1946 to 1954, the vessel operated out of Annapolis promoting weeklong cruises on the Chesapeake Bay.

The Edwin and Maud was renamed Victory Chimes in 1954 and moved to a charter service business in Maine. She was sold and purchased "for about \$1 million" in 1984, and taken to the Great Lakes area. By 1987 she was in foreclosure and sold at auction.

"Rumor was that if she wasn't sold she'd be broken up," Sikkema said. Other rumors circulated that the ram was going to sail off to Japan to be a sushi restaurant.

In 1988, Thomas Monaghan, then owner of Detroit Tigers Baseball Club and Domino's Pizza, purchased a national treasure and Bethel's absolute pride and joy.

He supposedly spent \$2 million restoring and remodeling the



The Victory Chimes, formerly the Edwin and Maud, is shown under sail in the coastal waters of Maine. Built in Bethel in 1900, the once iconic sailing ram that moved freight on the Chesapeake Bay is now on the market for \$385,000.

ram. It took a lot of pizzas with extra toppings to pay for the work. Monaghan renamed it the Domino Effect and the all-wood sailing vessel was used for "employee incentive cruises."

She went from carrying lumber, fertilizer, coal and fish scrap to delighting guests on outings, to promoting pizzas.

Monaghan, often credited with having saved the ram, sold it in 1990 to Capt. Kip Files and Capt. Paul DeGaeta, of Maine, to once again be used for commercial cruises.

They renamed her Victory Chimes and the state legislature recognized the ram as the "Official Windjammer of Maine." The likeness of the Victory Chimes was featured on the state's 2003 quarter.

Present owner and captain Sam Sikkema purchased the Victory Chimes in 2018, adding it to Maine's Windjammer Association fleet made up of 12 vessels owned by separate parties. Sikkema operates his business as The Victory Chimes Inc.

Since 2012, the Victory Chimes



Bethel, located north of Salisbury on Broad Creek, is known for its historic construction of sailing ships.

calls Windjammer Wharf in Rockland, Maine, her home port. "We were still booking guests for overnight adventures on the coast of Maine in September," Sikkema said.

If a ram could select an owner and captain, the Victory Chimes would certainly pick Sikkema. A lover of history, he seems ideal for the job, proud of the vessel, a capable captain, understanding of the personality that is the Victory Chimes and appreciative that he

had the opportunity to be at her wheel since 2018.

"The reason she's especially interesting, from a marine preservation perspective, is her architecture," Sikkema said. "She is a unique Chesapeake Bay design."

The Chesapeake is a cool place because shipbuilders there were so innovative during the age of sail, trying to find new ways, better ways to get sailboats to make a living. The ram schooner is one of the

SALISBURY INDEPENDENT

Darel La Prade, Publisher
dlaprade@iniusa.org

Konrad La Prade, Vice President of Sales
klaprade@iniusa.org

Cathy Koyanagi, Marketing Consultant
ckoyanagi@iniusa.org

Jennifer Stutzman, Circulation Director
jstutzman@iniusa.org

Wanda Ford-Waring, Corporate Services
wfwaring@iniusa.org

Katie Redefor, RFA Reporter
kredfor@iniusa.org

Greg Bassett, Editor
gbassett@iniusa.org



Charlene Bisson, President & CEO
cbisson@iniusa.org

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Mailing Address: PO Box 1385
Salisbury, MD 21803
Phone: 410-543-4500
Web: baytobaynews.com
Email: salisburyindependent@iniusa.org

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Kevin Phillips examines a model of the Edwin and Maud, a ram built in Bethel in 1900 and renamed the Victory Chimes in 1954.

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most economically successful sail vessels ever built. She spent her entire (freight moving) working life in and around the Chesapeake Bay. To me, that's where her home is. The reason why she is interesting, historically, is because she fits into the lives of people around that area.

"It's her 'ancestral home,' he said. "I feel if she can make it back down to the Chesapeake Bay it would be the best thing for her."

The captain loves taking the wheel and sailing the historic ram.

"She handles like a barge, but I mean that in a good way," he said, laughing. "Rams are unique because they were built with a flat bottom, she skids sideways a lot and is skittish to handle. But what's special and very impressive is what she can do under sail. Rams were about shipping freight, so though they developed this boat that shouldn't sail well, it does its job."

Under a good wind filling its 7,000 square feet of sail, it can move along at up to 10 knots.

"It's almost unbelievable," Sikkema said, "but when she was working the Chesapeake Bay, a three-man crew handled her."

It's almost unbelievable, too, for David Crockett of Crisfield, who worked on the one-mast skipjack Kathryn years ago when dredging oysters by sail.

"When we were working with sails it was all hands on deck," to adjust the canvas sails. "It took at least two or three men to operate the jib and a six-man crew, plus the captain, to operate the main sail so we could turn the skipjack around," Crockett said.

"There's a one-cylinder, six horsepower gasoline 'winch engine,' up forward, that we use for the sails and anchor," the captain said. "It was installed in 1905 and still works great."

Maritime workhorse

There's no denying that the Victory Chimes is visually stunning as she cuts through the waves on a beautiful day. A workhorse in her day, time has transformed her into a prized thoroughbred.

Ed Riggan and his wife of Rehoboth Beach were weekend guests aboard the ram years ago and he said the Victory Chimes is a maritime work of art.

Growing up he knew the vessel and Edwin and Maud. Its first captain, Robert Riggan, was his grandfather's cousin. "Ever since I was a boy, I've heard about the famous ram," said Riggan, 86. Capt. Riggan is believed to have been the owner of the ram in 1900, naming the vessel after his two children.

When the Victory Chimes captain at the time learned of the family connection, he introduced Riggan to the 40 or so guests as they sat down for dinner.

He felt humbled and proud, he recalled. "Those on board helped

raise the sails as part of the sailing experience. My uncle had been on it years earlier and insisted I sail on her, too, and of course I'm so glad I did."

Over the years thousands of folks have been aboard the Victory Chimes, and Sikkema regrets that his role in its history will soon end.

"Well, she's no longer economically viable here as a windjammer," Sikkema said. "We ran into some structural issues in the hull during an inspection in the spring. I decided it was too expensive to fix. I can't dump a million and a half into the ship and make that back. I don't want to sell it, I'd rather keep sailing her, but I can't. The only regret I have is not having figured out this situation sooner, the maintenance issue."

U.S. Coast Guard certification, which requires numerous safety inspection points, is imperative to allow the Victory Chimes to operate.

The captain is admirably honest about the "hidden costs" that color the appeal of the ticket price. Sometimes, a bargain just may not be a bargain for a particular buyer.

Like all boats, the Victory Chimes will require perpetual maintenance. But first things first, the ram will need a new home if she comes back to the Chesapeake Bay area.

From the moment the ink on the sales contract is still wet, the new owner has to find a place to dock the boat, all 179 feet of it. "And

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that's a lot of dock space," he said.

"For a lot of people, suddenly its size is so big it's no longer a 'boat,' it's an honest to God small ship. You just don't find spaces for something like this to park it, like you would your car. Finding a shipyard to do maintenance is a major concern. Most commercial shipyards don't like hauling wooden boats because they don't have the facilities to work on them, so they don't make a lot of money.

"Yes, just finding a shipyard for the Victory Chimes can be a hard sell."

Then there's insurance cost and maintaining security for the vessel.

"Buying it just gives you license to spend more money on it," he said, with laughter.

Sales nibbles

Sikkema had a sales nibble this summer when a New York City buyer wanted to convert the Victory Chimes into a floating restaurant in the city. That proposal has been put on hold, the captain said.



U.S. MINT PHOTO

The Victory Chimes is featured on the U.S. quarter that celebrates Maine's entry into the union.

Selling a ship he loves is difficult, but Sikkema, 35, is a down-to-earth guy, business first, emotions later.

It's simply being realistic. He has a love affair with the Victory Chimes, with a business-centered heart.

"What I don't want to see is this boat orphaned. My goal is to see it gets saved. I don't want someone getting this boat that really doesn't understand what they are getting into.

"By the end of January, things

will really start getting tight here. I hope I don't have to default on my loans, because the process of selling her gets trickier. At some point I won't have any say in what happens to her," he said.

"The business still owes money on the vessel. If it was up to me, personally, I'd give it to the people who want to take care of her. The last time she was in this situation, Tom Monaghan bought the vessel and was instrumental in revitalizing the ship so she could continue to sail." He's hoping history repeats itself.

Phillips and others have hope, too, hope that maybe a kind-hearted lover of maritime history will step up and save the day.

Things need to happen and happen fast, and the pressure has created an atmosphere of intense anxiety and stress among seller and potential buyers.

What makes this project especially important, according to Phillips, is that the Victory Chimes could be bought by someone who has no regard for her history or worse, sets about cutting the ram up to recycle its vintage wood.

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