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After Decades Breaking Otsego Lake Ice, HEAT!

Watch For 'Bubba,' 'Darling Tug,' This Spring

By JIM KEVLIN



Jim Kevlin/AllOTSEGO.life – **She’s bundled up against the cold now, but this April Paula Wikoff will be cutting up Otsego’s ice floe from the heated comfort of “Bubba’s” cabin.**

COOPERSTOWN – You may have noticed a tug boat, “Bubba,” parked in the snow between the Lakefront Hotel & Restaurant and the lighthouse. There’s a story behind it.

Last April, as her family – beginning with grandfather Alfred Engelmann – has done for 63 years, Lakefront proprietor Paula Wikoff headed out in a 30-foot steel cutter – let’s call it “Blue”

– to chop up Otsego Lake’s ice pack before it could break up and damage docks along Cooperstown’s lakeshore.

The ice floe “can be a mile wide. It can be two miles, coming at us,” she explained.

Usually, a warm Southwind is ‘blowing by then, pushing the ice away from the shore. Last year was another story, she recalled with a shiver, “there was a Northwest wind, 30 miles per hour, that never stopped.”

In warm Aprils, the mere wake of the cutter could break up the ice. “Last year, we had to cut it with the boat,” she said. “You’re getting the boat up on the ice and cracking it. We broke six engine shafts.”

“It was 10 days of this,” she recounted. “I didn’t get to bed for 10 days.”

Nonetheless, frozen nature overwhelmed, knocking out the Lakeland Shore Association dock.

“We cut straight for 48 hours,” Paula explained. “We left the lake for a half hour to fuel up. I ran up to get sandwiches. By the time we got back the dock was gone.”

Then, the ice pierced “Blue’s” hull. Water got into the hold and, when Paula got back the next morning, it had frozen and cracked both engines.



Ian Austin/AllOTSEGO.life – Paula Wikoff examines “Bubba,” the tugboat from the Port of Seattle she hopes will allow her to break up Otsego Lake ice this spring from the comfort of a heated cabin. This is the 63rd year her family has been providing the service to Cooperstown’s waterfront.

As it happens, the cutter was unheated. And Wikoff and brother Fred Zoeller – she operates the hotel; he the restaurant – finished the ice-cutting in “a little fishing boat” with steel welded around it; it also lacked heat.

Again she shivers, thinking of the experience.

The cutter was sent off to Canada for repairs. "But I said to my brother: 'This is it. I'm not doing this if we don't get another boat'," said Paula.

Ed Smith, who passed away in 2017, used to make a contribution to the effort, since the ice-cutting helped protect his dock at the end of Pioneer Street. The Village of Cooperstown, which expanded its docks at Lakefront Park, benefits too, and Paula is a bit miffed that Village Hall has never made a contribution.

Be that as it may, the family's investment in dockage at the end of Fair Street, plus being good neighbors at Lakeland Shores – developed by Engelmann and his wife, also Paula, in the 1950s – doesn't leave the family much choice.

First, Paula approached John Scarano, an Albany boat builder who had created the Glimmerglass Queen, the tour boat that plies Otsego's waters each summer. He was happy to build them another boat – for \$140,000.

"For a 10-day, two-week thing every year? I said, 'That's too much'," she continued. "We found some boats, but they were really rough." They spread the word they were looking for a boat, and Tom Swatling of Cherry Valley, looking online, happened on "Bubba," docked in Seattle. Paula called out there to owner Garrett Newman and was intrigued. The marine survey showed Bubba, which had been used since the 1950s to bring larger boats to dock in the Port of Seattle, only had 585 hours of use. The price was \$13,900; the replacement value, \$130,000.

"I did my first wire transfer the next day," she said.

The boat had been on the market for a year. But, wouldn't you know, as soon as Newman got the money, he was approached by another buyer, urging him to cancel the deal with the Cooperstown woman and offering twice as much.

"Garrett, you made a deal with me," Paula said – emphatically, you can imagine. "I'm not letting you get out of this."

The next question was, how to get it here. In the end, the owner drove it cross country. It was 24-feet tall – "the hull is really deep, which is what we want" – so it was tricky traversing the roads.

"It arrived on Halloween." Wikoff said to herself, "I hope this isn't a bad omen, coming on Halloween."

Garrett wanted to leave the next day, but Paula insisted on a trial run, retrieving the rudder from the hold and attaching it.

"We took it up to Kingfisher Tower and back," the new owner said.

"By the time we came back, people were calling the office: 'What is that cute boat on the lake? It's really a darling boat.'"

This year, with the tug and the steel cutter back from repairs in Canada with two new engines, Paula's almost looking forward to ice-cutting. Watch for it in April.

Best of all, from Paula's point of view: the cabin is heated.