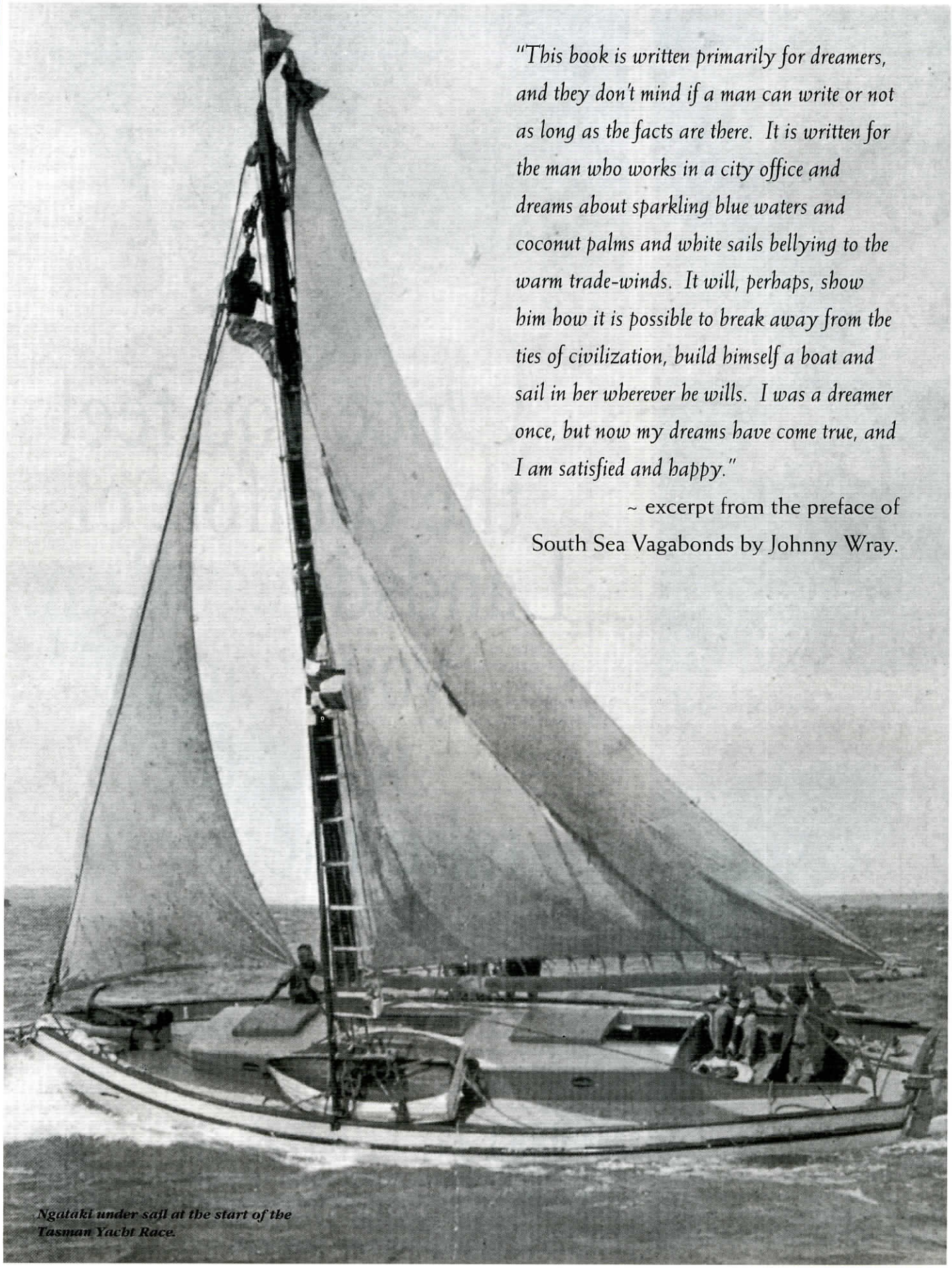
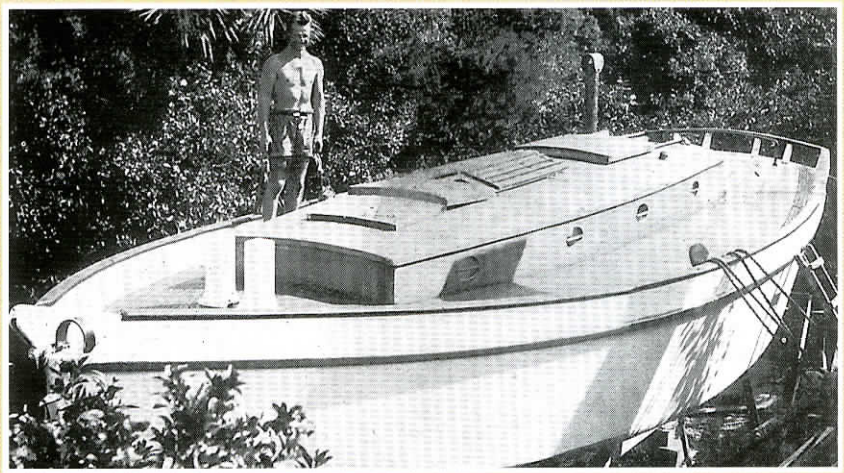


"This book is written primarily for dreamers, and they don't mind if a man can write or not as long as the facts are there. It is written for the man who works in a city office and dreams about sparkling blue waters and coconut palms and white sails bellying to the warm trade-winds. It will, perhaps, show him how it is possible to break away from the ties of civilization, build himself a boat and sail in her wherever he wills. I was a dreamer once, but now my dreams have come true, and I am satisfied and happy."

~ excerpt from the preface of South Sea Vagabonds by Johnny Wray.

***Ngataki* under sail at the start of the Tasman Yacht Race.**

The founding of a *sailing* nation



Johnny Wray with Ngataki under construction in the back garden.

The story of Johnny Wray and the Ngataki by
ROB GREENAWAY

Johnny Wray and his book ~ South Sea Vagabonds ~ are New Zealand icons. They represent the pioneering spirit of Kiwi sailors better than any modern sailing endeavour ever will, and I am happy to argue this point with anyone. Most of New Zealand might not realise the significance of Johnny Wray to our national sailing culture. We're far too caught up with the Americas Cup ~ millions of dollars worth of carbon fibre, sponsorship and marketing ~ to remember a kauri-hulled, 35 foot sloop called the Ngataki.

A 63 year old boat held together with fencing wire and pyjamas, recently returned from a circumnavigation of the globe and still going strong. It cost Johnny Wray 8 pounds, 10 shillings to motivate a nation back in the 1930s. Black Magic, and all other 'plastic fantastics', are by comparison, completely inefficient.

In 1939 a New Zealander by the name of Johnny Wray wrote a book entitled "South Sea Vagabonds." The story tells of how this indomitable New Zealander with no regular income and only eight pounds and ten shillings built his own boat and sailed the South Pacific ~ making his dreams come true.

John William George Bradford Wray was about 20 when he lost his accountancy job during the first stages of the Depression in the 1930s. Perhaps it wasn't so much the lack of work as his lack of interest that was the cause.

"I am not one of your slave-driving work fiends," he wrote, "but it is one of my beliefs that every man should do at least three weeks' work per year ~ if only for the good of his soul."

Either way, he became an unemployed accountant with plenty of time, a motorbike, a little over eight pounds to his name and a dream to go sailing.

The only problem was his lack of a boat, compounded by a lack of money.

A good friend suggested to Johnny that he had six possible means of owning a yacht: buy one (answer; no money), be given one (no chance), beg, borrow or steal one (he was generally honest and "had an intense dislike of being shot at"), or finally, to build one (he admitted he knew not one end of a saw from another). It didn't look good.

With those options in mind, Johnny visited a local shipyard, and the die was cast.

"Everyone seemed to be happy and contented in their work," he wrote. "They had good reason to be, for they were creating something; something which was to be useful and, in their opinion, beautiful. The man who is creating something seems to be invariably happy.

The blacksmith is happy when he creates something useful from a bit of old iron; the artist lingers over his picture; the carpenter whistles as he works; and the boatbuilder stands off and gazes with pride at the lines of his latest ship. But show me the man who is enjoying himself adding up dead figures, or looking after dusty ledgers.

"As I stood there watching the men carefully fitting the planks, the boys whistling and cheerfully making as much noise as possible riveting, I decided there and then to at least try to build a boat."

The question remained. How do you build a boat with about 8 pounds? Johnny took things one step at a time. First he needed timber. Kauri he wanted and nothing less. He scoured the inner Hauraki Gulf in a borrowed yacht and found seven good looking logs washed ashore on Tiri Island. Sadly, after towing them to Auckland he discovered they were pine. Still, they'd pay for milling his kauri logs, if he ever found any.

A few weeks later, Johnny was equipped with timber. He had also crafted a model of the hull he intended to create. He sat with two good friends, Bob and Walter, discussing the merits of the lines he had carved, ready for the next big step ~ actually building the boat.

"By the way, Walter", Johnny asked, "you haven't got any old hammers, saws, planes, or anything like that around your place have you? I haven't got any tools yet and for the best results you really need a few when you're boat building."

It was patently obvious Johnny had begun a task he was not really equipped to complete. But he had at least two things going for him: spirit, and some surprisingly benevolent friends.

As the year progressed, Johnny's boat began to take shape. Frames collapsed and knocked him unconscious. Boards split like toothpicks until he learnt the skills of steaming timber. He very nearly sank a friend's yacht retrieving more logs. He broke traffic regulations towing a 44 foot spar on a motorbike. He came close to breaking a 6 ton capacity bridge by towing a 24 ton weight across it. He could have been heavily fined, or electrocuted, for fiddling with the mains power

of his parents' house to light the tin workshop which he had planted in their backyard.

"In wet weather something seemed to go wrong with the works," he wrote of his electrical operations. "The shed became alive, so that it became a matter of some doubt as to what parts of it you could touch without getting a shock. Even the tools resting on wooden shelves inside the shed were, contrary to all known electrical laws, highly charged. There was a great pity, I thought at the time, that you can't tell if a wire is alive by just looking at it. There ought to be some way, but I don't know of it. The only way I know is by trial and error."

He and his mates formed the Ngataki Club (he chose the boat's name early on), with the only membership requirement the sale of a book of sixpenny raffle tickets to help raise money for sails, and to help pay for the weekly keg of beer consumed by the club in the evolving hull of the boat. They sang, and drank themselves hoarse. Johnny was free from accountancy and life was great.

The more you read of the book, South Sea Vagabonds, the more sentimental you grow. Here is the New Zealand that gave the nation its character. Here is the dream that we still hold, and most often bury: forget the money, let's get on with life.

Johnny, however, rapidly began to run low on cash. His first pound went on paying a recovery fee to the Auckland Harbour Board for three logs he'd anchored near a fairway. Economies were required.

Bolts are expensive things, for example, but they are very useful for holding a boat's frames together. These are the timber structures that look like a cross-section of the hull, and upon which all the timbers are fixed. Johnny decided fencing wire would provide the ideal fastening for the heart of his vessel.

"This method has the advantage over bolts in that the holes are quite small and the wood is not weakened to any extent," he theorised.

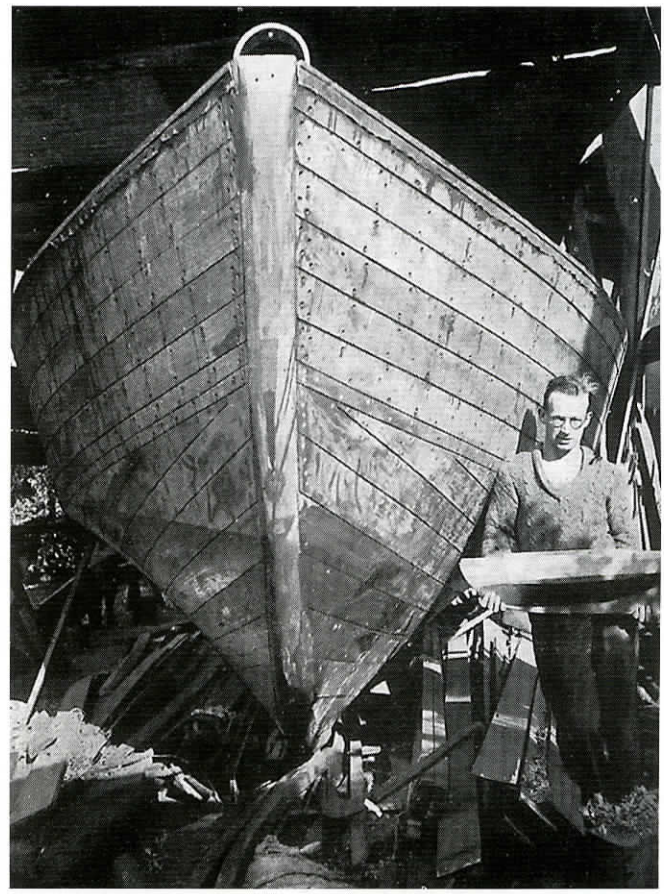
"I have to confess, however, that there was another small factor that had something to do with my adopting this method: I had no small bolts, whereas my father had a large coil of heavy fencing wire that he did not want."

He made sure the metal wire was well-protected. He borrowed bitumen from the sides of Auckland's country roads, boiled it up, dipped in his wire and baked the result in his mother's oven (while she was out).

He found an engine ~ a cast iron Zealandia made in Auckland in 1904 ~ under a gorse bush in a turnip field. The half ton motor just fitted on the back of his motorbike, so he took it home and made it work.

He reasoned that if caulking material was made of good quality cotton, and his pyjamas were also good quality cotton, the corollary must be that his pyjamas would make good caulking ~ plus three shirts and a vest or two. It took the shirt off his back to prevent the Ngataki's hull from leaking.

One day, after about two years, Johnny went to work on his boat to discover he'd actually finished it. He launched it in 1933, sailed to Australia, Raoul Island and Tahiti,



Johnny Wray with Ngataki under construction in the 1930s.

"Everyone seemed to be happy and contented in their work. They had good reason to be, for they were creating something; something which was to be useful and, in their opinion, beautiful. The man who is creating something seems to be invariably happy."

several times. He met a woman called Loti in French Polynesia, brought her back to New Zealand, married, and basically lived a very happy life, although he did take a break from the sea and served with the RNZAF as a navigator during the Second World War (until the airforce discovered he was colour blind).

Upon his return he built a second boat, a 43ft motor-sailer called the Waihape, settled on Waiheke Island and in 1986 died aboard his yacht. In his last years, after Loti died, Johnny became reclusive, apparently suffering from serious melanoma. He left his estate, and the royalties from his book, to the Red Cross. By 1991 it was reported to have netted $170,000.

The story doesn't end there, however. Johnny's book, South Sea Vagabonds, published in 1939, became very popular (for very good reason), and was translated into several languages. If you want to buy a copy now though, you're into a bit of expense and probably a long search.

There is a rumour it has been reprinted in England recently, but no Kiwi bookseller I've chased has turned up any clues. My copy is a second edition ~ 1952, published by A.H. and A.W. Reed.

My father is a bit like Johnny Wray ~ right down to being colour blind ('deficient' he calls it). A big difference is that he's a cabinet maker and has the skills to build boats ~ and a very nice few vessels he did launch. His main inspiration was that first edition copy of Johnny's book, which, apparently, he carried with him everywhere he went.The real sentimental link is that my parents met on an island off Coromandel while my father was cruising a yacht that Johnny Wray, in absentia, helped him build. I feel I owe something to Johnny.

Hearing that the yacht Ngataki had recently returned from a four year circumnavigation of the globe and was moored in Picton, was therefore an exciting event. Or should I say surprising?

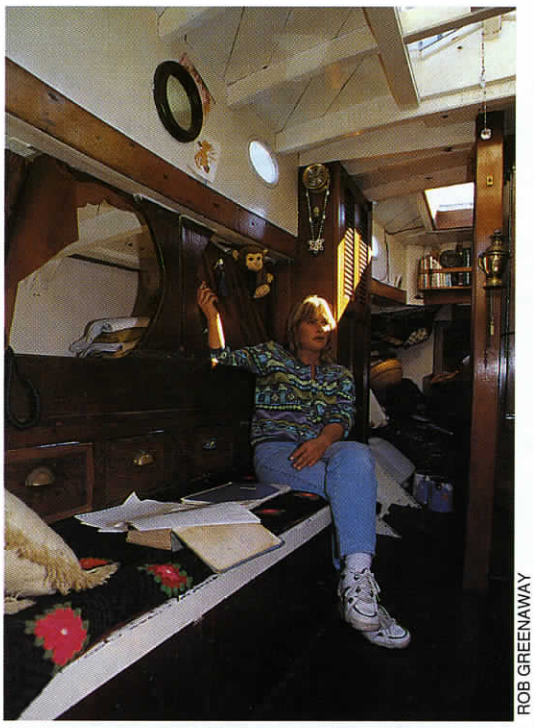
How could a 63 year old yacht, held together with fencing wire, essentially made from driftwood, caulked with pyjamas and built by an accountant, still be sailing the hardest oceans?

It's a legend, that's why. And legends don't die, mostly.

A recent article describes the boat's owner (or vice versa), Debbie Lewis, as 'diminutive'. It's not kosher, in my books, to call anyone who has sailed an 'old lady' of a yacht for seven years around the globe with the help of her 11 year old son, diminutive.

"You have a responsibility owning a boat like this," says Debbie. "Actually it makes you quite paranoid. I had a dream in the Marquesas about hitting a bommie [coral head] in a storm. When we were hove to off the Tuamotos for four days, I had the decision of riding it out or trying to make a run for it and anchoring in the storm. But I remembered that dream, and I didn't. They'd blame me for losing this boat, and half of that blame would be because I'm a girl."

Farewell from Auckland bound for Tonga.



ROB GREENAWAY

Current owner Debbie Lewis in the saloon.

The 'they' that Debbie talks about is the national yachting fraternity that was raised with Johnny Wray's book under their pillows.

Debbie doesn't quite fit their mould. She's a lot less pretentious. The Ngataki retains all its solid appearances and quite conservative external paint job, but on the inside it shows a bit of the influence of a mad keen surfer (that's Jason, Debbie's son) and a thirty-something woman who has made the boat home for quite a few years. It also has all the hallmarks of a yacht that wasn't built by a cabinet maker ~ all heavy timbers and solid as a rock, but with an appearance that it might have been put together by Dr Seuss.

The fencing wire is obvious on the exposed frames in the for'ard cabin.

Debbie bought the boat for a little over $50,000. That's a lot for a vessel of that age, but it is the Ngataki. To bring it up to 'category one' status (New Zealand's marine version of a warrant of fitness for international sailing), $20,000 had to be poured into repairs. However, the yacht was generally still in good condition, including the original keel bolts and iron fasteners.

It was re-rigged in '79, and recaulked in the same decade. Apparently the latter was carried out because of an unidentified leak. The assumption was made that it had to be Wray's pyjamas giving out, but the caulking removed was in good condition. It turned out to be a seacock that dripped on a certain tack.

Prior to Debbie buying the boat it had gone through about seven owners. "Generally the boat has been bought cheap, and fixed cheap, but with very heavy gear ~ mostly scrounged from somewhere." She can name half a dozen boats that have given up bits and pieces to replace the likes of the bow sprit and housing topmast.

Debbie's thinking about sailing off again. "I thought seven years was a long time during the last cruise," she remembers. "But now I realise it wasn't long enough. But I've got to get a surveyor to look over the 'Taki to see how she's going now, and there are a few other things to think about.

"Jason says I should be more like Johnny Wray. Just get the food on board and go."

Jason's right. It comes from that dream we all hold ~ forget the money and let's get on with life. ○