

'YOUTHFUL VETERAN'

Forty-eight years after a newspaper first acknowledged Martin Tomich's prowess as a skipper, the label still fits.

BY JENNIFER KARUZA

Martin Tomich drives down the sawtooth dock of Squalicum Harbor in Bellingham, Wash., pulling a boat trailer behind his sports utility vehicle. He rolls down the window, sticks out his head and calls toward the deck of a seiner where an unfamiliar young man — The New Guy — is bent over, working.

"Hey! When are you leaving?" Tomich asks in a thick Yugoslav accent. "I've been waiting all week to get my boat over here!"

The New Guy nods. "I'm leaving pretty quick," he says. "Within the hour."

Tomich, 75-year old fisherman and local legend, gestures at a second boat, docked in front of The New Guy.

"If you had tied up closer to him," he says, "we could have all three fit! Instead of all this waiting!"

The New Guy chuckles and nods again, agreeing that is what he should have done. He pulls out, and Tomich steers the Valiant Lady, his beloved 58-foot seiner, into the spot.

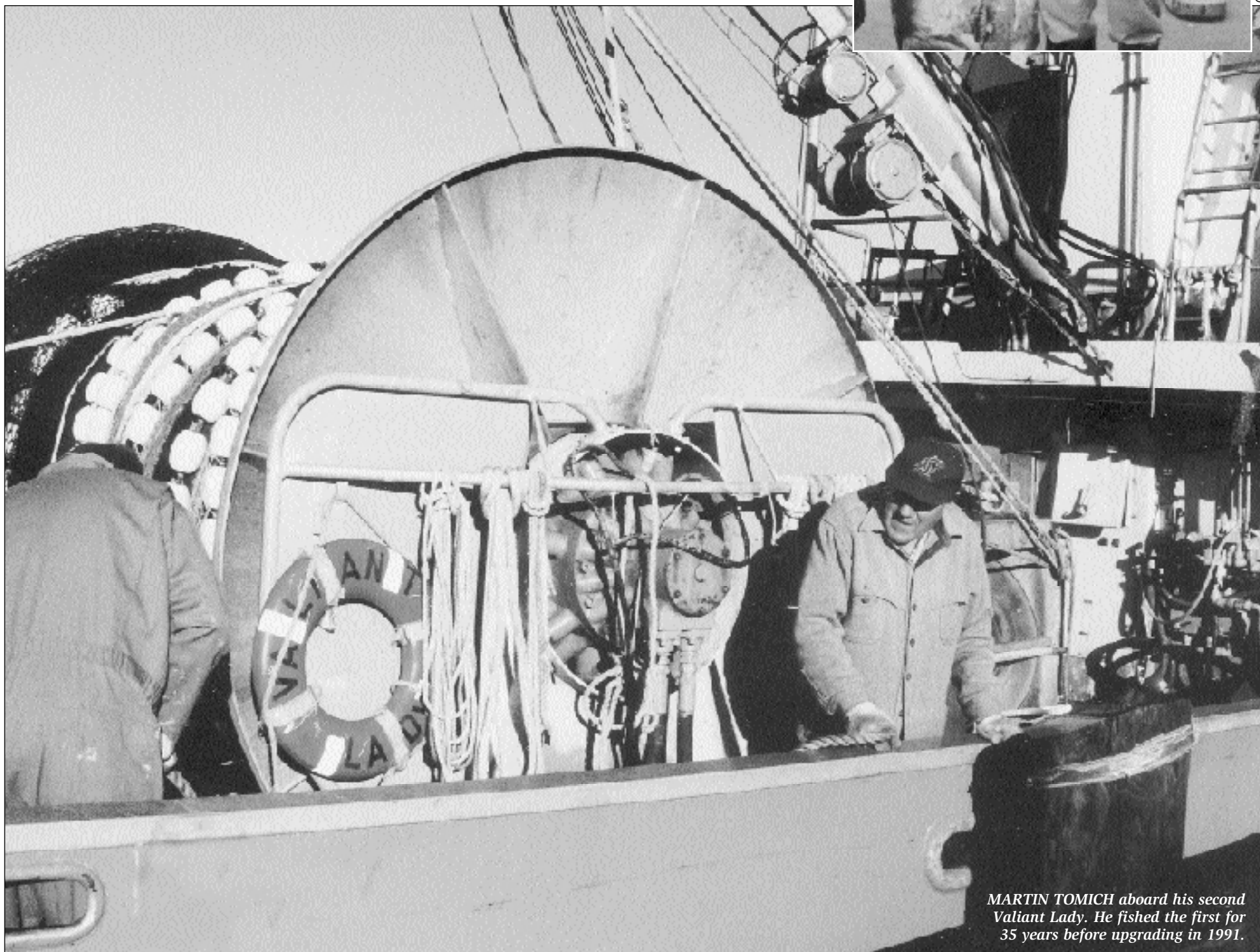
Tomich isn't one to wait. He began his career fishing for Puget Sound salmon in 1941 as a 14-year old aboard his father's boat, the Joseph. At the age of 27, he was called a "youthful but veteran fisherman" by *The Fishermen's News*. After spending over six decades fishing all over the West Coast and Alaska, he's back in Puget Sound, where he's gradually bringing his active fishing career to a close.

Tomich is a sharp man who recalls names, exact

LOCAL LEGEND Capt. Martin Tomich has plied the Pacific for over six decades.



COURTESY MARTIN TOMICH



MARTIN TOMICH aboard his second Valiant Lady. He fished the first for 35 years before upgrading in 1991.

JENNIFER KARUZA

dates and details from over half a century ago. His eyes sparkle with an intense alertness. There's a distinct depth to them, indicative of the knowledge and wisdom exclusive to a man of Tomich's generation.

"I started out as a young fellow," says Tomich. "You had to hustle and work hard. Like a baseball player. I might as well say I was kind of on-the-ball.

"It's been good to me," he continues. "I can't complain."

Tomich has participated in Alaska's Southeast, False Pass and Point Moller salmon fisheries, though he calls the Puget Sound salmon fishery his favorite ("when it was good"). He dragged in the 1960s in the notoriously tough Hackett Strait before the 200-mile limit came in. He seined for sardines and herring, and gillnetted swordfish in California. As recently as 2001 he seined for sardines in Oregon. He dragged bottomfish for nearly 20 years in California and was partners in a Morrow Bay processing plant, Gold Nugget Seafoods.

Tomich ran the Joseph during the 1953 and 1954 salmon seasons in False Pass, Alaska. He took notice of the way rough Alaska waters damaged the old wood boats, and resolved that he would build a new boat in the style of the big, steel tuna clippers in California. Tomich concedes one other factor in building the new boat.

"I was fishing with a little boat around some new boats!" he says. "It was like, the neighbor's got a nice car, and you've got a junky old car that don't look too good to you! You try to get a nice new car!"

Tomich launched the Valiant Lady (the first) in 1955. He fished the boat for 35 years until the launch of the second Valiant Lady in 1991. The original vessel was one of the first steel seiners in the fleet, and one of the first to accommodate the "modern" Pacific Coast fisherman's problem of following numerous fisheries during the year. A front page article in the June 1955 edition of *The Fishermen's News* boasted that the original Valiant Lady — a sleek, fast boat powered by a Cummins NVHM V-12 engine — also packed a hold full of water and had the unparalleled flexibility to move comfortably and effortlessly from one fishery to another.

The article, now yellow with age, is framed and mounted on a wall near Tomich's home office. A head shot of the beaming, 27-year-old Tomich and a picture of the boat on sea trials accompany the story, which continues for three pages. The launch of the vessel marked a milestone for her builder, the young Marine Construction and Design Co. in Seattle. At the time, Peter Schmidt, president of the new company, called the Valiant Lady the company's "first major contribution to the

North Pacific fishing fleets."

Tomich partnered up with his father and paid \$70,000 to build the vessel during a downtime in the industry — a time, according to the article, "as troubled a period ever seen in the business of Pacific Coast fishing." The article praises Tomich's "faith and courage of youth" in building the boat.

"Things weren't going the best at that time," Tomich agrees. "It was a lot of money to spend." But he adds, "That was a good move. That boat made me some money."

Tomich, who didn't speak English until first grade, is the son of Nick Tomich and the nephew of John Zaninovich, men who immigrated to the United States from the town of Vis in the former Yugoslavia. They came by boat to Ellis Island and then by train to the Pacific Northwest and joined a community of Yugoslav-speaking fishermen in Bellingham's Southside. Although Tomich's father came to America after his compulsory military service was finished in Yugoslavia, the community comprised for the most part men who'd escaped the service.

"They could see the First World War comin'," says Tomich. "A lot of these guys sailed the merchant marine. The first time they come to New York, they jumped ship. Get off and run like hell. They usually knew where somebody was and they'd head for that place. One guy comes, and one guy comes, and brings the next guy."

In 1947, Tomich bought into the family boat, the Joseph, for \$8,500. He worked three more years for his father until one day during the middle of a fall salmon opening in Deception Pass, when his father fell ill and announced he was going home.

"I said, 'Where are you going?'" recalls Tomich. "We just got through making the set! It's our turn to set again!"

"I quit," he said.

"I said, 'What do you mean, you quit?'"

"I don't feel good," he said. "I quit!"

"I said, 'But what about the fishing? What about the crew? What are we going to do with the boat now? You quit!'"

"He says to me, 'You've got two choices. You either run it, or we sell it. Go down and tell the crew, if they want to keep fishing, you just let me off at the corner. I'll go home, and you guys go back fishin'.'"

Tomich smiles. "And that's what happened. I've been running a boat ever since."

After 35 years with the original Valiant Lady, Tomich decided to upgrade. The second Valiant Lady, a 58-foot Alaska limit seiner, was launched in 1991. Once again, he wanted a new boat. A modern boat. One that included, among other features, a closed house, refrigerated seawater and



THE SECOND EDITION of the Valiant Lady, an aluminum 58-foot Alaska seiner, was inspired by Canadian vessels but launched in 1991 from an Alabama boatyard.

greater hold capacity. This time, instead of going south to look at steel tuna clippers in California, Tomich headed north to Canada and studied the aluminum vessels the Canadians were building.

"They were so shiny," he says. "I was like a kid in a candy store."

The new aluminum Valiant Lady was launched from Rodriguez Boat Builders in Alabama. The 58-foot seiner is powered by a 6-cylinder, 500-hp Cummins 1150, holds 10,500 gallons of fuel, and packs 160,000

pounds of product in four tanks.

He paid for the boat in cash. Once again, Tomich has no regrets. "I'm glad I did it," he says. "It's worked real well."

Tomich sits at the kitchen table inside his large and meticulous Victorian house overlooking Bellingham Bay — on the Southside, of course — that

he bought in 1958 for \$9,000. The banister upstairs is made partially from a ship's wheel. A model of the Joseph is displayed in the kitchen, and seine boats make up the design on the curtains. The entryway wall is lined with photographs of crews and boats dating back to 1941 and beyond. Maps and posters of the island of Vis are framed and displayed.

Tomich spends a large portion of his time researching Puget Sound and Bristol Bay, comparing the sockeye runs. He's determined to figure out exactly what went wrong with a Puget Sound fishery that used to boast seasons lasting weeks on end, but saw a 2002 season that lasted for one hour. He gestures toward his hot tub, which he's converted into a chart table. "I've been doing a little history, see. I've been working this out. Trying to figure out what the hell is going on."

Tomich studies his father's logbook, handwritten in pencil, which dates back to the 1930s. He runs his finger down a page of the log, and then compares the data with numbers from a book on U.S. and Canadian salmon landings. His mind is a whirl of adding and multiplying and deciphering as he churns out dates, numbers, pounds and prices for the last one hundred years.

"...but then '42 came back pretty good," he says. "That was a big year. Wasn't many boats. Don't look like much fish, but it was a good year, because it wasn't

a very big fleet. Then '46 was good again. It failed in '38 and '50. See? See what happened in '54 and '58? Fraser River is a circle. It's a cycle river."

Tomich picks up a piece of paper upon which he's graphed the years and numbers of salmon caught from 1902 to 2002. He points to the 1958 season, when the fleet fished 20 straight days in Puget Sound until the government closed the opener because of a problem. The problem? Huge volumes of fish. "They finally stopped us," he says. "But they still got so many fish, they dynamited. They wanted to get rid of some of them. Dynamited. Dynamited the fish," he says, shaking his head in disbelief.

He remembers the years between 1958 and 1990, when the sound was at its peak, Bellingham had as big a fleet of fishermen as anyone, and the price of fish soared. He chuckles at the memory of "old, junky boats" that couldn't sell for \$6,000 in 1940 but sold for \$100,000 in 1970. In the late 1990s, a man tried to sell his boat for \$1 but couldn't find a buyer.

His voice falters slightly. "I never thought the bottom of the fish business would drop out," he says. "It sure don't look good. No military secret about that. As bad as the Depression was, dollars and cents wise, it's worse than it was back in the 1930s."

Tomich's research renders a conclusion: There may not be a price, but there are still plenty of fish to be caught in Puget Sound. He's studied the logs, the returns, the runs and the cycles. Tomich's "faith and courage of youth" remain at the age of 75, and he is certain of evidence that points to a possible future in Puget Sound fishing. He's not worried about numbers of fish. Instead, he worries about government regulation, economics and outside sources, such as farmed fish, negatively affecting the fishery. He worries that come the end of this most recent cycle, in 2006, the bureaucrats will have phased out the entire Puget Sound salmon fishery and nobody will ever know what kinds of returns there really were.

Tomich picks up his dad's log and turns the page.

"We saw the good times," he says. "My generation, we got the best of 'em. We seen better times than our fathers did."

And, if Tomich is proved right, "better times" may be just around the corner for Puget Sound fishermen. **NF**

Jennifer Karuza is a freelance writer living in Seattle.

"We saw the good times. My generation, we got the best of 'em."

—Martin Tomich

REFLECTING ON HIS LIFE IN FISHING



FELLOW YUGOSLAVS Martin Tomich (right) and crew member Nick Mihovilovic feel right at home fishing in Puget Sound.