

The Phoenix Rises Again

By Don Sutherland

Go back enough in time and it's common tale: A single boat, a modest one at that, an owner with ambition and skill, a campaign of hard work and the legends it breeds, success and importance for the company that follows, and a legacy that goes on for generations. On the west coast it could be Foss Maritime, which tells proudly of its start with a second-hand rowboat. On the east, it could be a Michael Moran or a James McAllister or the young Arthur Fournier, who still dives into the river of lore, thrashing through a hurricane to his old tug. There must have been a hundred such stories, or a thousand, whenever individuals reigned and a world rewarded vision and initiative.

But the world keeps changing. Could the upstarts of old have succeeded in the scheduled, regulated, licensed world of today? Everyone carries a bigger load at the moment, whose weight needs a lever.

Where do you find a lever?

"I went to see it," said Capt. Mike Vinik, "and fell in love with it." So did everyone who caught sight of the old tug Gotham. "Beautiful lines," says Capt. Vinik.

Built in 1951 as Mobil 11, she upheld her owner's reputation for all the best trimmings. "Everyone who's been aboard says it's probably the nicest-built boat they've been on," says Capt. Vinik. "Some people say they've been on boats that were larger, but without as much space. There's a lot of storage room here. There are five rooms for the captain and crew, each with a telephone and sink. The water tanks are separate from the hull, so you can paint them. You don't have the nooks and crannies where gunk and rust can settle. There are more frames than you'd expect, and the steel is much thicker."

But there was a catch. Everyone who knew anything about tugboats, as the old Gotham brooded below the Outerbridge, knew she was shot. Would never work again.

Three and You're Out

"There were mechanical breakdowns," said Veronica Marshall, president of Kosnac Floating Derrick Corp., dba KTugs NY, the last to run the ex-Mobil 11, ex-Christine Gellatly, then Gotham. Almost any mechanical breakdown can be fixed. But after a point, a tool gets so broken that it's not worth fixing. "The damage was so extensive that the cost of repair exceeded the insurance. She was declared a constructive total loss."

Gotham's fate might have been different, if she had twin screws. But as a single-screw tug her commercial viability in New York, at least, was at a lifetime low.

The Kosnacs began as family businesses with single-screw boats, those generations ago when a man with a boat could just start a business. Same goes for the Browns, who likewise had just got their start when the Great Depression hit. Even as late as the nineties, a Chris Roehrig could come by with a nearly historic single-screw DPC, and set events in motion for, at last count, a nine-boat fleet.

It's players like these that, besides their own contracts, give the majors their flex,

So Kosnac's single-screw Huntington went west two years ago as a live-aboard, the Margot went back upstate to the canals. Roehrig's Tilly became a live-aboard in Florida. Brown's diminutive Catherine M. Brown went to an operation in Delaware. The single-screw Thomas J. Brown continues in New York with stone work and scrap work, according to Capt. Jim Brown, but it's the John P. Brown, their twin-screw newbuild, that gets the most calls. Kosnac replaced their single-

Even not running, she's still the real deal. She has things to work with, to train on. Local 333 supported the idea of the Gotham as schoolship

"There was a joint venture with Kingsboro College," said Charlie Chillemi, then president of Local 333. "Guys could learn how to splice, throw lines, they could learn maintenance. Apprentices could learn something about engineering — we thought we'd pull the engine, turn it on its side, put in a new crankshaft and bearings and get it running" — a lot of work, but not beyond the reach of an entire student body. The need was present and the idea was sound, and the future for Gotham looked good. But issues arose, finances included, and the project came to a dead stop. Gotham lay brooding below the Outerbridge.

The boat had survived plenty of close calls. Capt. Albert De Cruz looks back on a night when as mate on Mobil 11, tanker alongside, he dove through a wheelhouse window for some emergency steering. "I was almost upside-down, my head inside and my butt outside," with the pilot out of commission in the corner. It would have to happen at Hell Gate, as the tug with its right rudder began climbing up the tanker. Despite all her charms, this tug is known for a tendency to lean. Said Capt. De Cruz, "If the cook hadn't shut the engine room door, we would have sunk."

Capt. De Cruz recalls another event at Fish Island, where an encounter with rocks left a rip "eighteen feet long and a foot wide" in the hull. "It was the worst thing that ever happened to Tug 11."

But it wasn't the worst thing that could have happened, that almost happened. Capt. Vinik was told that the Gotham was one day away from the bottom of the Atlantic. She was to be reefed.

Housing Bubble Bursts

"I knew I wanted to buy a tug. So I went to them with a bid," says Captain Vinik, "and asked if they'd accept it." He doesn't quote the figure, but it might have been consistent with the price of a fish condo. "They accepted it."

So Capt. Vinik owned a non-working tugboat. One that if fixed, faced a single-screw life in a twin-screw harbor. Still, it would be more than a rowboat.

Capt. Vinik is a graduate of SUNY Maritime, receiving a formal education. But that's a requirement, in the new age of tugboating. For Capt. Vinik it was sort of a post-graduate study, having been sailing since age four and having taught sailing since eleven, and getting his taste for his present occupation aboard his father's tug, While still in school, he was decking for Weeks, and assisting the port engineer.



It's September 12, 2001, and Kosnac's Gotham is one of the few boats underway in New York. Gotham would play a major role in cleaning up "Ground Zero," and before long adopt a new life as the Dorothy Elizabeth. (Photo: Don Sutherland)

their back-up and reserve fleets. They guarantee on-demand, just-in-time tugboating on New York Harbor.

The majors include K-Sea, Bouchard, Reinauer, Penn, Hornbeck. They've all got great tugboats, but their mission is transportation, more than docking and assist. It's transportation of petroleum products, delivering an economical supply of essentials up and down the East. And according to the Coast Guard, the tugboats thus employed shall have two propulsion systems.

screw boats with their first newbuild, the twin-screw June K., and a few months ago the twin-screw Vera K. arrived in Kosnac orange. The boats of Roehrig Maritime keep getting bigger, the 6000 hp of the Annabelle that joined them in 2003 being matched a couple months ago by their John H. Malik.

So if there's an art to handling a single-screw tug, and a ton of good looks, and a link to tradition, there's a lot to lament as it falls by the wayside. But Gotham wasn't thought to be useless — not at first.



A six-hour ride from the "port city" of New York, the 600-ton Travel Lift at the Derektor yard in Bridgeport, Conn. eases the freshly scraped and repaired Dorothy Elizabeth back to the water. (Photo: Don Sutherland.)

His first jobs steering included the ferries of New York Waterway. "Eighty dockings a day," he recalls, "after almost a year it was burning me out. I wanted to get back on tugs." He drew a stint with Reinauer as a training mate, and from there went to the Sandmaster as a mate. Then he bought the Gotham, but did not quit his day job.

"We towed it across to the yard next to Perth Amboy Drydock for a number of months, then to Perth Amboy Drydock itself." Along with his brother Ken, and Capt. Pat Cannon of the Sandmaster, and ex-classmates who were happy to help for the experience — the old tug turned out as school of sorts after all — "we changed the heat exchanger and began to rebuild the lube oil pressure pump. Once Perth Amboy Drydock closed, we spent a year on a mooring in the middle of Amboy anchorage. We used a skiff to get to the boat." The Gotham's days below the Outerbridge had included New York winters, and "just about every pipe that had any water in it froze and burst — generator piping, main engine jacket water piping, both main engine heat exchangers, gear box heat exchanger, all potable water piping, countless valves for everything."

New York winters may be bonechilling, but "we had no heat that first winter. We made a list of the most critical issues, and heat and running water were not on it." It might be bitter, but a tug can do work, theoretically, without either — "I can't work without an engine and fire pump."

The Human Q-Tip

The damage from freezing was formi-

dable, but only added to what crippled the tug in the first place. "We rolled-out and renewed all the main bearings on the engine, replaced the lube oil pressure pump, really had to dig into the main engine. In order to get to some of the gaskets, I had to crawl under the engine in the bilge, to the gearbox," face-down all the way. Although the bilge was empty, there was the residue of a half century. "Chris Nelson, who was a big part of our progress, said I looked like a human Q-Tip."

By the spring of last year, the Dorothy Elizabeth, the old tug's new name in honor of Capt. Vinik's grandmother, was ready for business. But business was slow. "I was getting a couple jobs a week," Capt. Vinik reports. "It's probably understandable, all things considered, but at first hardly anyone was willing to try us out." Then Capt. Steve Richter of the Newport Pilots made some introductions at K-Sea, and before long "Paul Mahoney of the Normandy was getting me leads. I can't thank him enough."

A single-screw tug is forbidden to tow petroleum barges, but it can assist docking. K-Sea became a regular in those first days of operation, but still, things were slow. Did everybody know Vinik Marine was there?

Then came last September's Tug Races, the Labor Day event nearly deep-sixed by City regulations. The industry steered around the obstructions, with the Kristy Ann Reinauer and a deck barge in the Narrows obviating need for City approval. The 2005 races were the first under the

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Dorothy Elizabeth's "coming out" at the New York Tug Races last Labor Day weekend. Mike Vinik claims to have come-in fifth, but in this photo, shortly before the finish line, the "totaled" tugboat might be mistaken for third place. (Photo: Don Sutherland)

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auspices of the National Lighthouse Museum, but hardly the first the ex-Mobil 11 would enter.

Capt. De Cruz recalls how the races bolstered the tug's fame. "When Mobil had the boat built, they had an idea about an ocean tug. She was the biggest thing they had then — we called her the Iron Horse — and she had a lot of power, and she won a lot of races."

The tug's great power helped, but so did certain preparations.. "She'd go to Perth Amboy at night," said Capt De Cruz, "and they'd put the speed prop on. She'd come out with the fenders up, and she'd leave everyone behind. Mobil would run ads in the magazines showing her victory, and a headline like 'Buy Mobil Lube Oil!'"

That she blew a few heads or pistons in the race was a secondary issue, and did not appear in the ads. "The word we got was, keep that boat running if you have to get on your hands and knees on the diamond plate, and pray." After one of the races, Mobil 11 made for Yonkers. "Two tugs from Mobil came up and towed her down at night," Capt. De Cruz recalls. "At night!"

Capt. Vinik didn't risk blowing his recently-fixed engine, probably the exact same one after a few rebuildings that drove Mobil 11 to its victories. But still, in a field of thirteen, Dorothy Elizabeth came in fifth. Not bad for a 54-year-old write-off.

Crowded Waters

The Labor-Day showing produced no ads, except the word-of-mouth about the

red-white-and-blue tug that was new again. "We started getting more calls," says Capt. Vinik, "and they started using us more and more. By the end of December, we were really busy. It was really encouraging." Then, one day, crossing Jamaica Bay in 46 feet of water, "we sucked something up in our wheel." Capt. Vinik is a diver as well as a skipper and

went down for a look, and whatever the object was, it was gone. But its handiwork wasn't.

"The obstruction caused all the studs holding a saddle to break, so when we went into reverse, the gears didn't align properly."

Where do you get a gearbox for a 54-year-old tugboat? "Fred Kosnac called

and said he knew where there were two of them — Falk MB16s. I called the owners, but they weren't for sale — I guess they needed them for parts on their own."

If you don't have a gearbox, you don't have a tugboat. "My broker said it was the first he'd ever heard of declaring one boat a CTL twice."

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For those who've never seen one, this is what a 1951 tugboat engine room looks like. Capt. Vinik at right prepares to get underway, as engineer Wayne Lawson arrives to fire 'er up.

(Photo: Don Sutherland)



At the request of the MarineNews photographer in 2004, the original participants re-enacted the moment of Gotham's transferral to new ownership, to the best of their recollection. Capt. Fred Kosnac III (left) congratulates Local 333 president Charlie Chillemi (center) as Kosnac president Veronica Marshall (right) turns over a document of sale, or reasonable facsimile. In background is tug Gotham, on the verge of a few career moves.

(Photo: Don Sutherland)

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tion of the Dorothy Elizabeth became a topic of conversation, early in the year. Said Capt. Mahoney aboard the Normandy on January 21, "I told Mike the other day to post a note on the internet, like the Yahoo tug group."

Capt. Vinik took the advice, and received a response from Tim Mullane in Norfolk, who could provide an MB16. Next came the six-week rebuild. "Brad Simek from Amboy Aggregate was good enough to rent us dock space for repairs," said Capt. Vinik, parts for a gear box being perhaps much to move around by skiff. "New bearings, new clutches, new reverse bevel gears, a new pinion gear, new drums."

At last, the Dorothy Elizabeth was ready to get herself going again -- mechanically, anyway. But hulls have their needs too. "The boat hadn't been hauled in I don't know how long," said Capt. Vinik. "I dove on her and there were no zincs left, barnacles all over the place, and the anti-fouling paint was no longer acceptable. A hundred-foot boat is too much to scrape underwater." So then began the search for a drydock in New York. Perth Amboy Drydock was closed for redevelopment, Caddell's and May's



"Tugboats of New York" author George Matteson signs a volume at Snug Harbor's John Noble Collection on Staten Island. His slide lecture on the history of tugs will be given again at SUNY Maritime on June 10. (Photo: Don Sutherland)

were booked. "They'd say 'call in two weeks.' I'd call, and they'd say 'call in two weeks.' It went on for four months." Garpo's yard in Tottenville has been the salvation for many smaller tugs, but the Dorothy Elizabeth is extra-heavy — beyond the capacity of that Travel Lift. "A lot of companies use Feeney's" sixty miles upriver, at Kingston, "but they couldn't take us, either."

That left Derektor's, in Bridgeport. "Everyone said they gave great service, and they turned out to be just the greatest." The fact that they're six hours away, each way, is just one of those crazy things about doing business in modern New York.

One week after arriving in Bridgeport, the Dorothy Elizabeth was back in the water. Including transit time, it was an extra nine days without income. Still, coming back down, Capt. Vinik could feel the difference made by the freshly cleaned

hull. He was soon making calls, to let everyone know he was back.

At age twenty-six, Capt. Vinik reflects a lot of things about tugboating that go against the times.

One day he'll be forty-six, and this gloss will have worn-off. No longer gumption and potential, the discussion will center on Capt. Vinik's record.

If all goes well, he'll be one of the fixtures in a peculiar business, where competition is stiff — but everyone charters everyone, anyway.

Someday, everything that's happened so far will reduce to, "oh yeah, I helped him get started."

But that will be then, and this is still now. "It takes a whole harbor to raise a tugboat company," said Capt. Vinik, "it's like raising a child."

And although this one is formally named Dorothy Elizabeth, it could also be named Phoenix.



Looks like Mike got his engine fixed. Dorothy Elizabeth eases a tanker into place at the KMI Outer-bridge terminal, close to the spot where the old tug once languished, never expected to run again. (Photo: Don Sutherland)

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