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Island Rover is his treasure, and a tribute to recycling

By TESS NACELEWICZ, Portland Press Herald Writer

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FREEPORT — It's not your typical backyard project: building a huge steel schooner from discarded materials such as massive metal sheets from Bath Iron Works and pots and pans from a long-closed restaurant, items that will one day line the ship's galley. But then, Harold Arndt isn't exactly typical.

Arndt, 62, is a warrior against waste in a society that he says throws too much away. At home and in his work, the waste-management consultant lives the three Rs: reduce, repair, recycle.

He raised his family to conserve heat and fuel, gets around in a refurbished 22-year-old Mercedes and a rebuilt 14-year-old pickup, and is the former waste minimization officer for BIW. The shipyard created the job title for him, and he helped BIW win state recognition back in the 1990s for its waste reduction and recycling efforts.

But what has come to be Arndt's defining project is the Island Rover. The 113-foot, two-masted steel topsail schooner that he's been building for 12 years - and is about 40 percent complete - towers incongruously among the treetops on Arndt's five acres at Lower Flying Point.

Arndt's mission in building the ship is to "demonstrate how big and how beautiful a project you can do with what people consider to be waste." The finished vessel, which will use biodiesel fuel and include a marine research lab, will sail around promoting environmental consciousness.

But time is running out. The town is cracking down on his boat-building operation and the piles of materials and cars and other objects - some neighbors call it junk - that fill much of the land around the boat.

Arndt's problems began when he became a nonprofit corporation to better raise funds, a designation that made the project a disallowed use in his residential neighborhood.

In an agreement his Island Rover Foundation reached with the town this year, Arndt has until Aug. 15 to get rid of excess material that won't go directly into the boat; he must remove all materials and the boat by 2010.

Arndt is unfazed, however. He's confident he'll meet his August deadline. Fred Reed, Freeport's code enforcement officer, said last week that Arndt appears "well on his way" toward accomplishing the task.



Staff photo by John Patriquin

Harold Arndt, president of the Island Rover Foundation, stands in front of the steel schooner he is building on land he owns in Freeport. Arndt has been working on the 113-foot Island Rover for 12 years, using discarded materials such as massive metal sheets from Bath Iron Works.

And it won't take five years for him to finish the Island Rover, Arndt predicts. "I'll have it out of here by 2007 or by 2008," he said. The exact launch date of the boat - which he said would cost \$2.5 million to build if donated materials and labor weren't involved - will be determined by volunteer and fund-raising efforts.

For example, he says the most pressing need is to raise \$100,000 to pay workers to weld the boat. "I'm not going to get 4,000 man hours of (volunteer) certified welding time," Arndt said. "There just aren't that many Lucretias out there."

Lucretia Yentes, 22, is a certified welder and an engineering student at the University of Maine in Orono who recently became one of the project's volunteers.

Yentes learned about the Island Rover from an environmental news publication. She loves welding and believes in recycling, so she traveled to Freeport one weekend this month and donated 20 hours of her time to weld the decking of the ship.

She was impressed when she first saw the Island Rover, nestled in its homemade cradle and set on the wheeled trailer that will be needed when the vessel is finally ready to emerge from the woods.

"I was like, 'This is a big boat. There's a lot of welding to do. Where do I begin?'" Yentes said. "I admire Harold for taking on such a big project himself. It's amazing."

## EXTENSION OF BELIEFS

But to Arndt, the Island Rover is a natural extension of his upbringing and beliefs.

He grew up in Connecticut, instilled with the values of his parents and grandparents, who lived through the Great Depression. "We were taught that you used it, repaired it and used it some more," he said.

A marine biologist who graduated from the University of Connecticut, Arndt came to Maine in the 1960s to teach at Bowdoin College. He then began a business selling wire lobster traps and later worked for BIW for 13 years, starting out in materials and purchasing and then leading its waste management efforts.

He and his family also practiced conservation at their home on Lower Flying Point, where Arndt has lived since 1965.

"We just never wasted anything," said Dorothy Bowie, 40, one of Arndt's four daughters. "We would find someone who had cut down a tree and that would be our firewood. It might not be the driest or the best kind of wood, but that was what we used."

Bowie, who lives in Topsham and is a first-grade teacher at Woodside Elementary School there, says she and her sisters were fined a nickel for leaving lights on needlessly. They also learned to take quick showers, knowing that if they didn't, the hot water heated by the wood furnace their father invented would run out. Family car trips into town involved multiple errands to save on gas.

The family also had a large garden for food. Having to work in it was an unwanted childhood chore, Bowie recalls. "I didn't always appreciate it, but now I have my own huge garden and I feel that I'm giving my family healthier food. I do a lot of canning, too."

Bowie's upbringing "also affected the way I teach . . . I'm a pack rat. My students love it when I get out the box of scrounged materials and they can get creative with it," she said.

Bowie also takes advantage of the Island Rover Foundation's educational component. Each of the past two springs, she took her classes to see her father's boat as part of classroom lessons on recycling and care of natural resources, a component of Maine's Learning Results.

"His boat is just a huge example of making something out of trash, of nothing," she said. "The kids were very impressed."

Arndt also speaks at schools. Lucy Vaughn, a neighbor and teacher at Greely Middle School in Cumberland, says he inspired her students to start a recycling program. "He was wonderful," she said.

## REUSABLE, NOT JUNK

Arndt, a licensed captain, first thought of the steel schooner as a pleasure craft. But he began to see the educational mission of the 110-ton boat - which he says will be lighter than a wooden schooner of the same size because its steel panels are thinner than wood planking. He incorporated in 2000.

Then, last January, he asked the town of Freeport for tax-exempt status as a school. The town turned down his request. Assistant tax assessor Clint Swett said Arndt didn't get a break and his annual taxes for the foundation land remain at nearly \$2,000.

At the same time, the town also realized that because he had incorporated, the boat building could no longer be considered a home occupation or recreational endeavor. In February, Arndt and the town worked out the timelines to remove the materials and the boat.

Arndt's land is heavily wooded, so the ship and its building materials are not easily visible from most locations in the neighborhood.

The many piles of items include a pallet of wide oak boards for the ship's railing. The wood came from trees cleared by a neighbor. An old barn and outbuildings are stuffed with materials that will become part of the vessel. For example, an old rabbit hutch in which his children raised rabbits is now filled with submarine sleeping berths for the ship, which is designed to sleep 19 and carry 49 for day sailing.

His waterfront neighborhood has changed since the 1960s, when Arndt's family became one of only two living there year round. Now, more than 100 families call it home and luxury homes are replacing modest cottages.

Reed, the town's code enforcement officer, says some neighbors have raised concerns over the years about fire safety and possible hazardous materials on Arndt's land. Inspections have shown the fears to be unfounded, Reed says.

Other neighbors support the project. Stephen Baker, who lives across from Arndt's property off Byram Avenue, says the piles of wood and metal don't bother him because he knows Arndt has a purpose for them. "He uses everything. He probably has a use for the curl in a pig's tail," Baker said.

The clean-up agreement Arndt has with the town refers to his property as a "junkyard." He considers that a misnomer, saying reusable materials aren't junk.

“We’ve got to get rid of the throw-away mentality and we need to bring back the repair mentality,” Arndt said. “That’s really the message of the Island Rover Foundation.”

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Everything old is new again

Have you constructed anything out of recycled materials? Tell us about it and/or post photos.

Richard of Rye, TX

Jul 25, 2005 1:17 PM

On a visit to Portland when my folks were still alive I retrieved a lobster trap from a pier on Commercial Street, brought it back to Houston where I lived at the time and made it into a coffee table with a discarded piece of glass. My wife, at the time, however, didn’t think much of it. Therefore, I had to remove it. Did not throw it away though. A few years later I met a young lady who had migrated to Texas as well wanted it.

Don’t know if she still has it or where either it or she is but it wasn’t wasted as far as I was concerned. As she seemed enthused about I hope she enjoyed.

GN of Portland, ME

Jul 25, 2005 12:29 PM

Unfortunately, I’m not that creative (or handy). I do try my very best, though, to follow the 3 Rs.

When I was younger we lived near someone who collected old cars and other junk, but it had no use--it really WAS a junkyard. He spilled oil everywhere, and it was an eyesore, so my parents finally got a lawyer to have it stopped. This is much different. I wouldn’t mind living near Mr. Arndt knowing that these materials have such a great purpose. And since he’s obviously concerned about the environment, it doesn’t sound like there should be concerns about the oil, coolant, etc. that often accompanies these old materials. I think it would be a great conversation piece when having guests!

Leroy of freeport, me

Jul 25, 2005 11:43 AM

Sounds like a fun project. I’ve been rebuilding and reusing everything from lawn mowers to cars for years. I get at least 300 or 400 thousand miles out of a vehicle before I’m done. Thus guy is pretty clever. Too bad the Town Fathers are a bunch of petty money grabbing vultures. Freeport is a joke.

Barbara of Haymarket, VA

Jul 25, 2005 11:35 AM

In the 70s when my children were small and we lived in Yarmouth, their father made kids’ snowmobiles using discarded lawn mower engines and old snow tires (the tread) found at the Yarmouth town dump.

Years later, he also built our 30 x 40 foot barn using lumber from a building being torn down on the Portland waterfront.

Oh yes, he also brought home and refurbished a piano that someone at the dump was having trouble pushing off of the back of their pick-up truck.

Jan of Eustis, ME

Jul 25, 2005 10:32 AM

All of my gorgeous raised garden beds were made from recycled materials found at the transfer station. I have beautiful benches made from salvaged materials, coffee tables from antique tool chests, kitchen utensils placed in italian pottery vases from the transfer station; and I just picked 2 quarts of blueberries last night and put them in my "new" berry bucket - a lovely old galvanized bucket found at the transfer station yesterday! Having an appreciation for found materials can be both a conscious way to live and artistic as well.

Chris of Sanford, ME

Jul 25, 2005 8:34 AM

hmmm.....anyone ever read Spartina by John Casey....?

Darren of Cape Elizabeth, ME

Jul 25, 2005 7:09 AM

Our house was built primarily with materials reclaimed from the South Portland Shipyards. We got the materials for the costs of hauling and cleaning it up. The material is of a very high quality and the cost allowed us to use better materials. It was a lot of work, but we have a unique and very strong house.

We look at practically everything and ask ourselves if it can be reused before we throw it out.