

One man's dream

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FREEPORT — Since 1965, Harold Arndt has dreamed of building a boat from scratch. What he couldn't have imagined then is that he would also build one from scraps.

Arndt's dream of building his own 30-foot wooden schooner began when he was in college. A few years later, his father-in-law, who designed naval vessels, worked every Christmas to make Arndt's dream a reality by coming up with plans for the perfect boat.

Over time, Arndt's dream grew — as did the size of the boat. Eventually, his original idea of building a 30-foot wooden boat expanded into plans for a 100-foot schooner made of scraps of metal.

Arndt, now 59, has been working on his dream for the last 10 years. This Saturday, he hosts a celebration of the placement of the first deck plates, a major milestone in the construction of the steel two-masted topsail schooner called the "Island Rover."

From 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. at his home on Byram Avenue, Arndt will give tours of the Island Rover. He also will participate in a short ceremony in which a sail that reads "setting sail to spread the word" will be unfolded.

This vessel is not like other schooners. It is being made completely of recycled, reused, refurbished, retooled and surplus materials and equipment, according to Arndt.

"The goal is to spread the word as a society ... that we are living a standard that is very wasteful of nonrenewable resources," he said. "This has got to change because we are going to run out."

Once he completes the Island Rover, Arndt will embark on a seven-year, round-the-world adventure. The Island Rover will be able to accommodate ecology-minded vacationers and serve scientific researchers.

"I was in love with boats," Arndt said of the inspiration for his ambitious building project. He has managed to coax a number of family members to help him in one way or another.

Arndt's father, Christopher, who died at age 78 more than a year ago, helped build parts of the vessel by working a crane. Arndt's cousin and his family come up from Rhode Island to work on the ship when he needs extra hands. Arndt said his cousin plans to be the executive officer when the schooner sails.

Building a schooner is not Arndt's only mission. He formed the Island Rover Foundation, a nonprofit group to demonstrate the concepts of industrial conservation, thereby protecting the environment and conserving natural resources.

The Island Rover is something Arndt would like to use as a future example of what can be done with junk or surplus materials. Through promotion and education about ways to reuse materials, he hopes to increase awareness of industrial conservation.

To raise the money needed to complete the Island Rover, Arndt and the board of directors have formed Friends of the Island Rover. Individuals can join for \$10. It will cost foundations, groups and individuals \$100,000 to be a partner.

One reason Arndt gives for forming the foundation is to ensure that the project goes forward even if he were to die. "As you age, your physical capabilities decrease, so I wanted to get some help," he said. "I want this to go on after I am gone."

Steel was first cut for the Island Rover in 1994. The first frame was set in 1997, the ship was framed up in 1999. Deck beams have been installed, and the steel deck was hoisted by a crane, then fitted and welded into place.

Arndt said he hopes to launch the ship sometime in 2005 or 2006. Plans call for a 14-foot-by-22-foot cabin that will accommodate 28 people. The cabin will have eight portholes. The mast for the ship will be about 105 feet.

"There is still a lot of work that needs to be done," said Arndt as he looked at his dream come true from the deck.

Arndt said he puts in about 2,000 hours a year on the ship. His children joke that the Island Rover is his mistress. He admits he's dedicated to the point of obsession.

"The other night I had a choice to go to a dance or stay at home and work," he said. "I wound up staying home and working."

With such a huge dream to fulfill and much still to be done, Arndt will be doing a lot more working than dancing between now and 2006.