**The history of Vega**

It’s hard to understand a story about a boat without knowing a bit about the boat herself; where did she come from, who built her, and what was her life like before beginning her latest adventures. What follows is the history of Vega as best we have been able to discover it over the years. A lot of kind people in Norway and Sweden have helped us sort what at first seemed a hopeless paradox with Vega being two boats at the same time in two different places. From old ships riggers to museum curators many people contributed the bits and pieces to unravel her story. So, pull up a coil of line maties and have a sit while I recounts to you the tale of a brave little sailing boat called Vega.

It was early in the 1890’s when Mr. Johan Carlsson, the successful owner of a cement factory in Dagerhamn, Sweden, decided he needed another small sail powered cargo boat to deliver his products to the towns and villages along the coast of Sweden. This was at a time when Sweden and Norway were joined as one country in what was called “The Union” and many Swedish owners were building ships in Norway, so naturally Mr. Carlsson looked to the famous, and more economical, ship builders of Norway for his newest Jacht. Jacht or Jaght being the generic names for a small sailing cargo boat and the original source of the word yacht.

Outstanding among the Norwegian Jachts of that time were those designed and built on Hardanger fiord where the tradition of building strong swift sailing cargo boats was already well established in the late 1400’s. At the time Mr. Carlsson needed his boat the finest Hardanger jachts were being designed and built by Ola H. Nerhus in his Nerhuson boat yard at Olve on Hardanger fiord.

According to Lars Nerhus, great, grandson of Ola Nerhus and himself a boat builder, “By 1891 Ola Nerhus had an unrivaled reputation for strong well formed ships and high quality workmanship. His designs were so successful that he became a demanded shipbuilder and was the responsible model builder (the naval architect’s of the day) and surveyor for many of the most prominent "yard locations" in this region of Norway. In 1876/77 Ola had 7 vessel under construction: 3 at Nerhuson yard in Ølve, 1 at Onarheim in Tysnes, 1 at Malkenes, 1 in Strandebarm Kvam, and 1 in Varaldsøy. From historical documents we find: “There is reason to believe that most of the famous Hardanger jachts sailed by the men of Tysnes were designed and built by Ola H. Nerhus". This is a pretty impressive statement considering that Tysnes had quite a large fleet at that time.

In early 1891 Mr. Carlsson contacted captain Nils Vagan of Herøysund to act as his intermediary. Captain Vagan then commissioned Ola Nerhus to design and build this very special boat that was to be named VEGA after Mr. Carlsson’s daughter.

From the beginning Vega was designed and built to carry concentrated heavy loads such as cement, bricks, building stone, and pig iron and to be certified for trade in the Arctic, a classification few vessels were strong enough to merit. She was the only Hardanger Jacht ever built to have all oak keel and frames. Oak not being native to Hardanger Fiord this wood had to be imported from the east coast of Norway for the building of Vega.

Ola Nerhus’s idea of a strong boat built for heavy concentrated loads and service in the Arctic was perhaps a bit different from what the Swedish considered sufficient at the time. Vega’s frames are more reminiscent of a naval man of war from the early 1800’s than a merchant ship. These frame sets consist of between 4 and 6 grown oak frames tightly trunneled and bolted together with only enough room between each set for ventilation. Nowhere on Vega have we found more than 30 cm (12”) between a frame set and that was only at the bow and stern.

Vega’s intended cargos demanded a strong full-bodied vessel with a high displacement to length / beam ratio. She also needed to be a bit short of 60 ‘ between perpendiculars, due to the then existing tax and harbor / pilot regulations, yet be rated at 55 tones to meet the demands of Mr. Carlsson’s cement, brick, and building stone trade. Similar regulations meant that for the first few years of her life she would be rigged as a traditional cutter, which although an effective rig demanded a much larger crew than the well proven two masted galleass with its greater sail area and smaller crew. Faced with the age-old conundrum of how to make a small boat carry the same cargo as a much larger one Ola Nerhus did a splendid job of designing Vega, one that would eventually win him an award for design innovations at the great Oslo exhibition of 1898.

To gain more weight carrying capacity Nerhus employed an old fashion buff bow combined with a stern much wider than his traditional heart shaped designs. In fact Vega’s stern seems to have been copied from the famous Danish “Marstall Jachts” then slightly modified into a wider version of the heart shaped stern that was a Nerhus trademark. Vega has a very full deep body yet maintains a graceful tumble home and sweeping compound curve along her sheer line. Vega’s intended work allowed for little of the sharp bow & slight “wine glass” shape that was to be found on most Nerhus designed boats.

Even before Vega was launched her unusual design, ability to carry special “heavy concentrated” cargos, and Arctic certification had attracted an impressive list of clients all wanting to employ her. Apparently Mr. Carlsson, seeing a chance to make an even better profit buy leaving her in Norway, struck an agreement with Ola Nerhus to manage Vega for him in the Norwegian Arctic trade. This partnership was to prove beneficial to both of them up until the division of Norway from Sweden in 1904-5.

From her launching in the spring of 1892 until the time she was sent to Sweden in 1905-6 Vega was very successfully skippered by Jens Nerhus, the oldest son of Ola Nerhus. During that time she would have traded through out the Baltic and up into the Arctic. In the winter of 1898, the same year Vega’s half model won an award for excellence in design innovations at The Great Exhibition in Oslo, Jens Nerhus painted a portrait of his beloved Vega with all her sails and name flag flying. To quote Lars Nerhus, “When I was very young my grandfather would tell me wonderful tales of his sailing days. The boat he loved to remember most was always the Vega. He would tell me stories of her famous voyages sailing her deep into the Arctic to isolated islands and even further around the top of Norway loaded with very heavy machines that the other bigger jagts could never dream to carry. Many of the very first generators and engines to reach the northern islands and those for much bigger ships were delivered by Vega”.

In 1904-5 the Union of Sweden and Norway was dissolved with each once again becoming an independent country. Over night boats built in Norway could no longer be exported to Sweden or imported there. This left Mr. Carlsson in the difficult position of owning a boat in Norway that he could not bring back to Sweden. Fortunately human ingenuity came to his rescue in the simplest of forms. Late that summer Vega was loaded with a cargo destined for Bergkvara Sweden, Mr. Carlsson’s hometown.

On her arrival at Mr. Carlsson’s hometown of Bergkvara she was hauled out in the boat yard of Mr. K. O. Olsson where a few planks were removed then due to some mysterious internal damage the local ships surveyor declared Vega an un-repairable total loss and she was struck from the register in Norway. No insurance claim was ever made. To quote Lars Nerhus once again, “I was always told "Vega" was the best and strongest jagkt he (Ola Nerhus) ever built and all I could find out was that she went to Sweden in 1905 and never returned. This I would be told in a sad voice by my grandfather and it would always make me sad also”.

On the 10th of May the following spring Mr. Olsson launched a “new” boat from his yard of exactly the same dimensions as Vega for the same Mr. Johan Carlsson, of Degerhamn. Places like Bergkvara are small and everyone knows or is related to each other. So with a nudge and a wink Vega was condemned as a total uninsured loss then the next spring her planking was replaced, and after a new coat of paint the same surveyor accepted and approved for addition to the Swedish register of shipping the vessel "Vega of Bergkvara" as being newly built in Mr. Olsson’s yard. With the exception of fashion pieces (still in existence) that were added to her bow and stern that boat was exactly the same as the Vega condemned in his yard only months before. It would appear that Vega was not the only boat to be repatriated in this manner during those years.

 From that unusual re-birth Vega went on under the Swedish flag to become the famous “Vega of Bergkvara”. Transporting cement, building stone, bricks, and other heavy loads for AB Degerhams Kalkbruk until 1938 when she was sold to Olands Cement AB of Stockholm who had her until 1949. In 1928 she was equipped with a one cylinder 15 Horsepower diesel engine that was upgraded to a mighty 20 Horsepower single cylinder engine in 1939. Funny thing is that today we laugh at such small horse power ratings yet those engines pushed the boat every bit as fast fully loaded and our current 215 hp Perkins does and at about 1/10 of the fuel per hour. Seems to me that horses are getting a whole lot smaller these days and drinking a lot more than they did way back then. From 1949 until 1984 Vega had several owners.

As the demand for small wooden cargo jachts declined Vega was employed as a “Stone Fisher” a hard and dangerous profession well known as a “Ship Killer”. Stone fishers would haul a steel dredge bucket across the bottom of the shallow North Sea bed collecting the round glacial stones that litter the bottom. Once the hold was full those stones were then taken north to the small villages and traded for use as building stone against hides and dried fish. The work was hard, the profits small, and the wear on the boats enormous. Most stone fishers ended their lives on the bottom having been broken by the concentrated weight of their own cargo, a cargo they were never designed to carry.

Fortunately, Vega had been designed and built for exactly that type of cargo. In 1989, still carrying a modest sailing rig, Vega became the last wooden sailing boat to work as a Stone fisher. In early 1990, still strong, but showing the scars of her long hard life Vega was sold to a new owner who began a complete restoration of her hull and rigging. The restoration of her hull was a success; that of her rigging, she was re-rigged from a cut down Galleass to a cutter, left much to be desired.

In 1996 her then owner set out from Sweden to intrepidly sail Vega around the world alone. For many reasons that dream was to prove impossible. Having motored almost all the way to the Canary Islands that impractical fantasy was abandoned and Vega was hauled out on the hard where she was to sit ignored and neglected in the hot Spanish sun for the next 5 years.

When we first discovered Vega she was in a sad state of abandonment. Her hull planking had dried out in the harsh tropical sun to the point where the caulking had mostly all fallen out. All of her deck seams leaked and most of her systems no longer functioned. It was to be long weeks of hard work before she could be brought to even a minimum state of sea worthiness. On her first launching, even after several days hanging in the crane slings to expand her planking, she still took so much water that she had to be returned to land and a temporary coating of tar painted over the most offending seams. It took almost 2 weeks for her planking to swell to its proper size and the hull to seal up again.

While the hull planks were swelling almost every system on the boat needed attention. Neglect and lack of use are any boats worst enemies and at that point Vega had suffered from severe neglect for many years. What seemed like an endless list of tasks did, at last, reach a point where Vega could be sailed again. On her first sail her rig was found to be radically out of balance. Later studies showed that for the cutter rig she then carried her mast was roughly 1.30 meters (4’ 3”) too far forward – still in the proper position for a two mast Galleass rig. This clearly explained her problems tacking and her inability to make any reasonable windward progress. On most other points of sailing she was found to be an honest dependable sailor. All she really needed was some knowledgeable love and attention to undo the many past mistakes that had been inflicted on her. From that time until now Meggi and I have done our best to provide that love and attention in a practical seaman like manner with the hope that if we do our part well enough she might just possibly survive happily sailing along for another hundred years. During the time we have owned Vega we learned a lot about old sailing boats and the mysteries that surround them. We also learned the importance of a very philosophical ‘take it as it comes’ outlook on life that is of prime importance if you want to go to sea and come back sane rather than becoming a stark raving candidate for queen of the hatters ball.