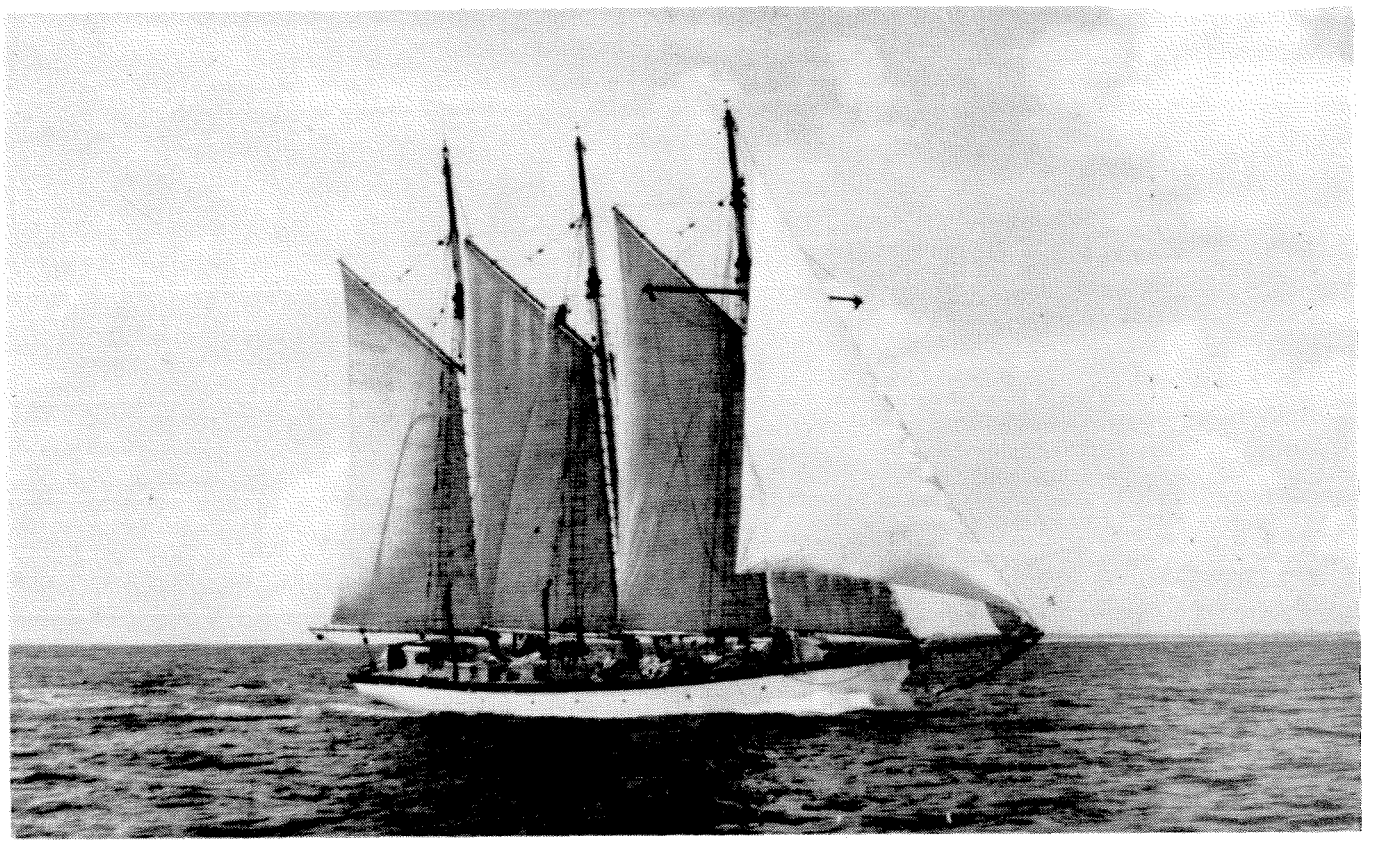

THE CRUISE OF THE CALIFORNIA

Ever dream of knocking off work and sailing around the world? Who doesn't? But here's the story of some men who really did it.

by HAL McCANN

ON SUNDAY, MARCH 20, 1949, the schooner *California* left Wilmington for a cruise around the world. The boat was a clutter of unstowed gear, the crew was completely green, and waterfront experts gave us only a fair chance of making the breakwater—but on December 6, 1953, four years and ten months later, we were back in the L. A. harbor with a complete circumnavigation behind us.

Ward Vickers (who attended Caltech in 1943) had given considerable thought to a world cruise and, upon his discharge from the Marine Corps in 1948, he and a friend, Nelson McCrady, bought the boat after looking on both coasts for a suitable cruising vessel. She was at that time fitted out as a fishing boat, and her new owners recovered a good percentage of their investment by fishing albacore off the Mexican coast in 1948.

The *California* is a three-masted flush-decked schooner. She has a clipper bow, an elliptical stern, and is

Six-man crew of the schooner California, as she set out from Wilmington on March 20, 1949, for a cruise around the world—Yvor Smitter, Hal McCann, Nelson McCrady, Gerald Fitzgerald, Ward Vickers, and Art Teets.

equipped with a diesel auxiliary. She is 63 feet on deck, draws 8½ feet, and has a beam of 14 feet, 3 inches.

Gathering a crew

The gathering of a crew was an extended and discouraging affair. Everyone who heard of the projected voyage thought it was a great idea; but when it came to quitting jobs, leaving families and girl friends, and putting up cash, the enthusiasts dropped out one by one. I heard about the trip around Christmas 1948, and immediately decided it was the chance of a lifetime. A week later I went aboard, shook hands around, and was invited to a general meeting in the fish hold. The following points were decided, all of which would make a true sailor shudder:

1. We would leave March 20, regardless of the condition of the boat, since she would obviously never be completely ready.
2. Those aboard that day would be the crew.
3. We would have no skipper. All duties on board would rotate, with the man on watch giving orders in emergencies. Major decisions would be made by vote.
4. Each man would buy an eqnal share in the *California,* but should he for any reason leave, all he would take with him would be his toothbrush.

That day was the beginning of a non-stop campaign to get the *Cal* ready for sea. On March 20 she was sound, possible to live in, and reasonably well stored. We sailed.

Aboard were Ward Vickers, Nelson McCrady, Gerald Fitzgerald, Yvor Smitter, Art Teets, and myself. Ward, known as "Vic," had been a V-12 at Tech in 1943 who had transferred to V-5 and finished off as a Marine Corps pilot. He was living at Long Beach and going to school at UCLA. "Julio" McCrady was a flying buddy of Vic's, living in Burbank. Fitzgerald was out of college, ex-Navy, and living in Pasadena. Up to the time we left he was driving a tractor for his uncle's contracting company. Yvor was an ex V-12 ensign going to Cal, Berkeley. His home was in Flintridge. Art was an electrical engineer (V-12 Caltech '45) who had taken his Master's at Stanford Business School. He was working in L.A. and living in Santa Monica. I was a Caltech civil engineer (V-12 '46) with a Master's from USC. My job was also in L. A., and I was living in Long Beach.

Blundering down the coast

Our average age was 23, and our knowledge of boats and the sea was almost zero. Moreover, with the exception of Vic's and Julio's long friendship, we were barely more than just acquaintances. Under the circumstances it was hardly surprising that our families were somewhat concerned for our safety.

With stops at Magdalena Bay, Acapulco, Puntarenas, and Golfito we blundered our way down the coast to Panama. Now, as I look back on that leg of the cruise, I realize it was uncomfortable, hazardous, and poorly executed. However, having no experience, we thought

at the time that conditions and foulups were normal. There is no doubt that ignorance can be an advantage under such circumstances.

Being somewhat disappointed with cruising and anxious to go fishing, Gerald and Julio signed off in Panama. This was not good—but our financial condition was even worse. Briefly, the boat needed about $3,000 worth of repairs, additions, and stores; and we had only $200 aboard. We started job hunting the day after our arrival in Panama, and within a week we were all employed.

Triangulation in the jungle

Vic, Yvor, and I went to work for Inter-American Geodetic Survey. We spent our time doing first-order triangulation in the Darien jungle and the Colombian Andes. The work was uncomfortable, but it paid well. The most necessary requirements were strong legs and a resistance to tropical disease. We had sold ourselves as geodesists, and managed to learn enough to do a competent job before we were required to show much skill.

Art stayed in the Canal Zone as an auditor for the Air Force. In his off time he supervised work on the *Cal*, paying for the job with our joint incomes. After ten months of this we had a sound, comfortable, and well-fitted-out boat; $4,000; three cases of malaria; one man (Yvor) struck by lightning; and one case of amoebic dysentery. At this point we decided to start the cruise in earnest while we were still healthy enough to move and young enough not to know better.

From May 1949 to August 1951 we cruised the Pacific. During that time we spent from two weeks to four months in each of the following places: Galapagos, Marquesas, Tuamotus, Societies, Cooks, Phoenix, Tokelaus, Samoas, Tongas, Fijis, New Hebrides, Solomons, and finally New Guinea.

Off the coast of Mexico, outbound: McCrady, Smitter and Vickers are at ease; Fitzgerald is at the banjo.

Hal McCann and sextant. Duties on board rotated—with the man on watch giving orders in emergencies.

Our next leg was to Singapore, with stops at Thursday Island, Banda Neira, Amboina, Makassar, and Soerabaja. We dropped the hook at Singapore in October 1951. After a two-week layover we sailed up to Bangkok for the holidays. On the return passage we caught the tail end of a typhoon and were forced to stop again at Singapore for three weeks for repairs before attempting the Indian Ocean.

Drafted from Ceylon

Between Singapore and Colombo we stopped at Penang and the Nicobars, arriving in March, 1952. At Ceylon Yvor was drafted. This was the hardest blow of the trip. After three years of extreme ups and downs, we were closer than brothers and a highly efficient boat-operating team. Moreover, the prospect of crossing the Indian Ocean and sailing (our engines had died in Singapore) three-handed up the Red Sea was not inviting. Several self-professed sailors offered themselves. But we had by this time discovered that technical ability was the least important requirement and we found no one that we trusted to fit into the pattern of our lives.

We sailed three-handed to Egypt, calling at Aden and Port Sudan. The hazardous and uncomfortable Red Sea passage reduced the boat and crew to a shabby appearance, but the thrill of accomplishment was more

than sufficient reward for our beating and efforts. The three boats previous to ours on that passage had (1) gone aground and been stripped by Yemenite Arabs, (2) lost the rudder and been carried to Port Tewfik on a steamer, and (3) sunk.

At Port Saïd we were joined by Steele Wotkyns, an old friend of Art's from Santa Monica. He is a graduate of Cal, Berkeley, and had been practicing architecture in Sweden. Enlisted by mail from Colombo, he flew to Cairo to join us. He knew nothing about boats, but after a brief adjustment period for all hands he proved to be a completely successful addition to the crew.

We entered the Mediterranean in July 1952—on the day of Farouk's departure—and began our zigzag course to Gibraltar. Our stops were at Beirut, Cyprus, Kastellarosso, Rhodes, Crete, Thira, Malta, Syracuse, Naples (where we left the boat for a three-month tour of Europe), Sardinia, and Almeria, Spain. That passage was marked by extreme temperature changes and high-velocity, short-lived winds.

On May 29, 1953, we sailed from Gibraltar for Panama, calling at Tenerife, Barbados, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, and Curacao. The actual circumnavigation was completed on July 28, 1953. Crossing the Atlantic in the trades is a simple and monotonous procedure. Between Balboa, Canal Zone, and San Pedro we stopped at Puntarenas, Acapulco, Cedros, and San Diego.

The foregoing is a brief outline of the cruise. It is impossible to include our adventures in anything short of a book. Besides, I somehow feel that this is not the place for tales of the jungle, sea, dancing girls, brawls and pirates. I will, however, attempt to answer the questions most frequently asked us.

Why do it?

This, though the most obvious question, is the most difficult to answer. My own ideas were that my interests and education were too narrow and that I had never really been tested. I never doubted that it was the right thing to do.

What was the hardest part?

Leaving, and living without friction. Also high on the list is the restraint required when some cocktail party acquaintance says, "You're so lucky to be able to do it."

How did you stand each other for five years?

Having no skipper made for situations that don't normally arise at sea. The experts to a man claimed the scheme wouldn't work, and one skipper even offered us medals if we made it. (We haven't collected yet.) To carry your load without direction or friction is not easy, but if accomplished yields the greatest reward of cruising. The requirements are an open mind, moderate intelligence, strong senses of trust and responsibility, the ability to differentiate between the trivial (no matter how maddening) and the important, a cool head in a jam, and the knowledge of how and when to keep your mouth shut. A man's characteristics ashore are a poor indication of his popularity and efficiency on small boats, since personalities tend to warp considerably under the stresses of cramped living and emergent siuations. Crew trouble is by far the major cause of cruise failures.

How did you spend your time at sea?

We stood a single watch, which kept each man on the wheel 7 hours in 24, except for the cook, who stood no daytime watch. The cook was required to turn our three square meals a day and to keep the below-decks spaces clean. We generally ate better aboard than we did in port. The cook's job was the hardest, with engine repair placing second. We installed and maintaained three diesels during the cruise.

With watches and routine duties the average day was about ten hours long. Most leisure time was spent reading books from our own large library.

Did you hit many storms?

The average was one bad blow per year. We caught our worst ones in the Gulf of Siam (5 days at 50 knots), the Tyrrhenian Sea (30 hours at 40 knots, 16 hours at 70 knots, and 3 days at 40 knots) and the Straits of Gibralter (24 hours at 65 knots). We considered ourselves lost only once, caught in 70 knots with the rocky Sardinian coast one-half mile to leeward.

How did you finance it?

After buying the boat and provisioning her, we had about $400 apiece. This lasted to Panama, where we worked for ten months. After that it was pretty much scratch and scrape. Occasionally we sold a magazine article. Exclusive of the original investment and money spent playing ashore, our expenses averaged $1.20 per man per day, including food, haulouts, and sails. This low expenditure was due to the fact that we did *everything* ourselves. Also, the generosity and friendliness of people the world over were beyond our greatest expectations. With regard to the latter, the Royal Navy has earned our highest respect and gratitude.

The boat was sold for approximately the same price we paid. We are in the process of preparing two books and a colored motion picture.

What use was it?

I know from experience that prospective employers don't consider the cruise of any value to them in their business. However, I feel that the broadened outlook, the sense of accomplishment, the acquisition of a realistic sense of values, and the knowledge of how I will react to extreme conditions are well worth the time, shocks, effort, and money.

What now?

Contrary to popular predictions, we seem to be fitting back into normal society with little difficulty, although I don't necessarily consider this desirable. A belaying pin feels more assuring than a slide rule. Does anybody want a civil engineer who can navigate and speak Malay?