

# Twice an Olympian

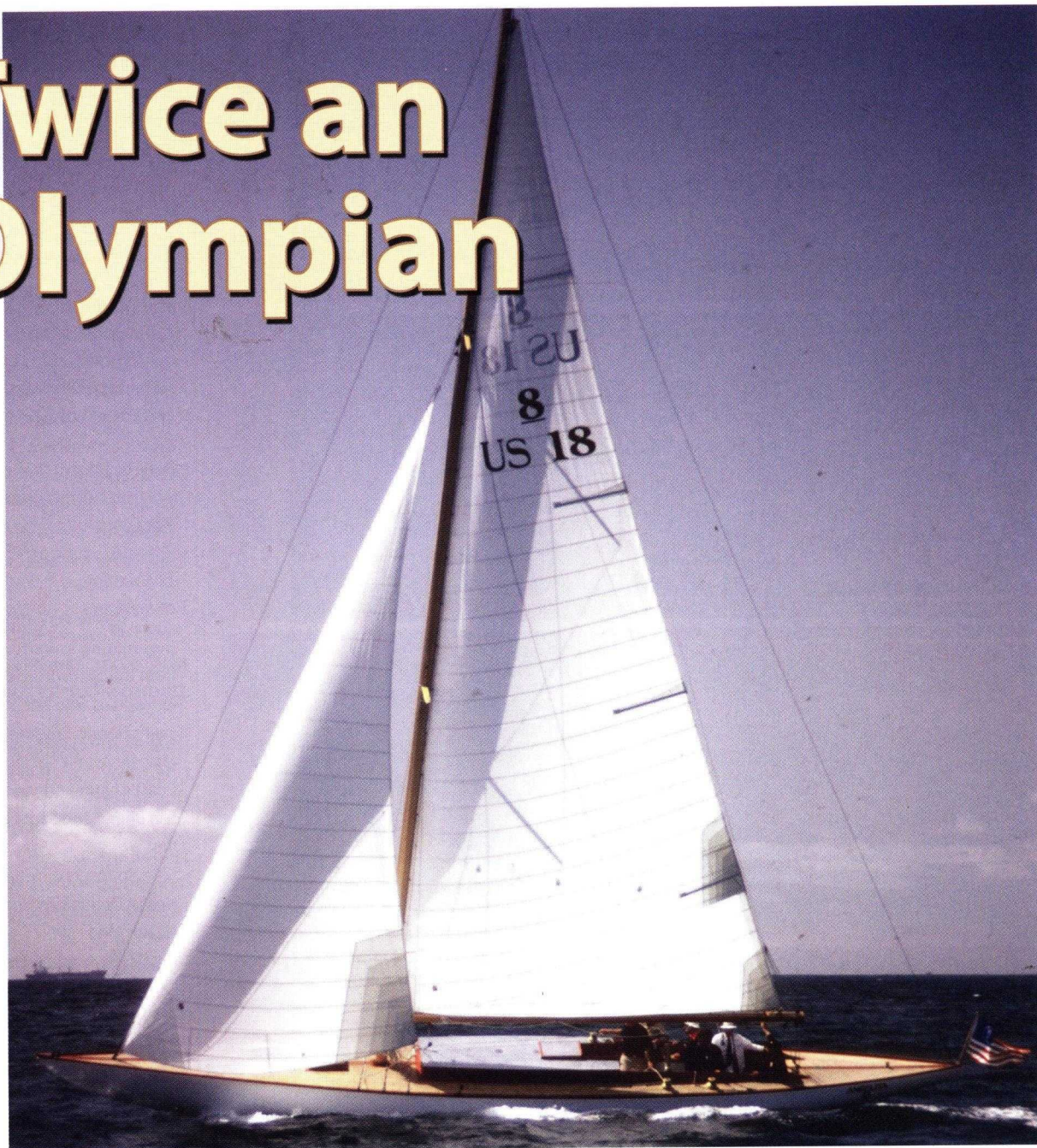


Photo: © Chris Caswell

**The 8-metre sloop *Angelita* made a splash in two Olympics—and for a brief time called Santa Cruz home**

By Geoffrey Dunn

The 1932 Summer Olympics were a somewhat muted affair as Olympiads go. Held during the height of the Great Depression in Los Angeles, city fathers scrambled to put together world-class festivities with limited resources and a reeling global economy that cast a long shadow over the proceedings.

If the '32 Olympics lacked some of the luster of more recent affairs, they did

produce a celebrated hometown hero, Owen Churchill, who skippered the U.S. entry in the 8-metre sailing race—the sleek and elegant sloop *Angelita*—to Olympic gold.

Churchill was a talented sailor and waterman. Born in Los Angeles in 1896, he was the son of a wealthy real estate tycoon and banker, served in the Army during World War I, and graduated from

Stanford University in 1919. A daredevil as a child, his mother reportedly bought him a sailboat to dissuade him from flying, and he became a well-known figure on the Southern California sailing scene. By the time of the 1928 Olympics, held in Amsterdam, he skippered the United

(Above) The sloop *Angelita* cruising under sail off the California coast during the 1984 Olympic Regatta.



States team aboard the yacht *Babe*, but failed to win a medal.

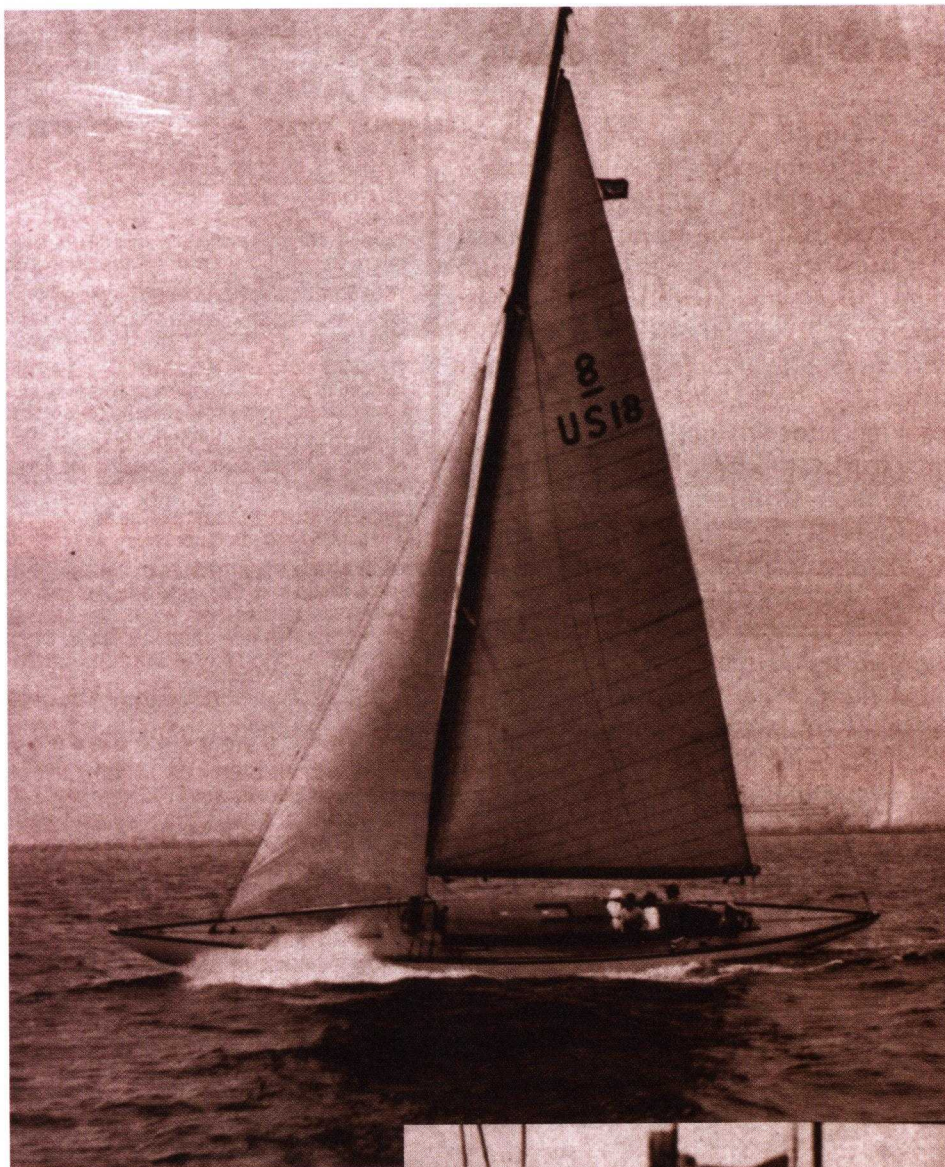
Churchill was determined to appear on the Olympic victory stand the next time around. He and a group of ten investors commissioned the construction of the *Angelita* in 1930, for \$20,000. Contrary to popular perception, 8-metre sailing vessels (once the most popular sailing competition class in the world) are not eight meters in length, but the "8-metre" classification refers to a complicated formula that takes into account waterline length, chain girth, sail area, and freeboard expanse.

The *Angelita* was a svelte 50-foot racer and Churchill believed in her. "She was a very fast boat," Churchill would later recall. "Sometimes she practically sailed herself." But when he lost the King of Spain Cup Race (in Britain) in 1930, his investors decided to fold their hand. Churchill bought the ship for \$15,000, trained his crew for two years, and when it came time to sail in Los Angeles, he swept the Canadian entry in the finals in four straight races. His victory marked the first-ever gold medal for the United States in yacht racing.

In 1934, Churchill sailed *Angelita* amid the recreated barkentines on the set of *Mutiny on the Bounty*. She had the grace and lines of a movie star.

Churchill hoped to bring his sloop back to the medal stand at the celebrated 1936 Olympic games in Berlin, but he finished a disappointing 10th and abandoned his Olympic dreams. The disconsolate Churchill eventually sold *Angelita*, and headed off to the island of Tahiti, where he developed the idea for a swim fin, which he patented and still bears his name. It was a small consolation prize for his loss in Hitler's Germany.

Over the next quarter century, the *Angelita* went through a series of different owners, and by the 1960s cut a popular figure in West Coast sailing races, including those held in Monterey Bay. During the winter of 1965, then owned by Dr. Eric Petersen, she went aground at the entrance of the newly opened Santa Cruz harbor. She was later raced by Gene Koblick. But by the mid-1970s, the *Angelita* had wound up in disrepair—a "grey ghost" for all Santa Cruzans to see, left to rot on dry dock at "Moore's Reef," located along Highway One, just west of



(Above) *Angelita*, with Owen Churchill and the original crew, sails to victory in the 1932 Olympics.

(Right) Owen Churchill relaxes on his *Angelita*, which he commissioned the construction of in 1930.





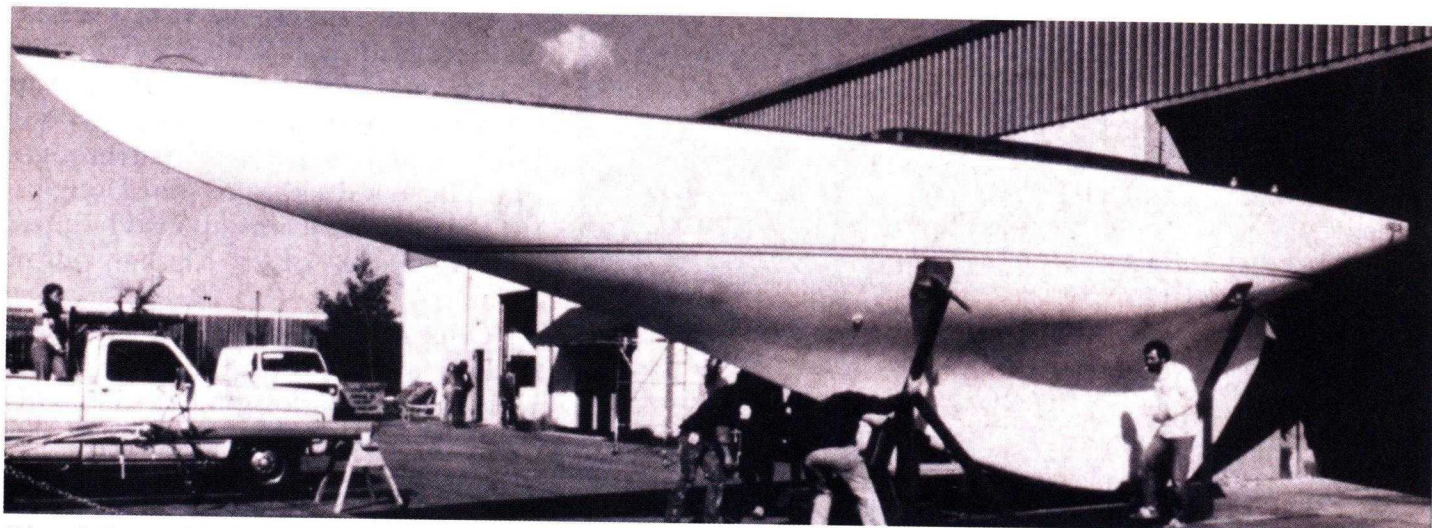


Photo: Bob Thomsen Collection/Barry Dow

(Above) The sleek hull of *Angelita* is rolled from the building in Santa Cruz's Live Oak district which was the home of C&B Marine.

the Skyview Drive-In.

*Angelita's* onetime Olympic grace seemed lost to the ages. All that was left of her was a bleached mahogany hull and her memories of Olympic glory.

Thanks to retired entrepreneur and avid sailor Alan Simpkins, however, the *Angelita* had another life in her. Once the visionary Simpkins realized that the 1984 Olympics would be held in Los Angeles, he saw an opportunity to resurrect the sloop.

Simpkins, who sailed against the *Angelita* locally in the 1960s, wrote his friend Peter Ueberroth, president of the L.A. Olympic Organizing Committee, proposing the restoration of the heralded sloop serve as the flagship for the 1984 Olympic games, a half-century beyond her original glories. Churchill, frail-but-willing in his late 80s, would be at her helm. An enthusiastic Ueberroth, who visited Santa Cruz in 1981 to survey the *Angelita*, agreed to the proposal.

Santa Cruz boat builders C&B Marine, then located at the corner of 17th Avenue and Brommer Street in Live Oak (and not far from where the swim center would later be named for Simpkins' family), was selected for the daunting task of rebuilding and refurbishing the boat. The challenges were many, but led by a local team that included Bob Thomsen, Jim Wallace, Mark Earl, Jim Raun-Byberg, Robin Mair, Ron Skolmen, Neal Jern, Gary Rhodes, and others, the *Angelita* was ready for the XXIII Olympiad in the City of Angels.



On a brisk winter's day in February of 1984, the revived *Angelita* was poised for its launch and journey (by land) to Los Angeles. Churchill and two of his surviving crewmen came to Santa Cruz to attend the dedication festivities. More than 250 local well wishers were in attendance. "It's been like having two boats," Churchill addressed the crowd. "I was lucky to have contact two times in the building of this boat—in 1930 and again today." When he first saw the boat, he acknowledged, he had broken into tears.

Churchill and the *Angelita* were a hit in Los Angeles. Sailing out of the harbor at Long Beach as the Olympic flagship, Churchill announced that "she balances beautifully, just as she always did."

The event proved to be Churchill's last hurrah. He died in November of the following year, at the age of 89. "I'll



Photos: Jim Samuels Collection

(Top) *Angelita* had basically been abandoned at Moore's Boat Yard, sometimes referred to as "Moore's Reef," where it had become overgrown with brush until the restoration began. (Below) Owen Churchill, flanked by Santa Cruz Yacht Club members Jim Samuels and Ernie Rideout, during a visit to "Moore's Reef."





Photo: © Chris Caswell

(Above) With Owen Churchill, *Angelita's* original skipper, at the helm, the sloop heads back toward the marina in Long Beach.

remember his face as he sailed *Angelita* during the 1984 Olympics," Ueberroth said upon his death. "I don't remember ever seeing a happier man." Rough estimates are that Churchill won more than 100 sailing races, including the King of Spain cup six times, during his lifetime. His ashes were scattered at sea from his beloved *Angelita*.

The sloop of his dreams had more life in her. In 1986, Santa Cruzan Michael Zelter bought the *Angelita* from the Orange Coast Racing Academy and brought her back to the Santa Cruz harbor, racing her throughout Northern California. "It was indeed a beautiful boat," says Zelter. "But it wasn't all that family friendly for young kids." After racing it for two years, he sold it to a sailing aficionado in Maine and shipped it across the continent.

According to Zelter, the *Angelita* has since gone through a form of nautical mitosis. The most recent owner rebuilt her hull (and kept her rigging) on Martha's Vineyard. The original hull—restored and cold molded in Santa Cruz—was sold to an owner in Germany. 🌊

(Right) While owning *Angelita*, Santa Cruz local Michael Zelter races his sloop in San Francisco Bay.

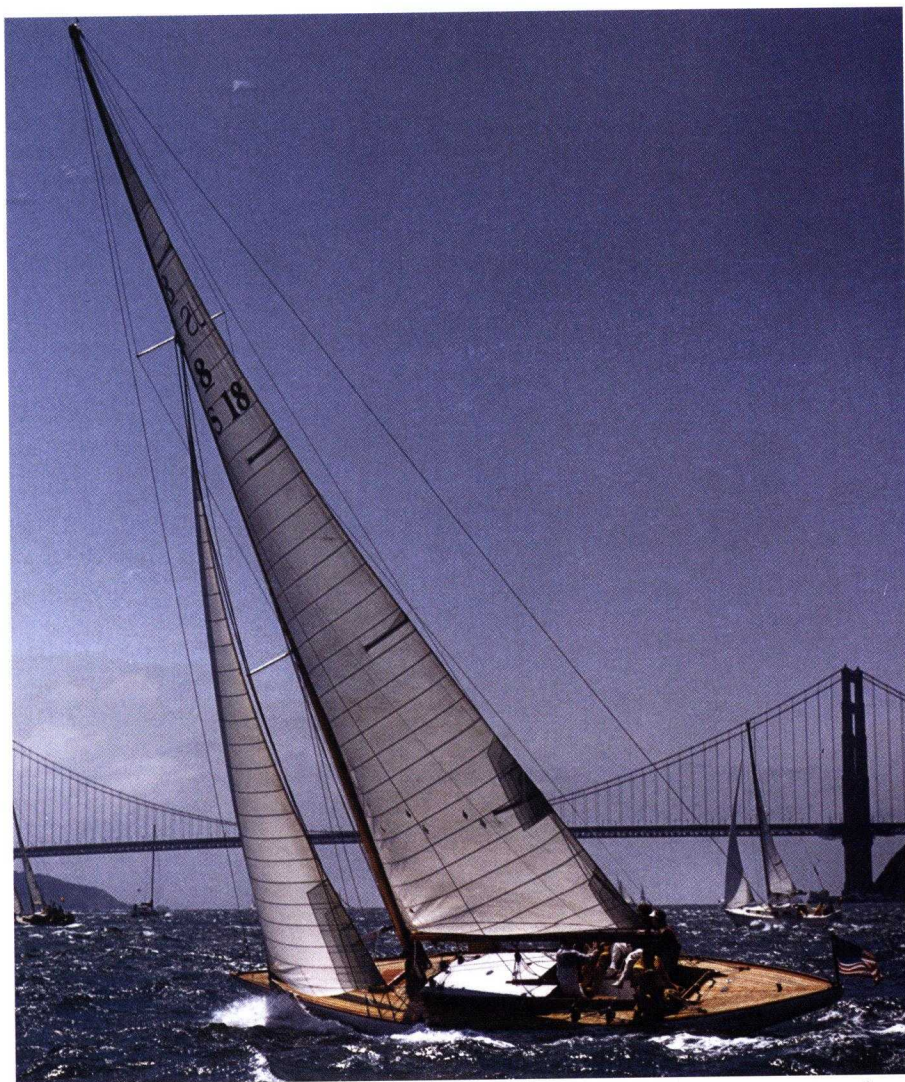


Photo Michael Zelter Collection/Diane Beeston