

Sea Stag II rides (the waves) again

By CANDACE ATKINS
STAFF WRITER

MIKE WEAVER is in love. Completely, hopelessly and head-over-heels in love.

The object of Weaver's adoration is a long, sleek hussy, just turned 40. Sure, she's got some miles on her, but her classic grace and recent facelift keep Weaver starry-eyed.

He's spent a fortune on her and swears it's worth it just to be around her. She may or may not return his favors. She could bring him fortune or plunge him into bankruptcy. Either way, Weaver's love won't waver.

It's a 38-foot commercial speedboat that's brought Weaver emotionally to his knees. The Sea Stag II is a 1946 wood-hull vessel that's beckoned him for 30 years.

When Weaver was a kid in San Jose, he used to visit the Santa Cruz Wharf and watch the Sea Stag II, then operated by Stagnaro Brothers, take people for spins around the bay. His mother, who was afraid of boats, wouldn't buy him a ticket, so Weaver would swim to the end of the wharf and bob up and down in the boat's V-shaped wake.

"I'd be out there watching it and think, 'Oh, I'd love to ride that boat,'" Weaver said. "By the time I got it together to ride it, they'd gone."

The operation, which started in 1946, closed in 1962.

Weaver, not admitting to

being a romantic, never forgot the Sea Stag II. He moved to Santa Cruz in 1969, and spent the next 16 years as a carpenter. He also traveled back and forth to Alaska, where he held a variety of construction jobs.

"When I got back to Santa Cruz before my last gig in Alaska, I was driving along by the wharf — it was Christmas-time, 1983. It was one of those clear, hot Christmas days we get. There were people on the beach and the wharf — I started thinking, 'God, whatever happened to the old Sea Stag II?' I visualized the route.

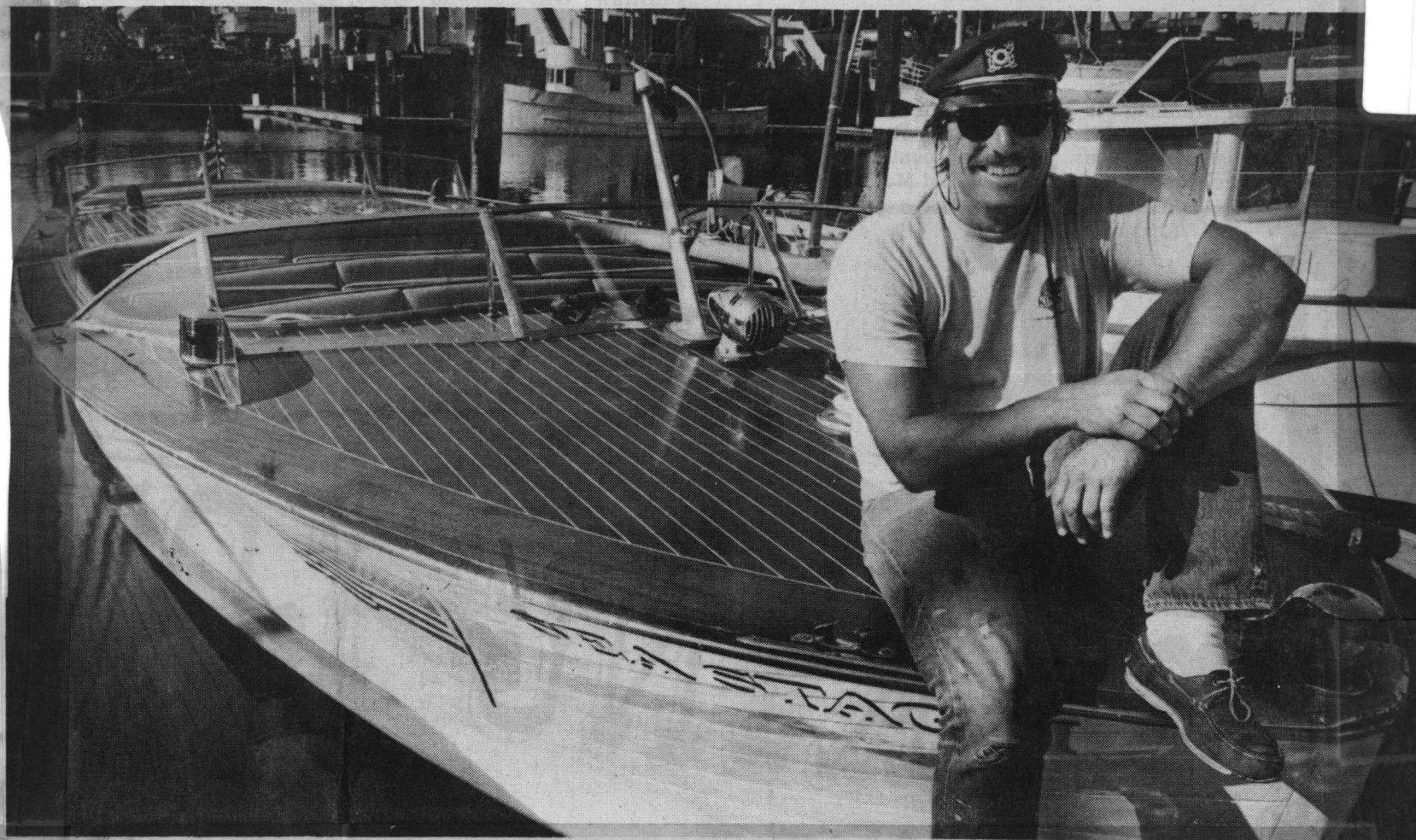
"Then I got a real strong premonition it was sittin' in a garage. I thought, 'It's gotta be alive.'"

Weaver looked up Robert "Big Boy" Stagnaro and got the name of the man who bought the Sea Stag II from the Stagnaro family in 1968. He didn't get any farther than the name, because he had to return to Alaska to work another six months.

"I was real anxious," he said. "If I'd thought of it (finding the boat), I figured someone else would, too."

But after more than two decades, the Sea Stag II seemed to have faded from everyone's mind but Weaver's. When he returned to Santa Cruz, he started to trace the boat. He had no competition.

He discovered that after its days at the wharf, the Sea Stag II had been taken to Lake Tahoe, where it was used to pull water skiers on the North Shore. Then the "Captain



Owner Mike Weaver says his infatuation with the Sea Stag II vintage speedboat just keeps growing.

Kurt Ellison

George" commercial boating company bought it and berthed it at San Francisco's Pier 39.

"He let her go. I heard she started looking real poor," Weaver said, running his hand along the Sea Stag II's new mahogany hatch covers.

The Sea Stag II was so neglected at Pier 39 that at one point it sank "to the decks." Another boater couldn't stand to see the vintage vessel die like that, so he hooked up bilge pumps to remove the water. Soon after that, the boat was dry-docked on 55-gallon drums, and deteriorated even more.

Eventually, the boat was repossessed and sold to a man who took it to Bethel Island and started repairs. He found a 750-

When Weaver came along two years later, the man was glad to sell. The Sea Stag II was seaworthy at the time, but needed more repairs. Weaver reverently rose to the task.

"I'd always enjoyed the different jobs I had, but there was

'I have a silent language with this boat ... When I reach the mouth of the harbor, it's like a metamorphosis.'

horsepower Hall Scott engine owned by the Navy. The engine had been slated for a naval museum, but the Navy agreed to sell it to him.

In addition to the 2,250-cubic-inch 12-cylinder engine, the new owner replaced planks, refurbished the deck and put in new upholstery. It was a long, expensive project that lost momentum.

also something missing," Weaver said. "Of all the hare-brained ideas I'd had, I knew I gotta go along with this one."

Bringing the Sea Stag II back to its former beauty turned into a minor problem compared to what Weaver called "jumping through hoops for the city." At times, he grew discouraged by seemingly endless requirements. He credits close business friends and his wife, Karen, for urging him to keep moving forward.

It has taken a year, and today

the Sea Stag II will return to the floating dock at Santa Cruz Wharf, exactly 40 years and one day after her maiden voyage from San Francisco. The thought almost brings tears to Weaver's eyes.

"The infatuation just gets better," Weaver said. "I have a silent language with this boat. I still have to pinch myself. I'm the curator of a floating museum. When I reach the mouth of the harbor, it's like a metamorphosis."

Weaver intends to preserve the Stagnaro tradition of loving the Sea Stag II and giving the vessel first-rate care.

"I feel obligated to do at least as well as they did," he said. "If I do better ... well, that'd be excellent."

The Sea Stag II will also be available for rescues — the boat was used in 30 successful rescues when it was owned by the Stagnaro family, Weaver

said. He also has plans to join the Coast Guard Auxiliary.

Weaver is licensed for 30 passengers and two crew members. He said he remembers the old days when the Stagnaros "used to stuff 50 smiling faces" in the boat — many of them local kids who couldn't afford a ticket.

"It's a good, fast, seaworthy boat," Weaver said. "It set a speed record the first time out. They were under the Golden Gate at 5 a.m. May 23, 1946, with 38 people on board. They were unloading them at Santa Cruz by 8 that morning. Gosh, they just cooked. They must have done 50 miles an hour."

Weaver said Big Boy Stagnaro sang Sea Stag II songs to him the other day when they had breakfast at Gilda's, owned by Gilda Stagnaro.

"He told me when he ran out of stuff to say (to riders), he'd start singing," Weaver said.

"When he stopped singing, he'd play Bing Crosby records."

Weaver hopes to get approval for a loudspeaker and have Big Boy record some of the old Sea Stag II ditties to play from the ticket booth.

Weaver will maintain the Stagnaro family-type operation. His wife will sell tickets and nobody but Weaver will be behind the wheel.

"Nobody touched this boat but Stago (Stagnaro)," Weaver said. "I can feel the spirit of that in this boat. I don't want anybody else to operate it, either. It's a funny boat."

"The spirit of the Stagnaro family is really strong. It's just time for this boat to come back."

Tickets for 15 minute rides from Santa Cruz Wharf are \$6 general, \$4.50 children and seniors over 55. The Sea Stag II will operate 10 a.m. to sundown six days a week through October, conditions permitting.