

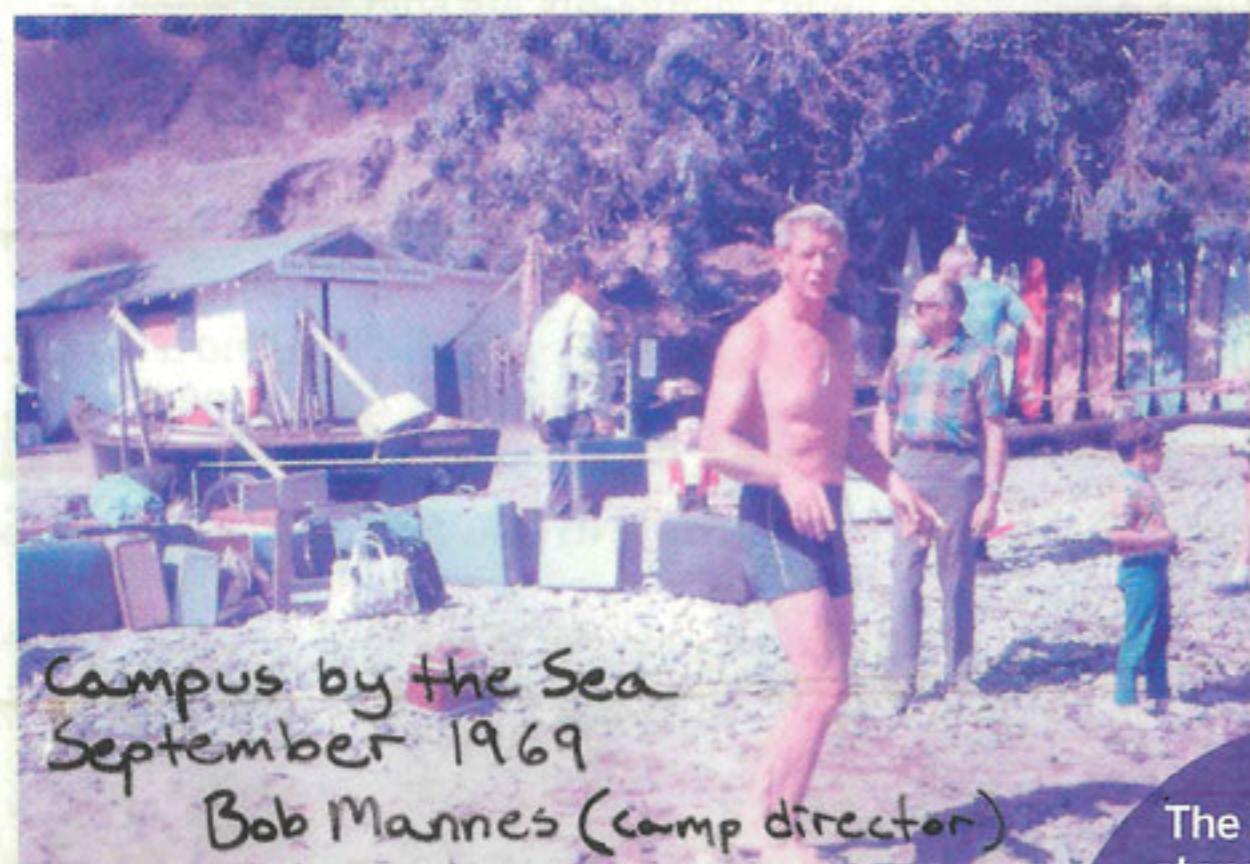


BY MICHAEL PETERS

# SIGHTLINES

## Patient Zero

WHEN I CAUGHT THE BOAT DISEASE.



The author's father stands on the beach before the *Northeaster*, the boat that started it all. Got a comment for Michael? Give him a shout at [inbox@pmymag.com](mailto:inbox@pmymag.com).

caught a glimpse of a photograph stapled to the inside planking. There it was, a picture of my father, all tall and tan and fit, with a boar's tusk around his neck, dated 1969. Covered in dust with a rusty staple, it was genuine. It took my breath away.

A million memories came rushing back. In this same photo, behind my father, was the *Northeaster*, a 14-foot plywood skiff, painted black, with a high west coast bow and a 25-horsepower Johnson outboard. Built in 1965 by the winter caretaker and master boatbuilder Bill Walden, the *Northeaster* had achieved local fame as the only boat still running after a devastating northeaster storm had hit Avalon one winter. In rough water, you would stand up to drive, with one hand on the extended tiller and the other pulling against a bow line for balance. It was like riding a bucking bronco, jumping from wave to wave, the rougher the water the better. I fell in love with that thrilling and heroic little boat. For me it was patient zero, the start of my lifelong boat disease.

By 16 I had decided to build my own *Northeaster*. Bill Walden was gone by then, so I had to figure out how to build the new boat myself. I leveled the *Northeaster* and spent my evenings using framing squares and bevel gauges and strings and tape measures to take the lines off her inside frames. I built the new mahogany frames from my measurements and precut the bevels to match, set it all up on a jig behind the boathouse fence, and began to build my boat. At summer's end, it was only half planked, so we lifted it aboard the *Mother Pig* for its ride to the mainland, to be finished at home in Los Angeles. I managed to get it seaworthy in six months, just in time for Easter break, 1970. *Desiree* was painted black, just like the *Northeaster*, but was a foot longer, with a 50-horsepower Mercury outboard and an aluminum beer keg for a fuel tank. With my father's help, I launched the boat in San Pedro for her maiden voyage to Catalina and proceeded to run straight into the dock. I had installed the steering backwards. Undaunted, I headed for the island anyway, steering left to turn right, with my dad running alongside as safety escort in the *Mother Pig*.

The backwards steering didn't bother my dad as much as the habit I had of letting go of the steering wheel to adjust the throttle at full speed. I had learned to hold the bow line for balance from the *Northeaster*, and I wasn't about to let go of it. □

Earlier this year, just after Labor Day, while vacationing in Avalon on Catalina Island, my family and I piled into a small boat and headed west along the coast three miles to the camp where I grew up. The canyon at Gallagher's Cove is too steep for a road, so getting there is strictly by boat. During the 17 years my father ran the camp, it was very primitive; no phone, no electricity, no flush toilets. Just the way we liked it. I hadn't been back in 25 years and for my brother Jim it had been over 40. On first sight as we approached, we could see that a pier now stood in place of the old floating dock and shuttle boat.

The winter staff at Campus by the Sea invited us for lunch, and after sharing old stories about the place, gave us a tour. We headed up-canyon and peeked through the original buildings from the '50s and the newer ones added since the years my family left in 1972. I stood on the deck of Rock Cod, the old caretaker's house on the cliff, overlooking the magnificent view of the Pacific Ocean and Long Point to the west, and reminisced about the year I'd spent as caretaker after high school.

I eventually wandered down to the boathouse, where I had spent many summers repairing the old camp boats. As I walked through the workshop, I couldn't help but think it looked just as messy as I'd left it, and that made me happy. This place was mine. As I headed through the double doors that opened to the beach, I