



**The Herreshoff Registry**  
***A resource for owners, prospective owners, builders, and aficionados***

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## **The Documenting History Initiative**

### ***An Interview With John Palmieri***

This interview was conducted by Steve Nagy in the morning of July 19, 2011 via telephone. Mr. Palmieri was at his home in Portsmouth, RI.



John Palmieri has been Curator of the Herreshoff Marine Museum since March, 2000. He holds a Bachelor in Chemical Engineering from Tufts University, a Master in Naval Architecture and Marine Engineering and the Degree of Naval Engineer from MIT, and an MBA from George Washington University. A retired Navy Captain, he served in the Navy for 27 years, primarily in the construction and repair of nuclear submarines and commanded a naval shipyard. He has 20 years engineering and program management experience in the development of advanced marine propulsion and power generation systems at Westinghouse and Northrop Grumman.

John describes his experience in naval architecture, his beginnings as the curator of the Herreshoff Marine Museum, and provides insight into the operation of a small museum. He discusses some of the things the Museum has been doing, and wishes to specifically call out the contributions of Norene Rickson, who led and accomplished much of the indexing, especially the America's Cup collection. As you will hear, John is very articulate and brings a significant background to his role.

#### **THE TRANSCRIPT**

SN: So ... You spent your career, your initial career, as an engineer in the Navy, retiring eventually as a Captain. Were you doing design work then? What kind of projects were you involved with?

JP: In the Navy?

SN: Right.

JP: In the Navy, most of my work was involved in ... in my initial career as a naval engineer, most of my work was involved in the construction and repair of submarines in the shipyards.

SN: Submarines? Were you in Groton or anywhere around there?

JP: No. I was in Pearl Harbor, Charleston, and Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and Mare Island.

SN: Oh. So I guess what I want to figure out is how you ended up with The Herreshoff Museum. So after you retired ...

JP: I retired and went to work for Westinghouse. I was involved in propulsion development, development and production of marine propulsion and power generation systems, mostly for the Navy. Mostly a lot of development work of new systems, new machinery, concepts, and then had a mandatory retirement at 65. Was living at the time, we were in California. Been in California for 20 years. My wife and I are both from the East Coast. We never felt at home in California. So we moved back to New England. She's from Massachusetts and I am from New York, so we picked Rhode Island.

SN: Halfway in between.

JP: Halfway in between. Right. And when I did that, I also decided I wanted to do some marine surveying. So I took a course in marine surveying, and started surveying boats in the, you know, in the Rhode Island / Connecticut area.

SN: Right. And then you eventually started volunteering at the Museum?

JP: Yeah. I volunteered at the Museum. I started as a volunteer, you know, like a docent. And I talked to Carlton Pinheiro, who was the curator at the time. I wanted to start getting involved back in wooden boats, so I offered to him that I would survey any of the boats in the collection he wanted, for free, and I would give a report, his report, and they could do with it what they wanted. It was a way for me to get more experience in wooden boats. So I started surveying boats in the collection, and I don't think Carlton was very happy with it, because he had his eye on some boats ... he thought it would be great to get them back sailing again. By the time I finished my surveys, the results were kind of disappointing and the possibilities of getting the boat back in the water for a minimal cost were ....

SN: Well ...

JP: But I enjoyed it a lot, and Carlton was a great person. Carlton was the heart and soul of the Museum. He used to dress up like Captain Nat. He looked like Captain Nat. You get him in a Buzzards Bay Boys boat dressed up like Captain Nat. He looked just like the famous painting of Captain Nat in a Buzzards Bay Boys boat, so ...

SN: Right. So you were ... when Carlton passed away, I guess that was the year 2000, you were still volunteering at the time?

JP: Yeah. I was a volunteer, Right.

SN: I guess you were something like his assistant curator at the time?

JP: No, no. Off and on ... at that time ... at one time the curator staff was, I mean, Carlton was the curator. He had an assistant curator for awhile. Chris Trowbridge worked with him a lot. And then there was a separate fellow who handled, whose name escapes me this minute, who handled America's Cup Hall Of Fame, who helped set it up.

SN: Was that a guy named Mike Pesare?

JP: No, no. Mike Pesare was .... I'll tell you ... the same fellow who set up the America's Cup database at the Museum Of Yachting. It will come to me while we are talking, sometime. But, you know, to me ... when Carlton passed on, I think he was so much of the heart of the Museum. The Museum, at that time especially, was a very Bristolian organization. And you're not a Bristolian unless you and your forebears and their forebears grew up in Bristol. The place was really not ready, I think, for a professional curator to come in and start doing things like a professional curator would, and disrupting the, maybe what Carlton and Halsey had spent so much time setting up and achieving. So that I was asked if I would on a part-time basis become a curator at the Museum. It was kind of like, I was a non-threatening guy, from that point of view. And they would get comfortable, although I lived in Portsmouth and not in Bristol, they had gotten comfortable with me coming across the bridge every couple of days.

SN: Well, it's close enough.

JP: Right. Well, it wasn't close for some people. But anyway, so I was asked if I would take the curator job on a part-time basis. Carlton [Halsey, *sic*] and I struck a verbal agreement, and that's stuck until, pretty much until today. That's where I am.

SN: So, you work ... are you still considered, you're not part-time, at the moment, right?

JP: Yeah.

SN: Oh, you are?

JP: Yes, I've always been a part-time. It's always been not ...

SN: You come in when you can, basically?

JP: Not a member of the staff, I was like, I guess you would say, a consultant, or outside contractor. Like an outside contractor.

SN: So, I guess in 2000 you became the part-time curator but ...

JP: Yeah, I think so, in March. I think in March, shortly after Carlton passed away.

SN: But you really didn't have years of experience of curatorial ....

- JP: I had no experience. No experience. My background is naval engineering ... mostly marine engineering background. I have a degree in naval architecture and marine engineering, but I've never been involved in the design end of yachts, or you know, the boating industry. I grew up in Larchmont, New York and I crewed, I was a paid crew on a 43 foot Alden schooner at Larchmont Yacht Club, and she happened to be the mother ship for the S-Boat fleet in Larchmont. So I got to see Herreshoff, and hear people talk about Herreshoff boats. It's great to be back involved with them. I'm doing kinda something ... that as a kid, I looked at those boats and said "they're pretty neat."
- SN: Over the years, though, you've done quite a bit, with things like the Classic Yacht Symposium and the Curator's Log. So I guess, how did you learn the ins and outs of being a curator? OJT, I guess?
- JP: Yes, yeah. Pretty much on the job. There were some great people before. Mike Pesare, who was on staff, did a lot of work, and Carlton did a lot of work, a lot of writing. He and Maynard had done Herreshoff Of Bristol, which is really a standard, a classic, and which we re-published in, I think, 2005. There are many stories about Herreshoff, many ways of looking at the Herreshoff corporation and the family, but I probably come back to Herreshoff Of Bristol book more than anything else.
- SN: I own three copies of it, one of each version, and one signed.
- JP: Carlton had seen and published, and Carlton and Halsey participated in Nat's Recollections, and also, just before I got to the Museum, they published Their Last Letters. And so those three, along with L. Francis' book, The Wizard of Bristol, so there is a lot of background information. The work of Kurt Hasselbalch at MIT has always been very helpful to the Museum and has always been very helpful to me. The fact that they have all the drawings at MIT, they also have, MIT also provided us with a copy of the microfilm. And so we have the capability to review the Herreshoff drawings at the Museum. That helps a lot.
- SN: So, you've obviously worked with many of the luminaries in the world of Herreshoff maritime history – Halsey, Carlton, Maynard, Kurt. Is there anybody else, or any individuals who stand out in your minds as being particularly knowledgeable or helpful? These guys obviously are the cream of the crop. Anybody else?
- JP: Yeah, there are a number of people. First off, if it wasn't for Halsey Herreshoff, we wouldn't have the Museum. His father and mother started it. But sure, Halsey carried it through its lean years, setting up the buildings where we are, and achieving ... and getting really some significant donations to the collection. Halsey is not only one of the originators, but he is probably the largest benefactor, because he has the model collection. The model collection at the Museum, which people come from all over the world to see. There's Claas van der Linde, who is just an amazing researcher. I met Claas, I guess, when I first started curating. He was over here at that time researching catamaran development. He's an amazing person and an amazing researcher and certainly has added a lot to the understanding of the Herreshoff Manufacturing Company, and the family. I often look at what Claas does and I think that he is doing work that we should have been doing but for whatever reason we never seem to get to do. And then there's a lot of builders. There's people like Ed McClave. Ed McClave probably

has the greatest knowledge of the construction techniques of the Herreshoffs. Not only what they did, by why they did it, and is able to express that in writing, in drawings, and in design work that I think is unmatched. There are a lot of other amazing people who are involved in restoration and have done great work for the Museum, like Taylor & Snediker, who restored CLARA. I would often, when I was restoring CLARA, which was Captain Nat's 1887 cat yawl, I'd often go down to Taylor & Snediker to see how things were doing. Bill Taylor would, I'd find him sitting in the middle of what was going to be the hull, in the middle of what would be the salon, looking at things and trying to think through how would Captain Nat have looked at it. That's the way they carried out the total project. There are people all up and down the east coast that do amazing work, as well as around the world. Those are a couple of them.

SN: Thanks. In a typical small museum, like yours, funding constraints are probably the fact of life, and it limits the size of the staff that you've got. And obviously, since the organization would cease to exist without effective revenue generation and chasing donations, and what have you, a good portion of that limited in size staff is devoted to organizational development and fund-raising. And I think probably, oftentimes at the expense of the curatorial function, you know, that the museum was originally set up for. I assume that this is the case at the Herreshoff Museum, and I imagine you oftentimes get frustrated with some of the financial constraints that you have to deal with?

JP: Well, you've got a small team that, in recent years the attendance and donations are down at all maritime museums. All gone through some hard times. The museum has gone through substantial management changes. You know, it's basically a museum that, you know, a family museum, and as time goes on, it's a difficult transition to a management structure which the founding family is not the key element, or is not as key an element, or as overriding an element, as it was to start with. So that's an issue that's going on with our museum. And as I say, it's typical of many small museums. We haven't had the money we'd like to put into our exhibits. I mean, we've had very short funding in funding exhibits. A lot of what we do, you try to develop concepts of what you'd like to do with the exhibits, or with boat restorations and things. But those ideas only work if you have a strong funding structure within the Museum. Or if you can entuse some donor who says "That's a project I want to follow." And we've had some key people like that. Since I've been here, one of the major things we've done is the restoration of CLARA, where we had one benefactor who really saw, looked at this stripped out old hull, and partially restored, and understanding of Nat's close relationship to that boat. I think it's the only boat, it's one of two boats we have, we have a photograph of Nat sitting, really not doing anything. There aren't many photographs of him not doing anything. He stuck with us, you see it's very close to completion. It's really a great part of our collection.

SN: You know, interestingly, as an aside, I spoke to a guy in California who had owned CLARA out there, I'm gonna guess in the 1950s, prior to ....

JP: Yeah, she was down in Newport Beach, I think, at one point.

SN: I spoke to the guy, this is an interesting comment. Apparently, he had been in touch with L. Francis, I don't know, looking for advice on maintaining the boat or what have you. And L. Francis told him, or he told me, based on his conversation, that L. Francis had, how does this go? His kids and Nat's kids had something in common. "L. Francis was conceived on the same

bunk as my two kids were. Forward bunk, starboard side.”

JP: I hadn't heard that. That's great.

SN: I have a note somewhere. If you're interested I'll forward it to you.

JP: Well, you know, that kind of thing continues. We've had, a couple times I've roused out a couple who was enjoying themselves together in the salon of TORCH, our Fishers Island ...

SN: Oh really? In the museum?

JP: I guess something about Herreshoff boats make people want to get close to one another. CLARA is a great story. She sailed for over a hundred years, for about a hundred years. She started her 100-year overhaul in 1980. She sailed as cat yawl, a ketch, and eventually a schooner. And so ...and a sloop ... a cutter at one time. She's quite a boat.

SN: You were talking a minute ago about the change in leadership at the Museum. I guess that took place, I don't know, a year or so ago, that Halsey took a ...

JP: Well, yeah. It's an ongoing process.

SN: I've heard informally that there are a contingent of folks who aren't entirely happy with the change. Can you comment at all on the new management team, what kind of changes they're bringing, or is there a new change in direction, or where you see the Museum going?

JP: Well, for us, from where I sit, after several years of changes, both bad and good, I think we've got a great board. I think we've got a great board right now. Halsey's a member of the Board of Directors. We've probably have more involvement of board members today than we've had in a significant time, since I've seen. They're moving the Museum in the right direction. They're trying to get, I mean they're working together to strengthen its financial underpinnings, which is not easy these days. And do, you know, I'm encouraged with the direction the Museum is taking.

SN: Great. What do you think the partnership with Mystic Seaport means, both to the Herreshoff Museum and to the Mystic view. It's not clear to me what the benefits are going to be. Do you have any thought on that?

JP: It ... there's an agreement that's been signed, and it's something, the idea is that I believe, my words, kind of work through it slowly to ... each museum remains independent, and it's an alliance or an affiliation, I forget the exact words, it's in the announcement, but the museums are independent, and with the demands on staff these days ... it's being approached slowly. Because you can't put ... one organization can't put demands on the staff of the other organization. We're working, we're working in our museum, we have a new exhibits and collections committee. We're trying to look at new ways of looking at our exhibits and our collection, and better organizing, I'd say institutionalizing some of it, rationalizing the collection. Through the years we've had many things donated to the Museum, which we were happy to accept, but may not be appropriate to the mission of the Museum. So we have a new

exhibitions and collection organization with staunch support from the leadership, from the members of the board. We plan to be meeting in Mystic and see how we ... they might be able to help us and advise us in some areas. From that point of view, it's going to be very helpful to us. It's something that's being worked through slowly, and I'd say, probably with a limited number of projects, or connection points between the two organizations, so we keep it under control and don't place unwarranted demands on either of the two organizations.

SN: That's a good answer, John. Thanks. It reminds me of another question that I have. And you know, with my own experience with computers and what have you, it seems that the ubiquity of the Internet, and Google, and electronic databases and what have you, provide the ability to find and distribute information in unlimited ways. Unprecedented levels of access by huge audiences to unprecedented amounts of information. It's kind of like the curator's dream. And the ability to use the computer to generate that access, or provide that access instead of expanding payrolls and increasing costs is really the Executive Director's dream. So I guess the question is, I wonder if the Museum leadership is considering the development or the expansion of some sort of digital collections? You know, digitizing documents and making them available electronically, that sort of thing?

JP: Through the years, we've looked at digitizing various parts of our collection. I would say we don't have a specific planned direction at this time. But I expect the new exhibits and collection committee, as we go through this process, we'll be developing one. Exactly what that's going to be, I don't know right now. You know, there's an issue, of how much of your material you get online. We have online right now ... Online right now we have our library catalog online. We've just been working to better organize ... we have some interns working with me for the summer who are working to better organize our digital collection, our scanned photo collection, so that we can make it better useful for ourselves, and also for researchers and others who are interested in those items. We've been doing a fair amount of work in improving our America's Cup Hall Of Fame collection, improving the files of the America's Cup. We've been cataloging the, Ed Moulin, member of the America's Cup teams in the 1980s, and a little earlier, gave us his business papers. We've been cataloging his business papers. So there has been a lot of work behind the scenes in better organizing and understanding what we do have within the Museum. As far as how much you can put out there digitally, and when and in what format, we're going to have to work through that with the collection committee.

SN: OK. On a related note, I guess it was maybe April, during the last Symposium, you were telling me that Halsey's got a considerable treasure trove of documentation in his personal collection. Do you have any idea what might happen with those? Will he donate them to the Museum, pass them through to Herreshoff Designs, pass them on through his family?

JP: No, you would have to ask him.

SN: Yeah. Fair question. Fair answer, rather.

JP: You, know, we have a large amount of materials in the Museum. Nat Herreshoff's collection, many of which were placed in the Museum by Halsey. I might say, You mentioned Herreshoff Designs. Halsey's organization, Herreshoff Designs across the street. A museum shouldn't be in the job of giving publicity plugs, but having them across the street, now fully open for

business with some early boats they have, I guess they're becoming a brokerage now too, and really having that active flow of people who are currently involved in designing and building boats. I think really adds ... that and Bristol Boatbuilding of Dan Shea, who is building the H20, which is one of Herreshoff's designs.

SN: FANO

JP: Yeah, that adds ... that activity really adds to the flavor of the whole campus, the Herreshoff campus. That's a lot of ... I am just happy to see them here. And the traffic they bring, to see people moving between the Museum and their location is really kind of fun and interesting to see.

SN: OK, John. That's pretty much it. A last question or two ... if you look back on what you've done so far as curator, is there anything you would have done differently?

JP: Yeah. I would have, I guess, allowed myself to be distracted to all the other things that go on, and I would have done a lot more in organizing and documenting and cataloging Captain Nat's papers, which are not yet finished. And also, maybe, I would have done a lot more in helping strengthen our volunteer organization. The volunteer organization is very important to the Museum. The Museum, I might have mentioned earlier, is kind of a family-based museum. That family extends beyond the Herreshoffs, to the many Bristolians, who were friends of theirs, admired them, or admired what the Herreshoffs did, or had family had worked there and were proud of the work they did. And ... that volunteer base is passed on, because, later years. I probably didn't do enough to help develop a new volunteer structure. A great person, Maggie Church, right now is working on that. I guess the only other comment I'd make before I close, in rationalizing our collection at the Museum, we have a number of boats, not a lot, that we are unable to restore, care for, in the way we'd like to, and we don't have room to store them. We are working through our collection, and have in some cases sold one or two boats. We sell them under a protocol, you might say, that requires they be restored, they must be restored in a certain period of time, and various other conditions on it. The purpose is, if we can't restore something and it's not, and it's, you might say surplus, because we have other boats or representatives of that period or time or class or time period in the collection. We would like to see it, in many cases, sailing again. We've been trying to do some things to get some things to get some S Boats. We've been trying to work to see how, with others, to see how the S Boats of Narragansett Bay can be enhanced. Possibly by restoring some of the S Boats we have. And so, I think we have five. So, we are working on that, and if anyone is interested in talking to us about it, we'd be happy to talk to them.

SN: Yeah, I keep a list of all those boats that are available, and I periodically refer them to you guys. I don't know if anybody follows up, but ...

JP: Yeah, we do. In fact, we just, a graduate of IYRS, a recent graduate of IYRS, has taken on a project. He has taken from us the Marlin.

SN: Seth Hagen?

JP: It doesn't have a name plate, but I think we've figured out ...

SN: I think we did figure it out, and you recently ...

JP: I think it's 1421, but I forget. I forget right now. It's 1421 or 1422.

SN: Yeah, it's one or the other.

JP: He just took it ... he just took it from us on Friday.

SN: Do you know the guy's name?

JP: Yeah ... John Hedley.

SN: John Hedley, and he's in Bristol?

JP: No, he's ... he has a shop with some others in Newport. He just graduated in this last class of IYRS. Good guy, and I look to forward to seeing his Marlin progress.

SN: Great. So John, before I stop the recording, is there anything else you'd like to discuss?

JP: Yeah, I guess in mentioning the people who've done some great things, I think of, the Herreshoff bunch and I. I guess I really feel bad, because there are many other great people who I haven't mentioned. But I'd like to mention you, because of the work you've done in ... online resource. Amazing. Started off by really trying to figure out where all 364 ...

SN: I don't think I'll ever come to the end of that.

JP: No, but you're coming closer every year. Since then, you've gone on to other classes, and what you have established is a place to talk about Herreshoff, look at Herreshoff, understand Herreshoff, mix it up with other people who want to talk about Herreshoff. It's great, Steve, so I think you're one of my heroes.

SN: Jeez. Well I'm glad you find the work useful.