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SEATTLE — Sixty-one years ago on a cold, January morning in Maine, the awesome Adventuress was launched. A 101-foot schooner costing \$100,000 when fully fitted, she commanded nationwide attention.

The Adventuress was built for John Borden, a young, wealthy Chicago man who founded the first Yellow Cab Co. The gaff-rigged vessel was a graceful, yet rugged ocean cruiser — and her first assignment was a whaling expedition in Alaska.

But ice prevented the schooner from reaching the whaling region and less than a year later Borden sold her to the bar pilots of San Francisco where she served faithfully for 37 years.

It was 23 years ago when the Adventuress sailed into Puget Sound under new ownership. And seven years and several owners later, she was purchased to be a Seattle-based training vessel for boy and girl scouts from Washington to California.

The unusual program is called Youth Adventure, Inc., a non-profit corporation that keeps the large, old schooner running at only \$15,000 a year — thanks to the group's all-volunteer direction and some reduced-rate assistance from marine suppliers.

Serious sailing and seamanship training is provided primarily for the Girl Scouts' mariner scouting program but also the Boy Scouts' sea scouts. The girls are going on many of the eight-day summer cruises because most of their troops don't have boats.

The Adventuress carries six sailing dinghies for basic-sailing instruction. Other aspects of cruising the Sound and into the San Juans are crewing aboard the schooner and such things as water safety, charting and marine mechanics.

Besides the summer cruising, the Adventuress frequently is under sail during weekends — providing abbreviated instruction for Puget Sound-area teenagers, most of them scouts.

New masts

Right now, however, the schooner is sort of at a turning point in her career. At her Shilshole Bay moorage, she's being prepared for re-masting at Lake Union Drydock.

Just a week ago Cascade Pole Co. in Tacoma completed some new sticks — a 100-foot main and a 90-foot foremast. With replacement of the present 65- and 62-footers, the Adventuress will be rigged as she was at the beginning — for the first time since 1915 when she was nearly destroyed by fire in San Francisco.

At the helm of Youth Adventure is Ernestine

Bennett. She was a girl-scout adviser at McMinnville, Ore., when her daughter first boarded the Adventuress at the outset of the sailing program.

When the mariner scout last disembarked from the Adventuress, she asked her mother, then active herself in Youth Adventure: "Just because I'm out of this, don't give it up. It's too good."

So, today, Mrs. Bennett is Youth Adventure's dynamic president — usually aboard for the cruises and while ashore, stirring up corporate and individual contributions needed to keep the group going.

Bought boat

In fact, Mrs. Bennett has become so enthused about the program that she and her husband, Stanton, a communications engineer, recently purchased the schooner from A. W. (Monty) Morton, longtime leader in sea scouting who started Youth Adventure. Continuing to serve as skipper is Karl Mehrer, formerly an engineer aboard tankers.

It's through the non-profit Puget Sound Sailing School of Mercer Island that teenagers register for the Adventuress sailing program (the schooner is not available for conventional charter). But there's more to Youth Adventure than learning how to sail.

"The kids learn how to work as a team," said Mrs. Bennett. "I think this is the vital thing that's needed these days." And they learn some discipline, too.

"The crew musters on deck and it's aye, aye, sir," she remarked. "In school, you can ask why. But on board, you do and ask afterwards — because that's the safe thing to do."

Also among the schooner's five-member Youth Adventure crew (the Adventuress usually carries 25 youth and two of their advisers) is Kathleen McKoon. Originally from the San Francisco area, she heard about Youth Adventure and came to Seattle to attend college so she could become a volunteer, on-board participant.

Now close to getting a degree in history and journalism, she plans to continue marine-oriented research and some freelance writing. Ditto for the Adventuress where the vessel's auxiliary diesel is her specialty.

She's staying with the program because "sailing ships are so recently gone that we're just now starting to miss them." And because crewing on such a vessel is "the only way for the kids to learn that kind of discipline and how to work with each other."

That, in a nutshell, is what Youth Adventure — and the gracious Adventuress — is all about.