

Dan Clark: Marine Contractor and Woods Hole Legend

By Pamela Nelson

On January 9, 2020, just two months before the global SARS-CoV-2 pandemic would make such a gathering unthinkable, the Woods Hole Historical Museum invited the community to join in a Conversation about Dan Clark in the Woods Hole Public Library. The discussion in the Library's Community Room centered on Dan's influence as a marine contractor in shaping the contours of the Woods Hole waterfront and the lives of a generation of young men who worked for him and whom he mentored in the 1960s through the 1980s.

An overview of Dan Clark's life and activities in Woods Hole is captured with warmth in an obituary released by the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute in April of 1999:

Daniel W. Clark, a seaman and later Second Mate aboard Atlantis in 1945-46, was born in 1918. Although he worked only briefly for WHOI, many knew him through his long association with the Institution as a marine contractor in Woods Hole. He assisted WHOI with many projects through the years, from dock maintenance and repairs on the ships to construction and deployment of a meteorological buoy and other instruments . . . He is perhaps best known to WHOI staff for construction of R/V Lulu in 1965 to serve as the support vessel for the new submersible Alvin. Dan wrote the estimate for the ship's construction on a shingle. Dan Clark also worked on other major local projects, including repairing damaged electrical cables



Dan Clark was a respected mariner and mentor to his friends and his employees.

Courtesy Woods Hole Historical Museum.

supplying power to Martha's Vineyard. His generosity and willingness to help are known to many. . . George Cadwalader credits Dan more than any other individual with helping him launch the Penikese Island School. [Dan moved his coastal freighter, La Chanceuse, to the island, where it was used as a dormitory while the house was being built—it offered comfortable bunks down below as well as a woodstove.]

The archives of the *Falmouth Enterprise* in the 1950s and 1960s include references to docks on the Upper Cape that Dan built and repaired and to the schooner *Brown, Smith and Jones*, on which he lived in Woods Hole's Eel Pond, before she sank at her berth on the inner Town Dock. The archives also include a terse reference, in the winter of 1959, to a roof fire, which caused only minor damage, at his Millfield Street house, "Zero Acres." A former neighbor says such roof fires occurred more than once over the years, when Dan, father of eight, got around to burning gift-wrapping paper after Christmas.

Most of the attendees at the WHHM Conversation had known Dan, but the few who were not acquainted with him doubtless showed up because of his legendary reputation in the community. Every chair in the room was taken, and behind the chairs people stood, shoulder-to-shoulder. Moveable bookshelves had been pushed to the sides of the room to make more space available, while a few latecomers sat cross-legged at the front, at the feet of the invited discussants. Following WHHM Director Debbie Scanlon's welcome and introduction, the speakers—Tom Renshaw, Peter Bumpus, and Chip Shultz—shared a nostalgic and affectionate collection of literal and verbal snapshots and anecdotes featuring Dan's boats and construction equipment and their roles as members of his crew.

Dan Clark arrived in Woods Hole in the mid 1950s from Osterville. According to Tom Renshaw, "he was at the time a one-man

dock-building crew. He said he lived on peanut butter, raisin bread, and quahogs. He said the raisin bread stayed fresh because of the moisture."

Peter Bumpus related the history of the coastal freighter *La Chanceuse*, the boat Dan loaned to the Penikese Island School. "This vessel was proceeding south from Canada to Cuba and had an engine failure about 100 miles off Cape Cod. She was towed in and brought to New Bedford and ended up in limbo. No one wanted her. She was eventually left alongside the pier and sold at auction for essentially nothing. Because it was a foreign bottom boat, that is to say, it was a Canadian vessel, she couldn't be used for work, couldn't be sold or used by the

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fishing community. She could only be registered as a yacht, so Dan bought her, registered her as a yacht, and used her as he pleased.

"When he first got her," continued Peter Bumpus, "she was hauled in Falmouth and the bottom was painted and was never painted again. He used her to push his barge around. It's a challenge with 80 feet of boat and 90 feet of barge to try to get into a narrow channel. Eventually, she sat for so long without attention that she sank at the pier there at the Clark

house. She was raised, Dan had some jobs going on at the shipyards in Boston, and his intention was to take her up and rebuild her, but she was not good enough to go through the Cape Cod Canal. There was nothing left, the bottom was paper thin, and she wouldn't have made it. The Cape Cod Canal people pay attention to those types of things—they've had problems before! So she was broken up by the beach by the yacht club."

Chip Shultz shared some of his very early memories of Dan. "I was growing up, and remember him in the *Rose and Crown*, a double-ended motor whaleboat from Nantucket. Dan was coming across Eel Pond with a baby, Gale, in his arms. It was about the coolest thing that I'd ever seen. A little later, at 20 years old, I was working at WHOI. Dan and his crew were working on Dyers Dock. I think they were turning it into a seaplane ramp, and there was Dan standing high on a single pile directing things. And then, that became the coolest thing I'd ever seen.

"After Sam Cahoon's Fish Market was closed, the Steamship Authority hired Dan to build the first "third" ferry slip. They needed help and so I joined the crew. It was a whole new experience for me in heavy construction. Paul Twitchell, dock builder and a legend himself, was there working, driving sheet pilings and 'monkeying' the sheets, 25 feet in the air. The police pulled up and said, 'We're looking for Paul Twitchell.' Dan said 'I haven't seen him,' and they went away. He couldn't stop the whole job just for that! I'm sure they caught up with Paul later.

"At the end of the job, Dan got Mrs. Frederick Pingree, who was the Woods Hole School first and second grade teacher and whose husband owned a nursery, to come down at night. He got her and the youngsters on the crew to put in a green, grassy area without the permission of the Steamship Authority so that they couldn't park cars there. He did it for the village. Someone then wrote a letter to *The Enterprise* congratulating the Steamship Authority for that.

"Dan was always very generous. When he found out that the steamer *Nobska* would make its last trip, he put a bunch of us in the seaplane and flew us to Nantucket so we could make the last trip on his dime. Who does that?

"A thing that we learned from Dan was his whole work ethic. He basically had two rules: one was to show up on time and the other was no drinking on the job. Both were a little flexible.

"Peter and I became carpenters, heavy timber carpenters, and Dan showed us the importance of keeping our tools. I used to take my paycheck every week and go buy a single tool and put it in my toolbox. Peter and I used to loan each other tools but to nobody else. We spent so much time sharpening them."

Dan's generosity was a recurrent topic. Peter Bumpus related an illustrative story. "A long time ago we used to have a different aquarium in Woods Hole and alongside it there was an old wooden residence, each built in the 1880s. The hurricane of 1954, Hurricane Carol, came

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and trashed them both. A couple of years later, Dan got the job to tear them down. They were all brick foundations, not stone. There were a hell of a lot of bricks, and they were all mortared together. If you took the mortar off, you'd have clean bricks. The bricks were offered up to the local community. If you wanted bricks, you just came to pick up as many as you wanted. It was a service to the community. He could have sold the bricks, but he left them there for people to share."

When the conversation was opened up to members of the audience, Matthew Bumpus, a crewmember from the next generation down, told of how he began working for Dan at the age of 14. "He had me doing night watch duty on the barge while I was working for Kit Olmsted during the day on the boat, when I was 14 and trying to get paid 24 hours a day in the summer. I started out just a kid working on *Cigana* and then I ended up managing the dive work in the end. As long as you stepped up to it, Dan would kind of let you do anything you wanted. At 17, I was diving out there in 90 ft. of water all alone, [without a dive buddy. There were tenders on the surface and there was a back-up diver there ready to jump in if needed.] Dan was happy to have you do anything you could do.

"At that time there were four or five live power cables to the Vineyard. Mostly in the summer, when they were overloaded, they'd blow out.



Dan Clark (right) with crew member Skip Norgeot at an Eel Pond project in the early 1960s.
Courtesy Woods Hole Historical Museum.

We'd have to go out there and locate the cables. They'd send radar guns down to locate them and we'd have to go find the break... Then there'd be two or three chase boats to keep other boats away and a tug minding the work barge 24 hours a day. So you have to get this all setup, then you have to go out with a great big reel on the deck of the barge to actually splice the cable, then carefully move the barge over during tide. So basically, Con Electric paid for a lot of my college and a lot of the local economy here!

"Dan was excellent at getting cooks for those cable jobs. He'd steal chefs from the Vineyard and we had exquisite food. They'd bring seven or eight shopping carts of food and he kept everyone going and happy. The fact is that he could mobilize that much stuff, get it all set up, and do a beautiful job. Never had one of his splices fail that I can remember and it worked out great."

Chip added one more observation about Dan's work ethic. "Never let safety get pushed aside for anything. It didn't matter what it cost. Safety was paramount."

These stories and others shared that January day during the Museum's Conversation emphasize Dan's generosity and his commitment to his workers and to the entire Woods Hole community. He is remembered as a genuinely kind man, a gentleman in his day-to-day interactions, with an inclination to offer people second chances when honest first attempts had resulted in failure. While members of his crew went on to other endeavors, he instilled in them a dedication to integrity and to producing quality work, to sharing knowledge with younger workers as they came along, and to treating everyone fairly.

A recording of the event can be accessed through the Woods Hole Historical Museum's website, <http://woodsholemuseum.org/wordpress/category/whhm-conversation/>.

A special thank you is extended to Daisy Glazebrook for her transcription of this Conversation.

About the Author: Daughter of an MBL scientist/investigator, retired radiologist Pamela Nelson summered in Woods Hole until she went to college. It had always been her intention to move to Woods Hole permanently although she did not achieve that goal until 2004, when she was able to join her husband, Kit Olmsted, in his family home. They had married in 1997, during a Vineyard cable job. Dan Clark, who considered Kit an indispensable member of the cable repair crew, generously offered to clear a corner of the work barge for the marriage ceremony.