

come sail away

THE MCNISH'S CLASSIC WOODEN YACHT RACE *has always been a labor of love*

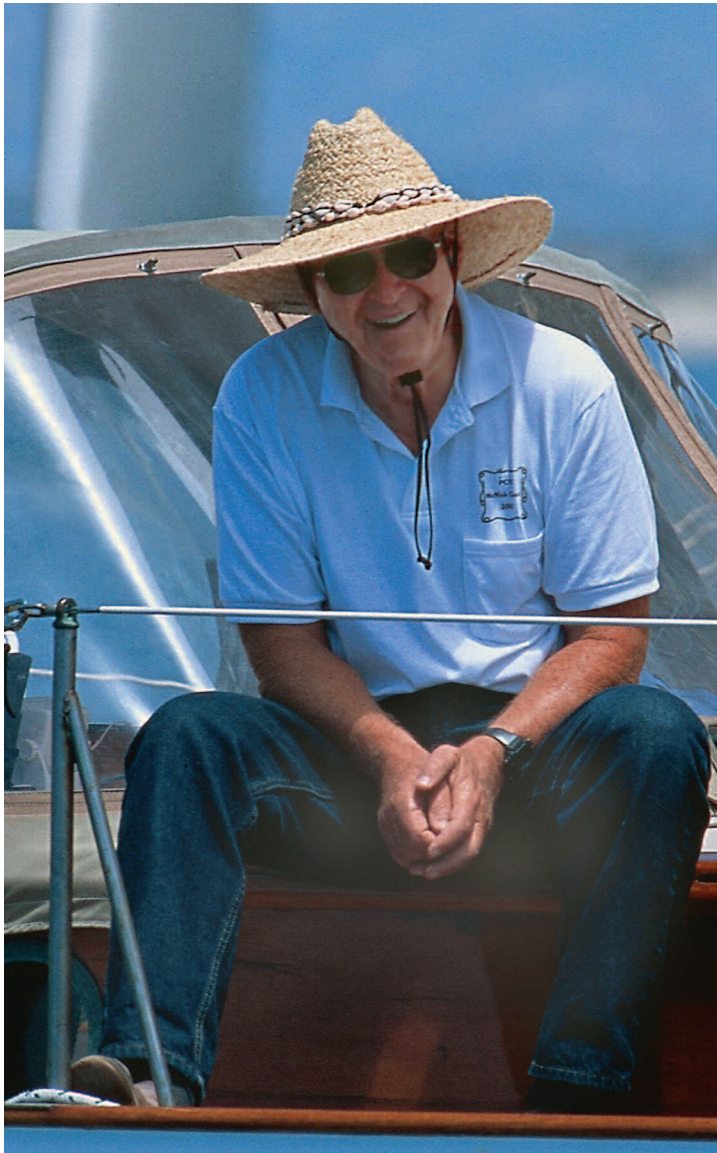
STEPHANIE KINNEAR | PHOTOS BY LOUISE ANN NOETH

Dick McNish's office keeps no secrets. A giant wooden desk sits in one corner, facing a row of large windows that look out over a street corner near Heritage Square in Oxnard. There is no computer on the desk, only a telephone and a number of carefully stacked piles of paper. Framed photographs are neatly arranged on three walls, and a large bookcase covers most of the fourth.

On the bookshelf there are a few books, a number of antique lamps, various plaques and trophies, and a framed quote that reads: "Blessed are the forgetful: for they get the better even of their blunders."

But the large photographs that hang on the walls, they're what give McNish away.

The photos are not of grandchildren (although he does have two granddaughters), or tropical golf courses, or sunburned men holding fishing poles and particularly large fish; they're not of celebrities or picturesque landscapes. Each photograph is of a sailboat. For the most part, the same sailboat: McNish's 46-foot wooden yawl, *Cheerio II*.



Dick McNish takes a moment to relax.

McNish is a seaman, a sailor, a mariner, although if you asked him, he'd probably just shrug and admit that, yes, he does enjoy sailing quite a bit. He's friendly, unassuming, with a dry sense of humor, and prefers to talk about his family and friends rather than himself. According to McNish, a three day-race from Newport Beach, Ca to Ensenada, Baja California that he participated in this past April was no big deal. And the classic wooden yacht race he founded and has been putting on for the past 29 years (minus a brief five-year hiatus)? McNish insists that most of the heavy lifting is done by other people.

Of course, ask just about anyone else, and they'll tell you that Dick McNish is the heart and soul of the Annual McNish Classic Yacht Race. Louise Ann Noeth, who has been photographing and acting as publicist for the race for the past 20 years, says there would be no race if it weren't for McNish. "Something his daughter, Leslie, said once, that I've stolen often: 'The only reason this race exists is because Papa had an old boat and no place to race it,'" says Noeth.

Sitting behind his desk, just before lunch on a warm day in late June, McNish is in the midst of preparations for this year's race, which will take place on August 5. In an off-white cardigan sweater, Levis and loafers, he looks ready for a sail.

"I had an old wooden boat, and I used to race, but I was never very good," he explains, delving briefly into the history of the event. "I went out in some races and I didn't do well. Because the technology advancements, even 29 years ago, from when the design of my boat was ... Well, it's like taking a Maserati and racing it against a Model A Ford. I was complaining

one day to a friend at the Pacific Corinthian Yacht Club and he said, 'Why don't you start a race for classic boats?'"

McNish took the suggestion to heart, gathered a few friends to help — Liz Maul to work on the handicapping, Jim Crandel and his son to design the first logo and T-Shirts, Al and Pat Naulins to form the first race committee and, of course, the Channel Islands Harbor Department, so that the race could start and finish in the harbor — and donated the Strathmore Cup as a trophy to the winner. The rules were simple: any kind of sailboat was allowed, any size, any shape, as long as it was wooden and built before 1952, the year, McNish explains, fiberglass boats became popular.

That first year, 20 local boats entered the race. Since that time, the race has seen up to 40 boats, many from as far away as Canada, and the course — a triangular 17 mile route that starts and finishes at the Channel Islands Harbor — has never been altered. The handicapping gives the race an "inverted start," with the slower boats leaving first. And if it's done well, all the boats end up finishing, dramatically, at just about the same time.

The only major change that's taken place over the past three decades is that now the overall winner also receives his or her weight in Mumms champagne, as well as the Strathmore Cup. It's hard for McNish to believe the event has taken on such a life of its own over the last 29 years. "It's just a nice get together," he says simply, "and I enjoy it very much."

Although McNish was new to race organizing back in 1977 ("I knew nothing about racing," he recalls, smiling), he did know a thing or two about sailing. McNish has been sailing since he was a young boy growing up in Santa Barbara. At a very young age he started sailing flatties, or geary 18s, a class of low-cost racing sailboats designed by Ted Geary in 1928. "You could rent them. They were pretty beat up, but they were fun," he explains.

As time went on, he continued sailing. Then, he went to work for a man named George Shakesfield. Shakesfield owned a dragon, an Olympic-caliber racing yacht, and allowed McNish to sail it from time to time. In the early '60s, he bought the boat from his boss. "I've owned a boat ever since," says McNish.

And he hasn't owned just any boat. In 1980, McNish and his wife Juanita bought a yawl named *Cheerio II*. *Cheerio II* was built in 1931, and from the information McNish has gathered, he figures they are the 6th or 7th owners the boat has seen. One of the earlier owners happened to be black-and-white film star Errol Flynn.

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The McNish's *Cheerio II* (center), daughter Leslie's *Alcyone* (left), and son Jeff's *Valliant* (right).

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But McNish doesn't keep pictures of Flynn on his walls; he keeps pictures of Cheerio II. She is his pride and joy, and for good reason. In 1983, on the way back from a sailing trip to Mexico, the McNish family noticed that there were some problems with the boat's hull. He immediately had the boat put in a yard and began an extensive two-year restoration. As McNish explains it, the entire aft one-third of the boat or, rather, the rear third, has been rebuilt. All the planks and the ribs were replaced, as well, with hand-picked lumber. And the efforts paid off. In 1990, Cheerio II won "Best Restored Vessel" at the Victoria Wooden Boat Festival in British Columbia, an award McNish is particularly proud of.

Although he makes light of his involvement in the nuts and bolts behind the McNish Classic, he's also proud of the reputation it's gained and the spirit of camaraderie it embodies. McNish can tell stories of people who have been coming to the race since it began. He remembers the year



1997's Class Winners with trophies in hand.



The only time boats are allowed to raft up in the Channel Islands Harbor is during the McNish Classic Yacht Race.

his son, Jeff, brought his guitar to the race and had a little jam session with another sailor, and the year the Orient and the Baruna, two boats that famously raced in the San Francisco Bay in the '60s, were both entered in the race. He remembers names of boats almost as well as he remembers all the people who sailed them: Samarang, Dauntless, Tempest, Sally ...

The race is competitive, but for some, it is just a good excuse to get out on the water and see a bunch of beautiful wooden boats in top form. "The McNish Classic is as much a floating history lesson as it is a race," explains Noeth. "Dick and Juanita, for nearly three decades, have made personal sacrifices to see that folks with classic yachts could come together and enjoy their boats and each other for a couple of 'yo-ho' days."

Over the years, many of the racers have become friends and, interestingly enough, family members have become competitors. Sailing is truly a McNish family obsession. McNish's daughter, Leslie, her husband, John "Sugar" Flanagan, and their two daughters, Darby and Alyce, own and live on a 65-foot topsail schooner named Alcyone in Port Townsend, Wash., while his son, Jeff, sails a smaller, 40-foot sloop named Valliant out of the San Francisco Bay — a boat he lived on until his recent marriage. Both children have challenged their father in the McNish Classic in the past, but neither will race this year.

McNish, however, is planning to give all the racers a run for their money, or, rather, a run for their champagne. **VM**