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A Throwback Idea To Set An Eco-Example On The Hudson River

KIM KAVIN · SEP 26, 2018

Five years ago, Sam Merrett saw the Ceres on the Hudson River waterfront and had an epiphany.

He'd grown up in the Hudson Valley, gone away to college in Ohio, opened Full Circle Fuels to convert diesel engines to use eco-friendly vegetable oil, and then moved his business back home. He'd been living in Hudson since 2010, working on community sailing projects and helping local kids build sailing prows, when the Ceres docked there in 2013 as part of the Vermont Sail Freight Project.

“They built this homemade sailing boat in Vermont and sailed a load of cargo down to New York City,” Merrett recalls. “We hosted them in Hudson, and that was the moment when I said, ‘Wow, what a cool way to put everything I care about together in one package.’ It’s education, it’s alternative fuels and it’s sailing on the river.”

The Vermont project’s goal was to see if the pre-Industrial Revolution business model of moving commercial goods from farms to cities aboard sailboats could work again today — not by necessity, this time, but instead to help the environment. It’s a goal that Merrett now shares, and a business model that he wants to make a permanent part of the Hudson River waterfront, working with Upstate New York farmers, brewers, cheesemakers and more to deliver their products as far south as Manhattan.

“After that Vermont sailing moment, I drove all over the place looking for a 50- to 60-foot boat,” Merrett says. “That seemed like the right size as a beginning platform, easy enough to maneuver but able to hold a good amount of cargo.”

He found the Apollonia advertised on Craigslist. She's a 65-foot, steel-hulled schooner designed by a naval architect in the 1940s for a doctor in Baltimore. She's changed hands a few times and been used for everything from family cruises to drug smuggling, eventually landing with a Bostonian who dreamed of fixing her up and sailing her around the world.

By the time Merrett saw the Apollonia in his backyard, she'd been there, on the hard, for 30 years. Her hull was solid, but her rig was missing—a correctable problem thanks to her original plans, which were at Mystic Seaport in Connecticut.

The Bostonian had made peace with the fact that his sailing dream wasn't going to materialize, and he liked Merrett's idea for the next chapter in the boat's history. He sold Apollonia for \$15,000 and left Merrett to figure out how to get her back on the water.

"She's heavy, tall and wide, to the point that when we were on the trailer, I had to build [structures with] flexible PVC from the hardware store," he says. "I bent the PVC to make arches on deck anywhere there was something that stuck up and could catch a power line. I had it all duct-taped so we could drive the boat under power lines, and they'd ride the humps and fall off her stern.

"We had to avoid bridges and fixed objects, so that was a challenge," he adds. "It took us two or three months to get her from that house to any boatyard, any place with water that can launch a boat. We got her to Marion, Massachusetts, to Burr Brothers Boats."

For about three months, every weekend, he drove from New York to Massachusetts to install basic mechanical systems. By October 2015, the Apollonia crew was able to cruise her (still without a rig) to her new home in Hudson.

There, the team has been working on the restoration while setting up shipping partners for what they hope will be their initial run of deliveries in 2019. The Apollonia crew is now selling sponsorships for blocks (\$150 to \$275) and spars (\$1,000 to \$2,500) to get them over their last financial hump. A rigging shop in the Chesapeake Bay area is donating labor for installation, and then the boat should be ready to sail.

Donations via schoonerapollonia.com, Merrett says, are not tax deductible — on purpose. They are, instead, an investment in an eco-friendly collective future.

"I've been holding it as a for-profit business because the whole idea is that this should be a reproducible business model," he says. "I don't want this to be another project where people donate, the money runs out and it's gone. We want to start a business with a plan that we can share with other people who want to do freight, so they can turn their vessel into a career and a profession for themselves. One boat is not going to make a huge difference, but in the 1850s, there were 1,200 boats moving freight on the Hudson River at any given moment. Look at all the old paintings. It's so cool. The river is full of sloops and schooners."

There's no reason the Hudson can't get at least partway back to that type of commercial use today, he says. Not every form of cargo is perishable; lots of products, from craft beers to apple ciders and some cheeses, can be moved in the river-temperature hold of a steel-hulled boat.

“The green transportation economy of the future is not going to be one solution for everything, but for many products, sailboats really are the solution,” he says. “Why does a jar of maple syrup need to move at 80 miles an hour on a highway? It can move at 6 knots on a sailboat and not even need that whole other transportation infrastructure.”

In fact, some manufacturers have already found a ready audience for boat-carried products, in part because they come with a great story. Jefferson’s in Louisville, Kentucky, sells its Ocean brand of bourbon as “aged at sea,” with the liquor being sloshed around via boat-carried barrels. Mill House Brewing Company in Poughkeepsie, New York, offers Ship Rocked IPA in partnership with the Hudson Riverkeeper as “barrel conditioned” on the Hudson River.

And while commercial success is one goal, Merrett also hopes the Apollonia effort will help more people connect with the river on a different level.

“What a cool way to create an economy on the river — and to create a whole new generation of people who really care about the river,” he says. “In a bigger picture, just spending time on the water, you start caring about it. You start understanding it. You start to see the impact of what’s happening with it. Sailboats are a natural way of getting people to understand how the river works. You’re not powering through it. You’re moving with the elements. Having this fleet will create a whole generation of people who are the future stewards of the river.”

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