

# BALLARD'S SHIPWRIGHTS

A WELL-KEPT MARINE INDUSTRY SECRET

STORY & PHOTOS STEVE D'ANTONIO

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**G**ranite countertops, cherry joiner work, stainless steel appliances, a big screen TV, a 750 horsepower Cummins QSK 19, bulbous bow, and bow thruster; she sleeps six and cruises at 8.5 knots. You might mistake this for a description of a custom-built expedition yacht; that is until you read the rest of the specifications, which include titanium refrigeration chillers, 65 and 150 kW generators, all stainless steel hydraulic plumbing (and lots of it), and an 18,000 lb. capacity, one of a kind deck crane.

This vessel is in fact a newly-completed fishing trawler, recently commissioned in Ballard, Washington. I spent about an hour aboard her while dockside, going through her myriad systems, and speaking with her proud owner, John Barry and his commissioning contractor, George Hooper of Hooper Marine. The builder laid up the hull, decks and cabin, painted it and then handed it over to Barry and Hooper, and they, along with their hired contractors, finished out the systems.

I stood on the dock after my tour and looked at F/V Optimus, her flawlessly painted gleaming white hull and blue trim, tugging at her lines as the Lake Washington Ship Canal water swirled around her bulbous bow. I marveled at what's involved in choreographing the systems, seaworthiness, aesthetics, form and function that make up a vessel of this sort. Much of the work was carried out by local, Ballard contractors, and herein lies the origin of this story.

#### Ballard, an Eclectic Mix

I clearly recall my first introduction to the area over a decade ago; I was in town for a Trawler Port event. *PassageMaker* magazine's founders, Bill and Laurene Parlatore, drove me to the locks, they both had a strong affection for the locale, although at the time I wasn't sure why. I would later find out, as I began to work more closely with Seattle's marine industry.

Fast forward to late 2013; over dinner one night, overlooking the Ship Canal, the subject of the attributes of Ballard's formidable marine industry was broached. Located in northwest Seattle, bordered by the Lake

Washington Ship Canal (often referred to as the Ballard Ship Canal), Shilshole Bay, Puget Sound and Salmon Bay, this area possesses a rich history and a variety of landmarks, the most notable of which are the Ship Canal and its Hiram M. Chittenden Locks, often and understandably referred to simply as the Ballard Locks. Built in 1911, the locks isolate and protect the Canal and Lake Union's fresh water from Puget Sound, providing an ideal environment for storage and repair of a wide range of craft, from small fiberglass and wood pleasure craft, to steel and aluminum commercial vessels.

My dinner hosts, Don and Sharry Stabbert, accomplished passage makers themselves, they've cruised their Northern Marine 77 Starr over 60,000 miles in the past fourteen years, including meeting up with the Great Sushi Run in Japan (via the southern route: Hawaii, Marshal islands, Micronesia, and Guam) and spending a year cruising in Japan, waxed poetic about the wide array of services and capabilities ensconced in Ballard's cozy, four square mile foot print.

Don should know, the principal of Salmon Bay Marine Center, located directly on the Ship Canal, he has his finger on the pulse of the neighborhood and its many businesses. It seems that he knows just about every shop's owner and top technician in the area, as he should; Sharry was born and raised in Ballard, and they've recently completed a nine month refit on Starr.

At one point during the discussion Don announced, "Someone should write an article about this area, we need to let pleasure boat owners know that this resource exists". Based on what I'd heard, and my personal experiences in the area, I agreed, however, I wanted to know why Don was such an ardent supporter of the neighborhood businesses; so I asked, "What's so special about Ballard?" "Ballard is different, and unlike any other waterfront area", Don said. He went on to explain the uniqueness of Ballard, above all else its marine industry is deeply rooted in the construction and repair of fishing vessels, an undeniably harsh and unforgiving environment, lives depend on the work carried out by

Ballard's craftsmen and women.

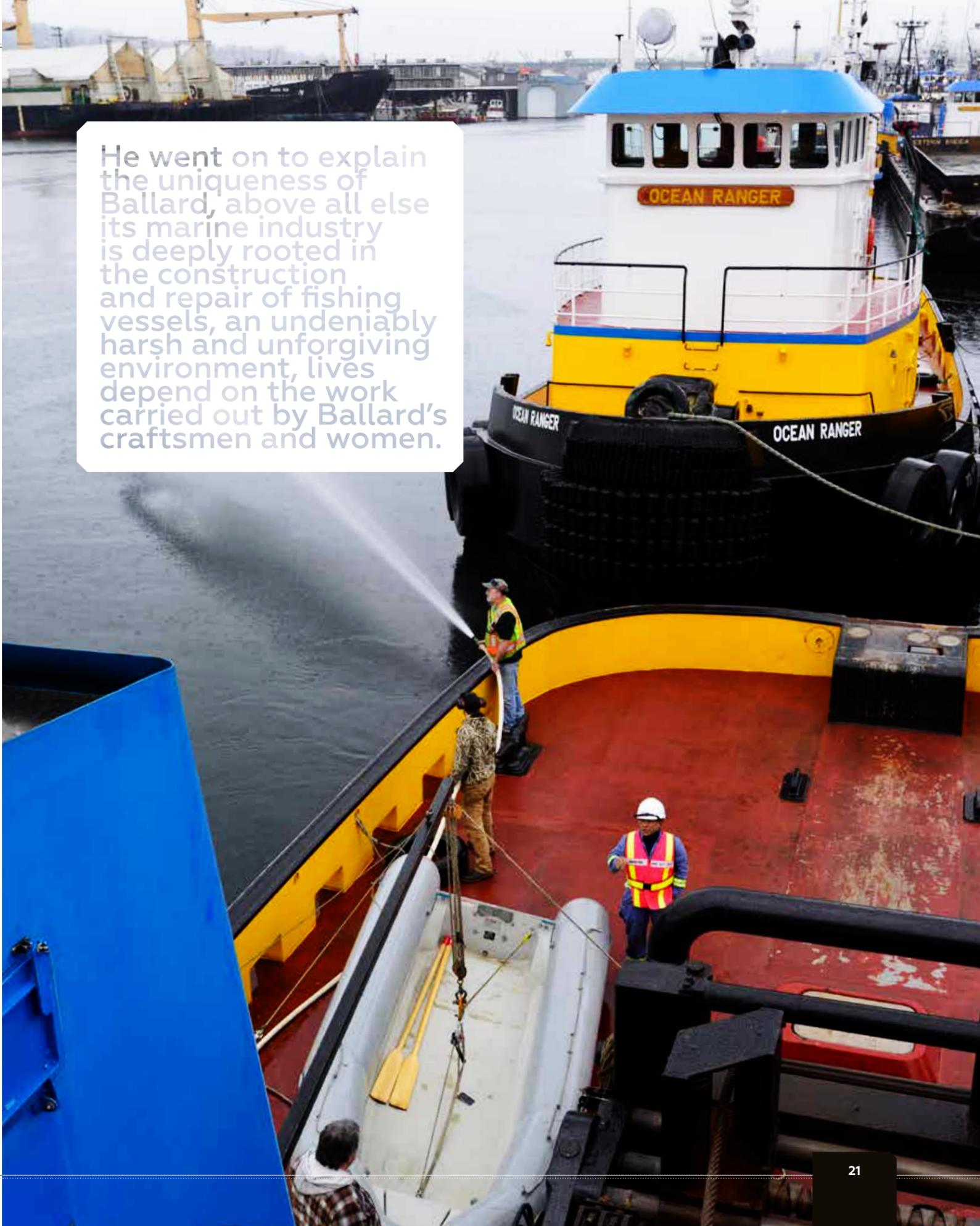
Additionally, Ballard and Seattle are rife with commercial vessel operations, ferries, the logging industry and tug boat operators. This fishing and commercial vessel foundation means the marine industry businesses in this area, as well as the individual folks working for them, are skilled, experienced and committed. Having worked with many of them personally, I can attest to their unusually high level of professionalism and maturity, there is a sense of urgency that I have not experienced elsewhere.

From a logistics perspective, almost anything marine can be obtained within a one mile radius of any shop or dock, from completed products and parts to service and support, thereby reducing delays and shipping costs. Often, there's more than one supplier or service shop for a given product, affording those relying on these services the benefit of healthy competition.

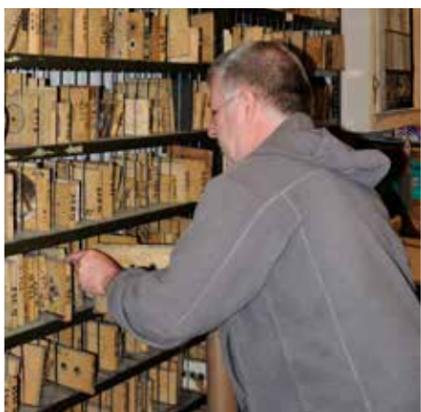
At one point in the conversation Don said, "Heck, these guys [referring to business owners and foremen] all know each other, they go to breakfast and lunch together, they are used to cooperating with each other on large projects and when someone, or something isn't right, word travels fast". I went to the diner, the Salmon Bay Café, and witnessed this for myself.

Furthermore, with the highly seasonal nature of this industry, Ballard's contractors often find themselves in the proverbial feast or famine environment, when the fishing fleet heads north to Alaska; the back log quickly shrinks, creating a perfect storm of sorts for maintaining, repairing and refitting recreational vessels.

Over dinner we hatched a plan wherein, with Don as my shepherd and time keeper, I would return to Ballard for a two day, whirlwind tour of a selection of marine businesses. Keeping to a tight schedule, I was allotted no more than half an hour at each stop (I'll admit it, I ran long); we managed to cover approximately twenty. It was at once fascinating and exhausting. Each location provided a delight for this gearhead's senses, from engine repair



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**TOP ROW:** Craig Hatton and dog \\\ The "showroom" at Ballard Hardware, where commercial accounts as well as walk-ins have been welcomed for over 50 years

**SECOND ROW:** Tidy, organized layout at famed Fisheries Supply \\\ Kitchen staff at award-winning *The Walrus & The Carpenter* restaurant shuck fresh, local oysters for patrons

**THIRD ROW:** Don Stabbart, proprietor of Salmon Bay Marine Center, and Captain John Barry, stand aboard the latter's new fishing vessel. Meticulously installed stainless steel hydraulic plumbing for the vessel's crane, a sample of the Ballard marine industry's handiwork, is visible in the background \\\ Detail work at Canvas Supply \\\ More attention to detail reigns supreme aboard Western Towboat vessels. These (and all) bronze fittings are polished to a high luster.

**FOURTH ROW:** A new, in-house build under construction at Western Towboat's yard \\\ Searching the library of gasket patterns at Gardico

## BALLARD'S SHIPWRIGHTS \ CONTINUED

and machine shops to canvas makers and hydraulic crane manufacturers, the multitude of crafts was dizzying. I was truly in my element and enjoyed every moment.

The skill sets I encountered included joiner work, cold molding (wood and epoxy), electrical, electronic, metal fabrication, hydraulics of every sort, engine installation, repair and rebuilding, machine shop work, propeller repair, and paint application. In short, every specialty was represented within the Ballard fold.

The stops we made were by no means comprehensive, and given the choice I would have gladly crisscrossed Ballard's maze of streets, docks and railroad tracks, visiting each and every one, getting to know the owners, managers and shop floor personnel. Alas, that would have required a week or more, and thus it simply was not possible. Those included below are the highlights, but by no means the whole story. Therefore, in no way should the reader draw any conclusions regarding the absence of any Ballard marine business, other than there simply wasn't enough time in the day to cover, and write about, each and every one.

One of my final stops on the Ballard Marine Industry circuit was Stabbert Yacht and Ship or SYS. Based on the Ship Canal, SYS is a shipyard that handles commercial, scientific and pleasure vessels up to three hundred feet. Its principal, Dan Stabbert, Don's brother, prides himself in the work ethic they've established. He points out that this work ethic is not unique to SYS, it's prevalent throughout Ballard's marine

industry, saying, "The Ballard and Seattle maritime culture is one of the most unique in the world, in its integrity, technical ability, and respect for the vessels in its care, and its customers. Outside a few other seafaring communities in Scotland and Norway it's unrivaled. It's a culture of which we are very proud".

If you are considering undertaking complex, challenging or lengthy refit or repair work, Ballard should be on your short list of destinations. With its high concentration of talented crafts men and women, and capable manufacturing, fabrication and supply facilities, there are few places friendlier to the boat owner in search of high quality marine services.

Finally, thanks to Don and Sharry Stabbert for hosting me during this excursion. ••

*Editorial Note: Steve's article goes into depth on a number of the companies whom he visited on his tour of Ballard as well as his important take on archaic taxation laws in the state of Washington. We encourage readers to read the full article in the October issue of PassageMaker magazine (beginning on page 66).*

About Steve D'Antonio: A former full service yard manager and longtime technical writer, the author now works with boat builders, owners and others in the industry as Steve D'Antonio Marine Consulting, Inc. \ [stevedmarine.com](http://stevedmarine.com) His book on marine systems will be published by McGraw Hill in 2015.



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