

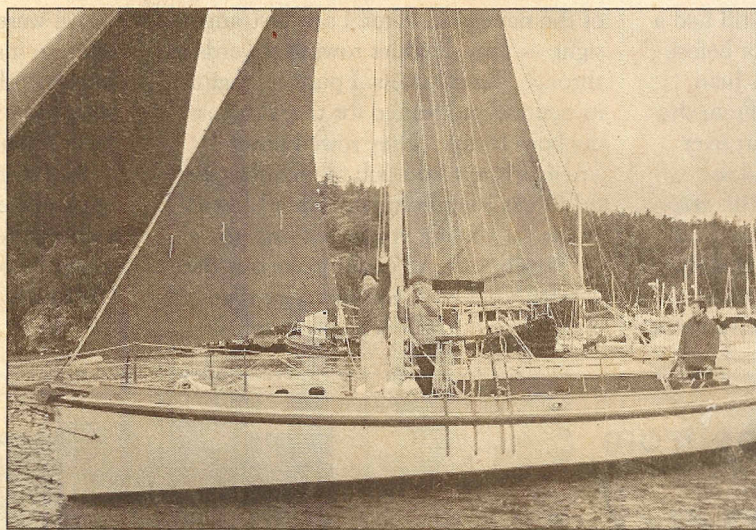
FIRST CHRISTMAS AFLOAT



by Bruce Habalisky

“My first Christmas without a tree,” I thought to myself with a touch of nostalgia. “Not even a little one. No lights and no carolers,” I continued with a sigh. Just then the freshening southeast breeze lifted the starboard rail of *Vixen*, our 34-foot sailboat. As we heeled over, I pulled the tiller and brought my mind back to the present. It was Christmas Eve day. My fiancée, Tiffany, and I had just left Victoria and were now heading to the United States to spend Christmas in the San Juan Islands.

I reached over to trim the jib, then scanned the expanse of the Strait of Juan de Fuca for any signs of a fellow Christmas cruiser. On the horizon I could see a freighter heading for sea; other than that we were all alone. To the south stood the Olympic Mountains thick with snow, and to the north, the rocky Saanich Peninsula of Vancouver Island. This was to be our first Christmas living aboard, and we had decided to make the most of it. True,



Bruce Habalisky's *Vixen*.

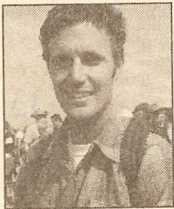
we would miss the carolers and the other more traditional aspects of the holiday, but it seemed a small price to pay if we could find a quiet harbor away from the rush of the city. Our destination was Deer Harbor on Orcas Island.

As we rounded Trial Island and fell off the wind to run through Cadboro Passage, the pleasure of the moment hit me with full force — I was on my own boat sailing to the San Juan Islands for Christmas with Tiffany. How much could change in a year! It had only been last February that we had moved aboard. Both of us had loved it from the start. The compactness of our living space gave it a feeling of living in your ultimate childhood tree fort (except for the fact that a large portion of it was

below sea level). Sometimes in the excitement to share our new lifestyle we would invite friends over for dinner to show them our home. Most admired it. Others would stare wide-eyed in amazement at the paucity of space, the lack of a shower and hot water, then look at us as if we had slipped into the world of the mentally addled. Apparently, living aboard was not for everyone.

Once out into Haro Strait, *Vixen* took off downwind towards San Juan Island and Roche Harbor, where we would have to clear customs. We came in under sail, then motored to the customs dock. In the winter, without the hoards of summer boaters, Roche Harbor felt strangely empty. The customs office was closed, but over the phone some officials agreed to drive from the town of Friday Harbor to check our passports and clear the boat.

Soon two agents arrived. One checked our papers while the other searched *Vixen*. After half an hour, while we waited on shore, the customs



Bruce Halabisky is a frequent contributor to *Wooden Boat* magazine. He has also written for *Cruising World*, *National Fisherman* and other maritime publications. He and Tiffany were married in June after living aboard *Vixen* for a year and a half. On September 1 they, untied the dock lines and headed for Hawaii, where they intend to spend the winter.