

Vixen Returns Home

A Connecticut Classic Completes Her Second Circumnavigation

By Bruce Halabisky

Eleven days after leaving the Chagos archipelago my wife Tiffany and I, along with our two-year-old daughter Solianna, sailed towards the northern tip of Madagascar on our 34-foot sailboat *Vixen*. We planned to stop at the port of Diego Suarez before continuing onto the protected waters of Madagascar's west coast. Plans changed, however, at three in the morning just twenty miles from the safety of Diego Suarez. As we approached Madagascar, the wind increased and shifted to the south – 30, 35 and up to 40 knots.

Adding to the difficulties of making our landfall, a four-knot current was sweeping us to the north. So much for Diego Suarez; now we just hoped to tuck into the lee of Cape Ambre at Madagascar's northern tip. This too soon proved to be a futile hope. The combination of strong winds and current was taking *Vixen* to North Africa! It was time to get serious. We tucked in a third reef, put up the storm jib and headed up to close-hauled. I knew it would be a test for a 57-year-old gaff-rigger to beat into these conditions. It would be a test for any boat. To my amazement, *Vixen* went to work and little by little Madagascar grew on the horizon as our little ship fought to windward and worked her way out of



Bound for Hawaii with new owners Tiffany & Bruce Halabisky, Vixen departed Victoria, BC in September 2004.

Photo courtesy of Bruce Halabisky

the current. Early the next morning, we anchored safely in the lee of Madagascar.

A Boat Made to Cross Oceans

It was not the first time *Vixen* had proven her mettle. In 1958, she had crossed the Indian Ocean with her first owners: Jim and Jean Stark of Miami, FL. Although I don't know much about that first circumnavigation (the ship's papers note that Jim Stark's *second* wife burned all the photos and film of the journey!), there is a record of *Vixen* being in Durban, South Africa on Christmas Day 1958.

I know that Jim Stark had been a bosun in the Navy. I can imagine him serving in the Second World War and dreaming, as many enlisted men did, of the cruising boat he would build when the war was over. He probably read the *Rudder* magazine, where he would have studied the work of popular designers of that time. In 1950, with a circumnavigation in mind, the Starks commissioned a design from John Atkin of Noroton, CT.

Vixen's builder was Joel Johnson of Black Rock, CT. Johnson was a favorite shipwright of Atkin with a solid reputation of doing things right. *Vixen* was launched in the spring of 1952 in Black Rock Harbor in Bridgeport. Within a year or two, the Starks were off on their world cruise.

In 1960, having successfully completed their circumnavigation, the Starks sold *Vixen*. Over the next 30 years, she had many different owners. She was taken through the Panama Canal for the second time, spent some time in Alaska and finally found her

The Halabiskys used a kite-mounted camera to capture this striking image of Vixen under sail. © Bruce Halabisky



way into the care of Les Schnick of Port Townsend, WA who spent twelve years restoring *Vixen* from keel bolts to mast truck. When Tiffany and I saw her in 2002 at the Port Townsend Wooden Boat Show, she was essentially a new boat and she was for sale.

Floating at the dock, *Vixen* looked ready to take her owners anywhere on the world's oceans. A few months later we bought her from Les. The next two years were spent living aboard in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada and in September of 2004 we sailed to Hawaii.

Vixen's Second Time Around

Fortunately, our first offshore run in *Vixen* was under ideal conditions. After 24 days we sailed into Hilo harbor on the big island of Hawaii. Tiffany and I were hooked. Any talk of sailing back to Victoria was forgotten as we learned more of Polynesian culture and dreamt of where our boat might take us.

After six months of living in Hawaii and waiting for the southern hurricane season to pass, we sailed to Tahiti and downwind through the South Pacific. A year later we reached New Zealand where our first daughter, Solianna, was born. In New Zealand we became quite settled. At one

point we actually moved into a small apartment with *Vixen* anchored out front in the Whangarei estuary. We bought an old Japanese second-hand car and even had a cell phone. Carpentry work was easy to find for me and Tiffany did well giving Thai massage and teaching yoga.

Most of our friends thought we would never leave New Zealand, but after a year-and-a-half we bundled up little Solianna and sailed the thousand miles north to Fiji. Sailing with a baby proved to have many advantages: customs and immigration was a breeze and being accepted into the lives of the islanders we met was much easier as a family.

From Fiji we continued across the Pacific, stopping in Vanuatu and a couple of mid-oceanic reefs en route to Australia. Sailing north of Brisbane, we followed the route of Captain Cook along the Great Barrier Reef. With Cook's journal in hand, *Vixen* anchored in Cook Town in the exact spot where *Endeavor* had been careened after hitting Endeavor Reef in 1770.

We cleared out of Australia at Thursday Island and headed west to Indonesia, a country of 17,000 islands. *Vixen* sailed over 1,000 miles during the month of October and we never saw another yacht in this sel-

More at home at sea than on land, four-year-old Solianna has logged nearly 20,000 offshore miles. © Bruce Halabisky



dom visited area of the world. Finally, on the island of Rinca, a UNESCO world heritage park where the giant Komodo dragons live, we met one other cruising yacht. Despite the oppressive bureaucracy, Indonesia was filled with highlights: the craftsmen of

Born on the Sound, Made for the Trades

In an article entitled "A Designer's Philosophy," John Atkin (1918-1999) wrote: "There is much to be said for a forgiving vessel when the going gets so rough the crew has exhausted their experience and can't think of what to do next."

"Just such a boat is the 34-foot, gaff-rigged cutter *Vixen*, designed by my father [William Atkin; 1882-1962] and me several years ago. Built by Joel Johnson at Black Rock, CT, she represents what I consider to be a wholesome, offshore vessel developed for her intended purpose. The low-aspect gaff rig is, in my opinion, well suited for long passages, and twin staysails provided her with the ability to run with ease and safety."

Using old-world craftsmanship, Joel Johnson built several Atkin-designed boats. Kaye Williams, the owner of Captain's Cove Seaport (near the site of Johnson's shop on Black Rock Harbor), recalls that the boatbuilder employed Scandinavians. "They wore wooden shoes," said Williams, "and you'd hear 'Clomp, clomp, clomp' all day as they walked around the shop."

As sturdy as those wooden shoes, *Vixen* will undoubtedly be sailing the world for many years to come.

Edward R. Speer caulked a plank at Joel Johnson's yard in Black Rock, CT.

© John M. Kochiss





Solianna shares the sprit with a booby in the South Pacific.

© Tiffany Halabisky

Soon Solianna could tell the wildebeests from the water buffaloes and spot dung beetles from the backseat of our moving rental car.

South Africa proved to be a real trial at sea with its few harbors and unpredictable weather. Twice we had over 70 knots of wind while sailing South Africa's rugged coast. In Haut Bay, outside of Cape Town, gusts of wind coming over the Cape of Good Hope nearly folded in half the dock to which we were moored.

From South Africa we had a beautiful sail to Saint Helena, a small island in the South Atlantic known as the place where Napoleon was exiled and died under house arrest in 1821. I say beautiful sail because the winds were perfect and the ocean was calm, but Tiffany remembers it only as a month of misery. She was pregnant with our second child and suffered from morning sickness all the way to Brazil.

In Brazil, we decided to park the boat in a small marina in Joao Pessoa and fly back to Canada to have the baby. Our second daughter, Seffa Jane, was born in Victoria on November 6, 2010. Within a day of her being born I was down at Canadian Vital Statistics to get a birth certificate and within a week we had a passport. Seffa Jane was only three months old when she made her first offshore passage. Her older sister, at four years old, already has close to 20,000 sea miles and has filled one passport.

The last six months have been spent sailing from Brazil through the Caribbean and the Bahamas. Instead of going through the Panama Canal, the most direct route home to the Pacific Northwest, we decided to head up the East Coast of the United States and sail *Vixen* back to her birthplace. On June 18, 2011 we took *Vixen* up into Black Rock Harbor. As we pulled up to the dock at Captain's Cove Seaport, just a couple of hundred yards from where *Vixen* was launched in 1952, the circle closed and *Vixen* completed her second trip around the planet.

John Atkin and Joel Johnson – Connecticut Legends

The vessel John Atkin designed for the Starks was typical of Atkin's earlier work and that of his father William – a double-ended, heavy-displacement, full-keeled boat in the spirit of the

Norwegian designer Colin Archer. Even in 1950, the gaff-rig was anachronistic but Atkin believed in the safety of the low-aspect rig and its power when running off the wind.

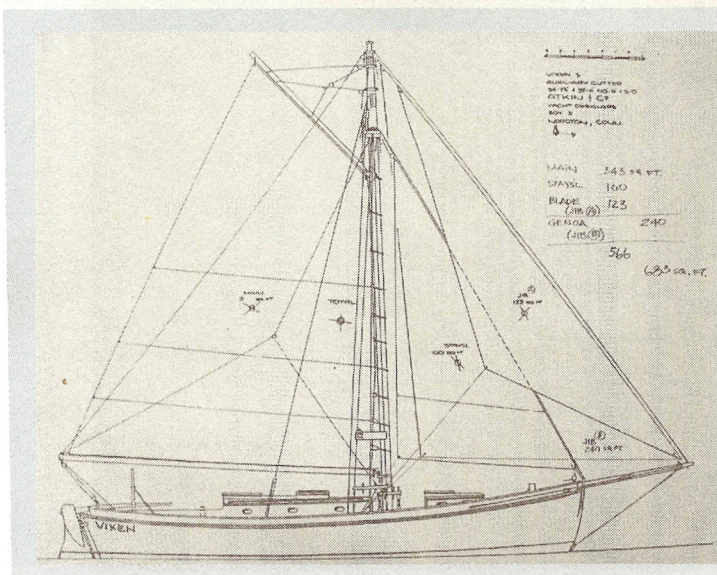
John Atkin wrote in *Rudder* magazine: "*Vixen* was conceived and grew into a mature, wholesome, modestly fast and able vessel, aboard which one might venture forth and return from the unknown in safety and comfort. While all

Bali, the orangutans of Borneo, and the beautiful wooden boats throughout the islands.

North of Indonesia is the infamous Malacca Strait, known for piracy and the busiest shipping lane in the world. We had no problems except for a lack of wind: the diesel proved a dependable friend. We spent five months in Malaysia and Thailand, then set off down the west coast of Sumatra to try to catch the southeast trades and cross the Indian Ocean.

Halfway across the Indian Ocean is a group of uninhabited islands called the Chagos Archipelago. Here we stopped for a few weeks to swim in the perfect lagoon, eat coconuts and enjoy one of the few atolls in the world devoid of people.

We ended our Indian Ocean crossing in Madagascar. This was another favorite because of the unusual wildlife, the beautiful wooden boats and the friendly people. *Vixen* sailed down the west coast of Madagascar and crossed over to Richards Bay, South Africa where we went to the first "American-style" shopping mall we had seen since leaving Australia over a year earlier. Of more interest were the beautiful game parks just outside of Richards Bay.



Vixen

- Designer: John Atkin
- Builder: Joel Johnson
- Year Built: 1952, Black Rock, CT
- Hull Construction: Eastern white cedar planks on oak frames
- LOA: 42 feet
- LOD: 34 feet
- Beam: 10 feet
- Draft: 5 feet
- Displacement: 26,000 lbs.
- Engine: Perkins 4-108 diesel
- Fuel: 60 gallons
- Fresh Water: 60 gallons

manner of opinions come to mind involving just what constitutes the ideal world cruiser, it is my opinion that *Vixen*, considering her size and overall characteristics, comes pretty close to fulfilling most of these requirements in a highly satisfactory manner.”

It is on the open ocean that *Vixen* performs best. Her heavy displacement imparts a sense of security. The bowsprit, low-aspect rig and long traditional keel keep her on course. In fact, we have no self-steering gear except for a line running from the staysail to the tiller. Perhaps *Vixen's* most redeeming feature is her ability to heave-to in a gale without any fuss or worry.

Below decks, *Vixen* has the classic layout of a boat from the 1950s with a head to starboard, a generous amount of room for the galley, two sea berths port and starboard and a double berth in the forepeak. Being double-ended, the stern has less room than a transom-ended vessel but still offers a fair amount of storage and houses a Perkins 4-108 diesel engine for auxiliary power. Oil lamps, varnished knotty pine bulkheads and bronze ports add to the traditional feel of the interior.

Overall, *Vixen* is a fairly simple boat without a lot of electronics or gadgetry. One 40-watt solar panel provides plenty of electricity to run the VHF radio, interior lights and navigation lights. There are no roller-furlers or electric winches to help manage the sails and this makes *Vixen* a physical boat to sail. Considering we might raise anchor a hundred times a year, *Vixen's* Muir electric windlass is a much-appreciated piece of equipment.

Aside from the highly functional aspect of *Vixen* and, to my eye, her beauty, there is the psychological comfort of knowing she has done it all before. She has weathered gales and wallowed in calms. She has fought her way off lee shores and romped downwind in the trades. Once, in Whangarei, New Zealand, we had *Vixen* out of the water to put on some bottom paint. An old sea dog walked up, planted his feet squarely, pointed at *Vixen* and proclaimed, “I anchored next to your boat – Tahiti, 1957.”

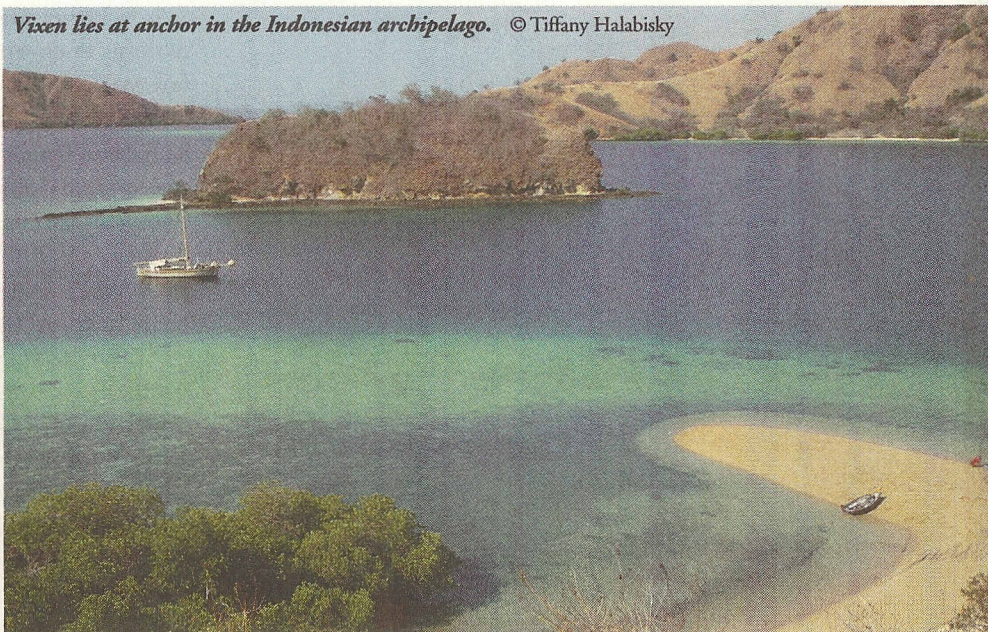
The genius of John Atkin was his ability to recognize what was essential for a safe, comfortable cruising boat and then incorporate these elements into a shape that was pleasing to the eye. Joel Johnson had the complimentary ability to take Atkin's ideas and turn them into real boats of quality materials. Now, having arrived back at her 1952 launching site, *Vixen* has proven, for the second time around, to be a fine example of these two men's work. ♦

Editor's note: Portions of this article were previously published in Latitudes & Attitudes Magazine and are reprinted with permission. Thank you Lats & Atts Publisher Bob Bitchin and Bruce Williams at Captain's Cove Seaport for connecting us with the author.

Following their visit to Vixen's birthplace in Bridgeport, CT, the Halabiskys sailed to Mystic Seaport in Mystic, CT, where Vixen was

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Vixen lies at anchor in the Indonesian archipelago. © Tiffany Halabisky



part of the Atkin & Co. display at the Wooden Boat Show. Pat Atkin, John's widow, sells plans for more than 300 boats including double-enders, offshore and coastal cruising yachts, rowing and sailing dinghies, utilities and houseboats. You'll find these "Individualized Designs for Unregimented Yachtsmen" at boat-links.com/Atkinco/index.html.

Bruce Halabisky is always happy to hear from anyone who knows more of Vixen's history or of Jim and Jean Stark. You can contact him at vixensvoyage.com or vixensvoyage@gmail.com.

Vixen at her launching in 1952.

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