

PassageMaker[®]

— The Trawler & Ocean Motorboat Magazine —

Vol. 18 No. 1

passagemaker.com

Jan/Feb 2013



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Hemingway's *Pilar*

Peter Swanson

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Ice Water Mansions

By TONY FLEMING

Glaciers, seals on ice floes, ominous noises, and new friends—discover the mystery and beauty of Alaska as Tony Fleming recounts his trip to Juneau, Ford's Terror, Glacier Bay, and more, on his beloved *Venture*.

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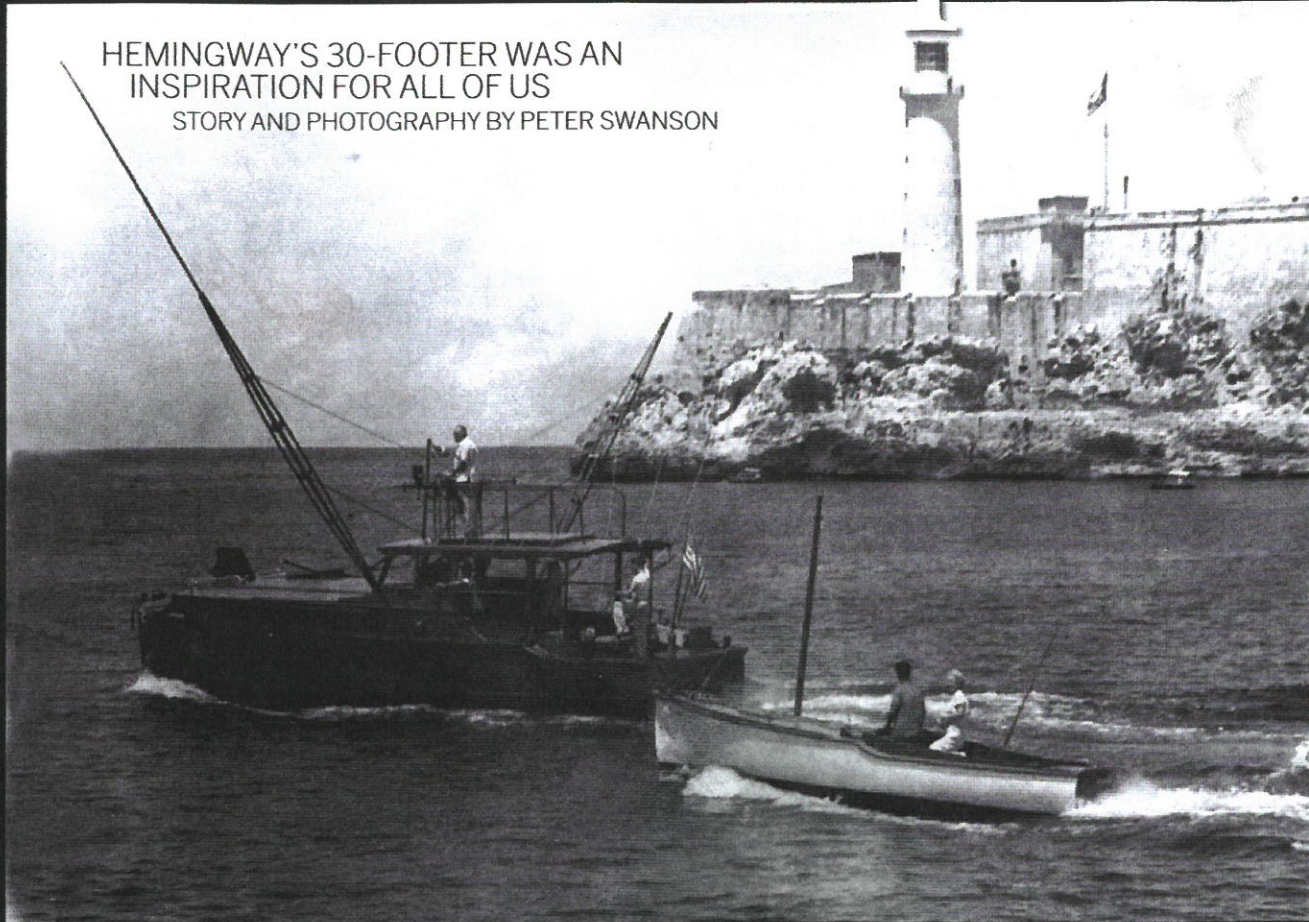
By JOHN WOOLDRIDGE

On a leisurely, three-day cruise from Anacortes to Bremerton in the great state of Washington, our editor-in-chief discovers the performance, amenities, livability, and outstanding customer service that are all part of the Ranger Tugs ownership experience.

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Cruising With Papa

HEMINGWAY'S 30-FOOTER WAS AN
INSPIRATION FOR ALL OF US
STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER SWANSON



"Thomas Hudson...felt far away now and there were no problems at all. He felt the ship gathering her speed and the lovely throb of her engines against his shoulder blades, which rested hard against the boards. He looked up and there was the sky that he had always loved and he looked across the great lagoon that he was quite sure, now, he would never paint and he eased his position a little to lessen the pain. The engines were around three thousand now, he thought, and they came through the deck and into him."

—From "Islands in the Stream," as the artist-hero lay shot and dying in the cockpit of his cabin cruiser.



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Ernest Hemingway's boat was renowned as a platform for the author's fishing exploits, but she was in fact a "cabin cruiser" and a very capable one, with features that would be valued by the power cruisers of today. *Pilar* was her name, and she is about to make a comeback in the American imagination.

Pilar herself sits atop the tennis court of Hemingway's old *Finca Vigia* just outside Havana, Cuba, an estate from long ago that has become a Hemingway museum. Over here, meanwhile, a beautifully restored 1934 Wheeler Playmate, plays *Pilar* in the upcoming movie *Hemingway & Fuentes*, which began filming in January. The film is part of a Hemingway revival that includes two recent movies, two non-fiction books about Hemingway and *Pilar*, and the release of many of the author's private papers.

The new movie is about the friendship between Hemingway and his capable Cuban captain, Gregorio Fuentes, as well as their relationship to the boat herself. *Pilar's* importance to the movie may be inferred from the \$250,000 price tag for the Wheeler's restoration and the moviemaker's strict demands for authenticity. Anthony Hopkins plays Hemingway. Andy

Left: Hemingway pilots the boat out of Havana Harbor from a makeshift flybridge. The outriggers are among the first ever devised.



Garcia, who also directs the film, plays Fuentes. It's being shot in an area of the Dominican Republic that closely resembles the north coast of Cuba.

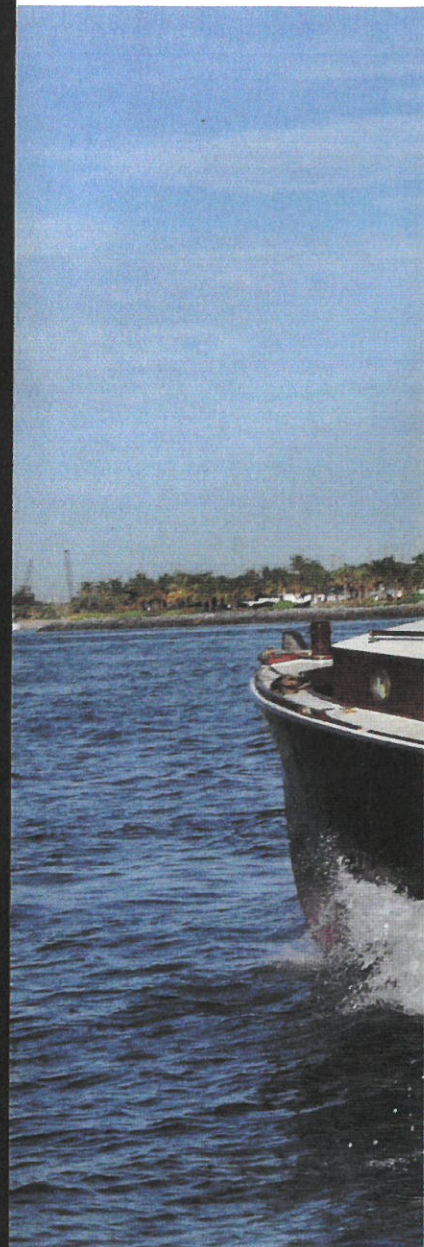
Hemingway lived and worked during the formative years of recreational boating, a period during which the pastime (today, we call it the "boating lifestyle") trickled down from the wealthy elite to the postwar generations of ordinary Americans. *Pilar* was the setting for many of Hemingway's magazine articles and articles by others about him. The author's adventures aboard *Pilar* inspired his posthumous novel *Islands in the Stream* and informed American attitudes toward boating in general.

To us, boats are an escape. They transport us to a wilder place where we establish deeper bonds with family and friends. The sea sets us free and purifies us. Then, of course, there's fishing.

Only eight other boats, in my humble opinion, shine as brightly as *Pilar* in America's nautical firmament. The *Nina*, *Pinta*, and *Santa Maria* make three. Add to those: *Mayflower*, *USS Constitution*, the schooner *America*, oshua Slocum's *Spray*, and JFK's *PT 109*. Only *Pilar* and one of the eight "lives" today, *Old Ironsides* at her berth in Boston.

Hemingway purchased his 1934 Playmate new from the Wheeler

Ernest Hemingway mans the helm of *Pilar* when she was only a couple years old.



This is the helm of *Pilar*, as it looks today at the Hemingway Museum on the outskirts of Havana.



Shipyard of Brooklyn, New York for \$7,495 or about \$120,000 in today's dollars. Not a bad value, really, considering *Pilar* could cruise nearly as well as many comparably-sized boats today—any of which would cost much more.

"There are only two colors to paint a boat—black or white—and only a fool would paint a boat black," Nathanael Herreshoff famously said. The legendary boat designer could not have anticipated Hemingway, however.

Hemingway was surely guilty of extreme foolishness in aspects of his personal life, but his choice of a black

hull (for the tropics, no less!) is as likely the product of vanity or misplaced romanticism, given the otherwise good decisions he made for the boat. *Pilar's* crew would suffer higher temperatures down below, and *Pilar's* planking would be prone to shrinkage (as has already happened to restored *Movie Pilar*). Discomfort and impracticality be damned, Hemingway never backed down! *Pilar* has remained a black boat to this day.

His other choices are really quite good, especially for a guy who'd only been going to sea for six years, fishing

from other people's boats. First and foremost, he specifies a combo power plant, a Chrysler Crown 75hp engine and a 4-cylinder 40hp Lycoming "trolling motor." "This motor is to be installed as a unit entirely independent of the main power plant, and all controls and instruments are to be at steering position," Hemingway writes to Wheeler.

A trolling motor, yes, but terrific insight on Hemingway's part about his chosen cruising grounds as well. Sea Tow did not exist in 1934, and to this day, much of the Bahamas and north



coast of Cuba are lonely waters indeed. The Lycoming was a get-home engine, a must-have for any “single-screw” recreational vessel venturing beyond sight of land, then or now. Regardless of how mechanically well maintained an engine is, and regardless of how well a fuel system is devised, events beyond a skipper’s control can stop an engine at sea, and when that happens during a closing weather window, it can herald the undoing of captain and crew.

As if to prove the point, during *Pilar’s* first crossing to Cuba in July 1934, the water pump on the nearly new Chrysler failed, and the engine became so hot

the paint peeled off it. Hemingway steered *Pilar* into Havana Harbor on the Lycoming.

Another wise decision was Hemingway’s specification of four 75-gallon fuel tanks. That gave *Pilar* a range of about 600 miles, further if you take into account the 100 gallons of gasoline Hemingway stored aboard in portable tanks. Range is an important component of any cruising vessel, and *Pilar’s* was impressive, particularly given her gasoline power plants. *Pilar’s* range is about the distance between Havana and Mobile, Alabama (which happen to be sister cities).

Let’s compare *Pilar* to one of the most popular power cruising brands of today, the Nordic Tug. The Nordic Tug 34, powered by a 260hp Yanmar, carries 205 gallons of diesel fuel and boasts a range of 500nm at 8 knots. The 39, powered by a 380hp Cummins diesel, carries 320 gallons of diesel fuel and will travel about 1,000nm at 8 knots. WOT is 18 knots. As you can see, *Pilar’s* performance falls comfortably between these two performance models, and positively shines compared to the 222-mile range of a contemporary 45-footer from Sea Ray.

Jim Moores, a master restorer of wood

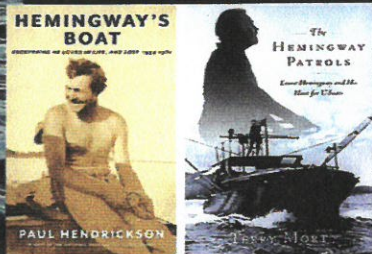
TWO BOOKS

This account owes much to two recent books about *Pilar*. One is *Hemingway's Boat: Everything He Loved in Life, and Lost* by Paul Hendrickson, published in 2011. The other is *The Hemingway Patrols* by Terry Mort, published in 2009.

These books are complementary in that Mort's book deals entirely with Hemingway's World War II U-boat patrols, and Hendrickson's book entirely (and mystifyingly) omits this two-year period. Hendrickson's critically acclaimed tome wanders far afield in a broad examination of Hemingway's loves and literature, whereas Mort cuts right to the sub chase and its consequences for Hemingway's love life and literature.

Thus one book, when it's discussing life aboard *Pilar*, concentrates on hunting fish, while the other focuses on hunting Germans, introducing one chapter with Hemingway's famous words:

"Certainly there is no hunting like the hunting of man. And those who have hunted armed men long enough and liked it never really care for anything else thereafter."



and loaded for anti-shark duty.

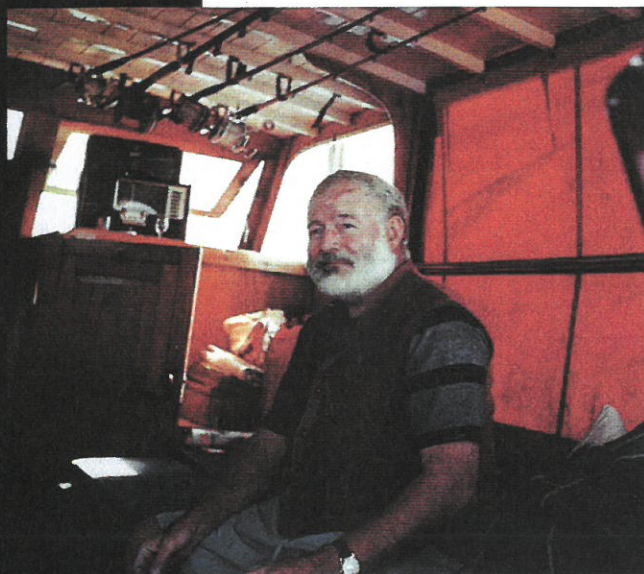
During our trial, Moores zips back and forth in front of the beach, going well over 15 knots, but *Movie Pilar* is light that day, and Moores says she is very weight sensitive. Although *Movie Pilar* is 34 feet compared to *Pilar*'s 38, their performance characteristics were probably similar. Doing the math, I would estimate *Pilar* would weigh an additional 5,000 lb., fully fueled and loaded with six people aboard. That pretty much guaranteed that *Pilar* usually moved through the water at 10 knots or less—just like most cruisers today.

Pilar is a good seaboat, but definitely needs man-handling. Jim Moores says it takes strength to steer *Movie Pilar*. The fine entry of the Wheeler boats suggest a tendency to bow-steer in following conditions, forcing the helmsman to wrestle her to course. But Hemingway was a famously powerful guy, having invented the technique of using brute strength to quickly bring gamefish to the boat so they could be landed before the sharks could begin ripping them apart. The technique was called "Hemingwaying" a fish. He would Hemingway the boat as well.

Charley Morgan, the great sailboat and (later in life) trawler designer, has long insisted that the ability to seek shelter is a key component in the definition of seaworthiness regarding cruising vessels. And the key to being able to seek shelter down island, Morgan says, is shallow draft. With a draft of 3-1/2 feet, *Pilar*

boats, took me out for a demonstration of *Movie Pilar*'s performance off Palm Beach. Moores prefers steering her from the "flybridge," and invited me to join him as we began our return to the dock. It's really only a prototype for today's bridges, made of painted steel pipes, an automotive steering wheel, and basic levers for control. As the conversation turns to range and *Pilar*'s 300 gallons of gasoline, Moores makes a quip about *Pilar* being the equivalent of a floating bomb. His comment inspires a mental image full of explosive possibilities: Fishing buddies drinking heavily, guns locked

Top: Jim Moores of Moores Marine puts Movie Pilar through her paces off Florida, recently. Right: Late in his life, Hemingway relaxes in the Pilar's cockpit. Note the fishing rods and canvas enclosure to keep out the tropical sun.



was well suited to the Bahamas and the north coast of Cuba with its archipelagos of mangrove keys.

During his 35 years with *Pilar*, Hemingway visited Bimini in the Bahamas and cruised a 400nm swath of the Cuban north coast from Cayo Levisa, west of Havana, to the port of Nuevitas well to the east. Hemingway, and his family and friends would go for days, sometimes weeks at a time. In 1942 and 43, during his U-Boat patrols on behalf of the U.S. Navy, Hemingway headed east along the Old Bahama Channel for weeks on end, anchoring for the night in lee of small islands called *caños* or keys. During these patrols, Hemingway had six or seven men with him and no head. The toilet had been removed to accommodate a

state-of-the-art single sideband radio and a radio homing gear to get bearings to any U-Boats using their radios. Eight guys on a boat using the "bucket and chuck it" method for weeks. Lovely!

When we provision nowadays, it usually entails a foray to a warehouse outlet for bulk purchases and two or three forays to the supermarket. Hemingway in Cuba certainly had access to canned and dry goods, but his provisioning was far more rustic than anything most of us would consider today. Examining *Pilar's* 1942 logbook, housed at the JFK Library in Boston, I came across this passage:

Bought:

12 live chickens @ .75¢
2 live turkeys @ \$2.50
1 pig @ \$8.00

400 eggs @ 3¢
98 gallons of water
100 lb. of ice @ \$7.20

At one remote cay, the log recorded that two large iguanas and doves were shot "for supper." That, of course, was in addition to the inevitable harvest from the sea, which included snappers, barracudas, and yellowtail that day. The entry continues: "Ate the white turkey—one hen dead—other stock well—Cayo Cruz hot but fascinating place. Saw flocks of golden plover on really dry lagoon bed—also great blue and white herons. Saw iguanas besides those shot."

The iguana population must have considered itself lucky that Hemingway did not shoot them all that day. Critics of Hemingway the sportsman, as opposed to Hemingway the novelist, claimed he

Q&A: PUTTING THE 'WOOD' IN HOLLYWOOD

A conversation with Nate Smith of Moores Marine

Nathaniel "Nate" Smith, 47, is service manager at Moores Marine Yacht Center in Beaufort, North Carolina, having worked at the company for 20 years. Moores Marine, which also has a branch in Palm Beach, Florida, is one of the nation's premier wood boat restoration outfits, and recently restored a 1933 Wheeler Playmate to assume the role of Ernest Hemingway's boat *Pilar* in the upcoming movie *Hemingway & Fuentes*. Movie producers paid about \$250,000 for the restoration.

PMM: What was your first reaction when you learned that Hollywood wanted Moores Marine to restore a boat for a movie, and you were going to be the guy in charge of the project?

Nate Smith: I was very excited, very excited. It was my first movie boat. My brother-in-law had done one back in the 80s. I was just very excited, and especially the boat they were talking about, Hemingway's boat. I'm a Hemingway fan.

PMM: Where did they get the boat for the movie?

Smith: They got that boat in June 1911. The owner was a gentleman named Norman Vanderbilt. It had been in his family for 50 years.

PMM: Moores Marine is known for its work with old Trumpy yachts. How many have you restored and are any famous? The brand was often associated with the movers and shakers of its time.

Smith: We've done a total of 20 to 25. I can't

remember the exact number. We worked on Howard Hughes' boat. All these old boats had famous people owning them.

PMM: Was *The Honey Fitz*, JFK's presidential yacht one of them?

Smith: *The Honey Fitz* was a Defoe but, yes, we restored it. I was not involved in that, but it was a Moores Marine Boat. Our company down south restored it.

PMM: How many man-hours did you spend working on *Pilar*? When did the project begin and when did it end and how many people were on the crew?

Smith: I'd estimate probably 10,000 hours. November of 2011 we started it, and we sent the boat to Florida in July. We started out initially with nine people and ended up with 13 at the end.

PMM: Looking over your construction photos, it looks like the transom was a major problem. Tell me about it.

Smith: Yes it was. The transom was not connected to the rest of the boat. All the attachments from the bilge stringers and clamps were cut, so the only things holding the transom on were the planking. I said, "Wow!" when I saw it. We spliced new pieces into the clamps and bilge stringers. We spliced those into the transom skirt and we used mechanical fasteners to fasten them together.

PMM: The entire transom is new wood, isn't it?



Smith: Yes it is.

PMM: By the way what is the construction of *Movie Pilar*? Is it oak

frames and mahogany planking?

Smith: It's oak frames and white cedar and mahogany. It's a mix.

PMM: A casual mix or an intentional mix?

Smith: It's an intentional mix because the quality of Atlantic white cedar that was around at the time was not the quality we needed for planking. So we put in some mahogany, and the previous owner put in some mahogany because he couldn't find it either.

PMM: Yeah, I had an old wood boat and ended up using mahogany because it was just the easiest thing to do. Some of the photos show new timber scarfed or spliced onto *Pilar's* framing. It looks like you took a more difficult path instead of applying sister frames as reinforcement, going for a more "prosthetic" approach. Tell us about that.

Smith: We try not to put sisters in boats because it's a fix, not a repair. To repair a rib we do a splice, a laminated splice. We actually make the rib stronger than it was previously. We cut out the rotten portions of the existing rib. We put a nine-to-one diagonal splice on the end we are going to fix. We cut laminates, usually 3/16 of an inch thick, and bend them to get that turn in the

was a “meat fisherman,” too concerned with quantity. Still, you have a feeling the Hemingway crew ate very well—and as *PMM* readers well know, meals assume a greater importance while under way than they ever do back at the house. Fuentes was not just a capable seaman and engineer, but he was also chef aboard *Pilar*, and hence his authority would have been unquestioned.

In their down time, Hemingway and his friends played poker in the cockpit, and pages of the log are devoted to keeping track of how much everyone owes each other. The alcohol consumption was prodigious.

In 1959, the Cuban revolution brought Fidel Castro to power. In 1961, Castro’s favorite author leaves Cuba forever. Hemingway, depressed and

alcoholic, commits suicide by shotgun in July 1961 at his home in Ketchum, Idaho. Mary Hemingway, his fourth wife, leaves *Pilar* to Fuentes, who eventually hands it over to “the Cuban people.” The boat is eventually hauled to where she lies today, an attraction viewed by tens of thousands of Cuban schoolchildren and tourists annually—hardly any of them Hemingway’s fellow countrymen due to the American government’s continuing refusal to let the general public travel to Cuba.

Don’t worry, when the travel ban is lifted, *Pilar* will still be there waiting for all of us. Museum Director Ada Rosa Alfonso is a fierce defender of Hemingway’s legacy and his boat, so I was pleased that she gave me permission a few years ago to climb

aboard *Pilar* and snoop around—something not allowed to the general public. Fuentes had just died a few years earlier at age 104—one of those durable characters who was able to enjoy a cigar and a shot of rum right up until the end of his life.

Alfonso tells me that the old man was a regular visitor to *Pilar*. “Not a day goes by that I do not think of him and our time together on that old black boat,” Alfonso quoted Fuentes as saying. That sentiment will surely form the emotional core of the Hopkins-Fuentes film. And if you think Hopkins at 5 feet 8 inches is an odd choice to play the 6-foot tall Hemingway, consider this. *Movie Pilar* is four feet shorter than *Pilar* herself, so the actor will be pretty much to scale. 🚤



Left: The transom was in perilous condition and had to be completely rebuilt. Top Right: A laminated replacement frame is “spliced” onto one found to be rotten. About 30 frames, or ribs, were repaired in this fashion. Bottom Right: Decades of paint are stripped away to get down to *Movie Pilar*’s bare mahogany.

shape of the hull. After we get the shape of the hull, we cut the splicing on the new frame with the same nine-to-one diagonal, epoxy it to the old one, attach it to the keel and fasten it to the planking.

PMM: How many do you suppose you did?

Smith: I think we did 30.

PMM: Were there any other major challenges?

Smith: The biggest challenge was getting the boat to look cosmetically like *Pilar*. We had a 34-foot boat, and we were trying to make it look like a 38-footer. That was very hard. We had to scale some things down a little bit, and we got it as close as we could. We could not get her to be an exact duplicate because the boat was built differently, and the producers did want to go so far as to make her look exactly like *Pilar*.

PMM: And finally what was it like working with Hollywood?

Smith: It was...ah...interesting. It was hard to get everyone on the same page. We had the owner on the East Coast, then we had the director of the movie on the West Coast. Trying to get everybody to coordinate was tough. A gentleman from New Jersey owns the boat. He’s the producer of the movie, Ed Walson.