

By Jeff Thomas

Southwest Virginia has about as much nautical tradition as, say, Kansas, but it was there that Mike Johnson's passion for Cape Horn began. As a boy he read books about sailors and explorers, nomadic peoples and faraway places, sometimes imagining he was on a Spanish galleon as he sloshed in the stream behind his house.

"Cape Horn first came to me," Johnson said, "when I read about a Frenchman who disappeared at sea. He said, 'For anyone who knows the sea, there's a place you must go to and it's not necessary to mention that place by name.'"

Johnson began to sail in earnest when he was in his 20s. As the years passed and his miles at sea multiplied, so did his fascination with the Horn. He read everything he could about this most desolate of rocks that marks the tip of South America. He read about Drake's Passage, the treacherous waterway of unceasing cold and stray icebergs where thousands of miles of open ocean and wind converge to create a devilish siphon. He read about the Schouten brothers, who discovered and named the Horn in 1616, about Magellan and Cook and the venerable Fujita, who, after two months of trying to enter the Pacific, was forced to sail around the world the other way to reach his destination. He read about intrepid small boat sailors like Miles Smeeton, Bernard Moitessier and the first yachtsman to round the Horn, Al Hansen, who perished on the coast of Chile after his feat. Through his reading, Johnson became aware of the potential for death for those who confront the Horn; over the past four centuries, thousands of sailors have died in its waters.

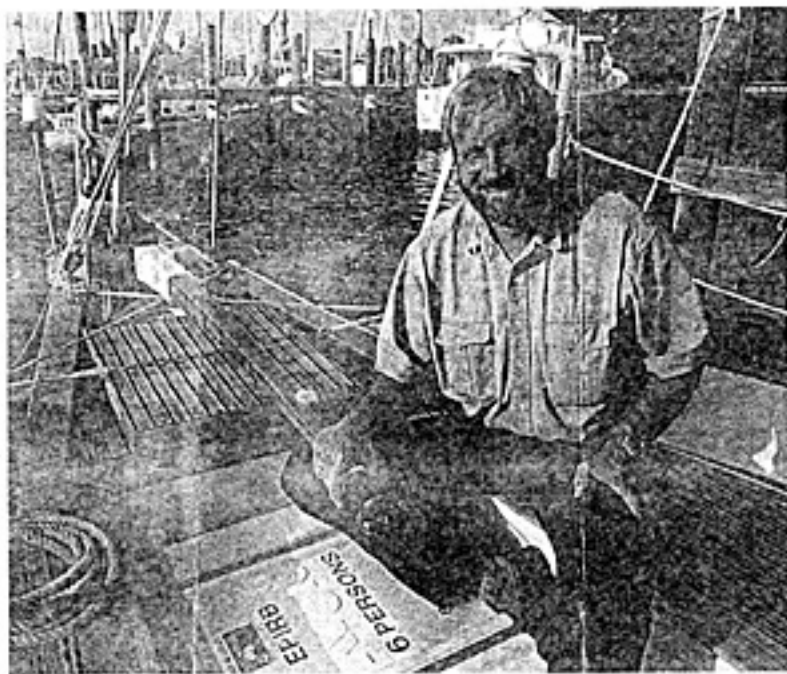
"You don't have to read much," Johnson said, "to come across references to Cape Horn as the 'Everest of sailors.' The reading is so horrific, for a long time I didn't imagine myself doing it."

Yet, the Horn never strayed far from his mind. The more he sailed and met ocean voyagers, the

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more he read and contemplated, the more the idea crossed from yearning to necessity.

In 1983 Johnson seized an opportunity to round the Horn from west to east as crew aboard the schooner *Lord Jim*. The boat survived a severe knockdown and steering gear



Mike Johnson

Cape Horn the hard way

failure but made it around to Mar del Plata, Argentina. The following year, Johnson attended a British Cape Horner Association meeting in Australia, where old-timers told of rounding the Horn in the early 1900s aboard square-riggers. They spoke of rounding "the hard way"—that is, rounding from east to west, against ferocious winds and currents. One old seaman stated that unless you rounded that way, you didn't round at all. Born with an adventurer's soul, Johnson began to think of rounding the Horn the way they did.

Over the next two years, he planned his return to the Horn. He would skipper his own boat and would round the "hard way." He would "double the Horn" as the square-riggers had, sailing nonstop from 50 degrees south in the Atlantic to 50 degrees south in the Pacific. And he would do so with only a sextant for navigation, a barometer for weather and canvas and rope for power. In front of witnesses, he would disconnect and seal his propeller shaft beforehand, rendering his engine useless for the voyage.

In March 1989, Johnson and two crewmembers departed from Rio de Janeiro on *Aissa*, his black-hulled Westsail 32. They next touched land 85 days later on Easter Island in the Pacific. It took 25 days to double the Horn, pounding into gale after gale, through freezing rain and sleet, seas washing over the decks, in constant

Cape Horn veteran Mike Johnson holds the hand-carved tiller of *Aissa*, the black-hulled Westsail 32 which took him around the ominous headland—from the east to the west—in 1989.

danger of being rolled or pitchpoled or driven onto lee shores. Not once did they catch a glimpse of the legendary rock.

"It's an otherworldly area," Johnson said. "The water looked black, dark, foreboding, moody. It would be easy down there to believe in ghosts rising up, sea dragons. I felt we were ants crawling across the anvil of the gods, expecting a hammer to come down any moment."

At one point, after several bleak weeks of scant progress, one crewmember suggested that they should turn back. Johnson insisted that as long as they had sufficient food and a working vessel they would remain true

to the voyage. They persevered to become the last drop in the long trickle of courageous mariners who rounded the Horn over the last four centuries.

"Having gone both ways," he says, "I don't think the voyages compare. West to east, the current's always going in the right direction. If you take the sails down and can survive, you're going to get around. The other way, you're acutely aware that if you're not violently beating into these winds and weather and seas, you're going backwards and every minute backwards is ground you've got to regain."

Many times during the ordeal Johnson wondered if they would succeed, but he never doubted that the risks were justified.

"Lots of people want experiences at very little cost to themselves," he said. "People who go to Antarctica on a big cruise ship are being inserted into an incredibly hostile environment in a painless, almost risk-free manner. I'm not knocking those people, but there's a certain lack of validity to that experience because it's too easy. If something is difficult to achieve, you've earned the right to be on that spot of the earth."

By any standard, Mike Johnson has earned his place in the history of Cape Horn. In recognition of his remarkable voyage, the British Ocean Cruising Club awarded him its highest honor, the Barton Cup. Not bad for a guy from southwest Virginia.