

TheTimesHerald

Bramble is part of what defines Port Huron

Syeda Ferguson, Times Herald 4:39 p.m. EST February 7, 2015

Without a doubt, the retired U.S. Coast Guard cutter Bramble has many stories to tell.



Stories about receiving nuclear fallout in the Bikini Atoll as part of government testing in 1946. About what it was like in 1957 being one of the first ships — and the only survivor of its two companions — to circumnavigate the Arctic Circle. About being stationed in the Caribbean during the drug wars of the late 1980s.

These well-documented historic events led to the nomination and unanimous approval of the 180-foot buoy tender and icebreaker on the National Register of Historic Places in 2012.

But there are other memories, infinitely more in number, in the personal reminiscences of men who have lived and served on the Bramble.

These stories lend to the ship what could be called a kind of soul, former Bramble commanding officer Bob Lafean said. "It's hard to describe unless you've actually been there. You do things that most people you talk to have never experienced," the Port Huron resident said. "We understand how the ships have their own identity, their own soul and ... they take care of you."

That feeling might be more difficult to locate precisely than the well-marked offerings tourists receive on their guided tours of the museum ship.



Sara and Bob Klingler purchased the former U.S. Coast Guard cutter Bramble and are restoring it. (Photo: TIMES HERALD)

Bramble owners Bob and Sara Klingler hope to bring visitors' experiences on the ship closer to that of servicemen through enhanced overnight stays for youth that include station duty.

The overnight stay program is a continuation of what was offered through the Bramble's previous owner, the Port Huron Museum.

The Klinglers last week celebrated the two-year anniversary since they acquired the Bramble from the museum. The ship will have its 71st birthday this year.

The station duty component is new, Bob Klingler said.

"You will not just sit and look," he said. "You'll be part of an operating group. You'll either wash the deck or start an engine or make a radio call, something that would actually indicate a real job to you maybe later in your life.

"That's the kind of thing that can change the course of a youngster's career."

The Bramble will begin taking reservations April 15 for Saturday overnight programs. The ship can accommodate two groups of 20 with their chaperones.

The Marine City couple also have been host to musters on the Bramble, gatherings among volunteers, "Coasties" and retirees from near and far.

"They all want to help the Coast Guard communities and the locals," Sara Klingler said. "Some of these guys are 70, 80 years old, and they sailed in the Coast Guard."

The meetings are typically on the second Saturday of every month. They include a status meeting and assignments for attendees.

"Not only is the meeting giving a status of the ship, but we're going to do something that day," Sara Klingler said.

In March 2016, the Bramble will be featured in a blockbuster movie, but Bob Klingler could not share much more information due to confidentiality agreements. He said the movie is not "Transformers 4," which the ship was considered for. He also said the upcoming movie is not through Paramount Studios.

A Bramble crew of about 25 was assembled to participate in a Michigan Film Industry activity in Ecorse for two weeks of filming the movie at the end of August 2014, Bob Klingler said. There was a film crew of 600 to 700 people there, he said.

"It was a big production," Bob Klingler said. "We were thrilled. Everybody had a good time." The project is related to Gov. Rick Snyder's ongoing economic development effort to make Michigan more viable in the film industry, he said.

"With our actual involvement in being solicited for 'Transformers 4' ... our name is out in the film industry as a ship that could be a prop and used in Michigan."

The Klinglers were contacted by National Geographic last summer to use the Bramble to look for a sunken ship in the Great Lakes. Time lines were not given, but if the project goes forward, it would involve a working crew of 25 people and the launching of a submersible from the deck of the Bramble.

A private company has contacted the couple with an interest in leasing the Bramble as a harbor ice breaker, they said.

And a sea trial in lower Lake Huron leading up to the Port Huron to Mackinac Island race on July 18 is in the works, involving a combination of Bramble crew and crew members from the U.S. Coast Guard cutter Sundew. Retired Bramble Capt. Charles Park of Norfolk, Virginia, will serve as captain of the sea trial, Bob Klingler said. Park was captain aboard the Bramble from 1978 to 1980.

"Our goal is to be out during a July timeframe. Our goal is to be out at the start of the race," he said.

Port Huron Museum was gifted the Bramble with help from Acheson Ventures when the U.S. Coast Guard decommissioned the ship in 2003 after 59 years of service.

The museum board voted to put the Bramble up for sale after years of operating it as a museum ship at a financial loss. Lafean helped to list the ship with broker Marcon International in April 2010. Four offers were made in 2011, according to museum records. All were denied, except one, for which financing fell through. There was also several showings of interest in the ship.

"The expenses alone were just so outrageous that we couldn't keep it. As nice as it was and as wonderful as it was to have the site, it would have put us in bankruptcy to keep it. And that's not fair to the rest of our sites and to the community at large," museum executive director Susan Bennett said.

Bennett said during the period that the Bramble was for sale, various people approached the museum about scrapping the ship, to using it as a sand dredge in the Caribbean or using it overseas in construction projects.

"None of those were appealing to us," she said. "So Mr. Klingler, as an individual and as a businessman, he and Sara were a dream to work with. He was passionate about the ship, and it was the absolute best outcome that ever could have happened."

"To keep it here was a huge, huge thing."

The Klinglers bought the Bramble in February 2013 for close to the reduced asking amount of \$200,000, Bennett said. Bob Klingler didn't want to talk about what he paid for the Bramble, which continues to be a financial liability in terms of operating costs and insurance.

"The purchase price is kind of a private thing. It was either going to be scrap metal or cut up and go to a barge in South America," he said. "So its history and its provenance and the ability to make it live again would have been terminated.

"But it does cost real money to keep it running, I'll tell you that. And there's no grant money. It's all out of my pocket."

According to Patrick Andrus, historian with the National Register of Historic Places, owners of private property listed in the National Register have no obligation to open their properties to the public, to restore them, or even maintain them, if they choose not to do so.

"Owners can do anything they wish with their property, provided that no federal license, permit, or funding is involved," Andrus said in an email.

The Klinglers bought the Bramble with the intention of preserving it for future generations as well as keeping it open to the public. "Everyone knows this ship is on the National Historic Registry, and we're not about to let anything happen to it," Sara Klingler said.

Lafean said the connection to the area many former Coasties who have served on the Bramble seem to develop is consistent with what he has seen elsewhere.

"As a general rule, it happens in all the small towns in the Great Lakes," he said. "They (Coast Guard members) are an easy fit into the community."

Lafean said the attachment goes back to the 1800s when locals volunteered to man the rescue boats. When the Coast Guard ships came in, they, too, became part of the community fabric.

"People lived in the community. They went to the local churches, shopped locally," Lafean said.

They also get married and have children, like Grinnell, Iowa-native Bob Emmert.

Emmert joined the Bramble crew in October 1995 as third class petty officer. He decided to stay on in Port Huron after his service with the Coast Guard was up in July 1998.

"The attachment that I see is that it has brought a lot of people in this town, such as myself. I'm one of them," Emmert said.

Emmert was the ship cook and lived on the Bramble during his service. He likened the ship to people's childhood homes.

"There are tons and tons of memories of you and your friends, your co-workers on that boat traveling. We took it all the way down to South America and back. We were gone for about 4 1/2 months taking it up into Lake Superior doing island cleanups and going over into Lake Michigan and doing festivals working the long buoy season on it. So when I look at that, it's my history. It's my previous home," Emmert said.

"You know, you always travel around and say, 'This is where I used to live. It's kind of cool that it's still around. I'd hate for it to go anywhere.'"

Looking back, Sara Klingler said she and her husband have accomplished a lot in two years.

"We've gone from a ship that was silent and tied up and kind of forgotten about on the south side of town," she said. "We're getting it back to the point when the Coast Guard still had it underway and they were still using it, and not letting the mechanical or any portions of the ship deteriorate to the point where you can't bring it back to life."

Ship engineer Tony Zolinski said the ship's parts had been unused for a long time, but that everything was built "very high quality."

"If we had to shove off from the dock, if it was an absolute 911 emergency, there's no doubt that what we need to come to life would come to life, no problem," Zolinski said.

Whatever adventures await the Bramble, Bob Klingler knows one thing for sure about the ship.

"It's staying in Port Huron, and it's staying warm. The engines, motors, pumps —all that is going to live on," Klingler said. "It's pretty much out of the love of it is where the whole thing is. Everybody loves it, and it's a huge piece of history." The Bramble is at the Seaway Terminal, 2336 Military St., Port Huron.

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TIMELINE

U.S. COAST GUARD CUTTER BRAMBLE

- Zenith Dredge Company builds the Bramble in 1943 and the ship is launched from Duluth, Minnesota, that same year. Cost for the ship and its machinery: \$925,464. One of 39 original 180-foot seagoing buoy tenders built between 1942-1944.
- Commissioned. In April 22, 1944 by the U.S. Coast Guard as a buoy tender.
- In spring of 1945, Bramble departs the Great Lakes to the first homeport of San Pedro, California, to perform aids to navigation duties.
- Later in 1945 transfers to Juneau, Alaska, for supply and navigation missions in the Aleutian Islands.
- Operation Crossroads. 1946. The goal of the mission is to test the effects of atomic bombs on surface ships near the Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands. More than 200 vessels considered "redundant," including aircraft participate in this first of 67 tests conducted in the Marshall Islands that ended in 1958. Bramble positioned at a distance of 15 miles from the epicenter of the 1946 explosion, according to Sara Klingler. Susan Bennett, executive director with the Port Huron Museum, said worries over radiation exposure were never a concern by the time the Bramble reached Port Huron, since it was decontaminated after the testing, and had two major overhauls before it arrived in 1975. Bramble is one of seven vessels remaining in the world that participated in the mission.
- In 1949 the Bramble reassigned to San Juan, Puerto Rico, and then to Miami in 1953.
- Northwest Passageway. Renewed interest in the Northwest Passage, which had eluded mariners for 400 years. Included a circumnavigation of North America, through the Arctic Circle. The Bramble, Spar and Storis were selected to attempt a forced passage along the northern shores of Canada, from the Pacific to the Atlantic Ocean. Special outfitting was needed for this voyage, including a steel propeller and bow reinforcement to withstand the tremendous pressure of the Arctic ice pack. The Bramble departed from Miami on May 24, 1957, en route to Seattle via the Panama Canal. On July 1, 1957, the ships departed Seattle on the Pacific through the Bering Strait and into the Arctic Ocean. The trip was 64 days and 4,500 miles across the Arctic Circle into the Atlantic. On Dec. 2, 1957, the ship returned to Miami, having accomplished the mission successfully with her sister ships. According to Bob Klingler, the Bramble weighs 1,100 tons base weight with an another 30,000 gallons of seawater that is added to the ship. Klingler said Arctic ice can be up to 10- to 12-foot thick and it can pile up 30-feet high. "It can actually lift you up out of the water and then you let it come down and you break the ice with your weight," he said.
- The Bramble transferred to Detroit in 1962 to perform missions of aids to navigation, search and rescue, icebreaking and law enforcement duties throughout the Great Lakes.
- First major overhaul to the Bramble in August 1974, including new engines, updated berthing area, and a new hydraulic boom for buoy handling.
- Port Huron is the final home port for the Bramble. Transferred to Port Huron in September 1975. Continued with navigation aid missions, search and rescue, icebreaking performed in Detroit. Also served as the Patrol Commander for the Port Huron to Mackinac sailboat race.
- Left for six months in 1986-87 to perform law enforcement duties in the Caribbean including arrests and seizures of 500 tons of marijuana.
- Again overhauled in 1989 and new electrical GM engines were installed, along with plumbing, electrical and generator updates.
- Operation Snowbird. From December 1997 to April 1998 the Bramble led a mission to train marine police of 10 Caribbean nations.
- Decommissioned by the U.S. Coast Guard in 2003 after 59 years of service. At the time of her decommission the Bramble was responsible for 187 buoys, a weather buoy, three fog signals and 22 shore side lights. It also serviced six lighthouses from Fort Gratiot to Port Austin. Bramble was replaced by the U.S. Coast Guard Hollyhock, a 225-foot Juniper class buoy tender based in Port Huron.
- Museum ship. The same year it was decommissioned, the ship was gifted to the Port Huron Museum as a local attraction through help and support of Acheson Ventures.
- Bramble for sale. Port Huron Museum board votes to place the Bramble for sale in 2009.
- Sold. Bob and Sara Klingler of Marine City purchase the Bramble in 2013.

Source: Port Huron Museum



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OVERNIGHTERS

- Organized youth groups can book overnight stays with station duties aboard the Bramble. The stays will be offered on Saturdays at the start of the Bramble's regular tour season, April 15. Arrangements can be made through the ship's website by clicking on the "overnight" page, www.uscgcb Bramble.com

MUSTER INFORMATION

- To be added to the Bramble's call out list, contact the owners, Bob and Sara Klingler through the www.uscgcb Bramble.com website. Musters are held aboard the Bramble the second Saturday of every month, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

MORE ONLINE

- Check out video aboard the Bramble at www.thetimesherald.com