High Country News

KNOW THE WEST

One man's mission to save a historic ship built a digital community

If you (re)build it, they will come.

Amelia Urry | **ESSAY** | **Sept. 25, 2019** | *From the print edition*

At the beginning, which might otherwise have been the end, the ship was an empty shell, without mast or motor. Just a bathtub with a deck so rotten you could toe into it like mulch, the wood well on its way to being dirt again. But she had a name: *Tally Ho*.

In May 2017, Leo Goolden climbed into the belly of the boat for the first time and sat with the fragile wooden ribs curled around him, rain dripping onto the plastic sheet stretched overhead. Inside the living wreck of the ship he had come so far to see, he conjured the photograph that drew him in: *Tally Ho* a hundred years ago, all new wood and fresh paint, crisp white sails petaled above in the wind.

She had already evaded death several times. In 1927, she won a prestigious race in conditions so stormy only one other boat finished with her, and in 1968, she was half-wrecked on a reef in the South Pacific. Always she was repaired, sold, sailed again. But eventually she coasted into the long decline common to wooden ships of a certain age, and was beached in this Oregon boatyard. Now, with the yard slated to close, the end seemed final.

But Goolden saw a chance for a new beginning. Fascinated by old boats, he had skipped university to apprentice in a shipyard in his hometown of Bristol in southwestern England. By age 25, he'd repaired a single-masted Swedish sailboat and sailed across the Atlantic, alone, navigating by sextant after his GPS broke and he decided not to replace it. Three years

later, sitting in *Tally Ho*, he remembered how it felt to leave land behind for the 20-day crossing: danger and excitement intermingled, a fizzy awareness that whatever happened next would change him for good.

Recognizing that feeling again, Goolden knew that what came next would not be easy. He would have to replace much of the ship's skeleton and nearly all of the planks along her hull, and then rebuild the cabins, deck, mast and sails. It would be expensive, a difficult job for one person. But when he finished — if he finished — *Tally Ho* would sail again. Or perhaps a reincarnation of her — the same shape, wrapped in new timber.

Tally Ho in 1927, running downwind with spinnaker during the fastnet race in Solent, UK.

Beken of Cowes

ONE MONTH LATER, *Tally Ho* was 400 miles north, in Sequim, a sleepy lavender-lined town nestled between Washington's Olympic Mountains and the Strait of Juan de Fuca, where some family friends had suggested Goolden turn their backyard into a boatyard. He gave up his sailing jobs, moved in and set up shop.

With his perpetual bedhead and sleepy, sun-creased eyes, Goolden's affect sometimes belies the bedrock confidence with which he approaches everything he does. After his Atlantic crossing, Goolden skippered on private yachts, despite his youth and lack of experience. He looks serious

when puzzling through some tricky problem, mouth pressed into a thin, straight line and a pencil tucked behind his ear, but a faint crook of an eyebrow betrays the dry, self-deprecating wit he deploys easily and often.

On video, this translates into a quirky, hard-to-categorize charm. Goolden started documenting the restoration process on YouTube after a friend showed him the popular channel of an attractive young sailing couple, apparently financed by the spoils of viewership. Goolden thought, "Surely, if they can do it. ..." He'd dabbled in photography and music production before, and he cut the first few videos with his usual attention to detail and a snappy, instinctive style.

Pancho the parrot and Goolden at the base of Tally Ho's restoration in Sequim, Washington. At the stage pictured, only the keel timber had been replaced, and Goolden was getting ready to start removing planks and replacing frames.

Courtesy of Leo Goolden

But each took two or three full days to produce, and Goolden felt conflicted about not spending that time working on *Tally Ho*.

The ship was in even rougher shape than expected. In January 2018, after prising off the ship's lead ballast keel — a solid, age-pitted metal beam that runs along the bottom of the boat — Goolden discovered deep fissures in the antique timber just above it. While the damage to *Tally Ho's* planks and frames had been easily visible, he'd hoped to preserve the original beams of the ship's backbone. Now he realized that wouldn't be possible — and the enormous pieces of new lumber he'd need to replace them would jeopardize his dwindling savings.

“A few people have suggested that it might have been simpler and quicker and cheaper to build a new boat rather than restore this one,” Goolden says in one early video, sitting below the swell of *Tally Ho*’s flank. “And they’d be absolutely right. But that’s not the point.”

His breath hangs in the cold air as he looks intently into the camera lens. “This is about rebuilding a historic vessel and saving it from destruction,” he says. “When this boat is finished, I’ll be sailing on a vessel that was built over a hundred years ago — that’s sort of magic.”

In the early stages of the restoration project, Goolden removes concrete from Tally Ho’s bilges with a jackhammer.

Courtesy of Leo Goolden

IMAGINE A WOODEN BOAT AS A BODY. The centerline is the spine, running from bow to keel to stern. The frames are the ribs, curving upward in matched pairs, and the planks that skin the ship, like the cells of the human body, are made to be recycled and replaced as they break down over time.

In Goolden’s videos, days of work unfurl in time-lapsed minutes, the ship shifting under the shadows that sweep through the shed. Rotten timber is pared away gently, like flesh, and new wood is sliced and smoothed and fit into place. It’s part “things organized neatly” and part time travel, as a century of entropy is slowly, painstakingly unwound.

In the two years since the first video, Goolden has amassed more than 100,000 subscribers and nearly 2,000 Patreon supporters, who donate between $2 and $100 for each new episode. “I want to say a massive massive

‘Thank you’ to everyone who’s generously donated or otherwise supported this project,” he says at the end of one early video. “As you know, this is not funded or sponsored or anything like that. It’s just my own crazy madness.”

“It’s recovering from all the knocks and bruises it’s had over the years, and so will we.”

His madness has proved surprisingly infectious. On a 5,000-member Facebook group, fans offer advice or encouragement to Goolden and each other. People send tools and materials from an Amazon wishlist or loan him larger items, including a forklift and welding equipment. One even brought a working 1930s ship saw that can cut massive oak timbers to precise angles.

Others, the super fans, come to Sequim to volunteer their labor — maybe 50 people over the last two years, determined to be a part of the project. Finn Birch, for example, a 25-year-old English forester, found Goolden’s videos after a fractured kneecap put him on the couch for a few weeks in January. Two months later, still healing, he flew to the States to join *Tally Ho*.

In the sunny, sawdust-heaped yard one afternoon in July, on his second visit to Sequim, Birch was searching for the shapes of new frames in the stacks of milled timber waiting to be cut. He scanned the grain for knots and defects, then steered the chainsaw to shear heartwood from sapwood. The pieces he cut would be planed and smoothed, then cut again, carefully beveled, on the ship saw, and finally fastened together with wooden nails into a solid, graceful arch.

Birch looked up at the boat, studying the pale new ribs that gleamed among the last few old frames, their dark, weathered wood porous as bone. The group would finish the rest before summer’s end, and then Goolden would keep going: the planks, the deck, the mast, the sails — everything that would make Tally Ho whole again.

“It’s recovering from all the knocks and bruises it’s had over the years,” Birch said, resting a hand on the ship saw table. “And so will we.”

"A few people have suggested that it might have been simpler and quicker and cheaper to build a new boat rather than restore this one," Goolden says, "and they'd be absolutely right. But that's not the point."

Courtesy of Leo Goolden

IN PHILOSOPHY, THE STORY of the ship of Theseus probes our uneasy relationship with identity and change. In the tale, the Greek hero Theseus sails home from slaying the Minotaur and becomes king of Athens. His ship is enshrined as a national treasure, but over time, as planks splinter or a bulkhead leaks, parts are replaced, one by one. After a hundred years, nothing of the original remains. Is it, the philosophers asked, still the same ship?

It helps to think of wooden boats as living organisms, Goolden said, their components continually being repaired and replaced. This simple answer hides a subtler, more complicated truth: Maybe it's only the same ship because we call it the same ship.

"We understand the world by categorizing things, and naming them," Goolden said one evening in July. "That makes it easy to understand, but it's not actually the way it is. If I say, I'm a separate person, and I'm called Leo, that makes it easier for me to understand my relationship with other things. But the food I eat — when does that become me?"

Goolden jokes that he initially thought the *Tally Ho* would take him two years. Two years later, his prognosis is the same: two more years. But he can see the end point now. The boat has its new keel and frames. The new planks are stacked in a kiln to dry, waiting to sheathe the boat in new skin.

In the same way, we are all made up of processes and all subject to entropy. The microbes and cells and molecules that compose our bodies degrade and are replaced daily. Our memories, too, shift and settle into different shapes over time. But above it all, encompassing everything else, there's a name that others call us, and we call ourselves.

Note: This story has been updated to correct minor errors in the timing of Tally Ho's rebuilding, that Goolden was 25, not 24, when he sailed across the Atlantic, and to clarify the amount his highest Patreon supporters typically donate and the type of wood used for the ship's original backbone.

Amelia Urry is a writer and poet in Seattle. Follow her on Twitter @ameliainahurry (https://twitter.com/ameliainahurry). *Email* High Country News *at editor@hcn.org (mailto:editor@hcn.org) or submit a letter to the editor (https://www.hcn.org/feedback/contact-us).*

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