

## THEA BELLE

The Tug of the Month: THEA BELLE, Olympia Harbor Days Tug Races and Festival.

by Les Eldridge

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Tug Thea Belle Courtesy LG Evans Maritime Images

THEA BELLE was constructed in City Island, New York for the US Navy in 1941 as YTL (Yard Tug, Small) 159. She sailed down the East coast and through the Panama Canal for Pearl Harbor to aid in the clean up after the December 7 Japanese attack. Next she was assigned to Puget Sound Navy Yard as a yard tug for the duration of World War II and until 1962. The Puget Navy Yard's YTL's helped several of the Pearl Harbor-attack surviving battleships as they limped back across the Pacific from Hawaii to Puget Sound for refit and repair. The *West Virginia*, *Tennessee*, *Pennsylvania* and *California* were all badly damaged, but when repaired, comprised the battle line at the 1944 Battle of Leyte Gulf at Surigao Strait, where the last of Japan's surface navy was sunk. USS *Tennessee* was repaired twice at Puget Sound Navy Yard, and in 1943, with her added beam from more torpedo armor plating, was too wide to use the Panama Canal.



Tug Thea Belle. Photo courtesy LG Evans Maritime Images

In 1962, Foss Launch and Tug Company bought YTL 159 from the Navy. She became one of the many dozens of Puget Sound tugs in the Foss fleet, bearing her new name, *Chris Foss*. We should not confuse her with the *Christine Foss*, a 1950s era Foss tug of

roughly the same tonnage, but whose engine generated 1380 horsepower, nor the *Thea Foss*, nor the first *Chris Foss*, a wooden tug still alive in Oregon. For twenty years and more, the *Chris Foss* towed log rafts and barges from Olympia to Juneau, Alaska, and everywhere in between. Foss sold her to a San Francisco tug company in 1985. In the Bay Area, she bore the names *Goldstack*, *Coral*, *Sturdy*, *Benjamin*, and finally, *Belle*, for as many different owners.

**THE PERILOUS VOYAGE OF CAPTAIN JIM:** In 2007, Captain Jim Bennett made an offer on *Belle* and conducted a sea trial in San Francisco Bay, which he found unsatisfactory. A further year of negotiations led to his purchase of *Belle* in June 2008. The perilous voyage began. Jim and three friends cast off Redwood City, CA. for Puget Sound. About four miles outside the Golden Gate Bridge they encountered fog so thick they couldn't see more than 200 feet ahead. Then, they endured a gale with 10 to 20 foot seas for the next seven days. No other ships were sighted. They sought shelter in Fort Bragg, CA, then in Eureka, CA, and finally in Newport, OR, each time entering at 2300 hours in the persistent fog, the swells, over the respective bars, past the jetties and safely into the harbors.

They shipped green seas both night and day. The bilge pump never rested. Three huge truck tires used as bumpers were torn off the bow. Off the Washington coast near Neah Bay, the generator failed and they lost all radar and navigation systems. A passing tug contacted the US Coast Guard. The Coast Guard guided them to Neah Bay. The generator was repaired by a friend in Port Townsend, and they finally arrived in Port Orchard. As Jim says, "other than that, it was an uneventful trip."



Thea Belle Bow 2016. Photo courtesy Karla Fowler

THEA BELLE still wears the Foss green and white color scheme although now under ownership of Jim Bennett. Extensive repairs modifications are ongoing. The THEA BELLE is 65 feet long, and draws nine feet, with a gross weight of 100 tons. Her V-8 Cat

D379B cylinder diesel engine generates about 500 horsepower. She has a four cylinder Cummins diesel powering a 20KW generator. She now boasts a 5000-pound capacity crane. Engine repair, plumbing, rewiring, and compressor and fire pump replacement has taken place since Captain Jim's purchase, to list just a few of the many completed refit activities. There is still a long list of tasks yet to accomplish. The refit has benefitted from the help of Jim's many friends and supporters in Port Orchard, and up and down the Sound.

Thea Belle is unofficially on the market for sale as Jim's stroke and arthritis have made the continual projects more difficult.



Photo from Olympia Harbor Days Collection

An outside observer might guess that the tug's present name reflects some of her heritage and history, 'Belle' being her last name while in the San Francisco area, and 'Thea' perhaps honoring her Foss years and the co-founder of Foss Launch and Tug Company, the energetic and irrepressible Norwegian immigrant, Thea Foss. Jim's dad immigrated from Bono, Norway into Ellis Island in 1917 and his mother's family came from Iceland. THEA BELLE has been a frequent participant in Olympia Harbor Days festival and tug races, noted for her sportsmanlike involvement. Jim often requests that THEA BELLE be moved to the Small Tug or the Harbor Tug category, rather than the Over 400 Horsepower race, so as to run at a more modest rate and reduce engine stress. In 2014, she finished fourth in the Over 400 HP race. In 2015, she was fourth in the same event, and in 2016, fourth in the Small Tugs race. Thea Belle's six foot diameter, five blade propeller provides lots of power, but little speed.



Olympia Harbor Days 2012 Logo

THEA BELLE was honored as festival and race logo tug in 2012. We look forward to many more years of THEA BELLE and Captain Jim Bennett (or new captain) at Olympia Harbor Days.



Tug Thea Belle and Tug Teal Heading to the OHD races. Photo courtesy of LG Evans Maritime Images

**Sources:** Puget Sound Navy Yard photo and interview, Mike Napper, PSNY (Ret.), Jim Bennett interview, 2016, *Sea of Thunder* by Evan Thomas, Simon and Schuster, 2006, *The Navy in Puget Sound* by Cory Graff and Puget Sound Navy Museum, Arcadia, 2010, *Ships of the Inland Sea* by Gordon Newell, Binfords and Mort, 1960, *Tugboats on Puget Sound* by Chuck Fowler and Capt. Mark Freeman, Arcadia, 2009, *West Coast Workboats* by Archie Satterfield, Sasquatch Books, 1992.

**About Les Eldridge:** Les is president of South Sound Maritime Heritage Association and author of a number of maritime histories as well as five novels of the American Civil War at sea. He lectures frequently ashore and afloat, and narrates the OHD races each year. For more, see [EldridgeSeaSaga.com](http://EldridgeSeaSaga.com).

**Tug of the Month** is sponsored by Olympia Harbor Days Tugboat Races and Festival, an Olympia Kiwanis Club event. It is edited by Carol Riley, Executive Director, OHD, with maritime illustrations frequently provided by maritime artist Karla Fowler. The free community event takes place every Labor Day weekend at the Olympia waterfront. 2017 is the 44th edition. For attendance information, see [www.HarborDays.com](http://www.HarborDays.com), or go to Facebook@OlympiaHarborDays. Direct questions to the OHD Executive Director at [info@HarborDays.com](mailto:info@HarborDays.com).