

Lee Eyerly, Purveyor of amusement rides, owner and skipper of the *Sea Rest*

Stories of boats and their people

by Norm Blanchard as told to Steve Wilen, Pacific Northwest Fleet

By the time I made the acquaintance of Lee Eyerly he was already a very successful businessman, owner of Eyerly Aircraft Company, and had purchased the 66 ft motor yacht *Sea Rest* from O.D. Fisher of Fisher Flouring Mills. But, that wasn't always the case, as he told me once when he came by the yard to arrange for us to haul the boat for a hull survey.

Lee U. Eyerly and his wife, Meta, lived in Salem, Oregon, and during the depths of the Depression he had obtained the lease as manager of the Salem Airport, which, as far as I could tell, had only one plane and one hangar at that time. So that was how Lee made his start in the aircraft business.

Well, one day, probably around 1934, Lee was working on the engine of somebody's plane, a rainy November day, and a little guy wearing a long raincoat walked in and stood around for awhile gazing up at this gizmo that Lee had built. This thing was a machine that today we would call a Link Trainer. Lee had built it in order to give people the feel of flying without having to get off the ground, because he figured that way he could sell more flying lessons. Finally, the little guy came over to Lee and asked something like, "Do you work here all the time?" Lee replied, "Yeah, I run the airport for the County." "Well," the man asked, "Who owns that thing?" Lee said, "I do." So the man asked him, "Do you want to sell it?" "Oh, no," Lee answered, "I don't want to sell it. I couldn't possibly ask a price that would pay me wages to build another one, and it's working out quite well for the purpose I built it for." And then the guy said to Lee, "Well, I could make money with that." Immediately Lee's ears perked up, as he and Meta had young kids at home and plenty of financial worries.



Sea Rest all ready for launch at the Blanchard Boat Yard in 1937. Photo courtesy of S Wilen from Blanchard archives.

It turned out that this man wanted to set the Trainer up on the boardwalk at Long Beach, California and charge thirty-five cents for a ride. So, after talking to him at some length, Lee talked to his lawyer, his banker and his accountant, and they all told him that they didn't think it was a very good idea, but Lee decided if there was any chance he could make money with that thing he was going to turn it

over. So he cobbled together a trailer that he could use to tow the machine to California.

Fortunately, Lee had a brother-in-law living in or near Long Beach, near enough to kind of keep track of this guy, and when he was telling me this story Lee said, "You know, by the end of the first month I had myself screwed up to the point where I figured I might get two-hundred and fifty dollars out of it. Imagine my amazement when the check came through for more than four-hundred. So I started building these things like crazy, and eventually I had about 25 of them out, and mostly they went to various carnival people." Once Lee even went to Florida to their annual convention, and he said, "The strange part of it is, everybody thinks carnival workers are a raunchy bunch, and a lot of them looked and acted it, but I have yet to have had more than just one instance where I was cheated -- in that case the equipment went across the border into Mexico -- and I've now sold nearly a thousand of these various amusement ride machines."

Besides the Link Trainer, Lee developed the Loop-O-Plane, the Fly-O-Plane, and the Whirl-O-Plane -- he developed five or six very successful and unique



amusement rides for carnivals. The Fly-O-Plane had eight arms that were hinged, with miniature planes on the ends of each of the arms, and the wings operated like ailerons so if you rolled it enough times and played with it enough you could make the darned things do a barrel roll.

Well, as I said, my acquaintance with Lee Eyerly was made after he had purchased the **Sea**

Rest from Mr. Fisher, and that's quite a story itself. At some point during his business career, Lee decided he wanted a yacht, and he purchased a Grandy-built boat that had been designed by Edwin Monk, Sr. for the Schmidt brothers of Olympia, WA. One day he was driving north from Salem, and was thinking about the **Sea Rest**, which he had spotted one day while wandering around the Seattle waterfront. Back in those days you could walk right into Marina Mart on Westlake Avenue, and Lee had spotted the **Sea Rest** there, and he had found out that she was owned by Mr. O. D. Fisher of the Fisher Flouring Mills.

The **Sea Rest** was also designed by Ed Monk and had been built by the Blanchard Boat Company in 1937 for O. D. Fisher. So Lee was thinking about that boat as he drove along, and he asked himself, "Well, just how much money would you be willing to spend for a nice boat like the **Sea Rest**?" Eventually, when he got to Portland he went in and saw his friendly banker and got a certified check for \$50,000, and headed north to Seattle. He immediately went to the Fisher Flouring Mills and handed his Eyerly Aircraft Company card to the receptionist, and she said, "Mr. Eyerly, I don't think Mr. Fisher's at all interested in airplanes." He said to her, "Oh, that's just the business I'm in. We're both yachtsmen and I just wanted to talk boats with him." So, as Lee told it, "I went in and the old man got to asking questions, and I told him I owned a Grandy boat, and it was a nice, comfortable thing, but not a nice, classic boat like the **Sea Rest**. Finally," he went on, "I told Mr. Fisher that I had just gone in to see my banker, and I got this," and he laid

the check in front of the old man.



Sea Rest underway in 1940. Photo courtesy of S Wilen.

Well, \$50,000 represented a very handsome profit for O. D. Fisher, and he had had about ten years of pleasurable cruising on the yacht, so, Lee said, they talked for another 45 min or so, and finally Mr. Fisher reached over and picked up the check and put it in his pocket. And that's the way Lee Eyerly bought the **Sea Rest** from O. D. Fisher.

The **Sea Rest** had twin screws, and had the first pair of two-cycle diesel General Motors 6-51s shipped to the West coast. Lee kept her moored in Olympia, and would have us service her, and so we enjoyed one of those delightful customer relationships with Lee Eyerly that I realized I was very lucky to have.

In the fall of 1945, after the war was over, I called Lee in Salem and told him that the next time he was in Seattle I wanted to talk to him about his business. So Lee drove up to Seattle and Eunice and I went over and sat in the pilothouse of the **Sea Rest** with him and talked until around ten o'clock that evening, and discussed the possibility of our buying one of the Fly-O-Planes from him. Lee sold his rides on very little down, and he carried the paper himself. This was right after World War II and the Blanchard Boat Company was winding up the arrangement with J. L. Patton that we had all through the war years for Navy contracts.

J. L. "Joe" Patton was owner of Seattle Marine Equipment Company. He commissioned the William Atkin-designed **Barnacle** (CYA 1217) of the Blanchard Boat Company. He entered into a joint agreement contract with the Blanchards in 1940 that ceased after World War II.

I'd given Dad back my fifteen shares of stock in the old corporation for just ten dollars, to make it a legal transaction. So, after Eunice and I had that interview with Lee, I reminded my father, when he first came back from his trip to Los Angeles, where he had been



conferring with Ted Pearson, that he had promised to make it right by me, and he said, kind of indignantly, "I know I did," and I said, "Well, I'm planning to go on Saturday morning to California, as we agreed before you went, and I can't talk to Ted Pearson intelligently until I know what sort of money I've got to work with." I think Dad had a pretty good idea that I had a nice savings account, maybe a lot nicer than it really was, because ever since I'd been on the payroll I'd never asked him for five cents that I'd not charged against the job that I was working on, and several times we had to wait until Wednesday or Thursday of the following week before we could cash our paychecks. Well, the next day my dad handed me a check for \$2,000, and said he didn't consider that he had discharged his obligation to me, but that this was all he could do at the moment. I figured that if he was as generous as he ought to be I'd get at least five-thousand dollars, so this was a pretty bitter disappointment.

However, Eunice and I did leave on Saturday morning, and our stay that first evening was in Salem at

Edward F. "Ted" Pearson was trained as a bookkeeper, although he worked at a variety of jobs before becoming secretary-treasurer of the Blanchard Boat Company in 1948. He left that position in 1950, but remained a close friend of the Blanchards.

the Eyerly home, which was up on the top of one of those knobs in the Willamette Valley. It had formerly been the Salem Golf and Country Club, which had gone bankrupt, and Lee bought the clubhouse and property for a few cents on the dollar. That evening he told me, "It's kind of strange, Norm. You know, since I made that deal with the guy to take the Trainer down to Long Beach it just seems like every deal I've been involved with turns to gold." He went on to tell me that he was in Portland one day talking with a friend when the friend's secretary came in and said, "Mr. Dray, you told me I was supposed to remind you of that auction going on down at the library." Mr. Dray said, "Gosh, thank you for remembering. C'mon, Lee, you haven't anything better to do, c'mon with me down to this auction." Well, the auction was a big, old home right in the center of Portland that, because of having been built before the grading was in, the streets were now quite a few feet below the level of the yard. The old couple who had lived there had finally both passed on and had left the house, property and contents to the library.

Well, Lee said he walked through the house and didn't see anything that he was particularly interested in buying, but he sat through the auction with his friend, who bought some furniture, and finally the auctioneer said, "That finishes the contents, ladies and gentlemen. Now the property." Lee said there were a few bids, like \$4,000, maybe \$4,500, and he said he got to thinking about it and, "when the bidding got up to \$6,000 I put in a bid for \$12,000 and bought the house." And he said, "When I got home to Salem my wife said, 'Somebody called you from Portland and is very anxious to talk to you'." So Lee called the number and the man who answered said, "Sir, I'm just back from the service, I worked with my father all through the Depression, some renovation, but mostly demolishing or salvaging what was salvageable out of old homes. My father's gone now, and I intend to go into that business for myself, and I'd like very much to take that house down, if that's what you want to do." Lee said, "Well, I'll come to town and talk to you about it seriously," which he did. And the next day he drove to Portland to see the start of this operation, and, of course, they were working on taking out the plumbing and things like that first. Well, he noticed that the windows around the upper sash on three sides had colored glass. He remembered as he was driving up from Salem seeing a sign south of Portland for stained glass windows and chandeliers. So he said to the young man, "Get one of those burlier men to take a sample of sash down and carefully remove one of each color of glass for me, and don't let

Eunice Scholl Blanchard, Norm's first wife, was the daughter of one of Norm's teachers at Broadway High School. Eunice died in 1986.

them smash up those windows until I talk to you again." So this was done, and Lee put the pieces of glass – about four and one-half or five inches square – in his pocket, and on the way back to Salem he stopped at this stained glass shop, went in and saw a man sitting there at a bench making a lamp shade, or something of that sort of thing, and Lee asked him, "Did you learn this trade from your master?" "Oh, yeah," came the reply, "from my father." "Well," Lee asked, "where does this colored glass come from?" "If it's any good it generally comes from Belgium," the man replied. "It's expensive, I suppose?" Lee asked. The man gave him an example of what he had, what he was working with there, and told him what he had



paid for it, so Lee said to him, "Take a look at this stuff," and showed him the squares from the window in the house he was having torn down. So this fellow said, "Let's go outside in the sunshine," and he held the pieces of glass up to the sun and looked through them, and said, "Hell yes, this is good Belgian glass. You got any more?" Lee told him, "Yes, I've got quite a bit." And he finished the story by telling me, "You know, Norm, one little thing from that house, and I got over \$1,600." He went on, "Before the house was fully down a contractor came to me and said, 'Mr. Eyerly, I've been looking at your property, and I've calculated that there's just about such-and-such number of cubic yards of dirt there, and I'd be very happy to pay you fifty cents a yard for it. I've got the truck and the equipment, the bulldozer, and can take it all down, because I've got a place where I can use it'."

So after Lee had made a good deal on the dirt, he had his entire investment back. And before the job was completed, Standard Oil of California, as it was known then -- now it's Chevron -- negotiated a ten-year lease on the property, and after they were only there a few months Lee sold the lease for more than its face value. He said to me, "It never ceases to amaze me, but I just seem to have the Midas touch."

That evening the Eyerlys insisted that Eunice and I stay with them, but we only had two weeks for our trip to Los Angeles, and we had to hurry along the next day, so Lee said, "I'll type up a letter for you saying you have a priority on Fly-O-Plane No. 3. We've actually got money down on about fifteen or eighteen of them, but I've held out No. 3 for you, and you can go down and see if you want to set it up someplace."

The first place we stopped to consider for the Fly-O-Plane was an amusement park out by Golden Gate Park at the ocean in San Francisco, but it was a dismal, crummy looking joint, and we didn't even like the looks of the people working there. Our next stop was at Santa Cruz. There was a gentleman living in that city who had come by the boat company recently to inquire about getting a new sailboat, and he had talked to me because my folks were in California at the time. I had told him that Eunice and I would be coming to California soon, and he had said, "Please come and see us. I don't have a guest room at home, but I have a small, two-story hotel down by the beach and I've got a room there that I always keep for a guest room that I'm sure you will find very satisfactory." So

we showed up. They took us to their hotel. It was right smack across the street from the main entrance to the amusement park pier. So I told him about our plans for the Fly-O-Plane and showed him the letter from Lee Eyerly, and he said, "Oh, gosh, Jennings owes me a favor. By golly, I'll get you an appointment with him first thing in the morning."

Mr. Jennings was the manager of the amusement park, so I got a call at the hotel room the next morning, and our friend explained, "Jennings is in court, some kind of a problem in court, and the only time he can see you is at twelve-thirty sharp, and it can only be for twenty minutes because he has to be back in court at one o'clock." So at twelve-thirty we went to Jennings' office right there in the park, and, of course, the park was closed down, as this was off season. Mr. Jennings read the letter from Lee Eyerly, and then he asked me, "Well, what makes you think you can run a machine like this?" So I told him what I had been doing all during the war, and immediately you could see a change in his approach, and he asked me, "Well, the second question is, we have pretty weird people coming in here sometimes. What do you expect to make?" And I said, "Well, I would feel it was far more sensible if I was asking you the question, so I'll say, do you think I have the prospect of making five- or six-thousand clear the first season, with my wife working in the cashier's cage?" "Yes," he said, "I'd have to admit that that's a reasonable expectation." This was roughly twice what I had been making on wartime wages at the boat company. That was pretty much the extent of our contact with Mr. Jennings because we had to go on to Los Angeles to meet with Ted Pearson, and we told Mr. Jennings that we probably wouldn't be stopping by on our way back north.

When we got to Los Angeles we went to the Post Office General Delivery window, and there we found the only letter I ever received from my dad, and it was hand-written, in which he enclosed another check for \$3,000, and his promise to make up the difference of whatever it took if I decided to go in with my father and Ted Pearson on a partnership basis. So we felt better about that. I'd always liked Ted Pearson, and, of course, he was a grown man when I was still a boy, but he was actually a little closer to my age than he was to my dad's. And that partnership is what eventually transpired, so we didn't get the Fly-O-Plane.

We didn't see as much of Lee and Meta Eyerly after



So who was Norm Blanchard

by Steve Wilen, Pacific Northwest Fleet,



Eunice Scholl and Norm Blanchard in 1931.

photo contributed by S Wilen

Norman C. Blanchard was born in 1911, the third generation in a family of mariners and boat builders. His father founded the Blanchard Boat Company in 1905. As a youth, Norman spent his spare time on the Seattle waterfront and after graduating from Roosevelt High School he worked alongside his father at the family boat yard. Almost 2,000 boats were built at the Blanchard Boat Company over its 60 year history, including commercial ships,

classic motor cruisers and sailing yachts. Following his father's death in 1954, Norman became the president of Blanchard Boat Company. He married Eunice Scholl in 1935; their son Norman J. Blanchard III was born in 1945; Eunice died in 1986.

In the 1970s, Norman C. Blanchard was appointed to the National Boating Safety Council and served as president of the Puget Sound Maritime Historical Society. He was active in sail boat racing and known for his extensive maritime knowledge of the Pacific Northwest. Norman was a member of the Seattle Yacht Club beginning in 1938 and served on its Board of Directors. He participated on several boat show committees and joined the Northwest Marine Industries at the first meeting held by the organization.

Norman C. Blanchard married his second wife Mary Barnard in 1991. The Barnard and Blanchard families were long-time boating friends, and the couple enjoyed cruising Puget Sound with other members of the Seattle Yacht Club. Norman C. Blanchard passed away on July 9, 2009 at the age of 98. Mary Barnard Blanchard died in Redmond, Washington on January 18, 2013.



Norm and Mary Blanchard enjoying Opening day 2000 on board the Kensington owned by S Wilen.

photo contributed by S Wilen

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that, but when he'd come in for drydocking I'd volunteer to accompany him to take the **Sea Rest** back to Olympia, where he always moored her, and then he'd always have a rental car available, or something in the way of wheels, and we'd drive out to the Olympia Airport and he'd fly me back to Seattle in his Beechcraft Bonanza, and Eunice would meet me down at Boeing Field. Eventually Lee sold the **Sea Rest**, and we more or less drifted apart after that, but during the years of our friendship he was always a very kind and generous man, as well as one of those customers that it was always just a pleasure to work with.

