

On Board A Beauty

Returns for another
season of tours

BY BETH YOUNG

The waters surrounding Sag Harbor are beginning to come to life with the annual parade of private motor yachts and sailing ships heading out for weekend pleasure. But those who watch from the end of Long Wharf, wishing they were out on the water in their own private boat, now have a chance to experience one of the most peaceful leisure activities the East End offers.

The *American Beauty*, Sag Harbor's only charter boat enterprise, will begin its second season of annual harbor tours this weekend. The boat may seem to be a familiar sight on the dock at Long Wharf, where another remarkably similar boat ran throughout the 1990's. Don Heckman, the boat's captain, bought the original *American Beauty* in 1992 and ran it through 2000.

He retired the boat in the spring of 2001 due to its age and condition,

when it was no longer cost-effective to continue using it. He then ran the water taxi and the mooring field in the village for two seasons, searching and waiting to find a boat similar to the original *American Beauty*.

In the fall of 2003, he found his boat through an advertisement 230 miles away, in Ocean City, New Jersey.

This boat is one foot shorter and 29 years younger than the original *American Beauty*. It's a wooden 44-foot powerboat built in Deltaville, Virginia in 1976 and used in New Jersey as a party fishing boat.

It now carries 39 people on tours throughout the harbor, and out as far as the Cedar Island Lighthouse. Heckman's favorite spot to take passengers is Mashomack Preserve, whose wild birds, osprey, waterfowl and pristine waterfront make a good getaway for those tired of touring the congested streets of the Hamptons.

"It's a good experience for people," said Heckman. "I'm very lucky to be doing this. There's not a lot of opportunity. Somebody has to do this and it should be me."

Heckman grew up in the small town of Woodbine, New Jersey, after which he went to Southampton College to study biology. He spent many years as a commercial fisherman working out of the Shinnecock In-

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let before coming to Sag Harbor to run the *American Beauty*. His training in biology and his years on the water are the basis for the narrative he gives on his 90-minute tours, which will run three times a day this summer.

Having kids on board the boat is one of Heckman's greatest joys, and he encourages families to bring picnics and always makes sure to give the kids a tour of the boat while they're on board.

Heckman's uncle was a member of the volunteer fire department in Woodbine, and he remembers when his uncle got a chance to drive the new truck in a parade. One of Heckman's favorite childhood memories is when he and his cousin had the opportunity to push the buttons in the truck.

"There was one button — I still remember what that button looked like," he said. He hopes kids who visit the *American Beauty* today will be building similar idyllic childhood memories.

The *American Beauty* will run 90-minute narrated cruises at 11 a.m., 1 p.m. and 3 p.m. throughout the summer, as well as a two-hour sunset cruise, which leaves the dock around 6:30 in June and July and 6:15 in August, when the sun begins to set earlier. There are also special cruises planned for the Sag Harbor Yacht Club fireworks on July 2 and the Boys Harbor Fireworks on July 16. Special cruises can be arranged in advance.

Heckman can be reached for details about the tours at 725-0397.