

He Couldn't Have Done It Without Her—

Exy Johnson's Seafaring Legacy

by Eleanore MacLean

Robert Johnson stands in his kitchen wearing a teal-and-white Hawaiian shirt, a nod to his childhood spent sailing around the world aboard his parents' sailing vessel, *Yankee*, more than seventy years ago. When I explain that I'm interested in learning more about his mother, he methodically goes through the familiar chronology he has told and retold over the years to the many fans of Irving and Exy Johnson's accounts of life at sea, including *Around Cape Horn*, the classic mini-documentary shot and narrated by Robert's father, sailing legend Irving Johnson. The exchange with Robert and his wife, Betsy, reveals other stories that show why the *Los Angeles Times* called Exy the "doyenne of sailing."¹ So much is known about Robert's famous seafaring father, but there is more to *Yankee's* story, especially given the period in which the story takes place. As Exy explained in their first book, *Westward Bound on the Schooner Yankee* (1936), women "learned first of all that the best thing we could do in nine out of ten cases was to keep still... There is something about a woman's voice that can sound terrible on



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Brigantine Yankee: the Johnsons had three vessels, all named Yankee—a schooner, brigantine, and a ketch. The brigantine here was purchased in 1946 and they sailed her around the world four times in eleven years.

a boat at times."² Yet former shipmates remember Exy as the glue that kept *Yankee* voyages together, and Robert reflects that, beyond those shipmates, "a lot of people don't realize how really important my mother was to the whole thing being successful at all."

Electa "Exy" Search graduated from Smith College in 1929 and headed west to continue her studies in French at the University of California, Berkeley. In 1931 she took a summer trip to Europe, but instead of returning to Boston via steamer as she had intended, she sent word to her parents that she would travel home via an almost fifty-year-old sailing vessel. The schooner *Wander Bird* was a former German pilot vessel under the command of Warwick Tompkins, the husband of a college friend. Alarmed at this turn of events, Exy's father immediately departed for Europe with two return tickets. The extra ticket went unused; Exy sailed home in *Wander Bird*.

The Atlantic crossing proved pivotal for Exy. Not only did she discover a new way of life, she fell in love with *Wander Bird's* mate, Irving Johnson. On 5 November 1933, the newly married Johnsons de-

parted from Gloucester in their own recently purchased North Sea pilot schooner, *Yankee*. While Irving was already a veteran mariner, Exy's experience was limited to her *Wander Bird* transAtlantic crossing. Despite the difference in their sailing backgrounds, this 1933 voyage in *Yankee* would be the first of seven circumnavigations the Johnsons would make between then and 1958 with paying crew.

By the end of the first eighteen-month world cruise, Exy was eager to return to Gloucester, writing in her journal: "Brick [the ship's doctor] compares this [arrival home] with getting back from France in 1918... Can't make the clock go around."³ Given the unpracticed nature of their inaugural world cruise, Irving's salute upon returning to Gloucester went appropriately awry, which Exy recorded in her journal: "The cannon...blew off a corner of the wheel box, ripped up the stern sheets grating, poked a hole in the bulwarks sheathing, three holes in the mainsail, & 2 in the ensign at the peak of the gaff! Our lovely solid brass cannon was in smithereens."⁴

Despite the natural desire to get ashore after a long passage at sea filled with the



COURTESY ROBERT JOHNSON

Exy at the helm aboard schooner Yankee.

uncertainties of a first voyage, Exy realized long before returning to Gloucester that she loved living at sea. Robert explains, “when my father noticed that my mother wasn’t complaining about sailing back to Boston in the dead of winter at the end of a long world cruise, he took it as a very good sign.” Exy wrote in 1936: “No life could be more simple—almost childishly so—but it was a very satisfying existence... there was no question of being bored. I don’t think the word could ever be applied to sailors—passengers, yes—but not to anyone who has ships and the sea to deal with himself.”⁵

Aboard ship, while Irving attended to his duties as captain, Exy served as ship’s secretary, editor, food manager, and linguist, among other roles. For each world cruise, Exy purchased the first nine months’ worth of food before *Yankee* departed Gloucester. These provisions were replaced with another nine months’ supply, pre-ordered, in Singapore. Along the way, Exy augmented *Yankee*’s stores of fresh produce and meat at local markets, a task made easier by her language and bartering skills. Exy oversaw the daily workings of the galley—though not the cooking itself—and planned the day’s meals in advance.

This did not mean, however, that Exy was not a sailor in her own right. Robert explains that his mother was a competent navigator. She “had used a sextant and worked out sights and had done some coastal piloting. The vast majority was done

by my father...but she certainly knew how.” Exy often took the helm in hazardous situations while Irving went aloft. On the second of seven trips across the South Pacific, Exy conned *Yankee* on her final approach to Pitcairn Island, while most of the crew, including Irving, were incapacitated from severe food poisoning.⁶

Robert explains that Exy was a good judge of people, and her input was critical in selecting a crew of twenty or so young people who would have to share a confined space for eighteen months. The world cruises did not revolve around specific academic or professional goals, allowing Exy to select crew members based on compatibility rather than previous sailing experience. Along with the sixteen or so boys, the Johnsons took along several young women to make the ship feel more like a family, as well as the ship’s only paid crewmember—the cook. Exy’s journals reveal how personally she took this task. Early in the third cruise she wrote: “They are a nice lot of boys, but it...doesn’t seem to have occurred to them to do things for themselves.” She added, “Perhaps a lot of it is adolescence...they’re bound to improve.”⁷

She stressed when there was discontent onboard, not only because she understood it could potentially ruin the voyage, but also because she wanted the crew to view the world cruises as she did, and cared that they left with having had a meaningful—and positive—experience. Exy recalled in a 1992 interview that, “At the time, I nev-



COURTESY ROBERT JOHNSON

Irving and Exy Johnson, 1937

er felt maternal toward the crew. They certainly didn’t want mothering. But now I feel as if they were all my children. We hear from them, we see them...it’s just like having the children come home.”⁸

Exy’s careful attention to the ship’s company and their voyage experience extended to her notice of the places they visited and her interest in the people they met, particularly the women. Living much of her adult life at sea without a community of women from which to learn, Exy relied on the female role models she encountered on remote islands, living in environments analogous to *Yankee* in that they required of their inhabitants resourcefulness, resilience, and determination. Pitcairn was a particularly influential port stop for Exy. There she met Ada Christian, who Exy described in *Westward Bound* as “unfailingly thoughtful, unruffled, serene, and tactful.” Ada and Exy would become lifelong friends.

Soon Exy also took on the role of mother to her own children aboard *Yankee*, and Exy’s contact with other women in the places they visited took on extra importance. Her sons both took their first world cruises at just over a year old—Arthur on the second cruise and Robert on the third. Exy took care of her sons “practically all of their waking hours” when they were infants and toddlers. Another woman sailed with

Exy shopping at the market in Zanzibar. From the Johnsons’ 1952-1955 scrapbook.



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them to help with childcare during the early cruises, though these aides were sometimes more work than help. On Floreana Island in the Galápagos, Exy wrote in her journal that, “Mrs. Munroe told me my children did me credit and I nearly burst with pride. It made all my efforts seem worthwhile and made me resolved to continue them.”¹⁰

When Arthur and Robert reached school age, Exy taught them using the Calvert Correspondence School curriculum. The boys had formal lessons every day *Yankee* was at sea and took their “vacation”

the crew, and “we never looked at it as sail training. People learned how to sail, but that was sort of incidental.” Exy wrote in *Westward Bound*: “In watches, as in everything else, the cruise was run on two main principles: to have a good time, and to sail the ship properly.”¹²

By the seventh cruise, Robert was a high school senior at a Connecticut boarding school and Arthur was in college. Exy wrote to Robert from the Tuamotus in French Polynesia: “Father and I more than most people feel there is so much more in life besides college that we do not feel you

has spread across the country to Los Angeles, where the TopSail Youth Program operates the twin brigantines *Exy Johnson* and *Irving Johnson*, launched in 2003. Exy was on hand to christen the ship that bears her name.

Exy was one of *Yankee’s* many on-board writers over the years and likely the most prolific. Exy once said that if she had not married Irving and sailed around the world, she would have liked to have been a reporter.¹³ In writing books about *Yankee’s* voyages, which are credited to both Irving and Exy, Irving would dictate to Exy, who



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COURTESY ROBERT JOHNSON

Motherhood hardly put a stop to Exy Johnson’s world voyaging. The Johnsons had two sons and took each on a world cruise just after their respective first birthdays. (left) Exy at sea as a young mother; (right) Exy, Robert, Irving, and Arthur Johnson.

days in port. Exy reflected in a 1992 interview that, “It was a very conventional time in education. You learned what you were supposed to and that was that.” Aboard *Yankee*, however, Arthur and Robert had “that one teacher, one pupil relationship [in which] you can’t slide by anything, so in that way they learned more than some children would in school...they [also] didn’t realize [that] what they were learning” in port augmented their formal lessons.

The ship environment helped Exy, too, because “the ship had to be kept in good condition...and [Arthur and Robert] saw that people stepped to the job. [Irving] was a very good example. They just had no idea that you could dodge things that needed to be done.”¹¹ Robert explains that while he and his brother had schooling on board, there was no formal academic program for

must get in...I think you will get in and will want to go, perhaps even this coming fall... [But] there are many alternatives open to you.” Exy’s progressive perspective foreshadowed the philosophy of many contemporary experiential education programs, and indeed *Yankee* and the Johnsons had a direct influence on modern sail training, particularly the Sea Education Association (SEA) out of Woods Hole, Massachusetts. SEA’s first vessel, schooner *Westward*, was built along *Yankee’s* lines, and Irving served as a founding trustee and consultant to SEA. After Irving’s death in 1991, Exy took his place on the board of trustees until she died in 2004. Son Robert now serves as a consultant. Robert considers one of his father’s contributions as “being the bridge between working sail and what’s now the tall ship industry.” The Johnsons’ legacy

would take the dictation down in shorthand and later edit it. All but *Sailing to See: A Picture Cruise on the Schooner Yankee* (1939) are written from Exy’s first-person perspective. Exy co-wrote ten *National Geographic* articles with Irving, and beginning with her *Wander Bird* voyage and continuing throughout the cruises in *Yankee*, Exy also wrote and published magazine and newspaper articles on her own.

By the later voyages, Exy seemed to recognize that her experiences in *Yankee* were not only good reads but also contained a record of remote peoples and places that might someday be changed irrevocably. The Johnsons essentially conducted longitudinal studies of their perennial ports-of-call, especially in the South Pacific where they developed close friendships. Exy wrote in *Yankee’s Wander World*: “Mrs. Wittmer

[of Floreana Island] and I were really old friends, though the actual hours we had spent together could easily be counted. In remote places those hours count more than they do in cities.”¹⁴ The far-flung and largely inaccessible Pitcairn Island served as *Yankee*’s South Pacific home. On each visit, *Yankee* brought much-needed supplies and caught up on the changes of the last three years. As *Yankee* prepared to get underway from Pitcairn for the last time, the Pitcairners stood on deck singing “Sweet Bye and Bye,” their traditional farewell song to the crew. Exy wrote in a letter that “when Irving replied ‘All I can say is thank you,’ his voice broke completely and it was all he *could* say.” Soon after, the Pitcairners rowed home and *Yankee* cast off. Exy writes: “Darkness came while we were down at chow and when we came back on deck the island had vanished.”¹⁵

Back home in Sherborn, Massachusetts, Robert tours me around the house as he continues to tell stories he heard as a child, his own tales from growing up in *Yankee*, and a few stories of his own. He points out memorabilia from his family’s years at sea, including carved figurines from various Pacific islands and *Yankee*’s wheel, which hangs above the piano. He shows me Exy’s handmade tapestry depicting the first three voyages and explains the details sewn within. Along with Mystic Seaport, which holds much of the Johnsons’ collection, Robert is the caretaker of *Yankee*’s history as the last surviving member of his immediate family.



COURTESY ROBERT JOHNSON

Exy’s tapestries depict Yankee’s voyages from her three first world cruises.

Looking back, it’s not surprising that there are echoes of the Johnsons in so many of the place-based, experiential programs available to young people today. In a 1951 article for *Motor Boating Magazine*, Julie Pyle, a crew member on the fifth world cruise, wrote: “We were to learn on this trip that there is no education like that taught by the sea. We were to realize, too, that sailing is a whole way of life and that a ship is a complete world in itself.”¹⁶ Just as Warwick Tompkins influenced Irving

and Exy, former *Yankee* mate Arthur Kimberly followed the Johnsons’ model of an extended voyage with paying crew in his brigantine *Romance*. Kimberly and his wife Gloria trained what would become the next generation of captains, including Bert Rogers, executive director of Tall Ships America, and Captain Dan Moreland of the world-voyaging barque *Picton Castle*. Rogers, Moreland, and some of their *Romance* shipmates, in turn, trained today’s captains of traditional sail, plus the thousands of passengers, students, and trainees who have participated in the active American sail training community. With each passing generation, the original model, in most cases, has become more academically oriented, while still retaining the adventurous spirit of the Johnsons’ world cruises.

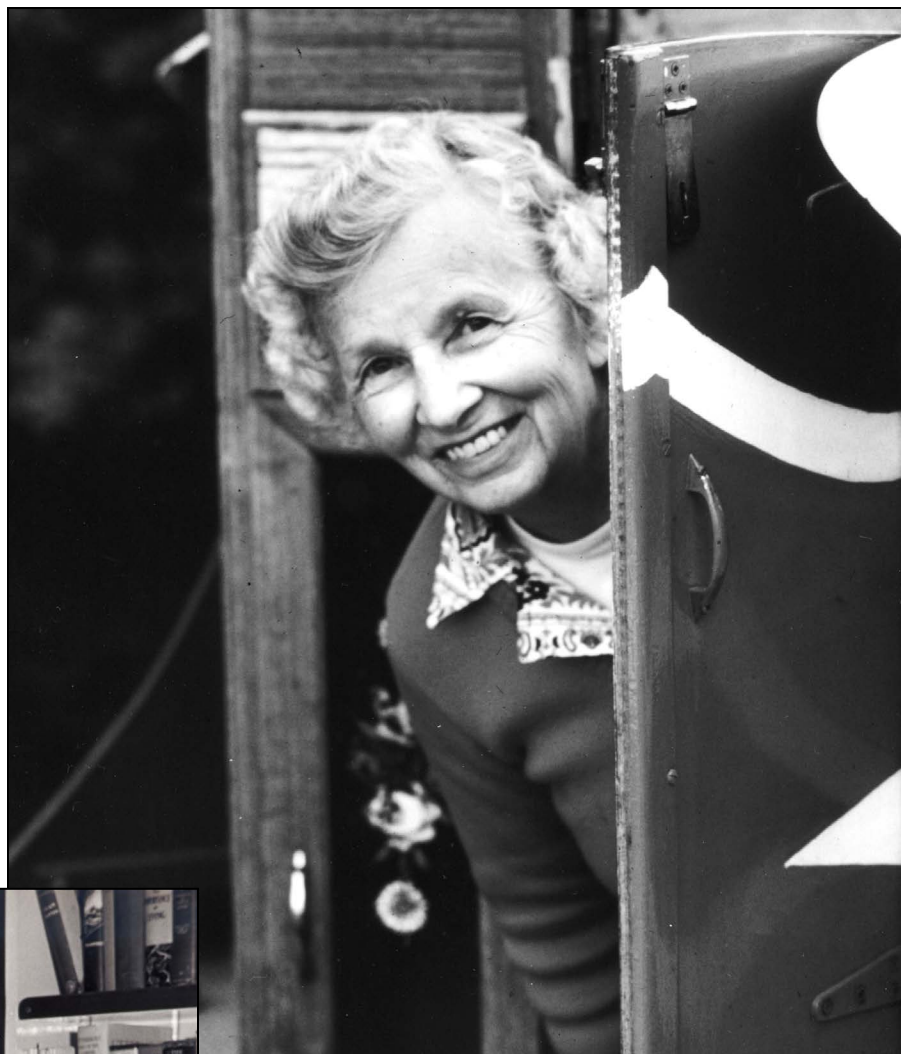
I also begin to see where my own story fits into the Johnsons’ legacy. I likely would never have sailed offshore in the brigantine *Robert C. Seamans* during my semester at the Maritime Studies Program of Williams College and Mystic Seaport, or completed a senior thesis on sail training,

(left) The Los Angeles Maritime Institute’s TopSail Youth Program operates two brigantines named for the Johnsons—Irving Johnson (left) and Exy Johnson.



COURTESY LOS ANGELES MARITIME INSTITUTE

were it not for the Johnsons. It's jarring to hear Exy say in a 1992 interview, "I realized and I think the other girls came to realize that we had to occupy a certain kind of position. It was kind of a case of staying out of the way of the boys, not getting in their hair...because it was a young man's cruise, really."¹⁷ This attitude began to change, even over the course of the seven world cruises. Perhaps not as obvious or impressive by today's standards, in the context of the time, Exy's presence on board and the fact that the Johnsons held spots for women on the cruises—two decades before the first maritime academy admitted women (in 1974)—helped set a progressive example of who might benefit from these types of experiences. The gender divisions Exy recalled are far less apparent aboard sail training vessels today, thanks in part to the Johnsons' legacy. Robert says: "My father has been given a tremendous amount of credit for the voyages that he did, but he couldn't have done it without my mother. They really worked as a pair; their abilities and all complemented one another." ⚓



Electa "Exy" Search Johnson (1909–2004)



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NOTES

- ¹ *The Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 4, 2004 (www.articles.latimes.com/2004/dec/04/local/me-johnson4)
- ² *Westward Bound on the Schooner Yankee*, p. 247
- ³ 3/12/36 Exy's journal, voyage #1
- ⁴ 5/5/36 Exy's journal, voyage #1
- ⁵ *Westward Bound in the Schooner Yankee*, p. 79
- ⁶ *Sailing to See*, p. 83
- ⁷ Exy's Journals #2
- ⁸ Exy Johnson oral history, 1992
- ⁹ *Westward Bound in the Schooner Yankee*, p. 88
- ¹⁰ Exy's Journals #2, p. 123
- ¹¹ Exy Johnson oral history, 1992
- ¹² *Westward Bound in the Schooner Yankee*, p. 243
- ¹³ Undated newspaper article in 1955–58 scrapbook.
- ¹⁴ *Yankee's Wander World* p. 59
- ¹⁵ Letter "Our Seventh Visit to Pitcairn"
- ¹⁶ "Woman's Ways on a Windjammer," in December 1951 *Motor-Boating*
- ¹⁷ Exy Johnson oral history, 1992

(left) Exy Johnson at her writing desk aboard Yankee.