



# The Gilbert's 2025 Christmas Book

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## *What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Stronger...*

What a year.... Due to its length, we are now calling this the Christmas Book.

## **Chapter 1. Getting Gratitude**

To begin this year, we must start with October of last year when we took possession of *Gratitude*, Aquila 54' (Hull # 72). We planned for it to be our Sarasota boat, so we could keep Interactive (Hull #5) in Mystic, Connecticut. We had fallen in love with Mystic since first summering there in 2023. That year, we'd planned to return to Sarasota in the fall, but we couldn't leave the place where we had made friends, and most people visiting from Atlanta said they would love to return. So, wintering the boat in Mystic was the answer, but that left us no Florida boat to enjoy in the winter.

We looked at condos, but they cost more than the boat, have monthly fees three times our slip fees, and require paying property taxes. Plus, you can't take them out to explore the islands or relocate them to other places.

Closing on *Gratitude* was fraught with peril. Our salesman asked if we would do it before the end of their fiscal year, September 30. We agreed and left for Clearwater a few hours after Helene passed over Atlanta. It had just ripped through Florida as a Category 4 hurricane with 180 mph winds at landfall, destroying boats, marinas, and flooding thousands of homes. As we prepared to close on the boat, Joel mentioned that we were still in the storm season until November 1, and that if another named storm passed through, the boat would not be covered for named-storm damage. Our salesman reassured us saying, "A hurricane came through here yesterday, and there isn't anything brewing out there...you'll be fine."

And guess what ... Sarasota received a direct hit by Milton 13 days later. Fortunately, *Gratitude* was still in the protected MarineMax Clearwater marina because we were unable

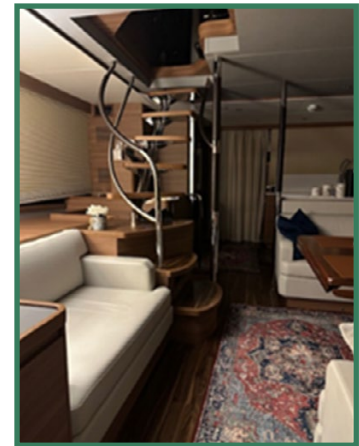




to relocate to Marina Jack because Helene had taken out the power there. A few weeks later when the power was back on, we returned to move *Gratitude* to Marina Jack. Walking to the dock in Clearwater to take possession, we were alarmed to see the yacht next to *Gratitude* completely submerged, sitting on the bottom, a total loss. That was proof we dodged a bullet there but perhaps was an omen of what the year held for us.

**More Boats.** Following Joel's daughter Natalie and Rudy's wedding in December of last year, they spent their honeymoon with us aboard *Gratitude*. They both quickly took to this boating life and returned to Atlanta, determined to find a boat for Florida to moor at Marina Jack or closer to home on Lake Lanier. After exhaustive searching, they found the perfect boat, a two-cabin 39' Sea Ray, which they have docked near our houseboat at Holiday Marina. What fun!

**And More Boats.** As we lived aboard *Gratitude*, Aquila 54 (Hull #72), we noticed some major improvements made between it and *Interactive*, Hull #5, which was wintering in Mystic, CT. The big one was an inside spiral staircase that made the bridge an extension of the main salon. Accessing it was easy and didn't require opening two heavy doors and going up the outside stairway, which can be challenging in bad weather or when underway. Knowing there had been a 5-year wait for these boats, we anxiously asked our salesman what the wait would be to swap out *Interactive* for this new configuration. With glee, he replied, "Joel, we just took delivery of Hull #88 in the configuration you want with the walnut wood and accessories you like."



It was meant to be ... Sold ... and fortunately taking *Interactive* (Hull #5) in cash trade! So in January, we closed on our second Aquila 54' power catamaran. Named *No Regrets* and Hull # 88 in the 54' Aquila family, it would take four months to set up the boat to what we now call the "Gilbert Configuration," including teak-like decking, more powerful thrusters, and wooden tables. But we had time. This boat was going to the Northeast in a swap for *Interactive* (Hull #5), which we had enjoyed for about 3 years.

We were in Clearwater in the picture here taking possession of *No Regrets*. You can't see it in the picture, but courtesy of Hurricane Milton, the boat that had been beside *No Regrets* was seven feet underwater.

Now we had to finish out *No Regrets* and get it to Mystic by May, where it would swap our much-loved *Interactive* (#5). We had too much going on to tackle the 10-day trip up the East Coast, so one of the MarineMax captains made the move for us and attempted to return *Interactive* to Clearwater. Unfortunately, less than an hour out of the Mystic River in the Long Island Sound, Captain Lance didn't like the sound of the transmission and turned into the first marina he found capable of pulling a 25' wide power catamaran. *Interactive* then spent the next five months in Bridgeport, Connecticut, being repaired.



**Joel on Visitors.** Once settled into Marina Jack, we had lots of visitors, including a wonderful family reunion where Joel's brother and sister-in-law, Ed and Sue Gilbert, came from Houston, and his daughter Lauren came with Ryan and their daughter Lilly, who did some beautiful artwork she left with us for boat decoration. Joel gave her fishing lessons, and we all enjoyed the beautiful backdrop of Sarasota.

This was followed by a visit from our close-by neighbor, Beverly Bannister, and then by my personal trainer and his wife, Will and Ria Freeman. They had their wedding celebration at our house years ago, and we enjoy their company.



About two weeks later, Jay and Judy Coyle visited for about a week. They visited us last year in Mystic and had such a good time, they wanted to sample Sarasota. I think they loved it.



We were thrilled that Ronnie and Jean Weathers came again to visit, and we all got to spend an evening with KT Curran, a movie producer recommended by the Pops conductor Robyn Bell. It just so happened she was a Hollywood producer living in Sarasota! The four of us walked to the corner Italian restaurant and met with KT to discuss how the GERDA III movie could come together. Back in Mystic, Howard Visez, author of the book about the boat, *Henny's Boat*, was delighted with our progress, but things were not going well with the Mystic Seaport Museum nor the Museum of Jewish Heritage, which owned the GERDA. We'll come back to that later.



*Pictured at Classico are Ronnie, Jean, Susan, KT of Wingspan Productions, and Joel in the shadows.*



We had fun too, having our Bradenton neighbor, Ann Fulghum, join us for an outing.

Somehow, the Weathers found a decorative tray featuring the name of our boat: *Gratitude*. How appropriate and much appreciated!





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## Susan's Family Update

**F**or more on the family front, Stephen is 29 and in his fourth year working for LexisNexis as a software engineer. He loves work and the people he interacts with. It's all remote, but they do get together a couple of times a year, usually for lunch. We are happy he still lives with us because we love his company, and he acts as house manager while we are away.

This year, we convinced him that it was time to look at other cars. Susan had replaced her 15-year-old RX, and Joel upgraded to the new Tesla S. Stephen's 12-year-old Hyundai, (which we got when he was 16 so he could drive back and forth to high school) only had 30,000 miles on it. It was in mint condition, so we got a great offer from Carvana to take it off our hands. After extensive car shopping and test driving, he found a black Mazda hatchback with red leather seats that he loves. It's funny that when I met Susan in 1985, she was driving a black Mazda hatchback sports car with red leather seats.

Susan's older sister, Maggie, who lives in Jacksonville, Alabama, has retired but substitutes several days a week at the local elementary school where she used to teach. She keeps in shape with yard work and going to classes she enjoys at the YMCA. Her daughter Angie, husband Brandon, and two beautiful children live on their farm in Southside, Alabama, where they raise crops and have horses, cows, and lots of other animals. Angie is a psychologist who works primarily with kids who are struggling.

Maggie's other daughter, Meri, and husband Kevin, live in Mobile, Alabama, with their two precious little boys. Meri is in management with a health care company and Kevin is an executive with Airbus who travels the world in his job.

## Back to Boating

**W**hile making the final changes to Gratitude, Joel slipped on the bottom steps of the inside stairs, hitting his head and causing a gash. Within minutes our boat neighbor, Ron Savage, came to assist and advise. "It just so happens" he is a brain injury expert, so it was good to hear his assessment that Joel was OK ... shaken for sure, but not suffering from brain injury symptoms. He still had to visit the ER to check for broken bones and an MRI to check for brain injuries ... which all came back negative. It took about three hours from end to end. Shaken up, but grateful knowing it could have been worse. We learned that the spiral staircase must be treated with the same care as climbing a ladder.

We attended the Sarasota Pops Wicked concert the next day and were treated to the fabulous performance by Kristin Chenoweth who played Glinda in the original Broadway production of Wicked. Then, that weekend, Susan led a retreat for the Pops Board, which they enjoyed and appreciated so much that they asked her to do it again next year.





## Growing Atlanta Household

As you may remember from last year's letter, Joel's daughter Natalie got married after about 22 years of engagement to Rudy Kelley, and Joel's daughter from his previous marriage, Susan Liddy (who kindly goes by Sue to minimize confusion), came to celebrate that. She enjoyed being with us so much that she chose to leave California and move in with us, arriving at the end of February. She brought her adorable little dog, Botello, and set up her own area downstairs, sharing the lower level of the house with Stephen, who really enjoys her company. Within weeks of moving here, Sue began dating Mike DiVergilio, who lives near Lake Lanier. We were able to pull off a rare family Teppanyaki dinner with chef Joel in early spring. Hope to do more of those, especially now that we are getting the family back closer together.



*Chef Joel, Sue Liddy, Mike, Stephen, Rudy, Natalie, Kelley, and me.*



*Stephen and Mom at Trivia*

Encouraging Stephen to be more sociable and get out of the house, they attended some Trivia Events at a Tucker bar. When she couldn't make it, Susan accompanied him. They did not win. Others had 8-person teams. But they gave it their best shot.

It was now time for Joel to play bassoon in the Sarasota Pops for the next concert, so he stayed in Sarasota for the 5 weeks of practice and the three concerts. These concerts are fast-moving with 16 or more pieces of music and all of it rather difficult, so he had his work cut out for himself.

Joel serves on the Board of Directors and plays bassoon with Sarasota Pops. This picture is of the two performers who played Dolly and Kenny in the concert. Joel was able to get us a backstage invitation to meet the performers at a social following the performance. They were incredibly good, backed up by a 70-member orchestra led by conductor Robyn Bell, who continues to amaze audiences with her productions. As their tagline says: *Music You Love, Musicians You Know.*





Joel then attended a virtual presentation about the Wells Boat Hall project at the Mystic Seaport Museum. He noticed that the 3D imaging area had gone away, so he pressed our contact, Maude, who tried to explain, but later learned that the museum was having funding problems. They only had about half the money they needed to finish the project: they needed another \$7 million, which, in museum-speak, means they needed \$10 million.

This challenge would come back to haunt us later in the year as you will soon see.

It was about this time that Joel's 12-year-old Tesla was acting up, so Sue took it in for repair, which took about six weeks. That was a warning sign, and he began researching trading it in for a new one, but they no longer offered the unlimited charging we had, so he waited, hoping that would change, and it did later that spring.

We were making periodic visits to Clearwater to see our new vessel, *No Regrets*, come together, and on one day in early March, on the way back, we entered the massive round-about right in front of our vessel, *Gratitude*, and were rear-ended. Nobody was hurt, but the damage totaled about \$12,000, mostly covered by insurance since it was not our fault. The car behind us was traveling too close, and when someone cut Joel off in the circle, he had to slam on the brakes, and he crashed into our two-month-old Lexus RX. We could still drive it, so we brought it back to Atlanta and got it repaired, which took two months. They did a great job; it looks new.

Joel played the concerts, and we headed back to Atlanta the last week of March to get the car repaired. He had been monitoring Tesla promotions, and they were now offering unlimited charging, so we stopped in to look at the new model. It just happened that they had exactly the car Joel wanted, but it was in Nashville, which was a demo with less than 400 miles on it. They gave us a \$10,000 discount, coupled with the \$16,000 they gave us in trade for a new one, so the net price was only \$70,000. Having paid close to \$130k for the first one, this felt like a bargain.

The car was delivered in time for us to be sure it ran well, and we drove it to Sarasota for our last visit to sign off on the new 54', *No Regrets*, which was in the final stages of completion. It was close enough and ready to go to Connecticut under the command of Captain Mosely, who made the trip in 11 days.

Our first 54', *Interactive*, was supposed to be in Clearwater by April so we could move all our personal belongings off it and onto *No Regrets*, but when Captain Lance started that trip, he found it had transmission problems and made only 50 miles before finding a nearby marina capable of pulling a 25' wide vessel. So *Interactive* remained in Bridgeport waiting for parts. This is where we got lucky because Captain Mike Monaghan, who had been managing *Interactive* for us in Mystic, and his wife, Jen, were able to make multiple trips back and forth to Bridgeport, loading their vehicle with our belongings and then placing them on *No Regrets* exactly where they were on *Interactive*. Jen took pictures of every cabinet before removing anything and placed everything back on *No Regrets* in its proper place. Amazing!

We felt so blessed to have a friend who cared that much. They occasionally use the boat when we are away, and we need someone aboard to keep tabs on all the systems that tend to fail if not monitored, so it's a blessing and a win-win. We were amazed to find fresh



flowers and cookies aboard our perfectly prepared boat when we arrived in Old Saybrook early in May.

In Atlanta, we held our traditional Derby Party on the first Saturday in May. It was a cold and sloppy track for a race, but our friends from Church enjoyed betting on the outcome and cheering on the ponies. It remains the most exciting 3 minutes in sports.



When in Atlanta, we try to find evenings we can cook on the outdoor Teppanyaki grill. It's hard to plan because it depends on schedules and the weather, but we did manage to find a time to get some of our favorite friends over for Joel to perform his magic.

## Back to Mystic

Arriving in Old Saybrook on May 11th, we had dinner at our favorite restaurant, Noah's, in one of our favorite towns in Connecticut, Essex.

The next day, we provisioned the boat and took off for Mystic Seaport Museum Marina. The boat ran perfectly, and it was so good to be back in that wonderful environment. Old Saybrook is nice, but Mystic is magical. There really are no words that adequately describe it. We were delighted to find that after two years of watching it under construction, the Delamar Hotel was now open, so we ate there that first night. It is a foodie place for sure and they are proud of their food, but on balance, it's wonderful sitting there looking out at our boat in the harbor.



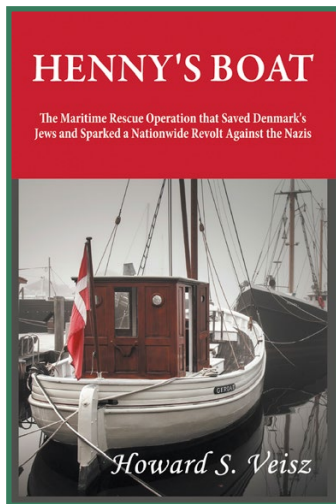
It was around this date that Captain Dave Hibberd was taking Gratitude down to FT Myers and up into the Okeechobee Waterway to store it out of the water in Indiantown as required by insurance. He ran hard aground, tearing up the entire starboard side running gear. He was able to limp into Indiantown at low speed, but he was troubled by the event. This never happens to a delivery captain ... but the Corps of Engineers had lowered Okeechobee



to prepare for hurricane season and had lowered it below normal safe navigation levels, and many boats using it ran aground. They closed the waterway the next day. Thankfully, Captain Dave offered to manage the repair project over the winter.

In April, we had the chilling call from Howard that the GERDA III had sunk in the Mystic Museum Marina and was now out of the water in storage, where visitors could not see it. Howard was devastated, the Museum of Jewish Heritage, who own the boat, was derelict, and the Mystic Seaport Museum was running out of options, given it was so far behind financially with building the Wells Boat Hall and the restoration of the Dunton fishing vessel.

But, in a pattern that Susan and I call "*it just so happened,*" Joel was on the bridge in the Seaport Museum Marina when one of the Museum Board Members walked by, and Joel thanked him for his service. He was there because this was the Annual Board Meeting and all the bigwigs were there, some of whom came in with their large yachts, so the harbor was buzzing.



He was happy to be thanked, and given that he stopped, Joel told him that we were working on the GERDA III restoration, which he knew a little about, but was not sure of the details. So, Joel ran downstairs and grabbed a copy of Howard's book, *Henny's Boat*, and gave it to him.

The next morning, he made the trip from his home in Mystic out to our boat with a thank you note asking if we could join he and his wife for dinner, which we did. His name is Bill Forster, and he had been the chairman of the museum board for about 15 years. His wife, Linda Hart, was a famous Broadway and movie actress. They have several homes, including one in Los Angeles where they are connected to lots of movie people. We had a lovely dinner, and it was clear he wanted to be part of our efforts to work with Howard and, hopefully, get a movie made about this story. Linda knows lots of people in the film industry, including Stephen Spielberg, who would be the ideal producer of a Henny's Boat movie. Things were looking up, but their schedules were already crazy and committed, so it would take a few months before we could consider next step

We moved the boat to Old Saybrook on May 21st and Susan flew home for about a week, and then we moved the boat back to Mystic on June 4th for about a two-week stay. It was the next trip to Old Saybrook that would change the course of events over the summer.

That morning, the tide was exceptionally low, but nothing seemed risky. We had made this trip 20 times before. Susan managed the lines and we worked our way down the Mystic River as usual. As we cleared the last river marker, we took the wide sweeping turn to the west into the Long Island Sound, and Susan went downstairs to get a fresh cup of coffee, so I slowed from 18 knots down to 5.

The depth gauge was reading 16 feet as expected in the channel and then, with no warning, we hit something big that ground the boat to an abrupt stop and killed both engines. The sound of scraping was thunderously loud and terrifying. Susan, who was downstairs, said it felt like an earthquake. Up on the bridge, Joel had no idea what had happened.



So many things raced through Joel's head. Does he call May Day? Were we taking on water and sinking? From the jarring impact, he knew that was a possibility. He pulled up all six bilge pumps on the boat computer and verified they were all off, so he turned them all on and noticed the amperages dropping. So, he knew they were keeping up with any water in the bilge. Take the idea that we were sinking off the list.

Step 2 ... see if the engines would run and could we make forward progress. They both cranked and started. When he put them in gear, we could make way, but at 5 knots, the vibration was serious, so he knew we had damaged at least one prop, but we were still mobile, and we could make it back to Old Saybrook.

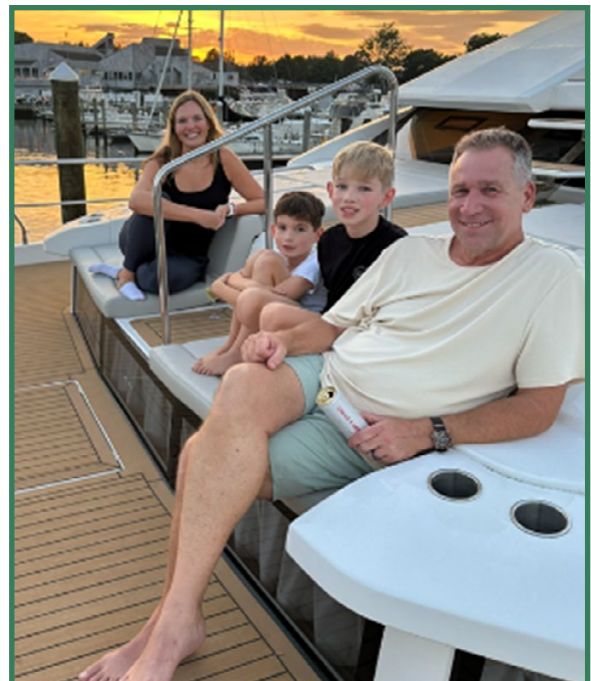
Step 3 ... Joel contacted our marina and alerted them as to what had happened, and that we probably needed another bilge pump, which they had ready when we arrived four hours later, running at about 4+ knots. Captain Mike had alerted Sea Tow of our situation and a young man from there met us when we arrived in Old Saybrook. He was able to climb into all six bilge areas and reported that the starboard side was dry and perfect, but the port side bow was taking on a little water.

Captain Mike sent a diver to the boat to assess the damage. He reported that there was a very long and deep scrape on the side of the port hull almost the complete length of the boat, and the port prop and running gear were seriously damaged. It was now a holiday weekend, so we couldn't get anyone to do anything. We were heading back to Atlanta, but Joel did monitor the bilges to see pump runtimes, which would give him a reasonable estimate of water leakage.

That next morning, Joel did a head check with Captain Mike, and they both agreed it was probably best to simply leave the boat in the water and wait till the end of the season to pull it 3 miles up the road in Essex and make the repairs there. Nobody had room for us anyway, since this was the high-activity time during the very short boating season.

The next week, we decided to cancel all our trips to Mystic and let our potential visitors know that we were only going to use the boat as a floating condo in Old Saybrook for the remainder of the summer. That worked out nicely because it forced us to explore the Old Saybrook area and become familiar with Essex, Chester, and Old Lyme, all of which are precious areas we would never have otherwise visited.

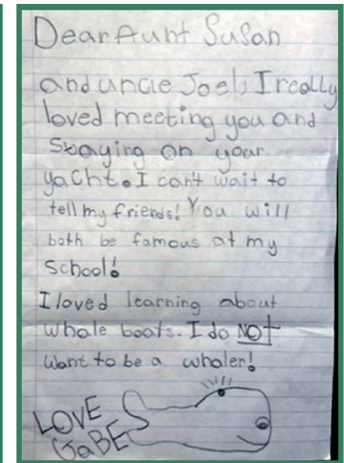
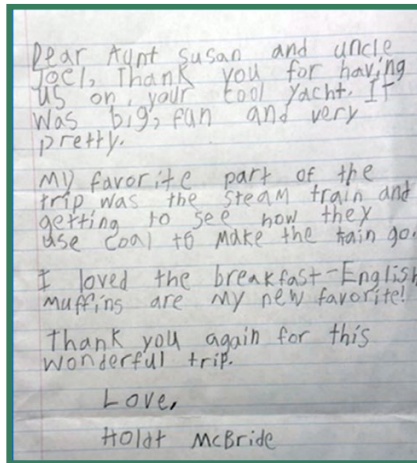
Our first visitors were Susan's niece Meri, her husband, and her two sweet sons, Holdt and Gabe. We had to drive them to the museum instead of being moored there, but that really didn't matter. Joel rented a pontoon boat to show them the Mystic River. They rode the Essex Steam Train and spent a day in the Mystic Seaport Museum, where we got my favorite picture of the boys at





the Cooperage, where the barrel maker asked them to climb into a huge barrel that was propped up in the entrance. Too cute!

After all that, they caught the commuter train to New York City where they played tourist and visited with other family. We all had a blast together, and from their thank you letters, the kids loved it too!



Following that, we were visited by our dear friend and professional colleague George Fitzpatrick and his wife, Karen, who took the ferry over from their Long Island home. They planned to come in their boat, but it was being serviced.

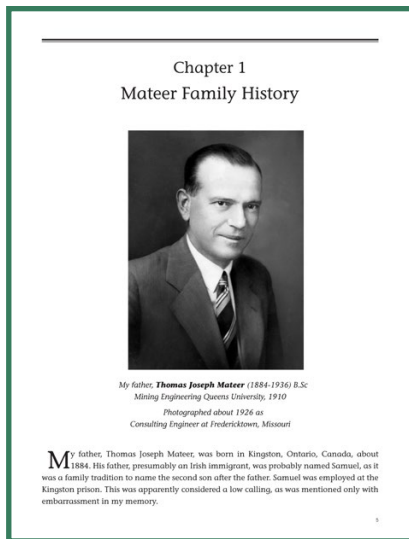
Then Glenn and Liliya Paist from our Church visited for about five days. This is them posing in front of our favorite little town in Connecticut, Essex, at the 250-year-old Griswold Inn. That visit was followed about a week later by dear friends, Ken and Linda Futch, whom we have known since before we got married.





## Susan's Big Book Project

Susan had wanted to edit and publish her father's memoir for more than 20 years. He wrote it after retiring from teaching at the University of Kentucky. He'd sit on the back screened-in porch with classical music playing and typed all he could remember of his childhood, family, and profession. The final document was over 200 pages, and Susan knew it would be a major undertaking to edit and update all the fonts and formatting. It was well written, but it simply needed another set of eyes on every word.



Her goal was to finish it in 2025, and she can report that it will be completed by the end of December. Valerie Williams, who was our lead artist for all 30+ years at Apogee, agreed to do the layout and will manage getting some copies made. We will send the books to family and friends and to the historical societies in some of the towns he lived in. Susan has probably spent 100 hours devoted to the project and couldn't be happier with the product.

## Back in Connecticut

While the Coyles were with us toward the end of August, as Joel fished from the boat, crabs kept eating his bait. So, we called the local bait shop and learned that they sold crab traps, which we picked up the next day. We weren't sure how plentiful blue crabs would be under our boat, but apparently, they thrive here. And because people here don't eat them, they are abundant and grow large.

Jay and Judy joined us on the hunt for crab traps, which took us to an out-of-the-way bait shop named Ted's. If you remember this line from Foxworthy's "You Might Be a Redneck," we had to "Turn off





the Paved Road” to get there. Yes, Ted is a Redneck and proud of it. Check out Jay’s pictures. We especially loved the posting of their operating hours:

### WE’RE OPEN TILL WE CLOSE. WE’RE CLOSED TILL WE OPEN.



Back at the boat, we baited the traps with chicken thighs and dropped our new traps into the water. Within minutes, Joel was pulling up big blue crabs, the largest I had seen in years. We now have a new and unexpected reason to LOVE Connecticut in the summer...CRABS!! They are our favorite food, but you can’t get them many places. For the last ~20 years, the only ones available at the Farmer’s Market were too tiny to bother cooking and cleaning. So, we suffice with getting crab cakes when we go to Houston’s or J Alexander’s. So, as you might imagine, we have been catching, cooking, and enjoying all the crabs you can eat on the good ship *No Regrets*.

The last visitors we had were Jay and Judy Coyle who this time wanted to focus on his research into his ancestors who happened to have been some of the first settlers to Old Saybrook in the early 1600s. They spent one day at the graveyard and ran into the caretaker, who showed them where Jay’s relatives, the Shipmans, were buried. Then we all visited the Historical Society for the few hours they are open each week and were thrilled to find a 650-page book on his family history. They also produced a file-sized box full of his family’s documents, including deeds, birth records, marriage certificates, baptisms, and so much more. As he was reviewing these materials, the lady helping us trace his lineage pointed out that they were cousins! We found a document that gave Jay another hundred years of history, tracing his family back to England. We had no idea you could do all this research.



Jay and Judy also got to meet two of our favorite people, Howard and Lorraine Veisz. Howard is the author of *Henny’s Boat*, for whom we have tremendous appreciation. If you are viewing this online, here are two short movies about his work. (Copy the URLs into your browser to view.)

- This one features **Howard**, the author and narrator.  
<https://mysticseaport.org/gerda-iii-danish-lighthouse-tender/>
- Joel found this one by the **Smithsonian**.  
<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=605663850000257>



We are working diligently to find a production company to adapt Howard's story into a movie. He and Lorraine spent two weeks a few years ago in Denmark interviewing members of Henny's family to piece together the story. At the museum, when a group gathers around the boat where it was in the marina by the visitor entrance, Joel and I often tell the story of the boat when no other volunteers are available to share it. Sadly, last April, before we headed back to Mystic, Howard called with the grave news that the Gerda III had sunk and would be pulled out of the way and stored somewhere. He and I continue to believe it is possible to raise the funds needed to repair the Gerda III if we can get traction with a movie.

After seeing Jay and Judy off, we closed the boat for the season and began the two-day drive home. What a season! After thinking the summer was lost to the damage, it turned out to be filled with surprises, adventures, and great times together with friends and family.

After a long day as museum volunteers, we sat at the Saloon briefly on the way back to *Gratitude*. That's the Charles W Morgan in the background. It's the only remaining wooden whaling ship in the world.



Weekdays, we enjoyed watching what Susan dubbed the "Babies in Boats." It's the summer camp kids who live for a week aboard an old whaling ship. They are learning to sail by being placed in small, colorful sailboats and instructed on how to operate them. Too cute! Mondays, there are some wrecks and kids flipped out of their boats, but by Friday, they are all able-bodied sailors.





## Let the Fixing Begin!

So, let us now describe how we got both Aquilas fixed. It just so happened...The port prop from *Gratitude* in Indiantown was fine and the starboard prop was damaged so badly that nobody in Florida could fix it. The prop on *No Regrets* was damaged, so a diver pulled that for us, and to our amazement and surprise, it just so happened...the world's top propeller repair facility was right there in Old Saybrook, just 3 miles from our marina: Hale Propeller.

We shipped the enormous props from Indiantown, where *Gratitude* was pulled on the hard for the storm season, and shipped them to Hale, which was a feat unto itself. They are huge, and each weighs about 150 pounds. They had to be boxed and shipped from Indiantown to Old Saybrook. Once there, Randy Hale scanned the good one to repair and match the damaged one and then rebuilt the port prop from *No Regrets*. It



took a few weeks, but we had the time, and when we saw the picture of the signed propellers Randy Hale sent us, they were so beautiful, Joel was tempted to mount them on the wall rather than put them on the boat. Susan did get the picture of them framed, and that will hang on our wall, but at ~150 pounds each, it'd be hard to hang the real things. Notice, too, in the picture, Randy Hale signs his work. And he should!



Few shipyards in Connecticut have the equipment to pull a boat with a 25' beam. The closest maintenance marina to us is Essex, where it just so happened... they installed a 25' capable lift this year. *No Regrets* was pulled in Essex early in September, and it took a month to rebuild the hull, repair/replace the running gear, recoat the bottom, and get it back in the water. We went up to see the damage and were terrified by the sight of a 15-foot gash in the port side that, had it been just a few centimeters deeper, would have sunk the boat.

Captain Mike then ran it back to Old Saybrook, waiting for the first day of November to move it carefully back to Mystic for in-water winter storage.





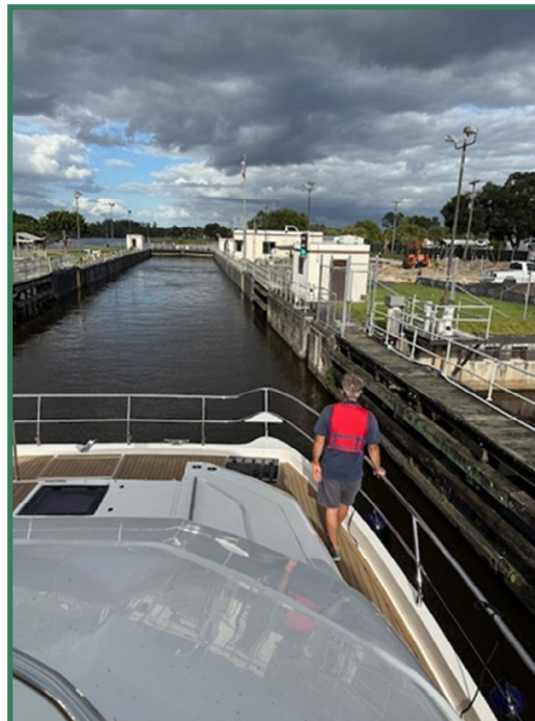
## Gratitude Returns to Marina Jack

After 6 months on the hard in Indiantown, FL, *Gratitude* was repaired and ready for the return trip through the lock in Lake Okeechobee to the pass at Stuart. Here is that trip.

**Wednesday:** We began the trip with Joel and Captain Dave Hibberd running the boat out of Lake Okeechobee through a lock that dropped us 14', then out into the Atlantic at Stuart, FL, where we overnighed. The next morning, we got coffee at Gilbert's Coffee Bar.

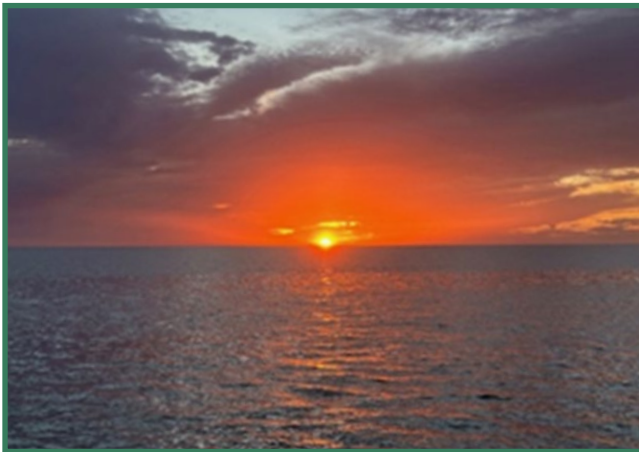
**Thursday:** Next morning, down to Ft Lauderdale, where the International Boat Show just ended. There we were moored beside two of the largest privately owned boats in the world, Hemisphere, the largest sailing catamaran, and *Man of Steel*, the largest yacht. Spielberg originally owned it. We think more than 30 people staffed it.

So, we were the ants among the giants. Joel navigated expertly around them. Our friend, Captain Dave, joined us on the 4-day trip and provided a lot of coaching and training, mostly for Susan, on features of the boat we were not familiar with and on things we were unable to do.





**Friday:** From there, we ran through mirror-calm waters in Biscayne Bay and dropped anchor in the Everglades near Naples where we planned to anchor out, which was quite an experience. We had never dropped anchor with either of our boats, but with Captain Dave aboard, it would be the perfect time to give it a try. It had the additional advantage of teaching Susan how to both drop and retrieve it. Another educational aspect of being anchored out in the Everglades is how dark it gets. The darkness is hard for your brain to comprehend. Susan described it looking like the boat was wrapped in a curtain of black felt under a sky full of more stars than we had ever seen before glistening bright white. Then the full moon came up, exposing the land in the distance.

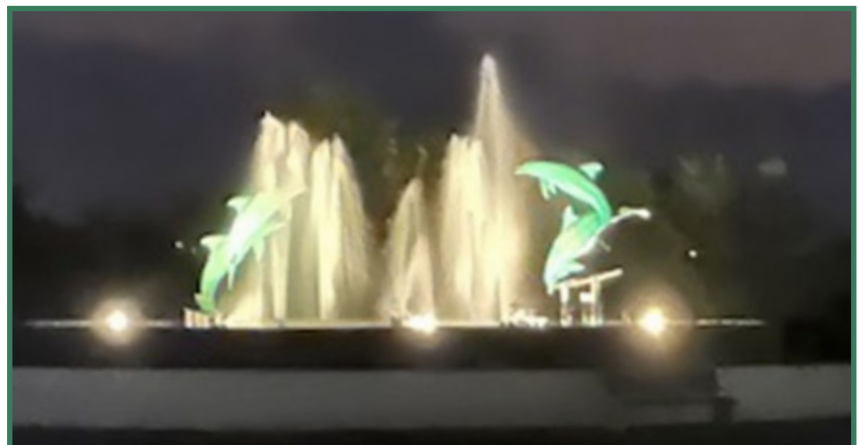


**Saturday morning,** we pulled the anchor, rounded Naples, passed Marco Island, Captiva, Boca Grande, and dozens of other islands, came in through the Venice Pass and up the Intracoastal, through four bridge openings, lots of boats everywhere, to home

base at Marina Jack. What a trip!! We were delighted to see all our boating neighbors here, with lots of catching up to do.



We celebrated at dinner at Marina Jack and enjoyed watching the dancing dolphin fountain in City Park beside the marina.





With the boat back in the marina, we held several fundraisers for the Sarasota Pops, where Joel plays bassoon in their concerts and serves on the Board of Directors. Next year is their 50th anniversary, and it is the first year Robyn Bell, the conductor, will be full-time with the Pops. Pictured here in the blue striped shirt, she is a game-changer for them with so much energy, creativity, and charisma.



The evening of November 16 was still, and as Susan closed the boat for the night, she noticed the water was like glass, so she shot this picture of the condos overlooking Marina Jack. It turned out so good, she gave it to the marina to use in their advertising and is having it framed for our wall at home.

Lucky Shot!





## Meanwhile ... On Lake Lanier

Our houseboat at Holiday Marina has served us well for more than 30 years now. The major 2023 renovation was completed, replacing most everything onboard, including adding an 8-foot window with views down the lake. In the summer of 2024, a storm put



enough strain on the aluminum hull to pull it away from the framing. Fixing that took most of this year and required taking up the new flooring that had just been installed. A welder was able to repair the hull, and the flooring was put back down. It's now like a new boat, and we love being aboard and having friends visit.

## Home for the Holidays

Back home for the holidays, the waterfall is happily flowing and entertaining us when it is warm enough to sit on the patio. Joel is busy teaching our Discovery Sunday School Class and keeping up with his various concerts that pile up this season. He writes two blogs each week, one on [Captain-Obvious.com](http://Captain-Obvious.com) and one on [Geek Theology.net](http://Geek Theology.net). If you are interested, you can sign up on the website to receive them in your email each week when they are published.





## Picture Perfect Thanksgiving



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## Christmas

We host our Class Christmas Party this month and will try to see as many local friends as possible while we are here until mid-January when we head back to Sarasota.

With all the disasters we managed this year with three boats, we decided it best to sell Gratitude in the Spring and believe the tariffs on the new Aquila boats coming from China will work in our favor. In September of 2026, we'll run No Regrets back to Marina Jack, going slowly to spend more time in some of the cities along the route, including St Michaels in the Chesapeake, Charleston, Savannah, St Augustine, and maybe Key West.

Yes, we realize this is the world's longest Christmas Letter, but we wanted to share our joys, challenges, and surprise coincidences of the year. And it's a chance to remind you that if you would like to come boating with us to Mystic, Sarasota, or Lake Lanier, do let us know the timeframe, and we will try to make it happen. As the year ends, we are glad to have these boating disasters behind us and thrilled to have your friendship. We are hoping it's true that what doesn't kill you makes you stronger.



Merry Christmas

*Joel, Susan, & Stephen Gilbert*

