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Spotlight on

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Wisconsin native Jon Paul Van Harpen is a writer turned underwater explorer turned museum curator who knows a thing or two about peg legs, pillaging, and buried treasure... and is eager to share it with the world.

ARRR.

Residents of Door County, Wisconsin, know him as a former newspaper writer who has introduced them to the treasures of the underwater world through columns in *The Door County Advocate* and *The Peninsula Pulse*. Shipwreck buffs with a soft spot for northeast Wisconsin know him as the author of the book “Door Peninsula Shipwrecks.” But those who have run across the name Jon Paul Van Harpen may not be aware that he is a longtime diver, underwater photographer and researcher with a passion for colonial history whose interests have taken him from the Great Lakes to the Florida Keys and back.

This onetime participant in the PBS series “History Detectives” also has a distinct talent for museum curation. In fact, Van Harpen is the man responsible for the Door County Maritime Museum’s current exhibition “Pirates — Ship to Shore,” the sequel to 2007’s wildly popular “Pirates!” The exhibition is on display at the museum’s Sturgeon Bay location through January 2014.

One might imagine that a man who could assemble such an impressive pirates show, and whose gruff voicemail greeting actually ends in “Arrr,” might have been a diehard pirate fan as a kid. Not so, says Van Harpen. In fact, his

childhood interest in pirates began and ended with Robert Louis Stevenson’s famous 1883 adventure novel.

“When I was fairly young, maybe third or fourth grade, my sister-in-law gave me a *Reader’s Digest* Condensed Book with ‘Treasure Island’ in it,” recalls Van Harpen, who grew up in Menasha, Wisconsin, the grandson of an Escanaba Line trainman. “It was difficult reading at that age, but I got into it. I really was interested in learning the sailing terms.”

What Van Harpen really came to love as a youngster was the nascent sport of scuba diving. The year was 1969, and Van Harpen said it was a very weird year. His parents were both in the hospital for separate surgeries, leaving the 10-year-old boy and his 16-year-old sister largely on their own; not only did they get discharged simultaneously, his brother returned from Vietnam, a survivor of the deadly Tet Offensive, that same day. It was July 20 — and Neil Armstrong walked on the moon.

“Just a week later, they raised the (1846 schooner) *Alvin Clark* in Green Bay,” Van Harpen says, laughing. “To me, anything was possible!”

UNDERWATER EXPLORATION

Deeply inspired by all of this, the young Van Harpen crafted a dive knife out of a hunting knife, got a mask and fins and taught himself to free dive on nearby lakes. In 1970, while on vacation in Escanaba, Michigan, the boy saw the *Clark* out of the water for the first time — and he was enthralled with the idea of wreck diving.

“My cousin was a U.S. Navy diver, and I went scuba diving with him at age 11,” Van Harpen remembers. “I got certified at 13 (in Neenah, Wisconsin), which made me the youngest person ever to go through the program without a parent or guardian. And shipwrecks were really what drew me into the sport.”

Diving did take a back seat for a little while in his young-adult years, he says, as he pursued offroad racing, got married and later divorced. And then the water beckoned once again; he returned as a dive master and ardent preservationist working to protect shipwrecks that remained at the bottom of Lake Michigan.





A PIRATE'S LIFE

By Heather Steinberger FOR ME



"I got into the preservation movement in 1986," Van Harpen says. "I also was technically the last diver to do anything with the *Clark*." Van Harpen was there when the investors who purchased the decaying schooner from former owner Frank Hoffman decided to move the ship. A drain gave way, and Van Harpen found himself diving in zero visibility with hay and 40-pound sandbags to fill that drain.

"In zero viz, you actually close your eyes to waken your other senses," he says.

Sadly, despite their efforts, the *Clark's* life was at an end. Without an adequate conservation plan and funding, she continued to deteriorate and was bulldozed just a few years later. Van Harpen's career, however, was on the rise. He got involved with a little bit of everything in the dive world, including salvage, research, mapping and underwater photography and film footage. He also remained a major player in underwater preservation, bringing in former Wisconsin State Representative Larry Swoboda to help craft legislation to protect shipwrecks from those seeking salvage trophies or those wanting to strip woodwork for other uses.

"The federal Abandoned Shipwreck Act became law in 1987," Van Harpen comments. "We got the state law passed in Wisconsin in 1991."

He remained dedicated to shipwreck preservation, attempting to catalog wreck sites and attract state monies for the Wisconsin Shipwreck Preservation Society. Ultimately, the Wisconsin Historical Society took it over, also establishing the state's Maritime Trails program.

PIRATES: THE INTRODUCTION

Van Harpen's interests took him beyond the Great Lakes as well. From 1987 to 1990, he lived in Florida, working with the Mel Fisher Maritime Heritage Society in Key West.

"I was only supposed to go for a three-month internship," he notes. "I'd met Mel Fisher's head archaeologist, Duncan Matthewson, at the Our World Underwater show in Chicago. We talked about the *Atocha* — it was only a year after they'd found the mother lode (aboard the wreck of the Spanish ship which sank off the Florida Keys in a 1622 hurricane) — and by the end of the conversation, he wanted to come to Wisconsin for projects, and I had the internship!"

During his time with Mel Fisher's organization, Van Harpen says he never got involved in salvage work. He was there strictly to work in the archaeology department.

"I wasn't into the pirate end of it," he admits. "I liked the colonial history and artifacts."

Fast forward to 2006. The Door County Maritime Museum was interested in capitalizing on the "Pirates of the Caribbean" movie franchise and the public's burgeoning fascination with pirate history. The museum asked Van Harpen to step in as a consultant for the exhibit, which would be christened "Pirates!"

"That exhibit dealt with the three Spanish fleets that sank off Florida in the 17th and 18th centuries," Van Harpen explains. "We wanted to explore how the treasure was moving around. Spain was a major force in global shipping; really, this was the first time we had a global economy, with these vessels moving between Asia, the Middle East, China, Europe and the New World."

As consultant, Van Harpen handled all the artifacts, working with the State of Florida in Tallahassee, the Milwaukee Public Museum, the Neville Public Museum in Green Bay, the Mel Fisher Maritime Heritage Society in Key West, and the North Carolina Maritime Museum in Beaufort to secure items for the exhibition.

"Pirates!" would go on to break all of the Door County Maritime Museum's attendance records during its eight-month run, with parents commenting that their kids were dragging them to the museum to see the show. So, when museum staff decided to open the new pirate-themed exhibition in May 2012, they approached





Van Harpen again. This time, however, he would be the curator.

"The biggest difference with 'Pirates — Ship to Shore' is that it has a more general theme than the first exhibit," Van Harpen explains. "We wanted to give people a real walk through history."

PIRATES: THE EXHIBIT

To that end, there is only one artifact display cabinet in the entire exhibit. The rest is devoted to storefronts in a recreated Nassau, Bahamas.

"We based our waterfront community on Nassau instead of Port Royal because it really was a pirate capital," Van Harpen says. "It was a no-man's land. The United Kingdom didn't invest a lot, so the pirates took over. It was called the Pirate Republic, and Blackbeard was actually supposed to be governor!"

"People usually are amazed to learn how governments all had their hands in piracy," he adds.

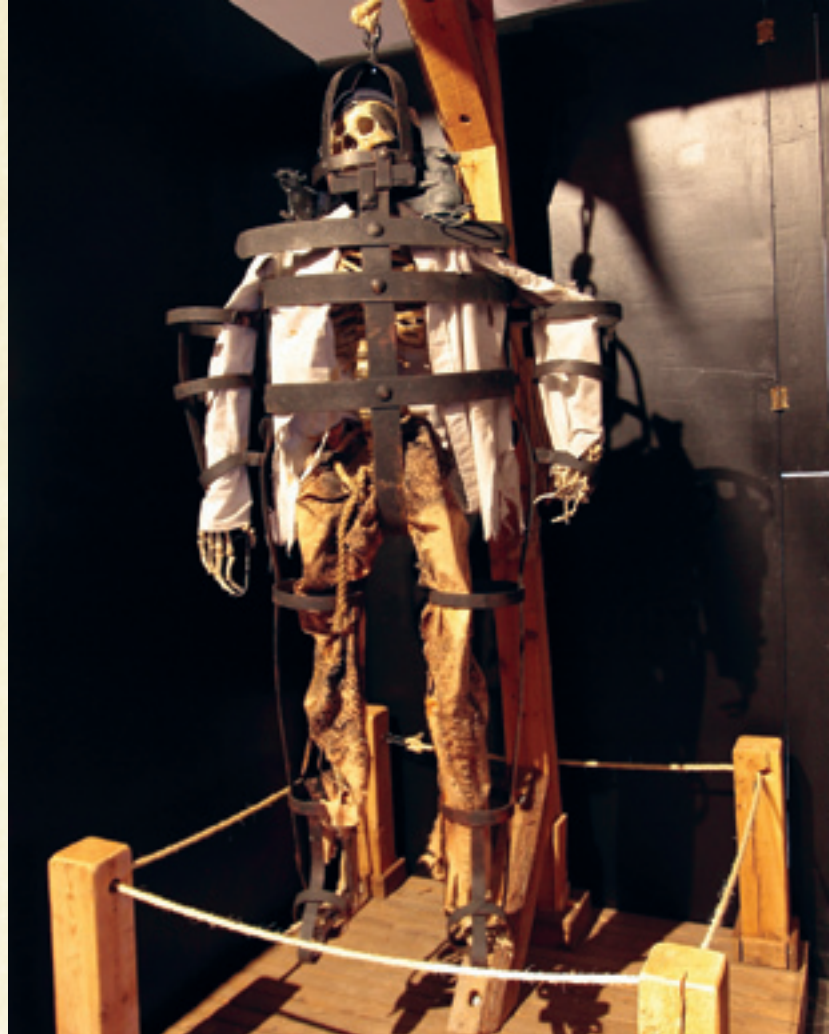
Stores include a gun shop, with original weapons from the Milwaukee Public Museum, the Neville Public Museum, and the State of Florida; an assayer's office, displaying replicas of New World treasures being shipped back to Europe; a display of real Spanish coins from the State of Florida; a ship's chandlery with navigational devices from the State of Florida, the Mel Fisher Maritime Heritage Society and the Wisconsin Maritime Museum in Manitowoc; an authentic pub; an interactive jail; and a costume room so that visitors will be properly attired as they stroll village streets.

"We also have a general store, so we can show people that pirates didn't just steal treasure," Van Harpen observes. "They also stole wine, liquor, medicine — anything of value."

While the waterfront community is striking, the highlight of the exhibition is the pirate ship *Fortune*, loosely based on the *Royal Fortune*. Van Harpen's company, Pirate Exhibits Ltd., contracted to build the ship, which took six months to design and a year to construct.

"The museum gave us the rental price of the exhibit, and we had to build to that price," Van Harpen says. "They had the cannons already, which helped. The ship is 32 feet long, 12 feet high and 10 feet wide... which made it really interesting to get it up a stairwell to the second floor!"

The ship was built in 12 major sections. Van Harpen said he drew heavily on his degree in marine drafting and design, which



he earned locally in a program that trained students for work at Sturgeon Bay's shipyards.

But his business, which he formed with friend and former Door County Maritime Museum curator John Moga, was not a new one. The duo started Pirate Exhibits Ltd. in 2010, when the National Marine Manufacturers Association was looking for something different for its boat shows that season.

"John and I became partners, and we did four shows that year," Van Harpen says.

Now, however, the company's assets are tied up in Sturgeon Bay and are unable to travel. Eventually, when the exhibition ends next winter, Van Harpen says they'll have to find a new home for all the materials.

"The good news is that we won't have to build from scratch," he says, chuckling. "And we can rent it out for a quarter of the cost of building new."

So, what's next for Van Harpen, as he awaits the next chapter for Pirate Exhibits Ltd.? He says he'd like to do some more writing.

"I like the writing better than the publishing," he said with a laugh. "Maybe I'll do more books, maybe I'll do columns again. And I feel very reflective about the *Alvin Clark*, about what we learned and what we're still learning. I enjoyed working with the *Clark*, despite what happened. And now I'd like to see one home for the remaining artifacts and the documentary film footage."

One thing is certain. Whether it's with pirate exhibits, books, newspaper columns, diving, research or preservation, Van Harpen will keep busy pursuing his interests. With a finely tuned sense of history, plenty of engaging stories, a ready laugh... and the occasional "arr." **LB**