

# Don't Pull the Plug!

Nanaimo, B.C. is home to the World's Largest Bathtub

By Laurie Jones



In 1967, the late Mayor Frank Ney and a group of marine enthusiasts dreamed up the idea of building fiberglass, claw foot-style tubs mounted on plywood bases and powered by 7.5 horsepower engines for the first ever bathtub race. With some dynamic marketing, Nanaimo, B.C. – known primarily as a mill town – would soon be catapulted on to the international stage with what was then known as the *Nanaimo to Vancouver Great International World Championship Bathtub Race*.

By 1972, the first version of the World's Largest Bathtub was not only plying the waters in Nanaimo and the Vancouver Marine Festival, it made trips across the country to promote Nanaimo and the bathtub race. Mayor Ney created the persona of Black Frank and dressed the part every year for the race and promotional activities. Ever present on land and water, Black Frank was the talk of the town.



One year in the 1980s, the World's Largest Bathtub was shipped to Toronto by rail to be showcased as a BC symbol at the Grey Cup Parade, with several members of the Loyal Nanaimo Bathtub Society and Mayor Ney in attendance. Sadly, the wintery train trip home took its toll on the tub. When

water and snow in the vessel froze, it became water-logged and the fiberglass hull cracked, making it unseaworthy.

On May 28, 1987, a second giant bathtub, christened the *Spirit of Nanaimo II*, was officially launched in Nanaimo. The length of the new vessel was 29'10" long, with a beam of 10'3". The first boat was only 24'6" long.

On that day, Mark LaLone, vice-Commodore of the Loyal Nanaimo Bathtub Society, said they were pleased to have the new vessel and were looking forward to the launch. "This took approximately one and a half years to build," he noted. "It was built as a super boat should be – from the engine, electrical systems, the safety systems, sandwiched fiberglass and foam to the best construction standards."

LaLone joked that the first giant tub was rumoured to have been built in one weekend with 2 x 4's, chicken wire, foam and eight cases of Carling's beer.

Also at the launch in 1987 was John Ruttan, then Commodore of the Loyal Nanaimo Bathtub Society and future mayor of Nanaimo. "We are very proud of the new *Spirit of Nanaimo II* tub. This is going to be the one we will use at all the major events because it's a seagoing vessel with a properly designed marine hull and it's capable of a good speed. We're looking forward to attending many marine activities locally and in other cities, and arriving by water," he said. "When we envisioned the project to begin with, we never realized it would look this nice."

Ruttan said the first tub had been around for 15 years and would be maintained for smaller events such as local parades. "It's no longer seaworthy due to many hard years on the water and multiple trips across the country for promotional purposes."

As the years went by, every summer the big tub was parked, or docked at various locations in town and became a symbol for the launch of Bathtub Weekend, now known as the Nanaimo Marine Festival. The white section of the hull was changed to Pepsi Blue after the demise of the Vancouver Marine Festival when the tubs no longer raced from Nanaimo to Kitsilano Beach.



But the *Spirit of Nanaimo II* was still a thrill to see on the water on race weekend, for boaters and ferry passengers alike.



Whether people are officially members of the Loyal Nanaimo Bathtub Society, or one of the lucky few who are invited to cruise the local waters on the iconic tub, memories of taking part in a one-of-a-kind boating experience last a lifetime.



The *Spirit of Nanaimo II* still makes its mark on sea and land year-round at a variety of festivities, including being the water touring boat during the Miss Nanaimo pageant.



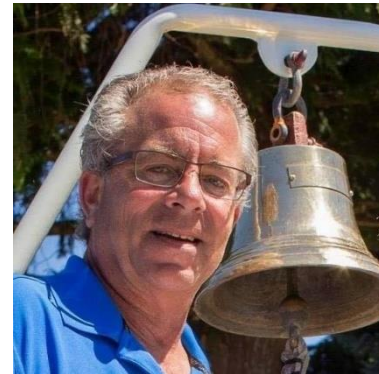
Not to be outdone, the annual Santa Clause Parade also shows the big tub may be a plan B for Santa and his team, who are quick to volunteer their time to dress up for the colourful evening of frolicking on dry land, with twinkling lights to guide their way down the streets of Nanaimo.



In 2019, the *Spirit of Nanaimo II* was renamed the *SS Bill McGuire* in memory of past Commodore Bill McGuire.

Greg Peacock, current Commodore of the Loyal Nanaimo Bathtub Society, says cancelling the bathtub race in the summer of 2021 due to COVID was disappointing, but the intention is that by summer 2022, the competition will be back in full swing.

"The giant bath tub is really an opportunity for us to thank and promote all the organizations that help us do what we do," he explains. "Although we will showcase race sponsors, many names on the tub are those who help with our events and the society as a whole. Just as important, there are a number of companies whose staff spent hours restoring and refreshing the tub, such as Extreme Fibreglass, Nanaimo Mack, who painted it, and Canadian Marine Parts who provided us with a new shield for the drive unit of the vessel."



Local radio stations and newspapers also have honoured spots on the giant tub for their promotional contributions to the Society, as do the Nanaimo Port Authority and Quality Foods.



Today the World's Largest Bathtub is back to the original white hull with red and yellow stripes.

After the logos are added, it will once again be ready to promote one of the most unique sporting events in the world – the Nanaimo Marine Festival and World Championship Bathtub Race – and encourage competitors from near

and far to get their race tubs ready for the first post-pandemic challenge at sea.

"At the end of the day, the Loyal Nanaimo Bathtub Society – and the World's Largest Bathtub – is about community. It's why we do what we do," says Peacock.

Photos courtesy of the Loyal Nanaimo Bathtub Society.