

Salt of all Trades — Sven Johansson

Seven summers. That's what it took for Sven Johansson to skipper the 60-foot *Belvedere* through the ice-laden Northwest Passage from the Pacific to the Atlantic. The saga began in early 1982 after John Bockstoce, a Massachusetts-based risk-taker with a love for the Arctic, recruited Sven, an adventurous ship's captain, reindeer specialist and bush pilot. Bockstoce wanted to be on the first yacht to cross the Passage from west to east and needed a skipper who knew about ice.

Intrigued by the challenge, Sven left for San Diego to locate the right boat. "I found a 60-foot twin-keeled, three-quarter inch steel cutter called *Pacifier*. Obviously, we couldn't cross the Arctic Ocean in a boat sucking its thumb," the Swedish-born adventurer chuckles. "We renamed her *Belvedere*, after the famous whaler. She'd just come in from Hawaii and drew only five feet. I had the keels cut off and then rewelded with a weak weld. You see, when the ice buckles between the keels, it can rip them off and shatter the boat. I wanted the keels to shear off easily."

Later that year, Sven brought the *Belvedere* to Victoria and refurbished it for Arctic duty. He added a pilot house, insulated her to avoid condensation, uninstalled the air conditioning system, and put in four heating systems: a glycol-laced hot water system, a diesel heater, separate diesel stove and a wood burning stove that could adapt to burning seal blubber.

In early May the following year, Sven and his crew set sail for New York through the Northwest Passage. Although rough weather was still a threat, he timed departure to benefit from the following winds that blew the yacht to Dutch Harbor in the Aleutians. There they waited until the Pacific high kicked in, the Bering Strait ice melted, and they could sail on to Point Barrow, the northernmost tip of Alaska. Travel north of the Bering cannot begin until early August, and only if the winds are southerly and blow the ice north; easterlies push the ice onto the beaches. "For ships in the far north, timing is everything." The *Belvedere* made it through the Beaufort Sea arriving in Tuktoyaktuk on August 26, too late in the season to transit the Northwest Passage's closing ice fields.

For the next five summers, the team tried to outwit the weather, leaving Tuktoyaktuk in late July after the Beaufort Sea's frozen vastness thawed sufficiently for a yacht to squeak through. They'd thread their way through the frozen clumps as fast as possible, but each year, rafts of gathering pack ice would threaten to crush or trap the vessel and force a return. "We'd spend from three-to-five weeks wending our way between icebergs and sheets. But we never hit the ice without knowing it." Sometimes Sven would deliberately steer the boat into a crack and then try to crash through the rest of the sheet.

In 1987, they again left MacKenzie Bay and came within 300 miles of their target — the Atlantic — before blockading ice floes forced them to return. "The following year, we thought we'd lost again. The stark, pure-white ice massed around us, grinding against the hull. We crept along and then anchored for four days until an east wind shifted the ice enough to let us sneak through and reach Baffin Bay, and later, Holsteinsborg in Greenland." The boat was put on the hard and the following summer, after sailing to Godthaab (now Nuuk), they journeyed south through Davis Strait toward Labrador. "The wind and weather cooperated in early July," says Sven, "although we still had to transit ice packs." They anchored off Labrador's Cartwright, a small community

located inside a protected fjord, where the temperatures soared. “We couldn’t fathom it,” says Sven. “We went from freezing to 100°. I’m talking Fahrenheit, of course.” After stopping in Nova Scotia, the *Belvedere* reached New York with great fanfare.

Sven seems to have danced through life, which may account for his ageless look. Although short and roly-poly, his handshake crushes my bones, his hair still tawny. He dropped out of school after grade six, and claims his floor-to-ceiling bookcases lining the walls of his bachelor apartment, and the stacks of music CDs ranging from Bach to jazz, make up for his lack of formal education. “Had to make up for it, you know.” One of his mottos for living a meaningful life is “Never a bad day.”

Although he spent half his life on the water, Sven never took any formal ship handling or navigation training. Born west of Stockholm in Seffle, Sweden, 78 years ago, this man of many talents learned on the job. When he was six, his family moved near Göteborg, on Sweden’s west coast, where “every damn kid builds a raft.” Later, at age 20, he sailed a friend’s small sailboat whenever he could. “It gave me a good sense of the wind and water and helped me become a serious boating professional.”

After World War II, he moved north to Lapland “living in the wilderness, which I loved.” He got to know and work with local reindeer herders, and spent winters hunting, fishing and trapping. In his late twenties, he landed a summers-only captain’s job on a 36-foot diesel boat transporting freight across a chain of lakes in Northern Sweden. They’d portage goods by hand-pushing railroad carts on small-gage tracks linking the lakes. A locomotive powered by a car engine would sometimes push the heavier loads, if, Sven laughs, they could get hold of the key to the loco shed. “Our boat carried whole trucks hanging over the bow — there wasn’t much regulation in that remote part. Sometimes I’d be so sleep-deprived I’d see things that weren’t there — terrific homework for transiting the Northwest Passage. Non-stop training. But I never had an accident. And I had great fun.”

He opted to leave Sweden when the government published plans to build hydropower plants in the wilderness and change the inhabitants’ way of life. Searching for other wild places, he singled out Arctic Canada as the logical choice. His experience with reindeer helped him land in Canada. “It’s easy to become an expert in such a narrow field,” Sven comments in his sing-song Swedish accent. “I wanted to emigrate. They wanted someone to take charge of the Canadian Reindeer project. I ended up Inuvik with the task of turning around the reindeer industry — food for the Inuit when caribou herds were scarce.”

Hired as an independent contractor, Sven arrived at Reindeer Station on the MacKenzie south of Tuktoyaktuk. The project was in trouble because the Inuits’ approach to reindeer herding differed greatly from the directives sent from Ottawa. “The bureaucrats wanted intensive, close-in herding,” says Sven. “But large herds need extensive grazing areas. These animals must roam freely and widely to find scarce tundra plants. So that’s what we let them do.” Sven reorganized the flocks, corralled the animals only when needed, and calmed the discord. “We patrolled the range against predators, both four- and two-footed ones.” In five years, he made reindeer herding a viable industry — and when abundant caribou herds competed with the local demand for reindeer meat, he froze it and shipped it south. Sometimes that involved boats. “We had to

transport the meat and used canoes with outboards, barges and tugs,” he says, a gleam in his eye. “Then we located the *Nanuk*, a heavy wooden, government ship with planks missing and no engine.” Sven and Inuit friends repaired it and installed an engine: “It worked great. These people were incredibly technically skilled.”

The reindeer organized, Sven, always entrepreneurial, trapped fox and ptarmigan for four years in the Mackenzie Mountains, built a cabin, hunted for food and became a big-game outfitter, guiding clients in August and September, the two months before the snows. As the nearest neighbour was 100 miles away, he bought a plane, attached fat, spongy “tundra tires” so he could land on rocks and bumps, and passed his pilot licence. Although isolated, he loved his life in the mountains. “You have complete independence, you know. It’s a rich, interesting life.”

In 1967, Sven fell in love — with the *North Star of Herschel Island*. The last of the western Arctic cargo ships, she had been built for two Inuit fox trappers in 1935 at the George W. Kneass Shipyard in San Francisco. The 57-foot sloop transported furs and supplies between Aklavik and Tuktoyaktuk to Sachs Harbour on Banks Island. “They’d trap white fox,” says Sven. “But they had to have their own water transport — dog teams could only carry small loads and the animals needed too much feed.”

Usually, the *North Star* was beached out during the long gloomy winter, and when her services became superfluous after airplanes began transporting cargo in the Arctic in the early 1960s, she remained abandoned on a Banks Island beach for six years. But its hull was shaped like a clipper ship and its charm captured Sven’s heart. That and its planked inner hull covered with Irish ship’s felt overlain with Australian greenheart, an exceptionally dense and hard wood also used to sheathe Shackleton’s *Endurance*. “The *North Star* was a ship that could freeze and survive,” Sven says. “And she had sails. That saves on fuel.”

He bought her and began repairs in Inuvik on the Mackenzie River delta. “I had no plans for the boat and said to myself, ‘what will you do with it?’” Nonetheless, he installed a new diesel engine and refitted her for use in the Beaufort Sea. One day, two Calgarians shouting to him from the shore solved his dilemma: oil had been found in Alaska’s Prudhoe Bay and the Canadian oil patch was prospecting the Northwest Territories. “That first charter with those Calgarians in the Beaufort Sea paid for making the boat seaworthy and left me with money to spare. I was lucky. There weren’t any other boats in the delta. Later, I even became a supply ship for a Houston oil company.” He was also “discovered” by the Geological Survey of Canada, which was studying the flora, fauna, bottom conditions and permafrost composition for potential pipelines. He also assisted with research studies on oil-feeding bacteria. “These microbes are a natural way of curing oil spills,” says Sven. “There were only a few around naturally, but when oil enters the water, these critters multiply like crazy.” His gamble on the old ship had paid off and the *North Star* became his home for nearly three decades.

“I took enormous pride in never putting a scratch on neither the *North Star* nor the *Belvedere*,” continues Sven. “That’s called seamanship.” He’d read in a *National Geographic* tale about David Lewis’s voyage single handed through the Antarctic in his 32-foot sloop *Ice Bird* (three times capsized and twice dismasted). Lewis had been quoted as saying, “The voyage seemed a sure rendezvous with death.” Sven finds himself at cross currents with that sentiment. “I never

believed in that attitude,” he says. “When you undertake these adventures, you must have a pleasant time. And you must make your decisions before you get stuck.”

In the early 1970s, Sven, married and with a young daughter, decided to move south. He observed changes in Arctic Canada, changes he didn't endorse. “The Inuit had been independent for thousands of years,” he says. “But do-gooders from the south who knew nothing about their way of life persuaded the government the aboriginals had been badly treated, that they'd been victimized. The government listened, tried to make Inuits into middle class folks but created dependence instead. I didn't want to stay.” The family sailed aboard the *North Star* through the Bering Strait around Alaska and arrived in Vancouver by 1974.

A year later, Sven had settled at Victoria's Fisherman's Wharf as a live-aboard. In summer, his boat supplied the International Boundary Commission surveying the B.C. and Alaska coasts; in winter, he offered sail training to young people. Often, he'd moor the boat at a dock, somewhere between Sooke and Courtenay, and school classes would visit the ship. “I used the ship as an introduction to seamanship and life skills. We'd tie knots. I'd focus on team work, like hoisting the teacher while singing a shanty. It taught responsibility for someone's life.”

He also converted the *North Star* into a 3-masted schooner, adding a bowsprit and jib boom, and making it the only fully-rigged, square sail ship in Canada. It carries 16 sails, including royals.

During his many adventures, Sven never worried about money. “I've always disregarded money. That's why I can do so many things. I don't let the lack of it stop me. I jump in headlong and the money comes. Money is a resource you must use immediately to make life better. Don't keep it — it does nothing for you.”

In 1993, Sven was made a companion of the Order of Canada, an honour that recognizes lifetime achievement. The award acknowledged Sven's contributions to wildlife management and reindeer husbandry, and his key role in navigating the first private vessel through the Northwest Passage.

But his life on the water and in the wild didn't foreshadow Sven's most recent — and most dramatic — career change. He sold the *North Star* in 1996 to pursue his other passion: dance. Convinced that dance is limited by gravity, he invented mechanical instruments that support dancers through the entire space on a stage, allowing even disabled people to dance. Sven choreographs works and takes performers to Europe. His work has been televised.

How does living with the elements for most of his life fit with dance? “The sea taught me to be humble,” Sven said fervently. “I always wanted to learn what the sea is about — its force, its way. Then you learn not to do things against the sea but to be harmonious with it. This respect for the sea's power shapes your character so you can adapt to anything in life.”

He sometimes misses the ocean but has no regrets. “Never look back is my motto. It gives you a kink in the neck.”

Sven Johansson died in 2019 at 95 years of age.