Editor’s Note: The Knutson Boatyard will be featured in our upcoming exhibit “Boats and Boatyards: Long Island and Westchester’s Contemporary Boat Builders and Boatyards.” The exhibit will open on January 17 at Arts Westchester in White Plains. Stay tuned for details.

Knutson Boatyard

Huntington, New York

Drive north along New York Avenue in Huntington and you will come to Knutsons Boat Yard, one of the oldest operating yards on Long Island that dates to the mid 19th century. According to owner Dan Knutson, the 3rd generation of Knutsons to manage the yard, the first yard on the site was the Atkinson Wheeler Shipyard, followed by the Abrams Shipyard, and in 1937 was purchased by Thomas Knutson, who kept the Abrams name. When Thomas Knutson arrived, many of the workers were Norwegians, like himself, and Italians, whose families had worked in Huntington Harbor as boat builders and fishermen. Like other family owned boat yards, the Knutsons built wooden boats and ships for use in local industries. However during World War II the yard eagerly began building military boats for the Navy, Air Force and the War Department, leading to a major expansion in the yard. Thomas’ son Arthur also worked in the yard.

“This was the largest employer in Suffolk County in the 1940s and 50s - WWII and Korean War. My

Dan Knutson is the 3rd generation of Knutsons to manage the yard.

See Knutson Boatyard on page 3

Passings: Lowell Ockers

Lowell Ockers was born in West Sayville and lived there his entire life. Lowell started working full time in the bay after returning from the Navy in 1957. He started fishing and catching eels with traps purchased from his father, who was also a bayman. Lowell, who enjoyed the independent lifestyle, would spend time clamming in between fishing and eeling. During a good year of eeling he would catch 10,000-12,000 pounds. He was one of the last bayman to use pound fish traps in the Great South Bay. He sold his nets in 1990 because the fishing had dramatically declined and finally ended his career in 1992. Lowell stayed connected to fishing by making sinkers for a few commercial fishermen, going down to the docks, and reading commercial fishing publications. Lowell participated in many Long Island Traditions events including several Maritime Folklife Festivals and Boating with the Baymen cruises. He also advocated on the behalf of commercial fishermen at local meetings and hearings. He was a mentor for several area baymen and fishermen including Bill Hamilton and John Verbeke. We shall miss him.
Indian Music and Dance Programs

There will be several programs this fall celebrating Indian music and dance on Long Island. On October 20th Mala Desai, classical Odissi dancer, will be performing at the Vedic Heritage Center in Hempstead with several accomplished musicians visiting from India. The program is at 6 pm and includes snacks. Tickets are $25. For more information call (516) 539-9055.

On Sunday, December 9th the Young Indian Culture Group will be presenting their annual Mangala program featuring area musicians and dancers including Taalika, an all female percussion band led by Sejal Kukadia of the Taalim School. The program takes place at Landmark on Main Street, 232 Main Street, Port Washington, NY at 3pm. Tickets are $10. For information call (516) 739-1575 or visit www.yicg.com.

Arts Education Partnerships

We are pleased to announce that the 2012-13 school year will see Long Island Traditions back in area school districts. The Wheatley High School in the East Williston School District, led by social studies teachers Dr. Paul Van Wie and Dr. John Staudt, will be exploring the sustainability of fishing on Long Island as an occupation with Wheatley high school seniors. Participating fishers will include Tony Sougstad, Tom Jefferies, Joey Scavone and Flo Sharkey. Students will be comparing local fishing experiences with those discussed in Sebastian Junger’s The Perfect Storm which chronicles the demise of the Gloucester fishing boat The Andrea Gail, which perished in 1991. Students will be conducting interviews and research in order to understand the future of Long Island’s commercial fishers. The program is made possible through the East Williston School district’s funding.

In Freeport 4th grade school students at the Archer Street School will be learning about the maritime heritage of Long Island through interviews and hands on workshops, along with a field trip to Woodcleft Canal. This year the program will include presentations by baymen Tom Jefferies and Joey Scavone, and environmental educator Don Harris of SPLASH. This program is made possible through the Freeport School District.
grandfather was building boats before the war. The submarine chaser was really the work force and backbone of the US Navy,” according to Dan Knutson. “On the eastern seaboard our biggest threat was subs. They were rescuing our airmen that were crashing all the time. They were building these planes really fast. Maintenance wasn’t the best. A lot of it was all new technology. And they needed a fast boat to get these guys out of the water. And those were the air sea rescue boats built here. The submarine chasers could chase a submarine for 2 days and that’s how long it took to kill a sub.” One of the reasons they were able to expand so rapidly was because the yard had three marine railways, making Huntington Harbor one of the busiest ports on the east coast. The yard milled its own lumber, had a carpentry shop, and also a machine shop that dates to the late 19th century. The Knutsons were also fortunate to have a major industry after World War II.

With the increase in suburban residents after the war, there was more demand for leisure boats, including sail boats. Knutson built several models of sail boats, naming each one for the length of the boat. One of the more popular boats was the K-37, a sailboat that commanded the impressive sum of $16,000 in the 1960s. The wooden boat included such features as self-bailing teak cockpits, stainless steel rigging and an indoor “head” or bathroom. There was also a 2-burner stove and foam rubber mattresses for sleeping, an innovation at that time. Other popular sailboat models included the K-35 sloop and the K-35 yawl.

As word spread of Knutson’s sailboats, so did attention from popular media. The cast and crew of “Let’s Take a Trip” starring Sonny Fox, visited the yard, along with regional and national newspapers including the New York Times. However changes were coming to the design and manufacturing of motor and sailboats. In the mid 1950s fiberglass began to replace wooden boats, due to their ease of maintenance and the less costly manufacturing process. No longer would dozens of boat builders and carpenters be necessary. While demand was still high for expertly designed boats, including wooden elements, fewer men were needed to work in the yard, including Knutsons.

Today the yard is quiet, but still operating. Dan Knutson is the 3rd generation in his family to work on boats, maintaining them with the knowledge that was passed down to him from his father and grandfather. He helps wooden boat owners keep decorative and functional elements intact, using tools and machines that are often older than his 52 years. Yet times are difficult at Knutsons and other traditional boat yards. With waterfront property commanding a premium, it is a testament to the Knutsons that the yard has survived. As Dan explains “Long Island is very prohibitive to build boats because of the labor cost and cost of living here. Now I’m at a point where I’m barely able to make money out of the operation because my taxes have more than doubled, whereas my income has stayed the same since ‘02.” The high price of fuel has also affected the boating industry. Despite the obstacles, Dan continues, as his ancestors did before him, preserving wooden boats for future generations.

Bay House Book Signings

This fall and winter we will be having several book signing events of On The Bay, so please come join us and get your new 2nd edition signed by director Nancy Solomon. The dates are:

Sunday, November 18: Massapequa Historical Society, Old Grace Church, 23 Cedar Shore Drive, Massapequa 2pm. For information call (516) 799-2023.

January 9: Northport Veterans Administration. 79 Middleville Road, Building 92, Northport. 2pm. For information call (631) 261-4400.
PLEASE NOTE: If you have a Long Island concert or program that focuses on some aspect of traditional culture, drop us a line and we’ll put it in our “Events of Interest” column.

Don’t forget to visit our web site and our Facebook page for timely information.

October 20: Mala Desai at Vedic Heritage Center (see accompanying article)

November 18: Bay House book signing, Old Grace Church, Massapequa (see accompanying article)

December 9: Mangala program. Landmark on Main Street (see accompanying article)

January 9: Bay House book signing, Northport Veterans Administration (see accompanying article)