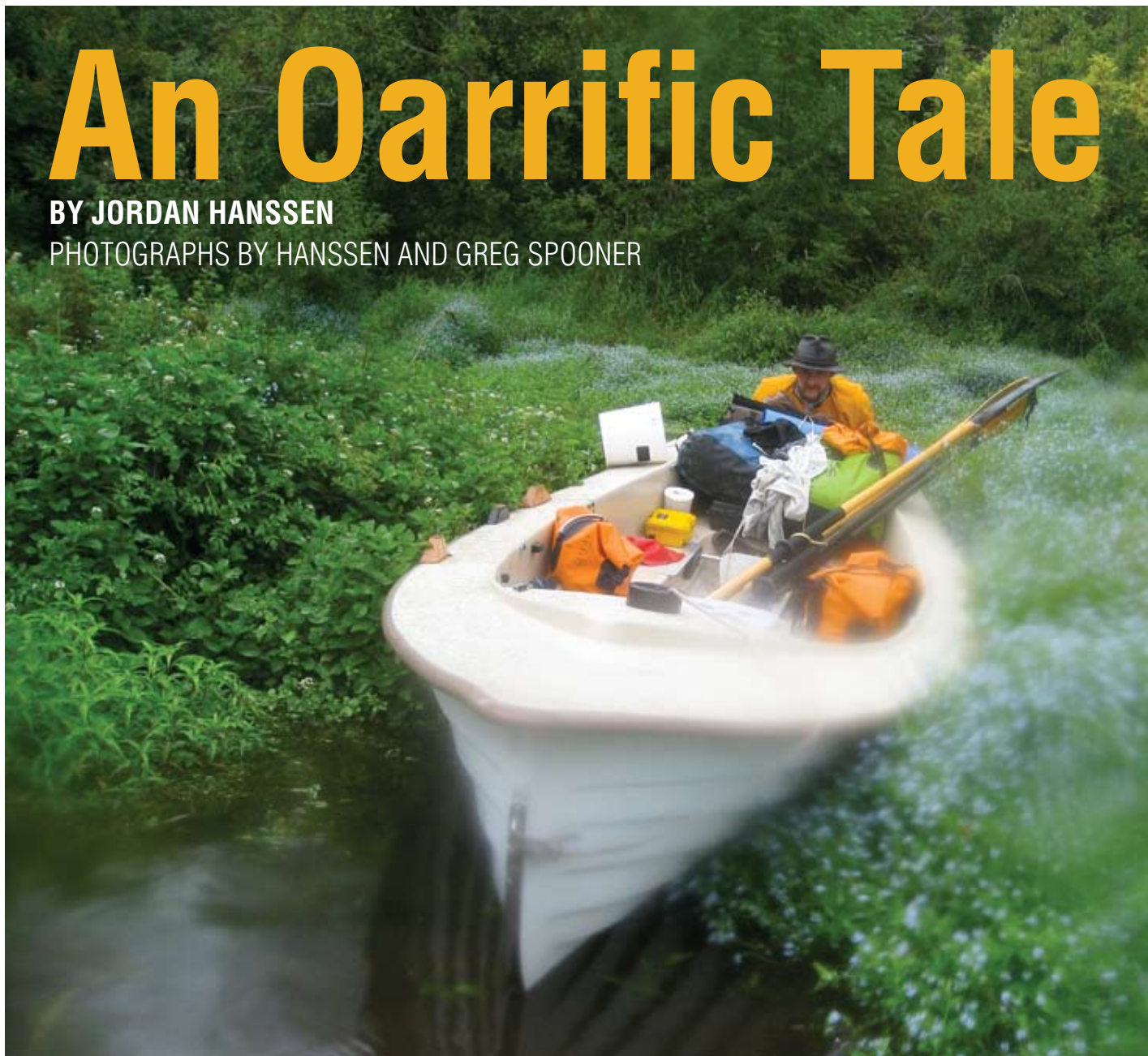


# An Oarrific Tale

BY JORDAN HANSSEN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY HANSSEN AND GREG SPOONER



**T** August 15th 2008, 6:23 a.m., just north of Queets River confluence.

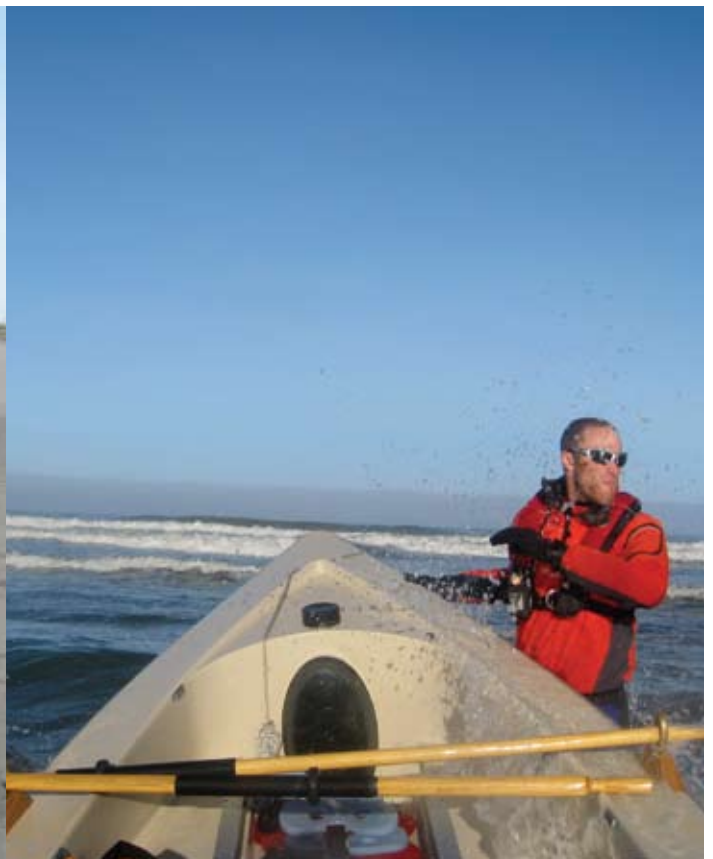
he fog had lifted, and there was little wind. The waves were clean and even. The tide was out, and we rolled 350 pounds of boat and gear on driftwood to the water's edge like an ancient block of limestone to the pyramids. Gear was lashed down extra tight, and we donned our dry suits.

Greg and I waded into deeper water, successive waves slapping the hull. Greg jumped in the bow and began to row. I steadied the boat with one hand, taking pictures with the other. Greg's labor produced steady progress, and I hauled myself into the stern, joining him on the oars, struggling to lengthen my stroke through the choppy surf. A cresting wave filled the cockpit to our ankles. We rowed on, attempting to power through the breakers.

Wave two changed my priorities from rowing to bailing. My camera, left on record in the confusion, later confirmed the futile efforts of the little grey hand pump to vomit the Pacific out of the boat and back where it belonged. All forward momentum had stopped, leaving our little dory the proverbial sitting duck. Matters continued to complicate themselves as our bright and

buoyant Crayola color dry bags beginning to struggle out from under my allegedly secure strapping job and float around the cockpit. The deciding wave, slightly larger than the first two, crested at an unforgiving angle to our bow. Greg continued to mechanically throw his back against the oars; water was well above our knees and rising to the gunwales. I focused on my pumping efforts, acting compulsively as I rapidly contemplated our next course of action. In my peripheral vision I became vaguely aware that the black Pelican case that held our GPS and VHF was floating away.

The boat was not beam to the waves, and I fell into chest-deep water holding my hands on the hull to keep the boat from swinging to hit me. Greg and I yelled incoherent orders at each other and despite the roar of the surf, concluded it would be best



for him to manhandle our new submarine as I swam, ran and crawled among the breaking surf to rescue our bags. I feared that the spewing mouth of the Queets River just south of us would wash our gear out to sea. Fortunately the physics of this river mouth interacting with the oncoming ocean created a swirling eddy that neatly threw what scattered gear I could not retrieve onto the beach. Thankfully our only casualty besides dignity was a small sponge. I joined Greg back in the surf bailing a bathtub's worth of water from the cockpit until the otherwise unscathed craft became light enough to haul up onto the beach.

### Summer 2007, Ballard.

"In the right boat you could completely circumnavigate the Olympic Peninsula."

This was the kind of claim that would have piqued my interest anyway. However, when said by David Burch, friend and Seattle-based navigator, I listened intently. In 2006 he lent his expertise to three friends and me in a rowing race from New York to England. We won. David played a key roll in navigation. Thus, his claim that the Olympic Peninsula could be circumnavigated in a boat meant that it could be done.

Those familiar with the Olympic Peninsula know the route from Olympia to Gray's Harbor is navigable in a variety of craft. The crux lies between Gray's Harbor and Budd Inlet. On most maps, this route is deceptively simple: up the Chehalis to the Black River, through Black Lake and a canal that goes north until it hits Percival Creek and Capitol Lake.

Route established I needed a partner and the necessary apparatus for the expedition. David's endorsement made the trip an easy sell to my Atlantic rowing comrade, Greg Spooner, and I assumed correctly that his participation was a forgone conclusion.

OPPOSITE—Jordan pushes the boat through periwinkles near the mouth of the Black River .

ABOVE L to R— Washed up on Dungeness Spit Greg hunkers down to make some dinner. Greg guides the boat out into the waves just north of the Queets confluence.

PAGE 27—Greg balances the boat on our first portage on the Chehalis. Jordan guides the boat through a nameless rivulet of the Black River in a farmer's field. Two hours later the boat would on completely dry land, being pushed.

Our journey would take us through nearly every classification of water except open ocean, and the appropriate vessel had to meet many demands. We turned to Dave Robertson of Gig Harbor Boat Works. Dave and his team built the sliding seat system for our ocean rowboat. Like David Burch's navigation, Dave's seats were a major contributor to our success. His seats are standard design on his rowboats. They proved such a success that the race organizers now recommend his seat design to anyone who wants to row an ocean.

Our Atlantic education taught us the virtue of a classic hull design (despite the ocean rowboat's rocket ship appearance, she had classic curves below the waterline). The traditional hull of a dory is remarkable. The beauty we attribute to it is a matter of form following function. With reasonable effort, it can be brought to reasonable speed with a reasonable load of gear in a reasonable amount of weather.

Dave finds designs of traditional boats he likes and fashions them out of modern material. The lap strakes built into his molds reflect his respect and affection for the look. The end result is a classic boat of durable fiberglass, enhanced with his sliding seat.

We choose the Melonseed. This is the only boat in Dave's fleet

# WE CHANNEL LEWIS, CLARK AND THE A-TEAM:

Or How the Hell we got back to Gig Harbor—Abridged Version.

There were conflicting emotions during our drive from the Pacific Coast to Hoquiam in Gray's Harbor. From a brutally honest assessment, our decision to take the responsible route and avoid battle with the Pacific surf meant we had failed in our goal of circumnavigating the Olympic Peninsula. Yet, decision made, we looked toward the rivers—the most unknown part of our trip, for redemption.

In 1824 the Hudson Bay Company sent an expedition of forty men and three rowboats up the Chehalis and Black River to search for the most efficient route from the Columbia to Puget Sound. The journal of an Irish officer came with the warning that the waters we planned to enter would become “very troublesome” to ascend in rowboats. Young, dumb, and undeterred, Greg and I sallied forth up the Chehalis the next day. A two knot tidal current pushed us briskly up river past hundreds of grey pilings topped with green grass.

In six hours our tide-enhanced efforts put us twenty miles up river till our hull met river rock. For three days we navigated gravel beds and cataracts—learning the basics of up river rowing (less oars, more rope). This put us well into the Black River, a tributary of the Chehalis. With the exception of a couple of three-mile sections accessible to canoeing, the Black is a shallow river, and our dory seemed titanic. Rain pelted us consistently, but it kept the curious eyes indoors and not on the two large men pushing and pulling a sixteen and a half foot boat up the damp gravel bed that ran though their back yards.

Between Black River and Black Lake are two farmers' fields and three miles of swamp. Field one was filled with irritable cows. Field two was so dense with floating grass that the best solution was to push the boat a quarter mile over a bone-dry tall grass that parted like the Red Sea before our hull.

After three days of hauling three hundred fifty pounds of boat and gear upriver to the swamp we felt we “knew tough.” We were quite wrong. After arriving at the swamp at ten a.m. with eleven hours of daylight left, we confidently predicted that we would traverse the three miles of morass to Black Lake by early evening. The swamp was a maze of lily pads, floating grass, thicket, and cattails. At nine p.m. we remained a half-mile from the lake. I stopped hacking thicket with my machete and turned to Greg, noting the boat was wedged between two trees and sitting on top of floating grass. I suggested we stop for the night. He agreed.

It took eight hours to go that half-mile. The boat floated between lily pads as big as dinner plates. These were attached to large stalks underneath the water and could easily hold our weight. Three hundred feet from the lake the pads disappeared into a wall of thicket. We could hear waterskiing

and the implied beer drinking that went with it. Our navigator, David Burch, was unsympathetic. The last of our cell phone juice brought this sage advice: “Just go back and find the little blue line, it's right here on my map. Perhaps it's covered with some of that mud.”

This translates to: “I've helped you as much as I can. Grab that machete you hauled around the peninsula and solve this problem.” We emerged at the edge of Black Lake an hour later like multi colored swamp things in our mud-covered blue and yellow dry suits.

Black Lake was an easy row. The canal towards Olympia proved an easy drag. Pulling the boat out of a 15-foot embankment, a satisfying challenge. Putting the boat on railroad tracks and pushing it a mile and a half and



having to dodge a train—possibly the dumbest thing I have ever done.

We emerged at Capitol Lake in Olympia. A police officer observed our struggle, laughed, and enlightened us that boats work better in the lake. By midnight we were back in the salty, tide-influenced waters of Budd Inlet, rowing in forty-five minute shifts while the other man slept beneath a dewy tarp. Phosphorescence squiggled in the kelp. The sky was clear and stars were bright. Devil's Head emerged at the end of the fourth shift and we fell asleep on the beach to a rising pink sun. Three hours later the tide called us north for the last time. Morning heat made waking easy. The run under the big green bridges into Gig Harbor was thankfully uneventful save the Tall Ships coming into port. Their off white sails filled the air like a flock of birds. We rowed in after them. —*Jordan Hanssen*



## A cresting wave grasped the hull. Greg nodded, and I tossed the drogue.

that has no historic predecessor. At 16.5 feet and 200 pounds, it was the only boat he had in stock that was long enough for us to fit in and light enough for us to manhandle.

### August 4 – August 15, 2008

The trip started at Gig Harbor, an aptly named place to start any endeavor involving oars. Two weeks of plying water for eight to sixteen hours a day had brought us up the Puget Sound, out the Strait of Juan de Fuca and halfway down Washington's rugged Pacific coast. A few incidents and encounters merit reference.

Our first camp along the Strait was on a fine sandy beach. We slept close to the boat, using it as a windbreak. That morning an either angry or amorous elephant seal charged us as we began to stir in our bivy sacks. Not many things will motivate young men to leap out of their sleeping bags like the threat of something that looks like an enormous aqua-mammalian-banana slug intent on loving or fighting. It observed our movement and stopped, staring at us blankly through small, shiny black eyes. After a long pause it lifted its head and to our great relief, jiggled its prodigious bulk away from us and into the water.

Thirty-six hours later a small craft advisory rocked us out of Port Angeles into an all night row through phosphorescence. A massive cruise ship, lit like an enormous floating diamond, passed us on its way back from Alaska. For two more days we rowed over thick kelp beds filled with jellyfish and horizon-to-horizon rainbows into Neah Bay. Here local fishermen and passing sailors complimented our craft's classic lines with camaraderie not experienced in previous ports.

We followed the tide around Tattoosh Island, past bird colonies and seal rookeries, for a short-lived view of the rocky coast before dense fog enveloped the boat. Visibility closed to fifty yards, and we rowed the whole day into a void. That afternoon voices materialized through the fog. As we approached the stacks and islands off Cape Alva the voices revealed themselves as the roars of dozens of sea lions. Thick kelp muffled the swells of the already calm ocean. At the arrival of each invisible trough, rocks broke the surface like breaching whales. Close into shore we could see the backs of cresting waves, but still no land. Night approached and the threat of a beach landing in the dark made rowing through the night to La Push the better option. Although we carried a VHF, we had cell service and called the La Push Coast Guard, notifying them of our situation. They called back. Mike, the man in charge told us he's usually up all night after a call like ours. It seemed like an appropriate time to drop the "Don't worry, we rowed across the North Atlantic" card. It worked too well. Mike seemed a little too at ease, going so far as to refer to us as "professionals." We cooked beef stroganoff in a camp stove and told dirty jokes before falling into forty-five minute watches. One rowing, one sleeping: both dreaming of being awake. The last few miles we rowed together and sang "Piano Man" at the top of our lungs to stay awake.

La Push welcomed us at 4:30 a.m. Shades of grey obscured the old fishing boats and trailer homes. Stray dogs barked protectively and followed closely at our heels as we checked in with the Coast Guard, somewhat disappointed to find out they wouldn't be in until six. Day came without sun. The harbormaster talked coaching football with us, and when we slept in our boat that day, he told the kids to light their fireworks somewhere else. Two

trawlers, Steve and Larry, invited us to exchange tales over pork chops and whiskey. These gentlemen had fished from California to Alaska, and they came back to La Push. The challenge of the waters and the coastline had gotten into their blood. So had the community. When a local died, the harbormaster would ask for a couple of salmon for the funeral. They always got more than they needed. This was a fishing town reminiscent of thirty years ago. In their eyes, it was the only one left on the west coast. Larry offered us some berths for the night, and we slept in the crannies of his fishing boat, warm and dry.

Morning was clear, but fog remained in every direction ready to swath us with a change in disposition. We rowed and then ate, ate and then rowed, rolling in six-foot swells 27 miles south of La Push. The melonseed's hull handled the waves with doughty grace allowing water to caress right up to the edge of her gunwales before rolling the other direction at the last possible second. Wind came at a brisk 20 knots from our northwest quarter—perfect conditions for our southerly row. Fog quit flirting and made an earnest effort towards us. Thick wisps of white materialized between us and the beach.

Although confident of our GPS's ability to lead us through the fog, twenty-seven miles seemed a reasonable effort for the day and as good an excuse as any to surf the boat to the beach, a maneuver as yet unpracticed, but understood in theory.

Taking turns at the oars we donned dry suits. Swells shortened as we closed the distance to shore. I crawled hand-over-hand to the stern of the boat. Redistributing my two hundred pounds to keep the bow up and from pitch-polling in the surf. Greg sat in the stern, keeping the hull lined perpendicular to the waves. Perched on top of our gear, I scanned the beach through the enlacing fog for rocks and other immovable objects, hopefully soon enough to change course. I clutched a small yellow drogue, and awaited Greg's call to deploy it.

A cresting wave grasped the hull. Greg nodded, and I tossed the drogue. Water filled the yellow cone, pulling the line taut. The boat slowed considerably, and the crest of a wave rolled up over the gunwale filling the cockpit. Surf pushed us towards shore until the hull scraped the beach. Despite our relatively gentle landing, adrenalin beat in our ears. We pulled the boat onto shore as far as we could manhandle it, and commenced to bail the few hundred pounds of water out of it. I grabbed our crayola-colored dry bags from the boat and lay them along a beach covered in large pastel river rocks that clinked loudly as each wave was absorbed back into to the Pacific.

A small crowd appeared out of the fog marching purposely towards us with what I mistook for an air of concern. The nearest public campsite was Kalaloch, two miles north. I assumed they had seen us out at sea and were coming to see if we were alright. Not so deep down I was flattered and looked forward to telling these compassionate strangers, "We're ok, no need to worry. Thank you for your concern," in my best "professional" voice. They would inevitably follow up with questions about our trip that would make Greg and me feel extraordinarily good about ourselves. Fortunately, the same God that kept us safe upon landing knew the last thing our resilient egos needed was a stroking by a crowd of young and old vacationing fishermen, and they walked right over our scattered gear and us without a single inquiry as to our health and barely a second look. Ap-



The Boat—Gig Harbor Melonseed. LOA: 16'5" BEAM: 64" DISPL: 195lb [www.ghboats.com](http://www.ghboats.com)  
 Illustration by Tadami permitted by KAZI Co.,Ltd.

parently, fishing in the confluence of the Queets River, a few hundred meters south, was more interesting than some random human flotsam.

Trees of ancient stature lined the beach. Under one we made our home, remodeling it with a windbreak of driftwood. Beyond the natural dunes lay a boneyard nearly a half-mile deep of bleached driftwood. The surf beat close that night, and the tide worked up towards our camp. We stayed awake watching our boat closely until the water receded.

#### August 15, 7:09 a.m., north of Queets river confluence.

With the exception of our dignity, we and our bodies and gear escaped damage. Failure made the waves appear more sinister than they had been a half hour before. The splash hatch that sealed the interior of the boat was just that, a splash hatch. The weight of the water in the submerged cockpit had forced water into the inner hull. Without an airtight hull to keep the craft buoyant with a submerged cockpit, the boat could have sunk beneath us. Making it past the breakers might have been fatal. Nature had backhanded us to the beach, and that meant it was time to reassess and ignore the siren trying to call us back out into the waves. The Queets had saved our gear and would, the next day, prove again to be an ally. A mile up its waters was a boat ramp close to Highway 101. This would be our escape route. We phoned Greg's friend Jeremiah. He generously agreed to come out on 12 hours notice with one of Dave's trailers.

That night, in answer to any misgivings we may have had about resorting to plan B, the Pacific picked up. Not with the grand misbehaving that laid the giant tree trunks on this beach, but with playful rambunctiousness that turned a tree stump the size of a VW bug into a chew toy thirty feet from where we slept.

The predawn light was grainy. The surf was half again as big as the day before. It took several trips to haul our gear to the edge of the fresh water. The incoming tide was slowing down the river's current and widening its mouth making it easier than expected to move the boat up-river against the current.

Two channels combined to meet the ocean. Naturally we took the wrong one, and our boat bottomed out. We followed the other channel up to the sandy boat ramp within sight of the Highway 101 bridge across the Queets. We hunkered down, throwing on extra layers, as our physical activity was no longer enough to keep us warm. Jeremiah rolled up an hour or so later. After loading the boat, we drove across the highway to the gas station. The chiming customer bell on the front door and the florescent light was an uncomfortable juxtaposition to the last few days of 24-hour exposure. Greg paid for the gas and grabbed three snickers bars, handing one to Jeremiah and me. It was an "Indiana Jones Adventure Bar." I sighed and shoved it in my pocket. A picture beside the cashier caught my eye. Six young Quinalt men in a canoe, with back hair and brightly colored life jackets, paddled hard through the waves of the Queets confluence. The cashier noticed my study of the picture.

"That was the first time in sixty years they got past the breakers," she said.

I turned to her and smiled.

"I believe you." •SCA•

*In addition to circumnavigating the Olympic Peninsula, Jordan Hanssen has traversed the North Atlantic in a rowboat and biked across the continent of Australia. His next big challenge will be to write a book about the Atlantic voyage. When not out adventuring, Jordan is a landlord and works in a neighborhood hardware store.*