



MV Gikumi

THREE MEN AND A BOAT

by Mary Borrowman

*As I sit sipping my coffee, watching the rising sun creep into the galley of our treasured vessel, I can't help but think of **Gikumi's** wonderful history and the plans we have been contemplating for her future. We are anchored in Cullen Harbour, a favourite little 'hidey-hole' near Fife Sound protected from most any weather. Only about an hour-and-a-half travel from Telegraph Cove, it seems like we are at the other end of the world. Our company, Stubbs Island Charters, has completed its 26th season of whale-watching and charter work out of Telegraph Cove and the best holiday in the world for us is to hop on **Gikumi** and hide in the islands and inlets of the Broughton Archipelago.*

Gikumi is 50 years old and a much-admired vessel in northern Vancouver Island waters, always welcomed at any marina or village. The name **Gikumi** means 'chief' in Kwakwaka'wakw (our local First Nations language) and if there ever was a chief of vessels plying the waters of Johnstone Strait and the Blackfish Archipelago, it is the beloved and respected **Gikumi**. There are, however, three mariners who have loved **Gikumi** the most – Fred Wastell, Jimmy Burton and Jim Borrowman.

Fred Wastell had several vessels over the years he lived in and worked out of Telegraph Cove. The **Mary W** was the first workboat for Telegraph Cove Mills, around 1930, followed by the **Hili-Kum** in the late '30s and the **Gikumi** in 1955. The **Hili-Kum** and the **Gikumi**, when tied together, looked very similar. Fred had taken the half-hull model of **Hili-Kum**, built by Jim Sharpe in Alert Bay, to naval architect Robert (Bob) Allan to draw plans for **Gikumi**. Allan didn't like the flat bottom on the **Hili-Kum** so he gave

*Above: **Hili-Kum** and **Gikumi** at Telegraph Cove, late 1980s. The **Hili-kum**, built by J.R. Sharpe in Alert Bay and launched in 1939, is presently registered to a Port Hardy owner.*



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Photo by Ann Folker



Fred Wastell and Jimmy Burton, summer 1973.

Gikumi a deeper, more-conventional, round-bilged hull which handles head seas more capably.

Jimmy Burton recalled the 57' **Hili-Kum** with big loads of lumber stacked in the hold and on deck. "She pounded something awful in a head sea," described Jimmy. "She'd come up, then whappo! Down she'd come!"

In 1936, at the age of 19, Jimmy arrived in Telegraph Cove on Union Steamships' **Cardena**. Meeting Fred Wastell on the

boardwalk, he asked if there was any work. Fred replied, "I think I can keep you busy for a day or two." Fifty years later Jimmy and his wife, Thelma, left Telegraph Cove and retired to the Comox Valley.

Jimmy Burton ran the **Gikumi** for many of the years he lived in Telegraph Cove. Not only did the vessel carry out her routine work but she also participated in many rescues. There were no phones in the cove so Fred Wastell would run down the boardwalk and bang on the door calling, "Burton, get up! Boat on fire out here."

Some of the worst weather Jimmy ever ran into was during the transfer of ships' pilots north of Port Hardy. "The ships were almost all Japanese-owned with Japanese captains who didn't know the area and we would need to transfer the pilots almost out at Pine Island."

A few years ago, during one return visit to Telegraph Cove and **Gikumi**, Jimmy Burton ran his hands over the wheel and sighed, "I sure do miss my boat."

In the fall of 1975 Jim Borrowman came to Telegraph Cove and worked in the sawmill for Fred Wastell and Erik

Vinderskov. Fred and Jimmy Burton were still running **Gikumi** full-time. Jim was a labourer in the sawmill, cutting the lumber then carting it to the end of the boardwalk for loading on **Gikumi**. One day he was asked to go on a lumber delivery. There were the two Jimmys: Jimmy Burton running the boat and Jim Borrowman laying on a stack of lumber in the sun as **Gikumi** crossed Johnstone Strait. Jim thought he had died and gone to heaven. His love for boats and the ocean went back to when he was 11 and received a rowboat for Christmas from his parents.

Jim and his former business partner, Bill Mackay [Bill and Donna Mackay now operate Mackay Whale Watching out of Port McNeill], bought **Gikumi** from Fred Wastell in 1983. They had leased the boat from him since 1980 to start their freight, scuba-diving and whalewatching business. Jim recalls Fred asking, "Why would anyone pay money to go see those darn blackfish?"

Fred Wastell and Jimmy Burton taught Jim Borrowman a lot about running a boat and one incident really stands out in his mind. He and Fred were delivering lumber down to Shoal Bay on East Thurlow Island. It was foggy and Fred didn't have the radar on. He didn't use the radar much. They were passing the Canoe Islets and Jim wondered aloud how on earth Fred knew where they were. Fred replied, "Well, once we get up ahead a bit further you'll see these rocks with squiggles on them and you'll know you're in the right place."

"What the heck is he talking about – rocks with squiggles on them?" thought Jim. But sure enough, on the south side of the Canoe Islets, there are prominent rocks with squiggly marks on them. No other rock formations in the area are like them and Fred Wastell knew exactly how to find them!

Jim's favourite memory of being with Fred on **Gikumi** was Fred's last trip in 1984 when he was 85 year old. Always a fan of the ladies, Fred had quite a reputation, going back years, for taking the nurses from Alert Bay out for Sunday boat rides. For his last run he wanted to go to Alert Bay with a couple of lady friends from Telegraph Cove so Jim, now owner of **Gikumi**, thought he'd better go along. Off they went to Alert Bay with Fred steering the boat with his feet and a lady sitting on each side of him. He was in his glory!

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MV Gikumi

Bea Robson collection



Fred Wastell on the stern of *Gikumi* soon after her launching at the Bisset and Gilstein shipyard in North Vancouver, September 1955. For Jim Bisset's account of building the Robert Allan- designed *Gikumi* please see "Building Boats Forever: Bisset & Gilstein" in the premier issue of *Western Mariner*, March 2003).

Bea Robson collection



The *Gikumi* was launched with a 190-hp Atlas Imperial diesel which Fred Wastell replaced with a Nissan V-8 diesel in 1974. The latest engine, installed by Jim Borrowman in 1997, is a Caterpillar 3406B which provides 8-9 knots at 900-1000 rpm.

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Fred Wastell on **Gikumi**, late 1960s.

As they were coming into Alert Bay, Fred decided he wanted to tie up at the docks. The **Gikumi** is always tied up on her starboard side because there is no door on the port side for visibility abeam or aft. Jim recalls, "Fred decides he wants to do a port-side tie and he's putting along at a pretty good clip. He steps down from the helm seat, gives the wheel a hard crank – he's going like heck! The boat does a 180, he's still doing several knots! The RCMP vessel **Pearkes** is at the dock but Fred comes right up behind it, puts **Gikumi** in reverse, gives the throttle a quick shot

and lands the boat on a dime!" Jim had figured both the dock and the **Pearkes** were going to be taken out but Fred had made a perfect port landing! As Jim stood there, mouth wide open in awe, Fred called out, "Well, aren't you going to tie it up?"

Gikumi was launched on Labour Day weekend in 1955. Over her 50 years on this coast the boat has travelled as far north as Prince Rupert and south to Seattle. She has circumnavigated Vancouver Island but spends most of her running time in the waters of Johnstone Strait and the Blackfish Archipelago. Her many adventures have included being the pilot boat for the Japanese ore ships loading in Beaver Cove and carrying all the material for the Nimpkish River bridge which was finished two years before the island highway linked Kelsey Bay and Beaver Cove. Then the only way to Port McNeill was by boat. Lumber and general freight was delivered into Rivers, Kingcome, and Smith inlets, into Burke and Dean channels and to Bella Bella, Bella Coola and Prince Rupert. **Gikumi** towed log booms into the Telegraph Cove sawmill and scow-loads of lumber out to customers.

Over the last 25 years **Gikumi** has served as a dive charter vessel and became British Columbia's first whale-watching vessel. With her companion whalewatching vessel, the **Lukwa**, she carries film-makers, marine researchers and visitors from all over the world out into Johnstone Strait waters to see Orca in the wild.



The **Gikumi** in its role of general freight boat, circa 1955.

Bea Robson collection



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Jim Borrowman collection



Fred Wastell and Bill Mackay, 1983.

Gikumi has evolved from a freight boat to a passenger vessel and eventually will be “retired” to use as a pleasure vessel. Our long-term goal is to carry on the whalewatching business and one day **Gikumi** will enable us to add to our many cruising memories as we venture upcoast to Alaska to enjoy the beauty of Mother Nature’s marine environment. Meanwhile **Gikumi** is being cared for and refitted for another 50 years on this coast.

As I spent time with Fred Wastell’s daughter, Bea Robson, she made a comment to me that I have come to understand and respect. “I know my father loved my



Jim Borrowman and Jimmy Burton, 2003.

mother very much,” she said, “but when it came to the **Gikumi** ...” she smiled, her sentence unfinished. Jimmy Burton spoke of “missing his boat.” Now, every time Jim takes **Gikumi**’s helm, he is complete.

*Author’s note: Capt. Jimmy Burton stepped off the Union Steamship vessel in Telegraph Cove at the age of 18 on St. Patrick’s Day, 1936. After 50 years of running the **Hili-Kum** and the **Gikumi**, Jimmy and his wife Thelma retired in the Comox Valley in the late 1980s. Jimmy passed away in his 87th year on November 14, 2005. We hope he’ll approve the changes we are making to **Gikumi**.*

Photo by John Simpson



The **Gikumi** alongside at Protection Island off Nanaimo where shipwright Gary Kollmuss refurbished the wheelhouse last winter (see photos in “North Vancouver Island Waterfront” in **WM**, December 2005) and replaced midships bulwarks and cap-rails. This winter Gary is extending the deck-house aft three feet (Jim Borrowman and Bill Mackay extended it by two feet in the 1980s), renovating the galley and carrying out further reconstruction of bow and stern bulwarks.



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Jim Borrowman collection

Stubbs Island Charters

BC's First Whale-Watching Business Celebrates a 25th Anniversary

By Rob Morris

Fred Wastell figured Jim Borrowman and Bill Mackay were crazy when, back in 1980, they approached him about renting his **Gikumi** for whale-watching charters in Johnstone Strait. "Who'd ever pay to come and watch those darn blackfish?" he asked incredulously.

The truth was Borrowman and Mackay weren't really sure anyone would actually pay to see Orcas, or killer whales as they're commonly known. In the late 1970s they had worked as scuba divers at Robson Bight alongside Fisheries biologists assessing the underwater ecosystem in the Tsitika River estuary and Robson Bight, areas frequented by Orca whales. Their involvement with, and interest in, Orcas increased during that time and ultimately, in 1982, the Robson Bight Ecological Reserve was established.

Bill and Jim started conducting dive charters with **Gikumi** in 1980 while, at the same time, they continued with the freight runs established by Fred Wastell and Jimmy Burton. That year they incorporated as Stubbs Island Charters, a name taken from a local island that's a superb dive location. During their first year, they had a bit of good fortune. A group from Ontario on a Gulf Islands sailing charter was forced to change plans when their boat broke down. They phoned Stubbs Island to see about the possibility of an boat excursion to Robson Bight to view the wildlife and scenery. Fred Wastell was convinced to take the group on board the **Gikumi** and the trip was an enthusiastic success. The whale-watching business was born.

For the first three years Fred Wastell rented **Gikumi** to the young company for \$35 an hour, including fuel, oil, insurance and the skipper. Fred was ready to sell **Gikumi** in 1983 and was very content to know the Borrowmans and Mackays were planning to keep the boat in Telegraph Cove.

Twenty-five years later BC's pioneering whale-watching company continues to take an increasing number of enthralled visitors out into Johnstone Strait to see Orcas in the wild. Stubbs Island Charters also maintains a leadership role in the establishment of whalewatching guidelines that minimize disturbance of Orcas and their habitat.



Photo courtesy Stubbs Island Charters

The **Gikumi**'s hardworking days as a freight boat are behind her but she still puts in a full May- to-October whalewatching season out of Telegraph Cove.



The all-aluminum, 48-passenger **Lukwa** was launched in 1989 for Stubbs Island Charters by T.D. Manufacturing in Port Coquitlam ('T.D.' stood for Tom Warren and Dennis Jenner; Tom is now shipyard foreman for Erling Sylte at Sylte Shipyard in Maple Ridge, BC). A design of John Simpson Ltd. measuring 60' x 18'6" x 9'3" and powered by twin Caterpillar 3406 diesels, **Lukwa** cruises at 17 knots and is likely the first vessel in Canada, possibly North America, specifically designed for whale watching.