



The Soul of a Boat

Do boats have souls? They certainly

believed so in ancient times, when

sailors are said to have placed real

human heads at the bows of vessels

starting their first voyages. More often

than not, legend has it, the heads

were those of beautiful maidens.

These great sacrifices were intended

to ensure the safe passage of the

vessel and her crew across the

stormy waters ruled by Neptune,

Aeolus, and other maritime deities.

When the heads fell off the bow, the

sailors took it as a sign that the gods

had accepted the sacrifice, and that

the young woman’s soul had entered

the ship.

Now that we have entered an era of

female emancipation, we no longer

dare use the heads of maidens, but

vestiges of the old order are still

occasionally apparent in the use of

carved figureheads on boats with

bowsprits.

Forbidden Names

A boat needs a name *and* a naming

ceremony. Superstition has it that if

you launch a boat without having held

a naming ceremony, you’ll offend the

gods and suffer bad luck.

But be careful when you give

your boat a name. A boat with a

name that is too presumptuous is

said to attract ill fortune.

Presumptuous names include those

that challenge the sea or the wind,

and those that boast that they are

tougher than the elements. If you call

your boat *Sea Conqueror* or *Tempest*

Tamer, you’re asking for trouble. It’s

safer to be humble.

A Simple Denaming Ceremony

by John Vigor

I once met a man in Florida who told me he’d owned 24 different yachts and renamed every single one of them.

“Did it bring you bad luck?” I asked.

“Not that I’m aware of,” he said. “You don’t believe in those old superstitions, do you?”

Well, yes. As a matter of fact I do. And so do a lot of other sailors who wouldn’t consciously do anything to annoy the ancient gods of the wind and the sea. Out at sea you need all the help you can get.

Actually, it’s not so much being superstitious as being careful. It’s part of good seamanship. That’s why I had to invent a “denaming” ceremony some years ago to ward off bad luck when I wanted to change the name of my newly purchased 31-foot sloop from *Our Way* to *Freelance*. I needed a formal ceremony to wipe the slate clean in preparation for the renaming.

I searched in vain for one. But research showed that such a ceremony should consist of five parts: an invocation, an expression of gratitude, a supplication, a rededication and a libation.

So I sat down and wrote my own ceremony. It worked perfectly. *Freelance* carried us many thousands of deep sea miles and enjoyed good luck all the way.

You can read this ceremony on the foredeck before a gathering of distinguished guests, or you can mumble it down below on your own if you find these things embarrassing. The main thing is that you must say the words.

The libation should be carried out at the bows, just as it is in a christening ceremony. Don’t use any but the finest champagne compatible with your budget--and pour it all on the boat. One of the things the gods of the sea despise most is meanness, so don’t try to do this bit on the cheap.

Before the ceremony, remove all physical traces of the boat’s old name. If the old name is carved into timber somewhere, it’s not enough just to paint over it. Fill, sand, and repaint. Don’t neglect to wipe the name out in the obvious places--bows, stern, dinghy, oars, logbook, charts, horseshoe buoys, and so on. There may be official papers with the old name on them, of course, and those should be temporarily removed from the boat for the ceremony.

Finally, don’t place the new name anywhere on the boat before the denaming ceremony is carried out. That would be tempting fate.

The ceremony

Here’s the actual ceremonial recitation:

“In the name of all who have sailed aboard this ship in the past, and in the name of all who may sail aboard her in the future, we invoke the ancient gods of the wind and the sea to favor us with their blessing today.

“Mighty Neptune, king of all that moves in or on the waves;

“And mighty Aeolus”, guardian of the winds and all that blows before them:

“We offer you our thanks for the protection you have afforded this vessel in the past. We voice our gratitude that she has always found shelter from tempest and storm and enjoyed safe passage to port.

“Now, wherefore, we submit this supplication, that the name whereby this vessel has hitherto been known, (_____), be struck and removed from your records.

“Further, we ask that when this vessel is again presented for blessing with another name, she shall be recognized and shall be accorded once again the selfsame privileges she previously enjoyed.

“In return for which, we rededicate this vessel to thy domain in full knowledge that she shall be subject to the immutable laws of the gods of the wind and the sea.

“In consequence whereof, and in good faith, we seal this pact with a libation offered according to the hallowed ritual of the sea.”

Now you can pop the cork, shake the bottle and spray the whole of the contents on the bow. When that’s done, you can open another bottle for yourself.

How long should you wait before the new naming ceremony? There’s no fixed time. You can do the renaming right after the denaming, if you want. But most of us would prefer to wait at least 24 hours to give those sneaky sea demons time to clear out.

(* Aeolus, as I’m sure you know, is pronounced EE-oh-lus, with the accent on the first syllable.)

New Christening Ceremony

The traditional ceremony calls for a bottle of champagne to be broken across the vessel’s bow. On small boats, the bottle is usually enclosed in a fine-mesh net so that dangerous splinters of glass do not escape. Alternatively, you may open the bottle and spray the contents on the bow and forward topsides.

If you have serious objections to the use of alcohol, use any sparkling non-alcoholic drink instead. The gods will not despise you nor punish you in any way for acting according to your true conscience.

The christening is very short and simple. The essential parts are the new name, and wishes for fair winds, safe passages, and good fortune. You can make up your own ceremony if you like, but here is one example. It is to be spoken immediately before the breaking of the bottle or the spraying of its contents:

“I name this ship (______). May she bring fair winds, safe passages, and good fortune to all who sail on her.”
(From *How to Rename your Boat and 19 Other Useful Ceremonies, Superstitions, Prayers, Rituals, and Curses*, published by Paradise Cay Publications.)