

# SIDNEY AND LAILA MESSER

"IT WAS A WONDERFUL LIFE!"

By Loui Tucker

I was planning a follow-up obituary on Sidney Messer who, as announced in the January issue of *Let's Dance!*, died in November just short of his 90th birthday. While I was interviewing Laila at their home in Sausalito it occurred to me that, because their lives were so intertwined, I couldn't really



Laila and Sidney in 1956

write about Sidney without mentioning Laila. Hence, this article about Sidney and Laila Messer, a fascinating couple!

They met at a folk dancing event in Richmond in 1949 when Laila was 16 and Sidney was 23. She told me she saw him in the crowd of dancers and told her girlfriend "I am going to dance with him before the end of this evening!" As an aside to me: "I was so attracted to Sidney!" Laila and Sidney did dance together that evening, and he even drove her home even though he was living in Richmond near the dance hall. Laila was too young at that time, and their romance did not run a straight course. After some obstacles and detours, seven years later, they were finally married.

The next part of their lives together is the most extraordinary: they lived on boats for the next 30 years! These were not those square-bottomed concrete affairs they call houseboats that line the docks in Sausalito and are permanently moored. Sidney and Laila lived on a series of real sea-going vessels, and their trips took them to the West Indies, through the Panama Canal, out to Hawaii, north to Alaska, south to Mexico, and much more.

Their first boat was a dinghy Sidney built in the living room of their small apartment in Sausalito. In the late 1950s they actually helped build one of their boats on Bainbridge Island, Washington – a 36-foot gaff-rigged schooner they named Sadie. After Sadie was launched, they sailed her home to Sausalito. They found living aboard so pleasant they did not move back to living ashore.

In 1962, Sidney had a sabbatical leave so they had Sadie shipped from Sausalito to Nova Scotia, met up with her there and sailed her down to the east coast to Florida and the West Indies, through the Panama Canal and back to Sausalito. During that year they decided they were ready to start a family. Sidney planned it so that his baby would be born in a winter month so it would be "sea-worthy" before they went sailing again the following summer. Their daughter was a Christmas baby and in a few years outgrew her 4-foot bunk bed, so Sidney and Laila went looking for a bigger boat.

Their next boat, Margaretta, was 50-foot double-ended ketch built in England in 1938. Keep in mind that a boat that is 50 feet long and about 12.5 feet wide at the deck isn't quite like having a 650-square-foot apartment, because the sides of a boat curve in. They had a sink and a stove, but no refrigerator. They had a toilet, but no shower or bathtub ("There is no dirt out on the ocean, so bathing was not a daily event anyway, and a sponge bath had to do.").

A boat that sleeps three does not have three bedrooms, it has three single mattresses slipped into cubbyholes inside the hull. These were the days before cell phones and bottled water, and they also managed without a television and hot running water.

They raised their daughter on these boats, along with an English bull terrier named Alice and a cat named Skighthagh (Welsh). Sidney taught Electrical Engineering at San Francisco City College and Laila taught at an elementary school so they had summers off. Weekends and summers were for sailing the San Francisco Bay, the Sacramento Delta and far beyond.

In the mid-1980s, a few years after their daughter went off to college (her dorm room was huge compared to her allotted space on the boat), they decided to live ashore and sold their boat. It was then that their focus turned back to folk dancing. After trying a few other local clubs, they settled in as members of Changs. Like so many couples who dropped out of folk dancing to raise a family, they returned to it in their 50s.

Sidney and Laila were active for decades after that in the Bay Area folk dance scene, at Changs as well as in the Federation. They attended Stockton Folk Dance Camp for 8 years. In 1997 Federation President Carlos Ruling asked Laila to lead the committee to put on a Beginners Festival (which is how I first met Laila). Laila then served as Secretary for the Federation from 1997 to 2002 at which time she became Federation President for two years. Sidney handled the Federation's membership from 2000 to 2009. They continued dancing regularly, at least once a week, even after they moved into an assisted living facility.

Laila mentioned that in the last year or so, Sidney became reluctant to drive to San Francisco on Friday nights to attend Changs. He would complain and ask where they were going and why. Once he got there, however, his mood lifted immediately, he danced and smiled and hugged — and, on the walk back to the car, he was always happy they had come.

Laila, by the way, has moved back to their home in Sausalito, and hopes to continue dancing at Changs. She has many wonderful stories to tell about her days with Sidney, learning to sail, building and furnishing boats, and cruising the waters of the world. The next time you see her, take her aside and talk to her - you'll be delighted!



The Sadie