Hope floats for revamping historic vessel

BY CAMMY CLARK - Miami Herald

The "Grand Old Lady" got a good scrubbing Saturday, the first step toward a stem to stern makeover. But before the 68-year-old gets her engine beds replaced and has some rib work, she's having a fundraising party.

After all, it takes money for an aging wooden schooner to look and function her best, especially after sitting idle for 15 months in Key West Harbor with a big "For Sale" sign.

On Sunday, Pepe's Cafe and the Waterfront Market are throwing a "Save the Union Festival" to raise money for the restoration of the Schooner Western Union, which served for 35 years as an underseas telegraph cable-laying vessel and is on the National Register of Historic Places.

"Many people have the desire to save parts of what make Key West special," festival organizer Jeff Salzmann said. "She's worth saving to keep in Key West forever."

Sarah Lee Guthrie, daughter of Arlo Guthrie and granddaughter of Woody Guthrie, is headlining the festival along with guitarist Johnny Irion. Local talent includes Michael McCloud and Chris Flowers, the Unpaid Bar Tabs, Caffeine Carl and the Mile Marker 24 Band.

Proceeds for the festival, which runs 2 to 9 p.m. in the Historic Seaport District of Key West, will go to the nonprofit Schooner Western Union Preservation Society.

It was launched three months ago by Dutch entrepreneur Theo Glorie, owner of a coffee shop a block from the ship's docking spot.

The schooner's previous owner, Historic Tours of America, had the schooner on the market for more than a year, with a $600,000 price tag.

Company president Ed Swift said several groups were interested, including one from the Cayman Islands and another from Tampa, but none would guarantee the schooner would stay in Key West.

Swift said it was so important to him to keep the schooner in his hometown that his company paid off the mortgage and donated the boat to Glorie's nonprofit group.

Glorie said he expects the society will need between $300,000 and $400,000 for the complete restoration, but he won't know more precisely until later this month, after the 130-foot, 90-ton ship is undergoes its annual Coast Guard inspection.
"She's actually in pretty good shape," said program advisor Bob Jason, whose diving students at the Florida Keys Community College conducted a preliminary underwater survey of the boat three weeks ago.

MAINTENANCE
Nine of those students spent Saturday in scuba gear and armed with clam rakes and other tools to clean the hull from 15 months worth of algae, barnacles and other marine crustaceans that attached to the outside of the hull and can freeze rudders, clog water-intake valves and seize props.

It was part of the preparation for its journey next week to the Merrill-Stevens Dry Dock Co., situated along the Miami River, for its inspection and survey.

The Western Union, the oldest working schooner in the United States, has a rich history dating to 1939, when its crews laid the first of more than 30,000 miles of undersea telegraph cable in the Caribbean, including from Key West to Cuba.

RUN-IN WITH CUBANS
During that time, the schooner had a run-in with a Cuban gunboat, an incident that was documented in a 1961 Time magazine article. The gunboat drew alongside the Western Union and ordered it into the Cuban port of Baracoa, even though the schooner was well outside Cuban territorial waters.

The Western Union's captain sent a message to the U.S. Naval Base at Guantanamo. Within 10 minutes, two U.S. jets buzzed over the ships, "encouraging several Cuban 6-26 light bombers in the area to withdraw."

Four hours later, a U.S. destroyer arrived. The Cubans got the message, shouting to the schooner: "Key West."

From 1974 to 1984, a local group of businessmen and maritime historians cared for the boat. During this time, the schooner transported Cubans during the Mariel boat lift; musician Jimmy Buffett was a frequent passenger.

But in 1984, Key West lost its Grand Old Lady. Philadelphia-based Vision Quest bought the schooner, renamed it "New Way" and used it for a program for troubled adolescents.

"I didn't expect to see it again," Swift said. "But when we had a chance in the late 1990s to get it back, we had to. I thought one chance in a bazillion it would be available again."

Historic Tours of America purchased the schooner, rechristened it Western Union, and ran sunset and day sails and charter trips.
"I've literally performed over 1,200 weddings," said Lenn Verreau, the Western Union's captain for the past 12 years. "Done a lot of funerals, too. We've shot quite a few people out of a cannon. It's kind of a neat thing. Put their ashes in a canister and shoot them into the next world."

While patrons loved sailing on the historic boat, it lost about $100,000 a year, Swift said, forcing him to sell.

$100K RAISED
Glorie said about $100,000 has been raised so far. And, according to their business plan, he believes that after the initial fundraising for restoration, the schooner can break even and provide at least two trips a month for children's activities, charitable events and educational outreach programs.

Swift said it is possible because the group's eligibility for state and federal grants and ability to attract private donations that a for-profit operation could not.

He also said the schooner's future would become more secure if the state designated the Western Union as its flagship.

"Twice the Senate and House of Representatives passed it, but both times it was vetoed by (then Gov. Jeb) Bush," Swift said. "It's a very important piece of Florida's maritime history and should be preserved."