

Don't let the Western Union sail away

Editorial

A stroll along the docks at Key West Historic Seaport doesn't seem, well, as historic anymore.

The maritime port that once bustled with commercial trade and fishing vessels now bustles with restaurants, bars, a new hotel, flashy yachts, fishing charters, and large, modern tourist-laden catamarans and party boats.

Sprinkled amongst the docks are a few schooners that are reminiscent of a bygone era when schooners were the primary means of transportation for goods and passengers, an era reflective of the character of Key West embodied in the historic homes in Old Town.

One such schooner, the Western Union, is the last surviving authentic working tall ship. It was built in Key West in 1939 as an undersea cable maintenance vessel.

The Schooner Western Union is the flagship for the city of Key West, and in 2012 was officially designated the flagship of the State of Florida. It is on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Western Union has a storied history of work, adventure, education and romance.

The schooner was part of the fleet of vessels that helped protect our coast from Nazi U-boats during World War II. It served as a Western Union cable service ship until the advent of satellite communications eclipsed cable communication and forced the schooner into retirement, and thus it began multiple "second careers."

These ventures included service as a passenger ship, a youth program vessel, and a participant in the 1976 bicentennial celebrations in New York harbor.

In 1997, the Western Union was purchased and operated for over a decade by the Historic Tours of America (HTA) as a day-sailer featuring sunset tours and educational stargazer sails. It is estimated that over 2,000 couples were married on its decks.

The Western Union was donated by HTA in 2007 to the Schooner Western Union Preservation Society and Maritime Museum, a 501(c) 3 nonprofit organization.

The schooner was in need of a major refit, and was placed "on the hard" (dry land) at Key West's Truman Waterfront for a \$1 million refit.

It was relaunched in 2011, and

resumed sailing tours until 2013 when it could not pass Coast Guard inspection and it ceased operations.

Today, at age 76, the Western Union sadly rests in its highly visible slip near the Schooner Wharf Bar looking more like a derelict vessel than the once proud sailing icon of Key West.

As beautiful and graceful as a wooden schooner can be it, the problem is they are wooden, and are notorious for their need of constant maintenance and repair to keep them in presentable, safe and efficient working order.

Has age finally caught up with the Western Union? Has the magic of slipping through the wind on an authentic 130-foot coastal schooner lost its appeal? Will the future generations of Key Westers not be able to sail on the ship that once protected their hard-working forefathers on their often treacherous, cable service occupation?

We hope not.

If an island community steeped in maritime history cannot save this hometown schooner, then we suspect it will be sold to a salvager, or worst yet Davy Jones' locker will be beckoning its arrival.

The ship's needed repair is extensive — well into the hundreds of thousands of dollars for minimum seaworthiness, and over \$1.5 million for complete restoration. In the near term funds are needed for basics like insurance, dock fees and other operating costs.

Considering its value to maritime history, the City of Key West and the State of Florida, these are not insurmountable numbers.

The nonprofit has been able to keep the schooner afloat; however, it will take the support and coordinated effort of state, local officials and interested individuals, private foundations, and other entities to donate or secure grant funds.

We invite everyone to go to <http://schoonerwesternunion.causevox.com/> to learn more about the efforts to save the Western Union and to consider a donation.

Lastly, a message to the Key West City Commission and city officials: Let's not let this remarkable piece of maritime history and character of Key West sail away forever.

— The Citizen