

MAC Shroyer,



Father of the Mexican Panga

By **Gary Graham**

In the early 1960s, two young school teachers dreamed of sailing around the world, but Mac and Mary Shroyer did not own a sailboat nor did they know even the basics of sailing. So to pursue their dream, they began painstakingly building a 24-foot Pivar trimaran in their small garage in Fortuna, Calif. After the couple's new vessel was completed nearly a year later, they spent

several months learning to sail it in the San Francisco Bay. Their confidence along with their excitement grew, and they quit their teaching jobs.

Finally, in August of 1963, they were ready; even the happy news of Mary's pregnancy didn't delay their dream. The two adventuresome pioneers set sail down the California coast, but instead of a covered wagon

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TO PURSUE THEIR DREAM, the Shroyers began with the construction of a 24-foot Pivar trimaran, which was painstakingly built in their small garage.

they traveled aboard the small, homemade trimaran. Carrying their entire savings of \$1,000, they sailed along the wild west coast of the Baja Peninsula, rounding Baja's tip and passing Cabo San Lucas before heading up into the Sea of Cortéz past East Cape into La Paz, where they anchored and remained for some welcomed R&R.

Then sanity prevailed and they headed east across the Sea of Cortez to Mazatlan, where medical facilities were available and they awaited the arrival of their first-born son, Malcolm Neil "Daniel" Shroyer Schoen, in February 1964.

Three months after arriving in Mazatlan, the proud parents and young Neil flew home, leaving the trimaran to be picked up by Mac at a later date, when he made the roundtrip drive back to Mazatlan and towed the vessel to their new home in Redwood City.

Their 2,000-mile voyage had dazzled them with the beauty of Baja, replacing their original dream of sailing around the world.

They had left behind a country filled with social unrest, the arrival of the Beatles, the escalation of the Vietnam War and, a few months into their trip, President Kennedy's assassination. Back in the U.S., they began dreaming again. Now they dreamed of buying a larger, 50-foot trimaran, the foundation of a new charter business in La Paz, which would introduce the growing number of visitors to the Sea of Cortez.

Nurturing this new dream, they resumed teaching while concurrently modifying their newly acquired, larger trimaran, the *Morning Bird*, and even installed a diesel engine. A year and a half into this ambitious project, their second son David Galen was born.

In 1967, Mac and a friend sailed to La Paz while Mary and

their two young sons drove down in a van to begin their new life in the charter business in the still sleepy, colonial city with its mere 35,000 inhabitants.

Yachts and Marine Services was established with local La Paz businessman/investor Don Francisco Garcia de La Garza. Mary was the managing partner of the company, which provided skippered, guided charters aboard a fleet of Grand Banks trawlers ranging from 32 to 36 feet in addition to the Shroyer's 50-foot trimaran. Advertising in *Western Outdoor News* and *Sea Magazine*, the business attracted a steady stream of clients eager to see the increasingly popular Sea of Cortez.

However, in late 1973, a Mexico vote against Israel in the United Nations resulted in the Jewish community in the United States launching a devastating tourism boycott against Mexico, and U.S. visitors to Mexico slowed to a trickle. The decision was made to close Yachts and Marine Services.

By 1968, Shroyer's talent for boat building had led to construction of 24-foot plywood inboard sportfishing boats for the many resort hotels springing up from Cabo San Lucas to La Paz. His factory was a simple, palm-frond-topped palapa not far from the present-day Marina de La Paz, which the family developed many years later and is run as a family business today. "I pursued what interested me," Shroyer commented wryly when we sat down together recently. "Call it 'dumb luck' ... I seemed to be at the right place at the right time ... most of the time."

He later acquired discarded molds from Uniflyte, Californian and other U.S. manufacturers and soon another fellow Baja pioneer and entrepreneur, William Matt "Bud" Parr ordered the new-fangled, larger and more durable fiberglass diesel-powered deluxe cruisers for his Hotel Las Cruces Palmilla. Hotel Cabo San Lucas followed, as did Ted Bonney of Rancho Buena Vista, Bobby Van Wormer of Punta Colorada and later Palmas de Cortéz. The fiberglass boats soon became common sights on the fishing grounds surrounding Baja's tip. Now, nearly 50 years later, many of those cruisers are still in service or stored in various hotel boatyards. The fiberglass boats didn't wear out!

So soon Shroyer was searching for other projects that could be incorporated into his busy factory. That's when the Mexican panga caught his attention.



THE 24-CRUISERS WERE A POPULAR ADDITION, and business was brisk.

The original pangas—small commercial fishing boats—were nothing more than homemade 16- to 20-foot hollowed-out logs, equipped with crude sails.

The commercial fishermen along the coast fished the local waters in these plank-on-frame, double-enders, introduced from the coastal town of Guaymas on the Mexican mainland in the 1950s, or little plywood variations of the boats, which had a transom and could carry a small outboard.

By the early 1960s, fishermen in Guaymas began producing a motorized canoe-type fishing skiff to sell to other fishermen. Later, BOA Co. in Mazatlan also produced a round-bottomed, caravel-planked version that had hull planks fastened edge to edge. But they were too heavy and vulnerable to be safe outside the region's protected estuaries.

Shroyer's first plywood-hull, outboard pangas were commissioned by the large fishing co-operative at Rancho Buena Vista on the East Cape. The 18 footers were hard-chined and had the typical vee-bottom, common with plywood construction.

In his typical methodical manner, Shroyer spent a great deal of time observing how the pangueros launched and recovered their boats, photographing the entire process at Todos Santos, south of La Paz on the west coast of the peninsula from the beach facing the open Pacific Ocean, where the large waves pounded the shoreline.

His conclusion: Unlike the lighter U.S-made trailer boats that usually surfed in on the front of the waves, their Mexican counterparts, carrying much heavier payloads, rode in on the back of the incoming waves. This dictated a design favoring more weight astern and a much higher flared bow allowing more water to remain under the boat, driving it farther up on the berm where the tow rope from a truck could be easily attached.

Meanwhile, the many other co-op fishermen who worked from primitive, seasonal beach camps along Mexico's rugged Pacific coast and the Sea of Cortez needed fishing boats



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that could accommodate practical hand-start outboard engines (at that time, 40-horsepower outboards), would be easy to launch and retrieve through the rough surf of relatively unprotected Pacific beaches, and get up and plane across large swells and short, stiff chops with light loads.

As well, each boat had to safely carry up to a ton of fish, gear and men returning from fishing far offshore, be light enough to be hauled up by hand onto rocky beaches and finally, be economical to fabricate in Mexico!

Shroyer met these demands by coming up with a new, innovative design for a full-size fiberglass 18 footer. Then he built a plug and mold to create his new line of boats. With the first boat in production in 1969-70 at his boat building business, Boat Baja California SA de



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The new creation was a molded, modified-vee hull boat, with large, graceful spray rails and small strakes, eliminating the boxy appearance of its plywood predecessors. The new, sleeker Esquibot panga was considered Mexico's biggest innovation in boat building at the time!

"They were only six-and-a-half feet wide," Shroyer described recently, "which was pretty narrow, but they were extremely adaptable for heavy seas and they had great handling characteristics. They did everything the fishermen needed them to do. Plus, fishermen could simply slap fiberglass on the bottoms themselves if the rock-strewn beaches chewed the keels up a bit. And even better my company could produce them economically."

Later, he lengthened the mold to build 20- and 22-foot models. Schroyer's first 22-foot, all-fiberglass panga was delivered on July 26, 1972. This panga was so successful that eventually he moved production into a larger factory and hired about 50 employees.

By 1974, Baja Sur had become a state. Mex 1 had opened and the ferries from the mainland were operational in Santa Rosalia, La Paz and Cabo San Lucas. Suddenly the demand grew exponentially for more seafood products caught by local fishermen and able to be shipped to Cabo, East Cape, La Paz, Loreto, mainland Mexico and the United States.

Once again the Shroyers found that they were positioned to capitalize on the growing demand for their popular boats.

By the late '70s, the Mexican government offered a loan package to fishermen that would allow them to purchase the basic 20- or 22-foot pangas, a 40-hp outboard, a fuel tank and nets for about \$2,500.

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groups of pangueros often relocated their families to rustic base camps, moving them frequently so they could follow the seasonal harvests of shark, seabass, lobster, abalone and other sea life.

Water often had to be delivered in plastic tanks to those makeshift camps, and their catches had to be taken in to the fishing cooperatives to be iced. Pangas were about the only modern convenience the anglers enjoyed.

By 1982, Shroyer's factory had produced more than 3,000 of his innovative-designed pangas in addition to other boats, including various sportfishing boats for the local resorts and the Mexican government. Many visiting anglers to Baja recognized the value of Shroyer's panga and were impressed with their performance. Soon, U.S. boaters were lining up to purchase them.

Of the 3,000 pangas Shroyer built during the 1970s and early 1980s, he estimates that about 300 were purchased by U.S. fishermen. Some West Coast owners trailered them down to Mexico to fish, while others simply stored them in the areas on this side of the border where they fished frequently. Some were even transported to remote areas of Alaska and British Columbia, where marinas were scarce and conditions were similar to those found in Baja and Mexico.

A hard lesson learned by Shroyer at this time was that while sales of his pangas had once been brisk, orders began to slow as the market became saturated.

"Outboard motors wear out, trailers and the trucks that tow them rust, and some of the old plywood models can often be seen rotting on a beach somewhere," Shroyer explained ruefully. "However, our fiberglass panga is practically indestructible and if repairs are needed it's simply a matter of slapping on a few more coats of fiberglass."

With the continued success of the factory, an order from the Mexican government for five boats, including a port pilot, patrol boat and buoy tenders, convinced Shroyer

Mac Shroyer

to begin planning to construct a warehouse where larger boats could be built. He did this on property across from El Mogote Peninsula off La Paz and next to a proposed marina site where larger craft could be launched and outfitted in the water.

But in 1982, calamity struck! The peso was devalued, banks were nationalized and all dollar accounts seized. Unfortunately, the contract Shroyer's company had with the Mexican federal government for the manufacture of the five boats was in dollars and although he had already delivered them, the government refused to honor its contractual obligation.

Shroyer didn't have the cash reserves to meet the financial obligations, so he sold the boat building business to his employees, who in turn quickly sold it to a group of La Paz investors. It became known as Embarcaciones ARCA and continued building from the panga



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In 1983, once again the Shroyer family found themselves starting from scratch. As fate would have it, the small dock they had built and used for their boat-building business was always in demand by boaters who wanted something more than being anchored or moored off the beach at El Mogote in La Paz. Anticipating the issuance of a Federal Maritime Terrestrial Zone for the waterfront property he owned, Shroyer pursued his idea of building a marina, with floating docks and all services for tourists. Four boat owners who were interested in securing long-term slips for 10 years agreed to pay the slip rental fees in advance, providing the funds for the formation of Marina de La Paz, SA de CV.

The new Shroyer business emerged and grew. Today, with 120 slips of all sizes, Marina de La Paz is one of the largest marina operations in Baja ... boasting one of the highest occupancy rates in the industry.

Although there have been many challenges over the years that have tested the family-run operations—including several major hurricanes, the most recent being Hurricane Odile—the Shroyers' resolve, ingenuity and, to quote Mac, "dumb luck" seem to put them at the right place at the right time ... most of the time.

These days, Mary and Mac are semi-retired; they travel together often and enjoy visiting family and



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friends in the U.S. and elsewhere. Their oldest son, Neil, is general manager and has assumed the responsibility for the marina.

A Mexican national by birth, Neil earned a degree from Humboldt State University, which is about 26 miles up the California coast from Fortuna. Bilingual with an extensive administrative background in government and business, Neil has guided the remarkable growth of the marina and the services it offers.

Using all the technology at his disposal to ensure that his staff—from dockworkers to those in administration—is responsive to tenants' and visitors' needs,



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he insists that everyone mirrors the friendly but firm business foundation that served his parents well over four decades.

Mac and Mary worked hard as a team to fulfill their dreams, always including their family. It has kept them close, with a bond of love and respect that still exists 54 years later; Mac interrupted our interview right at 1 p.m. and excused himself, explaining that he always shares lunch with Mary. Well, except when she is playing bridge.

When the Shroyers arrived in Baja California Sur, they believed it would be the first leg of a trip around the world. Many twists and turns later, they replaced one dream with a larger one; their marina changed the footprint of the city they call home, and Mac's panga design earn him a place in Baja fishing history.



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“It’s these changes in latitudes, changes in attitudes
Nothing remains quite the same.”

... Jimmy Buffett, 1977