

Love for SAIL

By Lynn Keyser

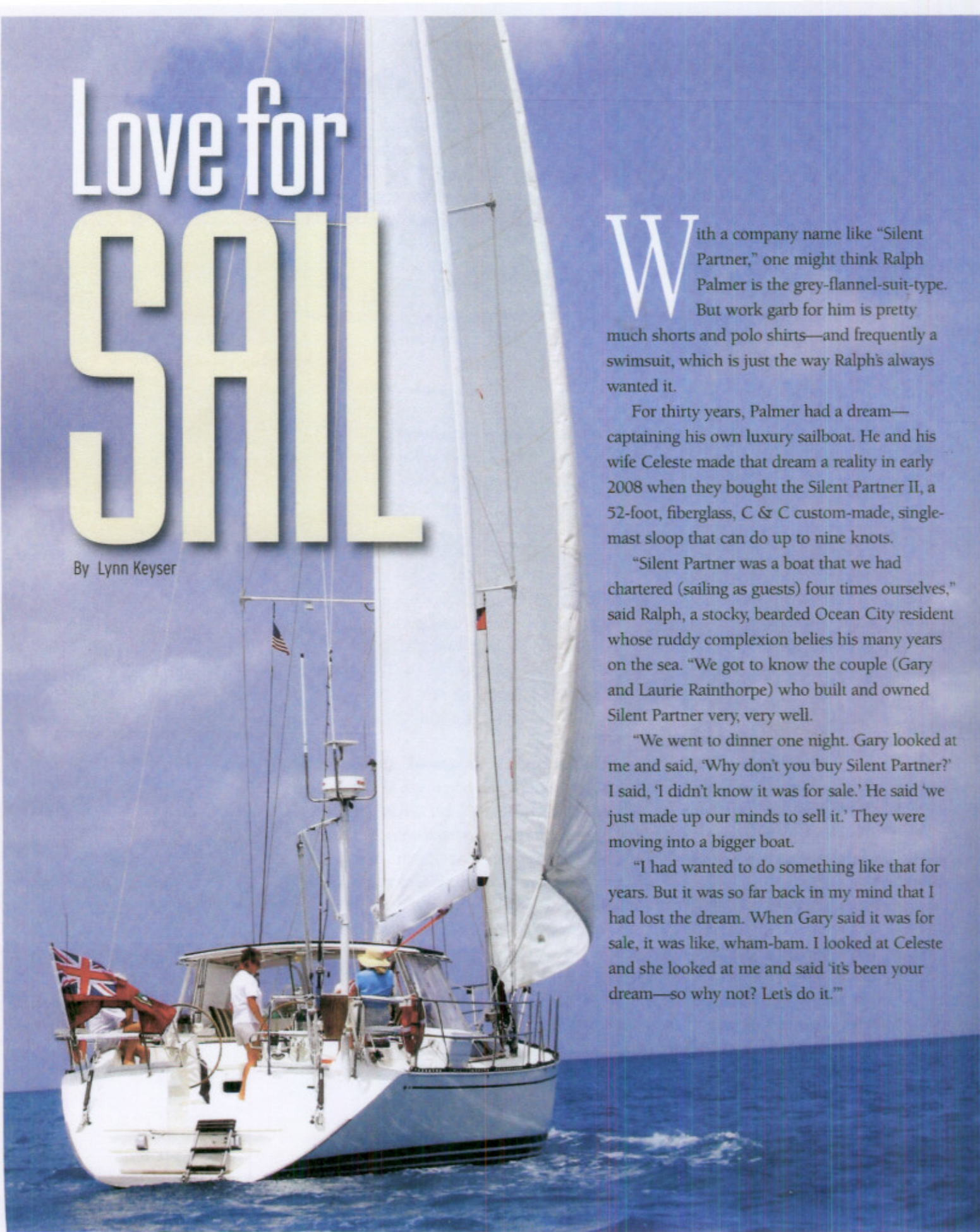
With a company name like “Silent Partner,” one might think Ralph Palmer is the grey-flannel-suit-type. But work garb for him is pretty much shorts and polo shirts—and frequently a swimsuit, which is just the way Ralph’s always wanted it.

For thirty years, Palmer had a dream—captaining his own luxury sailboat. He and his wife Celeste made that dream a reality in early 2008 when they bought the Silent Partner II, a 52-foot, fiberglass, C & C custom-made, single-mast sloop that can do up to nine knots.

“Silent Partner was a boat that we had chartered (sailing as guests) four times ourselves,” said Ralph, a stocky, bearded Ocean City resident whose ruddy complexion belies his many years on the sea. “We got to know the couple (Gary and Laurie Rainthorpe) who built and owned Silent Partner very, very well.

“We went to dinner one night. Gary looked at me and said, ‘Why don’t you buy Silent Partner?’ I said, ‘I didn’t know it was for sale.’ He said ‘we just made up our minds to sell it.’ They were moving into a bigger boat.

“I had wanted to do something like that for years. But it was so far back in my mind that I had lost the dream. When Gary said it was for sale, it was like, wham-bam. I looked at Celeste and she looked at me and said ‘it’s been your dream—so why not? Let’s do it.’”



"I HAD WANTED TO DO SOMETHING LIKE THAT FOR YEARS. BUT IT WAS SO FAR BACK IN MY MIND THAT I HAD LOST THE DREAM. WHEN GARY SAID IT WAS FOR SALE, IT WAS LIKE, WHAM-BAM. I LOOKED AT CELESTE AND SHE LOOKED AT ME AND SAID 'IT'S BEEN YOUR DREAM—SO WHY NOT? LET'S DO IT.'"

— Ralph Palmer



Celeste and Ralph Palmer

The Rainthorpes had the sloop built in 1997 with the thought of taking her around the world for the charter trade. Silent Partner II features a master queen berth guest cabin forward with an in-suite head and shower, and two double berth cabins aft, with a large shared head and shower. Crew quarters are separate, forward when more than two guests are aboard.

The Palmers kept the name of the sloop after buying her from the Rainthorpes.

"We thought Silent Partner is a great name. She's doing all the work, and can't talk, so she's the silent partner," Ralph said.

As part of the purchase deal with the Rainthorpes, Silent Partner II underwent a major retrofit in Trinidad in 2007-08.

"It's a beautiful boat, just absolutely striking," Ralph said, who is especially proud of Silent Partner II claiming the title of "best monohull" at a brokers show sponsored by the Charter Yacht Society of British Virgin Islands in 2008.

"Silent Partner was chartered for the '08 season. Gary and Laurie



ran 13 or 14 charters in January through May, and they essentially were working for us then."

"The season typically runs November to June. And if you had a really full season, you'd run 20 charters. Some boats run 22, but 22 is about it," said Celeste. "That would be a huge amount of work, but it could be done."

Silent Partner II sails out of Tortola in the British Virgin Island. Guests meet the Palmers there for what is typically a week-long cruise, although charters can be booked for as short as four

days. The cost is \$7,500 a week for a couple and includes all food and alcohol.

Although the charters are especially appealing for honeymooners and couples celebrating anniversaries, the Palmers say almost anyone who loves the outdoors will enjoy an adventure in paradise.

The British Virgin Islands are very, very beautiful. Down there it's 78-82 (degrees) every day. "We went down there in June of '08 for a year and I think we saw four days of rain," said Ralph.

A mechanical engineer by trade, Ralph spent most of his career i

L O V E F O R S A I L

industrial implementation sales. Through the job he met Celeste, a legal professional and self-described “farm girl from the tiny, little town of Cochranville” (Chester County, PA).

With her roots in the soil, Celeste admits she knew next to nothing about sailing and runnir charters before she met and married Ralph fifteen years ago.

“It’s been a great experience. It’s given me confidence that I can do anything when I put my mind to it. If I could master this, I can master just about anything,” she said.

Ralph had almost been born with a halyard in his hands. Much of his early training was in the waters off Ocean City.

“I spent every summer of my life in Ocean City,” said Ralph, “and have been sailing since I was 10 years old. I love controlling the elements. You’re moving without doing anything except harnessing the wind.”

Even though Ralph has held a U.S. Coast Guard license for many years and has captained numerous fishing charters off the New Jersey coast, he, as well as Celeste, took an “intense” Navy course on safety and responsibility before taking on their first charter.

Celeste, a pixie-like blonde, dubs herself “first mate, chief cook and bottle washer” in the Silent Partner venture.

The Palmers give charters a checklist of food and alcohol preferences, and are so accommodating to their guests’ wants and needs that they request shoe size to make sure everyone will have well-fitted fins for snorkeling.

Celeste likes to keep her cooking simple but elegant. Not always an easy task, but one she enjoys.

“I like to do everything with fresh ingredients and that’s sort of hard to keep things. You have to figure out what will last and how long it will last. Avocados—two days, raspberries—a day or two, bananas? Forget it. It’s such a warm environment.

“Actually it’s easier to cook in close quarters like that. Everything is right at your finger tips,” she adds. But it’s difficult when two of us are

in the galley.”

Celeste said many guests are “wowed” by the gourmet dishes she creates in such close quarters. Others—mainly women—will say ‘I give you credit.’

“It’s a lot of work, I don’t mind the work. What I don’t like is when we don’t have charters. It gets kind of lonely. A lot of movies and a lot of book reading.”

The Palmers can go about a week before provisioning, which is not difficult to do. There are four grocery stores in Roadtown, the main port in Tortola.

“They’re nothing like we have here, but you can get just about everything,” said Ralph.

When guests are kicking back or feasting on Celeste’s fare, they’re usually soaking up the sun or frolicking in the crystal waters.

“We’ll do whatever our guests want to do. Some guests like to snorkel so we’ll take them to prime snorkeling spots. In an average day, you get up, have breakfast and then we’ll go out and sail to a different island.”

In their first year in business, the Palmers have had a mix of charters, both age wise and experience wise. Guests can help with the sailing, but soon find that it’s not as easy as it looks.

“Everybody likes to steer,” said Ralph. “I encourage them to crank a winch and pull a line, too, but most of them don’t want to do that after the first time. It’s work.”

The Palmers have kept in touch with a number of their charters, socializing after they return home.

“We’ve met just some wonderful people. And all locals are as pleasant and as polite as you can possibly imagine. The other crews are terrific, very, very helpful with both task and knowledge.”

Celeste especially loves the wildlife—dolphins circling at the bow of the boat; sea turtles coming close enough to touch.

“When you see it every day, the same thing over and over again, it’s like with anything—you take it for granted. But when you get guests on board, you see it again, fresh, through their eyes. It’s really wonderful,” said Celeste. ■