

Charting a Course to and from Chelsea

A Biography of Arnie Jarmak

Diana Larsen

I FIRST ENCOUNTERED ARNIE Jarmak at the Chelsea Art Walk of 2016 where he was displaying a selection of his photographs in a shipping container in the main square. The poignancy of his work immediately drew me in and in the years since, I have had the privilege of getting to know this unique and wonderful man.

Arnie Jarmak photographed every day from 1977 until the late 1980s in the city of Chelsea for the daily newspaper, the *Chelsea Record* (plates 30, 32). This exhibition features a small selection from his oeuvre of over twenty thousand photographs of a specific moment in time in that city when it was undergoing fundamental demographic and social changes. In this catalogue, Ash Anderson situates Jarmak's work within the history of twentieth-century photography and explores his literary references while Marilynn S. Johnson contextualizes it with a history of Chelsea during that significant time of transformation. This essay will tell Jarmak's life story by tracing his trajectory from childhood up to the Chelsea years and from there until the present.

Moorings: 1949–72

Arnie Jarmak was born in Marblehead, Massachusetts, the second child of Ruth and Jerry Jarmak (fig. 1).¹ His mother grew up in Revere with an Irish father, Patrick Shanahan, whose family ran a moving company in the West End of Boston (he also drove a Metropolitan District Commission [MDC] truck for twenty-five years in Revere), and a Polish Jewish mother, Esther Miller. Ruth was an amateur oil painter and musician.



1. JARMAK FAMILY ATOP THE EMPIRE State Building, 1956.

According to his lifelong friend Joshua Resnek, “Arnie owed much of his heart and soul to his mother....With her support and urging [he] was able to search out his dreams.”²

Jarmak's father, Jerry, taught him his work ethic. Son to Aaron, who emigrated from Ukraine in 1906 to become a successful merchant and real estate owner, and Mary, Jerry was orphaned at a very young age. The family of eight children, raised by a stepmother, was evicted from their home during the Great Depression. Jerry vowed never to allow his own family to face a similar fate.

After serving in World War II as captain of an ordnance company loading bombs onto airplanes, he founded the Jarmak Company in 1947. As a manufacturers' representative, he supplied furnishings for schools, universities, and hospitals throughout New England.

The most important lesson Jarmak learned from his dad was the value of honesty in business. He told me, “The Jarmaks were not the flashiest people in the world but they were the straightest.”³

Jarmak attended Hebrew school twice a week and became conversant in Hebrew. He recalls reading the Old Testament knowing in his heart that it was just a fable: a nice but fictional story. He was a quick learner in school but always questioned the relevance of what he was being taught. He was a voracious reader and had a disdain for convention. At the age of six Jarmak was fascinated by a photobook of Matthew Brady's Civil War images he discovered on a bookcase at his grandparents' home near a plaque com-

memorating his great-grandfather's sacrifice in that very war. The dramatic black-and-white photographs of this searing moment in American history captivated the young boy.

A little later, when he was sick at home at the age of eight or nine, he came across *Oliver Wiswell* by historical novelist Kenneth Roberts, which tells the story of a Loyalist family during the American Revolution. This eight hundred-page book so captivated Jarmak that he read it twice, and he credits it with changing his perceptions of those who opposed the Revolution. His young eyes were opened to unfamiliar points of view and he developed early on a sympathetic understanding of peoples' differences.⁴

Arnie Jarmak attended Marblehead High School. He was a member of a championship



2. JARMAK AS A LEHIGH UNIVERSITY
Engineer, April 1970.

hockey team both there and in university (fig. 2) and recognizes the value of that time in his life to his later career as a newspaper photographer. "The ability to be a team player that I learned and lived helped me succeed at the newspaper, which was definitely a team endeavor. I learned in hockey to perform my role and then the team could flourish."⁵

Casting Off: 1972–74

Jarmak attended Lehigh University, an all-male private college in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. He had originally wanted to study to become a doctor but ended up getting a BA in finance in 1972. For his graduation Jarmak asked his parents for a Nikon camera. In the late 1960s, photography had become all the rage on college campuses and many students carried their Leicas and Nikons around their necks to document the many changes going on politically and culturally around them. Twentieth-century American photographers like Ansel Adams became household names for the generation that Jarmak typified.⁶

Jarmak worked in his father's company full time as a union carpenter during the years 1972–74 (a job he had done in summers previously). In 1971, his parents sold the Marblehead home and bought a house in Moultonborough, New Hampshire, maintaining a rented townhouse in Peabody, Massachusetts. Living between Peabody and Moultonborough, Jarmak took a part-time photography course at Essex Community College—a rudimentary introduction to darkroom tray and film development and

black-and-white printing.

He later worked as a sales representative in northern New England (Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont) for the Jarmak Company. Too much skiing and pot smoking caused his father to transfer him back to the Boston area to keep an eye on him.

Setting Sail: 1974

After living for a short time in Peabody in his parents' house, he moved to Lanesville (Gloucester) in 1974–75. Needing time to "self discover," he gave up working for his father. One day in Gloucester, some nuns on the pier where a priest was blessing a boat caught Jarmak's eye. He learned from a bystander, who turned out to be the captain's wife, that the vessel *Lady of Good Voyage*, built in Essex in the 1940s, was about to sail to an island off Honduras. Jarmak immediately sought out the captain to ask if he could join the voyage; he and the owner of the boat agreed to it. They would be leaving the following day at high tide! Jarmak promptly packed up his few possessions and prepared to leave to his parents' chagrin; they feared he would be traveling with drug dealers.

That could not have been further from the truth. The sixty-year-old captain, Joe Novello, turned out to be an admirable man, having spent an entire life at sea around Gloucester. The whole trip lasted eighteen days, ten at sea and the rest at stops in New York and Miami before reaching Honduras. There were three crew members, each of whom took turns on watch: four hours on and



3. *LADY OF GOOD VOYAGE* DOCKED IN New York City, 1974.

eight hours off. Jarmak recalls the awesome experience of observing the moon and stars over the open sea on his night watches. At the time, he said to himself, “Arnie Jarmak, can your life be this much fun?”⁷

When docked in New York with the towers of Wall Street looming in the distance, Jarmak reflected on his good fortune (fig. 3). No doubt the classmates with whom he had studied finance were working conventional jobs in those buildings. He was, meanwhile, en route to Honduras in a beautiful vintage wooden boat with a seasoned sea captain on a true adventure. He never had a desk job after that.

For his trip, Jarmak’s mother had bought him one hundred rolls of Kodachrome so he could take color slides. The *Lady* landed on the island of Utila (plate 41) where Jarmak encountered some students embarking on an archaeological dig at the Mayan ruins of Copán. They asked him to join them on their expedition. At the magnificent Mayan site,

serendipity led Jarmak to José Cuevo whose prestigious family owned the entire valley; his uncle was the director of antiquities there. He was invited to work as a carpenter to fix up Cuevo’s family farmhouse. The work never materialized so Jarmak was able to live and fully experience life there, enjoying freshly baked corn tortillas made for them every morning and exploring his surroundings. He stayed for three months in Honduras until his parents flew him home from Guatemala when the money ran out.

Return to Port: 1974–76

Jarmak moved back to Lanesville to an off-the-grid house and built a darkroom at his parents’ Moultonborough home. Gloucester had a vibrant cultural scene that stimulated the young man’s creativity. He had his first published photograph on the cover of a volume of poetry by Vincent Ferrini (1913–



4. COVER OF FERRINI POETRY volume, 1974.

2007, fig. 4) whose frame shop was a meeting place for the city’s artists and writers.

Jarmak admired the work of Walker Evans who used a Deardorff 8 × 10 inch field camera and aspired to own one himself. He bought a camera for \$200 from George Garian, a retired photographer from Lynn (plate 29). It did not have a bellows so Jarmak called Deardorff in Chicago and mailed the camera to them to fix. It took three weeks to get there due to the Christmas rush. Because of this delay, Jarmak decided to drive out there to get it back himself. With a friend, he drove an eighteen-wheel truck to Chicago with fish from Gloucester on palettes that they distributed along the way. His destination was South Peoria Street where he met brothers Jack and Merle Deardorff. He found out that he had a pre-1942 camera, the front of which did not swivel and the Deardorffs added the missing pieces from their current inventory. Jarmak was pleased to learn that the lens was made of the same glass that Ansel Adams used.⁸

In 1974, Jarmak began taking photographs in Gloucester and fixed his lens on a significant event in that city’s history: the destruction of the Fishermen’s Institute (figs. 5, 6). Established in 1891, the Institute was an important meeting place for fishermen, some of whom stayed or even lived there. Its destruction marked the end of an era; although fishermen continued to gather in other locales, it was never the same. “Gloucester enabled me to step out of my skin and grow into a new one,” Jarmak said. “At the time, Gloucester harbor was



5. FISHERMEN'S INSTITUTE,
Gloucester, 1974.



6. DESTRUCTION OF THE FISHERMEN'S
Institute, 1974.

filled with fishing boats, all wood fishing boats when I was living there....Who knew in the 1970s that thirty-five or forty years later, they would all be gone. If I had known that, I would have only photographed fishing boats.”⁹

While in Gloucester, Jarmak began taking graduate courses in photography and economics at the University of New Hampshire, traveling over an hour a day to get there. Eventually he moved into a rented pre-1800 farmhouse on fifty acres of land in Durham, New Hampshire owned by his girlfriend's family. Jarmak describes their arrival there in a frozen winter wonderland as being reminiscent of the scene at Varykino in the film *Doctor Zhivago*. Jarmak lived there for eight or nine months studying history and economics and working part time, all the while reading as much as he could.

On the Right Tack (the Chelsea Years): 1977–89

Jarmak had first discovered Chelsea at the age of sixteen with his childhood friend, Joshua Resnek, whose family owned a drugstore there. The teenagers used to frequent Resnek's for ice cream sodas at the fountain before exploring the nooks and crannies of the city that he knew from childhood. Chelsea was shunned by the outside world at the time. Resnek writes, “The city was locked... in an ongoing deep and downward socioeconomic spiral,”¹⁰ and the boys' Marblehead friends all viewed it as a place without hope. However, Jarmak and Resnek were discovering its truth and allure.

By 1976 Jarmak decided to move to Chelsea from Durham, New Hampshire. Resnek had secured a position at the *Chelsea Record* as a journalist and shortly thereafter, in April 1977, Jarmak was employed there as photographer. Many people were making black-and-white photographs in Boston at the time, but nobody was photographing in Chelsea with the exception of Harry Siegel, a street photographer who charged twenty-five cents for a portrait (plates 37, 38).

The relationship that anchored the two young men in Chelsea was their connection to the *Record*'s owner and publisher, Andrew Quigley, who hailed from one of the city's most notable Irish families (plate 31). His father, Lawrence, had been an eleven-term mayor and learned Yiddish to connect with the large Jewish immigrant population of the mid-twentieth-century city. Andrew himself

had been both a state senator and mayor of Chelsea by the age of twenty-five.

According to Jarmak, Andrew Quigley was an “unbelievably good guy”¹¹ who gave him a place to live (fig. 7) and a job at the *Record* with the freedom to go all over. The caveat to being the *Record*'s chief photographer was that he also had to run their new graphic arts camera and offset printing press housed in a separate building. Jarmak had to build a darkroom and take a crash course at another newspaper to learn how to run the process camera and printing press. The advantage to “doing it all” was that he could perform quality control for his own photographs. After a year, Jarmak got to work full-time taking photographs of Chelsea night and day for the front page of the *Record*.

Jarmak recalls when his first front page photograph appeared in an April 1977 edition, just before his move from New Hampshire. The image was of the Tobin Bridge with the sun setting behind. He placed it lov-



7. FIRST APARTMENT, 26 BROADWAY,
Chelsea, 1977.

ingly on the passenger seat of his car so he could admire it on the drive. He enjoyed seeing his photographs prominently displayed on the front page at their most beautiful when surrounded by black type.

It was a stressful job with only ten employees producing a daily paper and Jarmak remarks that “everyone had the right to ‘throw a nutty’ every now and then.”¹² Sometimes Quigley would reject a photo of his; Jarmak recalled that in one case, he played a prank by reverse printing a group photo with names listed from right to left so that they appeared backward in the newspaper. Another occasion, when a different photographer’s print was chosen for the front page, Jarmak printed it entirely white. His punishment was merely a week at home; clearly Quigley appreciated his work and gave him the opportunity to redeem himself.

Quigley hired freelancers to work on specific assignments like high school sports or the city’s Polish events, but by and large, Jarmak was the *Chelsea Record*’s main photographer and it were his photographs that appeared on the front page of the newspaper every day for a decade (fig. 8). Jarmak was part of the last generation of photographers using film before the advent of digital cameras. When he was taking photos in Chelsea there was only one other newspaper in the country that had a photographer using a Deardorff camera; it was very unusual.

Jarmak recalls, “Nothing could stop me.”¹³ He was in his early thirties and able to run around the 1.8 square mile city. He did push



8. FOURTH STREET OFFICES OF THE
“*Chelsea Record*,” late 1970s.

ups while developing his film and, with Resnek, ran several miles every day on Revere Beach after the paper came out around noon or one p.m. He remembers that after their daily run, they would go to the steam room at the Young Men’s Hebrew Association and follow that with a bowl of steamed noodles, shrimp, and peapods in Chinatown. They felt invincible and extremely lucky.

The young men had a unique role in Chelsea because, as journalists, they had the chance to get to know its residents and businesses intimately and to tell their stories with words and images. Resnek writes of this time, “This was our transformative experience, our trip to the moon or the bottom of the sea, to a land quite unlike any other for us.”¹⁴

Jarmak was inspired by the Depression-era photography of Walker Evans.¹⁵ During the time Jarmak and Resnek were at the *Record*, the city of Chelsea was in a depression of sorts with corrupt politics, decrepit housing stock, frequent fires, and pervasive poverty.

Jarmak captured it all with his camera (fig. 9). For Jarmak, Chelsea was a “profound visual reality—a train wreck—and an unrehearsed, unadorned picture of poverty.... The way people lived—this is what he wanted to capture.” “I saw clarity and truth. No one wanted to be reminded of this type of poverty and inequality. Powerful images were everywhere.”¹⁶

A familiar figure all over town, Jarmak made important connections with his subjects, often knowing them well. His poignant portraits of adults tell eloquent stories of their lives (plates 81, 91). Quigley’s favorite Jarmak photographs were the portraits of children that he took on porches, in playgrounds, and on the streets, documenting strong friendships and improvised games. Jarmak describes his role as a kind of pied piper where kids would follow him around asking him to “please take their picture” (plates 100, 104).

He told me, “I saw my role at the news-

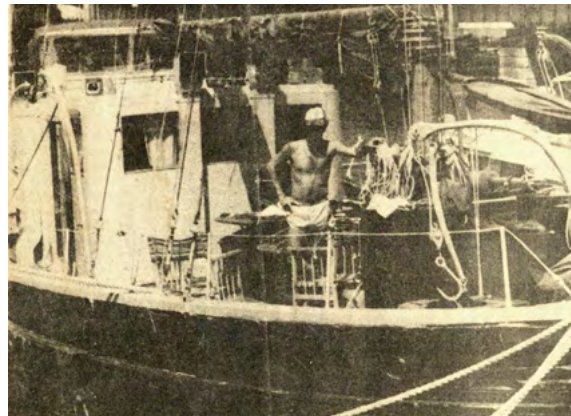


9. JOSHUA RESNEK, WALNUT STREET,
1978.

paper to bring beauty to the people of Chelsea in addition to record the events of the day. Not many people thought of Chelsea as a place of beauty. It was a role that brought joy to me and my publisher and fellow staffers at the newspaper. On days when I had a special image, large and prominent on page one, it seemed to bring joy to the entire city. I got instant feedback from countless people, some I knew well and some I hardly knew, who would say in passing, ‘Arnie that was a beautiful picture you had in the paper yesterday.’”¹⁷ Over time, Jarmak produced photographs for forty-five hundred issues of the *Chelsea Record*.

Working night and day, Resnek and Jarmak would sometimes find themselves at Pressman’s Deli in the wee hours of the morning at which time Sam Pressman (plate 76) would prepare some eggs for them. Jarmak also fondly remembers the delicious homemade soups made by Pressman’s wife that they would relish on their frequent stops there. The young men were part of the fabric of the city. One of Jarmak’s roles at the *Record* for a time was to deliver the daily newspaper to about eight locations around the city, each of which always had a handful of people waiting for it (plate 34). This interaction put him directly in touch with the people who took his photographs into their homes with them—something that always struck him.

Jarmak had bought a place on Pembroke Street near Winnisimmet Street, an area that his friend and local historian Ellen Rovner



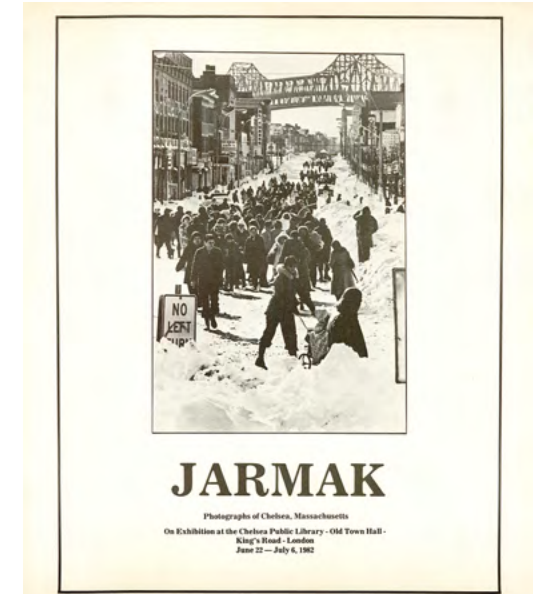
10. JARMAK ABOARD THE *FANNY Rosa* (*Chelsea Record*, July 30, 1981).

recalls from her 1950s childhood as being unsafe. Jarmak was there at the very beginning of the gentrification of that part of Chelsea. Friends used to sit on his roof with its spectacular views over the Boston skyline; it was there Rovner rediscovered her native Chelsea. She was surprised that Jarmak had such interest in and connection to the city having not grown up there. In Jarmak’s apartment, she remembers seeing the annual reports of major Fortune 500 companies that he would study to learn who formed the network of the top tenth of 1 percent in the country. This was part of his consciousness of Chelsea being the “refuse” of that system.¹⁸

In 1981, Jarmak chanced upon another opportunity to take a sea voyage. He got to know the captain of the *Fanny Rosa*: a sixty-two-foot wooden motor-sailer with the hull design of a North Sea fishboat that the British royal family had cruised on in 1949.¹⁹ It was sailing from Chelsea to Portugal and needed

a crew. Jarmak was a perfect choice (fig. 10), having taken the Honduras trip ten years earlier. Once again, he found himself with two other seasoned seamen, British captain John Moore and Roy Smith, who became a great friend, en route to Lisbon. He recalls being a thousand miles from land with water all around, feeling just how insignificant we are in the grand scheme of things. Jarmak took the helm to steer them into Lisbon’s harbor on the busy Tagus River full of oceangoing vessels.

On his way home after two-and-a-half months in Europe, Jarmak stopped in London. He visited an exhibit at the Chelsea Public Library where he sought out the librarian and showed her some of the fifty-odd newspaper



11. POSTER FOR JARMAK’S LONDON exhibition, 1982.

clippings and photographs of Chelsea, Massachusetts, that he had brought with him on his travels. She loved the images and agreed to his request to have an exhibition there the following year. Jarmak returned to London in 1982 for the opening of his exhibition (fig. 11), which was visited by the mayor of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea himself.²⁰

In the early 1980s, Resnek and Jarmak began buying and selling real estate in Chelsea. At the time, Boston had the greatest rate of return on invested capital in the country and Chelsea had the greatest rate of return in the Boston area. They bought the Beacon Café (fig. 12), a barroom that was, according to Ellen Rovner, “a bit of a dive.”²¹ Jarmak spruced up the dark place, and with his love for old things, made it beautiful. The Beacon became a hip place to go.

Coinciding with the death of his father and his girlfriend, Jan Congden, who was murdered in California in 1984, Jarmak became “a ship without a rudder.” The real estate market collapsed, Andrew Quigley sold the *Record*, and it was time to move on.

Getting Bearings Back: 1989/90–98

Roy Smith, his friend from the *Fanny Rosa* trip, was moving to Pennsylvania and asked Jarmak to buy an old house in Lancaster with him. An Amish man named Chris Fisher hired Jarmak to drive them to and from work where they together built and renovated barns and farmhouses. Jarmak stayed working with the Amish fifty hours a week



12. BEACON CAFÉ, EARLY 1980S.

for four-and-a-half years. He remembers, “It was hard physical labor with the greatest people in the world; they were straightforward, honest, God-loving, beautiful, and righteous” and “I got my moral compass back.”²² To the relief of his aging mother, a job salvaging scrap metal from destroyers with an old Gloucester connection brought Jarmak back to Massachusetts.

Anchoring: 1998

This work prepared him for the next chapter of his life. He went into business salvaging industrial lumber in 1995 and formed the Jarmak Corporation in 1998, which he still runs today (fig. 13).

Arnie Jarmak’s life has been rich because he is open minded. His liberal arts education, both formal and informal, familiarized him with the greatest authors of history, litera-

ture, and philosophy and informed his work in Chelsea. He had the rare ability to recognize the humanity of the changing city and to depict its multi-generational residents with deep caring and respect. His appreciation for old things enabled him to capture the stark beauty of Chelsea’s streets and structures. His lifelong passion for economics and history informed his dynamic photographs of politics, firefighting, poverty, and changing businesses.

Jarmak acknowledges that the empathy he inherited from his mother was a skill paramount in creating his Chelsea portraits. The honesty and integrity that he learned from his father enabled him to gain the trust of his subjects. A good judge of character, it seems that Jarmak always gravitated to the inspirational mentors and friends who helped define his priorities: devoted sea captain, Joe Novello; “the Senator” Andrew Quigley, his supportive boss at the *Record*; Joshua Resnek, its eloquent storyteller; Roy Smith,



13. ARNIE JARMAK AT JARMAK CORPORATION, Oxford, Massachusetts, September 2020 (author’s photo).

who traveled with him on the *Fanny Rosa*; Chris Fisher and the hardworking Amish; and finally his wife, Cathy, who he married at age fifty-six and who brought him grandchildren and also shares his love of antiques.

Arnie Jarmak's Chelsea years were the highlight of his life. He told me, "When I think about the things I have done in my life—I have a nice house in Maine, I have a house in New Hampshire, I have a house in Chelsea, I have a business and some bank accounts—but...the thing that means the most to me and that I really, truly own myself, are these pictures: I took them myself and I saved them for forty years and am now opening them up to the world again."²³

In preparation to talk to me about his images, Jarmak wanted to get some historical perspective so he read *Plutarch's Lives*, the biographies of forty-eight famous men. Upon reading, he looked at his own pictures and said, "I gained insight that a thousand years from now, nobody will remember the names of places and things that we have today....What I get from Plutarch is a sense of humanity and a...desire to preserve their life in a very human way for generations to come. [With my work], what I would hope for is that I would create a record of life in an American city of the late twentieth century—a sum total of work, a Balzac *Human Comedy*. It is a collection that in its mass tells the story of life. I have always taken pictures with that in mind—to create a record for people in future generations to come back and say, 'Did they really do things that way?'"²⁴

Diana Larsen, Assistant Director at the McMullen Museum, has held curatorial positions at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Harvard University Art Museums. She has curated exhibitions of nineteenth- and twentieth-century decorative arts, and researched and coordinated the photography for *British and Irish Silver in the Fogg Art Museum* (2007). At the McMullen Museum, Larsen co-curated and contributed to the catalogues for *Rural Ireland: The Inside Story* (2012), *The Arts and Crafts Movement: Making It Irish* (2016), and *Eaglemania: Collecting Japanese Art in Gilded Age America* (2019). She has also taught exhibition planning and design at the University of Victoria, in her native British Columbia, Canada.

- 1 Jarmak's sister, Sharyn Jarmak (now deceased), was five years older.
- 2 Arnie Jarmak and Joshua Resnek, *Turbulent Years in Chelsea: Documenting Life in the '70s & '80s* (Charleston: History Press, 2020), 46.
- 3 Arnie Jarmak, interview by author, Sept. 15, 2020.
- 4 Jarmak, interview (Sept. 15, 2020).
- 5 Arnie Jarmak, interview by author, June 23, 2020.
- 6 Ellen Rovner, interview by author, Sept. 22, 2020.
- 7 Jarmak, interview (Sept. 15, 2020).
- 8 Jarmak, interview (June 23, 2020).
- 9 Gail McCarthy, "A Sea Change: Photo Essay Resurrects Memories of the Fishermen's Insti-

tute," *Salem News*, Aug. 15, 2019.

- 10 Jarmak and Resnek, *Turbulent Years in Chelsea*, 12.
- 11 Jarmak, interview (June 23, 2020).
- 12 Jarmak, interview (Sept. 15, 2020).
- 13 Jarmak, interview (June 23, 2020).
- 14 Jarmak and Resnek, *Turbulent Years in Chelsea*, 38.
- 15 See Ash Anderson's essay in this volume for an examination of Evans's influence on Jarmak.
- 16 Jarmak and Resnek, *Turbulent Years in Chelsea*, 47.
- 17 Jarmak, interview (June 23, 2020).
- 18 Rovner, interview.
- 19 The boat was designed and built in 1947 by Sir Frederick "Boy" Browning, comptroller to Princess (later Queen) Elizabeth and author Daphne du Maurier's husband.
- 20 Jarmak, interview (June 23, 2020).
- 21 Rovner, interview.
- 22 Jarmak, interview (Sept. 15, 2020).
- 23 Jarmak, interview (June 23, 2020).
- 24 Jarmak, interview (Sept. 15, 2020).