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Out of the Attic

A notable waterfront family has an impact on the Port City

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Image: Alexandria Waterfront. Photo, Office of Historic Alexandria.

They came from places afar. According to them, the O'Leary family had spent time in Pakistan, Vietnam, Guam, China and Honolulu. More recently, the family of 17 had come from the Washington Marina in 1973, living on an 85-foot former workboat, the *Chicago*, which they had found partially submerged.

As seen in the accompanying photo, the boat continued to be partially submerged during its time in Alexandria. The family at the time included four sets of twins and one set of triplets — named Tom, Dick and Harry — and the children ranged in age from 5 to 32.

The father, James O'Leary, was born in Hawaii. By the time he was 2 years old, he was orphaned. By the time the family showed up in the Potomac, he was 58. He grew up in an orphanage in North Tonawanda, N.Y. and a series of foster homes. He told reporters that while at college in Iowa, he reached to steal an apple at the state fair and stole his future wife, Florence, instead.

The family had an adversarial relationship with the justice systems of multiple countries. They regaled local reporters with stories of running oil in Pakistan, arrests in Vietnam and more than 10 other places, the children using pikes and gaffs to fend off a police boarding party in Hawaii, as well as seven-month detentions in Guam and mainland China.

Their time at the Washington Marina followed a familiar pattern for the family that seems to persist until today. The O'Learys spent a year on the *Chicago*, which had been listing in the marina for 33 years, antagonizing other boat owners, bickering with school and welfare officials, and as the marina president at the time put it, "they violated every law in the book." They were finally evicted from the marina for failure to pay their \$60-a-month slip fees.

The family's first move was to tie up at the Naval Reserve Training Center at the foot of Franklin Street. The *Chicago* had drifted there without power. But, as would be expected, naval officials were not keen on using military space for a private residence, and they towed the boat out into the Potomac.

The clan ended up in La Plata, Md., but the *Chicago* sank off the Alexandria waterfront, and they then lived briefly in the back of a store and ran a swap shop. They inevitably got into trouble with their neighbors, and then acquired a dilapidated, World War II-era minesweeper from Naval Surplus named





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the Reliant. They switched residences between their new boat and a home that was found for them on Mount Vernon Avenue.

The Reliant was moored in front of the city-owned boathouse, near the final resting place of their previous boat the Chicago. City councilors, concerned that the boat endangered high school crew teams, paid \$10,000 to have the boat dismantled and disposed of. By this time, the family had purchased a Cadillac limousine and moved on to Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.