



SKIP NOVAK

A WONDERFUL FILM ABOUT THE VOYAGES OF AMERICANS BOB AND NANCY GRIFFITH HAS SKIP RECALLING WISTFULLY A TIME OF TOTAL FREEDOM AT SEA

Every now and then you come across a gem of a story. Recently a friend pinged me over a file called *Following Seas*. It sat on my desktop for some time. When I did run it I was spellbound for the hour and 25 minutes.

The story is about a couple of whom I had vaguely heard, Bob and Nancy Griffith, and their 20 years of world voyaging (cruising might not be an appropriate description) throughout the 1960s and '70s on their two yachts called *Awahnee*.

For some, the film will be a revelation of what sailing round the world was like, back in the day. But for me, it was more of a reminder. Back in those days I was still a teenage freshwater pirate on Lake Michigan, and how it was all done by the Griffiths was very familiar.

Bob and Nancy met in Hawaii in 1959 when Bob sailed in and brought the 53ft *Awahnee* to the dock under sail in a crowded marina – something I can relate to. Bob had bailed on his landside life as a vet in California after losing a young child. Nancy had a five-year-old son, Reid. They

joined forces and the rest is history, documented in parts on 16mm film.

This included a shipwreck on Vahanga Island, an atoll not far from the soon-to-be-radioactive Mururoa Atoll. The story of

salvaging the gear, parts of the structure and lifting the engine off its bed, which was several metres underwater, stands out in stark contrast to so many of the stories we see today where yachts are abandoned at sea, still floating, for little or no reason at all.

They were eventually rescued after two months living a Robinson Crusoe-style existence on the beach, eventually meeting and enlisting the only other two people on the island – two French convicts – to help in the salvage. When finally taken off, they were arrested as spies but immediately released and made their way with the remains of their boat (down to the nuts and bolts) as cargo, landing in New Zealand. They then promptly set to work building a ferrocement boat along the same lines of their Uffa Fox

original. They called her *Awahnee*, not *Awahnee II*. Nancy explained there was no point. *Awahnee I* did not exist.

Nancy Griffiths narrated this film a few years before she died in 2013. It is in the style of the beginning and ending of *Titanic* – an attractive, elderly, very lucid woman recounting a life led on their own terms. She takes us through those decades of adventures which included a circumnavigation of Antarctica and made a landing there in the early 1970s.

Tragically her son Reid was killed at the age of 14 in the Marquesas falling off a cliff while hunting goats. They had two children of their own (who also narrate parts of the film) and when Bob suddenly died of a heart attack in 1979 while they were living ashore for a time she buried him at sea. That was still doable, if you were resourceful and had not much respect for authorities.

She then went on to run a sailing school and later captain her own sailing cargo ship for a time. Much of the 16mm film now digitized was water damaged and ropery, but this adds to, not detracts from the overall quality of the production.

Neither of the *Awahnees* was a precious yacht (it appears the interior was never really finished on the ferrocement version) and, from what we see in the film, there were maintenance issues which would be criticised in the modern context of our standards. How they sailed would also be considered by today's marine thought police as decidedly cavalier. There is no evidence of a lifejacket nor harness ever being worn.

Granted, Nancy nonchalantly recounts the story of how she was thrown overboard when trying to furl the mainsail running downwind while wing and wing – it took them a half hour to return upwind, but she was never in doubt that they would find her.

I sat in a sad silence for a time after the credits rolled. I contemplated how we, by the virtue of our numbers, have out of convention tied ourselves up in bureaucratic knots and furthermore have entangled ourselves in so much safety equipment, gadgetry, tracking devices and contingency plans that there must come a time when there will be no point in taking that voyage, either for physical or philosophical motives. It can all be done by virtual reality! ■

'THE FILM TAKES US THROUGH DECADES OF ADVENTURES'