

FLORIDA

The key to the Keys

6 not-to-be-missed adventures

By **KATHERINE RODEGHIER**
Special Contributor

The chain of islands, some mere flyspecks on the map, spill off the southern tip of Florida, barely attached to the continent by a string of 42 bridges. Known for its independent spirit, the Florida Keys is a place apart, with attractions and activities both conventional and downright wacky.

Here are six not to miss. For details, visit fla-keys.com.

Katherine Rodeghier is a Chicago-area freelance writer.

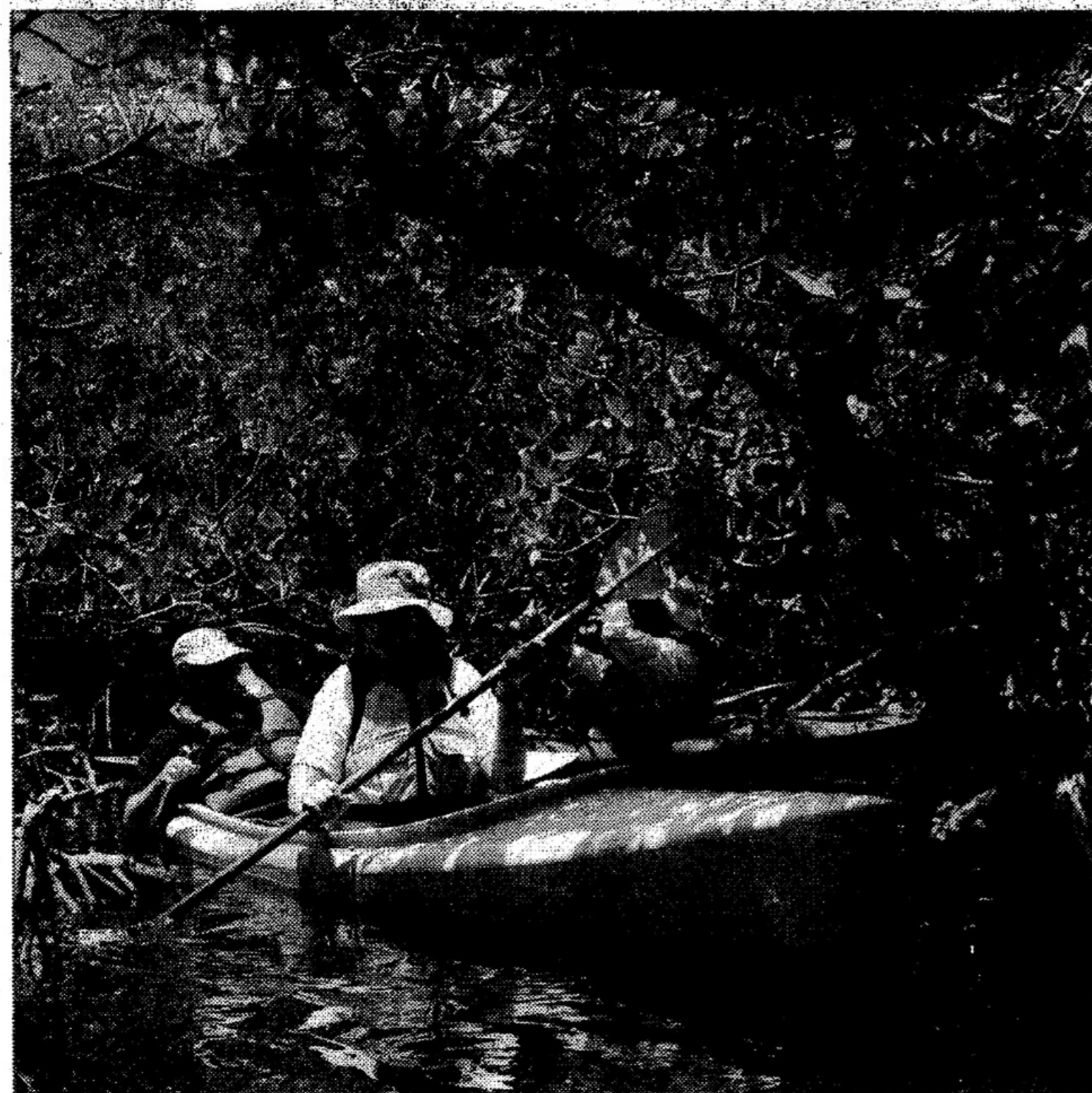
Kayak off Big Pine Key

Ease yourself into a kayak and look for the web of life in the sparkling water below your paddle. You'll see coral and sponges in odd shapes and sizes. If you're lucky, a human-size tarpon may glide past, or a sea turtle may raise its head above the surface to check you out.

Take a break from the sun and poke into the shade of the mangroves. It's tight quarters as you follow a narrow stream into a woody thicket. Be prepared to do the mangrove limbo under low-hanging branches.

Big Pine Kayak Adventures offers group tours and rents kayaks and paddleboards to individuals. On a backcountry charter with owner Bill Keogh, an author and nature photographer, you'll be accompanied by his white lab, Scupper, who rides atop his kayak.

Contact: keyskayaktours.com



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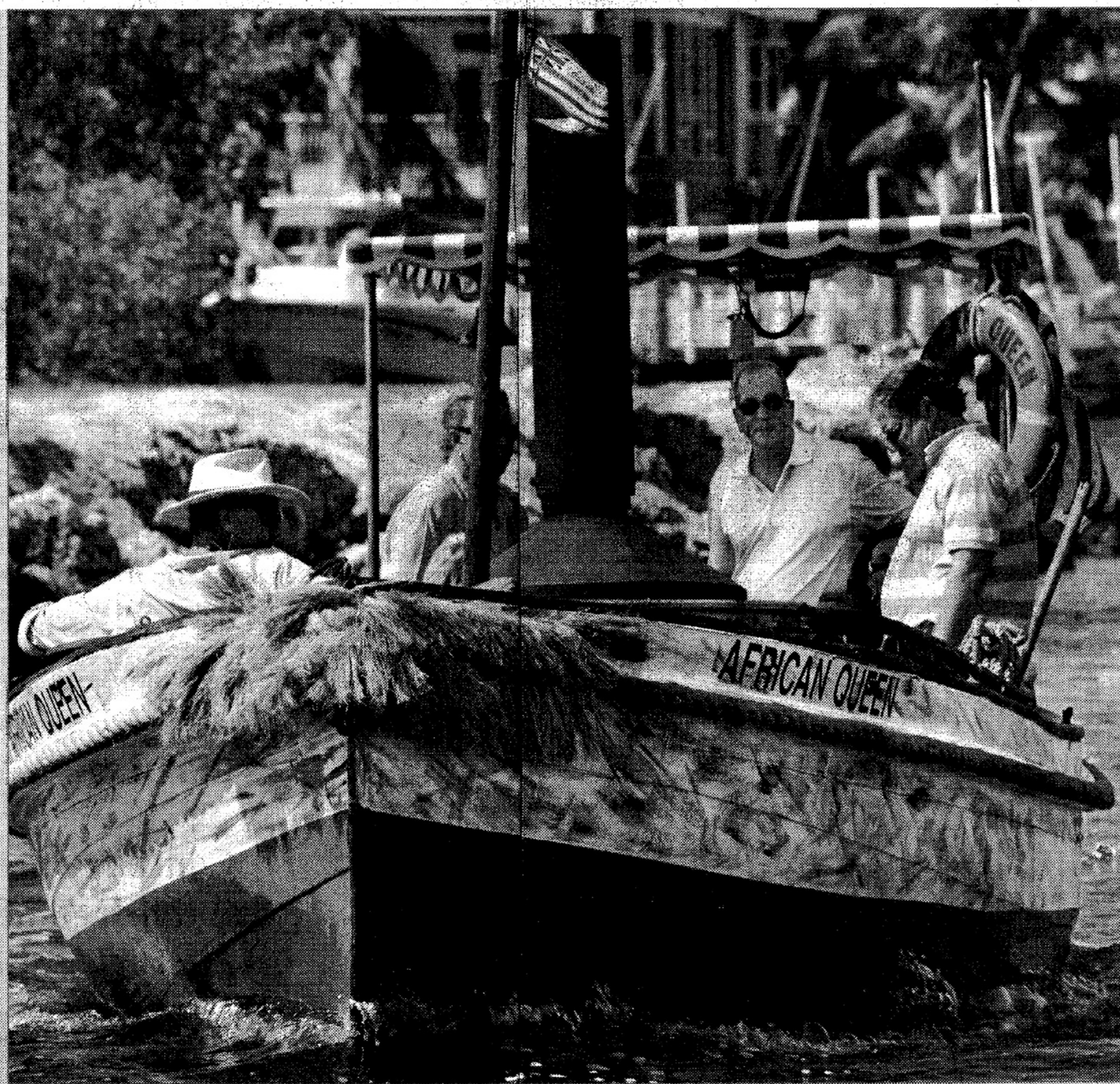
Travel through the mangroves on a nature tour by kayak off Big Pine Key, and be prepared to duck.

African Queen

Put on your best Humphrey Bogart or Katharine Hepburn persona and ride the African Queen in Key Largo. The narrow 30-foot steamboat, built in England in 1912, was called the Livingstone when she plied the waters of what was then the Belgian Congo. She was renamed for the 1951 movie that earned Bogart his only Oscar.

The boat was brought to Florida and restored. The boiler was sent to New York for rebuilding before the boat re-entered service this past May. Be one of six passengers to step aboard for a cruise on the Port Largo canals and you'll hear the shrill whistle blow and see the boiler spewing white steam.

Contact: africanqueenflkeys.com



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Humphrey Bogart's son Steve steered the refurbished African Queen in the spring as it re-entered service in Key Largo. The steamboat is from the film of the same name.



Bob Krist

Bahia Honda State Park features three beaches, which are not found in abundance in the Florida Keys.

Bahia Honda State Park

Many first-time visitors to the Keys don't realize the islands are bereft of beaches. Not so at this state park 37 miles northeast of Key West. Kick back on any of three natural beaches. Rent a kayak or book a snorkeling tour to see tropical fish and coral, or pop into the Sea and Sand Nature Center for a look at an aquarium and exhibits of marine life.

Be sure to climb the nature trail to the old Bahia Honda Bridge. It was built in 1912 as part of the Overseas Railway and converted to highway traffic in the 1930s.

When the new U.S. Route 1 was built through the Keys, this section of bridge was kept as a monument. From the top you can look down and spot rays and sea turtles.

Want to spend the night? Choose from 80 campsites and three duplex cabins.

Contact: bahiahondapark.com

Schooner sunset sail

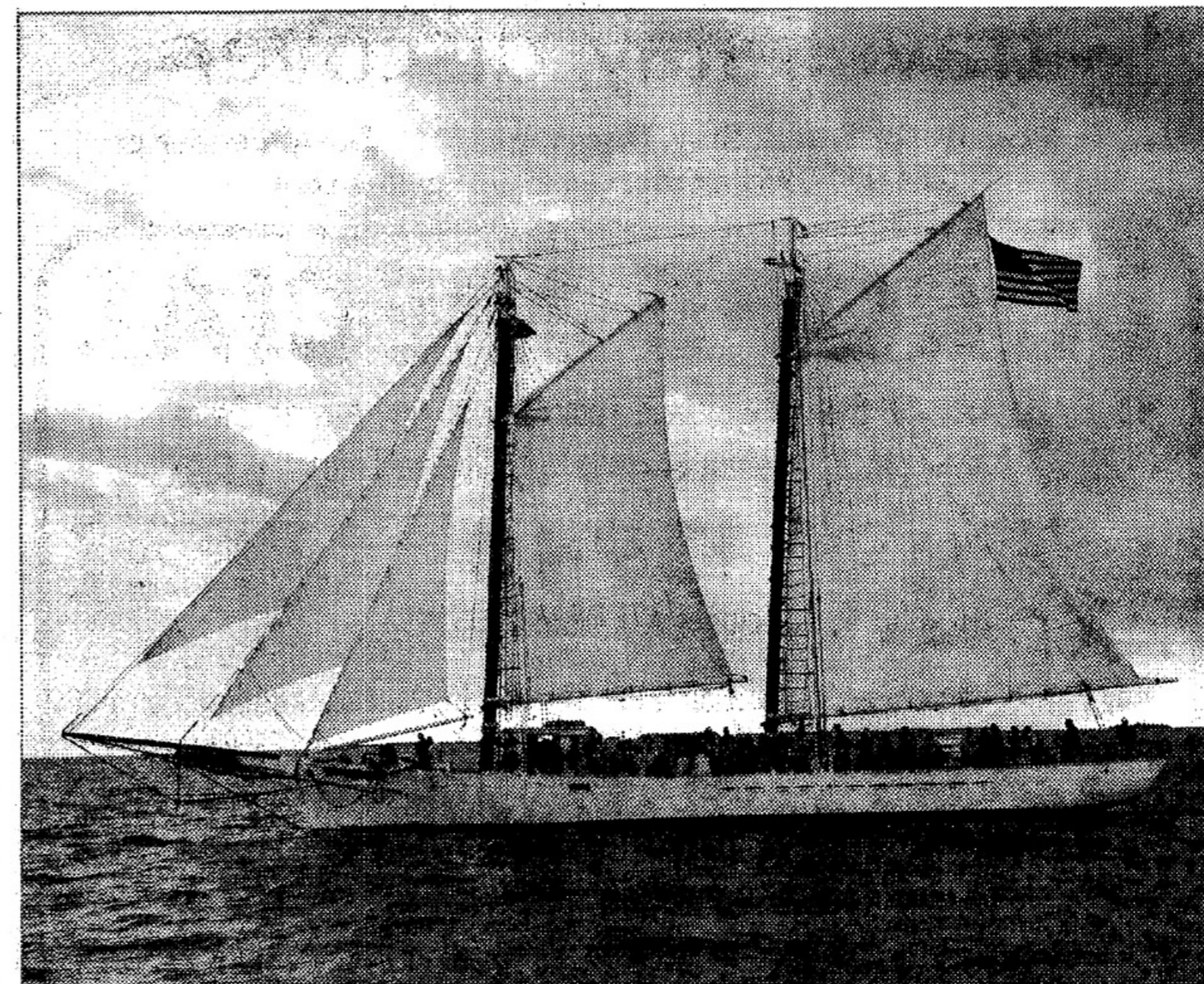
Key West is famous for sunsets, as anyone who has strolled crowded Mallory Square at dusk knows. A better way to see this nightly light show is from the deck of a masted schooner.

The last tall ship built in Key West, the 130-foot Western Union spent her working life laying cable from Maine to Venezuela. Step aboard one of the country's oldest wooden schooners and you'll be glad local preservationists saved this 1939 vessel, now on the National Register of Historic Places. Sit back and gaze at her Douglas fir spars and creamy sails as they turn rosy in the setting sun.

Contact: schoonerwesternunion.org

You'll be tempted to don an eye patch if you sail on the Jolly II Rover, an 80-foot rigged schooner that's reminiscent of those manned by rum runners and pirates in the Gulf of Mexico. Its flaming red sails light up the sky, competing with Mother Nature's show on the western horizon.

Contact: schoonerjollyrover.com



Katherine Rodeghier/Special Contributor

The 130-foot schooner Western Union was saved by preservationists. The ship offers sunset sails off Key West.

Ernest Hemingway Home & Museum

The hard-drinking novelist moved into this Spanish-colonial mansion in 1931. It's just down the street from the Key West Lighthouse. Hem joked that no matter how late he left Sloppy Joe's Bar, the light always showed him the way home.

A urinal from the bar is a water fountain in a side garden, where 50 cats, some descendants of his six-toed Snowball, roam. Look for the penny embedded in the patio, thrown there by Hemingway in a rage after his wife took down his beloved boxing ring and replaced it with Key West's first swimming pool.

Inside you'll see photos of his four wives and three sons, as well as a few furnishings brought from Europe. Above the carriage house, peek inside the studio where passages of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* were written.

Contact: hemingwayhome.com



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Ernest Hemingway's home has been converted into a museum.