NOW THEN and SAY WHEN

by Halsey C. Herreshoff

One hundred years ago the Herreshoff Manufacturing Company produced the most advanced power yachts of the time. Captain Nat Herreshoff designed every detail of the light weight steam machinery and of the steel or composite hull structure. The high sustained speed of these craft was unmatched in the United States.

One of the most remarkable vessels was NOW THEN, built in 1887 for Norman L. Munro, a New York publisher. This 88' power yacht was fitted with a quadruple expansion steam engine similar to the 5-cylinder engine of the U.S.S. CUSHING, sea going torpedo boat #1, built the previous year. These engines had a stroke of 15 " with cylinders ranging in diameter from 11" to 22 ½ ". The last two cylinders combined for the fourth stage of steam expansion. The design of this elaborate engine included a number of firsts, including placement of valves and valve gear to the side of cylinders rather than between. This scheme later became the norm for steam engines, and for all internal combustion engines to this day.

The CUSHING engine had such great power for a yacht of "only" 88' length that NOW THEN's design provided opportunity for hull innovation. Departing from the conventional narrow vee stern which allows a highly powered boat to "squat," Captain Nat designed a wide, flat stern for NOW THEN, producing an efficient, flat-running hull which was powered to a speed length ratio of nearly three!

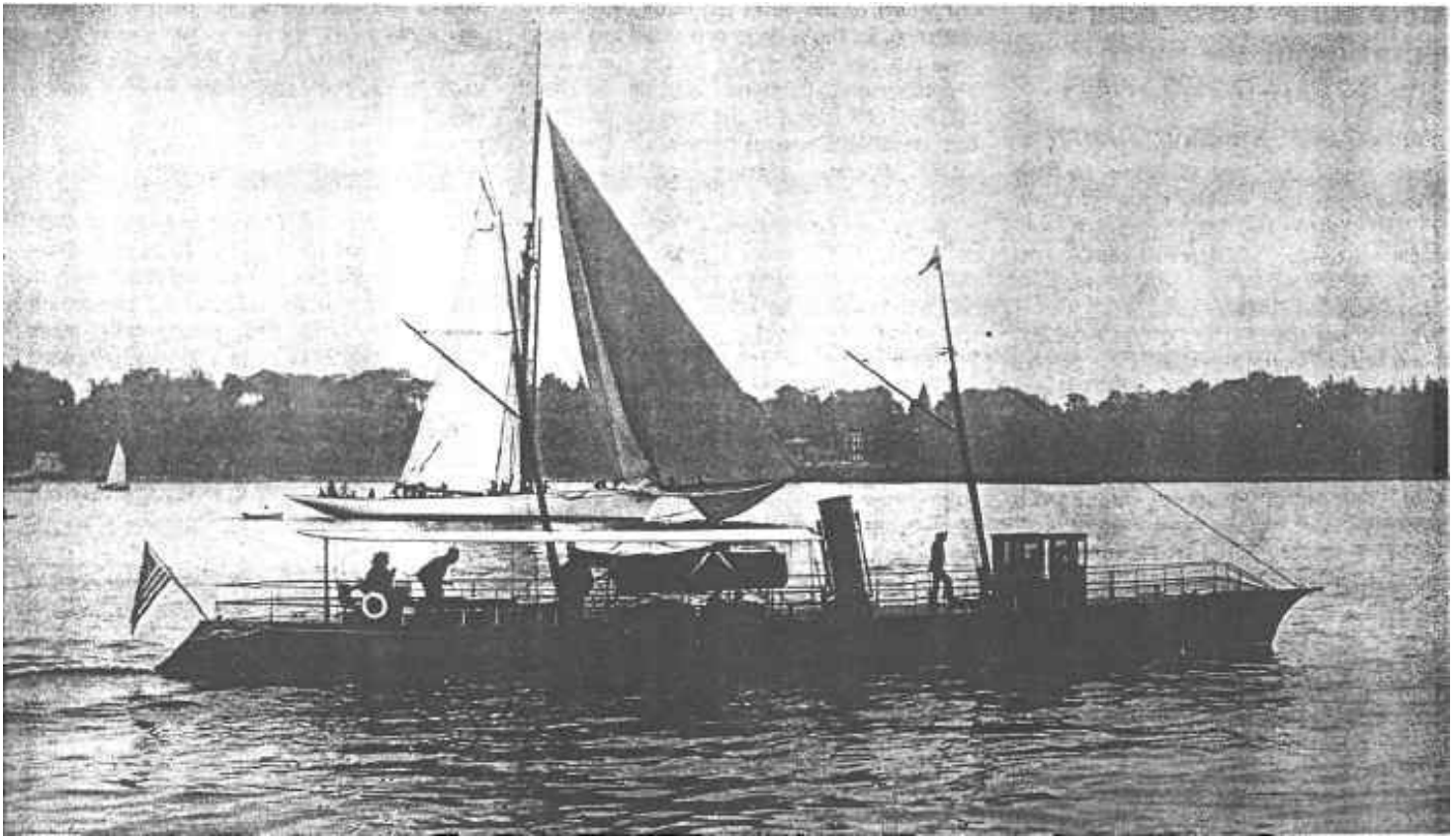
NOW THEN made a run from Newport, RI, to 24th Street, New York — a distance of one hundred and seventy miles — in seven hours and four minutes, an average of over 24 miles per hour. One hundred years later, how many private yachts can do this in total comfort? Not many! Mr. Munro was so proud of NOW THEN that he issued a challenge for a race against any American steam yacht without time allowance, but received no takers.

Another innovation, later much copied, was NOW THEN's rakish reverse angle transom, terminating in a sharp horizontal line with her flat stern. One day Captain Nat's wife Clara and some other ladies sat in deck chairs in NOW THEN's aft cockpit when she backed from the shop pier into a southwest chop. A wave dashed up the reverse transom, drenching the ladies. Captain Nat never again designed a reverse transom boat.

For 1888, Norman Munro got Captain Nat to enlarge the underwater form of NOW THEN to produce the 138' yacht SAY WHEN. The reverse transom was eliminated in favor of a substantial overhanging transom.

Again, the CUSHING model 5-cylinder engine was used, but interestingly in this longer yacht little more speed was attained than in NOW THEN. A sad incident occured aboard SAY WHEN that altered Captain Nat Herreshoffs career, likely driving him to greater activity in sailing yacht design. While getting up steam before a trial trip, SAY WHEN suffered a ruptured boiler tube. The fire door was open at the time, and the fireman stoking the boiler was fatally asphyxiated by the steam and fire suddenly thrown into the boiler room. At the inquest, Captain Nat was held responsible principally because it is alleged that he had cranked down on the boiler's safety valve the previous day. Captain Nat lost his steam engineer's license for life and had to run boilers and engines along with another licensed engineer from then on.

For all this misfortune, SAY WHEN was a most successful steam yacht, giving her owner much pleasure. Except for train travel, there was no mode of transportation 100 years ago faster than a high powered steam yacht. Quiet, with minimal vibration, boats such as NOW THEN and SAY WHEN were altogether some of the finest conveyances of all times.



NOW THEN, high speed Herreshoff steam yacht built in 1887 for Norman L. Munro. LOA 88', Powered by quadruple expansion engine.