

THE RUDDER

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Yachting in the Nineteen Hundreds

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DURING the last several years *THE RUDDER* at times has given us stories of youthful boating experiences, and to me at least these early adventures have been very pleasant reading. Perhaps the reminiscences of others have taken me back to my childhood, the time when sailing was the most thrilling, or perhaps I am entering my second childhood when some of these childish antics appear more amusing than they would have twenty years ago—at any rate, in return for the pleasure others have given me with their yarns in *THE RUDDER*, I will try to relate some of my early impressions.

My earliest experiences in yachting took place on small steam yachts, of which my father had had several, but as I was so young at the time these experiences all now seem hazy. About all I can remember is a succession of awfully good meals for which youthfulness and the salt air had prepared a surprising appetite. I was very lucky in having some sort of a valve in my throat which let things go down but prevented them from coming up again, and I cannot now remember a time when it was not a pleasant sensation to be swallowing something. We young ones often munched hardtack in the middle of the afternoon, although only a few hours before we had stowed a meal that would now cause prostration.

About all I learned in this nautical life was how to tie a few useful knots, how to keep my balance on a vessel that was rolling, and the use of nautical terms. However, as all forms of yachting etiquette were carefully adhered to on these yachts, I had become as accustomed to them as most people are to the civilities on shore, and could see much more sense to dipping the ensign when passing the stern of a government vessel than to taking my hat off to a lady on shore.

The principal object of our cruising or steaming around in those days was to watch the yacht races. This was because my father had designed many of the yachts that were racing and therefore took an unusual interest in their performance. In fact he was usually so absorbed in watching and timing the yachts at the various mark buoys that it was not safe to approach him closely. Particularly if his yachts were not in the van. So we youngsters spent most of our time towing models over the stern of the yacht, often two or three out at a time, but as the scale speed of these models was some hundred miles an hour they performed amusing antics in the boiling wake of the yacht. Some of the models had been whittled out with great care, and if they performed well were as fondly cherished by their owners as any of their possessions, but sooner or later the best of them took a dive and, after zigzagging around under water a few moments, parted the towropes and was last seen far astern, while the owner, half in tears, wound in a loose towline.

At such embarrassing moments, or if it became cold on deck, a favorite resort was the engine room, where a kindly engineer would set a lad down in a safe out-of-

the-way place where he was fascinated watching the moving parts of the engine as the pant of the air pump kept time with each stroke. After the bracing air on deck it was difficult to keep awake in the warm air of the engine room, and as the yacht rolled back and forth the lad's head would begin to nod until the engineer thought it was time to go on deck again. But even after all these years I can remember the pleasant smell of the engine room, with its scent of hot oil and steam, which is an entirely different odor from that of the modern engine room with either a gasoline or heavy oil engine, both of which to me are nauseating. We also cruised quite a little, and it might be safe to say visited nearly every navigable harbor from Bar Harbor to Sandy Hook, and now sometimes, as I study over charts, I am surprised that my father ventured into some of them on account of their shallowness.

While these trips on the water were good fun, I was generally much pleased if left at home, for then, with some boys of my own age, I would retire to a certain small pond in cow pastures back of the town. Here we held yacht races of our own. At that time it seemed stupid to me to watch an Astor Cup Race all day, and at the end of the long drawn out affair not always know who was the winner until the next day, on account of corrected time, etc. But in our miniature races the first yacht that crossed the pond was at once hailed as the winner, and if things went well we would have completed half a dozen regattas before the big yachts would have gotten well under way. The best thing about the miniature regattas was that they were so full of life, and the hopes and despairs of the various owners fluctuated back and forth every few seconds, for, although one of the yachts might have a commanding lead, when halfway across the pond she might suddenly come about and go back to the starting line. Many of the races were between a sloop and a schooner, closely matched as to speed, so that quite a little rivalry was the result. To make the races seem more realistic each of the yachts usually carried a miniature skipper in the form of a potato bug or a snail placed near the helm, and while we had each promised not to push our yacht at the start, each owner was so intent on watching the others' hands instead of his own that the yachts usually started off with quite a bone in their mouths, and this headway often carried them parallel a quarter way across the pond when Capt. Potato Bug on the sloop (being the leeward yacht and partly blanketed) might decide to luff, but Capt. Snail, being a rather deliberate sort of individual, might be slow in meeting the luff so that a foul was the result. Both yachts would then swing around in a circle with the gaff of the sloop between the mastheads of the schooner, and the mainsail of the schooner goose-wing over the head of Capt. Potato Bug, while the yacht owners at the head of the pond, not knowing which way to run, either came to blows or were pelting each other with dry cow dung which was always plentiful around the race course.

After making a few circles locked together, the yachts usually parted, one going toward the finish line and the other toward the starting point, and I remember one time when my sloop was nearing the finish line and I was all flushed with victory, all of a sudden Capt. Potato Bug, seeing a flaw of wind come down the pond, decided to gybe over and started off on a broad reach toward the north end of the pond, where he fetched up all standing on a rock about twenty feet from shore, while the schooner, which had gone back to the starting line and

put about, recrossed the pond and finally won the race under the cautious management of Capt. Snail.

These pond races so fascinated me that I often returned to them even after having a boat of my own large enough to sail in, for we boys thought it was pretty pleasant around that pond, and if the wind was too light for racing we could sit under the shade of the willow tree at the north end with our bare feet in the cool mud while the barn swallows skimmed over the pond, and now and then a kingfisher flitted by, and the song of the meadow lark could be heard from the nearby hayfield. Our tranquility was sometimes suddenly interrupted, for occasionally a mud wasp would sting one of the boys and he would start off running with a cry that made the mud turtles draw their heads below the surface, and might even disturb the cows which were browsing around us. In spite of such annoyances the pond seemed to me a much pleasanter place than the deck of a yacht where one had to sit in white duck pants and be careful not to soil the spotless pine deck.

My first command was a nine foot sailing skiff which, like most of my clothes, had been handed down to me from an older brother who had outgrown her, but she was a dear little ship and had been designed by the same man who designed the cup defender Columbia, and if J. P. Morgan was proud to be part owner of the Columbia I am sure I was as proud to be the full owner of that skiff. I remember very well the first day I sailed in her alone. It was under the lee of a very small island where the water was shallow, and as I sailed back and forth over the eel grass her speed seemed to me to be terrific and I have never had such a thrill since. She was a wet little boat though and the harbor where we lived was generally choppy, so that we usually had to sit in the water she had shipped and came home as wet as if we had been in swimming.

When about sixteen I was put in charge of a knock-about of eighteen foot waterline, twenty-four foot O.A. She had a good little cabin and altogether was nearly as nice a boat of her size as I have ever seen. While most all of my sails in this boat were between meals, we did occasionally sail to Newport, a distance of ten miles, and on a few occasions got permission to spend the night in Newport Harbor. One of these times I was accompanied by a friend who had been a competitor of mine in the cow pastures, and if possible was more of a rustic than I. The outfitting for these cruises was a simple matter, and consisted of filling the water jug and refilling the riding light. Then we took on board a wicker basket of food that the colored cook had packed up for us, and we were ready to start. I don't remember about the sail down the bay, but we were probably so busy anticipating the sights of Newport Harbor that the sail down was but a means to an end, for we knew the New York Yacht Club fleet was in and thought there might be an illumination, as there had been some years in the past.

We anchored way up in the south end of the inner harbor (which used to be quite shallow), for this insured our not being bothered in the night by larger yachts. Until sunset we feasted our eyes on the yachts of all sizes, very many of which we knew by name or had seen pictures of in THE RUDDER. Then as darkness came on we lit a small cabin light and tried to stay awake until the New York-Fall River liner had gone through the harbor, for the passage of this large steamer, all lit up, was quite a sight for country boys. However one of those

damp Newport fogs was settling down with the evening, so we were glad to go in the cabin out of the drip from the rigging.

In those days I seldom wore shoes and stockings and, as we turned in all standing on these cruises, about all I had to do was to take off my cap, blow out the light and roll up in a blanket. The cushions we slept on were only about two inches thick and were on flat board transoms, but the damp ocean air soon put us to sleep and it seemed no time at all until the sunlight was coming in through the cabin door. While not an early riser on shore, even in those days sleeping on a sailboat seemed to so revive me that it was pleasant to get up soon after the sunrise. So, putting on my cap, I stepped out in the cockpit, unhung the riding light, and mopped the deck and cockpit seats in the morning dew, not forgetting to empty the cedar bucket that had stood in the cockpit ready for use in the night. (And I might mention that this was the first cedar bucket I was shipmate with.) It seemed a long time before there was much life on the larger yachts, but soon the crews began scrubbing down decks and chamoising the brightwork, and by seven or so some of the afterguard of the racing yachts appeared on deck in their pajamas and soon plunged overboard nude for their morning baths. I might mention that it was an unwritten rule in those days that ladies should not appear on deck before colors, or eight o'clock, and in my opinion this, like all the olden customs of yachting, was a great improvement over present day practice. The reason for this rule, of course, was so the yachtsman could take his morning plunge, wipe himself dry with a towel, and go below without a dripping bathing suit and its salt.

So we boys had our plunge, and I should add that the water of Newport Harbor in those days was clear and transparent. It was just the right temperature, not too cold nor too warm, and guaranteed to produce a good appetite for breakfast. In those days we boys did not drink tea or coffee, so after a good glass of water, some hardboiled eggs and bread, we were ready for the day's fun. It was getting on toward eight o'clock and the crews of the yachts were standing by to make colors when we remembered we had on board one of my father's old private signals, so in great haste we bent its small staff to the flag halliards and when the gun from the flagship echoed across the harbor we had our flag mast-headed before most of her taller sisters, and probably even beat the flagship which, if I remember right, was the handsome steam yacht Delaware. Then we settled down in the cockpit to watch the larger yachts in the outer harbor hoist their mainsails and send up their club topsails in stops while the mast headsmen lashed the heels of their yards to their topmasts. In those days some of the larger yachts went out quite early, for it was calm it took some time to get out to the lightship, a distance of perhaps five miles.

By the middle of the morning, after the steam yachts had gone out, the harbor seemed quite deserted and we boys were trying to think what to do until the yachts came in again, when my friend suggested that we might take a walk to while away the time. Said he, "We might walk over to part of that much talked about Ten Mile Ocean Drive, and don't forget we've each got a nickel to get some of them Newport choc'lat sodies."

"Yes," I said, "but them sodies ain't so good as they used to be. I remember the first one I had about two years ago. Gee, but it was good. But the next one was

only fair, and the last one I had was nothing much more than some water with some sweetening in it."

So we dressed up to see Newport, which operation consisted of putting on shoes and stockings, but I might say that a boy's clothes in those days were a queer ensemble. We had linen caps called bicycle caps, white shirts with stripes or dots on them or both, butterfly neckties, and linen trousers called bicycle trousers which had a buckle just above the knee (that never stayed buckled), and that invention of the devil, long black stockings that were nearly impossible to haul on over wet feet. Well, after putting some lunch in a lard can we went ashore near the head of the harbor and tied the skiff in a safe place. There used to be a winding road bearing southwest from the head of the harbor that went at first under shady trees and then wound its way by several ponds and well kept country estates (called cottages in Newport, though I never knew why), until this road came out at the ocean on part of what is called the Ten Mile Drive. We boys were used to walking long distances in those days, but it was a hot summer day and the road was dusty, so when we sat down on the rocks for lunch we were thirsty and tired. This part of the shoreline, on what is called The Neck at Newport, we found very interesting. It consisted mostly of small rocky points on which the surf broke continually, while way out to sea the waves were combing over the outlying rocks with the racing yachts more than hull down in the distance.

This was a stylish part of the Ten Mile Drive, so that what seemed like an endless procession of carriages passed us, each rolling up its cloud of dust. In those days it was a custom among the dowagers of Newport to take in at least part of this drive every day, so as the phaetons and victorias passed us we looked with awe at coachmen and footmen in livery, not to mention the much belaced ladies under their parasols. We hadn't gone far along the ocean drive when my friend said, "Gee, but I'm thirsty. What do you say if we start back and git them choc'lat sodies we've been talking about even if they ain't as good as they used to be?" About that time I was sitting on the grass taking off my shoes and stockings, for to tell the truth, in those days it was easier for me to walk barefooted than with shoes on even if it was rough going, and here there was a smooth foot-path and grass. So we both took off our shoes, tied the laces together, and threw them over our shoulders. Then with stockings stuffed in our side pockets, we proceeded to take in the sights of Newport.

We hadn't gone far when we came to quite a wide street leading back toward the town. On the signboard it said Belleview Avenue, and as we thought that a queer name we decided to see where it led to. It turned out to be a nice wide street with shady trees, and we were making good progress, both thinking about the chocolate sodas we were soon to have, when my friend said, "Oh, look. Look at the funny lady in the carriage with a pair of glasses on a stick."

"Don't point," I said, "for maybe you look as funny to her as she does to you. Maybe she has never seen anyone walk up Belleview Avenue barefooted before."

"Well," said my friend, "I don't see nothing in that excepting the sidewalk is hard and hot and I wish there were a few nice cool cow flops to walk in along here, like the ones over around the pond at home." But as we walked along we were so taken up with the sights

that we forgot about ourselves and our appearance, although we must have caused some astonishment.

The principal thing we had our eyes on were the early automobiles, and we met two or three of them along that street, and when one of them stopped so did we, and probably walked around it to see what it looked like on both sides. Finally we came to the house with the owls in front of it, where James Gordon Bennett had lived, and then the Casino across the street with its stylish store windows and many people promenading up and down.

This street so fascinated us that we walked on it farther north than we needed to be opposite the head of the harbor, and came finally to a corner in front of a respectable wooden house which I was to know later in life as the Newport Reading Room. There we stopped near the stepping stone at the curb, undecided which way to go next, when a fine looking carriage with a coachman and footman on the box drew up to the curb just where we were standing. While we looked on with astonishment the footman alighted and helped a nicely dressed old gentleman out almost between us. He was probably one of the southern aristocracy, some of whom for generations had visited Newport in the summer. At any rate he was a tall thin man in a broad brimmed panama and light colored striped trousers, and no doubt as surprised to see two sixteen year old barefoot boys as we were to see him. But he stopped and said kindly, "Well, what are you boys doing here?"

And my friend spoke up and said, "We've each got a nickel and we're going to get some choc'lat sodies, but they ain't so good as they used to be."

This must have struck a favorite chord in the old gentleman, for he turned round and spoke to us very slowly and distinctly, keeping time with his cane. He said, "Young men, I have been around this blasted town quite a lot in the last seventy years and I can tell you as a certainty that there's not a blooming thing in the blazing place that is as good as it used to be." Then the doorman came out of the house and, with the footman on the other side, they took the old gentleman indoors.

The old gentleman had spoken with such strong feeling that it most scared us boys to death, so we struck out for the waterfront almost in a run and didn't stop until we were safe aboard. When my friend said, "By gee, we forgot all about them sodies," we had had such a very long walk and were so tired out that we decided to have a good drink out of the water jug instead. To make it a sort of state occasion we got out an old tin cup that had hung in the cabin two or three years, and probably had been used to dip out chowder a couple of times, and maybe used for varnish since it had been washed, for it had a very peculiar odor and usually made the water take on rainbow tints near its sides. But we each watched the other with envy while he had his turn at the cup.

By this time the yachts were coming into harbor again, so we were occupied with this spectacle until supertime, when we had sardines and much hardtack. That evening as I sat on the after deck jiggling my toes in the water I thought to myself, gee, this must have been quite a town once, if not a blasted thing here is as good as it used to be. And now, some forty years later, I understand much better what the old gentleman meant and I think, as far as yachting is concerned, there is not a blasted thing about the whole blooming game that is as good as it used to be.