

FIFTY CENTS

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THE MAGAZINE FOR YACHTSMEN OCTOBER 1964



• YACHT AMERICA •
Winner of the Cup at Cowes Aug 21, 1881
J. B. Bullenworth 1817 - 1884

The **AMERICA'S CUP** *Issue*



"Towering canvas and a great sense of power" is how Mrs. C. Oliver Iselin, who was the first American woman to grace the crew lists of an America's Cup Defender, recalls racing aboard the "ninety-footers," the popular designation for the big racing yachts around the turn of the century. Today, at 97, Mrs. Iselin is still the gay, go-ahead type she was then, and is still fascinated with Cup racing as much as with horse racing and golf. Mrs. Iselin was the outstanding sportswoman of her time, and later times have only limited her participation and not her interest.

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As an official member of the afterguard, or "aftergang" as they called it, she sailed regularly with her husband, who was owner-manager for New York Yacht Club syndicates owning four Cup Defenders—the *Vigilant* in 1893, the *Defender* in 1895, the *Columbia* in 1899, and the *Reliance* in 1903.

In those days, Cup Defenders were true yachts in the popular sense of the word. And they were called yachts. (The word boat applied only to rowboats and the like.) They varied from 123 to 143 feet over-all, and were just under ninety feet on the waterline (whence their name). The *Reliance*, the biggest of them all, had 16,160 square feet of sail area, and her main boom was 108 feet long. When she was carrying her largest racing topsail, she could not pass under the Brooklyn Bridge, which has a clearance of 127 feet at high water.

The easiest way of seeing the difference between these and contemporary racing boats is to read this description of the living arrangements aboard the *Defender*, which was the last one of this group to have them. (In later

years, the crew lived and ate aboard the tenders, and only working gear, spare canvas, and rigging were stowed aboard.) The members of the Syndicate, known as "C.O.I., et al," were used to creature comforts, and felt no compunction about taking them to sea, even when racing. A reporter from the "New York World" was given a guided tour by Captain Haff, her professional captain, in the middle of the summer season, and he described the interior as follows:

"It is in the stern overhang that Mrs. Iselin has her apartment, and a very pretty room it is too—a marvel of neatness and economy. It is shut off from the main saloon by a studded frame hung with rich, scarlet silk. The bedroom walls, which curve upward and inward (with the shape of the hull), were lined with white cretonne with cream and pale pink roses. Two berths with lockers beneath are cushioned with thick mattresses mounted on woven wire springs. A white enamel and natural mahogany bureau, with a good-sized mirror and large drawers, is tucked away in a convenient corner. All the fixtures in the cozy little dressing room adjoining the bedroom are of aluminum. (Mrs. Iselin describes this room as "a tiny head.") The stationary wash-stand has hot and cold running water. The saloon with the red silk panels (Mrs. Iselin chose them so as *not* to add to the weight) is furnished with a rich pile rug and high backed divan with cream colored damask patterned with red flowers."

There were also bunks here for the afterguard, and the crew lived forward. The "World" reporter went on to describe the accommodations for a valet and a maid. He

A Great Sense of Power

By Sally Iselin

also spoke of the big ice box and a set of blue and white china. Mrs. Iselin ordered the food every day which was served in two shifts, first to the professional officers, then to the afterguard. Dinner consisted of six courses. Captain Haff cautiously ended the interview with the statement that more mineral water was served than wine.

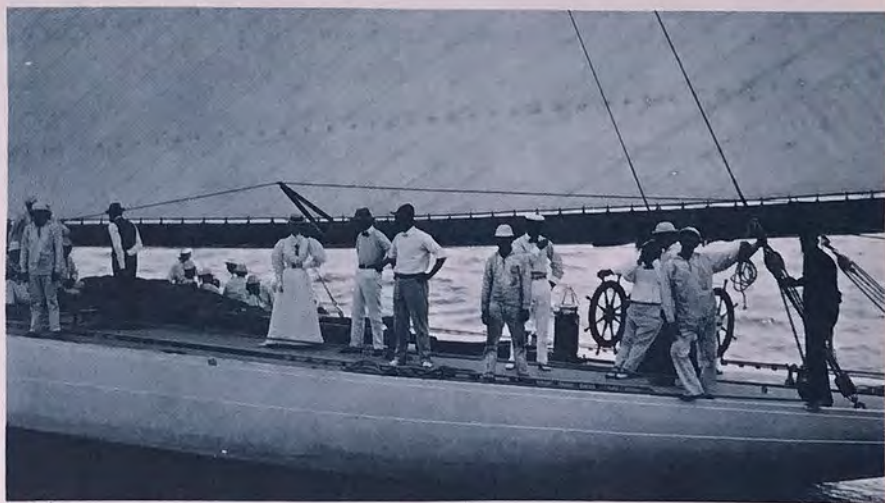
Except for the size and the scale of the boats, the Cup defending life was more or less the same as it is today. Despite the aforementioned extras, the boats were basically racing machines as they are now. The summer schedule has not changed: the boats were built in the winter, launched with ceremony and celebration in June, and competed in trial races throughout the summer on Long Island Sound, off Newport, and under sponsorship of various yacht club get-togethers such as the New York Yacht Club cruise. If the weather turned bad, as it did one night off Martha's Vineyard when pouring rain on the metal deck made it impossible to sleep, Mrs. Iselin could always retreat to the *Corsair* (the old one). The actual races against the British took place in the early fall off Sandy Hook.

By early spring, Mr. Iselin had a full-time job (without pay) supervising construction. Known as "the Boss" by crew and afterguard, he was in charge, as he put it, "of the officering and manning of the yachts . . . and the conduct of the races." Those Edwardian words sound a bit pompous, and they do not describe the good times he had. He had to stress the serious aspects to keep the support of the syndicates who paid most of the costs. He himself was a minority stockholder who earned his posi-

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Cup Races and Mrs. Iselin were favorites of the newspaper illustrators.



Mrs. Iselin aboard Defender. To her right stands Nat Herreshoff with hands behind his back. Mr. Iselin, in yachting cap, talks to bearded Hank Haff at wheel.

A Great Sense of Power

(Continued from page 25)

tion by way of his own earlier prowess racing sandbaggers on Long Island Sound. It turned out that everything he knew was the perfect complement to the skill of the yacht's designer, "Nat" Herreshoff.

Mrs. Iselin describes these good times as follows: "The 'Boss' and myself and the 'aftergang' were feted in all the ports in which we anchored. We were also surrounded by people in all sorts of boats who came to see the Cup Defenders." The latter were regarded as local landmarks when they were anchored with the trial horses and tenders off the Iselin country place in New Rochelle, which was then a center for racing. The only reason they were not swamped with too many visitors was the fact there were no outboards. The general public had to row out to see them, which kept their number down pleasingly. Usually, only the knowledgeable made the effort.

Everyone who owned any kind of boat was there the afternoon that Sir Thomas Lipton arrived on his steam yacht, the *Erin*. He was greeted at the dock by Mr. Iselin, dressed in a Prince Albert, and Mrs. Iselin, in a long skirt and jacket, and feathered hat. The dock and terrace were festooned with yachting emblems, the Star-Spangled Banner, the Union Jack, and potted palms. After dinner with Mr. Iselin's brothers, New York Yacht Club Commodore E. D. Morgan, Mr. and Mrs. W. B. Duncan, and others, there were toasts. At ten-thirty, the visitor retired to the *Erin*. It was an almost royal occasion.

Being good-looking and attractive as well as successful, the Iselins were treated to much the same kind of publicity given today to Mickey Mantle, with Duke and Duchess of Windsor overtones. Whether or not Mrs. Iselin brought a certain color parasol was regarded as a good or a bad omen. The more grand and dashing they were, the more the public liked it.

In the early 1890's, popular feeling was for showing off wealth and prowess, particularly against the British yachtsmen who were putting on quite a splashy show of their own by way of Edward VII's *Britannia*, which was practically a sister ship of the *Valkyrie II*. Even the naming of the *Defender* was done in a national competition; the "Tribune" ran a contest in 1895 with a prize of a hundred dollars (given by the New York Yacht Club syndicate) to name her. Hundreds of names were submitted and listed on the front page. A little girl won.

Mrs. Iselin was discussed almost as much as her husband and the yachts. She was ahead of most of her contemporaries in competitive sports. The former Hope Goddard of Providence, she was brought up there and at East Greenwich, where her family had a famous country place and farm of the traditional English type. By the time she was married, she knew how to sail a boat, and had won ribbons in the National Horse Show. She played a good game of golf. In 1900, she won a tournament sponsored by the then Prince of Wales against Grand Duke Dmitri who is said to have smashed his clubs in

rage because of being beaten by a woman. She was also interested in horse breeding and racing, a sport still her favorite. One of her horses came in third in the English Derby a few years ago.

Despite her being known as a sportswoman, she still raised comments about being on board the Cup Defenders. Besides the prejudice against having women on board, there was some doubt as to whether she could stand up to the long days of racing. The D.A.R. had a meeting to discuss whether she, a fellow member, should be on board. The "Tribune" discussed the meeting in some detail. Some thought it was quite all right; others were not so enthusiastic. It was finally decided that Mrs. Iselin was already so identified with the Defenders that "to see the big sloops without seeing her on deck, settled in the shadow of the mainsail, would not seem fitting or proper."

She was observed following the races with "frowns or smiles" as the case might be, and her "alert figure" and "bright face" were considered an "inspiration to the crew." What the crew thought was not known because they were not asked. She says that Hank Haff and Charlie Barr "accepted me politely but without enthusiasm." This in itself was quite a compliment for the times. When asked what they were like, she said, "Captain Hank Haff was a tall, rugged individual—a typical Long Islander, with great knowledge of the Sound and adjacent waters, and 'a good sailor man.' Charles Barr was a quiet, unassuming Englishman, rather short in stature, a past-master in handling large yachts, with a great knowledge of nautical lore."

While underway, she sat in the companionway. The most important thing she had to do was to keep out of the way, a difficult feat on any racing boat, even on the 90-footers, because of the live ballast on deck. She could not move about except at specified moments. Her brother-in-law explained her presence on board by saying she was official timekeeper. She says that she was more of a peacemaker than timekeeper. (Mr. Herbert Leeds, one of the afterguard, was timekeeper.)

Peacemaking required steady nerves, or, as she says, "coolness, a good sense of humor, and a fund of funny stories." Her sense of humor stood her in good stead in 1899 during the eighteen consecutive days of fog and calm which delayed the course of the races against the British. Every day, crew and afterguard sat staring at each other, and at the British boat, waiting for a breeze. As peacemaker, she feels responsible for maintaining that "established routine."

One theory on how to get the most speed was to put on as much sail as possible, with the result that often the gaffs, masts, and rigging could not stand the strain, and hundreds of square feet of damp canvas, broken spars, and rigging came crashing down on the deck. There were other accidents stemming from over-optimism.

There is an Iselin family story about the time "Uncle

Ollie" left a spinnaker on too long. Either Hank Haff, or Charlie Barr (no one can remember which one) suggested taking it down. Mr. Iselin decided to leave it up. The wind freshened, and when he wanted it to come down, it had to be cut away, by the man at the topmast, the one at the tack, and the one at the clew.

Mrs. Iselin says such situations luckily brought on no visible nerves as far as she was concerned. She tells of a time she was in the "tiny head" of the *Defender*. She heard a frightful crash on deck, tried to leave, and found the door jammed. She finally, by way of very strong wrists, got it open, came up on deck, and discovered an aluminum mast had broken and fallen on deck, covering it with a mass of "rigging, flapping canvas, and broken spars." Her first reaction was to go below and get a camera. Everyone was astonished at her coolness. It was later that she learned that the mast had just missed Mr. Iselin by a couple of inches.

Such accidents were almost an occupational hazard, particularly on the *Defender*. For a time, the Herreshoff boatyard was called the "yacht hospital." In most cases, it was able to replace spars and masts in a few days, a fact which gives one an idea of their inventory.

Bravado was as important as science is today. Nat Herreshoff's son, in his biography of his father, summed up what was asked from an owner-manager and an afterguard. He described a day when a reef had to be shaken out while setting a topsail during a "strong breeze." The way it was done showed "the daring, resourcefulness, and courage of Mr. Iselin, Mr. Morgan (E.D.), and Captain 'Nat'." We might call it foolhardiness, but they seemed to have taken such events quite in their stride.

The everyday routine was less eventful. There was no conversation except for the sound of Mr. Iselin's voice through a megaphone, and occasional conversation with the captain. The only time there was conversation among the afterguard was during lunch, which was served below. The live ballast laid in neat rows with their heads just over the windward rail. The reason for the silence was because of the noise of natural causes, such as the flapping sails (which were of heavy canvas), the wind, and the like. With the lee rail under water—"in the suds" as they called it—they certainly did feel "a very great sense of power." After a long day, the afterguard was given a "delicious concoction," named a "pink-un," the recipe of which was never divulged by its creator, Mr. Leeds, who probably did not want to tell Mrs. Iselin that it had gin—as well as grenadine—in it.

Launchings were very great occasions. They took place in the Herreshoff Yard in Bristol, Rhode Island, and were all done in the same manner. For the launching of the *Columbia*, during early June of 1899, special trains and excursion boats from Providence brought several hundred of the general public and the press. They had the dubious pleasure of waiting outside the shed all day for the great event, which took place at 8:00 P.M. when the tide was high. There was little to do except stare at the comings and goings of the Iselin family and their friends.

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In the morning, Mr. Iselin arrived bearing the bottle of champagne to be used for the christening. Bristol Harbor was crowded with all types of boats—Navy torpedo boats newly returned from the Spanish-American War; big steam yachts, including a particularly big one, the *Ballymena*, owned by John Nicholas Brown; and myriad small skiffs and sloops. By 5:00 P.M., there was not a rowboat to be rented for “love nor money,” according to the “Herald.” The Iselins gave a huge lunch aboard the *St. Michaels*, the *Columbia’s* tender.

The Iselin children were there as well as the various members of the syndicate. The two Iselin boys were observed “looking with longing” at their 15-foot knockabout anchored off the pier. In the afternoon, they and their father had the special privilege of touring the *Columbia*. She was sealed off from prying eyes of the crowd, which, in the course of the afternoon, grew to some five thousand. There had been speculation on who would christen her—Mrs. Iselin or her stepdaughter. In the end, it was Mrs. Iselin who had the honor. Dressed to the nines, wearing a big hat and a long-skirted dress, she did it from a twenty-foot high stand, which was placed at the bow of the boat. The champagne bottle was suspended on a red and black ribbon, red and black being Mr. Iselin’s private signal colors.

The *Columbia*, unlike her predecessor, the *Defender*, which was said to have earned herself bad luck by sticking on the ways, went down steadily into the water at exactly fourteen minutes past eight, under the glare of searchlights. (At this stage, the use of flashlight bulbs for photographs was still in the experimental stage with the result that one photographer was killed by an exploding flashbulb as he photographed the boat going down the ways.) There was a gala launching dinner afterward at the Herreshoff’s house, and the high point of the party was a candy model of the boat, under sail, imbedded in an artificial lake, set in turn on the dining room table. Made by the chef of Colonel Goddard, Mrs. Iselin’s father who lived in East Greenwich, it attracted as much attention as the *Columbia* herself.

During the three months of tuning up the new boat, which was done by racing her against the old Cup Defenders acting as trial horses, there were many gay doings on shore and aboard the steam yachts following them. No less than forty-eight steam yachts, including the first *Nourmahal*, owned by John Jacob Astor, and the *Delaware*, owned by F. G. Bourne, New York Yacht Club commodore, sixteen big schooners, and twelve sloops, seven of which were Cup Defenders, took part in the annual New York Yacht Club Cruise of 1903 as it went from New London, to Newport, to Martha’s Vineyard, and home again to the Sound.

During the day, the sailing yachts raced for such prizes as the Astor and Goelet Cups, followed by the steam yachts which were loaded to the gunwales with spectating society. The steam yachts had to be fast to keep up with the sailing craft. The *Reliance*, the 1903 defender, set a record for a 30-mile triangular course by completing it

in 2 hours 58 minutes 52 seconds. To do so, she had to be moving on certain tacks at some fifteen knots.

In New London, there was a display of fireworks, and the hotel was lit from top to bottom while an orchestra played all night. While they were in Newport, Bellevue Avenue was deserted during the day, and there was a ball every night. Sometimes there were two, but it was generally agreed that Newport, even in those days, could not support more than one. On the last night of the cruise, all the boats were illuminated, and searchlights from the *Delaware* played on the American flag at the naval torpedo station.

Mrs. Iselin’s clothes were typical of this elegant period, with straw hats, veils, and gloves. She wore white linen duck skirts and matching blouses, and in bad weather, a blue serge coat, topped by a straw sailor had banded with the red and black ribbon.

“A heavy brown veil was draped over the nose and chin, leaving the eyes free, as a suntan was not fashionable in those days.” Nor was showing the ankles, even when one stepped in and out of launches. “Of course, they did show,” she says, “but they were not supposed to do so.”

So, she wore the long skirts of the era, and sometimes, a slightly shorter type. And, of course, they were all made to order “because they had to fit.” Her shoes were by Peel or Wycoff in London, and were of white leather with sponge rubber soles with flat heels (sneakers had been invented, but were considered quite as unfashionable as suntans in those days).

These were the days, according to one of her contemporaries, when “women dressed to please, even when on a boat, not like today, when they all look like tramps in those blue jeans.” The wide skirts were cumbersome ascending and descending the narrow companionways, but she managed by “twirling” and furling them as one would an umbrella. If it turned cold, she had a sealskin rug to wrap herself in. As for companionship, on the *Defender*, she had the famous little yellow dog called Sandy, who was the mascot of the boat. He sat beside her often, done up with a yellow ribbon around his neck.

An ordinary mutt, this dog was quite a favorite with the public. He was usually referred to as “the little yellow cur, “and often appeared in sketch form in the papers doing tricks or simply standing on deck with Mrs. Iselin, who describes him as “most intelligent and lovable.” He went with her everywhere, including sitting on her lap on the box seat of a four-in-hand. Captain Haff, when asked about the dog’s pedigree, said he was a “cross between a little yellow cur and a sea dog.”

When the *Defender* ran into a chain of bad luck in the form of accidents, going aground, and illness of the crew and afterguard, it was generally felt she needed a special mascot to do away with the hex put on her when she stuck on the ways at her launching. So, Mr. Leeds bought the dog for twenty-five dollars and presented him to the *Defender*. He was given a big welcome, according to one of the people who witnessed it.

"The usually dignified head of America's syndicate (Mr. Iselin) danced a delighted jig with the dog in his arms, ordered that he be given a silver chain collar with the name 'Defender' engraved on it, or 'a gold one if you want,' and instructions were given that it be a strong one so that he would not get away. Nor was he to be overwashed for fear that 'the luck be swabbed off'."

Mrs. Iselin brushed him gently, parted his hair, and gave him his first yellow ribbon, which he wore around his neck. From then on, he was constantly with them on board the *Defender*, and proved his sea dog ancestry by never getting in anyone's way. His final public appearance was the day *Defender* won the series against the British challenger, *Valkyrie III*, when Mr. Iselin held him high for some twenty thousand cheering spectators.

In 1903, the New York Yacht Club chartered the *Monmouth*, a big excursion boat with a capacity of 750, for their members; as many as a thousand of them were aboard, along with the Seventh Regiment Band to entertain them. Every yacht known was in New York Harbor, either anchored off the New York Yacht Club dock at Twenty-third Street and the East River, in the Hudson, or off Staten Island.

Bets, the odds, and the names of the bettors and brokers were published in the papers. There was a yachting ice cream sold composed of model vanilla boats skimming pistachio waves. During the same year, Stock Exchange attendance was down a third, and the two-thirds who did go to work were "more interested in the Highlands of Navesink (a landmark near Sandy Hook) than in Jacob's Field," according to the "Sun."

A special bulletin board was set up, and when the *Reliance* pulled away from the British challenger in the final race, the market rallied. Big bulletin boards were set up in front of the newspaper buildings so that those who had to stay in town could follow the events. A flag was flown atop the Manhattan Life Building to show which boat was ahead, white for the *Reliance*, green for the *Shamrock*.

In 1899, no less a person than Signor Marconi operated his wireless telegraphy aboard the New York Herald's boat which was following the races.

The Plaza and the old Waldorf were jammed with people whose city houses were still closed. There were parties in honor of this and that, including several for the daughters of Lord Dunraven, the British challenger in 1893 and 1895. The Ladies Wyndham-Quin were considered to be very pretty and fashionable as they sat amidships on spare spars on their father's boat, dressed in "yachting suits" sporting their father's colors which were yellow and blue. The Duke of Marlborough stayed at the Waldorf, and followed the races aboard the *Nourmahal*. (One paper mentioned that he was thought to be such an important news story that no one noticed that the Duke of Alba was also staying at the same hotel.)

The races in those days were both popular and fashionable, and the Iselins and their boats had many rabid fans who followed their every move.



A close call during the first National Championships for the Rhodes 19 Class . . . on Long Island Sound, August '63

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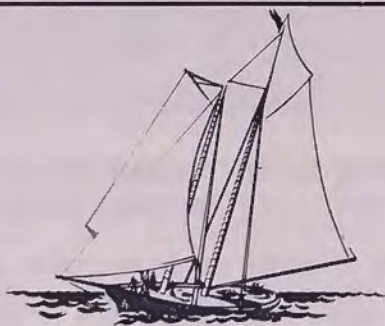
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Newport Ship Yard

The first big event of the week of the races was the official measuring of the defender and the challenger, which took place in the drydock of the Erie Basin in Brooklyn. The point of the measuring was to determine which boat would give time to which. From the public's point of view, it was the first and only time the boats could be seen at close hand. When the *Defender* and the *Valkyrie III* were measured one behind the other in drydock, over eight thousand people came by trolley to watch the ceremony and over twenty thousand people visited the yard during the day. The yachts were brought in under tow with the full complement on board; the press and the crowd had a good chance to stare, which they did.

Mr. Herbert Leeds was described as being "in a wealth of pink shirt." Mr. Woodbury Kane, of Rough Rider fame (another old friend), was seen talking with Mr. Iselin who wore a yachting cap with the New York Yacht Club insignia, white flannels with fine black pin stripe, and a dark blazer. Mrs. Iselin wore shore clothes with a trim sailor hat "which had a pin in it somewhere" and "a pair of laughing eyes" as she ascended the companionway in time to acknowledge the salute of Lord Dunraven, who was standing on the deck of his boat. Sandy, the dog, got equal attention as he wandered around the deck.

The next day, the *Defender* was towed from her temporary base off Sandy Hook through Ambrose Channel to the start off the Scotland Lightship. There was the usual number of sightseeing boats, which made the scene look like a "city on the ocean." This was the race which started bad feeling and led to Lord Dunraven's famous protest. There is myriad literature, including the New York Yacht Club official account of subsequent proceedings describing what happened, so there is no point in going into it here. There was a press account written at that time which described Mr. Iselin returning to the New York Yacht Club station at Staten Island and being greeted by reporters wanting to know what happened.

One of them asked, "Is it true, Mr. Iselin, that you said 'God damn that English b-----'?" The account went on to say that he glared at the reporter in a very cool manner, and replied, "It is not true," then he got in his carriage and rode off. This protest was probably the only unhappy event during Mr. Iselin's ten years "in office" as owner-manager, and it, like the races themselves, ended well.

The 90-footers, along with the Edwardian era, came to an end at about the same time. Nat Herreshoff began thinking of different designs, the "aftergangs" grew older and turned to other interests. The First World War put an end to yachts dependent on "live ballast." Even the Edwardians, who had taken the expense in stride in the early Nineties, began to take a second look after the turn of the century.

If we could see them today, under full sail, our eyes, accustomed to Lightnings and Blue Jays and the Twelve Meters, would pop out of our heads. It is hard to believe that they were once regarded as being as humdrum a sight on Long Island Sound as a new Rolls Royce on the parkway today.