

A Boat for the Bay: The Robin (Part 1)

Although many of today's boaters do not recall the Robin Class sailboat, at one time it was THE CLASS OF THE BAY and for a very good reason: it was designed specifically for use on Sodus Bay. (SBYC Centennial History, 29) But first, some background –

Back when the Sodus Bay Yacht Club was first organized (1893), handicap racing was the order of the day. This system awards each boat a rating based on its size and design; that rating translates into the seconds per nautical mile by which the elapsed time of each vessel over a given course must be adjusted, thus allowing sailboats of various sizes and designs to race against each other on an even basis. According to the Yacht Club's Centennial History, in 1894 the "fleet was composed of an assortment of sloops, ketches and centerboard yawls approximately 26 to 30 feet in length."

In 1904, one-design racing became possible with the addition of a fleet of 15 Larks (16' long with a 6' beam and, at least originally, a single gaff-rigged sail) which raced through the 1920s. In 1920, the club fell on hard times and the clubhouse was lost in a foreclosure sale. Although the Yacht Club was reorganized in 1923, there were only 5 members and no property. By 1934, membership had risen to 15 and the property was re-purchased in July of 1935. Apparently in an effort to attract younger members, then Commodore Harrison Bloomer and some of his associates approached a retired naval architect named Benjamin B. Wood about designing a sailboat suited to the wind and wave conditions of Sodus Bay. Wood was residing in Sodus at the time, recuperating from an accident. Local lore has it that he was confined on his back in bed and worked on the plans with the aid of mirrors and an overhead drawing board. (ed. note: I have searched rather diligently for actual evidence of this but have found none. As a matter of fact, what I actually know for a fact about Mr. Wood is meager. He graduated from Wolcott's Leavenworth High School in 1908, where he was a member of the debating society. In 1918, he was granted full membership in the Society of Naval Architects and Marine Engineers and he apparently lived in Philadelphia at that time. He was residing in Sodus in July of 1933 and his plans for the Robin [which are part of the Sodus Bay Lighthouse Museum's collection] are dated 11.1.33. Those plans list his business address at 332 N. Broadway in Pitman, NJ.)

Anyway, the Robin made her debut in 1934 and when the Sodus Bay Yacht Club returned to its clubhouse in 1935, its first official race was for Robins. According to The (Sodus) Record of August 1, 1935, that race was won by Leon Gaussein of Rochester, who covered the five-mile course in 1 hr. 42 min. 38 sec. Harrison Bloomer came in second, 2 minutes behind. Others in that race were Peter Kemper, Rudolph Rupert, Richard Comstock, Robert Bloomer, Roger Williams, John Newton and William Croucher. Two weeks later The Record reported that Gaussein was first again, this time covering the course in 1 hr. 30 min. Harrison Bloomer was next over the finish line, and missed being first by only 5 seconds. Peter Kemper was third. The June 4, 1936 edition

of The Record notes that Duane (“Buster”) Brown of Newark won the Saturday races in his new Robin, which he had launched the previous week and was racing for the first time. “Buster” was about 15 at the time and his boat was Robin #13, built by Bill Kallusch.

The Robin was immediately popular. It was fast and responsive and earned a reputation as a “light air” boat. Yacht Club historians proclaimed it “the right boat at the right time.” (Centennial History, 29) In fact, the Robin fleet eventually numbered 19 boats, making it the largest one-design class raced by adults in the club’s history.

A centerboard boat, the Robin was 17.5’ long, had a 6’ beam and carried two sails. In all, a total of 19 Robins were built: Bill Kallusch built 9 (as nearly as anyone around now can tell), the Skaneateles Boat Company built some and Pete Kemper finished two hulls (#3 and #14).

Apparently, over the years some liberties were being taken with the specifications called out on Wood’s original plans because a letter dated 1944 codified these restrictions and established a committee to enforce them. Since the point of one-design racing is to insure the equality of all boats in the class, such restrictions are necessary to “prevent the possibility of an owner gaining an advantage over his competitors through willingness to spend impropotionally (*sic.*) large amounts of money on equipment.” Henry Nesbitt recalled that sometime in the late ‘30s Terry and Jim Paton became the first skippers to dry-sail their Robins and caused “quite a ruckus” in the fleet because dry-sailing was considered a way of making the boat lighter, and therefore faster than if it were left in the water for the season. (Other Robin owners kept their boats on moorings.) Dry-sailing also made it easier to keep a boat clean and a clean boat is a faster boat. Henry said that he didn’t know if the dry-sailing actually made any difference in the racing results, however. Needless to say, competition was keen! (ed. note: My husband Bud tells me that this is nothing new. When it comes to gaining an advantage, sailboat racers are “sneaky people” – and he speaks from experience as a one-time class measurer.)

Since the Robin was designed specifically for conditions on Sodus Bay, it was raced here exclusively, except on the rare occasions when the weather made it possible to compete in the annual race to and from Fairhaven. The Robins sailed a triangular course. The start was always at the Yacht Club between buoy A and the club flagpole, regardless of the wind direction. Other marks were at the north end of Newark Island, off Thornton Point and off the South Shore. Races were held on both Saturday and Sunday from June through September and the fleet was very active. Yacht Club historians note that in 1942, 33 races were scheduled for the Robin Class.

To be continued...