

A Boat for the Bay: The Robin (Part 2)

During the 1942 racing season, The Record ran a column written by Larry Morley (owner and skipper of #10, “Chinook”) and titled “On the Wind”. Each week Morley recounted the details of the previous weekend’s racing events, primarily one-design races for Robins and Snipes. His columns make interesting reading. In the June 4th edition, he describes the action of the season’s inaugural race, when “four of the popular one-design racing class Robin sloops took the starting gun . . . Commodore Bill Croucher had the stick of ‘Rampage’, last year’s champion, while Tim Croucher sailed his 1940 champ, ‘Tip Toe.’ Bobbie Bloomer sailed his recently purchased ‘Pronto’ and Larry Morley was at the starting line with ‘Chinook.’ . . . Due to a misunderstanding on the part of some of the racing skippers, several of them failed to show up for the morning race and the Commodore ordered an unofficial race in the afternoon which resulted in two additional Robins entering that race. ‘Kempy’ Bloomer entered his number 14 and ‘Chippy’ Stuart held down 18, a sleek black hull with a former season’s championship to her credit.” “Chinook” won the morning race and in Sunday’s race “Bloomer ghosted to a decisive victory. . .” Morley concludes: “Other races constituting the fine series are scheduled for every Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning during this month, and in spite of the little inconveniences created by the necessary Coast Guard precautions of identification cards and painted numerals on the power boats, an active season of sailing competition is anticipated.”

In the next week’s column Morley writes that “Commodore Croucher of Newark experienced a bit of hard luck when his light weight jib block broke under the strain of a taut jib halyard, forcing him to run back to his mooring buoy for repairs.” Later in the same column we read that “two big coal boats had to be dodged by the racing skippers, and the captain of one of them made a courteous gesture when he practically put the big ship in reverse in order to eliminate interference with the race.” The Yacht Club historians recount another close encounter with a coal boat: “The Robin skipper was intent on the race, and didn’t want a ‘power boat’ diverting him from his course. He shouted all this vehemently to the men on the deck of the coal boat, who turned the deck hose on him and nearly sank his Robin.” (Centennial History, 29)

In the August 13th edition of The Record, we read that the racers had a lay day when a “lusty south-east wind and rain squalls, then driving rain” made racing untenable. However, Morley writes, “‘Dick’ Brown, in optimistic mood, aboard his Whiffenspooker, made a game attempt to leave his mooring off Charles Point, but shortly capsized and with some damage. Otherwise, floating property was left intact.” (ed. note: Dick told me that his Robin, the same #13 that his older brother “Buster” raced in the 30s, was named “Argo” and he had no idea how Morley came up with the name “Whiffenspooker”!)

And that brings to mind some other things I've learned. A few of the Robins had but one owner. Most of them, however, had a succession of owners – some as many as four. Robin # 4 was first owned by R. Rupert, then went to R. Chittenden, and then was owned by R. Swetland, who donated it to the SBHS a few years ago. Sometimes, as in the case of the Browns, a father bought the Robin for his son. Duane Brown, Sr. (who couldn't swim and never sailed) bought #13 for his son, Duane, Jr.. He ("Buster") sailed it until he went into the service, when his brother Dick took over as skipper. Henry Nesbitt's boat (#15, "Red Head") originally belonged to Harrison Bloomer. Henry raced until he entered the service in the winter of 1942; his father then sold "Red Head" to the Ralph Smith family of Newark, whose son Robert ("Bobby") sailed it.

After World War II the fleet began to decline, although some of the Robins were sailed on the Bay until the early '50s. A number of factors (normal deterioration common to wooden boats, the introduction of new classes, improved construction materials) eventually led to the disappearance of the class from Sodus Bay, except for Robin #10 which until recently still made an annual appearance on a mooring off the Bar (in front of Pearl Rook's cottage).

-- Jean Seymour

Sources

Sodus Bay Yacht Club. THE CENTENNIAL HISTORY: 1893-1993.

THE (Sodus) RECORD, Aug. 1 +15,1935; June 4, 1936; June 4 + 11, Aug. 13, 1942.

The above sources provided a great deal of interesting information but I could not have written this article without the help of the following people, all of whom either sailed a Robin, had a Robin in the family or knew someone who had a Robin: Margi Beale, Bob Bloomer, Kemp Bloomer, Dick Brown, Henry Nesbitt, Pearl Rook, and Barbara Stuart. Thanks to Norman and Ellen (Kemper) Plummer of Easton, MD, for their search for information on Benjamin B. Wood; they discovered about half of what little we know about him. (Incidentally, Ellen donated 7 Robin Class event flags [won by her father] to the Lighthouse Museum.) And finally, special thanks to my husband Bud who explained and clarified and corrected and knew all the right questions to ask the folks listed above.