

Boating

When I was a kid back in Nebraska, actual “boating” was something we did a couple times when the whole family went to Minnesota for a summer vacation. The entire extended family went to Minnesota and rented a lake, including all the cabins and all the boats. It was our private lake and the fish were our private fish. Of course, renting an entire lake in Minnesota is not a big deal given how many lakes exist in that very wet and glacier-gouged state. The boats were all made of aluminum and they were powered with very small, sometimes cantankerous outboard motors. I spent some time accompanying the adults on fishing voyages in one of these craft but mostly I



spent my time discovering that I knew how to swim without being taught. I was one of those little kids who had been born with positive buoyancy. Since I could float without effort, swimming was just a matter of flaying my arms and legs to create some motion in the water.

My earliest recollections of boating did not relate to anything that happened on a lake in Minnesota; rather, they occurred on the streams and ponds of the farm country around our farmstead in northeastern Nebraska. Any body of water bigger than a mud puddle was a suitable place to stage a full scale naval battle. Two mighty opposing forces would be launched, each composed of various twigs and small logs standing in for battleships, aircraft carriers and destroyers. From the shore, I would engage the opposing forces with mighty blasts from their big guns, all in the form of small rocks cast at the various

targets. At the end only a few of the faux ships would be floating and they were the victors.

My fascination with all things naval stemmed from having an uncle who was, in my view, a real-life Navy hero. He was tall, slender and exceedingly handsome in his Chief Gunner’s Mate uniform with lots of ribbons. He had gone into the Navy in the late thirties and served throughout WWII in the Pacific. He had been through many battles and I wanted to be just like him. However, since I was just a little kid, acting out naval battles in a pond was about all I could do.

We didn't get a real boat until our family moved to Portland, Oregon, in late 1948. We lived there about a year and, since the city had two mighty rivers, the Columbia and the Willamette, my Dad invested in a ten-foot-long, blunt-bowed wood boat. It was kept in storage at a facility on the Willamette River. To launch the boat you had to lift it onto a trolley and then roll it down



to the water. The objective of this purchase was to go fishing on the Willamette, hoping to catch a salmon. We never caught a salmon, but I had several experiences where I was permitted to take the little boat out solo, but only under oar power. I guess dad didn't trust me with the outboard, or more likely, he didn't want me to use an outboard until I had fully mastered the art of rowing.

One day while out rowing I failed to notice the tug boat coming straight at me. When you row you normally face away from the direction you are going so you often have to look over your shoulder to see what is coming—I had failed to do that. The tug boat operator took mercy on me and sounded his horn, and that scared me witless. When I saw what he was towing, I was even more scared. He was towing a log float that was almost half the width of the river. To avoid being run down I had to row for dear life—literally. Somehow I made it, which was a great relief both to me and probably to that tug boat captain.

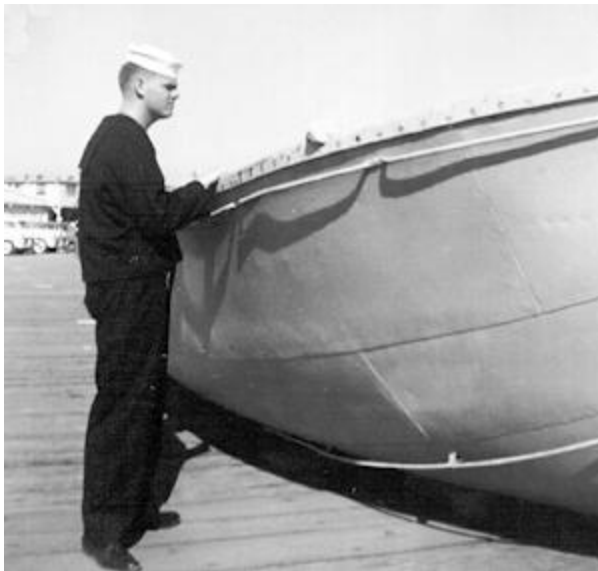
While we were living in Oregon and afterwards, Dad often rented boats to explore various waterways, but they were always just small boats with outboards. Usually the excuse was to go fishing, but often all we did was tour around and explore inlets. I don't think my Dad was ever much of a fisherman and neither was I.

From then until I finished high school in Anaheim, California, we had very few opportunities to go boating. Some of Dad's friends had boats so we did occasionally get to go out on the water. One of the most interesting outings was on an old Coast Guard cutter that a guy had converted to a private yacht. He had removed the very powerful engines that originally powered the craft and had replaced them with much smaller diesel units. The result was a very slow-moving, very rolling boat, and a lot of sea sickness. I spent the entire outing trying to control my stomach.

Another time we were invited to go fishing by one of Dad's friends who lived in San Diego. This was probably one of the most interesting boats I'd ever seen. It was a hand-built fiberglass boat. He had made a male mold out of a pile of dirt, covered with plaster on his garage floor.

After waxing the mold, he applied crude layers of fiberglass. The end result was a very lumpy 14 foot fiberglass boat that went through the water sideways. As with the converted Coast Guard cutter, the main outcome of the fishing trip was that I remained ill whenever the boat was in the swells after leaving the harbor.

After I graduated from high school I enrolled in junior college with the intention of becoming an engineer. My dad was convinced that the only worthwhile reason for going to college was to become an engineer, and I didn't want to disappoint him. However, after a few months of struggling with algebra, I decided that maybe my future would be in the US Navy instead of engineering.



When I graduated from high school I was still 16 years old. In July of that year I turned 17 and by December I was undergoing recruit training at the Naval Training Center in San Diego. Finally I'd get to realize my childhood dream of being in the Navy and participating in great battles at sea. That was the dream, but the reality was vastly different.

After completing boot camp, I was told that I'd be sent to Treasure Island in San Francisco Bay to be trained as an electronics technician, whatever that was. When I filled out my "wish sheet" I had only asked for a destroyer

anywhere on the east coast (I thought destroyers were undesirable and that the Navy would gladly grant my wish). At that point my dream had been transformed from wishing for naval battles to wishing for some tourist time in Europe so any interruption of that dream was not welcomed. But, instead I went to school.

Before arriving at ET school I had to spend a few months working in a chow hall to kill time because there were no openings at the school, or at least that's what they told me. While working in the chow hall I was clued into the need to work very hard at succeeding while at ET school. Some of the old hands informed me that if I flunked out of the school my life would be made miserable once I got to a ship. I remembered that.

Once at school I was confronted with a horrible piece of news. The first week was independent study of algebra and at the end of the week there would be a comprehensive test. Even though I hated algebra I had to pass the test, and I did. That was the first of many successes at the school and I graduated at the head of my class. Then it was time to fill out another "wish sheet" and once again I asked for a destroyer on the east coast, and once again I was disappointed. I got bus fare to take me to NAAS Brown Field in Chula Vista, California. NAAS stands for Naval

Auxiliary Air Station. Basically, “auxiliary” means “unimportant.” So I spent a whole year working on shore base equipment which, in my view, was wasted time.

At the end of that assignment I once more was given an opportunity to submit a “wish sheet,” and once again I asked for a destroyer on the east coast. I got the destroyer. The USS Gurke, DD783, based in San Diego harbor, a short taxi ride from Brown Field.



While stationed at Brown Field I had promoted to petty officer third class (E4), which wasn't a good thing since I had never set foot on a Navy vessel. When I got to the Gurke I arrived via shuttle boat since it was moored out in the middle of the harbor. I had consulted with lots of old salts before my arrival in order to come on board in true Navy fashion, doing my very best to appear as salty as possible.

About a day after I came on board the Gurke steamed out of San Diego on its way to Hawaii. I immediately become totally seasick and crawled under an equipment rack to stay warm and try to overcome the sickness. About a hour or so later an old chief petty officer came by and looked down under the rack to see whose feet were sticking out in the aisle. He asked me what I was doing there and then returned shortly with a big box of soda crackers. I was instructed to eat all the crackers (as in, “I'll be back in a half hour and all I want to see is cracker crumbs”). I ate the crackers and never got sea sick again.



I realized after that episode that you could never be considered an “old salt” if you hadn't conquered sea sickness, but some of our guys never got over it. I can remember a radioman who always worked with a bucket under his legs, just in case.

When I left the Navy it was many years before I did any boating. Of course, there were occasional outings. I once went along with our Beckman Instruments rod and gun club on a day boat out of Newport Beach for a little bottom fishing. We had only been out of the harbor for about a half hour when members of the club started getting sick and going below to hit the sack. As each of them passed by they handed their beer supply to me, knowing that they would be sick for the duration. Soon I had a very large supply of beer and proceeded to drink most of it. By the time we returned to the harbor I was totally looped. So much for the advantages of not getting sea sick.

Our first boat was a 16' Glasspar tri-hull runabout. It was powered with a 50 hp Mercury outboard accompanied by a little 6 hp Mercury kicker outboard used for trolling. Our original plan was mainly to use the boat for fishing both in the ocean and on lakes. On its maiden voyage, however, we quickly discovered that it wasn't much of an ocean boat. We invited some friends to accompany us on a little cruise leaving the Los Alamitos marina and going out to sea. When we got to the end of the breakwater it became very evident that this boat was not going to handle big swells with aplomb, so we quickly turned back and converted the day into a nice tour of the harbor.



Subsequently we hauled the boat out to Lake Mohave several times to do some boat camping along the shore line. In the afternoons Lake Mohave gets so rough that very few boats wander out so we had to do most of our cruising in the

mornings. We also took the boat to the marina in Dana Point a number of times to do a little ocean fishing—on calm days of course. I don't think we ever caught many fish so mostly we just cruised around and absorbed some sunshine.

Eventually, it became evident that the Glasspar was not a very useful boat. It was too big for small lakes and too small for big waters. Also, it was heavy and awkward and its tri-hull design was mainly good for flat river waters, not big waves. So we sold it.

Not long afterwards our friends the Hildes invited us out for a sail on their friend's sailboat out of the Dana Point Marina. This was going to be our first legitimate sailing experience. My only prior sailing experience had been crewing on a sailing whale boat in the Philippines so I really didn't know anything about sailing, but I was game. The boat was a cutter rigged, trailerable sailboat made by Venture. It was a nice boat but we soon learned that it had a major shortcoming—it only made forward progress going downwind. Regardless, we had a lot of fun and when we finally gave up trying to sail upwind we just fired off the outboard and powered back.

My first opportunity to have a more significant boat occurred about 1973 when good friend John Citso invited me to share ownership of a used 25' Coronado sailboat. We bought the boat and John spent several weekends teaching me the ins and outs of sailing. I learned all the obvious stuff about how wind interacts with the sails but also a lot of less obvious stuff, such as not making fast moves with the rudder or moving it so far to one side that it stalls and has no effect.



We had the boat in partnership for a year or so and then my wife Carolyn and I bought out John. The funny thing is that John continued to be our most frequent sailing companion. But we had many other sailing companions, including most of our relatives.

Our most favored sailing destination was Catalina Island, followed by Dana Point. When we first bought the boat it was berthed in a slip in Alamitos Harbor in Long Beach. When they kicked us out of there (we didn't have legal access to our slip), we moved the boat to a slip in the Leeward Bay Marina in Los Angeles harbor. This was an appropriately named marina as it was as far back as you could go in the harbor. When the tide went out, you couldn't leave your slip as the keel would snag on the bottom.

We loved sailing around Los Angeles harbor because it was such an active place; however, you had to be mindful of traffic and that oncoming ocean liners

would not yield the right-of-way to a little sailboat. Nonetheless, the old railroad bridge was still in service and it would open for any boat that couldn't get under it. We loved coming up to the bridge and sounding our wind powered horn to get them to open it. It probably pissed them off to waste all that energy for such a small craft. But no more; the bridge is now permanently lifted.

On all our sailing outings, beer was the primary beverage and lots of it. One day when I was working for LAPD, I invited a couple police officer friends to join me in a cruise out to watch whales. We were quite successful in seeing whales and almost had a collision with one that surfaced right next to our boat. All that time we were drinking heavily, much more than I was keeping track of. On the way back to our marina I decided to not use our motor. I was going to show my passengers what a great sailor I was. It worked beautifully in that I was able to sail the boat right into its slip and stop it dead in the middle. While the crew was applauding my skills, I stepped over the side to secure a line and fell straight into the water, drunk as a skunk.



We did a lot of family camping in the old Coronado. It had a nice cabin that would easily sleep the three of us. We mostly went to Catalina to rent a mooring or to Dana Point to rent a slip. At Catalina we used our rubber dinghy to get ashore. The water there is crystal clear so that even when you are moored where the water is over 30 feet deep, you can clearly see everything on the bottom.

On one voyage our plan was to sail to Catalina for a few days and then sail down to Dana Point for another brief stay. On the way from Catalina to Dana Point we ran into some very thick fog. The fog made the ocean seem much quieter than usual and that made the school of tunas that went under our boat much more spectacular. There are things like that you'll only get to see in a sail boat. However, the journey almost ended in disaster as we obviously had a compass error. Instead of making landfall near Dana Point just as the fog cleared and we heard breakers pounding on the beach we found ourselves looking at the Pottery Shack in Laguna Beach. Obviously we made a swift turn to the south.

One of our last outings with the boat was to have a rendezvous with Gale Poor, an LAPD friend, who had a much larger sailboat in Long Beach harbor. Neither of us had any pictures of our boats under sail, so that was the objective of our voyage. We met and then circled around each other for about an hour shooting endless photos. Anybody watching us must have thought we were nuts.

I don't remember exactly why we sold that boat but we did. I guess all boat owners eventually tire of their craft and put it up for sale. But whenever I see a picture of the Coronado I remember all the good times we had on it and wonder why was it exactly that we sold it?



After we sold the Coronado we entered into a period of canoeing. My old sailing buddy John had become interested in canoeing and invited me to join him on trip down the Colorado with a canoe instructor. The instructor provided all the canoes and we launched from a beach at a place now known as Laughlin, Nevada. That was well before they built all the casinos. I swiftly learned to love the art of paddling a canoe and became a paddling snob, in that once you know how to paddle a canoe you notice that most

folks don't have a clue.



But the canoeing thing didn't last very long as John shortly got me interested in yet another sailboat. This time it was going to be a Cal 20. This was a very different sailboat from the Coronado. Both boats had a racing background but the Cal 20 was all about racing. It had a very minimal cabin but lots of sail area and a super stiff keel with a big lead bulb at the bottom. You could load on all the sail you could muster and the boat would take it.

We didn't go many places in the Cal 20, but we did a lot of weekend sailing out in the outer Long Beach harbor. We'd venture out to sea occasionally but didn't do any voyaging because of the boat's lack of cabin accommodations. It slept two in semi-comfort and that was it. Besides, it wasn't built for cruising, it was built for racing.

One of the sneaky things about the Cal 20 is that its outboard motor was fitted into a well in the cockpit when in use (when not in use a plug was inserted into the well). That gave the boat a stealth capability. One morning John and I were sailing out to sea in a very light wind. We had our main sail up and drawing nicely, but we also had the outboard in place and running just fast enough to give us forward momentum without it being obvious that we were under power. We slipped past a 22' sailboat that was doing its best under sail power only and its skipper looked at us wistfully, thinking that our Cal 20 must be one hell of a sailboat to do so well in those light winds.

My dad liked to come out with us on both of the sailboats we owned, but he was particularly happy sailing in the Cal 20. Being an old pilot, he greatly appreciated the capability of the Cal 20 to maximize the use of wind. In a good blow I would be at the helm and he would be sitting behind me, using me as a windshield. Every once in awhile I'd look back at him and he always had a big grin on his face—he was loving it.



We finally sold the Cal 20 but we didn't give up sailing. Shortly thereafter we joined a charter club that enabled us to charter a variety of sailboats including some fairly large ones. The biggest boat we chartered was a 31' model out of San Diego. Most of the time we would get together with a lot of friends to share the cost of the charter and most of our voyages were out of the Newport Beach facility.

Chartering with a big party on board was a lot fun. Once we took an Ericson 30 out of Newport harbor with a bunch of folks from Carolyn's office and sailed down the coast toward Laguna Beach. We must have been having a really good time because we found ourselves way south of Newport Beach when it was time to return. When we got back to the harbor entrance it was totally dark and we were running under power with running lights on. The dock for the charter company was very compact so we approached our slip with just barely enough speed to maintain steerage, but to no avail. During the day someone had parked a very large sailboat opposite to the entrance to our slip so we had almost no room to make a good turn into the slip. When it became obvious that we were going to crash into the dock I asked a couple guys to go up to the bow and fend us off with a boat hook. Their efforts were a success but the boat hook was crumpled into a piece of scrap aluminum. That cost me \$35.



One time John, my dad and I chartered a 27' cutter rigged sailboat out of the Ventura harbor. We had a wonderful day sailing out and around Anacapa Island. All the animal and bird life on that island is totally protected, so sailing around it is like sailing around a zoo with no fences.

We gave up the charter idea, not because it didn't make sense but because we kept running into boats that had not been properly maintained. The charter company didn't own any of its sail boats; instead, they leased them from private parties. The owners of the boats were responsible for maintenance, not the charter company. Since the owners of the boats didn't have much incentive for keeping their craft in good working order, they tended to let things slide. As a result, on almost every voyage we ran into problems, everything from overflowing holding tanks to undersized rigging.

While all that was going on, we continued to take canoe trips from time to time. Twice we canoed from Blythe, California, to Imperial Lake. The first time the river was so low that it took us two days and lots of portages to make the trip. The second time the river was in flood stage and it only took us about half a day to get to the lake.



One of the main objectives of all our various canoe trips down the Colorado River was to consume as much beer as we could possibly carry. When John and I were in the same canoe we would both have large coolers filled to the brim with beer. Given my size and John's, that meant that it took a lot of beer drinking to get the water down a decent distance from our gunnel.

Canoeing on the Colorado is a lot of fun except that there are almost no places to camp. Much of the river bank is either private property or some sort of wildlife preserve where no camping is permitted. We could usually find a place, although in many instances we were either illegally camped on private property or hoping that some Federal authority would not come along and make us move from a preserve. In many cases, we'd just camp on a sand bar, hoping that the river would not rise overnight.

Once we started a canoe voyage by camping at the State campground at Needles. We arrived there late in the evening and asked where we could pitch our tents and put our canoes. The ranger pointed to an area on a beach and said that we could use that. We rigged our tents and unloaded the canoes, and went straight to bed, planning for a very early departure the next morning. However, at about two in the morning we were rudely awakened by the splashing of water against our tents. The area we had been given had huge rain-bird type sprinklers that were spewing out forty-foot streams of water. We crawled out of our tents and solved the problem by putting our canoes over the sprinklers. You can imagine what that sounded like. I'm certain the sound of those high pressure water jets banging against the inside of aluminum canoes must have awakened everyone in the park. But we were unapologetic..



Eventually we dropped out of the charter boat club and didn't take any more canoe trips, but that wasn't the end of boating. My next adventure was a sort of back-to-Nebraska thing. I had become enamored of a particular 15' aluminum boat. It was called the "Baja" and was specifically designed for noodling around the various coves down in Baja California. But we never took it there. The closest I came to the sort of thing the boat was designed for was a one-week outing my old sailboat John and I took on lake Powell. Lake Powell is positively huge but we managed to travel every inch of its shoreline from our launch point at Page all the way to the halfway point at Hall's Crossing. That was a lot of miles of crawling along the shore.



The boat had a 25hp outboard which was more than enough to readily bring it on plane in normal circumstances, but when first launched at Page we had so much weight in the boat (mostly beer) that we couldn't get the hull to plane. We had to drink our way to better performance. Every day at about two or three in the afternoon, we would look for one of the rare beaches and set up camp for the night. My buddy John slept in a tent, but I just laid out in the open (the temperatures averaged just over

100F during the daytime). That was a wonderful experience in that at night the bats would come out and put on great displays of aerial competence while chasing moths.

To see a lot of pictures from this expedition, check out the "June 1984 Lake Powell" photos under the "Old Photos" section of this website.

Unfortunately, I eventually tired of the aluminum boat as well and found a buyer for it. I'm sure it is still in service somewhere. That's one of the interesting things about old boats. Most of them never die as it doesn't cost too much to restore them.

We have not had a boat since then and have not been out to sea except for a recent cruise to Mexico. I have to say that in many respects the cruise was disappointing. I guess I was hoping I might be able to relive some of the experiences I had in the Navy out in the open ocean, rolling through the big waves, but modern cruise ships don't roll. You don't get much sense of being out at sea at all because the stabilizer system keeps the ship on even keel and your cabin is so far up from the water you can't even smell the ocean.

Next August we are taking a cruise up the Alaska coast but, although the scenery will be different, I expect the cruise experience to be the same. Someday perhaps we can go to sea on a very small craft where I can once again smell the ocean and feel it working on the hull.