



SALUTE TO THE *Ladies*

FOR MORE THAN A
QUARTER OF A CENTURY,
THEY HAVE SAILED THEIR
MAJESTIC WOODEN
SAILBOATS ALONG THE
COASTLINE OF LAKE ERIE.
THEY HAIL FROM AS FAR
AWAY AS NEW YORK AND
MICHIGAN AND ONCE A
YEAR TRAVEL TO THE
SHORES OF HURON, OHIO,
TO SHOW OFF THE LADIES.

BY CHRISTINA MACEJKO

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
LAURA WATILO BLAKE

"WE KEEP THINGS
TRADITIONAL."

BOB DIAK

The obliging term suits the classically beautiful boats well. Decked by fine mahogany and bejeweled with brass scrollwork, the ladies sport billowing sails like fine hats. And their dates, members of the Great Lakes Wooden Sailboat Society (GLWSS), treat them with all the respect they deserve. This year the ladies will be out in all their finery the weekend of August 17 at the All Classics Weekend, A Celebration of Boats and Cars, held at the Huron Boat Basin. They will compete in a regatta Friday and display the boats the rest of the weekend.

While the summer event used to draw 35 to 40 boats, there were only six last year, prompting GLWSS to join with the Lyman Boat Association for the event. "It's an aging group and membership is dwindling," explains GLWSS spokesman Bob Diak. "Either the boats get old and worn out or the guys do."

One lady the group holds in highest respect is the woman who headed the organization for years, the late Ruthie Gotz. A great sailor, recruiter and historian, it's

said that Ruthie knew every wooden boat on the Great Lakes. Since she passed away in 2004, the group, which began at the Huron Yacht Club, has been drifting, but Bob wants to change that and bring back the grandeur on the lake. He's been involved with the GLWSS for about 12 years. "We're a little different group than those with power boats," says the 55-year-old industrial engineer from Madison, Ohio. "We keep things traditional." Bob still sails the first boat he ever bought—a 1922 Starlight. "I was young. I didn't know any better," he says. "It looked like fun. People either get the fever or they don't." He did.

And so did Charlie Steigerwald, a lifelong sailor who joined GLWSS about a decade ago because "somebody's got to take care of the old girls." He actually started sailing when he was a boy growing up in Lakewood. He's managed to stay close to the water and his boats all of his life. The Rocky River resident frequently sails out of the Cleveland Yachting Club. He owns several wooden boats including a Concordia 31, a Yankee 1, a 17-foot Wooden Thistle racing dingy and a 13-foot rowing boat.





Charlie admires the craftsmanship that went into building the wooden vessels, “The designs, because they are generally older designs, are more pleasing to the eye,” he explains. “The wood itself has inherent beauty. And they [wooden boats] don’t rattle like fiberglass.” It’s the difference between looking at some really fine crystal and then looking at a regular drinking cup, he says. There is no comparison.

While the regatta gathers some of the prettiest ladies on the Great Lakes, it isn’t a serious race. Charlie is the winner most years with the Yankee 1 because she’s such a fast boat. Bob is consistently last. “I’ve got the slowest boat of all of them, but I get the best pictures—pictures of everybody sailing by,” he says laughing.

Both admit the purpose of the regatta and the show is to promote wooden sailboats. “There are a lot fewer than there were 20, 30 years ago,” Charlie laments. “It’s a sign of the times. People don’t have the time to work on them. There will probably be even fewer in the years to come.”

Bob and Charlie hope that’s not the case. They’re hoping others will be attracted to the glorious wooden sailboats at the show and that some might become as interested in sailing them as they are. After all, who wouldn’t want to be seen with one of the pretty ladies? ≡



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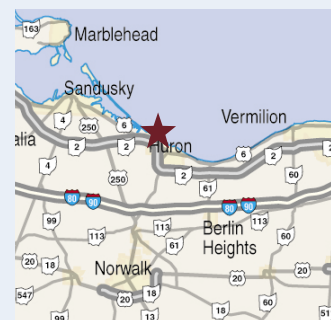
Info to Go

All Classics Weekend

August 17 to 19

Huron Boat Basin
330 North Main Street
Huron, Ohio
(440) 428-4064
www.geocities.com/glwss

Admission: Free



WETTING YOUR *thistle*

BY LAURA WATILO BLAKE

Many classes of boats rise and fall in popularity, but the Thistle has stayed the course through the years. While the majority of the 17-foot-long dinghies now are made of fiberglass, the original wood boats, including *Windlassie*, owned by Charlie Steigerwald, still remain competitive today due to the consistent one-design principle adopted by the Thistle Class Association (TCA).

"There is no obsolete Thistle," says Craig Smith, the Vice President of Growth and Promotion of the TCA. "Only ones that have not been maintained. We take great pains to make sure the Thistle stays pretty much the same." But, the real secret to the success of the longevity of the Thistle class may be the family-friendly lifestyle it creates. "It's not unusual to see second- and third-generation skippers sailing against their parents," Smith says, pointing to the Finefrock and Steigerwald clans in Northeast Ohio as perfect examples.

"I love the Thistle class because it is so family oriented," says Jane Steigerwald, whose children and grandchildren have skippered against or crewed alongside her

and her husband over the years. "It's a wonderful way of life because we can share it with our children."

Over the years, organizers of Thistle regattas have responded to changing family dynamics, which helps keep the fleets alive and well, too, says John Duckworth, a member of the Finefrock family of Thistlers.

"Some arrange for babysitters while Mom and Dad are out racing," he says. "And Pymatuning Yacht Club [in Jamestown, Pennsylvania,] traditionally has a truckload of sand delivered to its beach each year, so it'll be ready for the little ones to use during the Fourth of July Regatta."

And once kids reach sailing age, they have a tremendous amount of support from their families and other Thistle sailors. Smith says the TCA conducts one, week-long instructional class a year called Coach TCA. Even if you're not born into a Thistle family, learning the ropes is relatively easy and inexpensive. Used boats are priced as low as \$200, although a sea-worthy craft is more likely to cost around \$2,000. New boats cost around \$13,000. ☞

For more information about Thistles and a schedule of upcoming regattas, visit www.thistleclass.com.



"WE DROVE ALL OVER THE COUNTRY WITH THAT BOAT TRAILING BEHIND US," SAYS JANE STEIGERWALD ABOUT *WINDLASSIE*. NOW HER 15-YEAR-OLD GRANDSON, CHARLIE YINGLING (BELOW), SKIPPERS THE BOAT ON RACE DAYS WITH HIS DAD, JOHN.

