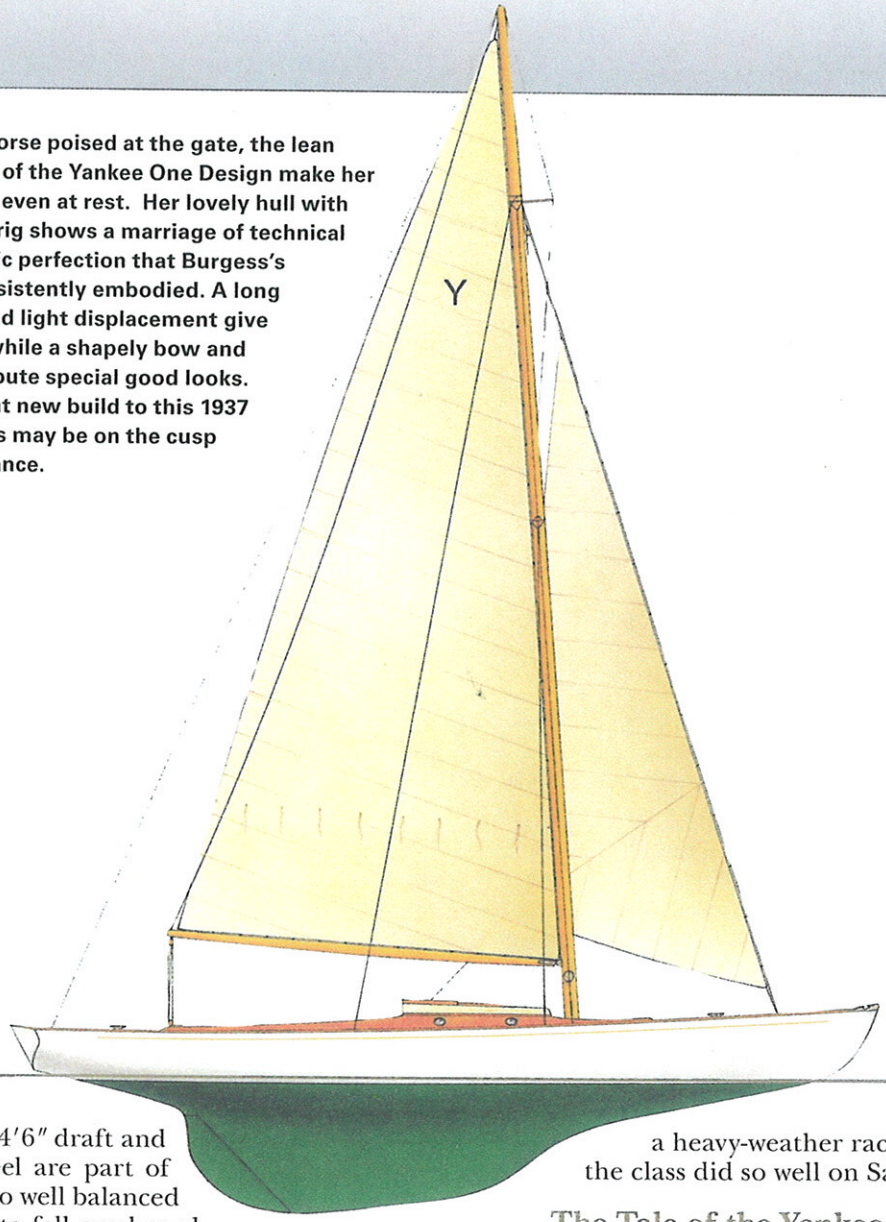
Starling Burgess's labor of love

by Sarah B. Howell

In 1936, Starling Burgess and Olin Stephens designed RANGER, the last and greatest J-class yacht to defend the AMERICA's Cup. The following year, while overseeing RANGER's construction, Burgess secretly designed a 30′ racing class called the Yankee One-Design (YOD). RANGER sailed just one magnificent season. Burgess had hoped his Yankee class would last 25 years, and I think he would have been pleased that the halcyon days of the Yankee racing fleets lasted well into the 1960s when lighter, cheaper fiberglass boats came to dominate the regattas. He'd have been less pleased to learn that the early YOD hulls developed broken frames after only a few years. But even with their hulls repaired by sister framing, this comfortable, elegant boat sailed so sweetly that the class quietly developed a passionate following. Just soaking in a Yankee's appearance can get you in trouble: more than a few of us have taken extraordinary measures to resurrect derelict hulls. That's why, 74 years after Burgess drew his revolutionary design, a handful of Yankees remain. I know—I too have been captivated, and that's why I commissioned a new Yankee, named GEMINI, to be built. She carries sail number Y 44 and is the first in four decades.

The Yankee One-Design is 30′6″ overall, with 24′ of waterline. Its narrow bow is good for slicing through waves, and with only a 6′6″ beam the boat leaves

***Above*—Uncloaking a decades-old mystery, new findings about the creators of the Yankee One Design are coming to light through correspondence between Waldo Brown and W. Starling Burgess (1878–1947) (inset), the boat's true designer.**



Like a racehorse poised at the gate, the lean proportions of the Yankee One Design make her appear fast, even at rest. Her lovely hull with its sensible rig shows a marriage of technical and aesthetic perfection that Burgess's designs consistently embodied. A long waterline and light displacement give her speed, while a shapely bow and stern contribute special good looks. With a recent new build to this 1937 design, YODs may be on the cusp of a renaissance.

KATHY BRAY

little wake. The 4′6″ draft and relatively full keel are part of why this boat is so well balanced that if you were to fall overboard, she will keep on sailing a steady course and leave you behind. There's no inboard engine to clutter the bilge, so the cockpit easily holds six, and because it is so deep, the crew sits low. Her low freeboard and narrow side decks encourage you to dangle your hand over the leeward side and feel the water as it slides by.

The Yankee's low profile also helps her perform to windward in a gale, but precludes a self-draining cockpit and standing headroom inside the cabin. Most people can easily see over the cabin while sitting at the tiller. There are watertight bulkheads, forward and aft, which reportedly will keep a Yankee from sinking should her cavernous cockpit accidentally fill with water. At under 5,000 lbs (4,775 to be exact), she was a light-displacement boat by 1937 standards, carrying over half that weight in her cast-lead ballast keel. Long, easy diagonals and a distinctive concave bow, in addition to her light displacement, are credited for her easy acceleration and an ability to sail swiftly in light air. At 312 sq ft, a Yankee's fractional rig is quite small, being supported by a forestay that hits the deck 3½′ aft of her stemhead, and a boom that stops 6′ shy of her transom. This adds up to epic abilities as a heavy-weather racer, and explains why the class did so well on San Francisco Bay.

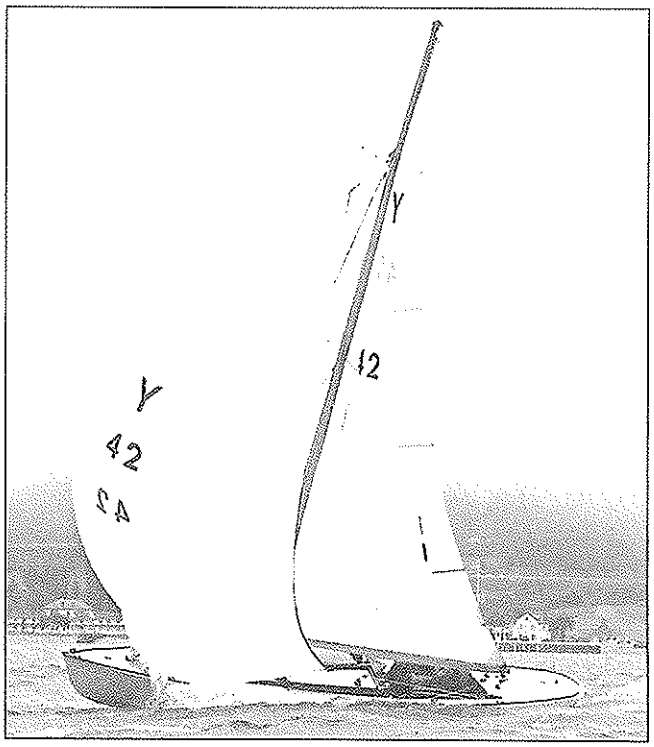
The Tale of the Yankee One-Design*

The origin of the YOD is one of the great stories of 20th-century yacht design. The money, talent, and publicity thrown at this design had previously been reserved for AMERICA's Cup contenders, but the identity of the designer had always remained a mystery. Most people familiar with the class know simply that it originated from a design competition juried by three AMERICA's Cup naval architects, L. Francis Herreshoff, Starling Burgess, and Frank Paine. Mystic Seaport Museum has catalogued the plans with the designer simply denoted as "unknown."

But the story of the Yankee One-Design is also the story of a friendship between W. Starling Burgess and Waldo H. Brown, the man often credited with conceiving the class. Correspondence between "Skipper" and "Brownie" reveals not only the truth behind the Yankee's design, but is an endearing window into the twilight years of a beautiful friendship.

Our story begins in January 1937 when Waldo Brown

* Correspondence revealing how the design was created is preserved in Mystic Seaport Museum's manuscript collection, access to which the author gratefully acknowledges.



DIANE BENSON

John Linderman built FLOTSAM (Y42) with help from his son, Jim, shown here sailing her to a class victory in the 1964 Lightship race in San Francisco Bay.

and Charlie Welch organized a group of New England yachtsmen who called themselves the Yankee One-Design Class Association. Their goal was to produce a 30′ racing boat fit for competition throughout New England, from Mount Desert Island in Maine to Narragansett Bay in Rhode Island. The M-B (Marblehead-Buzzards Bay) class had tried, but failed to fill this niche because it couldn't "take it" in blustery Buzzards Bay, so this new "Yankee" class would have to be designed to meet those challenging conditions as well as the more gentle winds that prevailed elsewhere.

The association's first move was to send a letter to New England yacht designers, requesting anonymous submissions for a 30′ racing yacht. The design criteria were that it should be a dry, moderately priced, heavy-weather racer that would perform well in all conditions and appeal to skilled sailors.

Brownie's and Welch's next move was to visit Burgess, whose office at the time was in Bath, Maine, where he was overseeing RANGER's construction, and to negotiate Burgess's role with the development of the Yankee. The rest of the YOD Association remained unaware that Brownie and Welch actually paid Burgess for the design he was to submit.

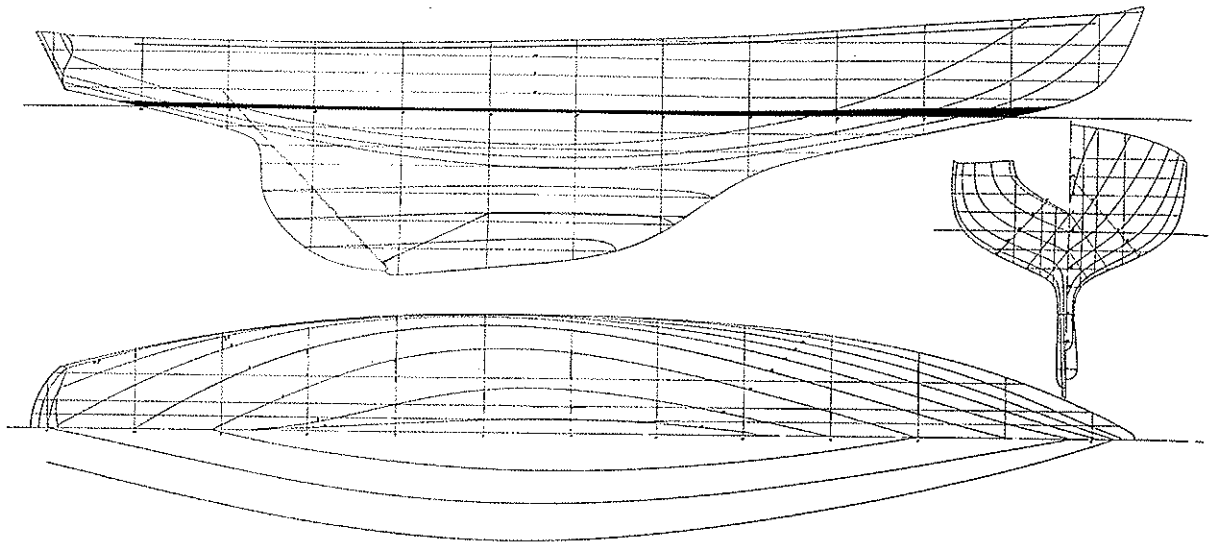
A total of 25 submissions were received from designers, including Burgess, and were displayed in Boston for the review of New England yachtsmen from February until June. The most intriguing of these designs were published in the April 1937 issues of *Yachting* and *The Rudder*. As Waldo Brown described it, the top designs and the feedback from them would be fed into a "mysterious black box" for the review by supposedly disinterested consulting designers: Herreshoff, Burgess, and Paine. These three would then collaborate to create a boat that was an amalgam of the most desirable qualities that resulted from the contest. For this final collaboration, Massachusetts Institute of Technology Department of Naval Architecture had even donated the use of their drafting and modelmaking facilities. It was a wonderfully elaborate scheme that had little to do with what really went on.

One tantalizing clue about the identity of the YOD designer was in the April 1937 issue of *Yachting*. Design No. 22 is remarkably similar to the final boat, and was even credited for forming the basis of the class. But who designed No. 22? Burgess. We know this because he saved his invitation to the YOD competition, and in the margin there is a handwritten note to Skipper from Brownie, showing the assigned number XXII.

Burgess submitted his drawings by the February 15, 1937 deadline, and by March 4 it had received enough attention for him to write to Brownie, "God help me if it ever leaks out who designed No. 22." Just three weeks after the designs appeared for wider review, Charlie Welch wrote to Burgess, "The job was very nicely done and we are entirely satisfied." On April 27, around the time that he asked Burgess for tickets to RANGER's launching, Charlie Welch ordered the construction plan for No. 22. With the rest of the world unaware of this move, and a month before the feedback of New England yachtsmen was to be fed into that mysterious black box, Brownie and his committee had ordered their boat.

The official story was that Herreshoff, Burgess, and Paine collaborated on the final design, but Burgess actually completed it alone. There is a staggering amount of evidence for this in the Burgess/Brown letters. Burgess was asked to keep his role a secret, and the members of the YOD Association signed the official YOD plans. To Brownie's delight, though, Burgess also put his signature on a set of blueprints for posterity; we know this from their letters. Unfortunately, those autographed blueprints have been lost.

The Britt Bros. Yard (see WB No. 167) built YANKEE (Y1) during the summer of 1937, and Brownie took a half model of this new design to show sailors at the July Edgartown Regatta. Unfortunately, it didn't look like a racing boat to them. The yachting world had AMERICA's Cup fever and, ironically, was obsessed with the extravagant overhangs of RANGER and ENDEAVOUR II. Burgess lamented, "Yachtsmen today fancy long, 'graceful' ends in a racing boat.... Why? Not because designers think they are pretty, or even like them, but because the rules develop them!" He knew the International One-Design class had been modeled on the pointy bow of a Six-Meter for no reason other than fashion, while in the Yankee, Burgess had been given the freedom to draw a bow exclusively for performance. Despite Burgess's and his chief draftsman's (Geerd Hendel) little-publicized local success with their slightly smaller and



A narrow beam, long, easy diagonals, and hollow waterlines combine to make an easily driven, fast class racer, while an elegant sheer combined with a sensuous transom and well-balanced bow make the Yankee One Design a pleasure to look at and to own. No wonder some were still racing after 30 years and others are still sailing today.

similar sloops like the Boothbay Harbor One-Designs and Small Point One-Designs, boats with short overhangs and long waterlines proved back then to be a hard sell.

YANKEE (Y1) was launched at noon on the day of her first race, September 18, 1937. She was towed to Marblehead, and soundly beat the M-B class by 8 minutes and the Herreshoff S-boats by 3 minutes. Her performance generated more interest than her profile, and in November 1937 Brownie reported that nine fleets were being organized. But in January 1938 he admitted to Skipper that, "There seems to be more interest in Detroit, France, England, and Australia in our boat than there is among the Yankees. Everyone seems to be scared here of doing anything."

By the summer of 1938 just one more Yankee had been built, JULEP (Y3), in Toronto. Meanwhile, an entire fleet of International One-Designs (IOD) also were delivered to Marblehead and Northeast Harbor from Norway.

Then tragedy struck. Upon the launching of the aircraft carrier USS WASP at Quincy on April 4, 1939, as thousands watched, a squadron of biplanes took off from the carrier and circled above, one of them piloted by Lieutenant Commander Waldo H. Brown. As they banked in formation, the airplane piloted by Brown clipped wings with another, and both planes dropped from the sky onto neighborhood homes. Brown, the Yankee's greatest champion, was gone at age 43, never living to see the first fleet of eight Yankees built for the Beverly Yacht Club in the spring of 1940.

The launch of the USS WASP was a sign of things to come, and by the summer of 1941 only one new YOD had been added to the Beverly fleet. Otherwise, production of the class halted as the New England boatyards turned from yacht construction to building military vessels.

The Test of Time

To measure the success of the YOD class, consider how well Burgess met the design criteria. He certainly didn't do well with the cost. His graceful design was not cheap to build, and the class proved expensive to maintain because its small scantlings led to broken frames. But on all other counts, Burgess hit a home run. While the Yankee appears neither high nor dry to modern eyes, it was a major improvement over the even wetter racing boats of her era (think R-boats, for example). A 1969 advertisement for the sale of YANKEE (Y1) speaks to the other criteria: "The yacht performs well in all types of weather and with reefed sails behaves beautifully in a gale. She is extremely fast, and a sheer delight for the sensitive sailor."

Skippers often disagree about the Yankee's competitiveness in light air, but when the wind cranks up, her power is beyond dispute. A Cleveland Yacht Club entry in the 1953 YOD yearbook offers: "When the Adelade Trophy came along on September 7, it was a day that shouldn't even happen to the hard cases. MADEMOISELLE and SIROCCO turned sissy and left DAWN and VALHALLA to show all the rest of the C.Y.C. assortment how to sail a 13-mile windward–leeward race against a northeaster. In this race, the handicaps are based on past performance and applied at the beginning and keel boats of all varieties had been starting for almost an hour before the two Yankees went over the line—not long ahead of the scratch R boats. Masts and rigging were coming down everywhere and more than half the entries broke down or dropped out, especially the auxiliaries. So it was a revelation to be standing on top of the cliff, leaning against the wind, and watching two little Yankees march straight to windward of everything that was left on the lake and then come plowing half way back to the home stretch before anything else had even reached the windward mark."

COURTESY OF THE JOHN LINDERMAN FAMILY

Nearly eclipsed behind a 62′ Rhodes ketch ALERT at the Stone Boatyard in Alameda, California, stand John Linderman's VENTURE (Y36) and Jack Ehrhorn's FLAME (Y34). The two men worked on the large ketch by day and built their own yachts in their spare time. VENTURE would eventually be stripped and cut up, in order to build GEMINI.

Looking for information

I am one of several YOD sailors who are fascinated by the history of this class. Tracking the whereabouts of the boats is fascinating; they come in and out of the narrative like ghost sightings. We're hoping there are Yankee sailors reading this article who can help fill in the gaps. The histories of individual boats are listed on the class website, www.YankeeOneDesign.com, but here's a summary of what we know:

There were 44 racing numbers distributed, but five of the boats were never built, and one was built twice. That makes a total of 40 Yankees constructed between 1937 and 2010. At this time, nine Yankees are in excellent condition and sailing. Seven "need work." Eighteen are unaccounted for, and at least six have been retired.

Most of the boats were built immediately after WWII. The Beverly Yacht Club added to its fleet in 1946, and new fleets were formed on Nantucket, in Cleveland, Lake Champlain, San Francisco, and eventually the Pacific Northwest. The Yankee never became the massive interclub racing class that Waldo Brown envisioned, but the Beverly and Nantucket Yacht Clubs held annual regattas that took the boats from Marion to Edgartown to Nantucket and back again. In 1955, the Beverly Yacht Club members sold all but two of their Yankees and switched to racing 110s. In the late 1960s there were six boats each at Cleveland and Lake Champlain, so those two fleets held annual skipper-exchange races. In 1968 the sailors knew the only way their fleets could grow would be if they commissioned a fiberglass Yankee. They looked into it, but the idea fizzled, and the last YOD fleets disbanded in the 1970s.

Most Yankees never belonged to a fleet, or only did so briefly. They were family boats, often remaining with the same family for decades. Most of the older boats that are currently in good condition have been rebuilt at least once. In a 1937 letter to Brownie, Burgess called the YOD a labor of love, and most YOD owners can relate. VARUNA, built in New Zealand in 1939, is in excellent condition after being brought back from the brink of destruction. SIROCCO (Y21) raced for decades in Cleveland and then was brought to Port Townsend, Washington, where she was left in a field for 13 years and then rebuilt. Steve Scharf, her current owner, reports that she's in great shape now and estimates that he races her over 30 times a year. Charlie Steigerwald raced DAWN (Y19) in the Cleveland fleet for about ten years until he sold her in 1965. Thirty years later she was full of rot when he bought her back. Charlie restored her and still owns DAWN today. He recalls that the men who formed the Cleveland fleet had been R-boat sailors who switched to racing Yankees because they also make great family boats. There's a big cockpit for kids and friends, and the boats are easy to handle, whether you're racing, relaxing with family, or singlehanding.

I wouldn't recommend it as a first-time project, but the Yankee is small for a 30′ boat, and an experienced builder could bang one out in about two years of weekends and holidays. That's how long it took Jack Ehrhorn to build FLAME (Y34) and John Linderman to build VENTURE (Y36) in 1948–49. The two men were working at the Stone Boatyard in Alameda, California, and used WWII-surplus iron fastenings; for keelbolts they salvaged bronze powerboat propeller shafts. A few years later, Linderman built TARFUN (Y40) in his spare time with his two teenage sons, and in 1963 he built FLOTSAM (Y42) with son Jim.

Linderman's first boat, VENTURE (Y36), spent its last 17 years sailing out of the Center for Wooden Boats (CWB) in Seattle. I sailed her for 10 of those years, enjoying her with friends and also taking all sorts of people out on the lake as part of CWB's sailing program. VENTURE's roomy cockpit was used weekly to host hospice patients and at-risk youth. She was especially well suited to sailing instruction, her balanced helm giving students the wonderful illusion of sailing well even on their first day.

She was a frail bundle of sticks by then, waterlogged and hogged, with nearly every frame broken and sistered, some of them twice. Even so, she was the most graceful boat I had ever sailed. I have received many letters to this effect from other sailors as well. But what stays in my mind is the way sailors who knew this class in its heyday looked wistfully at my boat when they came upon it at CWB. They often told me they had sailed all their life, but never once had sailed a boat as sweet as a Yankee. A theme I encountered is that some people sailed Yankees in their youth, assuming their life would be filled with a parade of such sweet sailing boats, and it was not. It's a twist on youth being wasted on the young. But I don't think Yankees were ever wasted on anyone.

Sarah B. Howell hails from the Finger Lakes region of upstate New York where she inherited a love of classic wooden boats from her father. She currently lives and writes in Seattle, Washington, where she also sails GEMINI.