



CUTTYHUNK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

# MONOGRAPH

## THE SPIRIT OF CUTTYHUNK YACHT CLUB: 50 YEARS

*Many of us asked to remember the history of the Cuttyhunk Yacht Club do so with at best a flexible attachment to fact. I am indebted to all who have remembered, in writing or in interviews, especially to Werner Bargsten and Susan Schwarzwald, who graciously provided the latter. I have borrowed freely, and therefore can claim little or no personal pride of authorship. Any errors are now mine – but perhaps they belong to us all!*

DAVID A. FROTHINGHAM



*Cuttyhunk Junior Yacht Club, c. 1935. (L to R) Doug MacLeod, Ben Walker, Jim Hall, Newie Garfield, Oriel Wood (Ponzecchi), Putt Helfrey.*

**T**he true character and spirit of the Cuttyhunk Yacht Club lie rooted in the hearts and minds of generations of Cuttyhunkers. Character and spirit are not grown overnight and cannot be sustained by any one group at one time. It has taken the belief and commitment of at least three and sometimes four generations to build this unique yacht club through its fifty years on Buzzards Bay.

Many founding names go back over seventy years to a short-lived ancestor club. In 1935, Cornelius “Connie” Wood set up the Cuttyhunk Junior Yacht Club, a modest sailing program for some 20 island children. In addition to the Wood children, prominent names were Garfield, Hall, House, Kidder, Thurston, and Walker — all names that appear in the club rolls today. The hurricane in 1938 carried away the boathouse and many of the boats. This catastrophe, followed closely by a world war, managed to extinguish the fledgling yacht club, but the embers remained.

Eventually the original club members settled on the island with young families. Summer and winter neighbors, Wye Garfield and Dave Twichell, assembled ‘Firefly’ sailboat kits from England in the winter of 1955. The pair of 12’ sloop-rigged, impossibly tender racing boats came to Cuttyhunk and were sailed through the summer. On a late August afternoon, loudly cheered from Jetty Beach, a round-robin racing series established Wye Garfield as the charter winner of the Thunder Mug, CYC’s first coveted trophy, now presented each August to the male sailing champion. (In its earlier life, the now-antique Thunder Mug was used to collect the proceeds from chamber pots in one of the old Cuttyhunk houses!)



*Thunder Mug with early winners painted in red.*

The flame was thus rekindled. Alec Brown and Newie Garfield were charged with setting up a corporation and hiring a sailing instructor for the new Cuttyhunk Yacht Club — to begin in June 1956. They were named Commodore and Treasurer respectively. Dues were set at \$10 per family.

On a sunny Monday morning, July 2, 1956, nearly 30 children, aged 5–14, reported for classes at the new Club. The facilities were a grassy bank on the inner harbor’s south side (given by Connie Wood); a short pier, made of driftwood and reused nails; a homemade ramp leading to a small, salvaged float which rested on about a dozen empty 55-gallon drums; and a large, old, wooden box, tipped on its side, roofed, and converted for use as a storage “gas house.” According to various tales, the Gas House was either a chicken coop from Joe Slate’s Island (Bill Garfield); an Army coal bin (Wye Garfield); or a fisherman’s ice chest (your author) — which was, they all agree, found after Hurricane Carol in 1954. The Gas House provided a place to store equipment, take attendance of A, B and C-Groupers, and host off-hours gatherings.



*Gas House and new dike; Matt Lovell and Chris Davis, instructors, 1971.*

Children were accompanied by parents and even grandparents; it was a family event from the start. Charlie Currier, a Harvard undergraduate and a newcomer to the island, was the first head instructor. His assistants were long-time summer residents David Frothingham and George Shaw. All three had grown up sailing and loved children. Their mandate was simple: develop and run a sailing program for children. Classes and activities were much the same then as today — knots, rowing, terminology, sailing, and racing. They even included swimming classes and a ladies’ sailing group. The latter was the perfect opportunity for summer babysitters to get out on the water with the young male instructors.



*Rigging race, CYC, 1956. (Note that the dock is closer to the Cove than it is now.)*

In 1956 the fleet consisted of six multicolored wooden Turnabouts, provided by Commodore Brown (who bought the first, #305) and other founding families; Newie Garfield's old Wood Pussy; the original Fireflies; a few other small sailboats; and a gaggle of rowing dinghies. The club launch, a 12' clinker-built skiff, was rowed at first, and later propelled by a small outboard. Moorings were discarded automobile wheels filled with concrete and marked by old lobster pot buoys; spare line was often recovered from the beach.



Here began a 50-year run for this extraordinary little yacht club. Over the years, much has changed and, thankfully, nothing has changed. A watchful club board and officers made absolutely necessary changes — often for safety reasons, and sometimes to serve the increasing sophistication of the young sailors. For most of the Club's history, there have been no formal records. Even those people directly involved debate just which summer this or that happened. Perhaps this is confirmation of the fact that things are not nearly as important as the spirit and people in this club.



*Toby Frothingham, with sons Ben and Andrew, singing at CYC party, August 2005.*



*Folding the sails at summer's end, August 2005. Photo by Louise Garfield Bachler.*

The rituals of opening and closing the CYC, the familiar boats, and the weekly A, B, & C-Group schedule stayed constant. The end of August saw C-Group rowing races, the Ladies' Race (The Rolling Pin with a sprig of beach heather was awarded to the winner), and inventive races such as sailing backwards to the finish line. New verses of the CYC song (originally written by Leila Hall and continued by the instructors) retold each summer's events, including gentle teasing of students and instructors. The chorus, eventually memorized by all, has been sung at the top of our lungs at the August CYC party on Winter House lawn for fifty years. That is the summer's end.

Spirit never flagged in the early decades. During the 50s and 60s, the Club remained largely a "do-it-yourself" organization, run by island families, populated with island children, and, as soon as possible, instructed by a stream of program graduates. Styrofoam replaced steel barrels under the float. The Gas House remained, but a new clubhouse was constructed in 1965 by islanders A. P. Tilton

and Alan Potter, down the road from the path to the dock, thanks to the generous gift of property from Wye and Kitsy Garfield. Shoals in the Cove necessitated moving the dock eastward onto land again donated by Connie Wood. Wooden hulls were supplemented by fiberglass; wooden spars by aluminum. But still, the manual labor was all-volunteer, and sails and boat parts were fixed and patched over and over again.



*Connie Wood and John Moore at Opening Party for CYC Clubhouse, 1965.*

The Club's program content fell naturally into place. Children learned to sail and race Turnabouts, but they also learned how to rig and handle boats loaned by club members. Two or three Herreshoff 12 "Bullseyes" joined the fleet, enabling spinnaker setting, and longer-distance day and overnight sailing to Quicks Hole, Penikese, the Weepeckets, and even Menemsha. These expeditions provided excit-



*Bullseye Sailing, Summer 1965. Photo by Joel P. Davis.*

ing seamanship challenges as well as sand camping and an occasional summer wind-chill factor. Children practiced sailing off a lee shore, studied tide tables, and learned how to right a capsized Turnabout. Island sailors came home from races on the mainland with stories not only about leaking Beetle Cats and frightful currents, but also about summer customs in other communities.

The children sailed and rowed in almost any weather, and learned fancy knots and splicing, seamanship, and basic navigation when fog, gales, or "flat calm" interfered. A blue workbook with patches awarded for sailing task mastery was in use for a



*George Huey, instructing a C-Group, 1970.*

Dill,” nature walks, or demanding scavenger hunts. On hot, calm days, swimming skills were addressed. Sponge tag or sailing scavenger hunts could be just as much fun as the Wednesday racing series, and served to reinforce important sailing skills.



Whether the year was 1935, 1956, or 2006, the CYC has served an island community where parents wanted their children to be confident and safe on the water. Thanks to creative instructors, the skills of rowing and sailing are made fun, and along the way children gain competence and resourcefulness. No one has actually counted the number of CYC sailing instructors, yet each has left a mark on the club and on the young sailors in his or her classes. Year after year, instructors mention how much they have grown and learned at Cuttyhunk. Many accomplish far more than anyone might have predicted, for themselves as well as for the Club.

In the early years, instructors lived for a week at a time with different families — getting a bed, three meals a day (usually large!), and laundry service!

Since the opening of the clubhouse, instructors have had their own quarters. Still, parents manage to maintain the “family” connection. They offer the instructors advice, dinner, or a washing machine. They also serve as “Commodore of the Week”; organize events and parties; or work on the clubhouse (whether as carpenters, interior decorators, or major summer’s end cleanup crew) and on the boats and floats.

The children’s agendas for yacht club classes have been diverse. Some want to race; some want to play. Some are courageous; some are timid. Some want to be challenged; some want to relax in a corner. It has always been up to the instructors to find the magic balance that will engage every child. The instructors offer careful guidance and encourage personal qualities such as consideration, courage, and sportsmanship. In return, they receive daily admiration.

few summers. The Woods’ red carpeted annex, the Garfields’ boat house, and members’ living rooms provided a land base until the clubhouse’s lower level became available. Frequent program alternatives included games on the beach such as “Red Rover” and “Hill

The “early” students matured and many climbed the teaching ranks. Off-island instructors came from time to time, bringing new perspective. Students of the first CYC instructors taught offspring of the first students, with that half-generation rotation providing extraordinary continuity. These seasoned Cuttyhunk instructors, who knew what had been fun, brought a spirit of adventure as they led children on land and sea. They expanded the boundaries of “Capture the Flag” games, offering visiting yacht clubbers the entertainment of navigating the island at dusk. Scavenger hunts became more inventive (and islanders learned there was little privacy on those foggy or windy days!). Teams with lists and black trash bags ran about, collecting such items as dust bunnies from under so-and-so’s bed, lobsterman Bruce Borges’s signature, or a fact from the Historical Society exhibit.



The 70s, 80s, and 90s might be thought of as transition years — at least in a material sense. The dock, always a source of splinters, acquired pressure treated lumber and pilings (and a major repair in 1991 after Hurricane Bob). Life jackets continued to change style, and at some point sneakers were required for classes. Floats, including additional ones for dinghies and new Lasers, were made lighter and more manageable — although they still had to be manhandled up the Cove’s bank for winter storage! The eternal “Mako” launch joined the fleet; it would be repaired, re-engined, resurrected, and re-resurrected through more than 30 years. The clubhouse grew a deck. Bullseyes were gradually retired to private ownership, and wooden Turnabouts were phased out.

With the Club established as not-for-profit in 1981, formal fundraising began, to assure a stable sailing fleet and related equipment. The Club purchased several of its own boats — instead of relying on “loans” from members. Finally, fees were increased just enough to maintain competitive instructor salaries.

Some CYC governors, volunteer parents, and students were still related to those 1935 families (even more to the 1956 crowd), but there was also a healthy influx of families new to the island. They willingly accepted



*A-Groupers, with instructors Rusty McPherson (standing at center) and Jon Smith and Toby Garfield (seated at center), 1965. Photo by Joel P. Davis.*



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*A-Grouper McKayla Dunfey at Laser helm, 2004.*

responsibility for their share of the Club's history. Racing became more serious. Lasers, much faster and more tender to handle, added a new challenge and allowed for more inter-club events and regular trips to the Beverly Junior Regatta. As more families vacationed for shorter periods, a July award ceremony was added to allow for celebration of children's accomplishments in both summer months. New trophies, for sportsmanship, "most improved," and racing were added to honor various elders of the island such as longtime storekeeper Muggsie Thomson. The unique "Singing Sailor" award (for joy in sailing) spoke to CYC spirit.

The club eventually added a retail component and, in 2005, a website. By offering a modest line of burgees, T-shirts, and neckties, in the late 70's, Bee Elmore and Patty Frothingham began what is now fondly called the CYC Boutique, a source of handsome CYC clothing and accessories (and income). The familiar image of a red upside down "T" in the burgee's center, as most everyone knows, represents the Gosnold monument in the West End Pond.



*Turnabouts and a 420 vie in the "Bang & Go Back" Race, August 2006.*

In short, the turn of the century saw a gracefully matured CYC. Always mindful of its traditions, it has successfully kept step with increasing enrollment and a changing world. Sailors and work crews welcomed such innovations as "permanent" floats (no more need for hauling), and a new class of racing sloops — the 420's. The Club, still small by most standards, continues its measured growth, with attendance at all time highs.

The foregoing "history" portrays a group of committed parents and grandparents, an energetic and creative teaching staff, and a collection of students receptive to matters of sailing and the sea. Through a series of meetings and interviews, kindly videotaped by Susan Schwarzwald and Werner Bargsten during the summer of 2005, it became extraordinarily clear that the great, sustaining strength of Cuttyhunk Yacht Club lies in intangibles.

No parent, no instructor, no child will ever forget the first rowboat or Turnabout solo, or a first place in a Laser or 420 race. It is remarkable how many CYC members of all ages remember these brilliant moments. The CYC parties — with a table full of lovingly decorated cakes for celebration of the young sailors' achievements — are always a summer



*Muriel P. Wood with children and cakes in Winter House sun porch, CYC Party, 1965. Photo by Joel P. Davis.*

highlight. Fortunate older CYC members recall Muriel Wood (honored by the annual Wood trophy for sportsmanship) personally greeting each cake and ice cream-cup eating child at long tables in the Winter House sun porch. And all can recall the silken feel of a single ribbon or a fistful of many colors; or perhaps the delight of hearing their name announced to come up to receive an award and to shake an admired instructor's hand.

"Spirit" is perhaps an inadequate word to describe the exceptional quality that makes CYC stand out in all of our life experiences. The Club has succeeded because so many people care and work together. A receptive child becomes confident, becomes a sailor, may even become instructor... and perhaps one day a volunteering parent who raises yet another sailor, and the cycle goes on. Today's students have three generations standing behind and beside them, honoring the spirit of the fifty-year-old Cuttyhunk Yacht Club.

So, Give three cheers for Cuttyhunk,  
Our spirits all are free.  
And no one knows the time of day  
Or cares, that's why we  
Love this isle of Gosnold,  
And every wind that blows  
In rain or sun we all have fun  
From spring to summer's close...

LEILA TUCKER HALL

David A. Frothingham has summered on Cuttyhunk since 1940, served as an assistant instructor at CYC in 1956 and '57, and head instructor in 1959. Three of his sons have since been instructors, and a grandson will start CYC in this 50th anniversary year.

Bits of additional history were added and woven into David's history by Louise Garfield Bachler, who thanks Pam Baldwin, Steve Bachler, Bill Garfield, Rebecca B. Garfield, and Wye and Kitsy Garfield for their contributions.

Photos from CHS collection unless otherwise noted.