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Ah - the boats I've known and loved

By Sally Sharrard

My parents dressed me in lifejackets and plopped me in boats. My first visual memory is of looking upward at blue sky and white sails while I rocked gently on my back on a cushion. They would strap me into an old, adult-sized cork lifejacket from a Great Lakes freighter and let me run downhill bouncing off pine trees until I could roll down the wood steps onto the dock. If I was going fast enough I could roll off the dock and into the lake where I had to float around until someone retrieved me. It was impossible to sink and I couldn't even dog paddle in it.

Dad would take me rafting down the AuSable River in Michigan to see moose and bear. I'd lay on the top of the tube in my lifejacket and I remember thinking it would be a long way if I fell into the bottom of the raft and it would be better to fall into the water so Dad could collect me.

The years following were filled with rowboats which Dad taught me to row so I could take him over to the lily pads late at night to fish. We'd watch the northern lights while I rowed him around and he would tell me of galaxies and point out how to navigate by stars. He would insist each summer that I show him how to dump a boat, fill it with water, bail it out, or swim it to shore before he would turn me loose with my siblings. Then there was the flat-backed fiberglass canoe where he installed a motor and we'd go "three shear pins" up the river and then float back down. The canoe soon sprouted sails made from parachutes and homemade dagger boards for stability. And, yes, I learned to flip it over and right it too.

Then the Air Force moved us overseas. I learned about locks on the Thames in a canal boat; houseboats on the canals of Amsterdam; and how rough the crossing could be on the ferry between England and France. Back stateside in Louisiana in the 50's I learned to sail on a man-made lake where we had to avoid duck blinds full of moccasins, and to row in the swamps while avoiding Cypress trees with hanging Spanish moss where the snakes liked to hide and could drop into the boat. We were very careful not to swim where there were alligators.

My teenage summers were interspersed with vacation river trips in many states. My parents never saw a boat they wouldn't try and I think we must have taken every ferry crossing in this country, and visited every fish hatchery. Best of the summers, though, was spent sailing on the Great Lakes on my Great-Uncle's 36' ketch. There I learned the dangers of big water when we were caught in a severe storm on a week-long trip - the dory sunk, the sails ripped off, and we had to bare-pole the night hoping not to be shoved ashore. It was on Lake Huron that I saw a great wave rise up and sink a tug and a barge, all hands lost.

Throughout these years I learned of my ancestors. I grew up knowing about my ancestor who fell off the Mayflower in monstrous storm waves, then pulled himself aboard with a trailing line; and of a collateral relative, Nathaniel Palmer, who discovered the Palmer Peninsula in Antarctica in a 20' gig riding those gigantic waves of the Southern Ocean. I knew my gene pool thronged with

ship carpenters and sailing captains who built the clipper ships in Mystic Seaport, Connecticut in the 1700's.

I was in college when my folks moved to Oregon and I came with them. Here I learned to row the white waters in a McKenzie river boat and how to cross Oregon's rough river mouth bars into the ocean - first in a 20' ocean-going dory and then in various sized motor boats. Many times we would go out and hang around the Whistler (buoy) and fish and once had to stay out for hours in a storm because the Coast Guard had closed the bar down. Sometimes the Coast Guard would come out when a deep fog had set in and lead the fishing boats back in over the bar.

In college I learned to kayak and built my own from fiberglass, although I was never really good. Then I bought a small white-water raft and began running all the big rivers from the Rogue to the Owyhee, the Middle-Fork of the Salmon, to the "River of No Return" (Salmon) in Idaho. My 20's and early 30's were spent dodging boulders and running white-water. But sometimes I would join my folks and we'd take the deep water ferries from Washington up through the Inside Passage to Alaska. We'd camp out on the upper deck to watch the Northern Lights. Or we would haul one of Dad's boats up to Puget Sound and go gunk-holing from island to island in the San Juan's. One of my brothers and I rented a sailboat on Spring break and would sail for a week in the Canadian islands of the Salish Sea.

In 1979, I was one of seven women who trained for a year to canoe about 200 hundred miles down the Fortymile River and the Yukon for ten days. We had to portage and scout rapids on this famous gold-mining river and found ourselves at flood stage canoeing "The Canyon rapids" which we were supposed to line. We couldn't line because the flooding river had destroyed the banks and to portage we would have had to haul boats and gear 500' up canyon walls and then wander for miles along bear paths through the tundra. We survived the rapids with only one upset canoe. The Fortymile is famous for being the river where the gold rush started. We met some goldminers in the bush and did a little gold-panning ourselves.



Then I moved to Puget Sound and bought an ocean-going sailboat. *Quiddity* was her name. She was small, 24', with a full keel and a hull design built for ocean waves and big winds. I didn't want to imitate Ann Davison who sailed a 23-foot boat across the Atlantic but I wanted to be able to go to Hawaii if I got the notion.

She was rigged for single-handling so I could bounce

around the cabin top hauling in sails with ease and confidence. When we encountered the big ocean rollers coming across the world and in through the Strait of Juan de Fuca between Victoria, B.C. and Port Townsend, WA she would just hunker down and glide up and over them. Once, with my sister onboard for the crossing, we discovered a school of large salmon hanging out behind the rudder.



Although I knew the fundamentals of sailing and was skilled in handling lake boats, I had never sailed a heavy-weather ocean boat on my own. It was a challenge that first year and actually a challenge every year after because there is always something new to learn when sailing among islands in changing winds and currents of salt water. I was familiar with charts and current and tide tables but I decided to take courses on handling a sextant and how to plot trips the old way using only wind and current readings. I didn't have fancy electronic equipment, only a depth sounder, a ship-to-shore radio, and a hand-held wind meter. Sailing was my aim although I had a backup in her one-banger diesel which I used as little as possible.

Taking a sun or star sight with a sextant proved hilarious since I had to wrap my arm around the mast to keep upright and try to hold on, turn knobs, and swing the sextant to get a reading on the horizon line at the same time my boat was bobbing up and down in the Puget Sound chop. After doing all the math I once got within 53 miles of where I actually was.

I spent many years gunk-holing around the Salish Sea which is the name for the inland body of water in and among the islands of southern British Columbia and northern Puget Sound. I learned how to anchor taking into account high tides and to sail into a dock and tie up with no assistance. I roamed the San Juan Islands and sometimes ventured out into the ocean around Vancouver Island, and even into some of the fjords of B.C.

Dall porpoises would ride my bow waves and once an Orca pod began jumping clear out of the water- *next to me*- when we had just completed a tricky current crossing between islands. A nuclear sub nearly ran me over when I was drifting without wind between Canada and the U.S. Once on a dark night, as I was laying on the sail bags on the deck with the boat anchored so I could see the Milky Way in all its glory, I saw the U.S. and Canadian Coast Guards surround a drug-running freighter drifting in through the Strait without its lights.

But that was a while ago. I sold my boat and I moved away from Puget Sound to Rose Villa.

Before the virus I was on the Rose Villa Dragon Boat team. I love the challenge of getting twenty people to paddle in sync with a coach, a tiller and a flag catcher, in order to move a 1½ ton wooden boat over a 500-yard river course in three minutes or less under any wind or current conditions. My muscles would groan and breath be short but I loved sharing with others the how of meeting a river challenge.

I still have a boat. Not as many as my siblings. Between the four of us I count 9 boats from my small kayak to my brother's 57' wooden sailboat which he built and lives aboard and sails the world. Mine is a 6' blow-up kayak and during August and September of this year I got up early in the morning to kayak-guard a friend who swims two miles in the Willamette with a group of other early birds. I would like to get a sailing dinghy because of the location on the Willamette would let me be on the water nearly every day, rain or shine. I dream of hauling it up to mountain lakes or over to the coast to the bay estuaries. There is something about the tang of salt water that lifts my spirits. I really want to go on a Windjammer cruise off the coast of Maine where my ancestors built boats and rode the waves long ago.