

REFLECTIONS

By Patricia Thoms

"Toot" Gmeiner, veteran of almost fifty Mackinacs, will be cheering on the participants and enjoying his favorite pastime — sailing.

Born in Detroit, May 27, 1911, Wilfred Gmeiner (nicknamed "Tootie" by an aunt) was always able to find time in his busy life as owner of Motor City Distributors, to pursue his avocation.

His interest in the sport was sparked by an uncle, with whom he sailed on the yawl *Calypso*, when racing for the Canadian Cup. As a young man, Toot sailed with his parents and he also sailed catboats out of the Detroit Yacht Club. He crewed with Harry Kipke, former University of Michigan footballer and All-American.

Toot's "old girl", "a New York 32, 45'4"" was christened *Apache*, May 9, 1936, and was sailed to Bermuda by "Bubbles" Havmeyer, out of the New York Yacht Club. There were twenty NY 32s built — nineteen are still sailing, one burned in a shipyard fire.

In 1939, Thomas K. "Tommy" Fisher of Fisher Body, bought *Apache* from Havmeyer. Toot crewed with Tommy for two years, and when Tommy went into the service, he sold *Apache* to Toot. It was 1941 — the year of *Apache*'s first Mackinac.

Norbert Taylor logged more time with Toot than any other crew member. They sailed together for 28 years.

Toot's sailing experience spans five decades, encompassing many races and countless memorable moments. Captain Toot recalls 25 years in the Nassau, the Southern Circuit, S.O.R.C. He sailed Cuba 16 times, and participated in four Bermuda races.

The Mackinac has seen *Apache* between 35 and 40 times — Port Huron to Mackinac and Chicago to Mackinac. In 1945, 48 boats started the race, but only four finished, many running aground. *Apache* won the race.

In the 50's, Toot sailed in the Rochester race (Rochester Yacht Club), the longest fresh-water outing of over 350 miles on Lake Ontario. One year, again, only four finished and *Apache* won in class B. The following year, Toot was invited to join the crew of

Escapade which won Class A Over-all.

One of Toot's most vivid nautical memories recalls his most dangerous experience. He and his wife were sailing with friends, Harlow and Eloise Davock of Birmingham, in 1945. Bill Law, a former Navy signalman, rounded out the crew. They were sailing on *Apache*'s sister ship, *Away*, returning from the Bahamas. The group left Bimini to cross the Gulf Stream. As they sailed, a southeasterly breeze unexpectedly developed into a north wind. "It was a fast storm, a 110-mile blow," Toot remembers. "We lost the spar overboard due to a rigging failure."

After many crossings of the Gulf Stream, Toot and his crew were prepared for emergencies, and there was no confusion or panic. Even so, the *Angleburg*, a 550' German refrigerator ship, under charter to the United Fruit Line, was a welcome and surprising "companion" on the rough seas. Bill signaled with a flashlight. Captain Wolfgang, a small-boat sailor of long standing, saw *Away*'s dilemma and signaled: "Want to be taken off?" "Negative, we're okay," was the response.

"We were 10 to 15 feet below the ship's water-line, and would travel up even with the bridge deck. We rode on her port side, in her lee. *Angleburg* 'mothered' us into Hillsboro Light, Port Everglades." Toot found this entire event especially unusual, since only months before, America and Germany had been at war. He adds that later he learned that the delay of the *Angleburg* in assisting *Away*, would have cost \$100,000 today.

Of all Toot's reminiscences, the most pleasant and smile-provoking are those times spent aboard *Apache*. "The care and feeding of the old girl" were turned over to sons Skipper and Douglas six years ago.

Skipper has achieved "Old Goat" status, and Douglas will join these illustrious ranks this year. "The boys" no longer compete with *Apache* but crew on other boats.

When reflecting on the sport, Toot makes some cogent observations about sailing. "A good sailor loves the water. He has a keen sense of direction and balance. He must be 'tuned in' to changes in weather and wind. Something often over-looked, is that he should be a good, all-around mechanic and maintenance man." Toot sees alertness and perseverance as a sailor's greatest attributes.

The ever-changing nature of sailing holds a steadfast attraction for Toot Gmeiner. "What you think you learned in one race, never applies in the next!"

Toot and his wife Jeanne are enjoying an active retirement between Florida and North Carolina. They don't intend to miss the pleasure and excitement of a single Mackinac race!

Toot Gmeiner's *Apache*

