

# SAY IT IN CAPS

By George E. Van, Sr.

The day will come as sure as tomorrow when the Mackinac Race fleet sails over the horizon without me in one of the crews. But this old Billy Goat, a sentimental mush, won't be looking. He'll be crying because one of the greatest things in his life style had come to an end.

Mackinac racing, like all offshore events, is an illogical way to get around. Often these sailing contraptions are slower than an ox cart. In heavy going the battle against nature's winds take a tough physical toll.

But I don't want to hear this from a non-sailor.

Then there are the glorious days in the sun when the wind is fair and, if you're racing and your craft is in good position, you're alive and life is rich. On a well-organized boat there's beer all around after a sail change.

This becomes an ingrained addiction, an obsession, a sort of fever that brings one back again and again. Often too, there's a tendency in hard racing, to ignore the beautiful thing we're doing. In these later years there's an awareness of the joy of this, now part of the warp and woof of my sensibilities.

The surge of memories is heavy now with the rocking chair giving me the yoo-hoo. Particularly the crazy peccadillos with other fun-loving shipmates in those early years at Mackinac Island.

Like: Changing the letter O to A in the Fort Mackinac stone banner on the hill below the fort. They finally did away with the stone banner; tying jib sheets together and ringing the church bell during the night; showing off, riding bikes off the dock and then swimming back with the bike; swimming across the Straits to Round Island...best way to get rid of a hangover.

Years afterwards it was difficult to explain these goofy antics to son, George E. Van Jr., who now has the fever.

There's a joyous memory too of the post race parties in the long ago, organized by the late Bobby Lawrence and Gordie Saunders. Bobby's habit was to start a cocktail party on the dock, all joined in and contributed. Gordie always had his barbeque along the beach just beyond the judges tent. Songs such as "Blow The Man Down" seemed to echo across the Straits.

One year someone stole Nate Shane's Pink Pony which hung outside his saloon in the Chippewa Hotel. His Pink Pony pub has been called the

second finish of the Mackinac races. Nate sold out to an island group last winter and retired to Arizona.

There was a time too in the long ago when a group, who shall be unnamed, brought a small pony up the red-carpeted steps of the Grand Hotel and into the lobby.

The Grand was even more formal then than now. Owner Stuart Woodfill was outraged and banned all Mackinac race sailors. That gave this then bright young man a great line to write for his paper, the then *Detroit Times*. "The Grand Hotel, which has the longest porch in the world, now has the longest rope in the world to keep the sailors out." Thought he was pretty cute.

The Mackinac Race, I contended, was no different than any other convention on Mackinac Island. I carried the feud on in the paper. But wouldn't you know that subsequently the late Mr. Woodfill and I became good friends. His son-in-law, Dan Musser, now owner and manager of the Grand, has welcomed me as a guest many times.

There weren't a great lot of good boats during those early years of Bayview's Mackinac. Only three boats were built specifically for the race during the first dozen years after the 1925 start...Tom Archer's *Barbette* in 1928, *Trident* in 1929, owned by Alger Shelden, Cleveland Thurber and Warren Booth, both 60 footers and Russ Alger's 46 foot *Baccarat*, designed by the late Russ Pouliot in 1933. It was 1938 when Pouliot designed one of J.B. Ford Jr's early *Royono's*, a 52 foot yawl, later named *Estrellita*.

Memories are revived by incidents during the races. In 1932 I was invited to race on the late Rupert Bell's 43 foot Alden, gaff-rigged topsail schooner, *Melodie*. The wind blew hard down Lake Huron and the crew became violently seasick, all except this Goat and Charley Taekles. We were hard on the wind and there weren't enough hands available to bring her about. Hours later the Canadian shore was off the bow. Young Rupe Bell and his chum, Jay Lemon, had revived sufficiently and we brought *Melodie* around on the starboard tack. The young pair then went to the lee rail.

It must have been late Monday afternoon. The head wind had become gentle on Lake Huron. That's when we spotted a dark hull in the haze off the bow. It was the 60' *Trident*, queen of the fleet. The long port tack we didn't want to take had put us up

there.

*Melodie* could ghost and the kids had the topsail up as she held on to *Trident* all night long as we sailed up the BobLo Island Shore.

At dawn, *Melodie* was a boat length behind to windward of *Trident* and Round Island and BobLo were abeam.

At that juncture a zephyr of wind came under the stern of *Trident*. The kids had the golly wobbler up (a light sail flying between the masts.) It caught the breeze and *Melodie* sailed through *Trident's* lee and won the race by 43 seconds.

I, like the rest of *Melodie's* crew was jubilant. I had to be a smartass and sound off. I yelled at *Trident's* dejected crew, "The damn thing is greatly overrated."

The sequel to my unseemly outburst even now makes me wince. Warren Booth brought me to the *News* after he bought the *Times* in 1960. The word was he wanted "the kid who knew which way the wind was blowing...and used all the results."

It was his idea to have a boat race and the Civic Center Regatta, held downtown on the Detroit River, went on for ten years.

Booth was aboard Shelden's *Strathbelle*, the judges boat for the 1962 Civic Center Regatta. So were his old R-class crew who sailed, was it *Rascal*, in the first two Mackinac races, 1925 and 1926.

Martini-emboldened, I mentioned I was surprised to be at the *News* after my display of bad taste...30 years before.

Booth put his hand on my shoulder and was shaking with laughter when he gave me the stunner... "You mean... "The damn thing is greatly overrated?"

The fascination maintains but somehow the reveries about the youthful Mackinac years are the brightest.

How proud we were when the late Bill Fisher fitted his crew out in red sail cloth pants, striped shirts and small bonnets aboard the 8-meter, *Margaret F. IV*. The bartender in the saloon ashore, noting our red pants, shut us down asking if we were with the circus.

*Maggie*, as we called her, was a gift to Bill from his uncle, Larry Fisher. The 50-footer, a Burgess design, built in Germany by Abington and Rasmussen was close winded...oh so close.

The afternoon of the race we had to

make only a few tacks offshore in the light head winds below Harbor Beach. The rest of the fleet were constantly tacking and *Maggie* stretched out a long lead and was first to finish by hours.

*Maggie* did it again in the 1934 Bayview Mackinac. *Maggie* had no power and we sailed in and out of harbors. On a visit to Charlevoix we sailed through the channel into Round Lake with the wind behind us. Buckets on lanyards were at the ready as brakes on the stern as we passed through the bridge.

The first Bayview-Mac race around Cove Island was held in 1935 and deserves mention in this treatise. I was on the *Baccarat*, winner in class A and second to finish behind the 44-foot *Alsumar*, owned by Davie Sloss and Tom Petzold, a light weather lady from class B who won it all. It was during the Great Depression and many boats didn't get to Mackinac Island until Thursday. Guys lost their jobs. The course wasn't used again until eight years or so ago. This Old Goat saw nothing wrong with the old direct course to the Island. The cove course requires navigation? Hell, all the navigator does now is push buttons!

As the self-elected ambassador without portofolio for the Great Lakes and its drinking water sailing, I've been telling the world: "Say it in caps... GREAT LAKES." The 600 milers from Port Huron to Sarnia and vice versa, compare in distance with the world's ocean classics... Newport to Bermuda, Sydney-Hobart and England's Fastnet.

But ours is tops with more variety... sailing in all directions in all kinds of weather and you can dip over the side for a drink of water. Wife, Marge, says I'm maudlin about the Mackinac. I suspect it's my greatest happening.

I've been asked which was my favorite boat in all of the Macs, aboard schooners, sloops and cutters. The answer has always been the same, "the one I'm sailing on."

Still, there are affectionate memories of those big queens... Bill Britain's *Ticonderoga*, Doug Jones' *Weatherly*, the America's cup winner; Roman Brotz' *Saber*, the 87-foot M boat; Charley Sorenson's *White Cloud*, Bob Timken's 72-foot *Kittihawk*, Bob Way's heavy *Masker*; John Andres's 12, *Northern Light*; and in the later years, Dutch Schmidt's *Sassy* and Steve Gagne's *Triumph*.

The world was mine the day in the

Chicago-Mac when I was at the wheel of *White Cloud* driving her to windward above the Manitou Passage in a hard wind when Joe Snay, our skipper, told me, "Nice going." Snay taught so many of us Old Goats so much.

That was in 1943 and *White Cloud* won the overall and set a modern course record for the 333 mile Chicago-Mac... something like 43 hours elapsed time. We arrived at the Island Monday morning in time for *The Detroit Times* to carry my story in the first edition.

Two pets, above all, stir the emotions. One was Toot Gmeiner's N.Y. 32 *Apache*, class B winner in '42 and the overall in '43. Toot caused me some vexation with his habit of steering *Apache* with his feet from a leeward position on the wind. But he became damn good at it.

The other queen was the 55.6-foot cutter, *Blitzen*, an S&S design, brought here in 1944 by Ernie Grates and Murray Knapp. I could chronicle ad nauseum about this great lady. Fidrych, the Tiger pitcher, talked to the ball. This was no discovery. Helmsmen have been talking to boats forever. *Blitzen* liked me and I responded, "Get up there baby, everybody's looking.", and she always did.

*Blitzen* was the nickname R. J. (Dick) Reynolds, her first owner, had for his wife. She won six out of eleven Mackinac Races overall and in class before she was sold East in 1950. This includes the '45 Mac, stormiest of all Macs (including Chicago's) when she was 12 hours ahead of the next finisher, Jim Lowe's *Manitou*.

One *Blitzen* incident: George Sollitt's 60-foot yawl *Onkahya* from Chicago Yacht Club was always our great rival. In one race we virtually nailed together slugging to windward at the finish at Mackinac Island. At the stick, she had a tiller, I knew I could beat *Onky* over the finish line if I sailed inside the radio beacon light which is just off the rocky breakwater.

I brought *Blitzen* about and Chick Stodgell, our great navigator screamed that we were headed for shoal water and going aground. "Lots of water," I yelled. And how did I know? I had to be funny. "Sailed my catboat through here many times."

"I quit. . . navigate yourself," Chick hollered.

We beat *Onky* over the line but I knew what I was doing. I had seen Bob Benedict bring his yawl, *Southern Cross*, around 60-feet long, along the Mackinac Island beach to win the Chicago-Mac one time.

This octogenarian doesn't concern himself with being modest. He's quite proud of the part he played in helping to bring the 48-foot *X-Touche* in first and the 1960 overall winner.

*X-Touche*, owned by Moon Baker and Jerry Clements, went for a go-for-broke spinnaker reach that took her 10 to 15 degrees off course. This brought the speed up from around 2½ to 6 knots. The wind shifted properly and put *X-Touche* in front of Charley Kotovic's 55-foot *Gypsy* by about 7 miles when we passed by Thunder Bay.

*Gypsy*, wonderful in any kind of going is a wraith in light to modern airs. She closed the gap inexorably but *X-Touche* was still in front a mile from the finish with *Gypsy* 150 yards astern.

At that point Skipper Kotovic headed for the beach figuring on a private breeze. The breeze came off shore but missed *Gypsy* and nestled in *X-Touche*'s sails. *X-Touche* took the overall, boat for boat by a scant 100 yards over *Gypsy*.

Later I was to join *Gypsy* when she won 3 out of 4 Mackinac races from Port Huron and Chicago in 1964-65.

That's when I should have swallowed the anchor (QUIT!!). But I've been going ever since and loving it more than ever. It was close last year when *Triumph*, leading much of the race, took second to Don Wildman's 12-meter *Heritage*. *Triumph* was second overall.

My best skipper? There are so many good ones but none better than Davie Sloss, winner of a half dozen Mackinac races. The soft-spoken Davie never had any panic parties on his well-organized boats. It's axiomatic that a consistent winner is the skipper whose organization begets loyalty and the crew stays with him.

The best sailor? Certainly none better than the late Ted Coggin who sailed eight or more winners than anyone.

The breed is improving. Now I find myself sailing with the sons of old shipmates. My usual crack is, "I don't want to have the same trouble with you guys I had with your dads."