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ANOTHER WAY: History in the Making

By Tania Aebi

For those of us who don't live on boats and sail on grand adventures year round, there are seasons of downtime, perfect for magazines and books. So, for this magazine, here is a little something about a book providing a soaring armchair ride through the history of sailing just for the fun of it, through the lens of the Cruising Club of America.

Gaze out over any anchorage or marina nowadays, and you will see many different kinds of sailboats. How often have you spent a few moments or hours doing this with friends, pointing out the ones you do or don't like? Monohulls, catamarans, trimarans, fiberglass, steel, wood, aluminum. These sloop, cutter, ketch, yawl, and schooner rigs come in all shapes and sizes, and each meets a different need, suits a different taste, and tells a different story about current and past owners.

As is true about most things, every boat also has a history stretching back to before it was built, to the inspiration for its design, and the stories of its designers. If you look a little further, you will arrive at the origins of cruising, to the time when sail went from being the primary source of propulsion to a sport and a way of life.

In the big picture, that didn't happen very long ago. At the end of the 1800s, Joshua Slocum, a sailing captain who had become jobless with the advent of the steam engine, sailed alone around the world and into the books as the proto-sailing adventurer and cruiser. Then, he and his boat disappeared in the Bermuda Triangle.

If you think about it, since Slocum's epic voyage, cruisers and racers sailing across oceans just for adventure have only existed for a hundred and twenty years or so. And, it was mainly in the decades following WWII that the industry really swelled. Boy, has a lot happened in that time. None of those greatest generation guys peddling sporty and classic sailing designs — Alden, Rhodes, Atkins — could have ever imagined the massive business it would become for the baby boom. After WWII, shipbuilders thrived in New England until the seventies, ushering in the middle-class surge in sailing. From wood to fiberglass to carbon fiber, marinas mushroomed, anchorages filled. With GPS, the industry kept expanding, right down into the pages of this very magazine.

In 1922, a small circle of mostly racing and some cruising sailors gave birth to the Cruising Club of America, an organization unfamiliar to many of us, even though it has played an outsized role supporting sailing life as we know it. Recently, Tim Murphy, a sailor and journalist, pulled together a book with editor Sheila McCurdy, telling this hundred-year-old history: *Adventurous Use of the Sea: Formidable Stories of a Century of Sailing from the Cruising Club of America.*

Read past the introduction describing the origins of the Cruising Club of America (an America that included Canada,

where the first boat of the first founder was first drawn), and you get sucked into the pages of stories about a very rarified group of men, and later, women, who designed and built boats to cross oceans — from doing it just for the adventure, to purpose-driven voyages meant to win races, break records, share amazing experiences with families, introduce the sea to others, educate youth, and help the unfortunate along the sailing routes they plied.

In those early days, a certain class of people dominated the sailing world and carried the CCA flag, almost always tied to finance, law, or engineering, New England, Harvard, or some other Ivy League institution of brainiacs competing for coveted Bermuda Race and America's Cup prizes. These people were born into loving sailing, who either had money or knew people with the money they needed for experiments, prototypes, and programs.

They have names like William "Bill" Nutting, who built a forty-five-foot Atkins-designed ketch named Typhoon in 1919 and sailed her from the East Coast to England and back in 1920. He and his crew did it with no bets, no advertisers, no challenges, no desperation — just to see if they could do it and have fun. And they did.

When home again, an editorial in the Tribune questioned the wisdom behind the hair-brained pursuit of crossing an ocean on such a small boat. Nutting indignantly replied: "Now, apart from the question of the risk involved, which is largely a matter of personal opinion, I feel that what American yachting needs is less common sense, less restrictions, less slide rules and more sailing."

Then, he and his next boat disappeared somewhere between Iceland and the East Coast, but not before he and a few friends formed the CCA in a New York City apartment. And, not before he did some back-of-the-envelope drawings scaling down the Colin Archer forty-seven-foot North Sea lifeboat to the once popular Westsail 32, a boat close to my heart that tangentially launched my ship of life.

Sixty-odd years later, and after some avoidable maritime tragedies, another CCA member developed the Life Sling, a piece of equipment now found on most boats. And this led to Safety at Sea Seminars, established by a cohort of experienced CCA members, courses now taken by most sea-bound sailors.

All along, CCA also governed rules on racing, design, and rating formulas. Every race that ever existed is mentioned, alongside the designers who worked endlessly on ratios, materials, and math I don't understand that resulted in boats I don't know in many races I've never heard of. This doesn't really mean much, as understanding designs and racing complexity has never been my thing. Just as well.

Women were not accepted as CCA members until 1994, so this is a very male-dominated history. Still, women are featured in the stories of many couple-driven adventures, such as Irving and Exy Johnson, who circumnavigated their training ship, the Yankee, seven times between 1933-1958, introducing a pantheon of well-known later adventuring sailors and couples to the sea.

Many of these characters were also writers, and the book contains an accumulation of quotes nicely summing up every description and feeling one can have out there, whether cruising or racing. I didn't think I'd care for the parade of yachting elite, but they command respect for paving the way with eloquence, intelligence, and mastery of whatever they were bringing to the art of sailing, cruising, and ultimately, living.

Members of the CCA make for an organization steeped in seagoing lore and achievement. Cumulatively, they've sailed millions of miles. The Capes, Antarctica, Greenland, Alaska, the Northwest Passage, Indian Ocean, Mediterranean, Caribbean, North and South Pacific, there is very little of the planet that CCA people haven't visited, no sailor their ripples haven't inspired or touched. Honestly, it's hard to feel singularly accomplished faced by all that accomplishment.

At the very beginning of the book, Tim says that during final edits, he realized the phrase "launched a thousand ships" was used about a thousand times, so other words were found as substitutes. But, as a reader, I stumbled over the ghost of those words. Many people, boats, books, and articles launched a thousand ships and ancillary sailors, businesses, materials, and equipment. One after the other, stories within stories that became the stuff of legend would remind me of the phrase.

You don't have to read it word for word as there are also plenty of beautiful and illustrative pictures, going from grainy black and white to color. But, whether you were born to love sailing or came to love it otherwise, no matter what your ride looks like or when and where you hoist your sails, you will find connection to something in this book.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In May of 1985, an eighteen-year-old Tania set sail from Manhattan, New York, and became the first American woman and youngest sailor at the time to circumnavigate the globe. Upon her return to Manhattan in November 1987, Tania had visited twenty-three countries and sailed 27,000 miles. Nowadays, Tania runs charters and delivers boats all over the world when she's not at home helping with her granddaughter, battling snow in the winter and weeds in the summer, or dreaming about writing her next book.

Treading Water
by Irene Olds