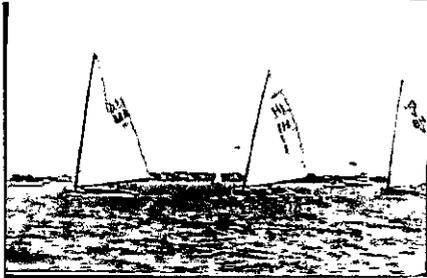


Asbury Park Press Article June 1990

by Bill Edwards



Sailing links

BBYRA

A Cat Fleet Captain

Name: Roy J Wilkins

Email: ihspv@yahoo.com



In 1920's the A Cats became the premiere racing fleet on Barnegat Bay. But difficult times followed and the fleet soon faced extinction. Now, they're enjoying marvelous resurgence

The Cats are back.

By BILL EDWARDS
Press Staff Writer

Nelson Hartranft remembers the summers he spent as a kid back in the 1940s over on Newport Avenue in Ocean Gate with a special kind of fascination. The piers he and his friends used to swim from. The pavilions they used to hang out on. The beach. The crabbing. The boating. "Your whole life was geared to the water," remembers Hartranft, warmly and vividly. A buddy of his, George Gronde, owned a sneakbox, an immensely popular Barnegat Bay summer staple as much then as now. Gronde was a skipper in search of a crew, Hartranft was a crew in waiting. Gronde inquired and Hartranft accepted.

When Grond turned 18, he became too old to race his sneakbox, named the Tern II, on the bay and sold it to Hartranft, whose passion for sailing was gaining a strong headwind.

"We used to take them (sneakboxes) up on the beach and wet-sand the bottom to get them nice and smooth" says Hartranft. "We'd put them back in the water on Saturday mornings and off we'd go to the races".

About this time, Hartranft remembers an Ocean Gate dentist named Tom Dilworth, who used to race around the Toms River in an A Cat named Bat. Only this was unlike any ordinary catboat he was had seen, with its marconi-rigged (triangleshape) sail that had altered the face of catboat design in the early 1920s.

"We would have given our right arms to sail on one of the A Cats when we were young," said Hartranft. "It was just this class.. their size, their grace, their speed".

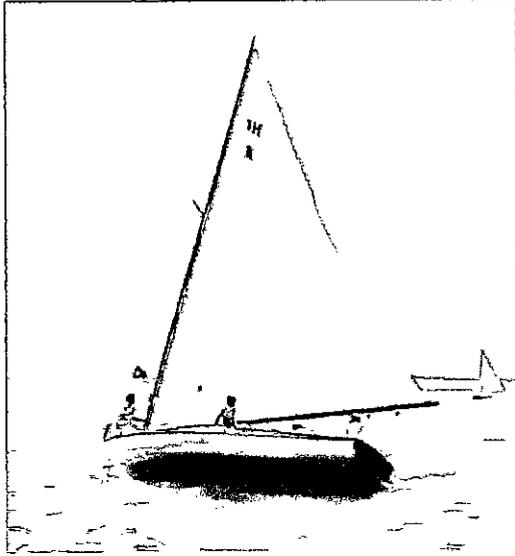
....."When we were kids, the A Cats were the epitome. In those days, it was an older person's boat, strictly men. They used cases and cases of beer on board (for ballast) and they'd race and they'd have a good time."

Now, more than 40 years later during which the fleet nearly became a dinosaur, this majestic group of Class A catboats, unique to the area, has enjoyed a marvelous resurgence. Once dubbed "The grand old ladies" of the Barnegat Bay, they're Top Cats once more, and theyre better than ever.

..The fleet now stands six strong. Hartranft's Wasp, campaigning for the ninth summer, and Peter Kellogg's Tamwock, christened two weeks ago, join charter members Mary Ann, Bat, Spy and Lotus.

..The Mary Ann is co-owned by Marshall Warner, Spring Lake, and John Hale, Island Heights. The Bat is co-owned by Mike Frankovich and Bob Lostrom, both of Island Heights.

The Spy is owned by Roy Wilkins and Jim Reynolds, both of Island Heights, and Maggie Groff,



Doylstown, Pa. Steve Brick, Medford Township, owns the Lotus.

THE A CATS.

They first arrived on the bay scene in 1922, when a federal judge from Philadelphia named Charles McKeehan commissioned the Mary Ann, which he named after his mother, for the sole purpose of competing in the then open-class Toms River Yacht Club Challenge Cup.

The Mary Ann so dominated the Cup the first time it competed that it spawned a fleet of A Cats. Bat and Tamwock were built in 1923, Spy was added in 1924 and Lotus came aboard in 1925. Foresome and Helen, two other A Cats built in 1923, campaigned only briefly.

Designed by Francis Sweisguth and Charles Moyer, preeminent marine architects of the day, and built primarily at the old Morton Johnson boat yard in Bay Head, these A Cats evolved from types of cat-rigged boats that had sailed the Barnegat as early as the 17th century.

Catboats enjoyed a fine reputation for their usefulness, weatherliness and speed, their ability to navigate shallow bay and river waters. Originally out-fitted with a Swedish rig, with gaffs of six to nine feet, the marconi design was subsequently deemed better suited for the overall performance of the boats.

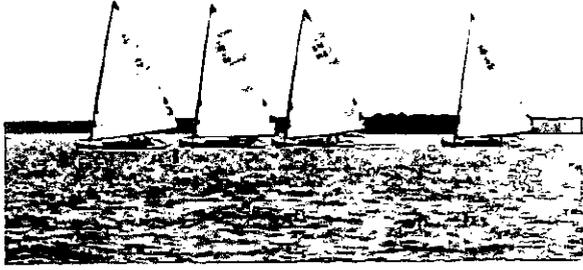
Twenty-eight feet in length (22 feet at the waterline), open hulls, with booms measuring 28½-feet long, masts standing 46 feet high, 605 square feet of sail and weighing roughly 3,000 pounds, requiring a crew of four to six persons, they were the Beasts of the Bay. But by the late 60s through the early 80s, this storied fleet had fallen on difficult times. The elegance and stat-stature that these boats had once enjoyed eventually gave way to various stages of neglect and decay. Extinction was only a matter of time. Death, however, was defied, thanks Hartranft and others. In the natural progression of Hartranft's life, from a stint in the service after high school, serving with the Marine Corps during the Korean War, to Lehigh University, where he majored in finance, to private business in and around Philadelphia, images of Dilworth and the Bat racing around the Toms River remained ever so vivid. And then in 1975, Jim McKay of Lacey Township put the Spy up for sale. Hartranft went for it. "The condition of it was just so-so," says Hartranft.

HARTRANFF HAS since owned all four of the remaining original A Cats. He sold them, with the only stipulation being that the new owners maintain and race them, and keep them in the area.

He was able to inject new life into the fleet and attract people willing to invest money and time into its restoration.

In 1978 Hartranft sold the Spy to Roy Wilkins and Charlie Cox, and at about the same time bought the Mary Ann from Carl Bach, a past commodore of the BBYRA and Ocean Gate Yacht Club. Shortly after, he purchased the Bat from an Island Heights syndicate and turned control over to his son, Nelson S. Hartranft II. He had bought the Lotus from the Toms River Seaport Society in 1981. He turned around and sold the Lotus to Brick in 1985 and then sold Bat to Frankovich and Lostrom in October of 1985 after it survived Hurricane Gloria.

..."We called him (Hartranft) ... and told him if it was still on the blocks after the hurricane, we were buying it" said Françovich. In the meantime, Hartranft sold the Mary Ann to Richard Yetman and John Engle, and it



was at about this time that another fire in him began to burn, a fire that would fuel the revival. A new A Cat? Hmmm. Why not? A risk, to be sure, but a gamble Hartranft was willing to take.

Soon it became an obsession. Trouble was, who would design it? And, more importantly, who would build it? Hartranft had approached Lachlan (Lally) Beaton, son of the renowned boat builder David Beaton of Mantoloking. Lally Beaton agreed to build the boat, reasoning it would be a good education for his son, Tom.

Plans to the original Tamwock were discovered in a chest of drawers in Ann Surgent's antique shop in South Toms River by a first mate on a schooner that was undergoing repair work in the area.

Riley Applegate Jr., whose father at one time owned the Lotus and worked for a Toms River engineering firm, had those plans reproduced.

A set of the plans was turned over to Lally Beaton, the keel was laid in February of 1980, signaling the official start of the project, and Lally and Tom Beaton spent the next two winters building Wasp.

The sail was cut by Marshal Moorhouse Jr., Medford Township.

The five gray weather-beaten clapboard buildings which comprise the various shops and storage sheds that handle the carpentry and painting, all built by Beaton and his sons, offer testimony to the family's thriving longevity, impeccable reputation and old-fashioned work ethic.

David died in 1979, and until recently the business was directed by Lally, who still works most mornings.

Now, Lally's brother, Ted, runs the operation with Lally's son, Tom, and Paul Smith, a Beaton employee for 27 years. Ted's son, Mark, operates a separate sail making business on the premises.

But where once building sailboats was its bread and butter, Beaton's has become a marina-type of operation that consists primarily of storage and repair.

"We'd build more of them (boats)," says Tom, who represents his family's fourth generation in boat building. "we're just too busy."

After Wasp was built, Beaton's boat yard became a hub of A Cat activity.

The Spy went in and stayed for two years. Outfitted with a new centerboard trunk, a new keel, a new deck and some ribbing, nearly 60 percent of it was restored.

"It was in a position where it was leaking severely and if our (bilge) pumps had stopped or failed for some reason, the boat would have sunk in 20 minutes," said Wilkins, who teaches adaptive physical education at Toms River High School South and coaches women's soccer at Stockton State College.

The Mary Ann who was donated to the Toms River Seaport Society, shipped her up to Benjamin River Marine in Brooklyn, Maine, where it was restored from stem to stern, over a year and a half.

"We bought the Mary Ann because we love what these old Class A cat-boats represented, the romance of the boats as much as anything" says Hale, president of Glendenning Mortgage. "There was also an appeal to sailing on the largest-sized boat that competes in the BBYRA." This appeal, this romance, this nautical love affair of another era.

Back in 1871, sailing was such a popular activity in Toms River that just about every man owned a boat. Competition among skippers was so fierce that it was decided to organize a race. And so on

July 1, 1871, a meeting of Toms River citizens and

boat owners was held at which time a yacht club, the Toms River Yacht Club, was formed.

A silver cup was purchased for \$175 from Tiffany's in New York to award the winner of this organized race, held for the first time on July 26, 1871 and won by a yacht named Vapor.

The race came to be called the Toms River Yacht Club Challenge Cup. It is sailed in a triangle area of Barnegat Bay near the mouth of the Toms River called the Wanamaker Course. Today, that cup is the oldest perpetual racing trophy in the U.S. Today, that cup is the oldest perpetual racing trophy in the U.S.

On Father's Day, 1982, the Wasp was officially unveiled as the fleet's first new member in 57 years. Hartranft's gamble had paid off.

"When the Wasp was launched, the others were still in real bad shape," said Brick, a real estate builder and developer in Medford Township. "Nelson made the boldest move of all when he had the Wasp built. Enter Kellogg, senior partner in a New York City brokerage firm and former owner of the Lotus back in the 1960s. And the Philadelphia Maritime Museum's Workshop on the Water at Penns Landing. And Dick Torpey of Toms River, a museum member, who brought the two together. The workshop annually builds reproductions of 19th century boats, primarily wooden sail boats.

"Roger Allen (the museum's Curator of Watercraft) and I discussed the possibility of putting together a consortium to finance this," said Torpey. "Peter asked for some time to work on it."

"Here, I thought he was putting together a group, and the group was him."

From plans of the Mary Ann, work began in earnest when the keel was laid in May of 1980. Tamwock, constructed of cedar and oak with brass and copper fittings, took some 5,000 man hours over two years before it was completed this spring, according to assistant boat builder Mike Cahill. It was launched in Philadelphia on April 28.

And on Saturday, June 16, Kellogg christened his Tamwock, 50 years after the original Tamwock was destroyed in an Island Heights boat yard fire.

"If it wasn't for the generosity of the Beaton family letting me come in and work on the boat and helping me, and Jim Reynolds coming along and Richard Groff coming along, there was no way (to rebuild)," Wilkins said.

Out went Spy, in went the Lotus in 1985, a "complete wreck" when Brick bought it, for an extensive three-year facelift. "everything was replaced but four pieces of wood," said Brick.

Finally, after being dry docked for nearly five years, the Lotus was relaunched June 11, 1988.

LIKE WILKINS and Brick, Frankovich and Lostrom wanted the Beatons to weave their repair magic on the Bat, but they didn't want to wait for Lotus. So they trailered the Bat, hogged, meaning it had a busted keel, to Lostrom's fiberglass shop in Wood-bridge Township in January 1986.

"When that keel breaks, you've got a big problem," said Frankovich, a mortgage banker who captained his sailing team at the University of Rhode Island. So using a half model from the Beck Crabbe Trophy, one of the Barnegat Bay Yacht Racing Association's perpetual racing trophies, for scale purposes, the two partners turned the Bat over and restored

the bottom. They fiberglassed everything, including the frames, ribs and bulkhead. They then fiberglassed the boat's guts.

Frankovich and Lostrom relaunched the Bat, now the only fiberglass cat in the crowd, in July of 1986. But right before their first race, the boom broke. They borrowed the Mary Ann's and wound up winning BBYRA A Cat championships in 1986-87.

The Mary Ann was by now in the hands of Warner and Hale. They had negotiated the deal with Engle and Yetman during Hale's wedding reception in September of 1982. Warner and Hale campaigned the Mary Ann through 1985

Flames Roaring through the boat yard in Island Heights belonging to Joe Vautier and Art Stokes in the early morning of May 7, 1940, destroyed more than 40 pleasure craft and other boating equipment valued at approximately \$100,000.

Among the ruins in winter storage at the time, was an A Cat named Tamwock, then owned by Albert Diss of Plainfield.

Diss, now 75 and living in Delray Beach, Fla., estimated Tamwock's value at the time at "probably \$1" something like that.

It was not insured.

Fifty years later, on June 16, 1990 under an early evening sky at the Mantoloking Yacht Club, with a crowd approaching 700 looking on, Peter Kellogg's wife, Cynnica, cracked a bottle of champagne against Tamwock's bow, baptizing the newest member of a family that was placed on the State Register of Historic Places on July 9, 1985.

At the same time, the BBYRA unveiled the Nelson R. Hartranft Trophy, named for the man who sparked the cats' comeback.

"It's been special to all of us," said Peter Kellogg. "it's just great that this fleet didn't get buried. Now that it's lived this long, the Tamwock christening is just an exclamation point in how much people care about this stuff.

"It's a love affair that a lot of people share on Barnegat Bay."

The future? Well, don't be too surprised if, somewhere down the line, a guy with boat building in his lineage applies those precious skills he learned from his father and grandfather, and another A Cat or two emerges from the shadows of Beaton's.

"I could probably be talked into it" says Tom Beaton, who occasionally sails the Wasp for Hartranft.

"but we're so busy, we're basically shorthanded. But, yeah, I think we could build one." -

Meantime, Hartranft's childhood chum, George Gronde, is now an engineer in Delaware.

And the Tern II? Whatever became of that delightful little sneakbox that opened one kid's eyes to a life long?

romance?-

"I lost track of it," he says.