

An 1890's Race at the Hempstead Harbor Club

In 1893, a young woman penned an account of a sail race at the Hempstead Harbor Club in Glen Cove, New York. While it shows a different sensibility from standard racing accounts of the era, the description of the event provides a record of a family's day at the sail races.

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In the later half of the 19th Century, the catboat was one of the most popular racing boats in the waters of Long Island Sound. Small, fast vessels of shallow draft, the hull of the catboat was broad in the beam – normally half as wide as she was long. It possessed a centerboard keel, which could be pivoted up to reduce the draft of the vessel in shallow water. It carried a single mast, close to the bow (front) of the boat, carrying a gaff-rigged sail. Most catboats were between 12 and 40 feet long.

It is generally believed that the catboat evolved in New York in the 1840's; initially it functioned as a workhorse for near-shore commerce, carrying small loads of freight from ship to shore and for small scale fishing and shellfishing operations. It was soon adopted for recreational use – especially for racing. The catboat appears to have reached the zenith of its regional popularity as race boat in the 1880-1900 era.

Catboats were somewhat unstable, demonstrating an unpleasant propensity to capsize when mishandled. New York City newspapers regularly reported on drownings and near-drownings resulting from catboats overturning; the New York Times pronounced it “the popular drowning machine.” (NYTimes, 1885)

In January, 1893, the Brooklyn Daily Eagle published a narrative of a sail race held at the Hempstead Harbor Club in Glen Cove. It was written by an unidentified young woman, and recounts how a young woman named “Allie” – presumably the sister of the author – skippered a catboat named *Presto* to victory in the race.

Further, no mention is made as to who the owner of the Presto was at the time of the race. There are several mentions of a catboat named Presto in newspaper accounts in the late 1880's and 1890's. In 1889, a catboat named *Presto*, owned by Harry Waldron of Sea Cliff, overturned in Hempstead Harbor, almost drowning Waldron and his guest. (Brooklyn Eagle, 1889). Another reference to a *Presto* appears in August, 1892,

in context of a sail race held at the Hempstead Harbor Club. The *Presto* was one of four catboats participating in the 16 foot class. She was owned by H Watson, and won her class. (NY Times, 1892) It is likely that this was the race described in the anonymous narrative. It is possible that both the catboat owned by Waldron and that owned by Watson are the same vessel. Some day it may be possible to determine whether or not Watson was related to “Allie,” to the anonymous author, and to twin sons.

How The Presto Won

Our boat was entered to sail in the regatta of the Hempstead Harbor club. Ever since this important question had been decided in the affirmative the household had been topsy turvy from cellar to garret, owing to the excitement of every member of the family, from Mary, the black cook, to Tony, the puppy, who was petted like a baby in spite of the fact that he was a mastiff and almost as large as a small pony. Tony's share of the preparations consisted in digging holes under all the trees. which proved traps for the unwary visitors. He also managed to procure and dispose of the most tempting dainties which Mary manufactured for our luncheon on the great day. When the fateful day dawned, everyone, though worn out with the excitement of the previous week's work, arose before sunrise. Old Sol, springing from his downy pillows of tinted rose and gold, and doffing his dew sprinkled night cap to us while he smiled a jolly morning greeting, seemed to wish us success in our wonderful undertaking.



Catboats racing in Long Island Sound off Larchmont in 1895. Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress.

The twins had been strictly enjoined to order an essential part of the luncheon, consisting of the beverages from the back road, but as usual they had forgotten to do so. Therefore Allie and I sent for a horse and buggy to be at the house at 8 o'clock A.M., in order that we might have time to drive out and order the forgotten requisite, returning in time for the race, which, according to one of the twins, would start at 11 o'clock sharp. Of course when the rig reached the side door of our little cottage neither of us was ready, having spent too much time in watching the flag to see which way the wind sported, and there was a hasty scramble into yachting frocks and caps. Our costumes had rather a peculiar effect as we drove through the dusty, rural lanes far from the sight and sound of the sea. We were compelled to so array ourselves, however, as there would be no time for a change in our raiment upon our return from the drive. The last thing before our start Mary discovered that the twins, as was their habit, had left all the baskets, etc., which they had been ordered to carry to the boat. It always seemed to me that the twins had so much trouble in keeping their pockets safe that they really had no hands to spare for bundles

or baskets and as we poor forlorn women had no pockets, they considerably left the packages that we might have something to carry in our hands probably to keep us from feeling awkward. Allie was therefore obliged to return to the house to carry down the luncheon and other parcels. This was no slight task as there were six rugs, two boxes and a basket remaining, after stowing three baskets in the buggy which I was to carry with me to the post office and thence to the boat. We were used to this sort of thing as we had been in training for several weeks. The twins really had most remarkable memories. They invariably overlooked errands or odd jobs which they were requested to undertake, but were sure to remember meal times and promised treats.

Our noble steed was warranted to be gentle, quiet and docile, and we soon discovered that he possessed all these attributes to it marked degree. He could neither run, walk, trot, nor gallop, but possessed the most deliciously stow and stately saunter, unequalled, I will venture to assert, even by a New York messenger boy. As a result of our horse's dignified stroll we were late in returning from the errand we had undertaken, and as we

did not wish to detain the lords of creation, who were awaiting us at the dock, we made all the speed possible after leaving our Pegasus.

Allie, loaded down with bundles and baskets, descended at break neck speed a hill, which at an angle of forty-five degrees led from our house to the beach. When I mention that this hill was exposed to the sun I am using most temperate language. All the sun rays which should shine for ten miles around seemed to concentrate their essence on this hill, while there was not a shrub to cast a few inches of shadow over the burning and ankle deep, sandy road. We (Allie and I), the only women of the party, reached the dock at 11 o'clock sharp to find most of the men lounging over the rail with their hands in their pockets, whistling, while one of the twins was leisurely washing out the boat which lay at her buoy with sail snugly done up as though she had at any rate had no thought of a race. The other twin, with the young man visitor, was off in the little steam launch getting water and coal. This shopping expedition was always the necessary prelude to a trip in the launch. In my opinion it was lucky that the launch indulged in nothing stronger than water, for the poor thing always had such a thirst.

About 12 o'clock, just as Allie and I regained our breath, the launch returned fully equipped, and the sail boat shook out its great white wing and floated in to the dock to receive its live ballast. They were a brave party of sailor lads and the little craft dipped and courtsied from very pride in her crew of jolly tars. At last we were off and soon reached the club house and joined the fleet of bright little launches and catboats which in gala attire were congregated about the starting point. And there our real pleasure began. It was the delight of our folks to quarrel. We were never thoroughly happy and contented without at least three fights on hand, to say nothing of misunderstandings and small bickerings. We discovered as soon as we arrived at the club house that the race was to start at 2 o'clock instead of 11, and that our incorrect information was a blunder of one of the twins.

It was the same twin who had scoffed at the idea of bringing luncheon, saying we should all be back home by 1 o'clock. This assertion on his part was not induced by lack of appetite, he simply did not want to carry the basket. This twin was the first to clamor for something to eat. As Allie and I had brought the baskets down greatly

to our discomfort, our arms being yet stiff from the load, we indignantly declined to give any of the men a bite of anything; that is, except the young man visitor who owned and was running the launch and who we were afraid to offend fearing that he might take occasion to forget to watch the boiler and forcibly eject us from his boat in small pieces. Therefore we treated him royally. As the remainder of the men were in the sailboat, we had the best of them in the matter of food and could afford to treat their haughty, sarcastic talk with contempt.

Our quarrels seldom amounted to anything but talk, and so as the day grew warmer and we saw how pitifully hot the men were in their open, unsheltered boat, we took pity on them and graciously passed them sandwiches and cooling beverages to allay their sufferings.

Oh joy, the welcome signal, and the large boats start to sail their long, triangular course. Then another signal, and again another, and at the third our boat, the smallest of them all, danced defiantly out with her saucy air, which seemed to say: "You think I'm little, but I can't be beat." The launch followed in the wake of the fleet of white wings, and we eagerly watched our little boat gradually gaining on the others in her class. The wind whistled brightly and encouragingly, and the little waves seemed try to help the race along to the best of their ability. We watched our tiny white sail, like a bit of cloud floating on the water. She rounded the stake boat gracefully, and majestically rushed off on the homeward stretch. We turned also. Allie was at the helm, and we were all making merry at some painful joke, as people will on race days, when a man in a little white naptha, which we were endeavoring to overtake, sprang to his feet and waved his arms like a windmill. As he seemed to be engrossed in something behind us we looked back, and oh, horror of horrors, saw a capsized cat boat, with a man and a boy perched on the high side, the man frantically clawing under the deck of the boat. We hastily came about and ran to his aid, as did also a handsome great white yacht.

Our anxiety was allayed when we discovered that the man was only reaching for his watch and not for a companion who had been caught under the boat, as we at first had supposed. The owner of the yacht sent two sailors to help bail out and right the tiny craft. Our young man visitor provided the shipwrecked hero with a cup of oil to soak his watch in, while the owner of the yacht

asked Allie, our helms-woman, a number of questions as to what race was on, etc. Ho insisted on addressing her as the launch's proprietress, ignoring our Y. M. V., as I will call hint for short. When the excitement calmed down and we pursued our homeward course and peered around for our boat; she was nowhere near. Can it be that that tiny sail in the far distance is she? Put on full steam and let us overtake it, and ascertain whether it is our own boat. It took good running to get near that saucy speck of canvas, which is running like mad before the wind with one of the twins posed in stately grandeur on the bow. She is far in advance of all the others and she is gaining more and more each minute. We watch her brave performance breathlessly, scarcely daring to believe our own eyes. We near the club and then she gracefully dips as she crosses the line and runs up into the wind. The *Presto*, our boat, has beaten the race and is the first boat over the course. Then the twins give three cheers and the launch gives three long, shrill shrieks, which uses up all the steam, and we fire off a little cannon.

It has been a long, trying day, but maybe we did not all go home happy that night and maybe we did not hold our heads at a haughty elevation as we passed other unfortunate competitors. The twins tied a broom to the mast of our little victor and sailed around in sight of the admiring crowds on the beach. They actually were willing to forego their supper in their excitement, the most touching way in which they could show their joy. So ended the race and with it our happy summer, for the next day our party separated, each to take up the cares and burdens of real life and the race of ambition once more.

Later our captain received an enameled cup, which is a beautiful tribute to the *Presto's* prowess.

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