

HISTORY OF SAILING ON ELKHART LAKE

The following text was researched and written by Dick Windsor in collaboration with Bill Thieman, John Gunther, Dave Sellinger, Za Prange, Harry Bremer, Bob and Heine Jung, and Ginny Saemann. We believe everyone who lives on or otherwise enjoys Elkhart Lake will find it quite interesting.

Among the earliest (1930's and 1940's) sailboats on Elkhart Lake were two Class "E" scows, 28 feet long. One was the "Slowpoke" owned by Dr. Otto Gunther, and the other was the "Avoset", owned by Al Steffen, Sr. "Slowpoke" carried a special flag atop her mast with the letters, ELYC, for Elkhart Lake Yacht Club.

"Slowpoke's" mast was solid and made out of pine. The only way the mast could be stepped was to load the boat onto a two-axel trailer and take it to Berny Schwartz's Turn and Anchor (now Schuster's) where there was a loft with a jin pole and a block and tackle. The mast would be raised very carefully and then lowered through the mast step which extended from the deck all the way through the bilge to the bottom of the boat. When the wind freshened and Dr. Gunther needed extra crew for hiking out, he engaged Buck, a farmhand in the area, for 50¢ an hour. Buck was a non-swimmer.

"Avoset" got pretty rough use from the likes of Al Steffen, Jr., Eddie Knauf, and Bud and Rich Vollrath. Fortunately, Al Steffen, Sr. had the only electric bilge pump on Elkhart. This was borrowed by several sailors on the Lake whenever they got into trouble. Because the former young sailors spent quite a bit of time on "Avoset's" leeboards, the leeboard boxes began to take water. That water became a problem after just two tacks across the Lake. The small fry -- Bill and John Gunther and Bill Thieman were taken along to do the bailing.

Although none of these wooden boats survive, Bill Thieman has sailed his fiberglass Class "E" scow on the lake since 1968. These "E" boats are the largest boats ever sailed on Elkhart.

The next largest boat on Elkhart Lake is one that had been sailed by Bill Hayssen. His was a 23-foot Burger-built wooden sailboat launched in 1940. It is presently owned and being sailed on Elkhart by Arthur Perry.

Snipes were among the first sailboats on the Lake. The Snipes were beamy and 14 to 16 feet in length. Gunthers sailed "Slowpoke II" which was later bought by Carl Prange and sailed by Henry "Za" Prange. Bill Thieman also sailed a Snipe.

Other early sailboats included the National-1 class. The Sellinger family sailed one, which was later sold to the James Roenitz's. Helene Steffen (Liebl) and Mary Testwuide (Knauf) sailed a National-1 which later was sailed by members of the Walter Koepsel family. "Waddley Woo" was sailed by Bill Braasch.

Lightnings, 19 feet long, were sailed by the Vollrath's. Bob Melzer sails the only Lightning left on Elkhart. Susan Strecker sailed a Seagull. John and Bill Gunther sailed "Sweet Marie" (named for a favorite aunt) -- a rowboat boasting a sail. They also managed to mount sails and bilge boards on canoes and kayaks.

"Dorothy Ann" was a Class "C" scow (19 feet long) first owned by the Vitts family and then sailed by Bill Thieman. "If" was owned by the Keith Osborn family and sailed by Otie Osborn.

(over)

An M-20 inland racing scow (#48), "Gemülichkeit", was sailed by Za Prange in 1964 and 1965 and bought by Dick Windsor in 1966. There have been at least two M-16 inland racing scows -- one sailed by Fred Koepsell and the other by Hil Schumacher.

The first of the exciting small board boats appeared on the Lake about 1956. Heine Jung owned one of the two Sailmakers. The Sailmakers had cotton sails and capsized very easily. They spent most of their time on the beach with their sails luffing to get them dry, because when they were wet the boats were so topheavy that they capsized almost automatically.

In 1958, Henry (Za) Prange built a wooden Super Sailfish out of a kit. Sailing a Super Sailfish was a lot like sailing a surfboard. One wore a swim suit and expected to get wet. Capsizing became just a pleasant swim rather than a dreaded chore because the little boats could be righted so easily. These and all subsequent sails were made out of nylon or the equivalent so that absorption of water by the sail material was no longer a problem. Henry and his friends liked the boat so well that the Prange Store placed wooden Super Sailfish and Sunfish kits in its stock.

In 1959, Bill Gunther, Bob Liebl and Dick Windsor built wooden Sailfish from kits purchased at Prange's. By building his on the dining room table, Windsor found he got a lot of help from his wife, Mary Ann, on the project. At the critical time when the hull panels of marine plywood needed to be fitted to the keels and the frames of the boats, Za made the rounds and helped each of the builders.

It was at about this same time that Harry Bremer's company in Elkhart Lake was making parts for another board-type boat called the Surf Skimmer, which was made with fiberglass. At one time there were 7 or 8 of these boats on Elkhart Lake. The hulls were about the same size of the 13'7" Super Sailfish, but the Surf Skimmer carried 65 square feet of sail as compared to the 75 square feet for the Alcott products (Super Sailfish and Sunfish).

Harry Bremer is recognized as the "Father" of the Elkhart Lake Sailing Club. The first race of these small boats on Elkhart Lake occurred in 1959. That race was won by Jean Vollrath in a Surf Skimmer. This event was so much fun and attracted so much attention that Dave Sellinger and Janet Ross were named co-commofores and the Elkhart Lake Sailing Club began having races every Sunday during the summer months.

The most popular boat on the Lake in terms of numbers has been the fiberglass Sunfish, lateen gaff rigged like the Super Sailfish. In the late 1960's and 1970's, the Butterfly, 12 feet in length with a Marconi rig, came into prominence.

All of the above boats raced in the same class, except for occasional senior-junior divisions until 1973 when Harry Easom began sailing a Laser. Lasers are 14 feet in length and carry 74 square feet of usable sail area. Another 2 square feet of sail is fashioned into a sock which fits over the mast (no halyard). Because of hull design and modifications of the sail made possible by boom vang, outhaul and Cunningham, the speed of this boat was such that a separate class had to be established.

In the early 1970's, as many as 80 boats were registered with the Elkhart Lake Sailing Club, and at times as many as 60 boats would start or attempt to start a race. The present goal of the Elkhart Lake Sailing Club is to re-ignite the fun, enthusiasm and friendships enjoyed in sailboat racing on Elkhart Lake.

Should anyone have corrections or additions to this history, please be so kind as to put them in writing and give them to one of the present commofores, Art Perry or Roseann Tolan.

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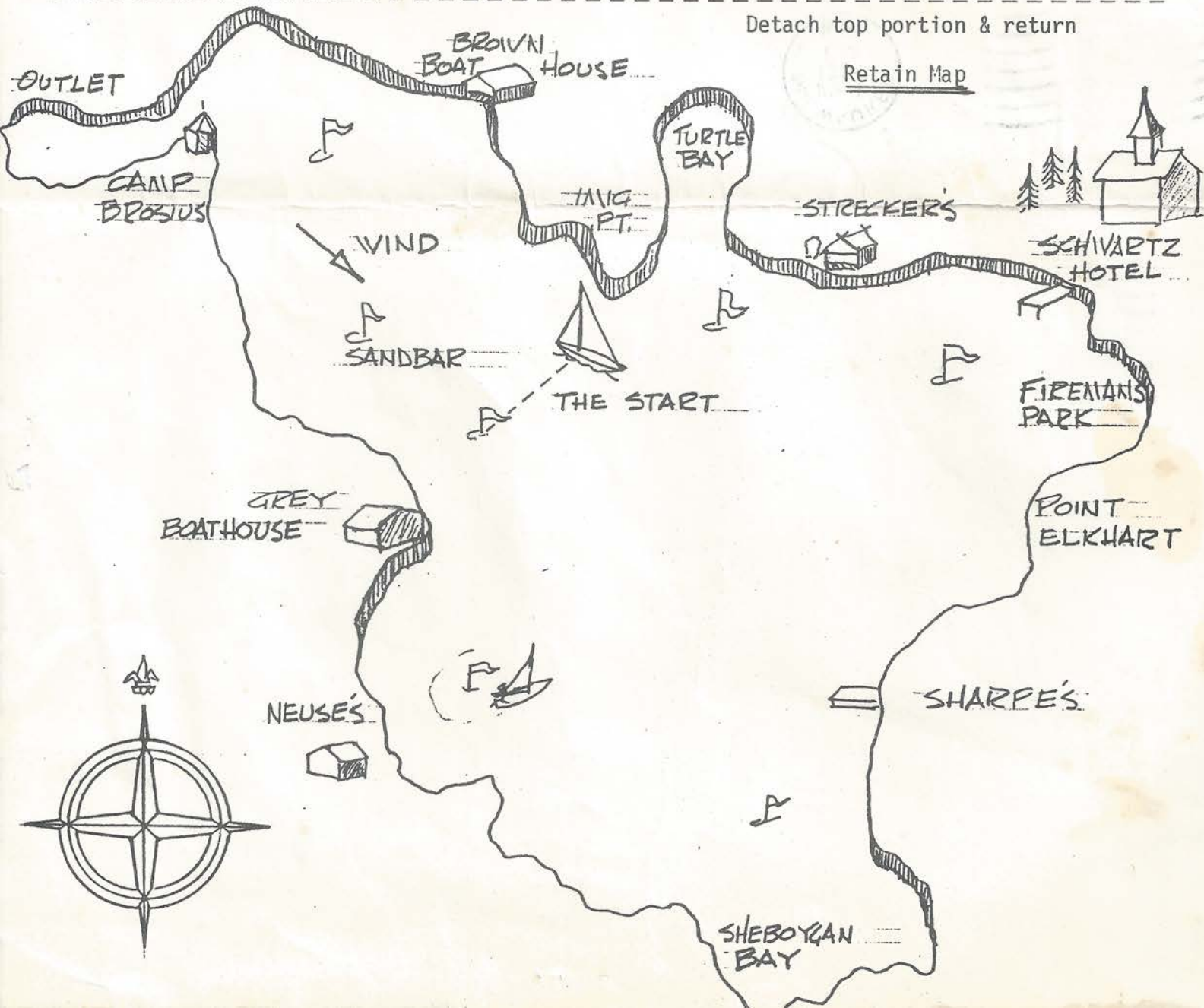
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