

The Slee Family Boats

By Richard Charles Slee, Century Caprice

My family has sailed for the last 120 years and most of those years at Queen City Yacht Club (QCYC). They have owned a number of boats starting with the Caprice, a 16 foot skiff, which was owned by my Great Grandfather Richard Slee at the turn of the last century. Richard joined QCYC on his 21st birthday in June 1890, 10 months after the Club was incorporated. However according to C.H.J. Snider, RCYC Club Archivist 1937, in the Annals of the Royal Canadian Yacht Club Volume I 1852-1937, page 94: "In addition to the Toronto Yacht Club the Royal Canadian had a further rival in Toronto for the season of 1887, the Queen City Yacht Club coming into existence under commodore T. A. E. World. There was room for the new organization, for yachting was in a flourishing state and small-boat sailing had developed to such an extent that it was a sport in itself. Indeed the Toronto Skiff Club was an outcome of the great interest in racing small-craft about this time." This was two years before QCYC's incorporation.

The type of boat that Richard most likely learned to sail on before buying the Caprice was described in the following paragraph to the quote above: "The popular small boat of the 1880's was a double-ended skiff, completely open or with a very large cockpit, and in both model and rig decidedly "unwholesome" judged by modern standards. Skiffs no longer than 16 feet over all, and 4 feet beam, would be rigged as schooners, with flying topsails and a tremendous sail area generally; or as sloops, with eight foot bowsprits and 17-foot spinnaker booms, and mainbooms to match. There is this to be said for these racing extremes - they bred a generation of alert, active and courageous sailors, and while sailing them was as much a matter of acrobatics as seamanship, the seamanship it demanded was of high order." Richard was to become a fine yachtsman due to this training.

Richard had come to Toronto in about 1890 and was working as an engraver for Toronto Lithography Co. However the economy by 1893 had slid into a deep depression and he was forced to find work in the Buffalo New York. Things must have looked up in Canada for he returned in 1896 and rejoined his former employer the Toronto Lithography Co. The first mention of the Caprice of QCYC in the local press The Toronto Star is for a second place in June of 1899 at a QCYC race for 16 foot Skiffs. This is most likely the new type of boat mentioned by Snider in the Annals of RCYC page 130: "A small boat development of pleasing and prodigious proportions began in the Lake Sailing Skiff Association in 1898 with the adoption of a new type of sailing skiff for all clubs within its membership. Replacing the old slack-bilged over-canvassed double-enders, these new skiffs were 16 feet on the waterline, unrestricted in overall length, but running around 24 or 25 feet, and between 6 and 7 feet in beam, with sail area limited to 330 square feet, in jib and mainsail. They were very shoal centreboard craft, wide enough to be stiff, and decked over with the exception of an open cockpit. They were built by the score by Toronto and Hamilton clubs, and over a hundred were in existence at the end of the century. The best of them could be built complete for \$200, and \$100 was considered a reasonable price for one. Some were clinker built, with wooden weighted centreboards." The Caprice is a good example of this type of Skiff.

It should be noted that \$100-\$200 was a lot of money in those days. My Great Grandfather is listed as earning \$800 in the 1901 Census which was consider a good salary, but the Caprice would have set him back two to three months of his annual salary. Using an inflation calculator this would be approximately \$5,500 in today's purchasing power. A more realistic assumption would be devoting two to three months of your own salary today (ouch!). They were very serious about their sport in

1900. As an example a Toronto Star article in June 1902 has QCYC as the “premier skiff club of the lake” and in 1905 the Club is listed as having 35 skiffs. According to an article in the Toronto Star in March 1899 six new skiffs were being built “from the designs of G. Herrick Duggan”. There were a number of builders of skiffs in 1900 which included: Ackroyd Bros., Weir and Sons, Judd Bros. of NY, The Flight Boys and the builder of the Caprice, John Morris (January 1901 article Toronto Star). The following are pictures of the Caprice in 1899.



The Caprice went on to place well or win a number of races in 1899 including the final race of the Lake Skiff Sailing Association (LSSA) at the National Yacht and Skiff Club on September 9, 1899 (Toronto Star and Toronto World September 11 editions). I also believe that he took the Shaw Cup presented by Mayor Shaw (builder of the Old City Hall at Queen and Bay St. Toronto). The Cup was presented “For

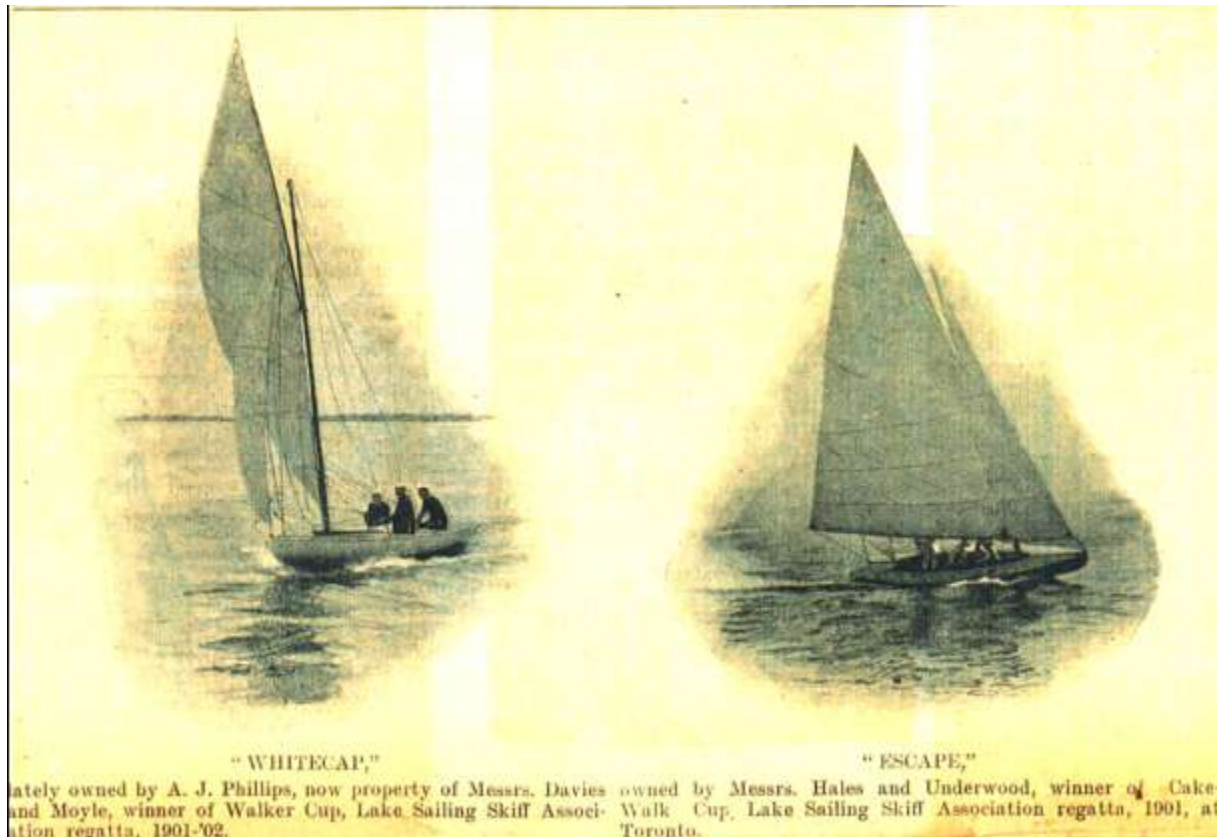
the best average 1899 - 16 Foot Class – LSA (Lake Sailing Association) – Toronto”. A picture of the Shaw Cup won by Caprice, skippered by R. Slee, QCYC is below.



The premier cup of the LSSA was the Walker Cup which had been held since its inception by the Hamilton Clubs. Caprice placed second in both 1899 and 1900. In the second race she came within 35 seconds of beating the winning boat Flight. In a March 1901 article in the Toronto Star stated that Richard was one of the first to fly a balloon jib or spinnaker in the Walker Cup race in 1900 which almost won him the race. It seems that by 1901 everyone was copying his example and using “loose canvas”. My Great Grandfather is quoted in the Toronto Star in the July 3, 1900 edition at the conclusion of the race “I’m getting nearer every season. Next season I’ll have the cup”. Unfortunately that was not to be. A faster 16 foot skiff by the name of Whitecap that was under the hand of A.J. “Plug” Phillips, a joint member of QCYC and RCYC would win almost every race in 1901. Snider has the following comment on Whitecap on page 130 of the Annals of RCYC “Most famous of all the sixteen-footers was the White Cap, built by Aykroyd Brothers for Mr. A. J. "Plug" Phillips, and winner of the Challenge Cup offered by Commodore Gooderham for this season. White Cap had many imitators, but no superior, and "Plug" Phillips could do anything with her. After she tried the merits of a high cut jib others followed.”

At the end of the 1900 sailing season a number of Yachtsmen from the Rochester Yacht Club tried to buy the Caprice from my Great Grandfather but he refused, most likely to his great chagrin the next year (Toronto Star December 29, 1900). In the 1901 race for the Walker Cup, Caprice placed fourth behind Whitecap and Escape both from QCYC. The Walker Cup is finally captured by a Toronto Club and the race is hosted by QCYC in 1902. In 1901 Caprice placed usually below third place in the races of the LSSA.

By 1904 there is a brand new type of 16 foot skiff. Snider states in the Annals of RCYC on page 138 "The 16-foot class of centreboard skiffs passed out in 1904, there being no candidates in this year for the Gooderham Cup for that class. It was succeeded, if not replaced, by a ballasted class of 16-foot waterline which provided excellent racing on a much modified scale. Only a few boats were built for it, but they were good ones, including Kathleen, Little Nell, Clip, La Souris, Independence, Widgeon and Lenore." There were new ballasted boats of this class built at QCYC and these included my Great Grandfathers second boat the Attempt. The first mention I have of the Attempt is a Toronto Star article in July 1903 about Dick Slee fouling the mark in the Attempt in the Cakewalk Cup. Over the next couple of years she usually placed second or third to Whitecap and Escape. I have no picture of the Attempt however I do have a picture of Whitecap and Escape of QCYC below.



Nevertheless, as you can see in the following article, he did win occasionally (Harry Sweetlove was a boyhood friend who had joined QCYC in 1890s with Richard)

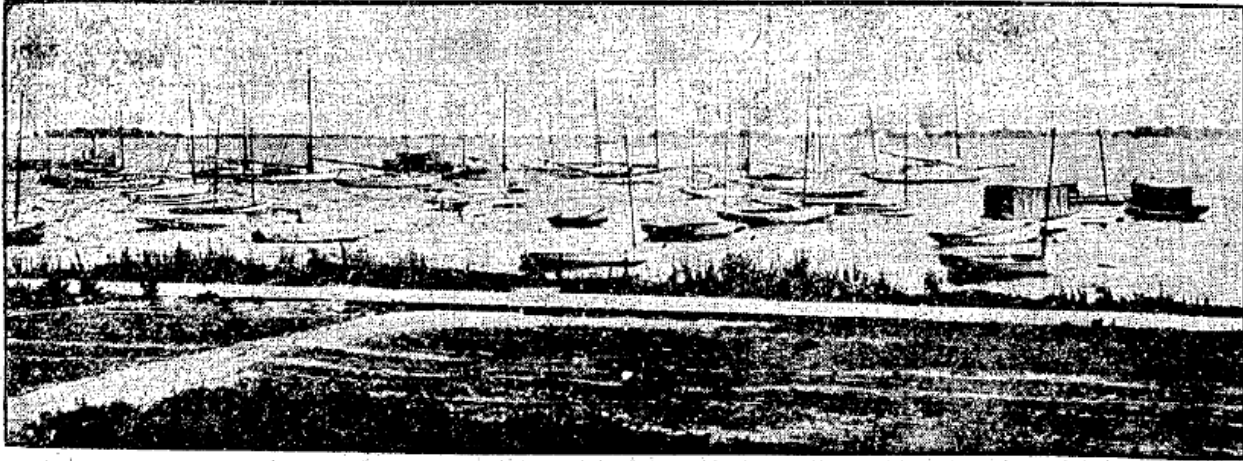
Queen City's Great Race.

The 16-foot skiffs of the Queen City Yacht Club sailed a most exciting race on the Bay this afternoon. The wind was easterly and of sufficient strength to allow the boats to barely carry a full mainsail. The start was to the east, and five boats were on the line at gunfire. The Escape got over first, followed by the Trial, Attempt, Acushala and Unknown in the order named. At the first buoy the Escape was still in the lead, with the Attempt close on her heels, and the rest of the fleet well together. On the next two legs of the triangle the Attempt gained somewhat on the Escape, and when they again came on the wind the boats were not more than 15 seconds apart. On the beat down the Bay the positions of the boats did not alter, and on the second run down the Island shore the Attempt passed the Escape, the latter having the misfortune to lose her spinnaker overboard. After this the Attempt was never headed, and won the race by the small margin of 23 seconds. The course was covered in the fastest time ever made by the 16-footers, the record time being beaten by over 7 minutes. On the second round the Acushala fouled the buoy and dropped out. Summary:

Boats.	Owners.	Start.	Finish.	E. Time.
Attempt (Sweetlove & Slec)	2.45	4.06.12	1.21.12
Escape (Hales & Underwood)	2.45	4.06.35	1.21.35
Trial (Ewing Bros.)	2.45	4.13.47	1.28.47
Unknown (Dr. Glasgow)	2.45	4.14.10	1.29.10
Acushala (Ross Gooderham)	2.45	Fouled buoy.	

The next boat Richard purchased was a motor boat which my Great Grandfather called the Ein Prosit (a German toast to health). I know little about the Ein Prosit however I have a number of pictures and it appears that my family owned the boat from approximately 1910 to the 1920s. Motor boats were extremely popular at QCYC and motor boat races were regularly held in the early 1900s though the Ein Prosit was definitely not a racer! A 1905 picture of QCYC boats including at least 15 motor boats.

The Popularity of the Small Boat in Toronto



This is a scene at the foot of York street. There were 43 boats, ranging in size from the popular 14-foot sailing dinghy to boats in the 25-foot racing class, in the slip. The photograph shows 37 out of the total. These boats all belong to the **Queen City Yacht Club** fleet. In the next slip to the west were moored 33 craft, at least half of which were

motor-boats. The cut shows the motor-boats Arrow, champion of the club, Ugoigo, Turbina II, Moonwinks, and Beaver, the auxiliary yawl Iola, the yawls Nada and Maysie II, the sloops Halcyon, Polaris II, Fleur de Lys, Bon Ino, and Shearwater, the sixteen-footer Escape, the knock-about Doris, the Mackinaw, Ethelwynn, Tainul, and Papposa, and a dozen or more dinghies, and some nondescripts.

The following pictures show the launch of the Ein Prosit at "Thornhill" at Humber Bay my Great Grandfathers home (on Lakeshore Blvd. just to the east of Parklawn) in 1913. I have also included a picture with Richard's children and wife which included, from left to right, Ethel, Richard Henry (my Grandfather) Muriel and Jennie (my Great Grandmother) in 1911.





My grandfather Richard Henry (1905-1990) who went by the name of “Dick” sailed 16 foot Skiffs (whose names I do not know) won his first trophy at a race at Alexandra Yacht Club in 1922. The following is a picture off the cup.



He was also active at the Club. In “The Red Ensign” (the Clipper of that day) in June of 1925 he is listed as a member of the sailing committee and placing fourth in one of the club’s dinghies on May 25, 1925. He also had two medallions, one from RCYC marked 1926 and the other from the Lake Skiff Sailing Racing Association as seen above right.

My grandfather told me as a child when vesting Algonquin Park and viewing an lumber hauling “Alligator Boat” that he was injured in the eye when a winch gave way and the handle struck him in the eye. Until his death I thought that he had been involved in the timber industry as a young man. When reviewing his documents after his death I discovered that he had never been near a tree professionally in his entire life but that he had been injured while hauling boats at QCYC! The following undated article states that he was 24 which would place the accident in 1929 or 1930. This ended his sailing career.



My father Richard Francis (1932-1955) unfortunately took an interest in flying (he learned to fly out of the Toronto Island Airport) rather than sailing and died in a mid air collision between two Sabre jets during a RCAF training exercise in the Maritimes.

My Grandfather, Richard Henry (1905-1990); who I was very close too, sent me to sailing camp at the Boulevard Yacht Club when I was 10 and 11 which infected me with the sailing bug. I could not convince him to buy a boat as he stated that they were too much work (he had to refinish the wooden boats of his father) and they were “holes in the water in which you threw money”.

I married Mary Elizabeth Harsant in 1992 and in 1993 when she was pregnant with Richard “Joshua” she expressed an interest in sailing and buying a boat. She had a romantic outlook of sailing and had never sailed. I decided to be rationale and thought we should look for a sailboat in the 27-30 foot category so if she did not like sailing our financial exposure would not be that great. I then made one of the tactical errors of life that men sometime make, in this case taking a 7th month pregnant woman boat shopping! At the Port Credit in the Boat Show in the fall of 1993 we went boat shopping. I pointed to lots of boats in the range I thought would be smart to look at. Mary immediately pointed to a 39 foot C&C Landfall in which she proceeded to try to get down the companion way and turn at the bottom which she had difficulty navigating being extremely pregnant! She then made the observation that the boat was too small and it then dawned on me that my rationale strategy had just got blown away and I was in trouble.

After Joshua’s birth in November we proceeded to join QCYC in January 1994. In the spring we went shopping for boats in the 34-38 foot range. Once again what I thought we wanted, classical narrow hull and full keel was not exactly what Mary had in mind. Mary ignored the external design and concentrated on the internal layout, with criteria like: how light it was in the cabin, did it leak (what boat doesn’t but on rainy days it eliminated almost every boat) and how stable it was (light fast boats need not apply e.g. Mirage 35). A frustrated salesman finally suggested we look at a Tanzer 10.5 (a what? Tanzer only made smaller boats). The boat was covered (didn’t leak until after we bought it) and Mary took one look at the interior and fell in love with the boat. It was one weird boat in my mind as it had a 1 ½ ton cast iron lift keel, a transom mounted rudder that could also be raised (draft from 6.5 to 2 feet), mast lowering deck mountings and equipment, two crossed bunks in the fore cabin and a queen size bunk in the aft cabin and if that was not enough a second nav station with wheel in the main cabin. I still thought things could be saved, so I made a very low ball offer which the seller countered with an offer that was just \$2,500 higher. I still thought I could salvage things by accepting but requiring an in

and out of water boat survey. The boat passed and we were owners of a 34.5 foot, 13,500 lb. boat (the biggest boat I had skippered up to that point was an Albacore).

We decided to take a basic CYA cruising course at Humber College before taking possession of the boat in late May. Unfortunately we ran into a bad storm and the steering column dropped to the steering quadrant making things a little dicey on the C&C 33 we were sailing around the Island. As I was the only experienced sailor on board I was given the helm while the instructor radioed for help. I had the rail in the water and was having a good time when I realized that Mary was scared to death. We got the boat back and on leaving Mary stated that she would never get on a sailboat again. Fortunately Mary is made of tougher stuff and has a fine appreciation of losing a lot of money. She got back on the training boat the next day and put the rail in the water. We took delivery of our boat the next week and brought it into the Club where we moored in front of the clubhouse. We stayed there for 1994 and Joshua got handed off over the bow (yes it was a med mooring) to a lot of members who became unofficial grandparents. The next year we moved over to “death row” (green dock) where for many years we were one of the only boats on the northern end of the seawall (yes it was a med mooring).

The boat’s name was Puissance II (Power in French) which we did not like for a sailboat. As the boat was Federally registered by name we had to have a unique name so I thought that Caprice II would be excellent however there was all ready Caprice 1 through 15 on the registry. Mary then had a great idea that since my Great Grandfather had sailed his Caprice 100 years before why not call it the Century Caprice (shades of the sailboat the Millennium Falcon which we had seen a week before). Thus in September 1994 we rechristened the boat. In 1998 on Mary’s birthday she asked for a further present; could we live on the boat in the summers. I loved the idea but thought that the four of us on a boat might be a challenge, however 12 years latter we are still spending our summers on the boat and loving it. The Century Caprice isn’t a great sailor but she is certainly comfortable and I have grown to adore the boat, though at every launch and haul-out our fellow members think the boat weighs substantially more then her 6.5 tons! If you want to see the boat, come to Green 24.

Joshua of course loves sailing though he’s a cruiser not a racer like his great great Grandfather Richard Slee but it looks like he will carry on the family tradition of sailing at QCYC.