

SURVIVAL SAIL

Written by Bill Wells

1984

It was an overcast fall day and the sailing season was drawing to a close. My usual crew was unavailable so I decided as I often did to sail alone.

My craft is a sea worthy twenty-two and a half foot sloop designed by noted naval architect Carl Alberg. Weighing about thirty five hundred pounds, a full keel with ample ballast and carrying two hundred and forty seven feet of sail it is a joy to sail.

The story is that of all the vessels he put on the water, this one, named Sea Sprite was his favorite, designed for his own use and pleasure.

Leaving my slip at the Genesee Yacht Club I glided downstream pass the railroad swing bridge toward Lake Ontario. The sky was sort of mottled gray, marked with blotches and the wind was brisk but not strong coming from the north west.

When sailing the lake for a few hours wisdom mandates that you sail into the wind. The reason is basically simple. If trouble of any kind arises you can come about and run, which is the fastest boat speed, for the river. On the other hand, if you go east of the river under the same conditions and something happens it becomes very difficult and time consuming to come about and tack back and forth into the wind to reach the river.

Eleven miles west is Braddock Bay and I thought maybe halfway would be a good sail.

Ordinarily by keeping an eye on the western sky you can tell from a distance if a change is threatening but this day the entire horizon was the same. About two hours after leaving the river the wind all too suddenly freshened and the waves gained power and height. I was about a mile or two off shore and realized immediately that a stronger front was moving through. Wasting no time I came about and headed for the river.

When sailing alone I only use the main sail, the boat is well designed to handle it.

It didn't take long to see that the main was too much. Shortening sail would take time and effort and not help much so I released the halyard and the sail fell to the deck. In between waves I managed to gather as much as I could and secure it with a couple of shock cords.

Sailing by the poles, meaning no sails, I raced for the river.

As I approached and started to turn a sudden, stronger gust caught me broadside and pushed me eastward and I knew at once I would miss the entrance. Missing the end of the jetty by a few yards put me on the lee side where I would have a few moments of quieter seas to try to come about and possibly slip around the end into the river. That idea didn't last long because the wind howling over the jetty was too strong and now I had a bigger problem.

I was within a mile of the beach and with the wind quartering from the northwest over my left shoulder I would soon be beached so I had to somehow sail out away from land. My only chance was to play the waves. That meant at the top of each wave as I started down into the trough I had to deftly give her right rudder until she started up the other side, straighten out and wait for the next wave. The speed helped as a sail boat only responds if there is headway. Gaining speed and a foot or more with every wave I found myself headed back to the open water.

My next thought was, "Where am I going?" Putneyville is perhaps six miles east and I know there is a yacht club there but the entrance is small and narrow. I couldn't see myself flying in there so the next harbor was Sodus Bay. I was familiar with Sodus Bay, in fact that is where I bought the boat.

Because the prevailing wind is usually from the west it might take five, six hours or more to sail there so I settled in for a run. Running with the wind is deceptively quiet. There is no boat noise such as the bow cutting through the waves or water breaking over the deck. The waves are silently coming from behind and if your vessel is well designed the wave moves under the fan tail and up you go. Then you are perched on top of the wave, surfing, until the speed of the wave passes along your length forward and leaves. It's almost like a short ride on a roll-a-coaster as you drop to the bottom of the trough and wait for the next upsurge. The wind whistling through the rigging is the only sound you hear.

There are two dangers. One is if your boat is not properly designed the wave will swamp you from behind and down you go.

Most smaller boats have floatation so when they capsize you hang on and stay with the boat. Mine does not have floatation, if it ever took on too much water it would sink like a stone.

In the age of the great sailing ships it is believed that when square riggers sailed before the wind and a sudden storm hit before they could shorten sail the increased wind speed caused them to exceed hull speed and they literally sailed into the water and down. Many were lost that way.

The other danger is if you do not hold your course and are turned broadside the force of wind and wave will roll the boat over.

Skill as a helmsman, working with the elements, holding a course and changing direction when necessary is the difference between disaster and a safe arrival at your destination.

The wind velocity increased, my guess is it was blowing at thirty-five miles an hour and gusting to forty-five or fifty. I believed the waves to be about twelve feet high.

As the wind direction held and the waves still angled toward shore I had to make every effort to stay away from land and hold my course.

So I settled into a rhythmic, repetitive, cadence that rose and fell with each wave.

The sky remained dark but the air at sea level was clear. From the crest of a wave I could see everything, the shore, trees, buildings, but no movement ashore. As I fell to the bottom of the trough the land and everything disappeared, I saw nothing but sky.

Nobody was on the lake. I wondered how many people might at that moment be gazing out over the lake and suddenly lean forward and say,

"What's that on the lake?"

"I thought I saw something."

"There it is again."

"Why, it's a small boat."

"What's it doing on the lake on a day like this."

"They must be nuts."

After about an hour of intense sailing I thought I saw from the top of a wave a small, thin, white column far ahead.

"Could it be, already?" I mused.

"Naw, it can't be the entrance to Sodus Bay so soon."

I couldn't accept that as fact but it gave me a point of reference to steer to.

Thinking back at the mistake I made missing the entrance to the Genesee I was determined to sail as close to shore as possible. As the minutes passed the white marker grew larger until I was sure it had to be the pylon at the end of the channel entering Sodus Bay.

Bearing down on it I began to gauge how I could safely enter the channel.

It is narrow and does not extend too far into the lake so I did not have too much room for error.

I had a bucket in the cockpit with a line firmly tied to its handle and the other end secured to a cleat. If dropped off the stern it fills with water and acts as a drag brake to cut the speed and hold a course. I decided it was not needed in the open water as I was doing fine but kept it close in case I might use it to prevent overshooting the channel.

Still sailing directly for the marker I changed course within two hundred yards of the entrance to avoid being pushed into the end of the jetty. Veering slightly away from it until I could look halfway down the channel I swung the tiller hard over and turned in on the crest of a wave.

Throwing the bucket brake into the water it cut the speed and I began to slow down. A line of trees are on the west side and the wind broke as I passed them. The entrance is short and the yacht club is west so I had to turn and move along the inner shore past cottages and docks. Retrieving the bucket I slowly approached the club and eased into a slip.

Lying back I said to myself, "Wow, I made it."

I had made the trip in roughly an hour and a half. My first thoughts were of being safe but then I realized that whoever might be at my club in Rochester must be concerned. My slip was empty and my car was there so they would obviously conclude that I must be on the lake somewhere. Securing the boat I walked to the club house but as luck would have it the doors were locked and nobody was around. I was frustrated for a moment but behind the back on the wall I found a pay phone. Putting all the change I had before me I dialed my home number. After a pause the operator said;

"One dollar, please."

Not knowing exactly what I had I started putting coins in and stopped at ninety-five cents.

"Five cents more, please"

"That's all I have"

"Sorry"

"Wait a minute, I'll reverse the charges"

"One moment"

Then I hear the voice say;

"Will you accept a reverse charge from Bill Wells"

"Yes"

"Your call has gone through"

"Hello, Arline?"

"Where are you?"

"I'm in Sodus"

"You're where?"

"In Sodus"

"What are you doing there?" "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, I missed the Genesee but I'll tell you later"

"Call the yacht club and tell them I'm all right so they don't call the Coast Guard, OK?"

"I'll do it right away," "what will you do?"

"I don't know but get on the phone" "Bye"

I crawled into one of the bunks and wondered what I would do next. Sleeping soundly I opened my eyes at first light. Stepping on the dock I looked at the club's wind vane and couldn't believe my eyes.

"Can it be?" I said to myself, "Maybe the trees are playing tricks."

Apparently the front had quickly moved through and the wind had swung around to the north east. That meant that with any luck I could sail back west. Before any sign of life I cast off and sailed out into Sodus Bay to test the wind. Sure enough I could hold a heading that would bring me to the mouth of the Genesee. Moving through the channel to the open lake I found the wind to be brisk but stable so without hesitation I entered the lake under sail and steered for home.

The sail back was calmer and the waves were still moderately high but I had the joy of running before the wind with half the wind speed and half the tension. No boat of any size was on the lake. Passing nine mile point and then Durand Eastman Park I soon reached the mouth of the Genesee and finally turned up stream. With the swing bridge behind me I shortened sail and slowly eased my way into my slip and completed the eventful sail I started the day before.

Some members were at the club. They had received the call so they all knew where I had been and helped me tie up with many remarks, such as;

"How did you get back here?"

"We didn't expect you back today?"

"How was it?"

It was a day that people still talk about.

As it happened the next day two of my golfing buddies during our round mentioned that the day before they had parked on the bluff by Durand Eastman to observe the lake. Noticing a lone boat heading west they wondered what idiot would be on the water on such a day.

Checking the time I laughed and said,
"That dummy was me."

