A Small Story about a Small Boat

by Helen Olson

My brother phoned me at my office; this brother doesn't like to talk on the phone, so I was a bit surprised. When the secretary gave me the message, it had the usual family disclaimer, "Don't worry; it's just something little," and his work phone number. In a family that didn't have a phone until after we had grown and left home, nothing will convince us that a long distance phone call, especially one during the day, doesn't contain news of death or serious illness. I phoned my bother back right away.

"We were just talking," he said, "and I wanted to tell you before I forgot. Did you know that Dad ran a tug when he was fourteen?" No, I didn't know. "Well. I thought you might like to know about it. Kathryn told me to tell you."

The family thinks I'm going to write our history. I wish I were, but I don't think it's ever going to happen in one piece. My work life doesn't seem to allow it, and when I'm really honest, the thought of a project that large scares me. But we can write little pieces and maybe someday someone can connect them.

"Well," said my brother, "Dad ran this little tug on Hubbard Lake the summer after he graduated from the eighth grade at the Norwegian School." What did he tug, I wondered. "Logs. They dumped logs into the lake on the South end and he pulled them in big booms to the North end where they dumped them over the dam and down the river to the mills in Alpena."

"I saw it, once," he said. "Dad and I were driving down around the South End. I was about ten or so. I suppose it was in the early forties. And Dad swung into this little road and there is was pulled up on the beach. We got out and looked it over. I can remember exactly what it looked like. Wasn't much of a boat. I remember it so clearly, I could draw it today."

Would you, I asked. I wish you would draw it. And other things you remember, too. We could put them in our book.

"Sure, I'd be glad to draw it. As I said, it wasn't much of a boat. I could draw some things about the County Line place, too. I remember that real well."

Yes, I said. Do the County Line place, Dad's first home and yours for awhile, too. The way it was when you lived there. I only remember it when Aunt Lena had it for a summer place and it was all bare wood and kind of creepy because it smelled of oil from the oil burner and mustiness from being closed up. What was it like upstairs, I asked. Upstairs was always a mystery. It seemed to be an unwritten rule that we couldn't go up there, and we never were even tempted to sneak away to look. I always thought it was dangerous because it was rotting or something.

"Darned if I know," my brother said. "I can't remember going up there either. Anyway, I'll draw the boat if you want me, too."

"We went back the next summer to look at it again, but it had been burnt . It was all gone but the ashes. Somebody probably burnt it to get the metal to sell."

So our Dad "drove" a tug when he was only fourteen years old. Is that what began his love affair with boats, because if it was something other than economic necessity that compelled him to spend the first part of his life first in the Coast Guard and then "on the lakes," it was the boats and not the water.

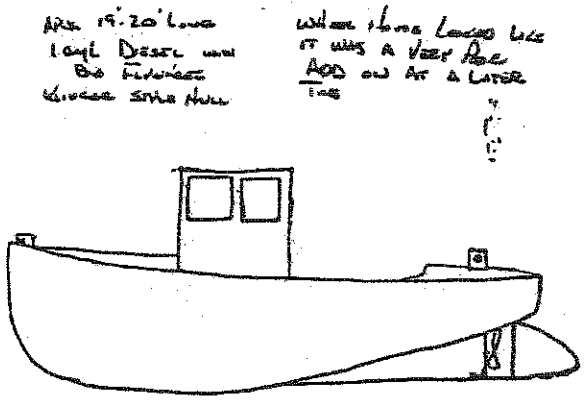
He didn't particularly enjoy going to the lake and I only remember seeing him swim three or four times (not counting the time he went in fully clothed to pull Johnny out when he fell off an inner tube) and then only on unbearably hot days when we managed to tease him in. I always thought he looked funny in his boxer swim trunks with his skinny, muscle-gnarled legs and his absolutely white chest with its permanent reddish-tan vee, left over from his days as a sailor. He was a strong swimmer and knew a lot of strokes. He'd get slowly into the cold lake and then, once wet, swim out a way, either with a breast stroke or a life-saver's crawl, never getting his head wet. I was impressed. Then he'd swim back in and get out of the water. He never just stayed in and puddled around the way my mother and aunts did. "I had enough of the water in the service," he'd say.

But he loved boats, especially the engines of boats. When he "worked on the lakes," he was an oiler on an ore carrier called the Conneat. As an oiler he ran the engine room. It was always important to us as kids that he ate in the officer's mess. I suppose he was the equivalent of a Warrant Officer, though it was many years before I had even the foggiest idea what that meant.

In any event, he loved the chance to look at boats and boat engines. Whenever we took the big car ferry from Mackinaw City across the straits to St. Ignace, he'd disappear almost as soon as we had gotten out of our car and up on deck to watch the passing scene. Shortly before the hour's ride was over, we'd see him emerging from the hatch, chattering happily away with some officer of the ship about the finer points of the ships huge turbine engines.

He left the boats just before Johnny was born in 1942, feeling he couldn't risk another ship wreck or missing the babyhood of another of his children. He claimed he didn't miss the boats. But when we were driving along the shore on our way to or from Alpena, he always looked at the boats on the lake and told us whether they were loaded or empty by the way they lay in the water. He always looked at the weather flags on the post office and told us the weather forecast and whether there were ship or small boat warnings out.

He was thrilled about the very notion of the Saint Lawrence Seaway and excited when the first foreign ships began showing up on the lakes, even as he laughed at the ineptness of ocean pilots weaving there huge ships precariously through lake channels. (After a number of groundings, the Coast Guard ceased to find the situation amusing and began putting lake pilots on ocean vessels for their trips through fresh water.) He showed us how to tell the difference between a lake carrier and an ocean-going ship. (The cabin of a lake freighter is on one or both ends; ocean-going ships have the cabin in the middle.) The day before a hopelessly drunk driver swerved into Dad's black, four-on-the-floor, wire wheels and spinner hubcaps Corvair Mazda, Dad had been out with cousins Will and Barb in their big outboard looking at a Norwegian freighter that had gone aground. It had been a lovely afternoon.



Drawing and Mechanical Comments by Frank Olson

Apprrx. 19'-20' long. 1 cyl. diesel with big flywheel. Klinker-style hull. Wheel house looked like it was a very poor add-on at a later time.
1992