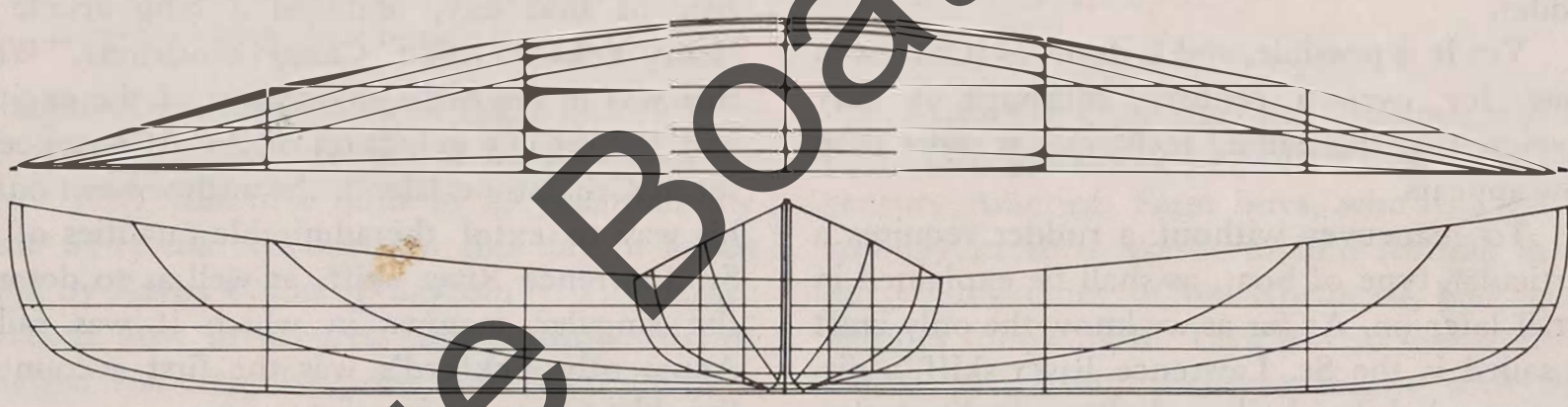


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THE SAINT LAWRENCE RIVER SKIFF

by John Gardner



Antique Boat Museum



750 MARY STREET, CLAYTON, NEW YORK 13624

The Saint Lawrence River Skiff*

Sailing without a rudder! A boat that handles smartly on all points of sailing with nothing resembling a rudder or substituting for it—no steering oar, no fin, no appendage of any sort extending overboard into the water. Most modern-day, salt water sailors are incredulous. Such a craft is outside their experience, and it is hard to imagine how it operates. On first consideration it seems impossible to sail without a rudder.

Yet it is possible, and is done, as it has been done for over a century, although it may develop that this sailing technique is older than now appears.

To maneuver without a rudder requires a particular type of boat, as shall be explained in detail later on. As far as we know the only craft so sailed is the St. Lawrence River skiff, a distinctive, lightly built, clinker double-ender, running up to 22 to 23 feet long for sailing models, a type which seems to have originated on the St. Lawrence River in the vicinity of the Thousand Islands, possibly at Clayton in Jefferson County, N. Y., in the late 1860s.

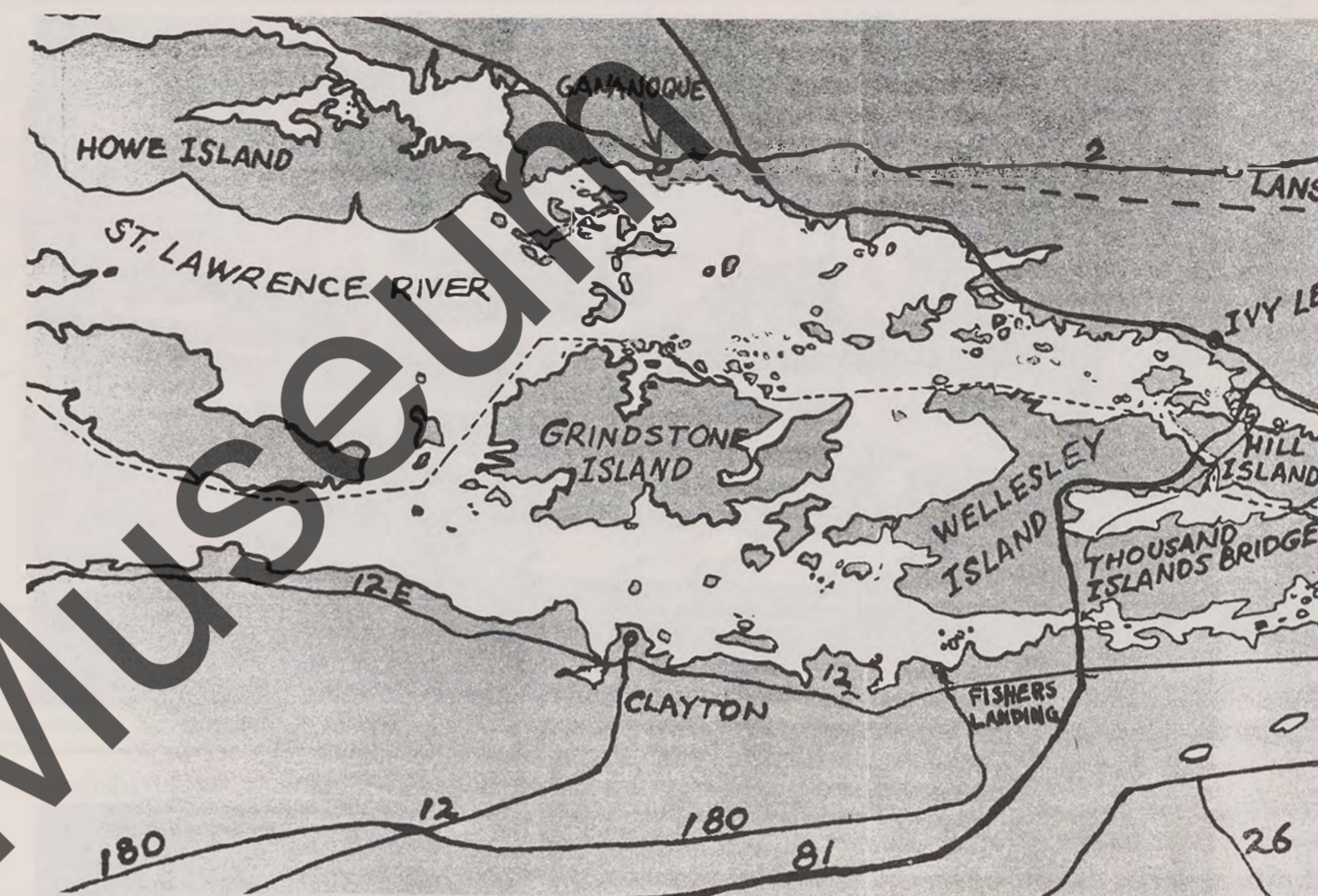
Directly in line between Clayton and the Canadian town of Gananoque in the Province of Ontario, midway in the St. Lawrence at a point where the river is several miles wide, lies Grindstone Island. Here, beginning in 1884, the American Canoe Association held its annual meets with hundreds of enthusiastic devotees of

the canoeing sport, both with paddle and sail, in attendance. Here in 1886 an American canoeist won the international trophy cup in competition with visitors from England's Royal Canoe Club.

For a brief few years, the canoe, and particularly the sailing canoe, dominated the American sporting scene. Thus, in its Mid-summer Holiday Number for August, 1885, *The Century Magazine*, the leading American magazine of that day, featured a long article by Henry Eckford titled "Camp Grindstone." While this was in the main an account of the exciting and fashionable goings-on of the ACA canoeing set at Grindstone Island, the author went out of his way to extol the admirable qualities of the St. Lawrence River skiff, as well as to describe the singular manner in which it was sailed. Apparently Eckford's was the first account of the skiff to appear in print.

Here is what he had to say about the skiff itself: "At the Thousand Islands there is an indigenous boat for fishing and rowing, remarkable for the methods by which it is managed under sail. Visitors call it a skiff, natives a skift. Holding five or six persons easily, it is of strong, yet light build, and in its lines probably the most beautiful rowboat afloat. Birchbark, Peterboro, Rob Roy, Shadow, Nautilus, Pearl, the hulls of all these must yield in gracefulness to the skiff."

This is high praise, indeed, for the names listed are those of the most popular and highly-



The Thousand Islands area around Clayton, New York, the center of St. Lawrence skiff development.

thought-of sporting canoes of that day.

Local tradition has it that the St. Lawrence River skiff was first built in all essentials the same as it has remained to this day in about 1868 by Xavier Colon in Clayton, N. Y. Whether research now in progress will confirm this, or whether some similar prior craft from which it may have developed will yet be revealed, remains to be seen.

However, it is clear that the skiff developed as a guide's workboat used primarily to take fishing parties to and from the fishing grounds in Thousand Islands waters. The Thousand Islands, so called, in reality number something like 1,800 islands and occupy a 50-mile stretch of river which is 12 miles wide at its upper end where it leaves Lake Ontario, and is still more than a mile wide at its lower end before the rapids begin. Here is some of the best, if not *the* best, muskellunge fishing in North America. Here also are to be found in abundance pike, pickerel, bass, perch, as well as numerous lesser species.

After the Civil War, the "summer visitor" came into increasing prominence in nineteenth century America. Farm boys, who had left the country in their youth to find fortune in the burgeoning cities of the Northeast, had in the decades following the Civil War accumulated the means permitting them to return with their families to vacation among the scenic beauties of unspoiled nature. They flocked to the seashore, to the mountains, and to inland rivers and lakes.

In New York the Adirondack woods and the Thousand Islands were greatly favored by vacationers. This was the era of vast, often palatial, summer hotels. While those of sedentary inclination relaxed on cool, spacious verandas, the more active took up canoeing or went fishing, especially the latter, for in those halcyon days the "big ones" had not all been caught, and pollution had not yet sullied the purity of aboriginal waters.

In the Thousand Islands region, because of the extent of fishing grounds and the distances

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(Above) St. Lawrence skiffs in front of the Thousand Island House. The guides and sports are ready for a day of fishing. (Right) A fishing guide, one of many in a trade that provided motive power as well as fishing brains before the advent of the outboard motor.



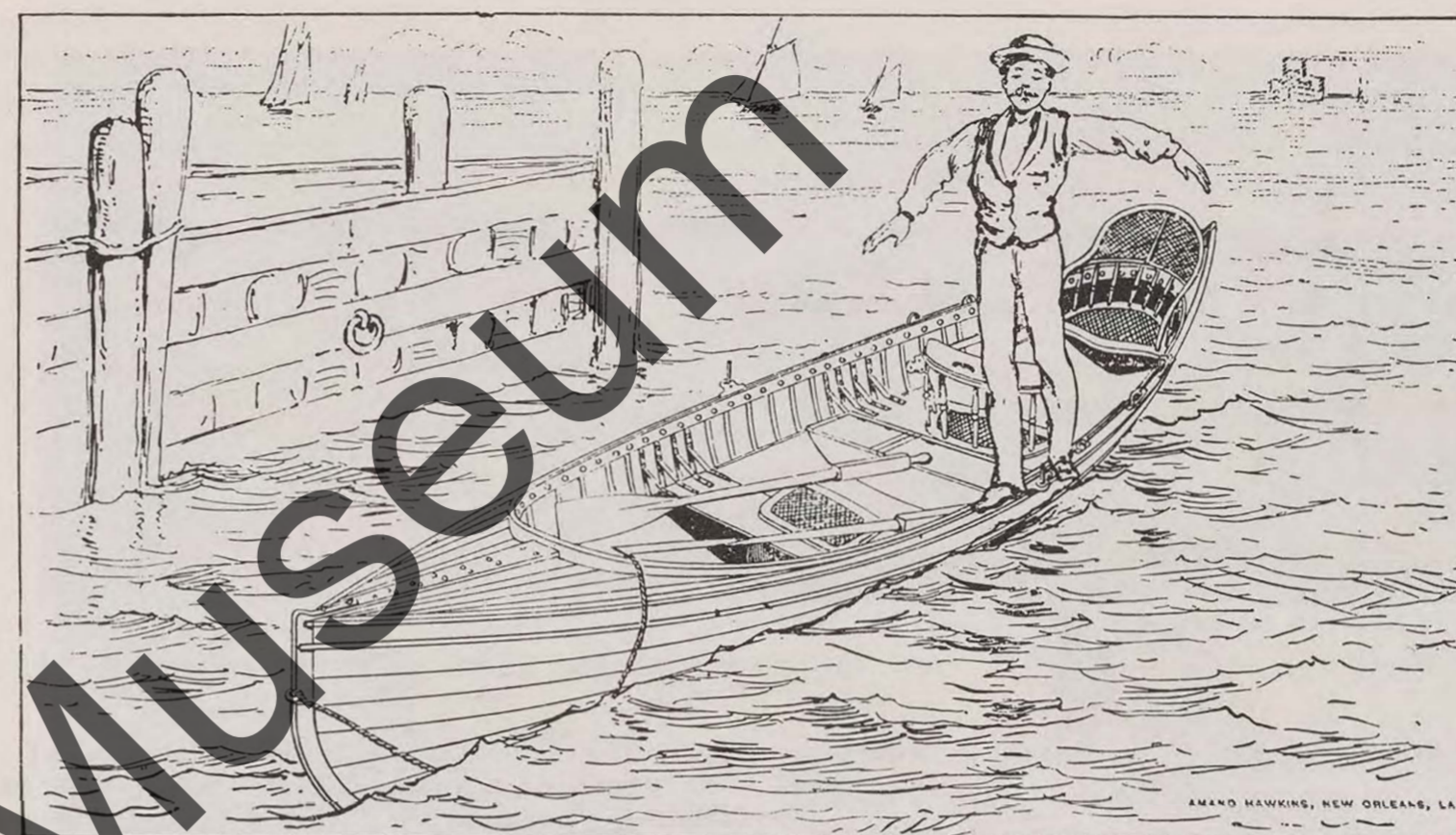
needing to be traveled to reach them, a special sort of boat was required. This was before the day of motors. There were only two ways of moving a boat—by oars or by sail. Besides, it could get rough on the wide, open waters of the St. Lawrence, for example the windy stretch of water off Gananoque, called the Forty Acre Shoals, a favorite lurking place for muskellunge.

A boat for the Thousand Islands had to row as easily as possible when it was calm, yet be able to hoist canvas and sail when a breeze sprang up. Guiding fishermen was highly competitive. The guide who could get back and forth to the favorite fishing grounds in the least possible time with the least possible trouble naturally got the cream of the business.

An account in *Forest and Stream* in 1889 states that St. Lawrence River skiffs "are used everywhere about the Thousand Islands for fishing, rowing, and sailing, to the exclusion of all other small boats. They are handled by professional boatmen who show the greatest skill in their handling. . . . The chief peculiarity of the boat is the absence of a rudder, even in sailing,

and steering being done by trimming the sheet and changing the balance of the boat. The boatsman brings her up into the wind by moving into the bow, and causes her to fall off by moving aft, handling her as perfectly as could be done by a rudder."

A longtime resident of Rochester, N. Y., a former summer visitor to the Thousand Islands whose experience with St. Lawrence River skiffs goes back to the 1890s, states in a letter written some 18 years ago that these skiffs were used by all fishing guides in the Thousand Islands region before the appearance of the small gas engine. Such skiffs, he explained, were very fast off the wind and were raced by the guides to and from the best fishing grounds. His father, who went on his honeymoon in such a skiff about 1880, had a St. Lawrence River skiff when he lived in



Stability test of a St. Lawrence skiff was shown in the Illustrated Catalogue of Dr. A. Bain, Clayton, New York, about 1884. The guide rowed from the forward seat; the passengers relaxed in the comfortable after positions.

Toronto, in which he used to sail to the Thousand Islands, camping on the shore at night, often in the company of friends also traveling in skiffs. When our informant and his brother were 10 years old, their father bought them skiffs.

"We used them on Lake Ontario," he related, "and almost every year sailed to the Thousand Islands in them, where we often brought them back by steamer because of prevailing westerly winds. Given fair weather and a southwesterly wind we could sail from Rochester to the Thousand Islands, a distance of about 150 miles, in about three days, camping on the shore at night."

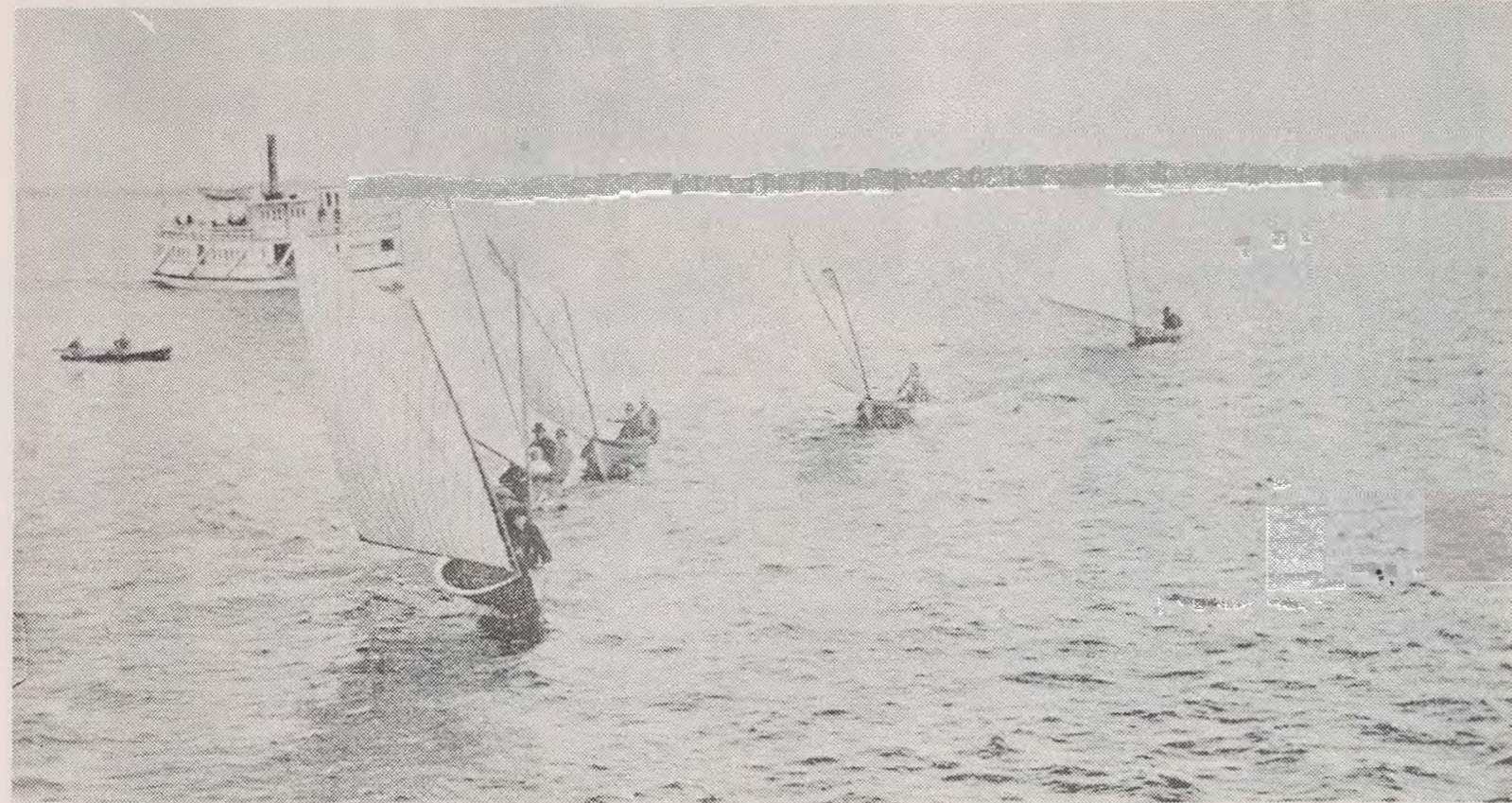
Farther along in the letter, our correspondent goes on to say that "the St. Lawrence River guides in the Thousand Islands used to hold annual regattas. There was great rivalry between the guides of Gananoque, Ontario, and those belonging at Clayton, New York. The St. Lawrence skiffs were normally sailed without rudders by 'ballast.' To come about one moved his weight forward keeling the skiff to leeward. My father had rudders put on our boats for use

on Lake Ontario where high waves frequently interfered with the ballast method of steering."

Rudders were also used on the so-called "batwing" boats, a special, over-rigged type of skiff developed prior to 1910 exclusively for racing. The name derives from the over-size sail which was heavily battened and of a shape somewhat similar to the wing of the nocturnal creature which it recalled.

Here is Henry Eckford's summary of how to sail a skiff from the August, 1885, issue of *The Century Magazine*:

It sailed, with the aid of a small centerboard, by means of a large spritsail, the mast being stepped well forward when in use. The main peculiarity of the skiff under sail is that neither rudder nor oar nor paddle is needed to guide it. Some persons help themselves to come about on a fresh tack with the oars, but this is not at all necessary, and is held in great scorn by a good sailor. The latter walks unconcernedly up and down his boat, pays her off the wind, or brings her up close hauled as if by magic. The secret lies in distributing the weight of the sailor forward or backward. In order to bring the boat into the wind with the needed swiftness, he moves suddenly forward quite to the mast. This buries the bow of the boat, and the stern shaped like the bow, rises up and is swung around by the wind. As soon



A race among St. Lawrence skiffs.

as the sail shakes well in the wind, the skiff-man runs aft, thus raising the bow, which is helped about by the wind, and depressing at the same time the stern. All this without steering-oar or rudder, or the help of oars in the rowlocks.

It is curious to see how sensitive such a boat is to the weight of a man. Running free, he sits nearly aft. Should it be necessary to run directly before the wind, he gets as far astern as possible; while to come up into the wind the reverse movement is made. First lessons in this unique boat deal severely with the shins of the novice and with the paint inside the boat, but a little practice gives mastery. In the skiff it is considered dangerous to make the main-sheet fast to the gunwale, because the boat is so long, narrow, and shallow that it might be easily caught in one of the squalls that come with little warning down from the islands. Many will not use the running-block, caught to the gunwale with a snap-spring, which keeps the sail flat and holds it well. The simple rope is preferred and held in the hand ready to be loosed at once. The block and tackle might be hampered in an emergency and the boat turn over. Of course the skiff is not the best sailer to windward in the world, and a good regatta canoe under full sail can generally beat her, especially if the wind be light.

Another view of the sailing skiff is to be found in a short account of skiff sailing at Grindstone Island recently supplied by James C. White, M.D., of Boston. Dr. White, who has sailed skiffs for many years, is still an avid sailor. It is mighty fine sport as he describes it:

In the 1800's and '90's, before the days of motor-boats, the Morgan and Leavitt families who summered at the head of Grindstone Island were entirely dependent on the combination rowing and sailing St. Lawrence skiffs, not only for their fishing, but for marketing as well. Indeed, our grandparents thought nothing of taking a guest with baggage the four miles from Clayton to the head of the island, or of sailing this distance to church and back on Sundays or to get a cake of ice to cool their drinks on other days of the week. Fishing, which in the old days was a frequent pastime, was done with the larger skiffs sailed or rowed by the boatmen.

After the advent of motorboats their offspring have used these superbly designed skiffs for many years. Races were usually held in a stiff southwesterly breeze over a figure-eight course which we called the "corkscrew." The first leg was around Papoose Island, then a reach with the wind abeam through the lee of Whiskey Island. After rounding it in the reverse direction by beating to windward the course was dead before the wind between Whiskey and Papoose where the puffs blew hardest.

The tricks to win were to get through the lees of the two islands with the minimal loss of headway, to tack the boat about smartly, and finally to jibe to cross the finish line at the Rum Point dock. In order to jibe you have to pull up the centerboard, sit on the extreme stern of the boat and haul in the sheet, hoping that you can pay it out smoothly enough not to capsize or get thrown overboard as the sail suddenly catches the wind on the other side and tilts the boat down to the gunwale. Some of the world's best yachtsmen, including Mike Vanderbilt, who skippered *America's Cup* defenders, came to grief in this way.



A skiff race underway on the St. Lawrence in the old days.

To illustrate how maneuverable these little skiffs are when well handled, we used to play a game of tag within our small circle of islands. Each boat had a two-man crew, a tennis ball, and fish landing-net. The purpose was for the boat which was "it" to avoid being tagged by the tennis ball thrown by one of the crew of four or five pursuing boats. If the ball missed the dodging boat or its sail, it had to be retrieved with the fish-net. Collisions were rare and no skiffs were ever seriously injured.

The children of the oldtimers, who are now in their seventies, are too stiff and off balance to carry out the rapid, well-timed maneuvers required for this type of competition, but still enjoy sailing in quieter waters as much as ever. Unfortunately our boats are too old and valuable as antiques to let the grandchildren take over the old exciting games for which they were used for over a half a century.

As you can see, old-timers, and some not so old, who were reared on the upper reaches of the St. Lawrence, invariably praise the St. Lawrence River skiff in the highest of terms.

Admittedly the boat is good, but is it that good? This is a question that some are bound to ask, suspecting that local loyalties and long and fond associations might have colored such partisan views. But we do not have to rely on the word of the local advocate, nor trust his unsupported judgment, for there are others, both qualified to speak and unbiased by local ties, who are equally lavish in their praise.

One such fan of the skiff was the late Dwight S. Simpson of Boston, the eminent naval architect and international authority on wooden construction, who at the time of his death headed one of this country's leading firms

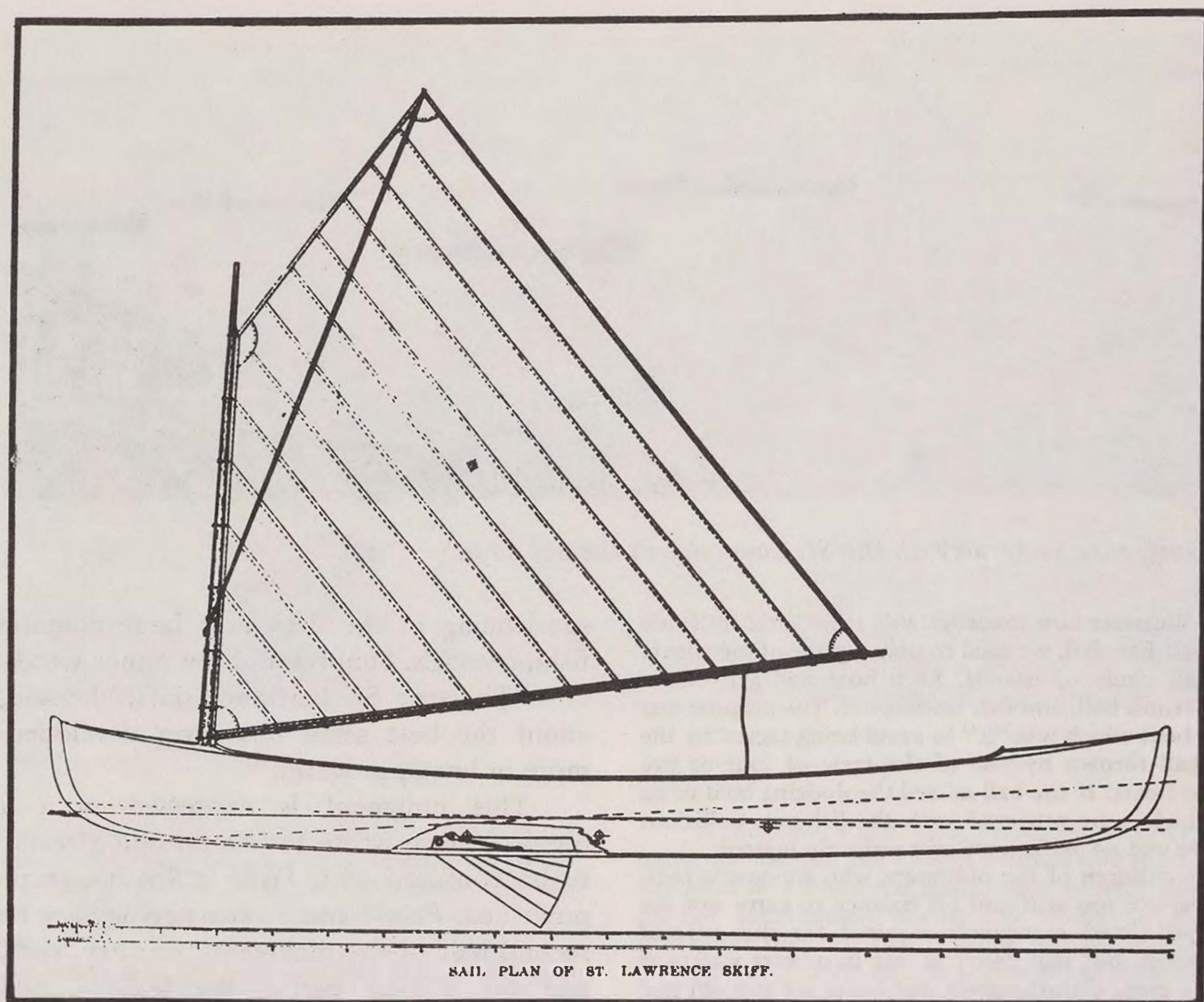
specializing in the design of large commercial fishing vessels. Simpson did not mince words:

"The true St. Lawrence skiff," he said, "is about the best small boat ever developed for more or less open water."

This judgment is expressed in a piece Simpson once wrote for *Forest and Stream*, not to be confused with *Field & Stream*, currently published. *Forest and Stream*, going back to the second half of the nineteenth century, the first, and for a long period the leading, boating journal in this country, suspended publication some years ago, but complete files are to be found in some of the larger libraries, for example the New York Public Library, and specialized libraries like that of the Adirondack Museum at Blue Mountain Lake, New York. Simpson's article on the skiff is in Volume 93, beginning on page 248. It contains a set of lines, dimensioned details for the identical stems, and a table of offsets. Those desiring to build a skiff would do well to obtain a copy. However, they should insist on a photostat or even a photographic enlargement of the offsets, which were printed in reduced size.

Simpson's lines were based on extensive research. He consulted old catalogs, of which there were a considerable number, and visited and consulted builders of skiffs along the river.

"I was surprised to find in my research," he wrote, "that the skiffs of most (though not all) of the old builders, while sharp at both ends,



SAIL PLAN OF ST. LAWRENCE SKIFF.

were not really 'double enders,' the after body being decidedly finer than the fore body. The line of the sheer and keel and stem profile is the same for both ends, otherwise there is real difference in the modeling... Owing to this difference the boat obtains the best possible trim—down slightly by the stern... without thought on the part of the casual user, whether loaded with one, two, three, or four passengers. This makes her row easily, and the high, full blow makes her dry and buoyant in a head sea."

Simpson treated the skiff solely as a pulling boat, not mentioning until his final paragraph, and more or less as an afterthought, it seems, that skiffs were sailed as well as rowed. "Skiffs were at first fitted with a single gaff-rigged sail, but later were rigged canoe fashion, and this boat will carry comfortably about 80 sq. ft. in the main and 25 in the mizzen. Usually sailed without a rudder, the steering being done by

trim of the sails and shifting the weight of the crew forward or aft. A centerboard or other lateral plane should be fitted of about 2¼ sq. ft. in area."

The rigging observations, it must be said, are not entirely correct. Normally and originally these skiffs were sprit-rigged, not gaff-rigged. A few in time may have been canoe-ketch-rigged similar to the partly decked-over sailing canoes of the late nineteenth century, but these would have been exceptional and comparatively few. These canoe-ketch-rigged skiffs must have steered with rudders, as the mizzen would have interfered with the free movement of the crew essential for balance steering.

The standard sprit rig, which was early adopted and never improved upon for ordinary sailing, is shown in the sail plan published in *Forest and Stream* for April 25, 1889, and reproduced here. Offsets, scantling dimensions,

and lines superbly drawn were also given in the 1889 issue of *Forest and Stream* and reproduced here. These details were furnished by Dr. A. Bain of Clayton, New York, who was the proprietor at that time of the St. Lawrence River Skiff, Canoe, and Steam Launch Company of the same town, having bought out Xavier Colon's original skiff-building business. Nevertheless, the skiff shown is Colon's model, which appears to have reached its final perfected form. I very much doubt if any basic improvement in skiff lines has since been made. Final proof of this waits, however, until lines of other and more recent builders have been drawn for comparison.

This 1889 Colon boat, like the skiffs Simpson observed much later, is not a true double-ender. While in profile the ends are alike, the after sections, as in the Simpson skiff, are molded leaner and sharper. Likewise, the Colon skiff, being fuller forward, will normally trim slightly down by the stern.

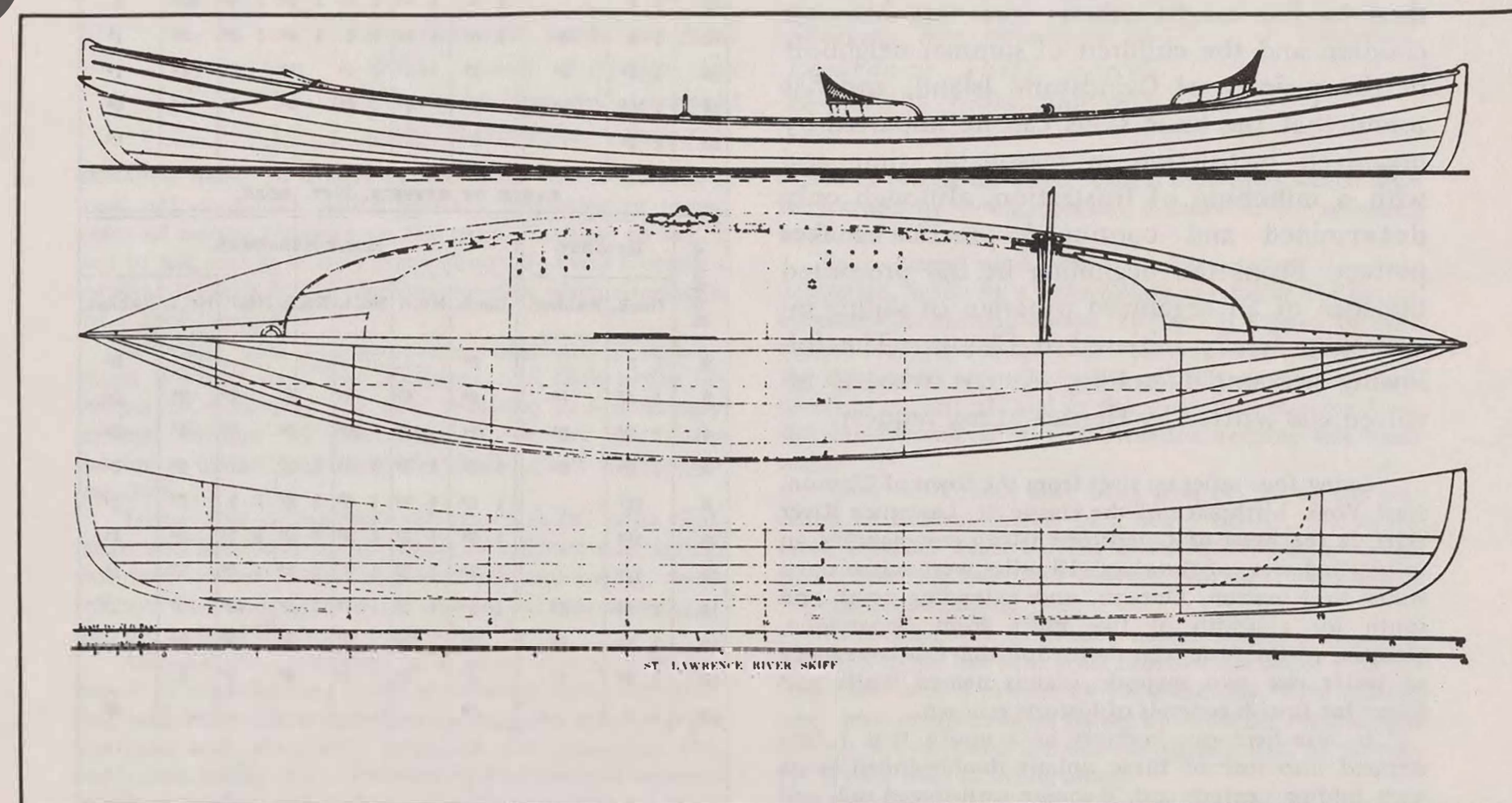
To sail these boats, agility, quick reflexes and a bit of daring are required. Yet they are

safe enough for those who know how to manage them, and learning how is not so difficult, if one has instruction. The skiff is a remarkably stable craft for its size, and it is true that a 150-pound man can stand on the gunwale of a skiff of intermediate length in smooth water without putting it under. The 20 and 22-foot boats, more commonly used for sailing, are even more stable due to their greater length.

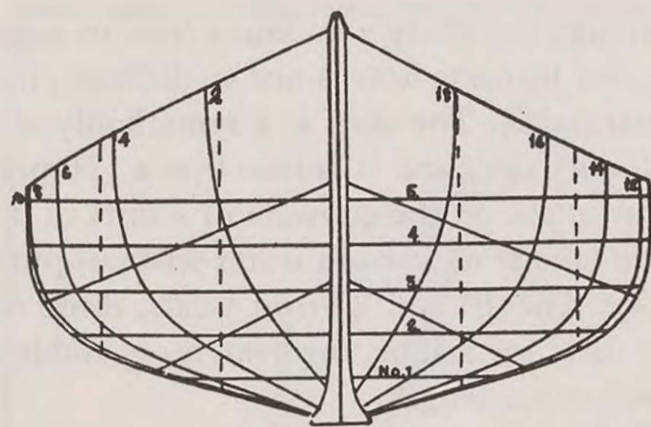
While it is possible for the tyro to capsize any small sailboat, an important part of sailing skill is knowing how to avoid a capsize, as well as what to do should it happen. On rare occasions in jibing the skiff in a strong wind, it might be necessary to go overboard momentarily to hold her upright, and then to clamber quickly back again over the end. That this is an advanced maneuver hardly needs saying; it is one that requires split-second timing, yet it is one which can be executed with safety, albeit with wet pants, by the experienced sailor.

Of course, the wise beginner does not attempt to jibe his skiff in a hard blow.

Experienced and avid skiff sailors claim



ST. LAWRENCE RIVER SKIFF



there is nothing quite like sailing the St. Lawrence River skiff. The exhilaration, the keen sense of movement and speed, and the lively action on the water add up to something that is close akin to flying, they say. Under the urging of a skillful sailor, his skiff comes alive—it responds almost like a part of his own body, becoming in a measure an extension of himself, and yielding sensations and experience not otherwise attainable.

Harold Herrick Jr., one of the most active promoters of the present skiff revival, has sailed skiffs from boyhood, and is still sailing skiffs with undiminished zest and enthusiasm. He learned to sail the hard way—by himself. Since then he has taught others, including his own children and the children of summer neighbors in the vicinity of Grindstone Island, and has found that the basic skills can be imparted by organized instruction in reasonable time and with a minimum of frustration, although only determined and continued practice makes perfect. From the beginning he has promoted the idea of an organized program of sailing instruction, finally initiated at Clayton. The following account sketching in part what is involved was written by Herrick at my request:

Lying four miles up river from the town of Clayton, New York, birthplace of the classic St. Lawrence River skiff, is the head of Grindstone Island commanding an unexcelled view of the river—18 miles west across open water to Kingston, Ontario, and extending north and south for a width of five miles from Gananoque, Ontario, to the American shore. Splitting this large body of water rise two majestic islands named Wolfe and Howe for British generals of historic renown.

It was here one summer as a youth that I first stepped into one of these unique double-ended boats with folding centerboard, 8-square sprit-rigged sail, and

	20ft. boat.	15ft. boat.
Length over all	20ft.	15ft.
L. W. L.	19ft. 1 in.	14ft. 3 in.
Beam, extreme	3ft. 6 in.	2ft. 7 in.
Draft	8 in.	6 in.
Least freeboard	8 in.	5 in.
Sheer	10 in.	8 in.
Fore side of stem to mast tube	2ft. 9 in.	2ft. 0 in.
Coaming	3ft. 11 in.	2ft. 2 in.
Rowlocks	8ft. 9 in.	8ft. 7 in.
Slot	8ft. 10 in.	5ft. 1 in.
Mast, deck to truck	8ft. 5 in.	7ft. 0 in.
Diameter	2 in.	2 in.
Boom, length	12ft. 2 in.	9ft. 1 in.
diameter	1 in.	1 in.
Sprit, length	10ft. 6 in.	7ft. 11 in.
diameter	1 in.	1 in.
Sail, foot	11ft. 10 in.	2ft. 10 in.
luff	7ft. 1 in.	5ft. 4 in.
head	5ft. 6 in.	4ft. 1 in.
leech	12ft. 9 in.	9ft. 7 in.
tack to peak	12ft.	9ft.
clew to throat	12ft. 8 in.	9ft. 6 in.
area	70sq. ft.	43sq. ft.

TABLE OF OFFSETS, 20FT. BOAT.

Stations.	HEIGHTS.		HALF-BREADTHS.						
	Deck.	Rabbit.	Deck.	No. 5.	No. 4.	No. 3.	No. 2.	No. 1.	Rabbit.
0	2 2 ⁴	0 ¹	0 ¹						0 ⁴
2	1 10 ²	2 ²	8 ⁷	8 ¹	7 ¹	1 5 ⁴	3 ⁴	1	0 ⁴
4	1 7 ²	0 ²	1 3 ²	1 2 ²	1 1 ²	1 1	10	5	1 ²
6	1 5 ²	0 ¹	1 7 ¹	1 6 ²	1 6 ¹	1 5 ¹	1 2 ²	8 ⁴	1 ²
8	1 4		1 8 ¹	1 8 ¹	1 8 ¹	1 7 ¹	1 5 ⁴	10 ²	2
10	1 3 ²		1 9	1 8 ¹	1 8 ¹	1 8 ¹	1 6	11 ¹	2
12	1 4		1 8 ¹	1 8 ¹	1 8 ¹	1 7 ⁴	1 5 ¹	10 ⁴	2
14	1 5	0 ¹	1 6 ¹	1 6 ²	1 6	1 4 ¹	1 2 ²	8 ²	1 ²
16	1 7 ¹	0 ⁴	1 2 ²	1 1 ²	1 1 ²	11 ⁴	9 ¹	4 ⁷	1 ²
18	1 10 ²	2 ²	8	7 ²	6 ⁴	5 ¹	8 ⁴	1 ⁴	0 ⁴
20	2 2 ⁴	0 ¹							0 ⁴

TABLE OF OFFSETS, 15FT. BOAT.

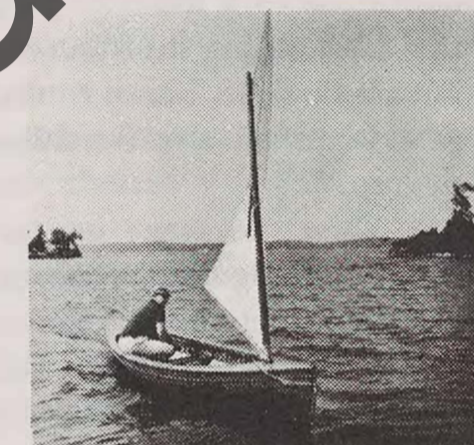
Stations.	HEIGHTS.		HALF-BREADTHS.						
	Deck.	Rabbit.	Deck.	No. 5.	No. 4.	No. 3.	No. 2.	No. 1.	Rabbit.
0	1 8		0 ⁷						0 ³
2	1 4 ²	1 ⁴	6 ⁴	6 ¹	5 ⁴	4 ¹	2 ⁴	0 ⁴	0 ⁴
4	1 2 ²	0 ⁴	11 ⁴	11 ¹	10 ¹	9 ¹	7 ²	3 ⁴	1 ¹
6	1 0 ²	0 ¹	1 2 ²	1 2 ²	1 1 ¹	1 1 ¹	11 ¹	6 ¹	1 ²
8	11 ²		1 3 ¹	1 3 ¹	1 3 ¹	1 2 ¹	1 1	7 ⁷	1 ⁴
10	11 ²		1 3 ¹	1 2 ¹	1 3 ¹	1 2 ¹	1 1 ⁴	8 ¹	1 ⁴
12	11 ²		1 6 ¹	1 3 ¹	1 3 ¹	1 3 ¹	1 0 ⁴	7 ⁷	1 ⁴
14	1 0 ²	0 ¹	1 1 ¹	1 1 ¹	1 1 ¹	1 0 ⁴	10 ⁴	6 ¹	1 ²
16	1 2 ²	0 ⁴	10 ⁴	10 ¹	9 ¹	8 ¹	6 ¹	3 ⁴	
18	1 4 ¹	1 ¹	6	5 ⁴	4 ⁴	3 ¹	2 ¹	1	
20	1 8		0 ¹						0 ⁴



Harold Herrick, Jr., self-taught yet now-expert skiff sailor, hauls the sail taut as he prepares to come about.

Start of tack shows sail drawing well. The sprit is too short; it's a substitute for the proper one, which was broken.

Body weight is brought forward to depress the bow and lift the stern, which is at the point of swinging about.



On the new tack, the boat slides easily through the water, leaving only a slight wake behind her sleek run.



Showing her power, a St. Lawrence skiff barrels across the finish line in a race.

unstayed mast. In a stiff breeze from the southwest I took off on a tack which was the beginning of many years of sailing pleasure on the river. Needless to say, I had to use oars at first to come about, and was forced to capsize the skiff to stop forward motion when coming in for a dock landing.

Through trial and error the technique of coming about without oars was mastered, and then began attempts to maneuver the jibe, resulting in a seemingly endless number of overturns. These are my early memories of wet pants and the challenge of the rudderless skiff.

Today this sailing craft still provides the same challenge and satisfaction and thrills of split-second timing. But with years of "hacking around" and racing, one's reflexes and habit patterns tend to become automatic like the trained field-trial retriever.

Anyone who can even in a small way acquire the knack of coordinating body movement with sail handling will have taken the first big step in attaining the alertness and sensitivity required for managing this rudderless sailing craft. Positioning body weight forward or aft as needed and to leeward with the sail is the basic

secret of getting her going. This is something which must be learned by doing. Besides, I know of no reference books on skiff sailing.

In a heavy wind, one's movements are slow and deliberate, while in a light breeze the faster the better, especially in coming about. The sail is nipped in taut, centerboard jerked up, and with your rush to the bow the stern spins around. As the sail fills on the new tack, speed in moving aft and at the same time shoving down the centerboard is most critical for keeping full headway.

Many skiff races have been won or lost on the precision of this maneuver. In a heavy breeze, fast movement forward when coming about will result in taking water over the bow and leeward rail, and could end in "operation swamping."

In tacking one must also adjust weight position in the skiff with the sail. With practice the sailor gets the feel. How well is proven by his wake line. Here again, I have seen inexperienced racing sailors with their weight too far forward and the sail too closely hauled. Result: the skiff is only crawling along.

The skiff's leeward angle is also important. In a

heavy breeze it is not unusual to lash a spare sprit fore and aft across the thwarts to get toe purchase for hiking out, otherwise the sail cannot be hauled flat in order to obtain maximum speed without taking water to leeward.

Now we come to the most critical maneuver for a St. Lawrence skiff in a stiff breeze, the jibe. Body weight is concentrated in the extreme stern of the skiff as one sails down wind. The secret is to whip in the sail tight to swing the bow. If your weight concentration aft is not sufficient, you will not be able to jibe, as the bow will not swing around, being offset by the wind velocity on the sail. Should this be the case, one resorts to coming about.

However, when the bow has swung sufficiently to pick up the wind, shift your weight to windward and clear the sheet instantly as the boom swings around. The centerboard has been pulled up and the slightest mistake means "the drink." In a gale wind, with no downhaul, I have had the boom lift up in a jibe so that it swung completely around in front of the mast. Should this happen, drop the sheet, throw your body overboard to windward, and hold on! I have experienced this but once, a memorable occasion, in a 30-mile wind, and I should prefer not to have my reflexes tested again in this way.

Skill in the use of the four-bladed, folding metal centerboard, with a handle for working it up or down, can influence the performance of the skiff. A little centerboard is most necessary to substitute for a rudder in keeping a straight run down wind in the 19-foot Miller racing skiff.

And so finally to those seasoned sailors from both fresh and salt water who have never before taken on St. Lawrence River skiff sailing, I say: "Good luck, good swimming, and remember to take a long-handled pot for a bailer."

THE ST. LAWRENCE SKIFF COMPARED TO THE MAINE PEAPOD

Whether the St. Lawrence River skiff, developed for fresh water, is equally suited for use on the ocean is something to be considered. A few St. Lawrence River skiffs made their way to the ocean in times past, but what their performance was in comparison with saltwater craft appears not to be on record.

It is a well-known fact that waves build up very quickly, and to towering heights, on large freshwater lakes, and the Great Lakes in particular are notorious for rough water during storms. Yet at one time it was not uncommon for trips to be made in these skiffs, using both oars and sail, from one end of Lake Ontario to the other,

with the voyagers camping out on the shore when night overtook them. Such trips occurred in summer, and presumably in good weather; yet even so, winds of moderate force must have been encountered, nor could the water always have been flat calm.

Nor was the water always calm in the vicinity of the Thousand Islands where the St. Lawrence leaves Lake Ontario. Between Clayton, New York, the birthplace of the skiff and Gananoque, Ontario, on the Canadian shore, lie several miles of open water. Bertha Fry Hall, daughter of Lucien Fry of Fry and Denny, famed builders of skiffs at Clayton in the late 1890s and early 1900s, recalling her girlhood, wrote me in a letter: "As you doubtless know, there is nothing more seaworthy than a good St. Lawrence skiff. I have rowed across the river in a gale when all the freighters were anchored or tied up."

Then she went on to make a most interesting and significant observation: "We were in Norway a number of years ago and visited the museums housing the Viking ships. They are mounted on supports; and as I stood at the bow looking aft, the lines were identical with those I had seen so often in my father's boat factory."

Apparently this refers in particular to the museum in Oslo where the large Gokstad burial ship is preserved together with the three smaller king's boats found in it, ranging from about 19 to 30 feet. These three double-enders are exhibited on inconspicuous supports at good height above the floor for viewing, and it is true that the lines of these king's boats are strikingly similar to those of the skiff. Also, these ancient Norse craft were superlative sea boats whose lines have not been improved upon in more than a thousand years.

This, then, provides support for the assumption that the skiff would also give a good account of itself at sea. It would make an interesting experiment to test the skiff on salt water in comparison with the performance of standard saltwater types.

The Maine peapod, in particular, comes to mind in this connection. In some of their

features, the skiff and the pod, two nineteenth-century double-enders, are quite dissimilar. In other respects they have considerable features in common. The one makes a good foil for the other.

To begin with, the origins of both the skiff and the peapod, presumably dating from the early nineteenth century, are obscure. Both began as workboats, and while the peapod always remained such—a plain, functional craft without frills—some of the later skiffs attained the ultimate in finish, varnish inside and out, trimmings of walnut and mahogany, inlaid decks, and generally exquisite workmanship.

It has been theorized in the case of both craft that they developed from the Indian birch canoe. While it is clear that they both replaced aboriginal canoes, in a sense, and that they resemble canoes to the extent of being double-ended, there are nevertheless abundant double-ended craft of European origin that might have served as prototypes, including the Viking boats already mentioned.

The Indian birch was plying the St. Lawrence when the whites arrived and remained in use down to fairly recent times even after the bateau had superceded it to a large extent as a freight carrier. Certainly those who devised the forerunners of the perfected skiff were thoroughly familiar with the lines of the birch canoe.

An unsigned article on the skiff in *Forest and Stream* for April 25, 1889, states: "The exact origin of the boat is not quite clear: it is practically but a large canoe, and so it might be considered an enlargement of the ordinary open canoe so common on the St. Lawrence; but as the drawings show, it resembles much more closely the decked canoe of the States in model and construction."

The foregoing is not quite so. Let it be noted that while the lines of the skiff above the water do resemble the canoe, there is a marked and important difference below the water. The lines of the skiff show a rather considerable angle of straight deadrise, which the Indian birch does not have and cannot have on account of its

manner of construction. And this amount of deadrise, which allows good bearing in combination with fairly deep displacement, is a critical factor in the skiff's superior performance, as it is in the Whitehall boat and other planked boats with similar underwater lines.

Indeed, the construction of the skiff is nothing like that of the canoe; the skiff could not possibly have borrowed anything essential from the canoe. "The decked canoe of the States" in its construction owed nothing to the Indian canoe, but was wholly in the wooden boatbuilding tradition of Europe.

The skiff built by Xavier Colon at Clayton, New York, in the early 1870s, or possibly a few years earlier, set the basic form. There was no subsequent evolution to speak of. Alterations or modifications by the numerous builders who followed Colon were never more than minor or superficial changes, limited mainly to finish. The pattern established by Colon was never improved upon.

Yet it is certain that Colon did not devise his perfected skiff all at once and all of a piece, without prototypes or precursors of some sort. The boats previously used on the river have not survived, and no plans, models, or detailed accounts of their construction can be found. But tradition has it that the early guides built their own boats in the wintertime, and even took part in skiff-building bees, helping each other.

For the fishing guide on the river before the day of motors, a good boat was all important. It was his livelihood, no less. The guides with the best boats got the cream of the business. To row 20 miles a day and often more, an easy pulling boat was desirable. That the boats were able is attested to by the lack of a single record of a guide's skiff ever having been involved in a fatal accident.

We do have one hint of what the earlier skiffs were like from an account of the Hon. Thomas G. Alvord's fishing experiences as published by Haddock in his *Souvenir of the St. Lawrence River*. Alvord, a Syracuse attorney and an inveterate fisherman, put out from Alexandria Bay one September morning in 1852

to wet a line for the first time in the famed waters of this river. As he explains in a letter written in 1895, "At that time Alexandria Bay was the Mecca of fishermen and Clayton the headquarters of square-timber cutting [ship-building], and no boatman or fisher-folk hailed from there until some years thereafter."

The fishing guide's boat at that time was not a canoe, yet apparently its only resemblance to the Colon skiff of 20 years later was its double-ended shape:

The boats of that day were but the crude prototypes of the present exquisite ones, which have no superiors on the globe in form, finish or perfect adaptability, with their well-matched oars, centerboards, cushioned chairs, and other requisites, superior in all respects for the uses to which they are put. . . . I embarked on my first fishing excursion in a boat made of pine (not piano finished), sharp at each end, not more than 14 feet long, low-sided, with naked wooden boards, without back-rests, for seats. Loaded down almost invariably on the return from a day's fishing with their human cargo and catch of fish, the gunwales would be perilously near the level of the water of the river.

The early beginnings of the Maine peapods are even more obscure than those of the St. Lawrence skiff. The notion that they may have originated from birch canoes will not stand examination, either, although bark canoes were still used by Indians on the Maine coast until the late nineteenth century. It must be admitted that the large, low-ended bark canoes employed by the Passamaquoddy Tribe for shooting porpoise in the rough waters around Grand Manan Island were not unlike peapods in shape. In construction, however, there was nothing in common between the fisherman's pod and these sea-going canoes.

Fishermen commonly built their own pods, as guides appear to have built their own skiffs at one time. Occasionally, local boatshops and some builders became known for their excellent pods. But peapods were never produced in large commercial factories as skiffs were beginning in the 1880s, when the business established by Xavier Colon was taken over in 1887 by Dr. A. Bain of Clayton, who with the backing of New York City capital put up a factory measuring

50 feet by 100 feet and three stories high. Nor was there ever developed one standardized peapod model, as in the case of the Colon skiff. On the contrary, and within rather loose limits of size and form, a nearly infinite variety of pods was produced, nearly every one different according to the special requirements, or even whims, of individual fishermen and builders. Pods were built both clinker and carvel, with keels and with flat bottom boards, with abundant sheer and bottom rocker, as well as straight on the bottom and flat on the top.

In some, stems were plumb, in others, raking. Some showed slack bilges and a marked angle of deadrise, while others were broad of beam with very flat floors, the latter being favored by lobstermen willing to sacrifice rowing ease to gain initial stability for hauling their pots.

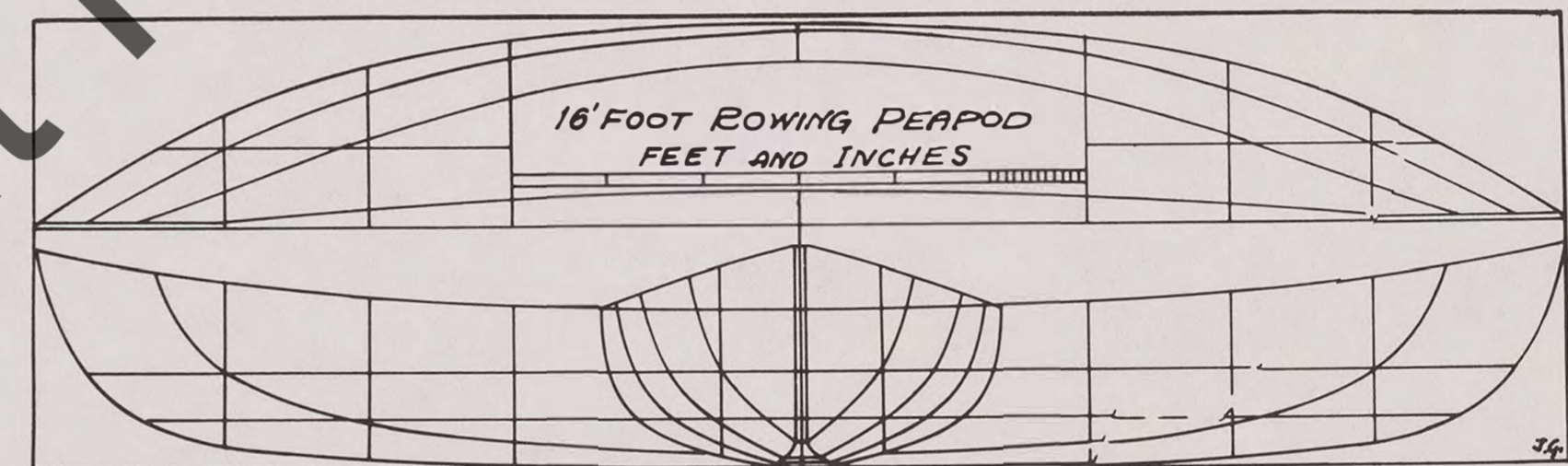
As far as I know, no mention of a peapod was ever included in a printed catalog, while at least a dozen different nineteenth century boat-building concerns issued catalogs in which St. Lawrence River skiffs are listed.

The first peapod lines to appear in print that I have seen accompanied a piece in *Yachting* for February, 1932, by C. W. Van Ness. (See Chapter 16.) Built by Bendix in Prospect Harbor, Maine, this pod used for lobstering had been put together in the local blacksmith shop and was framed with "natural bend hackmatack from the woods nearby." This pod showed an unusual amount of sheer and bottom rocker, which rounded up in raking stems very sloping and cut back in the forefoot. In a light condition a boat of this shape was bound to be lively and tender, but put a load in such a pod and she would settle down, yet continuing to pull easy. It is said that this pod was used in January for tending traps set nine miles offshore, and on more than one occasion got caught out in storms but always managed to make it home.

In 1969 Gordon Bennett of Clayton found a set of skiff molds in the old Colon house in that town. Presumably these were molds belonging to Xavier Colon, if not his original set. From outline tracings of these molds supplied

me by Bennett, I worked up a set of skiff lines which turned out to be typical in all respects, and are shown herewith. The lines of the 16-foot rowing pod are also shown printed approximately to the same scale to facilitate com-

parison. The similarities between these two sets of lines are rather marked in several respects. Of course, as already stated, some pods would show entirely different lines.



Antique Boat Museum

