

# AN EARLY HISTORY OF THE SALTSRING ISLAND SAILING CLUB

## Remembrances by Lawrie Neish

*Notes: years refer to school years September to September. Events from my Day Book and shop log at GISS (Gulf Islands Secondary School)*

On Canada Day 1968 Aileen and I arrived on Saltspring Island, via Langley from the Gareloch on the Firth of Clyde, I to teach in the Gulf Islands Secondary School and Aileen to deliver our Canadian and Saltspring daughter (Morven) . I had come to Canada for “foreign experience”. Rumours had circulated in Helensburgh Sailing Club that the real reason we were emigrating was because we could no longer sail to our handicap (it had been lowered three times in two years). For the past year at Langley High School I had been exhibiting withdrawal symptoms caused by a lack of sailing in anything other than a B.C. ferry. This was to continue for a further year on Saltspring while we wrestled with the problems of a young and growing family not to mention a different education system. To pass the time prior to the start of my position at GISS and relieve some of the symptoms, I resumed a long-standing hobby, the building of a model racing yacht. When school started, fifteen grade 8 students in the School caught the virus and started building an International Marblehead class model boats at lunch time and after school. Prior to my arrival on the Island in 1968 the GISS Industrial, Education shop was the result of a failed referendum. The funds approved in a previous referendum had run out building the new Gulf Islands Secondary School and a second referendum to add the IE shop failed. A large portable was purchased which did not meet provincial industrial education standards and was seriously under equipped in both power and hand tools. Heating failed and wash up water froze in the winters. The shop lacked dust extraction and ventilation systems. The senior students eventually built these as side lines to their own project work. To add the problems my Grade 8, 9 and 10 classes at GISS, were all double, or more, than the provincial Industrial Education average class size. This is probably the cause of my white hair and the beginning of my deafness!

The previous teacher had left in disgust! The “shop” situation did give reason to be creative in approaching teaching. Surprisingly, I have been told that there were forty applicants for the position – obviously the situation was not known to the applicants, or they were looking for a springboard for eventual retirement. That I was the cheapest teacher was probably the reason I was hired!

In the 1968 - 69 school year, with two students, Allan Jackson and Jay Rozzano, we produced a plug for a Sabot and built a mould followed by hull from it to check it met class rules. To Allan and Jay this was a side issue to building plugs, moulds for dune buggies. We eventually produced eleven dune buggies. The test boat served its purpose and to recover the costs it was sold to the Buitenwerf family. The Sabot hull produced as the plug was sold to Florence Hepburn as a rowing dinghy for her duck pond. The Sabot caught the attention of the model yacht builders , now in Grade 9 who quickly worked out that they could have a “real” boat for less cost than a radio control model. The result was the abandonment of the models in favour of the sabots.

During the building period Marshal Sharp who had been the commander of the RCAF Survival School, and amongst other things, read the Island’s Hydro meters, became friends. He was also a school trustee and his interest went a long way to smoothing any problems. He had first become aware of the boats when he arrived to read the shop meters. It tended to take some time for the reading!

When the first fifteen Sabots were nearing completion, the sabots and other boats in the shop in general were the subject of a conversation between Barbara Toynbee (who was a school trustee) and me at a school open house and exhibition. The result was an advertisement in the "Driftwood" inviting any person interested in sailing to meet at the Toynbee home. At this meeting great enthusiasm was displayed by all and a small group of officers was chosen. But nothing happened! After a month, or so, a second meeting was held, this time at the home of Dave and Carol Rainsford, and a slightly changed group of officers was resuscitated, once again to languish in the warm Island sunshine.

Meanwhile, back in the Industrial Education Shop of the Secondary School, the fifteen Sabots had reached completion by the Woodwork /Metalwork 9 class. Having built the boats with the students I then faced the problem of teaching the builders to sail. The problem was eased somewhat by one or two students having been members of the Sea Scouts. The teaching of sailing to 15, or so, raw beginners was accomplished by giving all the budding sailors an hour or two of sailing time in small keel boats. The boats used were "Sonsy", owned by Marshall and Nora Sharp, and "Clarion" owned by Aileen and me. "Clarion" had been built in a crash program when I realized the way we were headed, and I needed something reliable I could depend on to teach sailing. Clarion was similar in concept to a boat I had designed and built at Hermitage Academy as the prototype of an instruction boat for Dunbarton County Council Education Committees lifetime sports program. This was based on my experience as a coach and sailing master at Inverclyde, the Scottish National Recreation Centre,

After their initial experience the embryo sailors were put in their Sabots and pushed off. Aileen sailed round like a mother duck with her brood, while I initially circulated in the Sea Scout Lightning. For the loan of the Lightning I had to spend the previous winter rebuilding it. The scouts then promptly dropped it on a rock, and I repeated the rebuild the following year. While Aileen demonstrated, I coached the 'saboteurs'. We had a great time; marks were laid to give positive direction to the sailing, and before we realized we were racing. This was conducted off Alex Shelby's Ganges Marina. Alex very kindly gave us a dock (if we could keep it afloat) and space. The following year we obtained docks from Ladysmith and more space from Alex.

At this point Warren Hastings and Harold Dibnah of the Harbour's End Boatyard offered a trophy to the School District for sailing. A third (and to me final) meeting was held by the previously mentioned sailing group. At this meeting I suggested, for want of anything else happening, that they might like to sponsor the Sabot racing and an open regatta for the trophy. This suggestion was not greeted with enthusiasm: "someone will be drowned," and "they will be luffed up the beach" were some of the comments. Obviously, our sailing efforts were not held in high regard, or had not been seen.

Faced with such enthusiastic support, we just had to hold our regatta, but it was a strictly local affair. The day was also cold and wet. Jim Pringle won the four-race event and we met a little kid from the Elementary School for the first time - Mike Cannon. Mike became one of our best skippers and for some years later in life, he ran the Royal Victoria YC junior program. "Racing" continued through the fall and sixteen more sabots were started. The cost (\$100 complete ready to sail) perhaps helped their popularity.

Over the winter 69 / 70 we decided to go big time. We joined the Canadian Yachting Association and thus recorded the name "Saltspring Island Sailing Club" (the name I had given the school club), for the first time on an official document. The name sounded more imposing than some of the alternatives. We had two members the first year and had a 100% increase by the second year when Marshall and Nora Sharp were added to our membership list. Naturally, we then had to have a constitution and a burgee. The constitution was simple to deal with, but the burgee was more of a problem.

After scratching around and finding most of the simpler designs already being used, I hit upon the idea of the loosely adapted and stylised elephant from the coat of arms of the County of Dunbarton. I had used this as the trade mark to identify canoes and dinghies I had been producing with students at Hermitage Academy and for Dunbarton County Council's Outdoor Centre. The field of the flag was blue and the elephant white. "White elephants" and starting and underwriting the running of a sailing club seemed, in my mind and wallet, to produce the same result - poverty. Jeannete Larson sewed a prototype for us and for some years made them for club members. The original burgee was also painted on each Sabot's quarters. The HMS Ganges elephant was quite coincidental - I only found out about it a year later when I discovered why a local restaurant (now gone) was sometimes called the White Elephant and sometimes the Ganges Crest. Most of the Sabots, at that time, sported major and spectacular works of art on their transoms. These paintings helped relieve the boredom of Sabots and El Toros belonging to other clubs while following our Sabots round the racing course.

At the beginning of 1970 to feel out the opposition Aileen and Robert, my older son, sailed in the Royal Victoria Yacht Club's Inter-city regatta and took first and second places respectively, in the Sabot class, without being "luffed up the beach." There was some consternation when the two Saltspring sabots passed the lead El Toros which had started ten minutes earlier. This event led to a long and happy relationship with R.V.Y.C. members and the girls of Strathcona School. The next event was held at Elk Lake Sailing Club - everybody went, but the ferry was late, and the event started without us. We had to settle for Aileen and Jim Pringle finishing in fifth and sixth places. Not bad with some forty boats racing and one race over before we arrived. The next year I took the boats over the evening before and rigged them for the kids. Since that event, except in one regatta, a Saltspring Sabot won every Sabot-event we entered. The one regatta was the National Championship which we held for the Canadian Sabot Association. One notable thing came of this event in Michael Cannon placing fourth and Alex Neish placing fifth in his first year of sailing. ( Vancouver hot shot, "That kid is doing everything wrong, but he is still going faster than me!" )

In the balmy days of the early seventies Sabots carried the name and burgee of our small club off-island to some fourteen or more regattas a year, hosted by clubs all over B.C. Th Island Centennial Committee presented a trophy for annual competition. The sailing standard became incredibly high. Our main transportation device was a trailer which carried six Sabots and their gear. This became the terror of many a B.C. ferry crew and the nemesis of at least three cars I owned, or fell heir to, during that period. At the Secondary School, Sabots came off the line like liberty ships, the total eventually reaching one hundred at the last count. We branched out into Flying Juniors, Fireballs and OK's for student and others.

The original Sabots were built to the available Canadian Sabot drawings with the hull tweaked within the class measurement rules to produce a faster boat. These had the short fore deck and were a little wet to sail. There were two main differences beyond the hull. The drawings had called for ½ inch plywood rudder and dagger board. Ours were initially ¾ inch laminated mahogany and carefully shaped to produce a boat which could sail higher on the wind. These boards were eventually laminated in spruce and reached 1 ¼ inches (fat is fast). The second and perhaps more critical feature was the masts. The drawings called for a rather stout spar made from a base of a 2 x 4. Our masts started as a 2 x 3 and were tuned to the skipper's weight and to the sails. These masts were described as "elegant broomsticks" by some of our competitors. As the skipper grew heavier often the mast was traded to a younger skipper in exchange for a stiffer spar with the older heavier student helping the younger one to make the new spar. Great attention was given to mast position and shroud adjustment.

Towards the end of the second production run, I built my only wooden sabot for Aileen's Christmas present. It was a radical re-think in decking of the boat. This boat became the model for future hulls and led to a second plug and mould. It was shown by the Canadian Sabot Association on their stand in the Vancouver Boat Show as the only wooden boat in that year's show. We turned down an offer of \$1,000 for it. Its name was "Hot Pants" - you can work out the then popular attire for females. Its transom was adorned with a scantily clad female followed by a dragon breathing flames in the appropriate area of her anatomy.

All this sailing and boat building by students started to attract shady characters who lurked at the Industrial Education Shop door, noses twitching in the polyester scented breeze, or else they slipped from piling to piling on the Shelby docks on sailing afternoons, trying to be as unobtrusive as a Saltspring deer, looking for the last rose bush in a Scott Point garden. Most were parents and friends who formed a loose supporter's group. Some became the Flying Junior builders. It also produced a character who went about trying to buy up these fast Sabots and sell them off Island in a market like that commanded by early nylon stockings.

In the Gulf Islands Secondary shop, we had branched into building Flying Juniors and other dinghies. This led to racing these on Wednesday evenings and to holding annual regattas twice a year and to sailing in off Island events. We were successful in our efforts in these. To the extent that in a regatta put on by the private schools we were told to leave our boats at home and the host school, Brentwood College, would provide the boats. We finished up winning all three classes Sabot, Laser and Flying Junior. We were not invited the next year!

Our two open regattas a year were well supported by other clubs, but cruisers showed a decided reluctance to race except Marshall Sharp and myself who would race any boat that appeared in the harbour whether the other boat realized it was racing or not. Phone conversations in the summer tended to run - Marshall, "There is a really interesting boat going down the harbour." - Lawrie, "I will be there in five minutes". There were a lot of 5.00 handicap boats in those days.

The friends, parents and associates eventually prompted me to try the idea of a sailing club other than in its existing format. Another conversation with Barbara Toynbee produced another advertisement in the "Driftwood" and another meeting, the fourth, again in the Toynbee house. The group met with representatives of the Saltspring Island Sailing Club, me (as Commodore) and Arthur Buitenwerf (as Fleet Captain) present. After much discussion, for the fourth time, the people present again decided to form a sailing club. Various names were suggested, Saltspring Island Sailing Club being the most popular. I pointed out that the name was already in use. After some more talk the group voted to ask the Saltspring Island Sailing Club to expand their membership to adults other than the Commodore and his wife. Arthur and I were asked to conduct negotiations on the group's behalf and report back. Saltspring Island Sailing Club, after much discussion on the dangers of adults in clubs, voted to accept the members of the group en-mass provided that all active juniors, as they would be, retained their full voting rights. Arthur and I reported back the results to the group and the conditions were accepted. Along the road to the club this condition disappeared.

The Club at this point entered the second phase in its development. With the experience of three failed meetings, I declined the Commodore's position, preferring to be secretary and thereby not lose track of the mail should the Club fold. The second Commodore was Dave Smith, Fire Chief). The club was very much a family orientated affair. This was reflected in the second constitution drawn up by Bill Hood and me with much borrowing from the R.C.Y.C. and R.V.Y.C. etc. It was still predominantly junior, and sabot and dinghy based. Picnics were common and attended by the whole Club. The ladies of the Club decided to learn to sail. Wednesday evening classes were arranged for them. Aileen described this as an interesting experience!

When Marshall finally lost the battle with his heart, friends of Marshall, Peter Grain, Cliff Hatch, Gus Reuter and others approached me with the thought of putting up a trophy in his memory. Earlier, when I heard that "Sonsy" was being sold, I had asked Nora Sharp if I could have Sonsy's name board as a keepsake and gave a simpler name board in exchange for it. I suggested to the would-be donors that her name board would make the basis for a good trophy. I donated the name board and the shield /transom to mount it on. So, the donors got off lightly! The trophy was originally intended for a Sabot multi-stage race around Saltspring Island (the Ramsay brothers had circumnavigated the Island the previous year on a raft). We had enough Sabot trophies and sense prevailed. The result was the "Round Saltspring Race" almost in its present form, except it was "Around Saltspring Race" and was open to all boats including dinghies. The race did more to get cruisers out racing than anything else.

The third stage in our Club's development was triggered by the Royal Vancouver Yacht Club's purchase of the Scott Point Marina when my friend Reg Taylor decided to retire. Most of our Club cruisers kept their boats at this Marina along with other non-members of the Club. To reduce this to a minimum story, we held a meeting in Central Hall where all the refugee non-members joined, and we started getting serious about finding a property. This had been talked about for some time, but it took the threat of becoming homeless to make it a priority. The result of this was the club was swamped and its basic thinking changed from active sailing to providing moorage. The original members now were suddenly a minority

At this point the Club the on most members will be aware of the Club's progress if they have read the record of acquiring the original property, its financing and dockage being built.

To Aileen and me one unfortunate and sad thing was that in the pressure to acquire our property resulted in the resigning of almost all the original members. There were two reasons for this exodus of members many of whom had spent considerable energy and financial expenditure in building the club. A draft of a new constitution proposed that there would be two classes of members and the juniors lost their vote. The second class of members were also not to have vote. Only debenture holders were to be first class members and have voting rights. Fortunately, this was discarded but the damage had been done. A second issue there was no provision was provided for, or, envisaged in the future for the dinghies. The result was the Saltspring Island Sabot Club. Saltspring Island Sailing Club's attempt at a junior sailing program failed basically because its promoters seemed

unable to maintain their commitment beyond a couple of weeks. This happened in two consecutive years. The Sabot Club continued quite happily. A year or so later I wrote a letter to the executive of our club pointing out that I was a grandfather, white haired, and one of the youngest members of the club and that it lacked juniors and young people. Wayne Pearce as an executive member took up my suggestion that the club should accept the Sabot Club seniors as members in exchange for the Sabot Club's boats and gear, etc. and thus reintroduce junior sailing. This was successful for some time but unfortunately, it dwindled, and the club has not developed a junior program to the level it reached previously

One major difference between the original program and subsequent attempts at junior sailing was that the boats were almost all built and maintained by their skipper. They were kept in immaculate condition – never stood in ashore and never dragged up a beach. There was a pride in their ownership. There were two boats which were funded by the SIPARC these were loaned to skippers and were maintained by the skipper while in their care in the manner of the example set by the others. This care was reflected in the club's race results.

An aside. The first Sabot, John, Jeff and Arthur's "Aeolius" is now reputed buried along with its second owner under the ash of Mount St. Helens at Spirit Lake - perhaps the ultimate Viking Funeral. Whether this is true or not I cannot vouch for but neither the Sabot, or its owners, can be found!

My second term as Commodore saw the beginning of the fourth phase of the Club's development. At this time the Club was facing the problem of slippage of the then only driveway and the danger of the garage and A frame disappearing down the creek. This was caused by the creek scouring (ten feet in one year) the road / beach access to our north-west. We were having problems with the Ministry of Highways doing nothing, or allowing us to do anything, about the problem. Our neighbour was not the best of help and attempted to lay the blame for the problem on the Club. He had suffered a substantial slip of his property into the creek. One evening after an executive meeting in a conversation with Gary Greico, the then secretary, I casually remarked that it would pay us to buy the property on the south east side, if it was ever for sale, and just move south away from the creek. There were no "For Sale" signs. The following morning in my office, I received a call from Gary to the effect that the property was for sale and he had the listing. Gary indicated if we were to go for it, he would donate his fee to the club. At that time the price was less than the estimate to rip rap the creek.

The pitch presented to the members was that the additional property allowed a larger moorage base to support the land part in addition to moving away from the problem of the creek with the related silting of the inshore docks in the area of the pier. The members approved. In the following year Richard Larson, Rear Commodore, and I led work parties to refurbish the existing docks and adding more to flush out the then water lease. This almost doubled our moorage space. When told by the treasurer that the reason we had empty pilings was there was no money, I asked members on the wait list for moorage to prepay, if they were willing, to prepay \$1,500 for moorage and sold and built the lot. We only required half of the wait list to achieve this as teach dock had two sides – the second side was generating income .

I presented the "pitch" for an increased water lot to the Advisory Planning Committee and received unanimous approval. The history of the Club and its junior program had considerable influence on their decision.

While the purchase of property and refurbishment of docks were going on, we finally made progress on the creek situation. On the advice of our MLA I contacted the Ombudsman's Office regarding the situation. The Ombudsman, Scotty Gardner, found the MOTH 75% responsible and the Club and our neighbour responsible for 12.5% each. With a new bid on the riprap our cost was under \$7,000

During my time as Vice Commodore and Commodore I spent considerable time on weekends working with a bobcat (Robin Reid) draining both the original and new properties which as the garage and the A frame are still there, seems to have been successful.

At this point I had become heavily involved in the Artspring project which I had been working towards since 1977/8, as the project reached "critical mass" Unfortunately, in the Club some direction was lost in the following three years. The junior program and dinghies disappeared.

## **AILEEN**

None of this would have been possible without Aileen who ran the family with an “absent” husband. In this I consider myself very fortunate and have to say the kids turned out well thanks to her. When we met, I found that besides her other attributes she was a very good helmsman (person!) and the story goes that I took out the opposition by marrying it. We spent our courting time polishing a National Hornet class dinghy and building a Black Diamond class fin keel boat. Very romantic!

Aileen set an example for the kids on the water, both in skill and manners, and did considerable teaching and coaching. Her demeanor was reflected in the kid’s attitude in competition. One sailing afternoon I was approached by a stranger who turned out to be from a large San Francisco yacht club which raced one of the Sabot variants. who told me that he had been watching our sailing and that it was the best display of sportsmanship and in sailing skill he had witnessed anywhere. This resulted in a formal invitation to travel south but the cost did not allow it. Aileen participated in events and was the boat to beat until the best kids developed their skills. Later, as the students grew and became heavier, he regained her position. Fortunately, our own kids seemed to like sailing for some reason, so I did get to see them!

Additionally, that I survived in the classroom is more than a little due to Florence Hepburn (Commerce and maths) assigning my older daughter, Doreen, to me as a secretary and Doreen’s typing speed, somewhere in excess of 100 wpm, and ability to read my handwriting

## **BOATS**

### ***Boat production run GISS...***

100 sabots 98 fibreglass, 1 wood  
4 Flying Juniors Fibreglass  
1 Fireball - Alan Menzies wood  
1 OK wood  
Clarion wood/glass

### ***Boat Production Run at Hermitage and Bearsden Academies***

*Note...Scottish physical education emphasised life time recreation activities, Hermitage was a leader in this and the D of E Award programs*

4 GP 14 class for Dunbarton County Council Education Outward Bound/Outdoor Lifetime Sports Centre.  
3 Albacore class from kits wood hot moulded  
1 Hermitage one design. 20 ft. cold moulded.  
2 Flying 15s cold moulded  
1 Black Diamond class wood glass  
RAF  
2 GP 14

### ***Pre-College***

4 GP 14  
1 Wild Fowling gun punt!

I should point out that I had a lot more going on than building Sabots and accidentally starting a sailing club. My school day started before 8 am and ran until after 2.30 pm. The shop ran lunch times and I became addicted to cold tea. I was teaching thirteen industrial and maths courses in eight blocks with no preparation time - all but two courses were new to me and required notes and prep. I had taught engineering in Scotland. I ran the “shop” after school until 5 pm went home for supper and returned to open the shop at 6.30 until 9 pm. This kept kids, working on other projects in addition to the Saboteurs, off the street – the lights burned late!

In the evenings the sabot mould was prepped – washed, polished, waxed and the fibre glass cut. Experience in glass work was gained by making the flotation tanks and dagger board trunk. The gel coat was sprayed on Friday evening and the hull laid up Saturday. The hull taken from the mould late Sunday evening or Monday morning.

After layup in the evenings and weekends each boat hull was finished by the owner which usually took around three to four weeks of class time and overtime after school for the originals to reach ready to varnish and fit out. The dagger board, rudder, mast and boom were made in class time (Woodwork 9) The metal fittings were completed in class time (Metalwork 9). This was the justification for building sabots as part of the Woodwork and Metalwork 9 courses.

We were also building dune buggies (11), go karts, etc. and were also winning design contests in the usual shop projects. The teacher training unit at UBC made annual visits to show their students what could be achieved in a somewhat primitive Industrial Education shop.

## **THE SABOTEURS**

When I came to Saltspring I had been told that the Island students were not overly industrious and the Outer Island students less so!! I did not find them so. I suspect they were not overly enthused making cribbage boards and the like. The standard of work produced was very high in the view of government inspectors and they won many awards. As the Saboteurs turned out, four became doctors, three captains and one an inspector for Norsk Veritas. Several work in the marine industry and others went to the Coast Guard College and the RCN. There was a predominance of Honour Roll students and to work and travel with them was a pleasure.

All built their own boats—girls and boys. This was before girls in Industrial Education by quite some years. They worked in lay up teams of three – the boss whose boat it was to be, the second who did most the “joe” layup and the third who was the apprentice gofer. Next boat saw a new gofer, the previous second became boss. Parents also often helped on the layup.

The later boats from #40/45 onwards became much more demanding of the builder as the woodwork became more sophisticated.

I spent a lot of time with the sabot kids on Saltspring and the students at my previous teaching appointments building boats and have never regretted it. They were the best.