

Two Master Racers in Woods Hole

Prince Crowell and His Imp

Judith G. Stetson

Based on a story in the Yarmouth Register on Jan. 31, 1957, an article by Gloria Negri in the Boston Evening Globe on July 14, 1971, an article by Bill Abramson in Sport Guide on Sept. 5, 1971, and conversations with Prince Crowell's daughter, Olive Crowell Beverly.

Prince Sears Crowell was born on Christmas Eve 1881, and grew up as one of nine children in a house on Little Harbor in Woods Hole. When he started sailing his 18-foot Knockabout from Woods Hole in 1936, he had already been sailing "ever since I was big enough to hold a tiller."

Prince Crowell won two Knockabout National Championships, one in 1961 and the second in 1965 when he was 83 years old. He won the Cape Cod championship three times and the Woods Hole championship six times. In 1971 he made one concession to modern technology—a fiberglass boat named *Elf*.

"I sailed my wood 18-footer *Imp* until last year," Prince said in 1971. "They were towing all the Knockabouts to the Nationals, but they wouldn't tow the *Imp*. They said she'd pull apart. After all, she's the oldest one, built in 1929."

Prince Crowell
at the helm of *Imp*
in Woods Hole
passage, 1959.
Photo by
Dorothy I. Crossley.



She may have been the oldest one, but she had been kept in the best shape. The designers of the fiberglass Knockabouts took their measurements off *Imp*, discovering in the process that one side was different from the other!

"The fiberglass boat is stiffer and takes the wind better," Prince conceded. "You can carry more sail and the boat stands up better.

"In the first race of the year in the new boat we were second with no hope of catching up. Then one of those big power boats came up from behind and we moved over so it would pass between us and the other boat.

"As he went by we steered directly at his stern and got into his dead water and were carried right past the other boat to win.

"I learned that trick while I was carrying the mail to Naushon Island and Tarpaulin Cove," Prince recalled. "The man who had the mail contract found it was more profitable to take charter parties so I sailed the mail for him. I'd stop at the ship store on Naushon and they'd have a bowl of milk and crackers ready for my lunch."

Prince had that job in the summers of 1899 and 1900. If there wasn't any wind, he would row his catboat, standing and pushing on the oars. Sometimes he would go to Hadley Harbor and walk almost two miles across Naushon to Tarpaulin Cove. But most of the time he was sailing in Vineyard Sound or Buzzards Bay, learning the tidal currents, eddies, and the way of the winds that blew over the waters. In those years, before the Cape Cod Canal opened, the Sound was full of big schooners, few of which had auxiliary power. Prince would sail his catboat right up to a three or four masted schooner and let its dead water carry him along.

Prince had many other tricks. One of his prized pictures showed him stealing the start of a race on port

tack, a risky maneuver which requires great skill and excellent timing. He was an expert on aerodynamics. He knew that a reaching boat gains speed as she hauls to the wind and drags her stern as she turns. He knew how high to point his boat without pinching her, and how to edge even further to windward when a puff came. He would balance his boat before he tacked, like a rider collecting a horse before a jump, then come into the wind slowly and let the boat work herself around.

Here are some more hints he shared at a talk one year: "Keep a record of races: sails used, wind, and any bright or dumb thing that I did and the results obtained. Tune up the skipper as well as the boat. A skipper may be a good light wind skipper but not know how to handle a heavy wind. Trouble may be in the sails. Reduce weight of everything above the water line. Make centerboard and rudder as sharp as possible, to razor blade. Water entering or leaving centerboard box causes drag. Momentum is mass multiplied by velocity squared."

He needed all his tricks against Sam Cahoon. The two were great rivals in the 40s and early 50s before Sam passed away in 1955. Both were masters of their craft. They kept their hulls mirror smooth, their blocks free running, their spars curved, and their sails just taut. They carefully studied the course, the wind and the currents before every race and took instant advantage of every opportunity during the race.

"Sam has a sailboat—that's right, an 18-foot Knockabout sailboat—on his grave," Prince's grandson said in 1971. "And it's facing away from our family plot. He did it so he'd always be ahead of Prince. I guess that with a 15-year head start he should be 25 feet ahead."

Another arch rival was Joe Small, Commodore of the Bass River Yacht Club. The BRYC reported receiving a letter in which "Prince admitted willingly that Joe can beat him in the matter of getting his craft launched

Imp port tacks fleet at start of Cape Cod Knockabout race, 1954, Woods Hole Yacht Club. Photo by Dorothy I. Crossley.



early and leaving it overboard until the ice is ready to flow; however when it comes to the question of getting around buoys first he takes issue with him. Joe claims Prince has one picture of *Imp* beating *Vagabond* around a mark of the course, and he keeps that in a prominent place to keep up his spirits.”

Prince himself had countless stories which highlighted his quick wit and an ability to enjoy the lighter side of

the sailing and racing experiences he was part of for almost a century.

“When the Nationals were at Waquoit Bay a few years back, they gave us lunch and a wonderful time. After we got back I wrote them a nice letter thanking them, but I had only one complaint. It seems that the bottom of the bay was too close to the top of the water when we were racing.”

One of his favorite tales was about a race at Martha's Vineyard. "We were racing from Woods Hole to Edgartown for a regatta there," Prince recalled. "When I got just to the west of East Chop we were way ahead so I turned the boat over to a friend of mine who knew nothing of sailing. I figured that the mainsail was up on one side and the spinnaker was on the other, so I just laid back with my feet over the centerboard box and looked out over Nantucket Sound taking it easy.

"Once in a while I'd glance back and notice that some of the Herreshoff-12's were catching up and then going past us. I knew we were always going past them and couldn't imagine why they were going so much better. I hollered over to one of them as she went past, 'What makes you fellows go so fast?'

"And he answered back that he was anchored and we were drifting. It seems that the tide had shifted and while I was looking over the water and not at the land I hadn't noticed that we were going backwards!"

Prince used to sail catboats quite frequently in his earlier years; three of them were named *Gnome*. He called

his first big catboat *Gem* in order to reuse the letters from his last *Gnome*. He loved to tell the story of his victory in "the biggest catboat race ever held in Woods Hole in 1960."

"I was sailing with Walter Nickerson and he wanted to jibe the turning buoy himself with no help from me. Well, the main caught in a wheel and swung us around. By the time we got squared away four or five boats had gone past us and we were way down. He looked at me and asked what we could do.

"I told him to head for the Tarpaulin shore and use the eddies along the coast for a boost. As it turned out we won the race and it started a big commotion. Seems some of the others thought we'd let them get ahead of us so they wouldn't bother when they saw us going the other way."

Barbara Little, a longtime Woods Hole resident and Knockabout sailor confirms his point. In those classic racing days, her skipper always asked her "What are Prince and Sam doing?"

Judith G. Stetson is a member of *Spritsail's* Editorial Board.