

St. Mary's River Yacht Club



The First 20 Years, 1947 to 1967

By Lani Clark March 8, 2020

- Cover photo: 1952 photo of Christie Clark (left) & me on Dad's Hampton.
- Preface: This is my story, as I remember events. There may be inaccuracies, but none are intentional.
- I obtained permission to use the old county photos from Arcadia Publishing Company, from the book, "St. Mary's County Postcard History Series" by Karen L. Gruber. The county statistics are from the book "History of St. Mary's County 1634 – 1990" by Regina Combs Hammett.
- Our Commodore Bill Fry asked me to talk about how the Clark family ended up here, and what it was like here in the county when I was a child, in addition to the first 20 years of SMRYC. So I'll start with those two items.
 - Kay Singer Clark & Ralph Clark grew up outside NYC in Flushing and Queens, they met at Hofstra College on Long Island.
 - Ralph spent his childhood summers in Huntington Beach L.I. where he learned to sail and raced Lightnings.
 - Kay spent her summers at Camp Killooleet in Vermont.
 - Both were socially outgoing and "go getters". Each had their pilot's license before they graduated from College. In fact, they spent college weekends in the early 1940s traveling the east coast with another couple racing piper cubs!
 - They spent WWII on Oahu, where I was born, working for Grumman Aircraft; Dad supporting the air troops, and Mom as a secretary. Dad raced Lightnings in the ocean on weekends.
 - Grumman transferred Dad to Pax in 1946 when I was a year old and we rented the stucco house on South Snow Hill Manor Road that's next to Rich Paradis' current home.
 - On the other side of Rich's house there was a narrow wooded path down to the beach where we launched our canoe and played on the beach and many watermen kept their boats tied to poles sunk in the mud.
 - South Snow Hill manor Rd was just a 2 lane track in the pine straw through piney woods with 3 or 4 houses farther in.
 - In 1949 my parents bought the lot where our house is and we moved in to the original house in 1950.
 - It was struck by lightning in 1976 and burned down. They built the current house on the old foundation.

St. Mary's County Before the Base

- In the 1930s, steamship travel was still common.
- There were ports at Brome's Wharf (now the Dove Dock), Glen Mary (earlier), & St. Inigoes that handled seafood, farm crops, and passengers.
- In the 1930s & 40s the "Oyster House" at Brome's Wharf was an oyster packing plant.

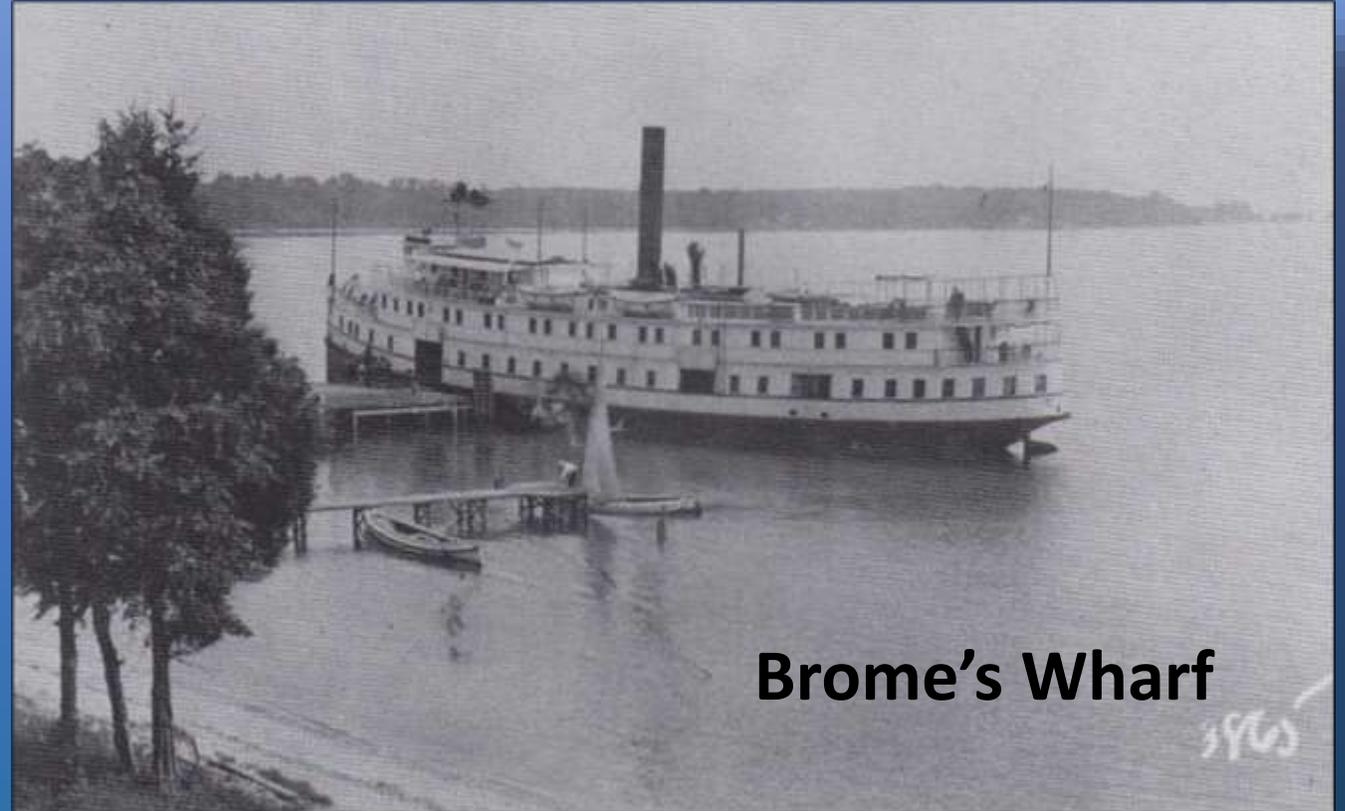


Photo Credit: "St. Mary's County Postcard History Series" by Karen L. Gruber, 2015.

St. Mary's County Before the Base

A “Farmer’s Train” ran intermittently from 1881 to 1928, and was used primarily for farm produce and freight with a few passengers.

- The train was to have run from near DC to Pt. Lookout, but in spite of several starts, adequate funding was never obtained.
- The grading and berms were prepared to Pt. Lookout, but no track was laid south of Millstone Landing, near the base.
- In 1942 it became the train that brought concrete down from Brandywine to build the Base and ran until 1954 when tracks (they had laid lightweight track) became dangerous due to lack of maintenance.

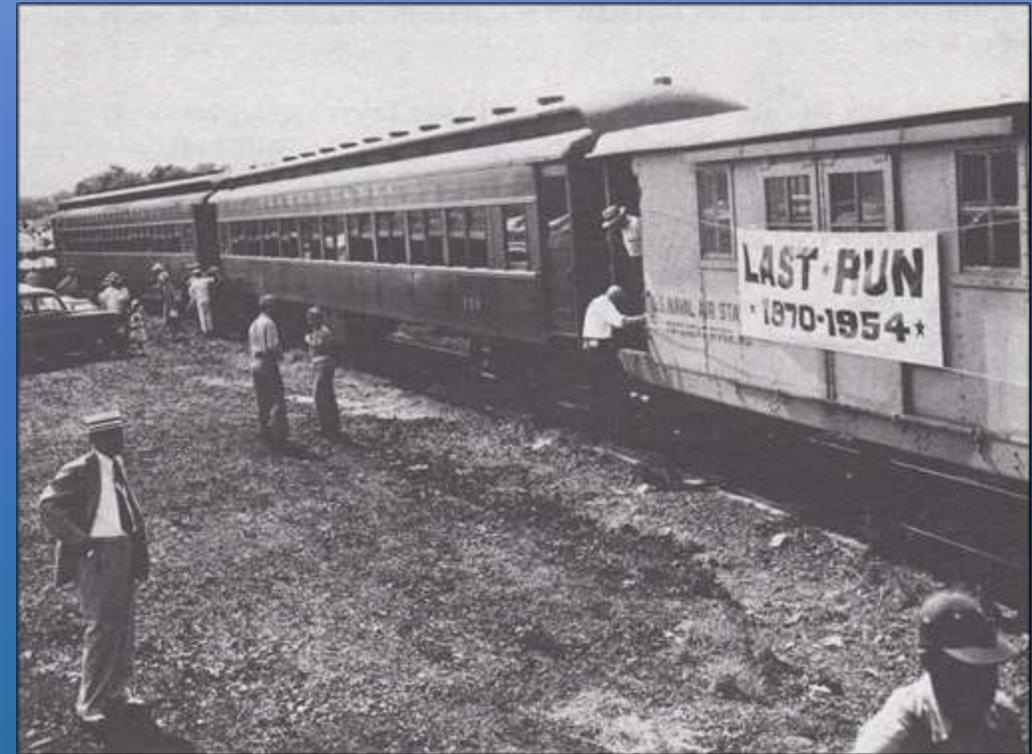


Photo Credit: “History of St. Mary’s County 1634 – 1990” by Regina Combs Hammett.

St. Mary's County Before the Base

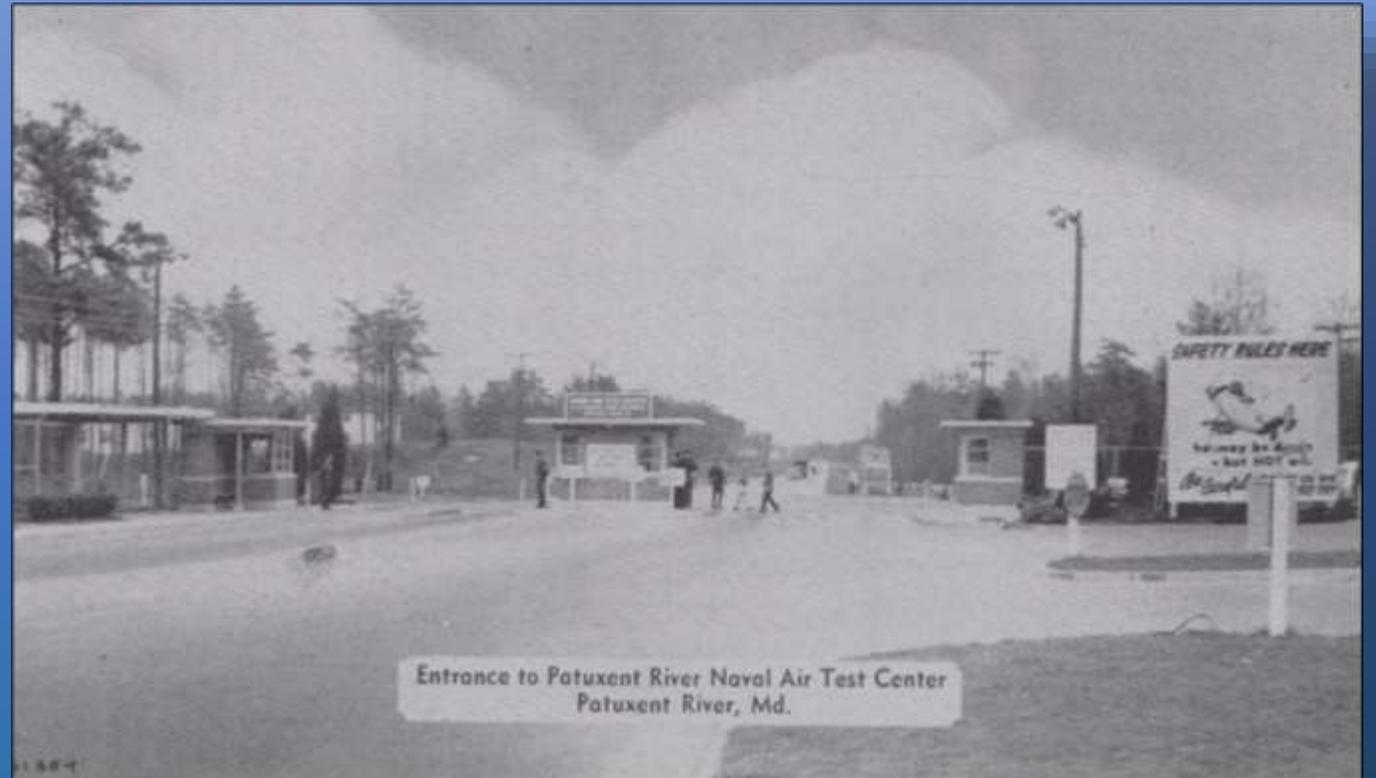
- In 1940, County population was 14,626 (In 1960 = 38,915).
- Route 235 was a narrow 2-lane road through the woods north of where the base is now.
- Electricity also came in fits and starts until SMECO was founded in 1942, and from then on grew steadily to all areas of the county.
- Phones were not fully automated with rotary dials until 1963!
 - In 1946 when we arrived, you called the operator and asked for a number.
 - There were only party lines, with up to 10-12 people on a single line.

A Naval Station in St. Mary's City?

- In 1875 the Secretary of the Navy established a board to explore installing a Naval Station in St. Mary's City!
- Decided it wasn't needed at that time.
- But think how different our river would be now if that plan had been approved....
- WW II focused the need for a testing facility and more options were explored.

NAS Opens in 1943

- 1943 US Naval Air Station opened
- 1945 Naval Air Test Center established
- One traffic light at intersection of 235 & Great Mills Rd



1943 Main Gate, Route 235 & Great Mills Road

Photo Credit: "St. Mary's County Postcard History Series"
by Karen L. Gruber, 2015.

Lexington Park in the 1940s

- It was a new town, founded just outside the base gate, named to honor the WWII aircraft carrier.
- It was essentially just Tulagi Place:
 - Murphy's 5 & 10 cent store
 - A & P
 - Pharmacy
 - The Hub clothing store
- Movie Theater (where the post office is now).
- The Roost Restaurant (corner of Great Mills Rd and Willows Road).



Tulagi Place

Photo Credit: "St. Mary's County Postcard History Series"
by Karen L. Gruber, 2015.

The College in the Early Days



- 1949 St. Mary's Female Seminary was reformed as St. Mary's Junior College.
- 1964 St. Mary's Junior College reorganized as the 4-year St. Mary's College of Maryland.

Route 5, Approaching College in early 1930s

Photo Credit: "St. Mary's County Postcard History Series"
by Karen L. Gruber, 2015.

The College in the Early Days

- In the early 1950s the college had about 250 students; 600 resident students by the 1960s.
- From 1950-59, all students were required to perform in the “Birth of Tolerance”, a 3-day annual program in St. Mary’s City.



Indians & Settlers on Church Point!

Photo Credit: “St. Mary’s County Postcard History Series”
by Karen L. Gruber, 2015.

St. Mary's County in the 1940s & 50s

- Solomon's Johnson Bridge didn't open until 1978 so county was very isolated at the end of the peninsula.
- There were very few recreational opportunities other than the rivers & a golf course on Base.
- Later in the 1950s there was a roller rink, bowling alley, and drive in theater.
- Little League for boys was the only organized sport.

Horseshoe Bend in 1950

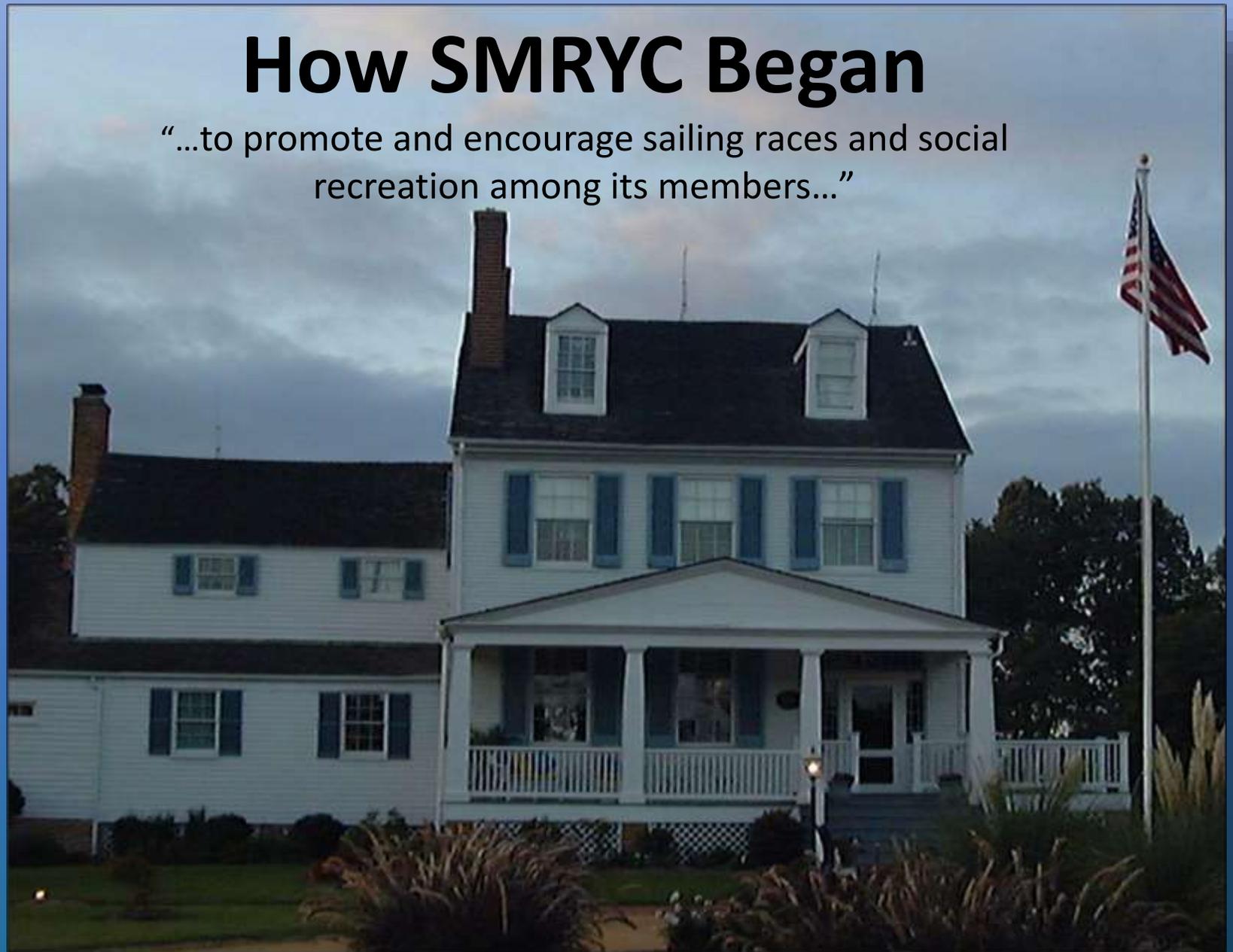
Note the wide sandy beach! It's gone now, water level is higher.

Clark's original house.
Bob White's house is here now.

How SMRYC Began

“...to promote and encourage sailing races and social recreation among its members...”

- On September 27, 1947 thirteen couples who lived around Horseshoe Bend met on the porch at the Brome Howard house to discuss forming a yacht club.
- At that time, the house was located near the state house on the bank above the Dove Dock.
- It was owned by Spence Howard Sr. and his wife.
- In the 1980s (I believe) the house was moved to Rosecroft Road.



Some of the 1949 Founders

Pictured: in rear (l-r):

- Elizabeth Dickey
- Dudley Chase
- Terry Gardiner (& friend)
- Richard Dickey

Center:

- Ruth Chase
- Teresa Gardiner
- Cecile Cherbonnier
- Blanche Howard
- Francis Elwell

Front:

- Victor Cherbonnier
- Spence Howard (holding Gardiner's dog)



**Notice how young everyone is!
Average age of the skippers was 27!**

Founders in 1997 at the 50th Anniversary

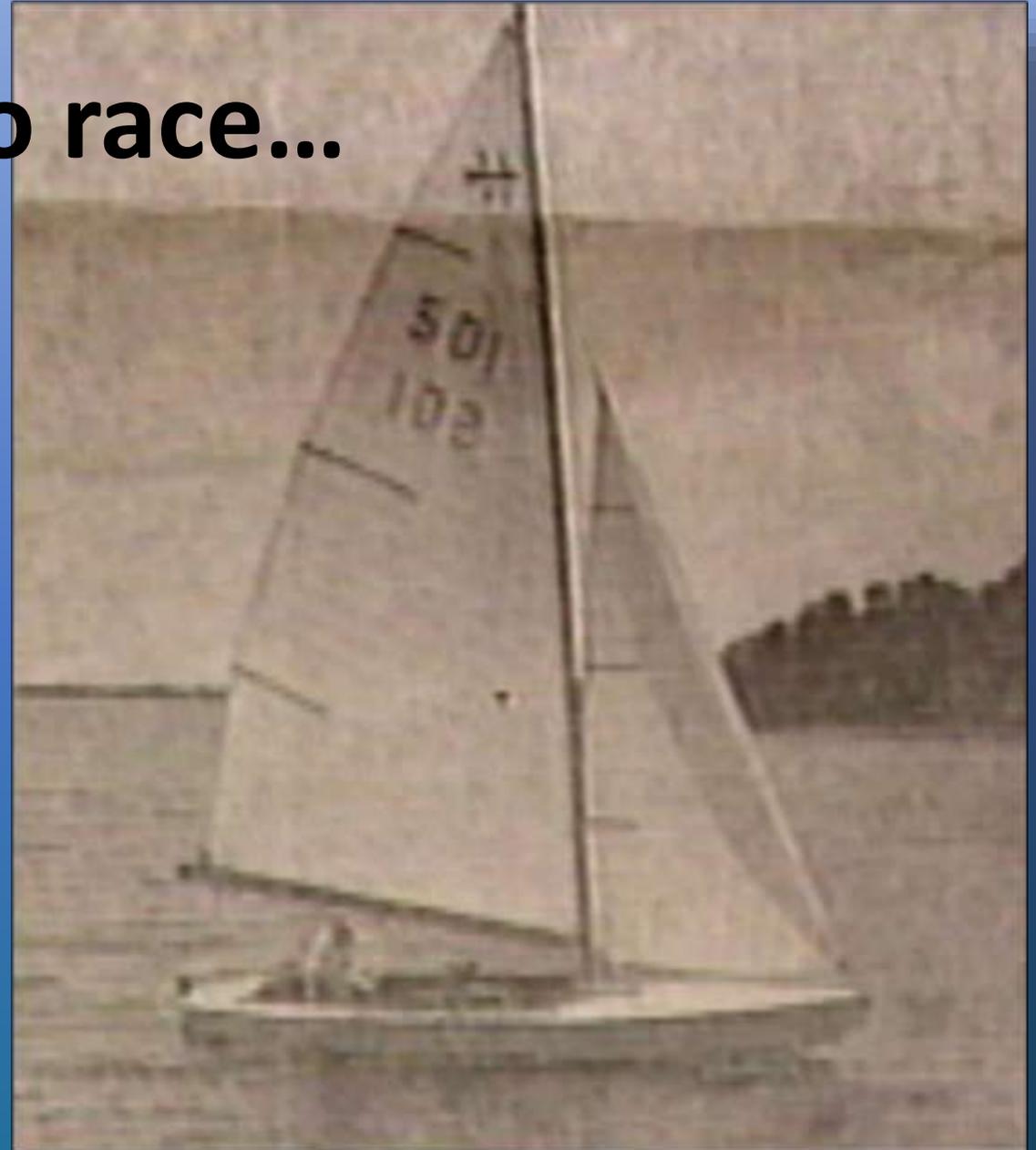
Pictured l-r:

- Ralph Clark
- Spence Howard
- Margaret Fahnestock Lewis
- Kay Clark
- “Doc” Tom Howard

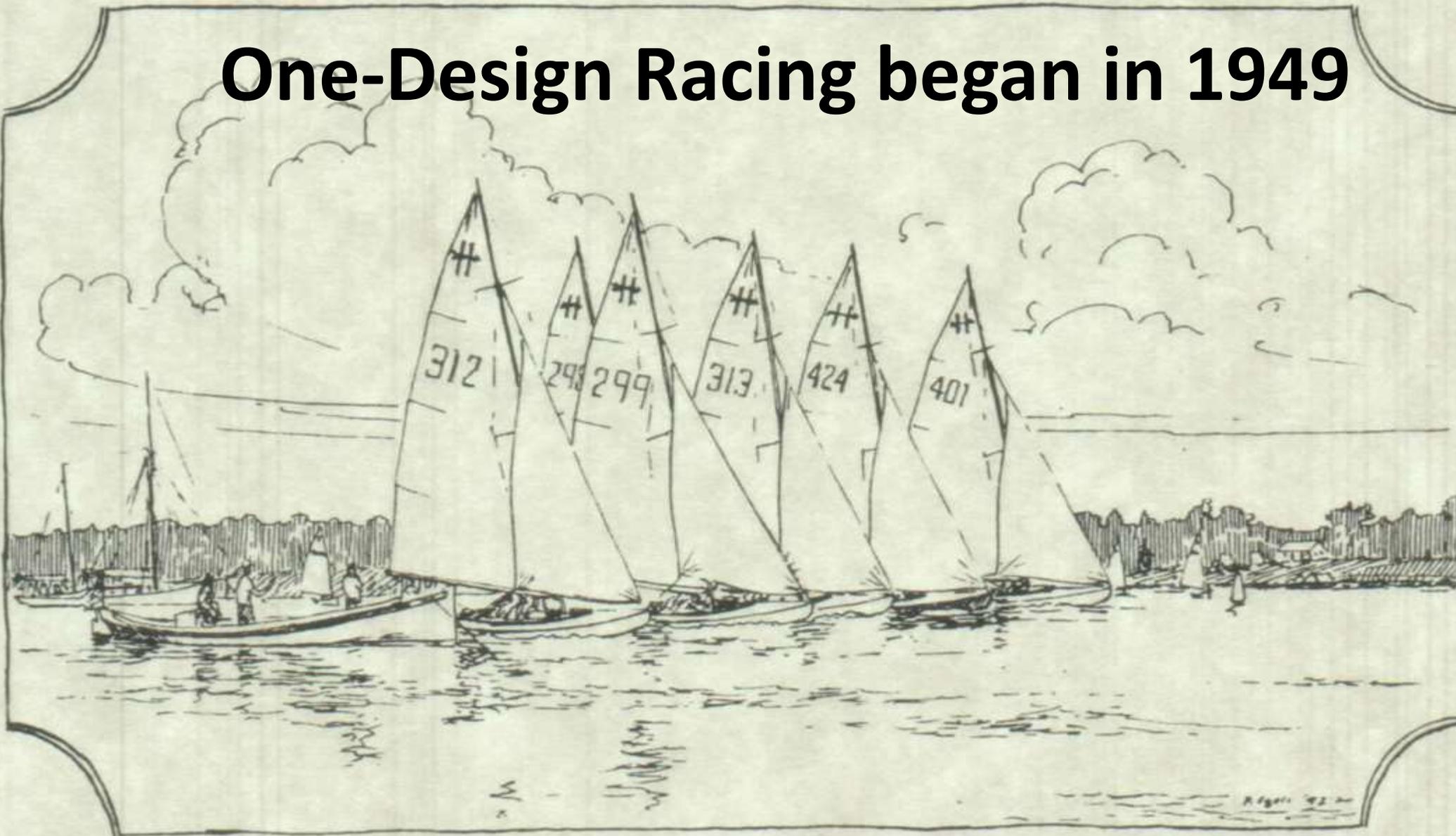


The search for a boat to race...

- Club members all had different boats.
- Racing would be more fun with “one design” boats, so they formed a committee to find a boat for racing.
- In 1948 arranged a purchase of 4 Hamptons from Cambridge Shipyard at a discount.
- More Hamptons were added in 1949, and by late 1950s, the club had 14 boats racing in the fleet.



One-Design Racing began in 1949



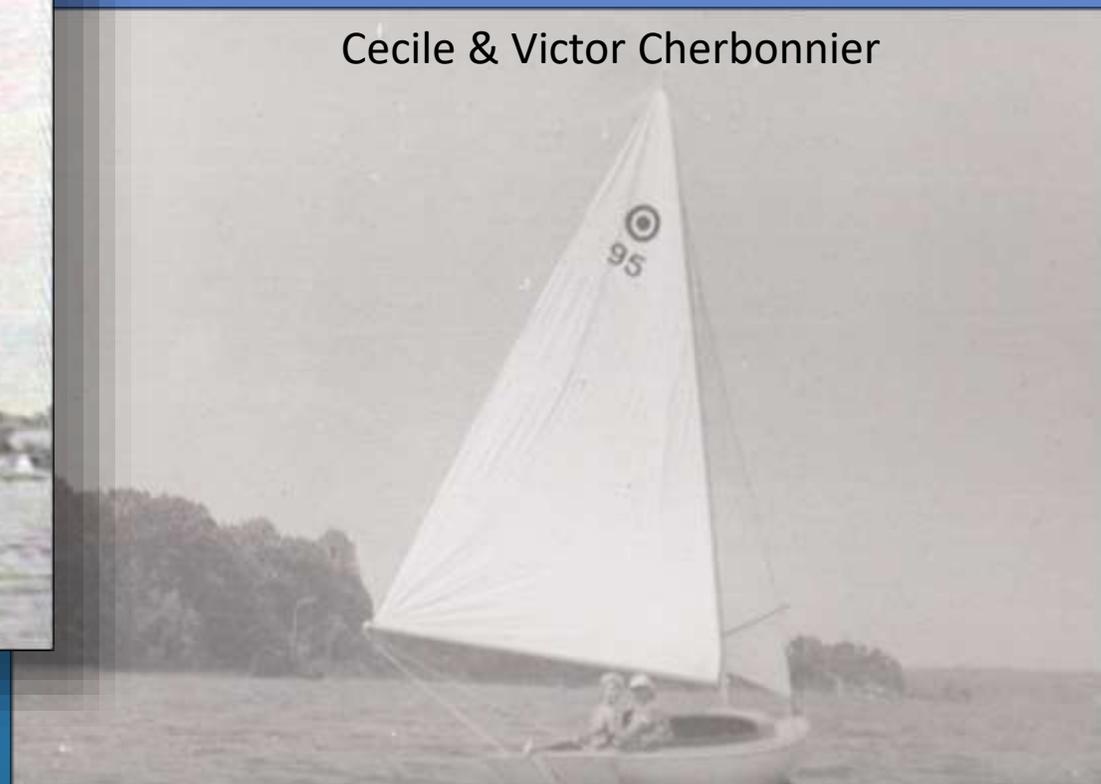
Sketch by Peter Egeli in 1992 of early racing

2 Racing classes: Hamptons & Bullseyes



Hamptons: Wooden, centerboard, 18' long, 2 sails

Bullseyes: Fiberglass, keel, 14' long, 2 sails



Protests began too!

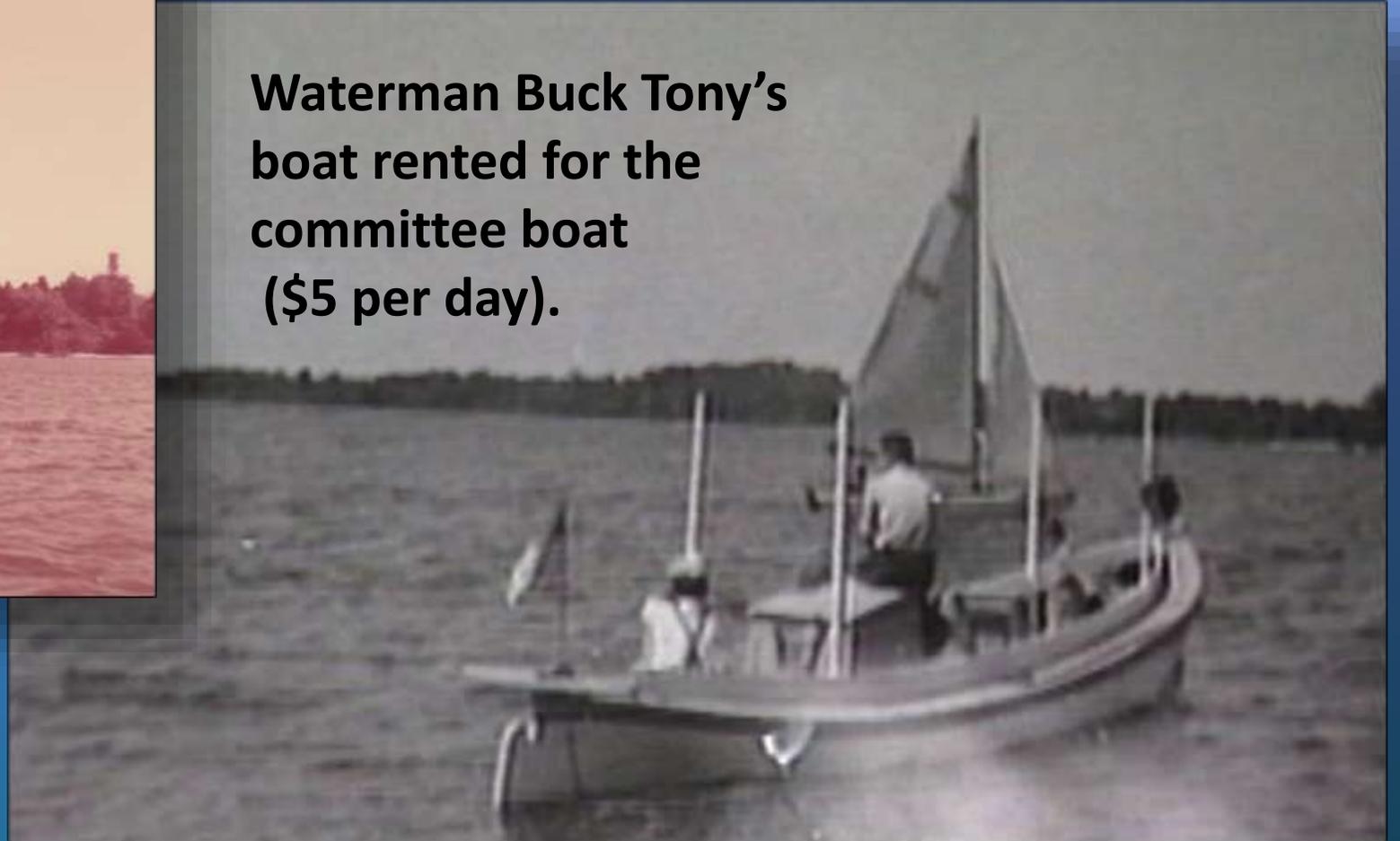
- Held on the Committee Boat
 - Left: Rick (last name unknown)
 - Center: Ralph Clark
 - Right: Spence Howard



1952 Committee Boat



**Waterman Buck Tony's
boat rented for the
committee boat
(\$5 per day).**



1953 Committee Boat

Ralph Clark is left rear, unfortunately the others are unknown.



Other early Committee Boats



Director III



L. to R: Ted Elwell(?), Cecile & Victor Cherbonnier, Blanche Howard(?) in foreground, Ralph Clark, unknown.

1952 Ladies Race



Round Robin and Rigging races were also held every summer.

3 Classes Racing in the 1950s-60s



- 15 Hamptons
- 4 or 5 Bullseyes
- 12 Penguins (added in 1955)

Hampton Regattas were held in the 1950s

- Boats were invited from other clubs around the Bay.
- Visitors launched their boats at the Brome Wharf (now Dove Dock) or the college beach.
- Club members hosted visiting sailors in their homes.
- Friendships were formed throughout the bay clubs.



Hampton Regatta - 1955

Picture from The Enterprise - July 21, 1955



1955 Regatta Winners

- First place trophies presented by RAdm. Dutch Duerfeldt, SMRYC commodore 1969-71, (center) to:
 - Ralph Clark, Hamptons (left)
 - Victor Cherbonnier, Bullseyes (right)



Club sailors also took Hamptons to other clubs' regattas



It was a beautiful day for sailing last Sunday as you can see. The above picture was taken just after the start of the race. Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Clark in boat number 111 went on to victory.

**Solomons Sailing Trophies Taken By
St. Mary's River Yacht Club**

SMRYC competed in the Hampton Nationals in Norfolk for many years

In 1955 Ralph & Kay Clark took a daily first in Hampton #501 at the Nationals (5th place final standing).



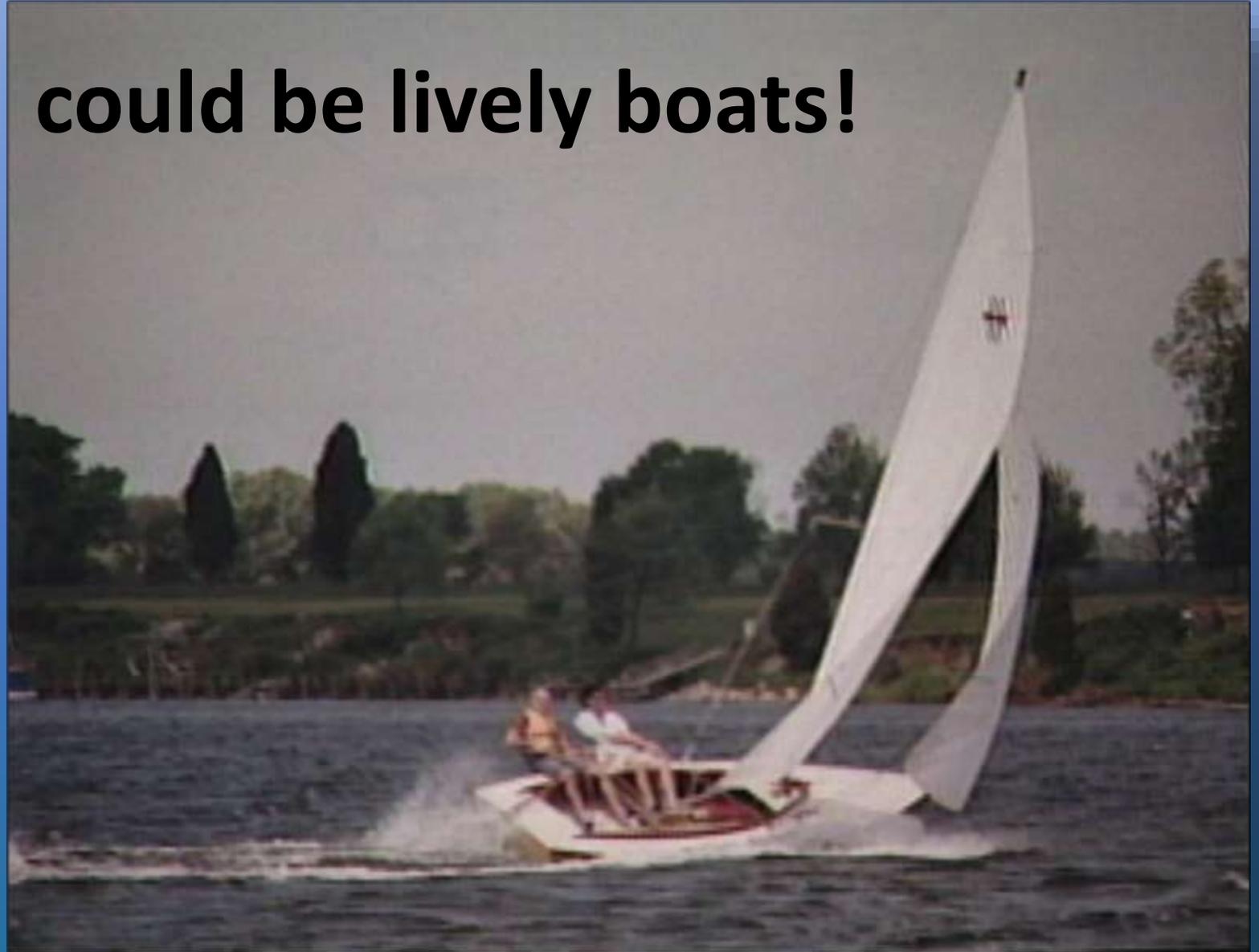
Hampton Nationals in Norfolk

Margaret & Sheridan Fahnestock and friends cruised to Norfolk to watch the racing.



Hamptons . . . could be lively boats!

- Photo: Joe Jennings (skipper) & Brian Tarleton (crew).
- Capsizes were frequent in heavy winds or with crew mistakes.
- Club awarded “Upside Down” trophies almost annually!

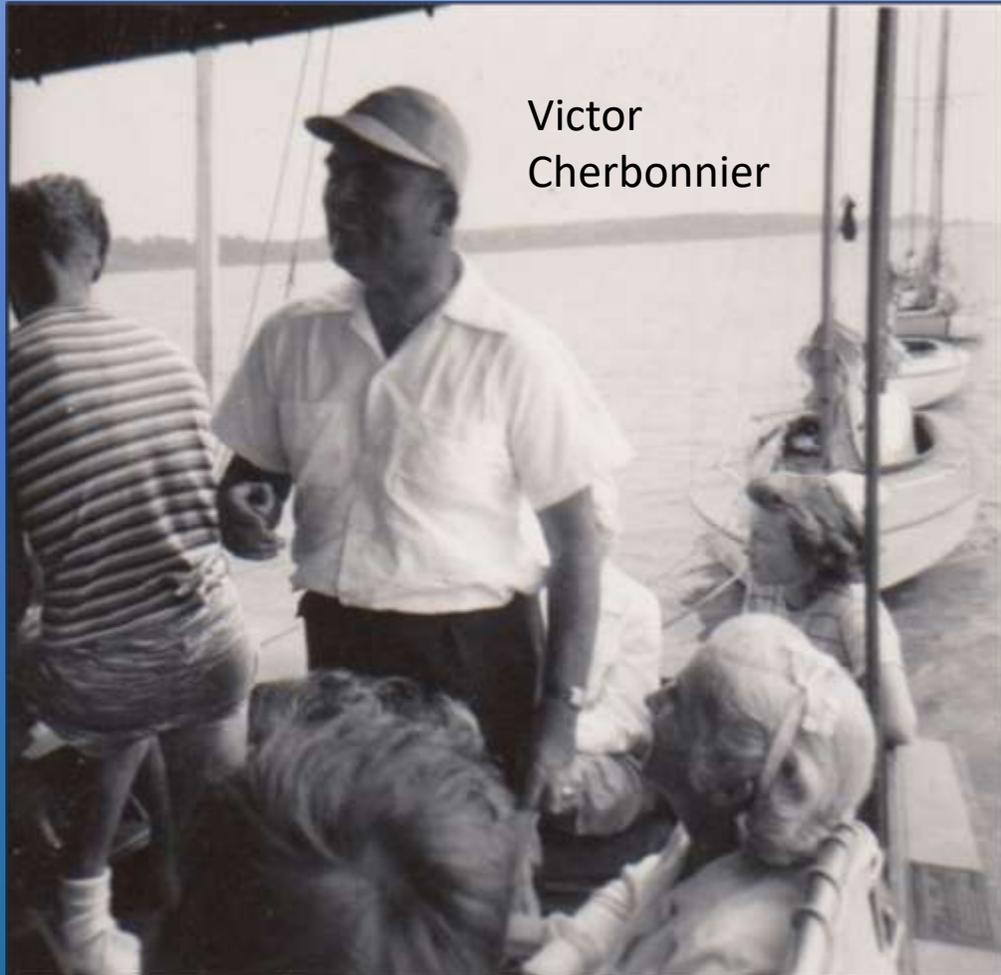


A Hampton trapeze was added in the 1960s

- In 1964 Lani tried out the trapeze, crewing for her Dad, Ralph Clark.
- Unfortunately, later that summer, crewing for Tommy Thompson in the Nationals in Norfolk, she tipped over his boat by being out on the trapeze when the boat was wind-shadowed!



Hamptons were frequently towed from the finish line to the rendezvous held immediately after the racing.



Speaking of a Rendezvous...

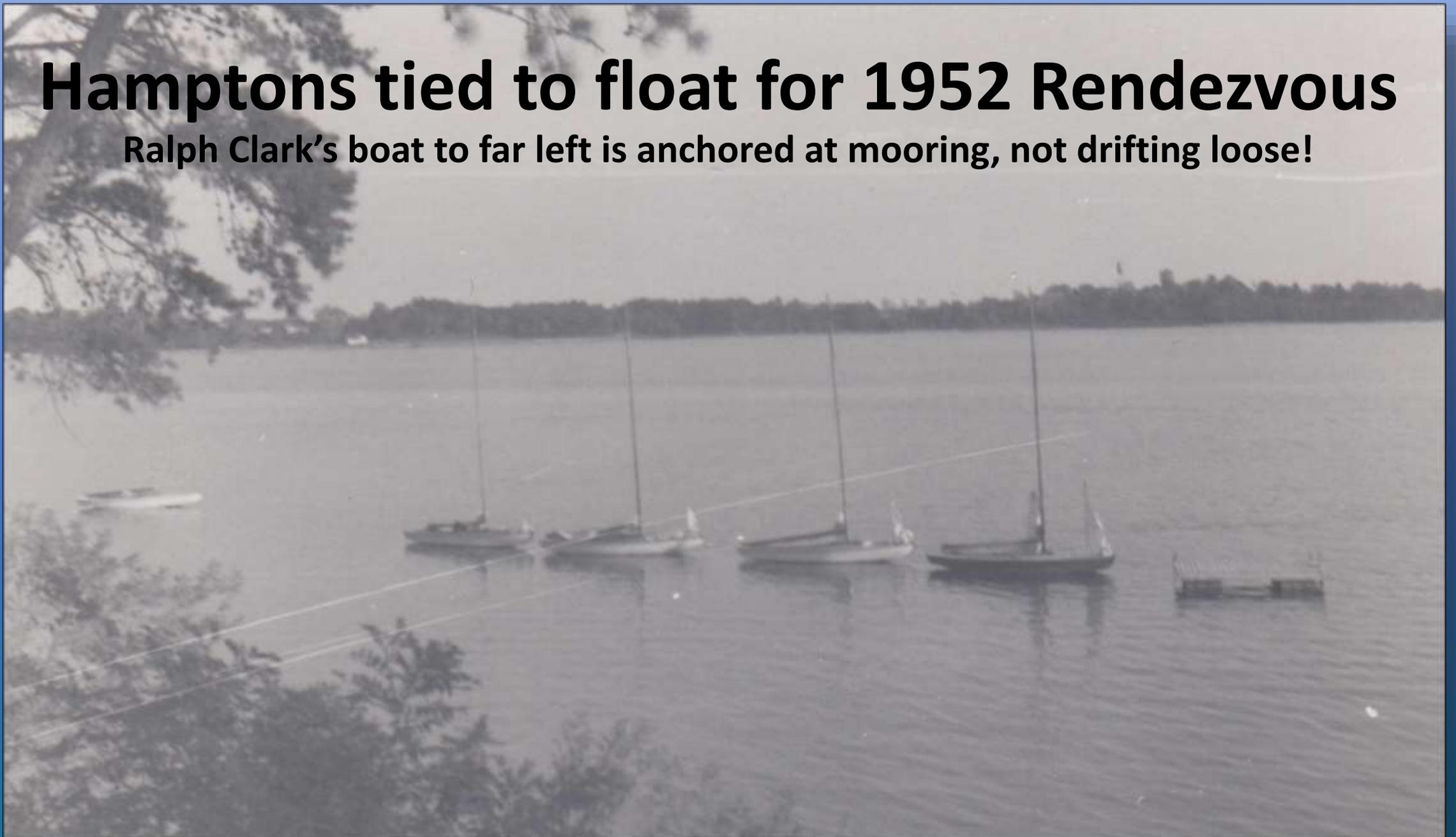


1952 at Clark's Windward Mark (note the elegant seating: boat cushions on cement blocks and boards).



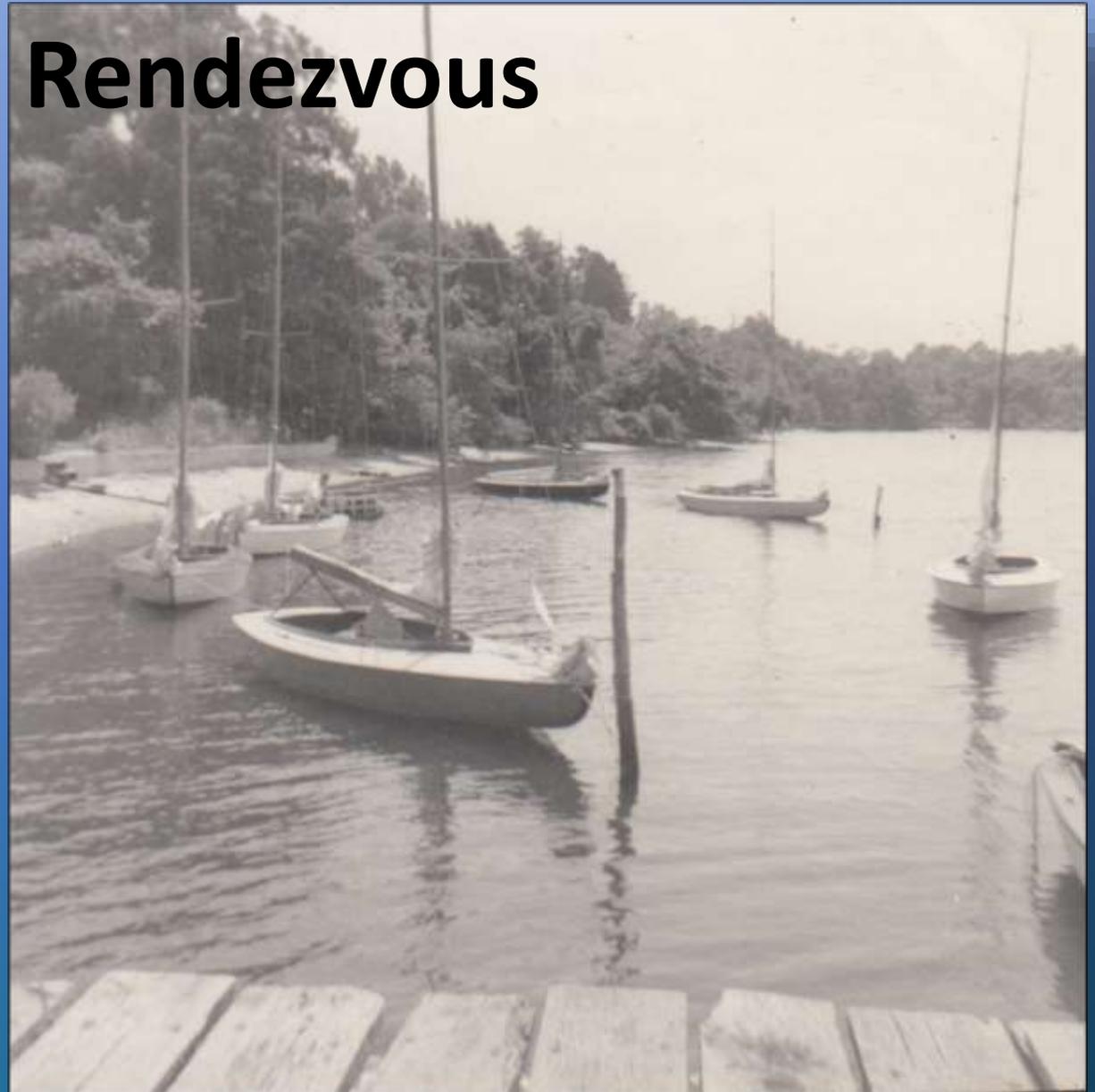
Hamptons tied to float for 1952 Rendezvous

Ralph Clark's boat to far left is anchored at mooring, not drifting loose!



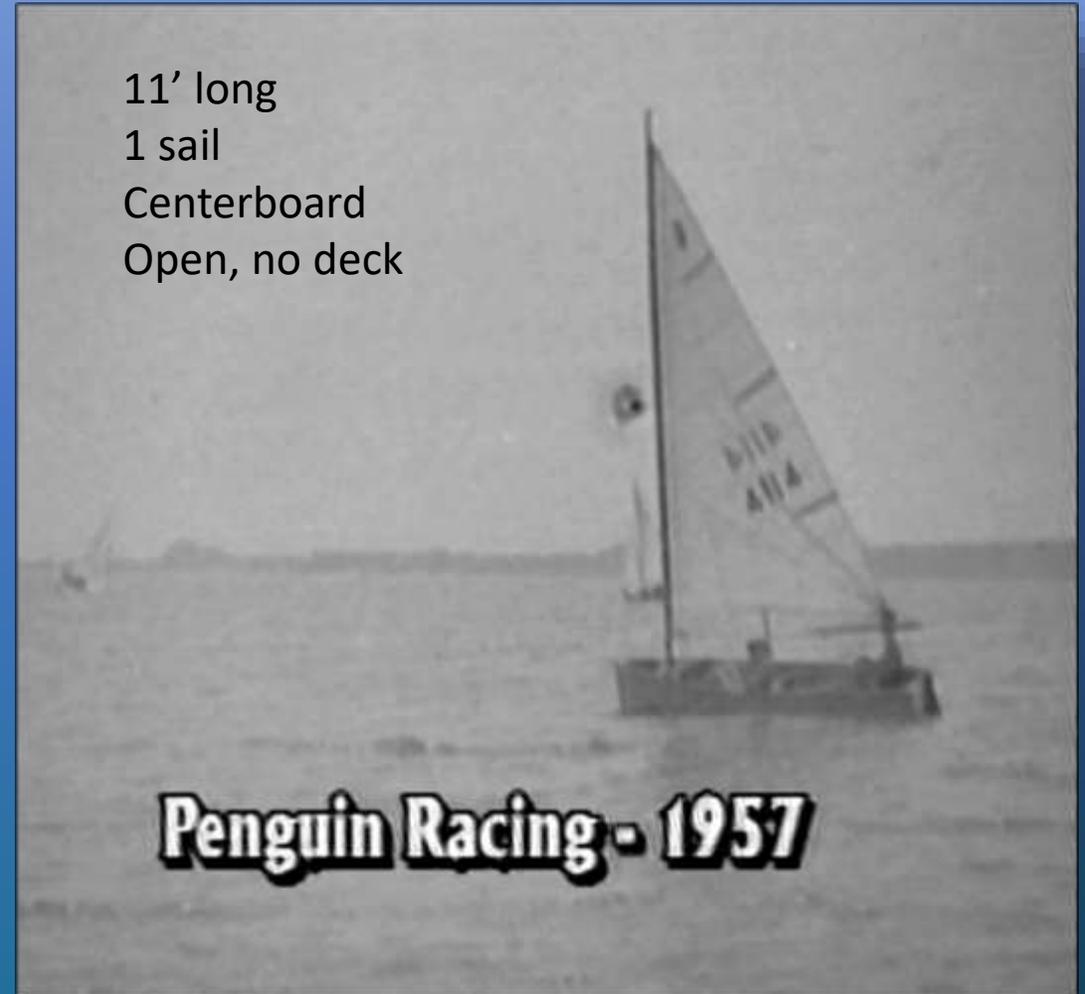
1950s “Oyster House” Rendezvous

- Hamptons anchored at Brome Wharf for a rendezvous.
- The “Oyster House” was frequently used by the club in the early 1950s.
- Note the wide beach in the background.



A Penguin Fleet was added in 1955

- One design dinghy, class grew to 12 boats in late 1960s.
- Raced by junior members, aged 8 and older:
 - Clarks
 - Paradis
 - Leopard
 - Fahnestocks
 - Jones
 - Hodgsons
 - Leppers
 - Taylors
- Penguins were used for college's first sailing classes—started by Helen Paradis & Kay Clark.



Penguin Juniors



Patsy Jones above, Kathy (now Lani) Clark & crew Dorothy Hodgdon (an adult) left.

Clark's beach in early 1960s

- Most Penguins were kept on beaches.
- Notice how much beach there was!
- Hampton's trailer to the left of the penguin.
- Don't miss our treehouse above the Penguin!



Rosecroft Races

- Raced from Horseshoe Bend to Rosecroft.
- Anchored/docked and had a picnic—open fire chili.
- Then raced back to finish line.
- Many “storm stories” associated with this race!
- Forerunner of our current “Destination Race”.



Social Events



- July 4, 1948 First SMRYC sailing picnic on Shipping Point in St. Inigoes.
- Landowner Gen. Thomas Holcomb arrived with a thermos of icy martinis—joyously received!
- Held annually for many years.

Water Carnivals

- From the mid 1950s, when water skiing was new, until 1962 the club held a play day for fun on the river.
- In June before jellyfish came in waterskiing, canoe jousting, tube fights, and general shenanigans were followed by a picnic dinner.
- Photo: Ralph Clark moving the “Flying Dutchman” party barge for the carnival.



“Balloon Belles” preparing to show off

Seated l-r:

- Jean Jones
- Mary Salisbury
- Kay Clark

Standing l-r:

- Bill Salisbury
(hidden)
- Dick Lepper
- Scott Jones



Annual Crab Feasts

- Later a crab feast became the picnic dinner following the Water Carnival activities.
- After the novelty of waterskiing wore off, an Annual Crab Feast replaced the event completely.
- Usually held at Point No Point, the Waldschmitt's home, owned by the parents of our current member Robert Waldschmitt.



Boating Day on the Potomac



- Before the club initiated cruising events in the 1990s, they held day sails.
- Here, Ralph Clark & Margaret Fahnstock on Gwynn Gardner's boat, "Optimist" in 1956.

Club Business Meetings

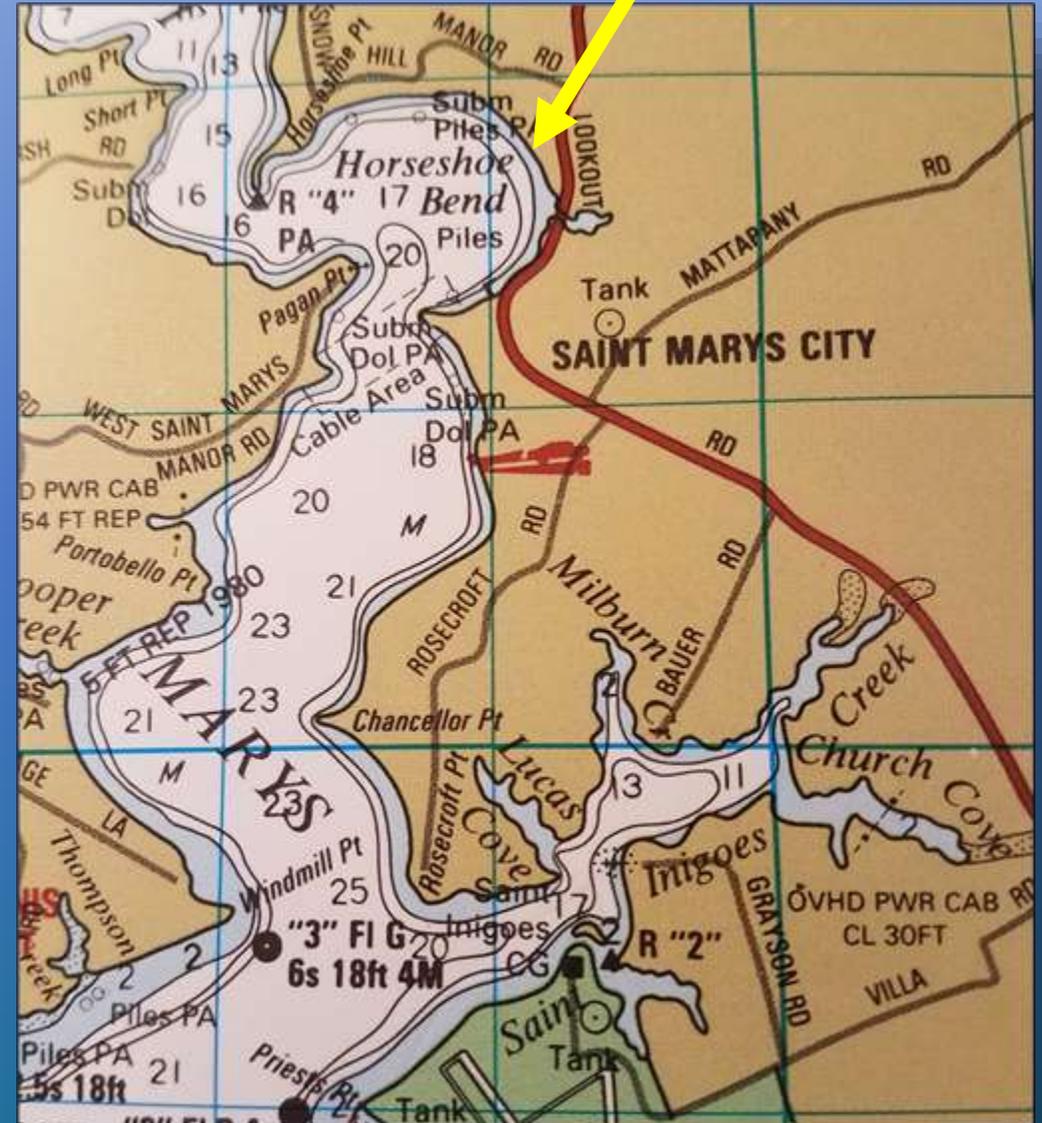
- Held in each other's homes—as many still are today.
- These were very formal events (founding members came from other large yacht clubs such NYC Yacht Club).
- All meetings required “formal” attire: coats and ties for men, dresses for women.
- Discussions and arguments sometimes went on for hours, until finally the club kept the bar closed until the meetings ended!
- Meals were formal sit down dinners, with linens and china rented from the Officer's Club on the base.
- Hosts prepared and served all the food.

Now...about that Clubhouse we DON'T have!

- In the 1950s and 60s, the club turned down a FIVE offers (some were to have been outright gifts!) of land along the river for a club house.
- During this time, the club had fifteen to twenty families as members.
- Members were required to own land along the St. Mary's river.
- To have a clubhouse (OR NOT) was a constant and interminable debate at club business meetings.

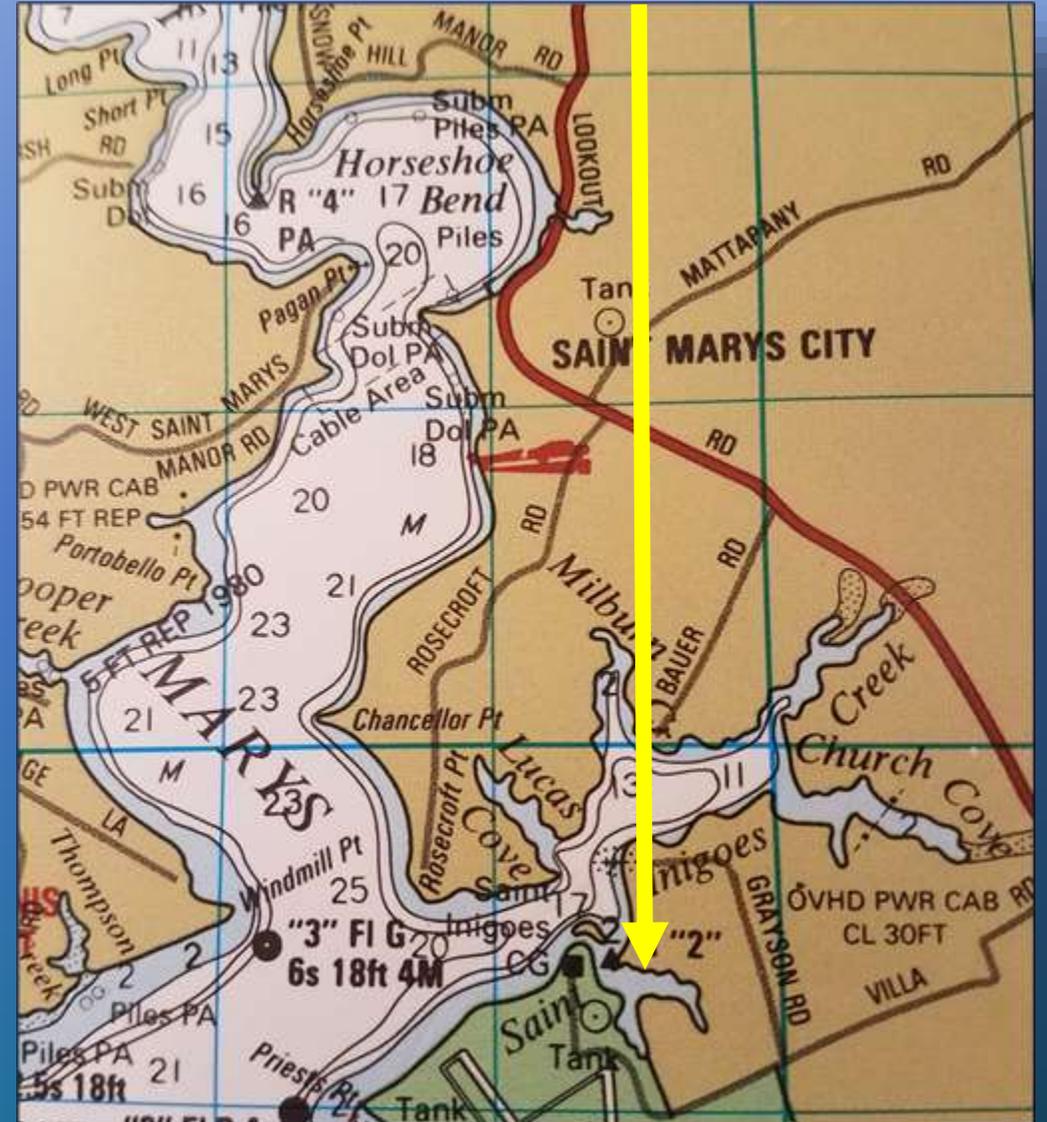
Clubhouse Site #1

- In 1949 William Hart Sr. offered a GIFT of 5 acres of land just to the west of Tiny Taylor's current home.
- The club's 27 members rejected it because:
 - More congenial to meet in each other's homes.
 - Founding member Victor Cherbonnier had been a member of the NYC Yacht Club, and was strongly vocal about the maintenance issues.
 - i.e., No one wanted to "mow the grass"!



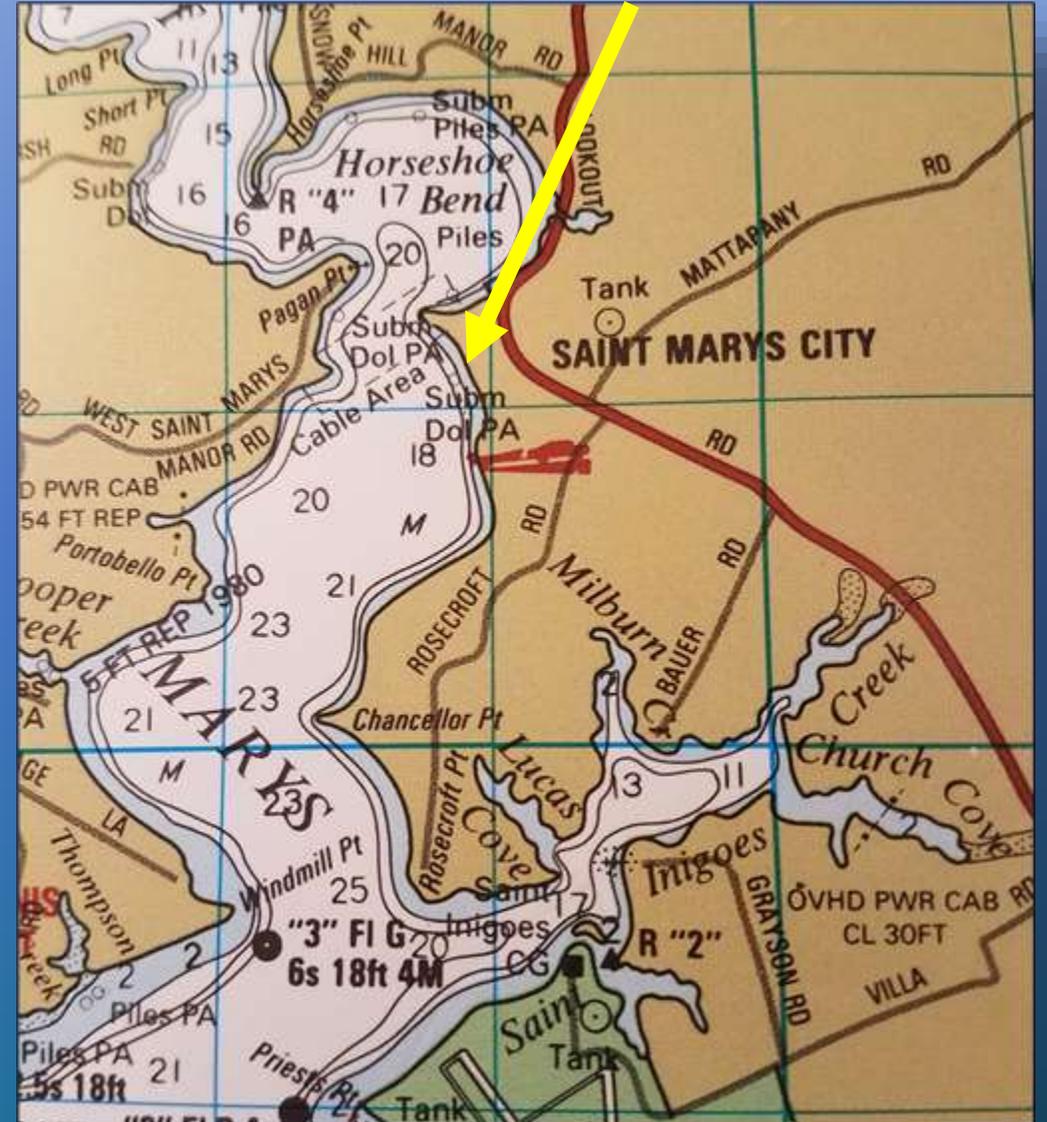
Clubhouse Site #2

- Douglas Lawrence offered a GIFT of land near his home, Fenwick Free (now Alex & Betty Jo Kampf's home).
- On Moll's Cove near the USCG base and Webster Field.
- Stipulation that the club should erect a simple structure within a certain length of time.
- Club was looking for a place to launch visiting boats and hold a sailing camp.
- Offer was rejected: It was "too far from St. Mary's City"!



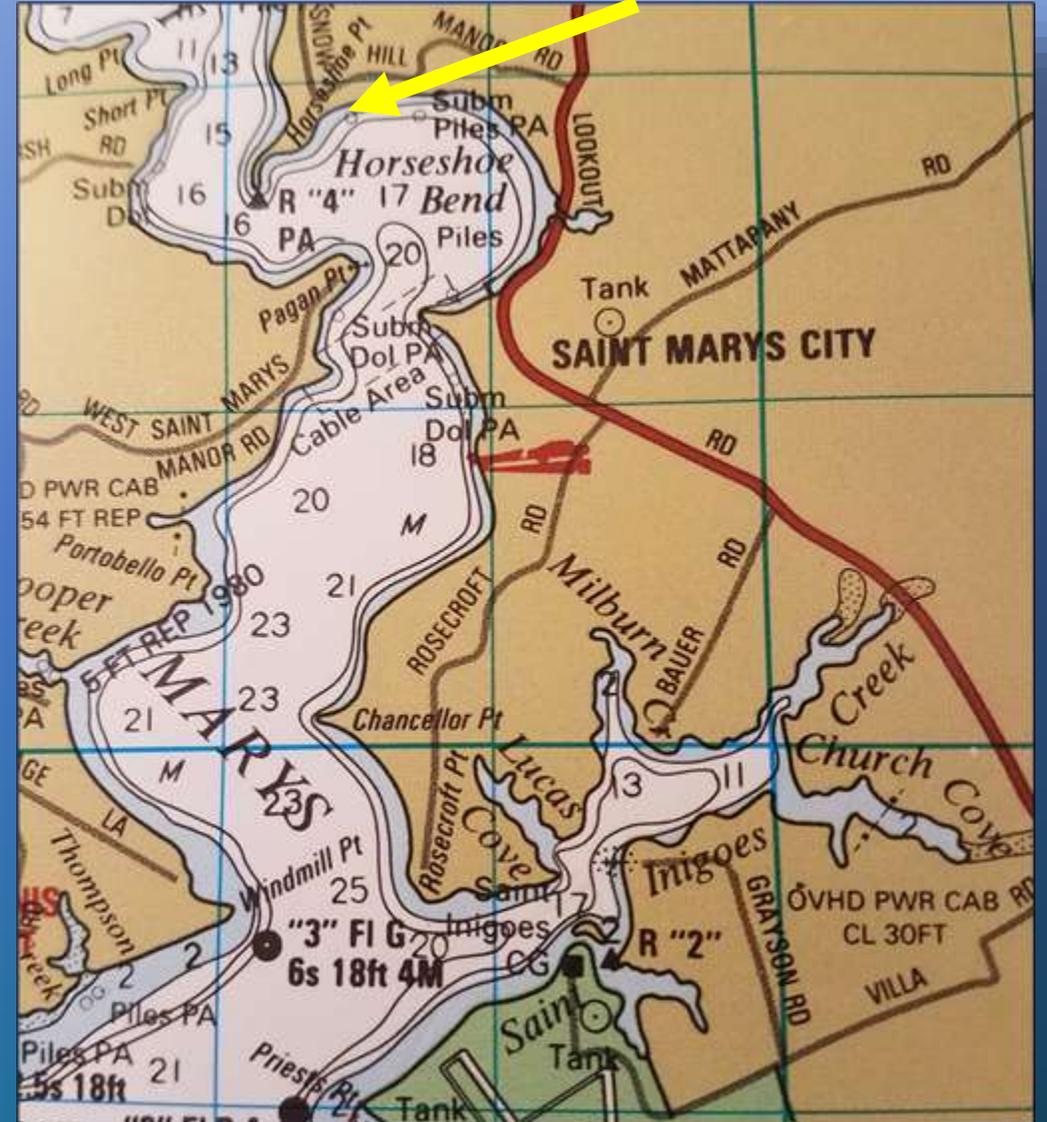
Clubhouse Site #3

- Then the club considered buying the “Oyster House” at Brome’s Wharf.
- The building was a large open concrete warehouse built on pilings at the base of the current Dove Dock.
- It had been an oyster packing plant in the 1940s.
- It was rejected: it would be too expensive to remodel and maintain.



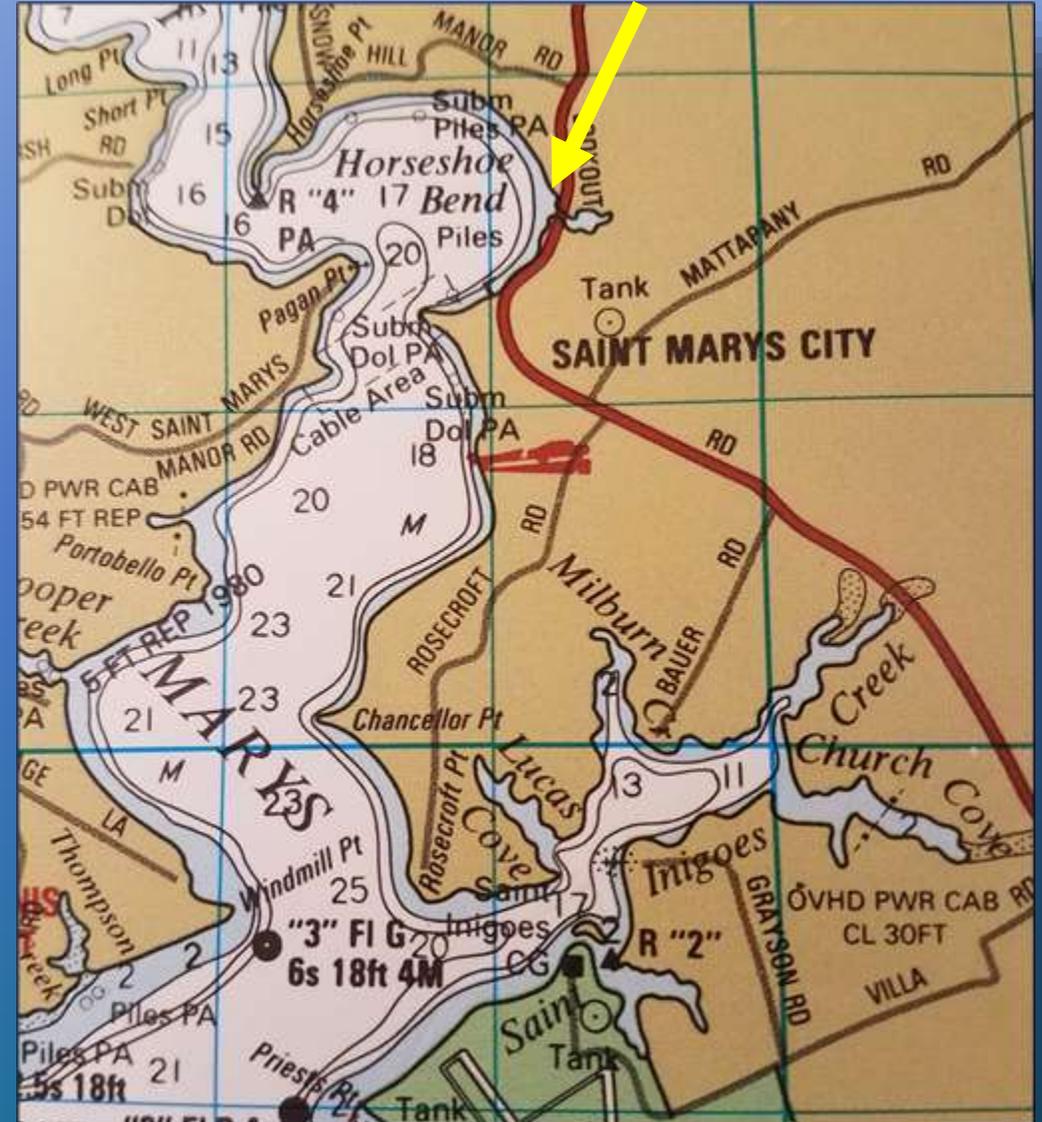
Clubhouse Site #4

- The fourth offer was for the club to purchase an acre of land just to the east of Horseshoe Point (now near Jim & Karen Nutter's home).
- Club was again looking for a place to launch boats and hold sailing camps.
- Offer was rejected: the club didn't want the expense of the liability insurance required.



Clubhouse Site #5

- In 1959 the Chapman's offered the use of their building and gas dock. It was their St. Mary's Outboard Shop on route 5 along the water (where the entrance sign to SMCM and SMRWA oyster reefs are located now).
- The stipulation for the club's use was that we make the repairs and improvements needed, about \$2,000 worth of work (plumbing, new flooring, parking).
- Club's 29 members were unanimously in favor of accepting this offer. Finally!
- But...before a deal could be signed, the building mysteriously burned down one night!



SMRYC 1960s Sailing Camps

- In late 1950s in conjunction with the rise of the Penguin Class, club mothers organized sailing camps for the children to learn to sail.
- The college's waterfront and penguins were used.
- Covered sailing techniques, racing rules, knots, boat handling and water safety.
- In the 1960s, club junior members took over teaching:
 - Lani, & then Christie Clark
 - John, & then Peter Paradis
 - Bruce Fahnestock
 - Robin Tappan
- There is a video of one of the 1960s sailing camps in the clubs' 50th Anniversary video.

The End

- Thank you Mom & Dad (and the other yacht club founders) for your part in founding our wonderful yacht club and providing an incredible childhood for us.
- Now you know more than you ever imagined about the beginnings of our club.



Christie (left) and me in 1952 on the Hampton.