

THE HARD WATER PILOTS OF ORIENT

Iceboating in Orient from the 1860s to Today

by

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Dedication

Robert Reeves, Jr. , or Mr. Iceboat as he was often called by many Orienteers, had a lifelong, insatiable love of the sport. He just couldn't get enough of it.

He was easily recognized in our small village in his pick up truck with the words ICE BOAT on his license plate. He founded and kept afloat a club of like-minded "hard water pilots". He cherished his extensive personal collection of ice boats and loved sharing his passion with the entire village. He lived for those precious dawns when the ice was hard enough and perfect enough to allow him to skim across the surface of the bay.

Icy mornings in this village are few and far between in this era of global warming and somehow it is appropriate that the glory days of the ice boat here in Orient may have dwindled with his passing.

Bob moved south just months before his sudden death. But, throughout his last year in Orient I had the privilege of working with him on behalf of the Oysterponds Historical Society to write this book. We sat for long hours as he regaled me with story after story about a time when ice boating was truly a way of life, of sustenance and of recreation in Orient.

I dedicate my words to Bob. His history and the history of iceboating in Orient cannot be told separately. The image of him braced against the cold and the wind as the sun came up over Hallock's Bay will stay with me always.

Sail on Bob.

Ellen Mitchell
2019

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The Keepers of the Tradition

It's a rare morning in Orient. The sun is just up; the air is frigid, there's a brisk wind, and the ice is "black" on Hallock's Bay, not snow-covered, but sleek and strong...perfect. And so they come....that faithful band of stalwarts...the iceboaters. When conditions are such that they can glide across the frozen surface of the bay, they are quick to take advantage of it. With piercingly cold winters occurring less frequently in Orient as the years go by, who knows when such a morning will dawn again.

Iceboaters call the ice "hard water". They describe the sensation of sailing on ice a passion, exhilaration, an art form, terrifying and traveling at warp speed. When a gust of wind comes up and the iceboats, particularly the graceful, 150 year old craft that look as if they have sailed straight out of a romance novel, are whizzing across the bay, spectators and sailors agree there is nothing more resplendent.

Time was when iceboating in Orient was a necessity in the rhythm of life. There were years when winter brought such bitter cold that Orient Harbor froze over. Local families relate stories handed down through generations of such harsh conditions during the late 1800s that people depended upon iceboats to go from Orient to Greenport. The horse and buggy could not traverse the deep snows and the ice that covered the only narrow wagon trail connecting Orient to the rest of Long Island. Iceboats were the only means of transportation across the harbor to secure food and other supplies. In a swift wind an iceboat could cross the seven mile expanse from Orient to Greenport in as little as ten or fifteen minutes. Those hand-crafted, vintage boats were capable of traveling three or four times the speed of the wind.

When not called upon to serve the villagers in that way, the iceboats provided a popular form of sport and recreation. Turn of the century photos show the local crowd, both young and old, gathered out on Hallock's Bay. There they are bundled against the elements, some with sleds, some on skates, all come to

watch the stately, wooden iceboats race across the ice either separately or in competition with one another. Most of those antique iceboats remain here in the village. Their current owners have lovingly maintained them and continue to sail them whenever possible. In the off-seasons and the off-years they are stored in local barns and sheds, much as they were when they were originally hand-built by the farmers and fishermen of Orient. Today their fleet has been enlarged by a number of modern-day commercially-built iceboats, sleeker, lighter and faster, no longer a necessity of life, but the mainstays of a sport kept afloat by those mariners who call themselves “pilots of hard water sailing.”

The Fastest People of Earth

The simple explanation of an iceboat is a craft resembling a sail boat but built on runners similar to skis or skates, enabling it to glide on frozen water. An iceboat sits only inches above the ice and is strictly wind-powered...no engines; it's all done by sails and wind. Here in Orient where men have always gone down to the sea in ships the iceboat is a natural.

History tells us and paintings and old woodcuts depicting the 17th century, confirm that iceboats were built and sailed on frozen lakes and rivers throughout many parts of Europe, Scandinavia and the Netherlands to transport both goods and people in that era. It is said that even the Vikings built a primitive form of an iceboat.

Boating on ice...in this case without benefit of runners... did first occur in North America as far back as 1676, according to documents at Loyola University, the Jesuit University in Chicago. These give a detailed account of the travels of Jesuit missionary Claude Allouez, who came from France and worked with the Indian tribes of North America. In his diary Allouez recounts his “extraordinary kind of navigation” during a canoe trip he took in 1676 when ice formed on a lake in Wisconsin. He experimented by rigging his canoe with sails.

“We put it on the ice, on which a favorable wind carried it along by sails, as if it was in water,” he wrote. Allouez' venture was surely a forerunner for later iceboat design.

The first true iceboat of record in the United States comes about in the late 18th century. According to Wikipedia, it was the brainchild of Oliver Booth of Poughkeepsie, who in 1790 constructed a small triangular box with two runners affixed to the front and the rear and a steering rudder at the stern.

When Dutch settlers moved from Europe to the upper Hudson River Valley,

they brought with them the knowledge and expertise for building and using ice boats for winter travel.

Eventually the Hudson River Valley provided a playground for the wealthy, who built mansions there. Families, including the Roosevelts, were iceboat enthusiasts. They ordered the construction of very large iceboats, which they referred to as “ice yachts”. Most of these were manned by hired crews and staff.

As he grew older Franklin Delano Roosevelt took up his family's interest and he became an avid iceboater. His mother Sara presented FDR with his own iceboat as a Christmas gift in 1901. He named it The Hawk and sailed it during his college years, according to the New York History Blog.

F.D.R.'s uncle, John A. Roosevelt, owned a magnificent craft, which he called The Icicle II. The boat, measuring almost 50 feet in length and carrying 735 square feet of sail, had to be transported to the riverside on its' own railroad flatcar. As noted in the New York Times, the well-to-do owners were “content to watch the progress of their boats through binoculars from the shore and bet on race outcomes,” while hired help, sometimes numbering as many as 10 crewmen, handled the actual sailing. There are Currier and Ives prints depicting some of these Hudson River races, the boats are competing not only against one another, but regularly challenging the New York Central express trains as they ran on tracks adjacent to the river.

“Those big boats upstate would wait in the little bays along the Hudson,” said Robert Reeves, Jr. of Orient. “They'd hear the locomotive coming and race them down the river. The boats could go over 100 miles per hour and they beat the trains. Since there were no planes back then and trains in the late 1800s were considered the fastest form of transportation, the iceboats could then claim that title,” said Reeves.

Reeves is Commodore of the Orient Ice Yacht Club. He is the Orient community's undisputed iceboat “guru”. Over the years he has worked as a farmer, a fisherman, managed a plumbing supply store and been an active member of the Orient Fire Department. His family has been into iceboating for generations. He took his first ride on an iceboat as a toddler, and he has been doing it ever since. His truck proudly displays the license plate “ICE BOAT”.

The Orient Ice Yacht Club has about 100 members, most of whom do not have their own boats, but share a love for the sport. Reeves keeps in touch with the group by phone, internet and newsletter. There is also a colorful badge which features the name of the club and a woven image of an iceboat, which at one time was available to all members.

Iceboat enthusiasts, and anyone else, could some years ago have purchased a 14 cent U.S. postage stamp meant for postcards, featuring an 1880s vintage

iceboat. The stamp was introduced in 1985 in Rochester, N.Y.

Because newspapers and magazines as far back as the mid 1800s carried diagrams and descriptions of the iceboats, Reeves believes his forebears and others here in Orient read about what was going on elsewhere and decided to try it.

“My great, great grandfather and a group of guys started building in the mid 1800s . They'd build the boats out of wood from around here, cut it down and use it,” said Reeves. One of the boats built in 1880, now called The Platter, and still in existence, was constructed using adjustable steel rods from an old windmill to actually hold the boat together. They used the sails from their regular water-going sailboats, these being the distinctive, handsome , four-cornered sails seen in old photos. The owners built the rudders and the runners with the help of the local blacksmith on Village Lane. It was a grassroots combination of ingenuity and the necessity of using what was on hand.

“Going back in history, I marvel at some of the engineering,” said Doug Hardy, a retired marine biologist and member of the iceboating group. Hardy, who moved to the area from Boston in 1962, witnessed the iceboats out on Hallock's Bay and quickly became a convert.

"Even back in the 1860s and the 1880s , these were big boats, 20 feet long or more and heavy,” said Hardy. “The farmers would trade ideas and some of the engineering was very clever, how they joined planks, how they understood stress and strain. It was hundreds of pounds of pressure when they powered up. They used bolts, the local blacksmiths made special hardware fasteners. They were clever people. They'd store their boats in the barn, load them on a horse and wagon and spend half a day at Hallock's on the ice. The horse and wagon could go maybe 10 miles an hour, and they'd be going 60 miles an hour or more on the ice,” said Hardy. “They were the fastest people on earth....imagine the thrill. When I think of that, it always impresses me.”

What's an Iceboat?

Mike Acebo is General Manager of the Brewer Yacht Yard in Greenport. He comes to work sometimes at 4 AM to dedicate a couple of hours before the start of his business day to his personal passion....iceboats. Some time ago, Acebo was working on three boats simultaneously. He walked amidst the hulls of his projects, patting them lovingly as he strolled.

This one is the Ruby , over there is On the Rocks. The third has yet to be named. Acebo has modified the slender, sleek shape on this latest boat so that the front now resembles a Roaring 20s roadster.

In the 1990s a group of nine local ice sailors, all members of the Orient Ice Yacht Club, would come together on Friday nights at Brewer's and construct iceboats by hand. The results of their labor are nine 14 foot long iceboats of a class known as J-14s. There is one of the larger fleets of J-14s anywhere in the nation, according to the Club members.

"Bob Reeves came to me and said they wanted to build a boat and had a plan. I looked it over and figured out the materials list. We put together a list enough for nine boats, all the stuff we would need and we divided up the workload," said Acebo. They built the hulls, which are the main bodies or A-frames of the boats and made the planks at Brewer's.

Continuing in the Orient tradition of native ingenuity, Bob Deroski, one of the group, constructed a "perfect" jig for building the planks and in so doing made the job considerably easier.

"We'd get some pizza and beer and the guys would come down on Friday nights. We knew whose boat we were building and eventually they would continue the process themselves," said Acebo.

Not far from Brewer's, Doug Hardy was building an iceboat in the workshop out behind his house. Over the years he and his son have built three boats together. On the ground outside the workshop sits another boat which Hardy is modifying with a new sail. The elder Hardy was among those in the original boat building brigade at Brewer's.

That workshop in Hardy's backyard has an iceboat hanging from the ceiling. Joe Townsend, another of the iceboaters , also has an iceboat hanging from the ceiling in a shed next to his home. Many of the iceboats in Orient today are built so they can be disassembled, easily stored..or hung from the ceiling... and transported by small truck or van to sailing locations both on Long Island and further afield to other lakes and rivers, when Orient's weather does not cooperate.

While the first boats built in Orient back in the mid 1800s were modeled after those of the upstate Dutch settlers, the boatmen here in Orient took it upon themselves to modify and redesign as time progressed. It is these unique and impressive vintage boats made of native wood and constructed nearly two hundred years ago by the farmers and blacksmiths that are the pride of the Orient fleet. It is because they were stored so lovingly and meticulously, polished and carefully maintained, that a number of them remain today not only as showpieces, but in a condition such that they have lived to sail another day.

Iceboats, both new and old, fall into a number of classifications. The earliest

boats built here in Orient were all stern-steerers, meaning driven from the rear, as opposed to many of the more modern boats which are piloted from the bow, meaning the front. As a matter of convenience the old craft as mentioned earlier were rigged with sails removed from local water-going sailboats, those large, dramatic, graceful four-sided sails. The rudder, a flat piece of wood or metal attached to the stern of the craft, and uboats built here in Orient were all stern-steerers, meaning driven from the rear used to turn the boat, was in those early days made from a wagon wheel axle...a feature unique to Orient's iceboats. The old boats have a wooden plank that sits cross-wise at the front of the hull and has runners affixed to both ends. There is a third runner attached to the bottom of the rudder at the back of the boat. These boats were much larger than modern-day craft.

Scooters, yet another early type of iceboat, have a wooden hull that resembles a small plane. The Scooter has iron runners attached to the bottom of the hull, but no rudder. The boat is steered by manipulating the jib and mainsails. This type of boat can carry up to 600 square feet of sail. Some Scooters can seat as many as four people.

In the 1930s iceboats called Skeeters were introduced. Unlike the huge sails on the Scooters, the sails on a Skeeter are limited to 75 square feet. These boats are front-steerers and are extremely fast, capable of reaching speeds over 100 mph, sometimes going five times the speed of the wind. Borrowing a term from auto racing, some sailors refer to the Skeeter as the "Formula One" of iceboats, because of their speed. They are made to hold a single seat but some Skeeters can carry two people and some have a portable side car for a passenger. Today's Skeeters make use of high-tech materials such as carbon fiber and Kevlar.

Another class of wooden boat is the DN, probably the most popular iceboat today. It is small and light, weighs only about 100 pounds and is about 12 feet in length, it carries a 16 foot high mast. The DN, so named because it is the result of a contest sponsored by the Detroit News in 1937 during the era of the Great Depression, was designed to be home-built and relatively inexpensive. The one person cockpit sits atop three steel blades arranged much as the three wheels on a tricycle. While it is small, the DN can travel at speeds in excess of 50 mph. Since its initial design in 1937, the DN has undergone several reincarnations, but remains basically true to the original.

J-14s, the class of boat built by the Orient group that labored at Brewer's, were originally designed by Jack Jacobs, a Michigan iceboat enthusiast. The Orienteers made their own modifications to the J-14. Because the J-14 is a 14 foot boat in which the pilot can sit comfortably in the rear, Acebo calls it a "Lazy Boy Chair" boat.

Most of the iceboats mentioned above, while they have markedly different features, also have several hallmark traits in common. Their ride is dependent upon the friction between their runners on the ice as well as the shape of their sail in the wind. They all ride just a few inches above the surface of the ice. While some can clock phenomenal speeds of 100 mph and beyond, most mariners hold their speeds to a 40 to 50 mph range. The feature that truly surprises...not to mention terrifies most people unfamiliar with the sport..... is that most iceboats have no brakes. Some of the modern boats, however, do have a small hand brake. As Reeves points out, some mariners will use their foot, clad in a spiked shoe to slow down by cutting into the ice. He or she can also slow the boat by easing the ropes which control the sails. In general, however, the pilot must steer directly into the wind; a complete stop depends on the pilot's skill against the wind.

And, as any iceboater will tell you, the most sensational thing about the sport, no matter the vintage or class is that.....all iceboats provide an incredible thrill.

Preserving Our Past

Much of what is extraordinary about Orient is the devotion the villagers have to keeping the past vibrant and meaningful. When the ice forms and one of those vintage boats from the mid 1800s glides across Hallock's Bay, it provides a breathtaking scene, one Orienteers have enjoyed all through the intervening decades. One can just envision the local crowd back in the late 19th century and through the 20th century out on the ice rooting for their favorite to win if there is a race that day or simply enjoying the day and the excitement and maybe hoping to convince an iceboat pilot to take them along for a ride.

Among the early iceboats of Orient which still can be seen out on the ice come a cold winter day are the following:

THE PLATTER....was built in 1880 by Will Brown , a son of Orient's famous whaler Peter Brown. This boat was owned by Orient's King family for many years and eventually sold to its' present owner, Bob Sorenson, of Orient.

THE RED BIRD....was built circa 1850 by Henry Young King. THE RED BIRD typifies the way in which most of the vintage boats were handed down to today's sailors. Henry King passed THE RED BIRD on to Charles Henry King, who in turn gave it to Edwin H. King, who passed it on to family member Vera Wilson. She gave the boat over to family member and Iceboat Yacht Club

commodore, Bob Reeves. THE RED BIRD is believed to be the oldest iceboat still in use in Orient today.

Edwin H. King, who was born in 1891, was known to be one of Orient's most avid ice boat enthusiasts. At one time he owned five iceboats including THE PLATTER, THE RED BIRD, THE EFFIE, THE EAGLE and THE SLIM, all of which today remain in Orient. Aside from his passion for iceboating, Edwin H. King was said to own one of the largest farms in the area, some 400 acres.

It is easy to see how so many of these boats have remained intact and in use. They have been cherished and ultimately handed down within families for generations, turned over to sons, an occasional daughter, and grandsons with the knowledge that they are being placed in good hands.

THE RIVAL....was built in 1880. It has proven to be one of the fastest boats in the Orient fleet. It is currently owned by the Tuthill family, descendants of one of Orient's founding families.

THE EFFIE....this boat is an A-frame stern-steerer built and launched by Rufus Tuthill in 1903. It was purchased by the King family in 1960 and is now owned by the Ken Newman family, Jerie Newman is Bob Reeve's sister.

THE EAGLE....was built circa 1903 by Elmer Vail...the Vail's, another founding family, first launched THE EAGLE in 1905. Vail built the boat for his two sons, who at the time were 12 and 14 years old. THE EAGLE was purchased in 1917 by several members of the King family. THE EAGLE has proudly held the reputation of being one of Orient's best sailing boats for almost a century. It too is now owned by Bob Reeves. Elmer Vail also built an earlier boat, which he called the JACK FROST. The JACK FROST is being restored in Orient by its' current owner Joe Wysocki.

THE SILVER EEL, another boat more than a century old, was at one time in the Orville Terry family...the Terrys yet another pioneering Orient family The SILVER EEL is now owned by Scott Harris, former Supervisor of the Town of Southold. Harris has used a bit of modern technology, the GPS, to clock his SILVER EEL at over 50 mph.

THE GREYLING was built by N.A. Luce and passed on to his two sons. In the 1880s it was sold to Ed Latham, also of Orient and remains in the Latham family.

Yet another vintage boat belonging today to Bob Reeves is THE NORTH WIND...built circa 1930 on Shelter Island, it is a stern-steerer and was originally owned by Kent McCarthy. It then passed on to members of the Tabor and Adams families, both local people, before becoming part of the Reeves collection.

Reeves in reminiscing about his grandfather Ed King gives his ancestor much credit for keeping participation in iceboating alive and well even in those

times when his fellow ice pilots were loathe to go out in the cold.

“My grandfather was so interested in iceboating all his life that when we had ice in Orient, he would get after all those guys who had iceboats stored in their barns. He'd send his crew down with a truck to pull the boat out of the barn, put it on the ice, rig it up and tell them, 'Hey, come on down and sail your boat.'”

The Ice Is Good, Let's Party

Although it doesn't happen often in Orient, when Mother Nature does cooperate and send temperatures frigid enough to thicken the ice on Hallock's Bay, or even more rarely on Orient Harbor, iceboating becomes a community event...precious and memorable. And when Mother Nature does not cooperate, at least some of Orient's hard water pilots are able to disassemble their boats and transport them by truck or van upstate or even out of state to follow the ice. Indeed, there is an expression for those who do just that.... they say, “he goes to ice.”

Bob Reeves grandfather at age 80 told his grandson he'd only been able to sail his iceboat during eight winters in Orient throughout his entire life. Obviously, it is a sport that requires dedication and a whole lot of patience.

But when the ice is “good” here in Orient, the word goes forth. In today's world of e-mail, text messaging and such, news that the ice is ready and waiting spreads quickly among members of the Orient Ice Yacht Club. The mariners will have their iceboats out at Hallock's Bay by 7 in the morning. At day's end, most leave their boats at Hallock's overnight in order to be up and ready to take advantage of the “good” ice while it lasts.

Just what constitutes “good” ice is determined by testing before anyone can venture out for a sail. The ice is salt water ice at Hallock's, and the sailors want it to be at least 5 inches in thickness. Members of the club use cordless drills to burrow into the ice and then a tape measure to determine the thickness. The team of testers usually outfit themselves with a life line and ice creepers, which are spiked footwear. More than one hole is dug in those areas the boats will use, so the testers walk slowly across the ice and mark any hazards including thin ice, cracks in the surface or perhaps a spot where birds have kept open a hole to the water beneath. Each hazard area is marked with a short red flag attached to a dowel stick, the stick is dropped into the ice and freezes at that spot.

An unusual footnote to this process is that different clubs have different

traditions; some call it “flag etiquette”. While a red flag would seem to make sense for marking an ice hazard, by contrast on the South Fork of Long Island at Mecox Bay, which is a popular ice boating location, the testers use black hazard flags. Doug Hardy had the experience once of being chided by the head of the iceboaters at Mecox for using the wrong color flag.

“We were in foreign territory, I guess you'd call it,” said Hardy. “We measured the ice and started putting out red flags. John Halsey, who was kind of the patron saint of iceboating at Mecox stopped us. 'We use black flags,' he said. We really have no competition with them, but this was their turf and that was their custom.”

Only after such tests do boaters feel secure enough to venture out. No smart iceboater will go onto the ice without other boaters nearby.

“You just don't sail until somebody else shows up,” said Mike Acebo. “It's our rule and we strictly adhere to it. There are some rogue people who don't adhere, but that's their problem, not ours. If it's a club event, the club may have an aluminum skiff with rescue gear, possibly a dry suit, extra clothing, we really work hard to be self-sufficient in first aid or rescue.”

Bob Reeves adds that it's just common sense. He points out that if an accident does occur only another ice boater is going to get to the scene in time to be of any help.

Because Hallock's Bay is salt water, the ice that forms there is stronger than fresh water ice, which can be as fragile as glass. Black ice, the ideal for iceboating, forms at night, and is not topped by snow. By comparison, grey ice usually has a lot of bubbles, and is weaker and softer. White ice is snow-covered or has snow patches making sailing difficult at best.

So, on those rare mornings when the ice is right and the boats are out, Orienteers have been turning up to watch the spectacle for generations. Aging, sepia-toned photographs depict the crowd standing on the ice by Barrel House Point just off Narrow River Road. Indeed, a couple of the houses pictured along the shoreline in the background of those old photos still exist today.

Five or six inches of salt water ice is considered safe. So 150 or 200 spectators standing in close proximity on the ice have no reason to fear falling through the surface. And, a good thing that, because those old photos show many in the crowd dressed in their Sunday best. A photo dating back to January of 1904 has the male spectators in long dress coats, and the women in full length flowing skirts and small, decorative hats. A fall through the ice in such outfits would have meant people would sink below the surface very quickly; it would have been extremely difficult to pull them to safety.

As for the old-time mariners, they could outfit themselves in oilskin to keep

warm, according to Joe Townsend. He said that oil skin was worn back in the years when folks had to bundle up to cut ice chunks from frozen lakes in the area and store it for later use before there was refrigeration. There was also clothing handmade from sheep's wool, but nothing to compare with today's array of winter clothes made popular for skiing. Nowadays, waterproof, insulated and lightweight clothing and footwear have made iceboating a lot more comfortable and sensible for sailors and spectators alike.

Lest anyone get too hungry with all that activity, the Orient Ice Yacht Club members have been known on occasion to heat up barbecue grills down at Narrow River and serve hot dogs and hamburgers.

"When the ice is in Orient, it's like stepping back in time," said Mike Acebo. "You'd have people there with their dogs, parents pulling sleds, adult men from Wall Street sitting on old American Flyer sleds they dug out of the attic. I saw someone borrow his wife's umbrella and sail downwind on a sled with an umbrella. There's ice skaters, people on inner tubes, it's a riot, really a step back in time. People just gather and enjoy their lives. These are the locals. They come out of the woodwork. Elderly women come out in blankets and sit on the land to watch and the elderly men drive their pick up trucks down and sit in the trucks with the heaters on," said Acebo.

Richard Gluckman, an architect based in Manhattan, has maintained a home in Orient for some years. One day he chanced upon the scene.

"About 25 years ago, walking with my family on a sparkling winter day we came upon a septennial moment....iceboating on Hallock's Bay," said Gluckman. "It felt like we stepped into an updated Currier and Ives print; 15 or 20 iceboats from the 19th century to modern models, kids playing hockey, dogs playing on the ice, hot dogs being roasted. Pretty great."

So great, in fact, that Gluckman was inspired to purchase his own modern iceboat and is today a devoted participant in the sport.

"One of the wonderful things about iceboating in Orient is the fact that someone will give you a ride," said Reeves. An important lesson he gleaned from his grandfather about the sport is that the mariner gets to go iceboating whenever the conditions are right while the landlubber does not.

"My grandfather said, 'some of these people may never get a ride' I still remember that, and I try to live up to his training and share iceboating with others. In 1963 we had five weeks of good to excellent ice on Hallock's. The word got around, I guess, because we had bigger and bigger crowds each weekend. I spent all day from seven in the morning 'til dark giving rides. We had about 250 people on the ice at one time enjoying the sport. In this day and age of lawsuits some worry about taking people for a ride. As for me, I will continue to do so for as

long as I'm able.”

And he has done just that. One of those lucky enough to be invited along for a ride in the more recent past was Gail Mitchell, the daughter of the author of this historical account. Gail recalls the experience.

“I rode on an old double masted boat with a raft-like wooden plank bottom. Initially, it seemed awkward to lay stomach down at less than a foot off the surface of the ice. Once the boat took off, we soared at an unbelievable speed across the ice. We were at a perfect height to race with the seagulls, which were swooping along side us.”

She recalls being a bit concerned about the strength of the homemade ice picks made from dowel sticks, which the mariners use to pull themselves back atop the ice should they somehow fall through the surface. Also home crafted she noted were the ice cleats laced onto the pilot's shoes. The cleats were made of old fire hose embedded with bolts on the bottom.

“ It was an amazing and unforgettable experience that seemed to take place in slow motion and yet we were traveling at an extremely fast speed,” she remembered.

Is Your Boat Hurt?

You'd think that racing across the ice at upwards of 50 mph in a stiff wind, the temperatures well below freezing, and lying or sitting just inches above the ice surface might be a recipe for disaster. Not if you know what you are doing and are prepared for any eventuality. So, yes, there are accidents but no one here in Orient can recall anyone suffering serious injury or worse in an iceboat incident.

Mishaps yes, but serious accidents, no.

Doug Hardy's wife Carol Simons took her first...and last...ice boat ride on Hallock's around 2010.

“My dear wife had never been iceboating. She's a city girl, had never seen an iceboat before coming to Orient.” said Hardy. “So we decided to take her out for a ride. She was very hesitant. I was still setting up my boat and there were only two boats out on the ice...Scott Harris was out in his Silver Eel, probably a 16 footer, and Ed King was in a newly built J14. My wife climbs aboard the Silver Eel and off they go, she with this responsible former Supervisor in control. Ice covered the area and there were only those two boats out; they lined up...and no one can understand why...but they headed for each other and they collided.

Scott's boat was demasted, the mast and sail fell down and my wife was underneath the sail. Ed King and Scott Harris hop up to survey the damage and my wife is still underneath there. Their first question to each other... 'Is your boat hurt ?' They looked over the gear and left her underneath it all. She was not pleased."

There's an old saying that iceboaters are familiar with "You either love it or you never go again." Carol Simons never went out on Hallock's again. She did venture one more iceboat trip...but it was on a "magnificent" 38 ft. boat on the Great South Bay...a big boat that was more like "an ocean cruiser," said Hardy.

Hardy relates another incident he was part of back around 1962. A local doctor, a surgeon in fact, was at the tiller. Hardy and several others were standing on the boat's plank, while the surgeon, a man with skilled hands, was at the tiller in the rear. "Suddenly it got very quiet at the back of the boat. We looked and he was gone. He'd been flipped off and there he was rolling on the ice. We were headed for Orient State Park in the boat, he was headed there without it. Finally we were able to kick it over and steer and stop, but it was touch and go there for brief time."

According to Hardy such occurrences are not that uncommon, because if a boat suddenly swerves in a gusty wind the centrifugal force will throw you off . Happily, he noted the driver is so low to the ground that "when you hit the ice, you slide like a ski jumper, the impact is not that great." He said the real danger is when two boats collide...a person could get killed that way, he said.

Of course it helps to "know before you go". One day when Hardy loaned his boat out to two women who were not familiar with the territory, they promptly ran it into the area where the tide comes in alongside Orient State Park. The ice gets very thin there. Hardy's boat at that time was a metal craft which does not float...neither did the two women. Fortunately that water is shallow, because the two ladies and the boat ditched. They later presented Hardy with a bottle of Chivas Regal.

According to Reeves no one has ever been killed in an iceboating accident in Orient. One man was thrown off the Red Bird and injured when he was intent on taking photos and not intent on where the boat was headed. And many years ago a young girl was seriously injured upstate on Orange Lake when she fell from her boat in front of another boat and was run over.

Joe Townsend said he has had a few close calls on the ice, but nothing serious. He said the pilots always go out wearing helmets, goggles and gloves. Spiked shoes are also advised. Helmets are particularly helpful in protecting against low swinging sail booms. Also, Townsend, like the others, used "picks" as a safety precaution. Picks being those two dowel sticks about 6 inches long.

Each has a nail in one end and these are attached with a rope that goes around the mariner's neck. "If you go under you can use those to hoist yourself up onto the surface through a hole in the ice." or so he claimed.

Townsend cautions that the cold can "sneak up" on both the sailor and passengers and lead to frostbite.

"If you were out in 10 degree weather and sailing 50 miles an hour you could freeze the nose off your face," agreed Bob Reeves. He noted that years ago before L.L.Bean and such you had to wrap up in everything you could find. Now, with all the insulated winter wear available Reeves said it is "a better sport".

Because it takes time to put a boat together each morning, the sailors take the opportunity to talk to each other and discuss the conditions, which can change from day to day.

Mike Acebo attends safety meetings in other areas of Long Island, where the boaters warn of what to be cautious about in various locations to which they might travel. They discuss conditions and of course, they adhere to that cardinal rule, never to go out on the ice alone. The sport of iceboating has no official controls, no speed limits and no design limitations. The boats have no hull numbers. The mariners must monitor themselves and they do.

Just How Fast Do These Things Go?

Although there have not been any iceboat races on Hallock's Bay in recent years, there have been numerous events in the past...A number of the members of the club have trophies and plaques to show for their efforts. Some travel outside the area to participate in races. Different locations will host as many as 10 races in a day, the lengths of which could be anywhere from 500 yards to a mile, the course determined by the wind. In Orient, as elsewhere, the race course is established in the morning depending on conditions on the ice and in the air.

Before the start, the participants gather to discuss any hazards and how the race will be run. Starting positions are established by drawing numbers out of a hat. The boats are divided by classes, since some types are much faster than others.

Over the years the record keeping has been somewhat sporadic. In fact there was once an Orient trophy known as The Challenger Cup . There are reports that the Suffolk Times newspaper in 1905 carried a photo of a loving cup presented by

the Orient Ice Yacht Club...(apparently there was an earlier version of the current club, because the latter was not founded until 1991) There were races back then in competition with other clubs from other areas and the trophy was won by someone from out of the area. No one has seen or heard word of the trophy since.

Among Doug Hardy's iceboat treasures is a replica of a diver's helmet given out at some unknown location to the iceboater who had logged the most hours on the ice. Hardy didn't win it himself, but he prizes it nonetheless.

Although he has never had opportunity to race on Hallock's Bay, Richard Gluckman has purchased a 12 ft. DN suitable for one person and he has transported it to lakes in upstate New York and Maine, He considers himself still a "novice", but calls racing the best way to learn how to sail the boat.

When you are racing, said Mike Acebo you are restricted to the course and the conditions set for that course. But, when you are cruising you are looking around and having fun. While he has clocked his speed at 68 mph, that was on a lake in Vermont. He has skied on snow and said iceboating has a similar feel.

"It's the proximity to the surface you are on, the thrill of exhilaration of being able to go when and where you want. I guess, too, it's the danger," he said.

Iceboat racing speeds vary according to the type and classification of boat. Here in Orient most mariners keep their speeds down well below the 50 mph zone.

In fact there is no worldwide official speed record for iceboats, according to the Guinness of World Records website. Suffice to say, that speeds well upward of 100 mph have been claimed....even some in the 140 and 150 mph range. No official time keeping exists to back these claims and none of them have occurred on Long Island. However, there is a belief among many who go down to the sea in iceboats that their's is the fastest wind-propelled sport on earth.

Back to the Future

Because iceboating has not occurred in recent years in Orient and because it is so much a part of Orient's history, not to mention the fact that they love it, the local hard water pilots are concerned about the future of their sport. In recent years, no one has seen ice and snow equivalent to what used to be and of course no one can predict the future. They can only hope.

Bob Reeves grandfather recalled on his deathbed that around the year 1918 there were such frigid temperatures that both Hallock's Bay and Orient Harbor were covered with ice for six straight weeks. They went ice boating every day throughout those weeks. He remembered that even the Long Island Sound froze over that year. We have not been able to verify that statement, but it would be nice

to imagine. In 1936 at Truman's Beach between Orient and East Marion the Sound did freeze...this time partially. Reeves' aunt told him that did occur and she recalled that she along with a group of friends set out walking and were more than half way across when they had to turn back. The ice was getting thin.

Of course the threat of global warming may deter some from getting involved, but Richard Gluckman did purchase his 12 ft. DN, and while he has yet to sail it on Hallock's he looks to the day that will be possible. Meanwhile he "goes to ice." elsewhere. He figures if the weather does not cooperate here in Orient it will make for longer road trips in order to sail.

Bob Sorenson, a local contractor here in Orient who now owns the vintage boat the Platter, intends to build a replica of The Rival. Meanwhile he and his two sons have sailed the boat at Hallocks Bay when the ice is good. Sorenson said his sons love the sport.

Ice boats today can range in cost from several hundred dollars for a small, used boat to \$60,000 for a modern Class A Skeeter.

"We're talking there about boats that will go over 120 mph. They look like jet liners," said Doug Hardy, "They even have a different sound than our boats. I came upon one at Winnepesaukee in New Hampshire and I could hear a weird sound coming up behind me. I was probably going 50 and he just shot past me." Hardy said it's sad that because of the scarcity of frigid weather here, iceboaters are having to move further north.

Prices and classes of iceboats are quoted on iceboat.org, which recommends that anyone interested in making such a purchase go iceboating with a veteran sailor for a season or two before making any decisions. There are numerous websites devoted to the sport of ice sailing.

So what does happen if the winters get warmer? Doug Hardy calls iceboating a sport for optimists.

Bob Reeves is doing his utmost to interest young people in iceboating. He has held information sessions at the Oysterponds Historical Society for classes from the Oysterponds Elementary School. The kids get a chance to see what an actual iceboat looks like and to ask questions. At one such recent session not one child in the group had ever been on an iceboat nor had any said they had heard of the sport.

"Young people are just not getting into iceboating," agreed Mike Acebo. The young, he continued, live by the calendar. "They have every weekend logged in. You can't do that if you're an iceboater. You have to wait and wait and you can't just put it on the calendar."

After all, who knows when Hallock's Bay will freeze over again.

ORIENT ICE YACHT CLUB

Orient, N.Y. 11957
Re-organized, Dec. 1991

MEMBERSHIP CARD



_____ ()
(MEMBER) (NO.)

SEASON (_____)

Officer: _____

Orient Ice Yacht Club membership card



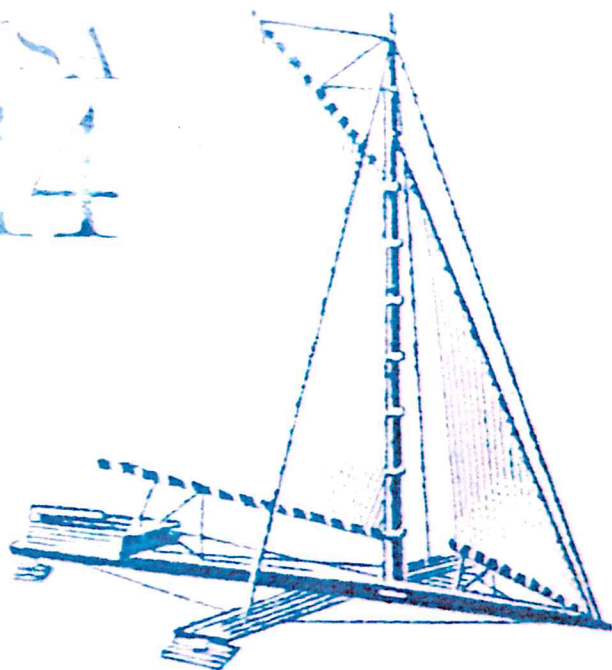
Orient Ice Yacht Club membership badge.



Bob Reeves truck carries the license plate
ICE BOAT.

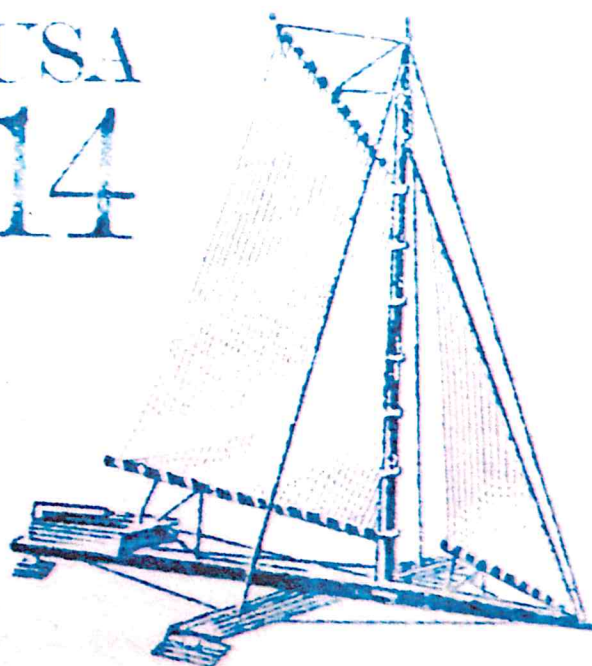
Iceboat 1880s

USA
14



Iceboat 1880s

USA
14



A 14 cent US postage stamp for postcards. Issued
March 23, 1985.



Early morning at Hallock's. No one sets sail before other pilots arrive on the scene.



Dawn at Hallock's Bay . The iceboat pilots leave their boats on the ice overnight in order to get an early start the next day.



Checking the depth of the ice at Hallock's before
a days sailing to insure a depth of at least 4 or 5 inches
and looking for irregularities in the ice surface.

7



There can be no sailing on the surface of Hallock's Bay until the snow clears from the surface of the ice



Boats are disassembled and carried to Hallock's
to be assembled there.

22)



23

Assembling a boat before the day's sail.. The clothing would seem to indicate the mid to late 1900s.



“The Auk”....a vintage stern-steerer glides on
Hallock's Bay in January 1990.



A class of iceboat known as the J-14
in the foreground.



A pair of Scooters lifting off the ice in a maneuver known as hiking.



The Eagle, built circa 1903 by Elmer Vail for his two sons, ages 12 and 14. This boat has had a reputation as one of Orient's best sailing boats ever since. It is an original stern-steerer with a four-sided sail.



Edwin King on one of his five boats. King, born in 1891 was known to be one of Orient's most avid iceboaters.