

First Sail of the Season

(The Register - 1973)

We have a 14-year-old friend who prepared his Beetle Cat early so he could sail during school vacation. In all of Bass River there were perhaps two moored boats, sturdy veterans of winter. Six canoes paddled by, and beyond Stage Island we saw the sail of another Beetle. Otherwise the river was empty.

Beetle Cats are one of the few remaining class boats still built of wood, shaped on the same jigs used for 40 years. There are reasons for their durable popularity. Obvious things like shoal draft, ease of handling, safety. And then less obvious things. We experienced the less obvious things.

It was low tide, perhaps six inches of water over the flat off Wrinkle Point. We raised the centerboard and slipped over the bar. A pod of Bufflehead watched us approach and beyond them half a dozen Canada Geese raised their heads. The birds didn't bother to move as we went by, as though they recognized a kindred spirit

when they saw us half-flying across the channel.

The sound of a wooden sailboat in a fresh breeze is one of the less obvious things. The hull transmits the slap of waves with special fidelity. The mast strains against the shims in the deck, the halyards stretch, the leech trembles, all contributing to a combination of sounds that only occur in that circumstance. Or the motion of the Beetle Cat, how she thrusts forward in a gust of wind without losing balance, or pushed too far kicks her stern around and dumps the wind, flapping her sails like an old scold.

Or the smell of the river " fresh from her winter's rest, cleansed from last summer's depredations.

There is a Beetle Cat preserved at Mystic Seaport as befits a classic boat. She's no curiosity of the past, but a living craft whose values endure for their merit. It was an appropriate time and place for a sail, and appropriate company, canoes, wild , ducks and another Beetle Cat.