

CHESAPEAKE CATBOAT ASSOCIATION: BAY CRUISE 97

"Gunkholing on the Little Choptank River" by Marc Cruder

INTRODUCTION

We moved south again this year, on another low mileage, sail everywhere, don't use power if you can help it trip. Participation was maintained with 5 boats for the first half of the cruise and 4 for all but the last day, when we were down to 3. GROWLER returned with Jerry Smith's "trout hat" monitoring the weather, while Professor Minneo took charge of the fleet's high tech air cover with an experimental dragon fly sound producing device designed to ward off mosquitoes. Don Dunn was back, but without his outboard. Bill Hoover was back with his son Howard, and this year welcomed newcomer to the annual cruise, Bruce Smith. All were rigged with dinghies/skiffs towed.

The weather was a mixed bag of rain and wet early on, followed by a few days of dry out, and finishing up with some strong but favorable winds. The overall lower than normal temperatures kept all the anticipated bugs from making the scene. No major breakdowns were reported. Here's how it went...

RETURNING CRUISERS:

Marc "Which way to the swamp" Cruder sailing *SYLPH*: Wittholtz/Hermann 17

Jerry "Pass me another crabcake" Smith with Tony "Captain show me your fire extinguisher" Minneo, sailing *GROWLER*: Herreshoff 18

Bill "If you get in trouble, fire three shots" Hoover with Howard "Pass me my corn-cob" Hoover, sailing *GULL*: Mystic 20

Don "Am I glad to have my inboard back" Dunn, sailing *TIR-NAN-OG*: Atlantic City 21

NEW FACES:

Bruce "I may go home tomorrow" Smith, sailing *GYPSY*: Marshall 18

6/1: DAY ONE - DESTINATION: BLACKWALNUT COVE - TILGHMAN ISLAND

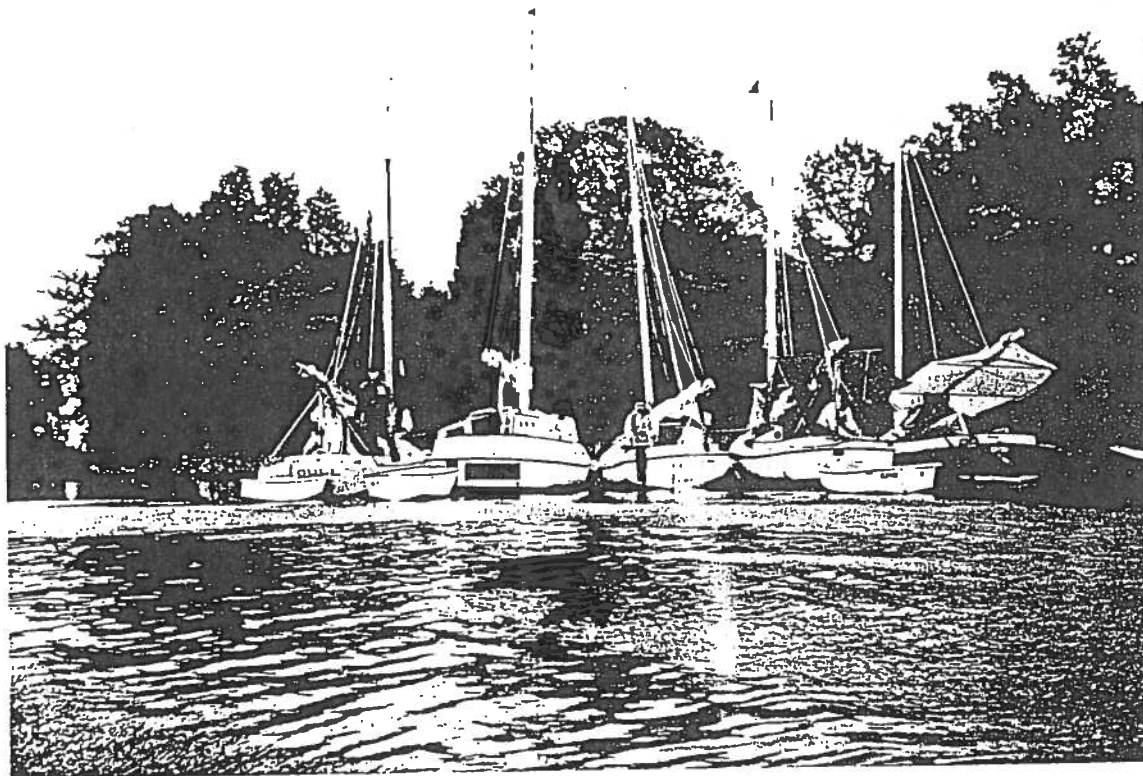
Packed up and with dinghy in tow (FLIPPER ID), I cleared the South River Red #4 at 1300, setting a southeasterly course of 160 degrees magnetic, toward Tilghman Island under full sail. Weather was cloudy/overcast with winds northeast at 5 to 10 kts.

Proceeded down bay making steady progress. Passed Green #1 at 1400. Sighted downbound tug/barge, altering course to 140 degrees magnetic, to safely cross the shipping channel. Returned to base course on the east side of the channel, passing Red #84A at 1445, and abeam Coaches Island Red #84 at 1515. Passed the entrance to Knapps Narrows at about 1600, with rain starting to come down. The southern tip of Tilghman Island was just in sight as visibility began to decrease.

At 1700 raised TIR-NAN-OG on VHF to find he and GYPSY moored in Blackwanut Cove. No other catboats sighted either ahead or astern all afternoon. Continued close down the western side of Tilghman Island, maintaining visual bearings and navigating crab pots. Simultaneously sighted the listing Sharp's Island Light, and a single gaff sail heading east on a starboard tack. Identified the gaff sail as GULL.

Continued until abeam Sharp's Island Light and "crab line" buoy. Came about and made for the Green #1 entrance buoy to Blackwalnut Cove behind GULL, bouncing along the shallow east side of the southern tip of Tilghman Island. Dropped sail at Green #5 in about 3 feet of clear water. Rafted up outboard of GYPSY.

The first happy hour of the trip ensued under the well rigged awnings aboard TIR-NAN-OG and GYPSY, affording protection from the rain for all. While waiting for GROWLER, who I knew was somewhere behind me, the usual obscure yet detailed discussions took place which attempted to answer burning questions like why Don's wheel was not marked with a "king spoke" and why the tips of spars on traditional boats are painted white. The short answers to these two questions after much discussion was ...I have no "king spoke" position and nobody really knows why they are painted white.



Sighted GROWLER coming around the tip of Tilghman Island at about 1915 under power. Rendered the appropriate "checkfish" salute in honor of Tony Minneo's return, and tied GROWLER up outboard of SYLPH. Individual culinary efforts then got underway. These ranged from the side of beef cooking on the Hoover "cleat barbecue" to the more interesting canned fair which included barbecued chicken from Dinty Moore (and you thought they only made beef stew!) to the award winning entry from Chez GROWLER of "Tamales in a Can" sprinkled with artichoke hearts.

The group stayed rafted up in this very protected shallow harbor, and settled in for our first night out. Blackwalnut Cove is without a doubt a recommended catboat anchorage. The limited water depth ensured no crowd, with plenty of room to enjoy this pretty spot. The sparse human population at this end of the island also made it a quiet anchorage, the sound of the wind punctuated only occasionally by the local swan population.

6/5: DAY TWO - DESTINATION: SLAUGHTER CREEK - LITTLE CHOPTANK RIVER

Slept well, but a little cold without the sleeping bag I had forgotten, or chose not to bring because I had visions of hot, sticky nights. Instead, I had to get up in the middle of the night to close my deck hatch and opening port, which the wind was whistling through, even though I was moored by the bow.

Everyone got up leisurely, since the run would be short and the weather wasn't promising any improvement. The sky was overcast with a light drizzle falling and winds predicted to be 15-20 kts. With that in mind, consensus was that reefing was in order. I tied in two. All underway at about 0930.

Leaving the #1 Green, we all set sail on a beam reach, except *TIR-VAN-OG*, who took it at a slow bell under power. Although it was sloppy out, the double reef was perfect for me. I had an uneventful sail, dry and in control.

GYPSY had only one reef in and was literally sailing circles around me. At one point, Bruce came up close along side and conducted "cookie underway replenishment" making a perfect toss onto my deck. Used *GYPSY* as the ready boat to go back and check on Don, who looked to be moving a little too slow under power. Bruce doubled back, checked on Don, who was fine and still passed me before we got to Slaughter Creek.

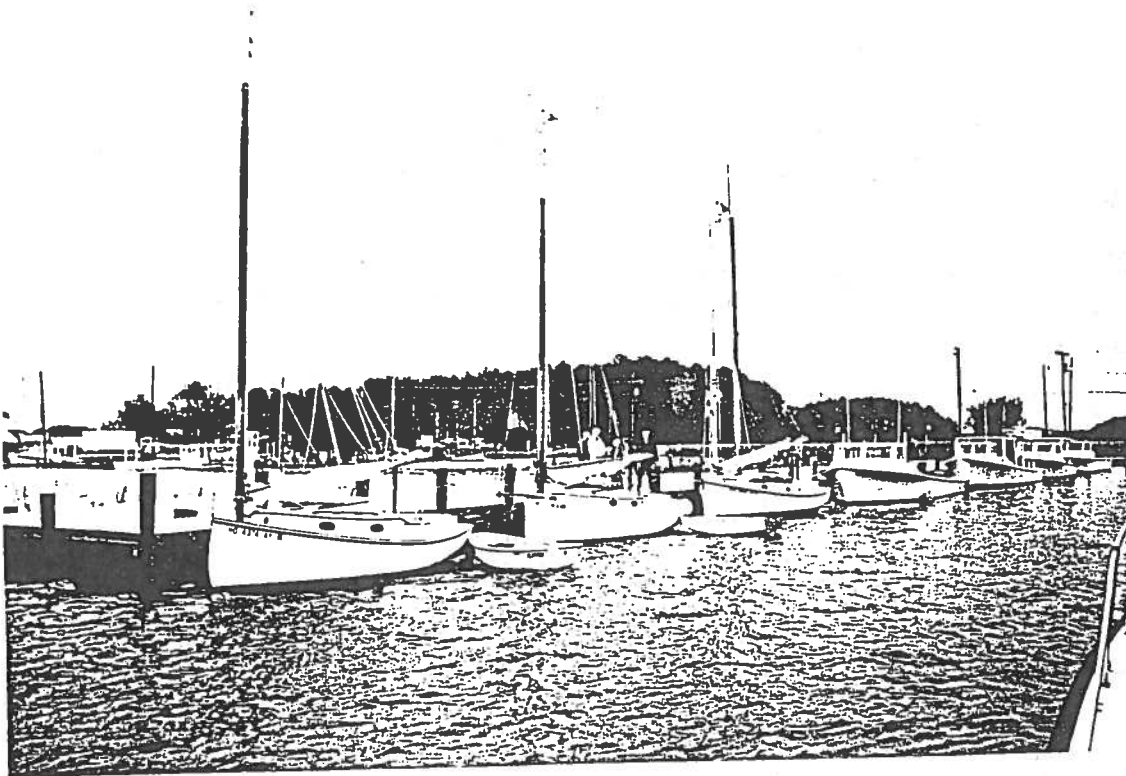
Picked up the entrance buoys to the Little Choptank River, and made the turn into Slaughter Creek at about 1200. Raised *GROWLER* on VHF for the noon radio check. All catboats in sight, proceeding orderly into Slaughter Creek.

Pulled up to the area just in front of the marina, and dropped the hook along with *GYPSY*, later to be joined by *TIR-VAN-OG*, *GROWLER* and *GLIZ* pulled to the dock. Dinghied ashore to find the store and restaurant closed, so I used the telephone. The group decided to power over to the Taylor's Island General Store for a bowl of soup. The General Store was a blast from the past, only slightly modified by the present. It was a store, bar, restaurant and gas station all in one, that served the biggest, tastiest, non-filler ridden crabcakes we had ever had. Bruce instantly took a liking to the place and the whole area. Since he had only planned to be with us for half the trip anyway, he proclaimed that this was his destination for the trip, and that he might even just buy a piece of property and stay. After a while, though he decided he didn't need to stay, but maybe he should go home. Thus began a theme that Bruce would echo at every meal thereafter...gee I don't know...maybe I'll go home today...then again...maybe I won't. I decided I would believe it when I saw it...knowing that Bruce would hang in there despite these idle threats of departure.

Everyone stuffed themselves on the unusually high quality crabcakes...even me. I had only ordered soup, but when "Miss Mary" came back, she threw it in front of me, and said "I made six anyway, so you better eat it!" It was the kind of situation where the only logical response was...Yes ma'am. Bruce and I walked back to the boats over the wooden Taylor's Island Bridge, to work off lunch.

The original plan of cooking Jerry's marinated flank steak got put off another night, as each catboater to his own hook crashed for a nice afternoon snooze...it was still drizzling.

After a nap, I dinghied ashore to talk to the Coast Guard at the now floating Station Taylor's Island all-purpose 55 foot patrol boat. We reviewed a chart of the area. They pointed out the few places where services could be expected, and then gave me the combination to the showers. A very welcome gesture.



Went back to the anchorage, passed the combo number around and got consensus that individual cooking was in order. Shared a dinner of Filet Mignon aboard GYPSY under his awning with the sides zipped in. Externally, it makes the boat look like a floating RV, with windows and all, but it sure makes the cockpit a comfortable and usable space even in foul weather.

Took a shower ashore before turning in with some dry clothes on. Had a nice easy day sailing despite the rough and wet weather. My new chart book (ADC out of Alexandria, VA) is already delaminating...page ends cut after lamination process...wrong!

6/5/97: DAY THREE - 1st change - DESTINATION: HUDSON CREEK

Spent a rocky night on the hook amplified in the morning by the local work boats giving us a beam sea. Moved the anchor line to the bow, lowered the centerboard and went back to sleep. Meanwhile, the others eventually one by one left for anchorage on the protected side of the marina.

The weather was still cloudy, overcast and drizzle, but I prepared for the swamp trip to the Honga River. Popped my 25+ yr old Sears 3.5 hp outboard (known in the family as the "debbie motor" which my father-in-law bought for my wife when she was a teenager so she could terrorize all the cadets at the Admiral Farragut Academy in New Jersey) on the back of FLIPPER II, loaded up the extra gas and provisions, and powered over to the others to see who else was ready to go.

Here came the first modification of the trip. Although I was ready to go, the weather still wasn't promising, and I quickly realized that if I went into the swamp, I was going alone. Group dynamics quickly took over on the dock, with Professor Minneo presenting the

logic...something like a choice at the time between goose droppings (which were all over the dock) and breakfast at the Taylor's Island General Store...goose droppings...breakfast....mmm.

As I was pondering that thought, the law firm of Smith, Minneo & Associates also pointed out that I did not have a life jacket in the dinghy, which automatically made me subject to immediate reporting to the local Coast Guard, who were just spitting distance away. In addition, that launched Minneo into a sea story about a Coast Guard Auxiliarist who hailed him once in the middle of a busy section of the intracoastal waterway with the famous words...."Captain show me your fire extinguisher." Still another thing I didn't have. After careful consideration of this quandry, I gave in and went to breakfast, using the transit as a shake-down for the old outboard.

Over breakfast, (although enjoyable, but not up to the first crabcake experience) which took quite some time owing to the personal attention of the staff presumably cooking one serving at a time out of the only frying pan they must have had in the place, logic began to take hold. CAPT Hoover in his own convincing yet not condescending way proposed that with the clearing of the weather still at least a day, if not two off, the group might be better served by moving our schedule up a day. This would mean making the run to Hudson Creek in the rain, with the promise of coming back at the end of the week to try the swamp, and be in better position to head home after that. It sounded like a plan, and after minimal discussion and a command decision, it was done...we would move on today.

Powered back and stowed the outboard parafernalia. Because the transit was short, left everyone to pack up and get there at their own speed. Thanked the Coasties for their hospitality and got underway out of Slaughter Creek under sail at about 1200, opting to tack out under double reef, owing to the weather prediction of 20+ knots on the bay from the North-east.

The double reef was just barely enough power to make reasonable headway, but was perfect once I got out on the River. Making the longest tacks I could, I noted that the red buoy line coming out of Slaughter Creek must be followed, due to fast shallowing on the east side of the buoy line. However, there is plenty of water west of the green buoy line, which allowed me to tack almost to the shore every time.

Lost all catboats visually as I entered the river due to weather and decreasing visibility. Found myself on a heading of about 015 degrees magnetic coming out of Slaughter Creek headed for the west side of Ragged Point at the entrance to Brooks Creek. I sailed till I sighted a deadhead in the water marked by an orange float. Coming about, I tacked out 2 more times before making the Green #1 entrance buoy to Hudson Creek at about 1445. Continued to tack up the very puffy Hudson Creek, dousing sail and joining the raft up at a pretty little spot about half way up the creek on the right side behind a stand of trees and a family graveyard. The anchorage, picked by Smith, Minneo and Associates was perfectly protected and had the advantage of neighbors that wouldn't complain if the party got lively...and it did.

In celebration of the first indication of clearing weather (it wasn't raining) and to commemorate the last two days of non-stop wet, I broke out my reserve stash of Goslings Black Rum and Bermuda Ginger Beer to offer the group a round of "Dark & Stormys." This got the situation loose, fast...while the Hoover Grill was warming up and the Smith flank steaks were in their final stages of marinade. The long and the short of it was that good food was prepared, cigars & pipes were enjoyed, pictures were taken, and an interesting musical accompaniment ranging from Irish/American "Pipe" music to Italian Opera with Pavarotti and parts of "the three tenors" performance filled the air on Hudson Creek. Luckily, we had picked a less habited spot, and no intervention by local law enforcement occurred. Although there would be the devil to pay in the morning for the impact of all the free-flowing libation, the

group came together that night, with individual idiosyncracies fading, to be replaced by some true catboat camaraderie and human spirit. After over two days of physically never quite drying out, and dealing with the short but energetic sailing patterns, we certainly enjoyed some common ground happily that night....as fellow sailors...we were having a "moment." Not a drop of Goslings was wasted nor remained, and SYLPH got a tatoo when I wasn't looking. A capital evening.

6/4: DAY FOUR - DESTINATION: FISHING AND CHURCH CREEKS

Moving slow, I finally emerged from the cabin to find the others begining to stir. GYPSY had sailed out early without a detectable sound, with Bruce being true to his word, but only after spending exactly the amount of time he originally planned for the cruise, instead of ducking out early as he threatened many a time. Having been invited to join Bill and Howard aboard GULL for breakfast, I made my way to that end of the raft-up. Bill was geared up and already churning out the buckwheats. I had a few, and Howard was persuaded to make up the difference between what I had eaten and what was still left to be cooked....waste not, want not. As usual, Bill's buckwheats were not to be missed on these cruises, so I enjoyed every bit.

Got underway at about 0930, with the intention of exploring the rest of the creek to its head. With wind still out of the Northeast, I opted to power. Found a nice spot in about three feet of water in view of a skipjack under restoration. Decided to drop the hook and write the previous day's log, drying out under the first day of real sunshine all week.

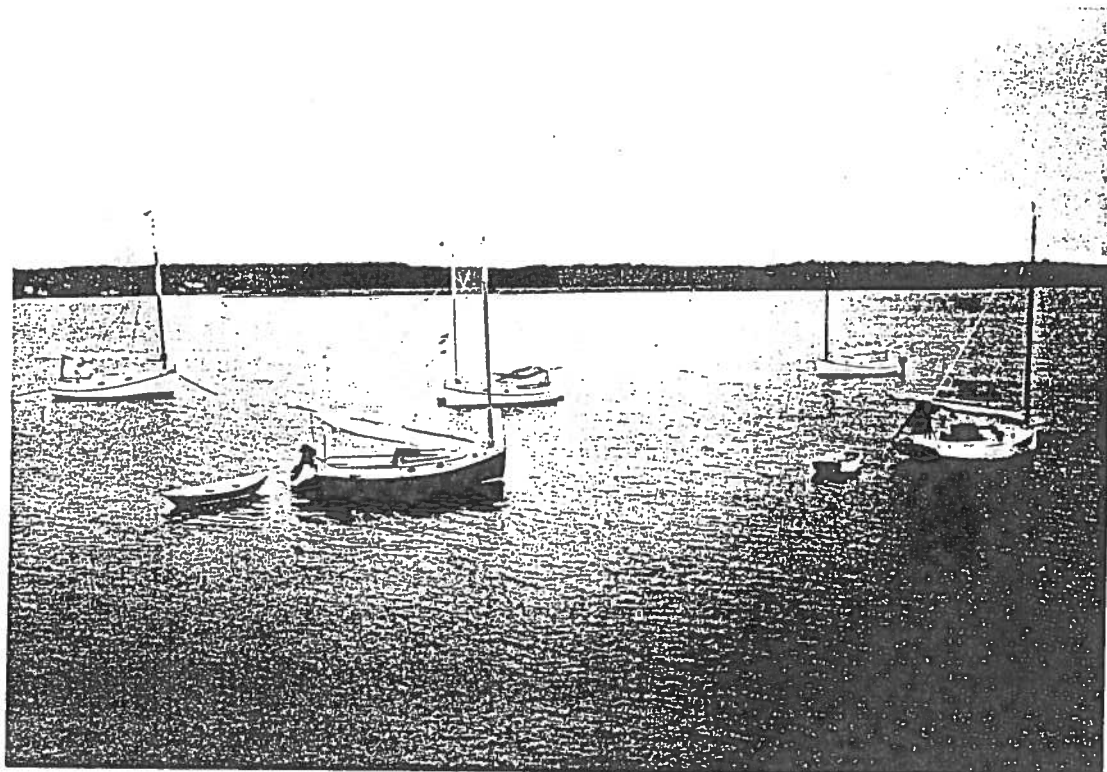
Sailed downwind off the hook at about noon, enjoying the sparsely populated creek and watching the workboats with the latest in hi-tech crab catchers working their trot lines. Cleared Hudson Creek at about 1400, shaking out the double reef, but opting to keep one in strong easterlies off Butter Pot Point.

Took two tacks to make my way following the buoys into Fishing Creek. Identified the turn to starboard into Church Creek by the house on the point which had a wood Grand Banks 32 moored on one side of the dock, and a Marshall 15 up in a cradle on the other side of the dock. That would be a combination I could live with.

Found the rest of the catboat crew tied up to the pier at the Old Trinity Church. Sailed myself beyond the church, the short distance remaining to the head of the creek, which ends where you can see Route 16. Doused sail and powered back to tie up at the church. Went ashore to visit, finding CAPT Hoover to have already paved our way with the caretakers in attendance. As expected, the church was well maintained and remeniscent of what you might see in Colonial Williamsburg. The surrounding cemetary was full of the graves of local families, and a substantial number of military, some obviously dating back to the American Revolution. We all signed the guest book. Tony got driven down the road to recharge his telephone and Jerry's radio battery.

Sailed back out of Church Creek, looking for a suitable calm anchorage. SYLPH, GULL and GROWLER each to their own hooks found a beautiful little cove on the east side of Church Creek. TIR-NAN-OG found a similar spot in an adjacent cove, and made the transit by dinghy to confirm the next days events. Howard decided to go exploring up into the cove by dinghy, disappearing behind some high grass. We hoped he would not find the creature from the black lagoon in the process, as Bill reminded him "If you get in trouble....fire three shots."

As it turned out, Howard survived the mini-swamp tour, while the rest of us enjoyed the sunset. Things were looking buggy as the wind died down, so Professor Minneo engaged the hi-tech dragonfly device to ensure our air cover from incoming mosquitos. We all retired after this first fair weather day.



6/5: DAY FIVE - DESTINATION: BECKWITH CREEK

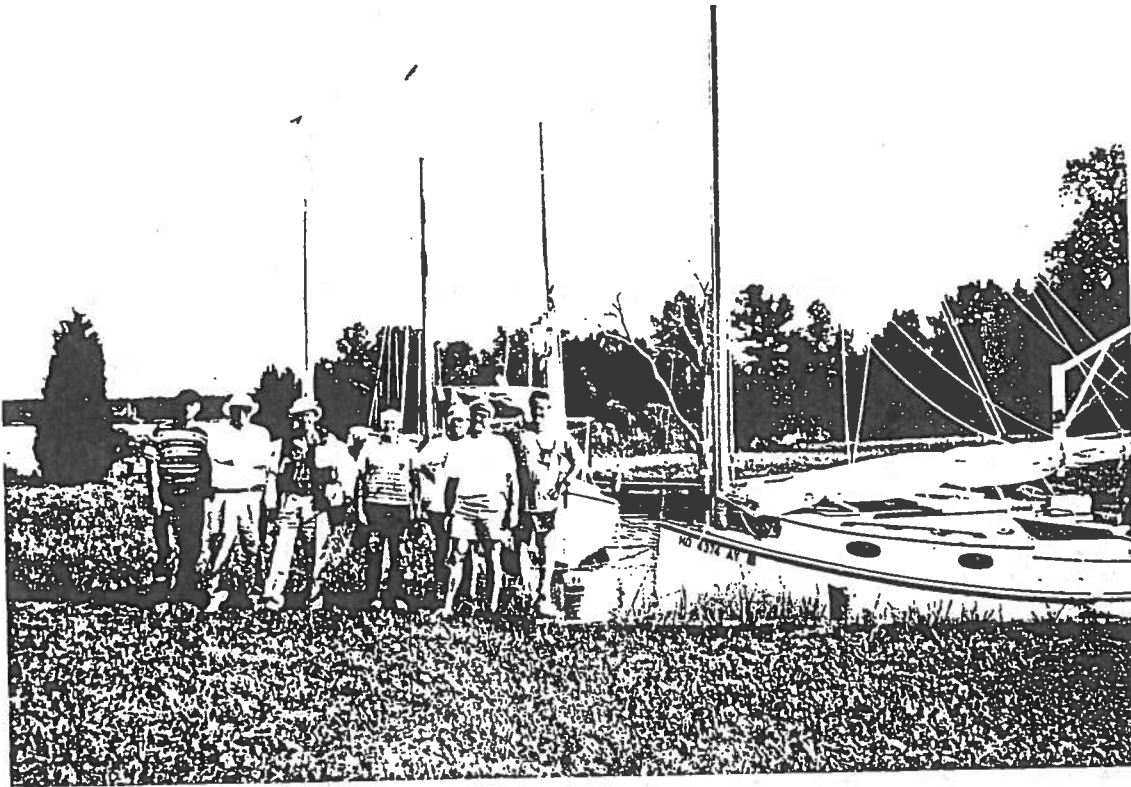
Slept well, but temperatures still only in the high forties overnight. No bugs in the cabin, but all boats and dinghies covered in gnats.

Having accepted a breakfast invitation aboard Chez GROWLER, I made a pot of coffee and dinghied over. Now knowing that Jerry had some appreciation for Italy, I also brought my Stella D'oro (Gold Star) breakfast treats. Jerry was pulling all the stops out preparing french toast, while Tony was trying to find his way out of the cabin. Enjoyed a leisurely breakfast aboard GROWLER, watching a lone workboat crabbing in the river and enjoying the reflection of all the catboats in the calm cove....it couldn't have been nicer.

Checked in with GULL after breakfast to discuss the day's itinerary and then dinghied back to SYLPH. Underway under sail at about 0930 tacking out of Church Creek. Turned on to Fishing Creek in 5-10 kts of wind for a perfect sail out. TIR-NAN-OG caught up to me under power, and we discussed our rendezvous point at Beckwith Creek before separating.

Exited Fishing Creek at about 1100 onto the beautiful Little Choptank. It was like a crystal blue glass lake, allowing leisurely long tacks with adequate wind and no seas...it just doesn't get any better than this.

Got my bearings, locating Cherry Island at the mouth of Beckwith Creek. Tacked up Beckwith Creek to inconsistent and constantly changing winds. Sighted GROWLER and GULL under sail out of Fishing Creek...beautiful. Picked up landmarks and other miscellaneous features of Jim Terry's farm per the hand drawn "Howell Nautical Chartlet" provide me by Tom Howell and found the sheltered little bulkheaded inlet next to the big white davits and the orange wind sock.



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Met with Jim, who was knee deep in house contractors, fresh cut wood and pvc plumbing. Got the nickel tour of the farmhouse under renovation, the hanger where the last owner kept his seaplane and the tidal swimming pool that currently was home to some pretty large blue crabs. Jim let us borrow his van to drive into Cambridge for supplies, etc....what a trusting soul! Even though he was recently retired from New York City, his hospitality was Eastern Shore all the way as this troop of ragged looking catboaters took off into town...unsupervised!

Tom and Judy Howell had invited everyone to dinner at their log cabin home on the other side of the main and only road (Route 343). Everybody chipped in to stock the hosts with appropriate libation, dessert pies, and a couple of more feet of pvc pipe Jim needed to complete a kitchen plumbing job at the farmhouse.

Got back to Jim's farm without incident or altercation with local law enforcement, to find Tom had arrived. Took a few pictures, including some classified photographs of some U.S.N. Seal Operations Jerry Smith was conducting in and around our dockage....something about checking for explosives attached to

catboat hulls and the security of the United States at stake....you can't leave these Navy guys alone for a minute you know. I really think he just couldn't take the heat and needed to take a dip. Some large swimming black snakes had been reported earlier in the trip up Beckwith Creek, but luckily Jerry didn't find any during his short underwater ballet episode.

We loaded up again, and headed for the Howell household. The log cabin nestled in the pines looked like the "lincoln logs" tin I had as a kid....(there I go dating myself again....for the younger readers, that's what was around before plastic legos). In any case, Tom's wife Judy was a gracious hostess allowing us free reign, including shower facilities. As the drinks flowed (including Jerry teaching Judy how to mix the perfect martini for Tom) and the camaraderie grew, one by one, each catboater emerged almost unrecognizable in clean clothes, some shaved for the first time during the trip, and certainly refreshed.

As director of the Chesapeake Maritime Museum's Boat Shop, Tom is never at a loss for nautical artifacts and antiquities of his own. Some of the highlights of the evening included



family journals circa 1919 aboard of all things a catboat, as some of Tom's family was originally from points north of the Chesapeake Bay, and a tour of Tom's own boat shop which included one turn of the century tugboat under restoration, another under construction, family handed down dugouts and kayaks, Tom's recent restoration of a Barnegat Bay sneakbox, and a Triumph Spitfire.

We finally got out of the boat shop, and returned for coffee and pie before being packed off back to the catboats. Hats off to Tom and Judy Howell, who really made us feel welcome and to Jim Terry for giving us the perfect dock for a few wayward catboats.

Back at the boats, the night was starlit, and we had time to reflect on what was another great day.

6/6: DAY SIX - DESTINATION: SLAUGHTER CREEK..."The Swamp" .

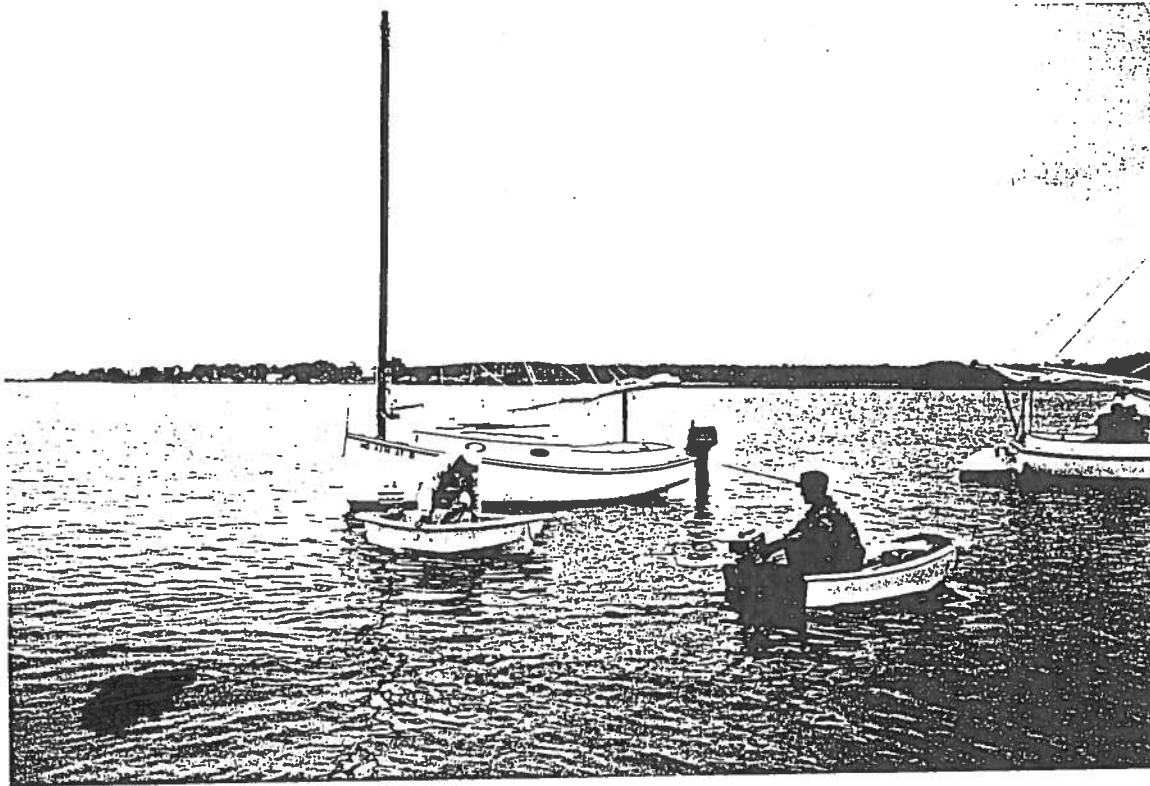
Another cold, but tolerable night under the foul weather gear again. Up early to fill water jugs and say good bye to Jim. Found *FLIPPER II* full of water to the gunwhale after having been caught under the dock as the tide came up. At least I know I put enough floatation back in.

The catboats started moving out at about 0800. *TIR-VAL-OG* under sail heading home, while *GULL*, *SYLPH* and *GROHTEK* departed with wind astern on the run for Slaughter Creek. Had a nice sail across the Little Choptank arriving at the Taylor's Island fixed bridge within minutes of each other. Down to three, we anchored on the west side of the bridge as Howard and I prepared our dinghies for the swamp cruise.

We ate lunch first. *GULL* was the radio watch. I brought extra gas, camera and charts. Howard was in his camouflage gear (ex-Marine), had the beer and the compass. After

appropriate fanfare, we proceeded under the Taylor's Island bridge into the swamp, making regular radio checks back to *GL'LL*.

Powered through Slaughter Creek Broads into Slaughter Creek Narrows. The first refueling took place about a half hour into the trip and then hourly after that with the 3.5 hp Sears "debbie motor" at half throttle. Just into the Narrows, Howard reported that the "Cruise n' Carry" had cracked the Hoover dinghy transom. Assessing the situation, and not wanting to do any more damage to the dinghy, we decided to try taking the Hoover dinghy in tow. The "debbie motor" was up to it, so we continued, reporting our status at the next radio check.



Got ourselves far enough into the Taylor's Island Wildlife Management Area and maybe into Upper Keene Broad until everything started to look the same. Stopped coincident with refueling at about 1400 and decided to head back before we really lost our bearings. We had already gotten ourselves off the

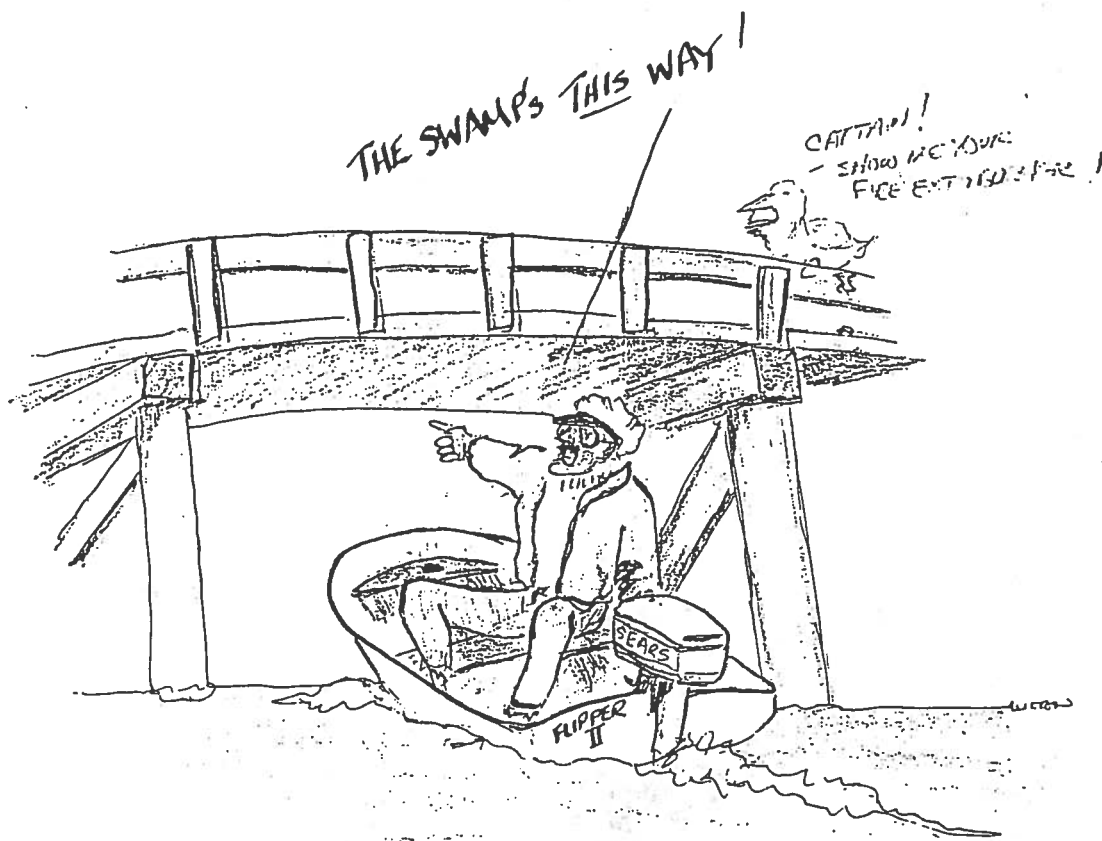
main ditch once and found our way back on. As a matter of fact, we were in a fairly broad waterway, so I'm sure we would have ended up either out on the bay or on the Hlonga if we had continued, but lacking sufficient height of eye to see where we were going, discretion became the better part of valor and we started back.

Opened up the "debbie motor" full bore with Howard in tow for the last twenty minutes, returning under the Taylor's Island Bridge for photo opportunities of the Coast Guard bringing the Marines back before breaking the tow.....Expedition Complete!

Broke anchors free and re-formed starboard side to the dock at Taylor's Island General Store for dinner. We all had a nice surprise when Bruce Smith walked back in to give Jerry Smith back a tape. We all recounted the trip a little over dinner, and as is traditional, discussed options for next year which included the Pautuxet, the Miles/Chester and the Nanicoke Rivers. Time will tell. We ended dinner with my being presented an appropriate caricature done by Jerry Smith, which I call the "Dinghy Portrait."

Bruce was nice enough to take some of us down the road to the Taylor's Island Post Office, where the pay phone was, and then back to the boats before leaving. He also offered me a

warm jacket, which I took. We all got underway and anchored just to the north in Taylor's Cove for the night.



CATBOAT COMMAUDOS ASSAULT THE SWAMP

Slaughter Creek, June 6, 1997

6/7: DAY SEVEN - DESTINATION: HOMEWARD BOUND

After morning coffee, took FLIPPER II around to pay my final respects to GROWLER and GULL. GROWLER was sailing straight home, while GULL was going to overnight off the Choptank east of Tilghman Island. All agreed it had been a good trip, and would give some thought to next year's destination.

Underway, sailed off the hook at 0730....almost losing my hat after a sloppy jibe. Followed GROWLER out of the cove under sail, but quickly had to motor straight into the wind out of Slaughter Creek. Waved good bye one at a time to the handful of workboats already out working their trot lines on the creek. Noted that the Coast Guard 55 footer was gone underway. Cleared the creek at about 0830.

With the sail full, killed the outboard and adjusted trim to stay slightly upwind of GROWLER on a course of 350 degrees magnetic. Winds were kicking up, but SYLPII was rigged with a single reef, which seemed to match the wind condition.

Spent the next two hours trying to catch up to GROWLER. Cleared the entrance to the Little Choptank at about 0930, and after clearing the lee of Ragged Island, was hit with the full wind and sea coming out of the Choptank River. SYLPII reacted negatively and was overpowered. I was unable to sail to windward as well as GROWLER due to heavy seas on the bow slowing the boat substantially. Gave up catching GROWLER, altering course 15 to 20 degrees to keep the sail full and driving, while putting seas closer on the beam. Used Sharp's Island Light as a visual heading, and had the lighthouse abeam by 1030. Wind and seas were heavy, but SYLPII was driving through and making steady progress as we sailed through the Tilghman Island sportfishing boat fleet.

Continued on a due north course until abeam Coaches Island. A downbound freighter and an upbound tug/barge operation forced a temporary course alteration to 320 degrees magnetic to cross the shipping lane.

Abeam green #1 at about 1400, getting my bearings by identifying Bloody Point Light, Thomas Point Light and Red Nun #2 at the entrance to the South River. Eased off course, boiling into the South River on a broad reach. Made the dock at 1600. Removed excess gear, showered and was home by 1800. So ended the hardest day of physical sailing and the trip.



EPILOGUE

Although a little wet at first, the Little Choptank River has to be the best gunkholing/sailing ground yet, and will always be worth a return trip in my book.

So ends another annual cruise with all safe and sound, and some new destinations that are certainly keepers....see you next year.

mcc