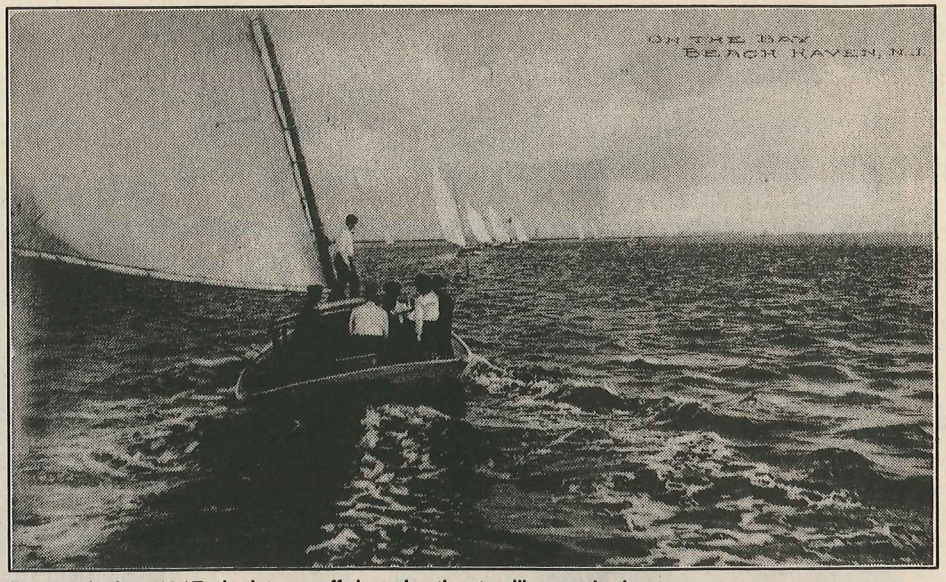
Tuckerton Odyssey

By CHARLES EDGAR NASH

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Postcard, circa 1917, depicts a gaff-rigged catboat sailing on the bay.

In colonial days, the Chestnut Neck-Tuckerton-Barnegat region of the New Jersey coast, together with its offshore islands, of which Long Beach is the most prominent, was known as The Middle of the Shore. And "middle" it was indeed, the nearest shore to Philadelphia, most prominent shoals north of Hatteras, a key outpost of coastal and transatlantic shipping bound to and from bustling New York Harbor, and a beehive of coastal maritime activity. Small wonder it became a veritable "crossroads of adventure" in all of our wars and most of our all-too-short periods of peace.

Everything happens "off Barnegat" and has for nearly four centuries. The region is known to every mariner who sails the Seven Seas. It is a place that lives and breathes history.

Fortunately, there is never truly an end to the flow of evidence pertaining to the past, precluding the likelihood of any so-called "definitive" account of this region ever being written, no matter how diligent the researcher. But there does come a time to put findings and recollections on paper. This seems to be that time.

In the first quarter of this century, or certainly as far back as I can remember, one of the most pleasant and relaxing experiences for young and old alike for those who summered on Long Beach was a sail to Tuckerton and return on a typical Barnegat catboat. The captains of most of these were members of the Beach Haven Yacht Club, who sailed or guided fishing parties as a means of livelihood, for there were very few craft of this calibre owned by private parties who summered here in those days.

These catboats were strictly a local design, admirably adapted to their bay-wide environment and were often called "Barnegatters" though they were made all the way from Tuckerton to Forked River. They were of shallow draft, too broad-beamed to upset in any normal blow, and usually ran from 19 to 23 feet in length. They sported big centerboards in centerboard wells amidships, which were raised or lowered according to the depth of the water, giving them very good "reach" on a tack when down to their fullest extent.

Most had cabins that sheltered the forward part of the cockpit to protect occupants from too much sunburn in the salty and often spray-filled air, or from rain if a storm blew up. The six or seven-inch wide semicircular coaming around the open read cockpit behind the cabin was invariably topped with a conforming plank seating arrangement about eight inches wide and an inch thick, on which most persons aboard sat atop a cushion from the cabin.

A tall mast with a gaff-rigged fore-and-aft-sail, usually fitted with three or four horizontal lines of reef-cords, provided the motive power. Sometimes a colorful touch was given by a triangular or swallowtail burgee on top of the mast or high on the trailing edge of the sail. As I recall, a jib was seldom used or thought necessary, except in the biggest boats, for it simply meant more work and responsibility for the captain.

It was fun for youngsters, or even oldsters to sit in the cabin and look down the centerboard well into the crystal-clear green water to see an occasional fish or crab swim past, as you listened to the unforgettable music of the water tinkling and gurgling, as it sang against the hull, which magnified the sound like an empty barrel. The captain always warned his passengers to watch the centerboard very closely, for if it struck an unsuspected shoal or any underwater obstruction, it might kick up quickly in its well.

These cabins were comparatively low-roofed. A grownup standing on the floorboards in the cockpit could see over them. They had a long curving bench or bunk on each side that conformed to the shape of the boat. On these you could lie full length, half under the deck if you didn't feel well, or if you just wanted to relax and take a nap or enjoy the lapping of the waves.

Underneath the bunks were long rows of bulky canvas-covered cork lifejackets with canvas shoulder straps and tie-strings, ready for instant use in an emergency.

In the center of the cockpit, a few feet behind the centerboard, there was invariably a sizeable fish-box made of tongue-and-groove boards, with a generously-painted canvas-covered top that could be lifted for access. On a fishing trip, the catch was put in there instantly to keep it out of the sun, for in those days of rather primitive refrigeration, a fish remained safe to eat for only a couple of days at most, preferably within 24 hours. The fish-box was about 30 inches high and made a substantial seat for as many as four people.

Cabins could and did get hot. The earlier ones were built with turned posts about two inches square, holding up the cabin roof. Between the posts, roll-type green and white striped canvas awnings were installed. These could be pulled straight down and buttoned in place or rolled up and fastened, thus allowing any degree or ventilation or protection desired. Latter-day cabins were wooden-sheathed in place of the canvas and got their light and ventilation from glassed ports that could be opened or closed. At first, the two forward ports were rectangular with wood

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frames that swung out and could be fastened up. Round bronze ports, opening inward, were used along the side of the cabin and within a very short time were used all around, in spite of their cost.

The bay was no uniformly deep fish-pound that could be sailed with inpunity in a deep-riding centerboard craft. Tides and channels had to be respected at all times. And very particularly it was no cinch to tack up Tuckerton Creek with its tricky channel and its many twists and turns. So the captains had every reason to take great and justifiable pride in their ability to navigate all the way up to headwater, without running aground on a mud-bar or smacking into a boat sailing out.

Here they docked and their passengers debarked near some of the town's graceful and beloved willow trees along the creek, then walked a short distance to the main street and across it to Blackman's famous ice cream parlor for some long-anticipated refreshments.

At a time when most ice cream emporiums stocked only vanilla, or at most, vanilla and chocolate, Blackman's took pride in making and serving all the natural flavors that the fruit and berry seasons of the countryside provided. The selection ranged all the way from wild strawberry and swamp huckleberry to cultivated peach, apricot and cherry, made fit for the gods with real cream, obtained directly from local dairymen.

The servings were enormous and the prices were most reasonable, being five and ten cents a plate, if my memory serves me well. In later years I never found any ice cream that could even approach this, save possibly premium-priced Italian spumoni, also made of cream, or Bassett's ice cream of the Philadelphia Reading Terminal Market, widely known for its sheer goodness.

Not that it mattered, but there was homemade sponge cake, too, and iced cupcakes, if your appetite dictated. But I will never forget the big glasses of ice cold cedar water, direct from the cooler in the corner, chilled by chunks of the previous winter's ice, harvested from the adjacent lake.

It was virtually a natural uncarbonated rootbeer, crystal clear and of a rich coloration, almost like sherry wine. This natural impregnation with energizing extracts, came from the roots in a chain of cedar swamps upstream, connecting with what scientists have called one of the greatest natural reservoirs of pure, germ-free water in the world.

For generations, until supplanted by modern refrigeration, cedar-water ice was cut and harvested from Tuckerton Lake after prolonged cold spells. It was carefully stored in cedar-shingled icehouses on the lake shore, where it lasted all through the summer under thick layers of insulating sawdust. Each layer of ice blocks was covered with a layer of sawdust to keep it from freezing to the next layer of blocks, and the whole heap was covered so deeply with sawdust that very little ice melted away and was lost.

The proximity of this unfailing supply of ice that was there for the taking was undoubtedly one of the prime reasons that Blackman ice cream came into being as a means of livelihood for that enterprising family, with memorable ice water to top it off. For electricity had not reached the shore communities in those days, so naturally there was no electric refrigeration.

The sailing excursion from Long Beach to Tuckerton "T'was of such stuff as dreams are made of"

Today, we cannot seem to duplicate and enjoy the simple pleasures and complete relaxations of yesteryear. Just the thought of a zig-zag sailing trip of perhaps 12 or 15 miles across the bay, up and down Tuckerton Creek, with its innumerable twists and turns, requiring much tacking and them back across the bay, following the channels, may seem boring to a "hot shot" modernist. This is especially true when the end in view seemed to be only a plate of ice cream, a glass of water, and, perhaps, a piece of cake.

There was no thrilling speed, perhaps only successive sheets of drenching wave spray, when the tide was bucking the wind; and there was no particular excitement, except the knowledge that you were sailing through history.

Going up and down the creek, on the salt marshes rich in peat, you passed and re-passed what experts have called the largest prehistoric Indian shell mound on the East Coast, north of Florida. At least it once was, but over the years, mainland farmers have used tons of its clam and oyster shells to lime their fields.

As we first saw it, the mound was still imposing, being perhaps 10 feet high, 20 feet wide and almost 150 feet long. It had exactly a dozen red cedars growing on or around it, the five on top being old-timers that were gnarled and twisted from having weathered many a coastal storm. Part of the mound is still there and a few of the trees, also.

Over these same salt-grass meadows, the roar of cannon and the rattle of small arms once reverberated as our daring privateersmen, who swarmed from Tuckerton to Chestnut Neck, raised havoc with British shipping at sea beyond the coastal islands, during the Revolution and the War of 1812. Offshore from Sandy Hook to Brigantine, our seamen achieved more victories afloat than our armies did on land. They captured many ships, millions of dollars worth of much needed supplies and altogether, with our other privateers, two thirds as many captives as were taken in land battles. Among these were many trained officers, soldiers, and seamen that George III needed badly.

In their first attack by sea on Chestnut Neck during the Revolution, the British raiders under "Scotch" Ferguson, not only burned most of the buildings in that town and captured or burned the ships there, but burned three saltworks as their land forces skirmished up the coast. Less than a rifle-shot from Tuckerton Creek, on Osborne Island, they fell upon an American outpost in a dastardly night attack in which little quarter was given.

Thus, between 40 and 50 of Count Casimir Pulaski's crack cavalrymen were killed in their sleep. Only five were captured. This was part of the force sent across the state in haste to meet the anticipated British attack. Ferguson later claimed the foray was instigated mainly by a French deserter from Pulaski's Legion and others with him, a typical military shift of blame.

Scoff if you will, at such a sailing trip, but anyone who ever made it, never forgot it!

Thousands of fiddler crabs, sidling for their holes that riddled the mud-banks, the males toting their single big claws like bass fiddles, or waving them menacingly as they retreated. Bank swallows diving in graceful swoops overhead in their pursuit of insects. The rattle of a kingfisher as it rocketed downstream in search of a mullet for its brood. The unerring dive of an osprey intent on a noonday meal of weakfish. The measured wingbeat of a distant blue heron. Mudhens fading like shadows into the safey of the tall saltgrass. The plaintive call of a killdeer. These were some of the touches of grace that colored such a trip. "T'was of such stuff as dreams are made of," or at least, memories.