



Photo by Bradley Davidson

Beauty and the Beast at the Turkey Shoot Regatta

by
Jere Dennison

It didn't go exactly as planned. Preparing to leave our slip in Deltaville on Friday morning, it was dreary, overcast, and spitting rain. We were bound for the Yankee Point Yacht Club on Meyer Creek at the mouth of the scenic Corrotoman River. West of the Rappahannock River Bridge to Whitestone, it was only a short 15-mile trip. The YPYC would be hosting the 13th annual Hospice "Turkey Shoot" Regatta over the second weekend of October. This sailboat regatta, held in a sleepy rural area of Virginia's Northern Neck, has grown to become the largest hospice regatta

in the country. For the second consecutive year, we wanted to participate in this special charitable event where only classic wood and fiberglass yachts, designed more than 25 years ago, would meet on the racecourse to compete for honor and glory. But winning this event was a possibility that we had never dared even to consider.

I was part of a crew of eight, including the owner and skipper, Jack Moseley, a retired physician now living in Deltaville. His wooden yacht *Tusitala* had been constructed in California over a 14-year period by

Jack's former father-in-law, John Townsend, before her launching in 1971. Her maiden voyage had been across the Pacific to Hawaii. Townsend, an aerospace engineer, had gained distinction as a member of the project team that built Howard Hughes' mammoth wooden airplane dubbed the *Spruce Goose*. He applied his meticulous engineering and crafting skills to create the ultimate cruising machine in his own backyard. Displacing 38,000 pounds, *Tusitala* is cutter rigged and measures 47 feet on deck with a high freeboard, centercockpit, aft cabin, canoe stern, and draft of nearly 7 feet.

She bears little resemblance to the typical racing sailboat but is designed for hard offshore ocean passages, not the light airs and placid waters of the Chesapeake Bay.

After his retirement in 1999, Jack with the help of family and friends from California, delivered the boat via the Panama Canal to her new home berth at Deltaville. Over the course of her existence, *Tusitala*'s mettle had never been tested on the race-course until last year. Attracted by the panoply of over 100 vintage sailing craft, we took her to the Turkey Shoot in 2002. Never expecting scintillating performance from the venerable old gal, whose name translates as "teller of tales" in Polynesian, we accepted our assigned rating and finished in the middle of our class but well down in the overall rankings. In fact, during the second race that year we withdrew from competition as we floundered in the light air that soon all but vanished. It had definitely not been our kind of weather, and we resigned ourselves to a similar outcome in 2003.

The slip occupied by *Tusitala* was also shared with *Desperado*, a newly-restored 1954 Hinckley Owens Cutter 41 owned by Ric and Sharon Bauer. After a lengthy restoration, *Desperado* was to take her maiden voyage in the Turkey Shoot Regatta, and a friendly wager of a bottle of grog was proffered for the winner of an informal matchrace to Yankee Point. *Desperado*, radiant in fresh paint, gleaming varnish, and polished bronze, epitomized the graceful beauty of a traditional thoroughbred racing yacht. Silhouetted against the hulky *Tusitala*, it was clearly a case of "beauty and the beast." One could not help but surmise that *Desperado* might be destined to claim the Most Beautiful Boat Trophy determined by a vote of the spectators aboard the *Miss Ann*, a 124-foot vintage yacht constructed in



Tusitala owned by Jack Moseley, was built over a 14 year period by John Townsend and launched in 1971. Photo by Bradley Davidson

1926 and owned and operated since 1956 by the Tide's Inn in Irvington for the benefit of its patrons.

Departing Jackson Creek, we rounded Stingray Point light and headed west up the Rappahannock, killing the engine to spread our sails to a brisk northeast wind. In just three hours we had arrived at the Yankee Point Yacht Club and dropped our 65-pound plough anchor in Meyer Creek with *Desperado* tagging along behind. From our anchorage, we surveyed the severe damage caused to the marina's piers by the recent passage of

Hurricane Isabel. After the customary pre-race festivities on Friday night, we braced ourselves for the race on Saturday, a triangular course around the buoys followed by a windward leg and a final downwind sprint to the finish. Following breakfast ashore, we toured the *Claud W. Somers*, a restored working skipjack built in 1911 and now owned by the Reedville Fisherman's Museum. She would be the sole entry for this year's Skipjack Trophy Race.

Making our way to the starting line on the south side of the Rappahannock River across from

Carters Creek, we contemplated the refinements made to *Tusitala* over the past year: a new mainsail to replace the original 30-year-old sail, and a three-bladed folding propeller to substitute for a fixed two-bladed prop. These changes would certainly enhance our performance, but to what degree we did not know. If we could just find some heavy air to coax *Tusitala's* 19 tons through the water, we might have a chance to improve our position over last year. But the odds were against us. The Rappahannock River is notorious for its light, fickle winds. Certainly we might enjoy decent wind on one day, but for two consecutive days - no way!

Well, a funny thing happened after the start of our class. Owen, the crew member at the helm, had given us a clear start and was sailing the boat close-hauled toward the first racing mark placed directly upwind. It was blowing, and blowing hard. Suddenly we realized that we were passing, not only the boats in our class, but those in the classes ahead of us as well. *Tusitala* was on a romp, and it was

going to be our day. Only two boats that had started in a class ahead managed to cross the finish line before us, and on corrected time after factoring in our time allowance handicap, incredibly *Tusitala* prevailed as the overall winner for the day! A handicap is assigned each boat and is expressed in seconds per mile that are subtracted from the elapsed time over the measured distance of the course. The handicap is based on a number of performance factors, such as the boat's length, sail area, hull and keel shape, displacement, etc., and allows yachts of different sizes and designs to compete against each other on an equitable basis.

Although we were ecstatic over our victory, we were not optimistic that we could repeat our performance on Sunday in the pursuit race, where each boat starts at a separate time calculated by factoring in its time allowance over the ten-mile course. In this race, the slower boats start before the faster boats based on their handicaps, and theoretically all

boats should cross the finish line at the same time if the handicaps are fair. This will never happen due to a number of factors such as the quality of the skipper and crew, the consistency and strength of the wind, the condition of boat bottoms, the condition of sails and rigging, tides and currents, strategy and tactics, luck, etc. In order to win a pursuit race, you must pass all of the yachts that started ahead of you and stay in front of all the yachts that started behind you.

I won't bore you with the puerile food fight that the crew of *Tusitala* engaged in at the splendid dinner served up by the regatta hosts on Saturday night, but Sunday morning dawned with blue skies and a feeble wind rippling the surface of the protected harbor. It appeared that it would be one of those dreaded light air days on the Rappahannock. The skipper surreptitiously slipped below to empty one of *Tusitala's* two freshwater tanks to eliminate dead weight. If we had to endure drifting conditions, we wouldn't give up without a struggle.

***Desperado* was the winner of the Miss Ann Trophy as the most beautiful yacht.**



Photo by
Bradley Davidson



The *Tusitala* crew: Owen and Anne Davidson from Christiansburg, Judy Buis from Richmond, Hunter and Coleman Davidson from Charlottesville, Betty Ann Harsh from Richmond, and the author from Richmond.

Miraculously, as we awaited our assigned starting time shortly before 1300 hours, the wind slowly began to increase in intensity. Soon it became apparent that our prayers to the wind gods might be answered, and after we crossed the starting line, we were rail down in the gusty conditions, charging windward toward our two weather marks at Towle and Rogue Points. Squeezing past many of the boats that had started earlier, we quickly found ourselves near the head of the

fleet. What could go wrong now?

But leaving Towle Point light behind, we discovered to our horror a major problem below. Our floorboards were floating in a flood of rising water that threatened to engulf us. *Tusitala* was slowly sinking. Pumps were frantically activated in an effort to stem the flow from an unknown source. Still rail down on the port side due to the heavy northwest breeze, we had to find the source of the leak and find it fast.



At YPYC, Jack accepts the Virginia Spirit Cup as the owner of the overall winner of the Large Boat Regatta.

A porthole in the head that had been left open was the unlikely culprit. Due to our severe heel caused by the windy conditions, the port located below the rail had actually submerged below the surface of the river allowing hundreds of gallons to enter the hull undetected. With the portlight closed, the water slowly began to recede. Owen, at the helm, was unaware of the chaos below but discovered later to his distress that much of his personal gear had been soaked, along with a cellphone that would not survive the inundation.

By the time we arrived at the turning mark at Rogue Point, the bilge was finally dry. It was back to business. We rounded first and winged our jib for the downwind leg to the finish. We had only to leave Towles Point

The *Miss Ann* with her boatload of passengers from the Tides Inn was on station to review the fleet and pick the most beautiful yacht in the regatta.



light to port and cross the finish line off Carters Creek. But there was no time to relax – the apparent wind dropped as we sailed with the breeze. A smaller yacht had rounded Rogue Point just behind us and had thrown up a double headsail rig, spreading a greater expanse of sail to catch the following wind. She was creeping up on our stern as we approached Towles Point, and anxiety swept *Tusitala's* crew. Mercifully the final leg to the committee boat offered us a tighter reach with blasts of northerly wind funneling down the Corrotoman River. *Tusitala* accelerated to the finish and received the winning gun. We now realized that we would be the overall winner of the Turkey Shoot Regatta. The *Miss Ann*, with her boatload of passengers from the Tides Inn, was also on station to review the fleet and pick the most beautiful yacht in the regatta. While we posed for the spectators, our hearts were pulling for *Desperado*, our slipmate in Deltaville, to win this coveted award.

The awards ceremony at YPYC following Sunday's race was a jovial affair for the crew of *Tusitala*. Surrounded by his crew: Owen and Anne Davidson from Christiansburg, Judy Buis from Richmond, Hunter and Coleman Davidson from Charlottesville, Betty Ann Harsh from Richmond, and the author from Richmond, Jack accepted the Virginia Spirit Cup as the owner of the overall winner of the Large Boat Regatta. The Virginia Spirit Cup was named for the winners of the first Turkey Shoot Regatta 13 years ago when there were only two racing classes. The winners of those classes were the yachts *Virginia* and *Spirit*. Back then the regatta was held on the weekend following Thanksgiving when the weather could be brutally cold and daylight was scarce. When the event was moved to mid-October several years ago, participation burgeoned.

In 2002, 102 boats registered for the event, and \$27,500 was raised as a benefit for Hospice Support Services of the Northern Neck, making it the largest such event in the country. The goal for 2003 was 125 boats with \$30,000 in funds raised for this good cause. That participation level would doubtlessly have been achieved had it not been for the malicious intrusion of Hurricane Isabel that wreaked havoc on the local marinas and forced many boatowners to haul their boats out of the water before the end of the season. The final total for 2003 was a healthy 91 entries, still an exceptional level. The final tally on fundraising effort has not yet been concluded but is likely to reach a considerable sum. To learn more about the Turkey Shoot Hospice Regatta and all the hospice regattas held around the country, along with complete results for each, check out their website at www.hospiceregattas.org.

Now what is in store for the crew of the *Tusitala*? The winners of the Turkey Shoot will compete next spring in a National Hospice Regatta Championship against winning crews from 20 hospice regattas held around the country in 2003. The event will be held in Annapolis, Maryland using loaned J105's to compose a strict one-design fleet. Our Turkey Shoot winning crew will have a busy off-season becoming proficient in this high performance craft before the showdown in Annapolis.

And by the way, in case you were wondering, *Desperado* was the winner of the *Miss Ann* Trophy as the most beautiful yacht - and most deservedly so.

Jere Dennison is a past Commodore and a longtime member of FBYC. Additional photos can be viewed @bradleydavidson.com



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