

March 1990 OFFSHORE Article

by James Hebert

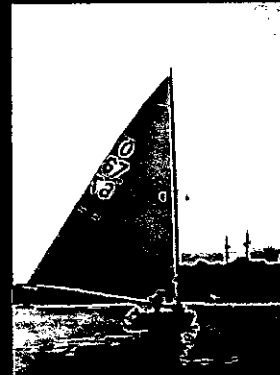
NJ's fabled Barnegat A-Cats are rescued from near-extinction

ON a dreary day about 12 years ago, an old salt by the name of Riley "Snapper" Applegate was poking around a New Jersey antique shop, wiling away some time. Snapper spied an aged, musty chest of drawers. He popped it open and began rooting around. Inside, he dug up something unexpected blueprints, but very old ones, and apparently for some kind of boat. A closer look, and Snapper's surprise turned to giddiness. He bought the plans, hurried home, phoned a fellow member of Ocean Gate Yacht Club, and said, "You won't believe what I just found."

To understand what Snapper was so excited about, it helps to first know something of the sailing history on New Jersey's Barnegat Bay. It especially helps to know something about the A-Cat, a type of wooden catboat peculiar to this shallow and marshy bay just inside the Jersey Shore. A long time ago, around the time flappers and Gatsby were holding sway over popular culture, the A-Cats were the champagne of Barnegat's sailing set. Rocketing along the bay's length, their 28-foot hulls bucking under enough canvas to cover half of New Jersey, these fast and fragile cats were the hottest talk on the water. SPY, LOTUS, BAT, MARY ANN, the four original A-Cats traded trophy after trophy among themselves, including the Toms River Challenge Cup, today the oldest sailing prize in America. There was a fifth A-Cat of the era, too, the TAMWOCK. When her cedar-on-oak hull burned to ash in a 1940 boatyard fire, the already declining age of the A-Cats fizzled out. The boats were sold, fell into disrepair, were sailed only on occasion. But if TAMWOCK's demise sealed the end of the A-Cats first era, her ghost, if you want to call it that, spurred on the second. Because when Riley Applegate found TAMWOCK's original plans inside that dusty chest of drawers, it sparked a chain of events that would lead to the building of the first new A-Cat in 50 years and with it, the rebirth of the class.

Today, if you're lucky, you might see all five of those A-Cats sailing the bay's summer breezes, SPY, LOTUS, BAT, MARY ANN and WASP, which was built at the renowned Beaton Boatyard in Mantoloking using the old TAMWOCK drawings. If you're really lucky, this coming summer you might even see six A-Cats out there. A new member, so new it hasn't even been named yet, is under construction at the wooden-boat workshop of the Philadelphia Maritime Museum. She was begun as part of an exhibit at the museum, and is now set to be launched April 28 at Penn's Landing. Peter Kellogg, her main benefactor, will campaign her in races come summer. And if that's not enough, word from Roger Allen of the museum is that two more A-Cats might well roll off the ways before long, one with at least partial support from Kellogg, the other with backing from an as-yet-unnamed party. The whos and wheres of the two projects are thus far uncertain, but Allen says chances are good that the A-Cat fleet will number eight in the near future.

In all, it's shaping up as a remarkable comeback for an elite fleet that only 10 years ago was largely dry-docked and disused. Says Tom Beaton, one of the builders of WASP: "These boats were almost dead



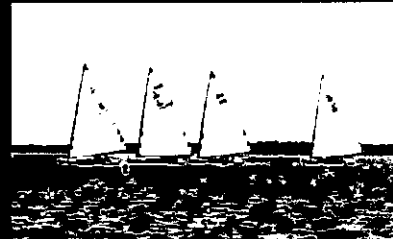
Sailing Links

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a few times. But I think there's so much local history behind them that no one will let them die. A lot of the same people have sailed them, the same families. They've gone down through the generations. Indeed, Riley Applegate's father was one of the original skippers of MARY ANN, the oldest of the existing A-Cats. She and the three other veteran A-Cats were designed by naval architect Charles Mower and built at the Morton Johnson boatyard at Bay Head between 1922 and 1923. Catboats of some type had been fixtures on Bay Head as fishing craft, but Mower's designs were the first to sport Marconi-rigged sails. The 5,500-pound A-Cat was also distinctive for its shallow sheerline, low freeboard and wide (12-foot) beam.

If you ask today's sailors what's most distinctive about sailing an A-Cat, they'll likely tell you it's the boat's almost reckless power. More than 600 square feet of sail flies from the 50-foot mast, and with the boat's hull speed of seven mph, a skipper is often hard-pressed to keep her upright and under control. That, says the A-Cat clan, is why these boats are so much fun.

"They're a blast to sail," says Roy Wilkins, co-owner of SPY. "They're totally overpowered. I have to work out all winter just to be able to handle it."

The original advent of the A-Cat class sparked fierce competition between the local yacht clubs; Island Heights, Bay Head, Seaside Park and Toms River were all represented in the fleet. (In fact, "SPY" is an acronym for Seaside Park Yacht Club.) But these days, A-Cat racing is more an individual than a club competition. That reflects the manner in which the boats have been rejuvenated, through the work of local people who, alone or in groups, each took on the task of saving one of the boats. Or, in the case of Nelson Hartranft, saving all of the boats. As Peter Kellogg explains, "Nelson Hartranft bought up each and every one of those boats and rebuilt them over time.

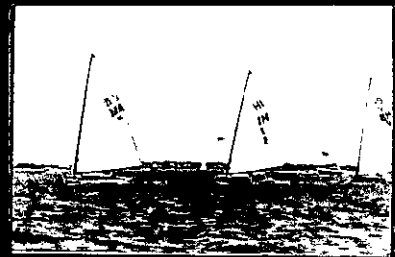
It was Hartranft that Riley Applegate called when he found the plans for TAMWOCK; Hartranft then arranged for the Beaton yard to build WASP. Now he races her against the same boats he helped bring back to life. Kellogg himself has also been an important force behind the A-Cat rebirth; besides backing the Philadelphia project, he helped finance the restoration of MARY ANN.

MARY ANN has had as interesting a recent history as any of these boats; for starters, she was bought by John Nash Hale of Island Heights barely minutes after his wedding ceremony. "We negotiated the deal for MARY ANN at the bar during John's reception," explains Marshall Warner, who co-owns the boat. "The bride didn't know anything about it. Actually, I think a lot of boats are probably sold at bars; maybe not at weddings, though."

Like virtually all of the A-Cats, MARY ANN had some big problems when Warner and Hale acquired her in 1982. She wasn't in great shape. Warner says, "We had to use pumps to keep her afloat while sailing. She was recaulked in 85, but in 87 the structure became so rotten that it needed major surgery. And you know how it is, the more you dig, the more you find. We pretty much had to rebuild her."

MARY ANN was packed off to Brooklin, Maine, to be rebuilt at the Benjamin River Boatyard. Though A-Cat sailors are fiercely proud of the boat's Barnegat pedigree, they tried not to chafe at MARY ANN'S being refurbished in New England. As Roger Allen says, "We won't hold that against her." MARY ANN returned in the spring of 88, with thickened ribs and a hull built to last. She was relaunched with much ceremony at Marty Nelson's boatyard in Island Heights. I think she's good for another 50 or 100 years," says Warner.

Another of the original boats, BAT, had become so rotted that owners Mike Frankovich and Bob Lstrom of Island Heights decided to fiberglass her hull.



That didn't sit well with the rest of the fleet, particularly after BAT won the Bay Championship (a summer-long 10-race series) twice in a row, and also took the 1987 Toms River Challenge Cup, the 119-year-old trophy that is the Holy Grail of the A-Cat set. Lostrom and Frankovich finally answered their critics by pouring nearly a ton of lead into the boat's hull, thus fattening her to the approximate weight of the other boats in the fleet.

To this day there's some grumbling about the BAT controversy? Roger Allen of the Maritime Museum says the glassing puts BAT in a different class, but most A-Cat aficionados now accept her owners' decision as necessary. BAT was just about dead when they did that, says Tom Beaton. "I can't fault them. It was either that or say goodbye to the boat."

Maybe the toughest restoration project was that of SPY, which Roy Wilkins bought for about \$3000 in the late 70s. As a kid, I remember seeing the A-Cats, and I always wanted to own one, he explains. Problem was, SPY had hardly any life left in her, and after Wilkins raced her a few years he realized it was time for another rebuild (Nelson Hartranft had done some earlier work on her). Wilkins took her to Tom Beaton, who all but read SPY the Last Rites. Her ribs were cracked, her keel broken... in other words, said Tom, she was totaled. And I said, "Oh _____, now what", recalls Wilkins.

Not easily dissuaded, Wilkins found a couple of financial backers, and for two years went straight from his schoolteaching job to the Beaton yard nearly every weeknight. When it came time to put the 3,000 plugs in the bottom, he says, I asked some IHYC members to help me.. It was a real town project, people knew the boat, and enjoyed helping me with the restoration..

They must have done something right, SPY has won the last two Bay Championships, and last season she amassed such a crushing record that Wilkins could've won the series without sailing the final race. He doesn't gloat about it. He attributes the wins mainly to a string of fast starts. In fact, he says the rival cat BAT is by far the best boat of the five. But if you don't sail the start right, and you get in bad air, it's hard to break free. "I have been fortunate to win some starts and leave the fleet in SPY's bad air."

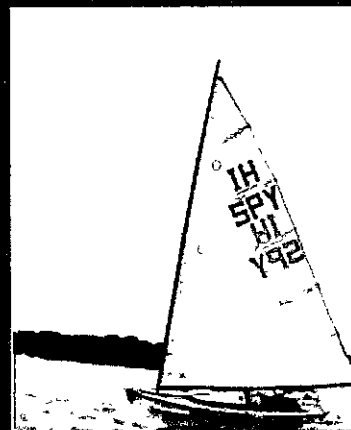
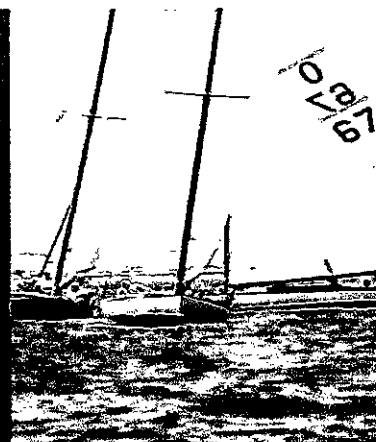
A-Cat anecdotes are about as numerous as the sandy shoals that lurk under Barnegat Bay and the Toms River. Marshall Warner remembers the first year he and Hale raced MARY ANN. "We ran aground off Goodluck Point, the centerboard just got wedged. Then, during all the confusion, the boom fell down. That was only the first or second race of the season. But believe it or not, we ended up winning the Sewell Cup that year."

Another time, Warner raced with three crew who had never set foot on an A-Cat before. which was fine, except it was during the heaviest air of the year. We almost lost her, he says with a grimace. They were holding on for dear life.

Then there was the race last year in which SPY and LOTUS were locked in a tacking duel for the finish line and were suddenly blanketed in fog that cut visibility to inches. "None of us knew where the finish line was, says Wilkins. "We don't carry loran on these boats" Lucky for Wilkins that the pea-souper moved in, he had been trailing Stephen Brick's LOTUS, but found the finish first and snuck in for the win.

Frankovich and Lostrom, for their part, once gave crew members a couple of good reasons to remember their day aboard BAT. Not only did the boom break from dry rot during the boat's first race, but a slow-drying paint left all those aboard with green rear ends by the end of the day.

As far as the A-Cat sailors are concerned, though, such mishaps and mayhem are all part of the fun. And the fun of A-Cat sailing is a big



reason these boats are still around. "They hold eight people, so you can have a party every time you go out", says Roy Wilkins. "Just like the offshore boats need rail meat".

Roger Allen agrees that the A-Cats are "absolutely wonderful sailing," but cautions that you can't expect to stay dry "Just wear your boots, or go barefoot"

The fun's sure to be at a peak this summer, when the newest A-Cat is christened and begins sparring with the existing fleet. According to Allen, she'll be a freshly minted version of the original Mower-designed cats: her design is based on that of MARY ANN.

We spent a lot of time talking to Tommy Beaton, Allen says. The only changes John Brady (the boat's chief builder) made were the same ones that Tommy had made and that are now in all the boats. A few things were done to improve the hull's strength. For instance, we put a lot of hanging and lodging knees in it.

With luck, such improvements should ensure that the current crop of A-Cats will be around for a long time to come. The way the boats have been restored, there's no reason for them to fail now, says Roy Wilkins. When they were first built, they weren't designed to last a long time. Now we realize where they break down. Tom Beaton, too, is confident in the cats: "We're taking this class into the 21st century"

So instead of one day chancing upon a set of old dusty old plans for a once-proud Barnegat A-Cat, perhaps someone like Snapper Applegate will, 50 or 100 years from now, be able to look out over the bay and see the boat itself, its low profile blazing across the shallow waters. More than anything, it's been the A-Cat's linking of the generations that has kept the fascination with this boat alive. That linking allows for some hope that the fleet will keep sailing a few generations longer.

"When you're sailing a boat that's been raced for 65 years", says Wilkins, "well... I really can't explain the thrill of competing on an A Cat and all of its history.. It is wonderful way to spend a Saturday afternoon."