The Toms River Challenge Cup is the sport's... OLDEST CONTINUOUS COMPETITION

By BILL ROBINSON

ON A JULY EVENING in the 1870's, Robbins Cove, a sheltered small boat harbor at the town of Toms River, N.J., was jammed beyond its usual capacity as, gunwale to gunwale, squat, beamy catboats lay moored fore-and-aft to the bulkhead. Amid the usual soft creaks, groans and slat-slats of a group of idle sailboats, some oddly alien sounds lent an extra tension to the darkness. On many of the boats, men cradling shotguns across their laps sat on cabin tops or in cockpits, and the occasional thump-thump of their moving about blended with the normal boat sounds.

They were waiting and watching through the night for the next day's Toms River Challenge Cup race, a new event that had attracted great interest since its start in 1871. They had come from Forked River, Manahawkin, Tuckerton and other Barnegat Bay towns, and even from as far away as Keyport on Raritan Bay. During the days preceding the race they had made their way westward from the bay up the Toms River to join home-town boats in the cove off the new Toms River YC, and their skippers, crews and followers had repaired to the bar in Captain Britton Cook's Ocean House Hotel to join the locals in pre-race discussions and predictions. As usual these had mounted hotly and steadily until a great number of bets had been placed.

And so all was in readiness for the race, which was taken very seriously by the professional watermen who sailed the boats and by the townspeople and summer residents who had formed the yacht club to sponsor racing. So seriously was the race taken, in fact, that a boat in the previous one had been found with wooden blocks nailed to her underbody. Other skippers had also suspected tampering, and the armed guards were not there to pick off any stray mallard ducks.

In this July of 1971, the Toms River Challenge Cup is still being competed for, but, as the club celebrates the double centennial of the

Challenge Cup and the club's founding, the pre-race atmosphere is a bit different. There are no armed guards and not much wagering on the side, but there is, for the four boats competing for the trophy, a very direct line of descent from the catboats of 100 years ago. Today's are marconi-rigged instead of gaff, but they are about the same size—28 feet, and of very similar hull form, to the original competitors, and they are keeping alive the oldest continuously competed for trophy in sailing.

It all goes back more than 100 years to the outbreak of the Civil War. The last ship out of the harbor of Charleston, S.C., as the guns boomed around Fort Sumter, was a coastal schooner commanded by Captain Britton Cook of Toms River. He got her back to Barnegat safely, but the war forced him to give up the coasting trade, and he then took over management of the Ocean House, a hotel his family owned in the active little seaport.

To get afloat, he and some of the other captains who had also been confined to harbor by the war, began to race catboats as a diversion, and the racing soon caught the interest of New Yorkers who spent summers at Toms River. Year by year the pickup racing became more serious, and, with the war over, there was enough interest by 1871 to start a yacht club to promote formal competition. The club was formed on July 1, 1871 (with dues of $3), and plans were made for a race on the 27th.

Fletcher Westray of nearby Island Heights donated a silver cup about eight inches high, to be known as the Westray Cup, but the members and racing skippers had ideas for something more grandiose. A summer resident and club member was Joseph Chattelier, a New York jeweller whose son-in-law was president of Tiffany's, and Chattelier designed a trophy 14 inches high of coin silver. A collection among the members to pay for it raised $179, and Chattelier and a committee took the design, the order and the cash back to Tiffany's as plans went ahead for the inaugural race.

And so a competition was started that, in the absence of documentary evidence to the contrary, is billed as the oldest continuous one in sailing. Most trophies end up gathering dust in someone's attic after a period of active life, but this one is still in competition, after 100 years, for the same type of boat, with a virtually uninterrupted (if somewhat spotty in places) history.

In July 1871, the eight catboats moored to starting stakes off Westray Point, the northern side of the mouth of the Toms River where it joins Barnegat, were gaff-rigged workboats of a type prevalent on the bay since Colonial times. They had low freeboard, plumb stems, counter sterns with fairly long overhang and boxy cabins. They were sailed by

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men who were, or had been professional watermen—fishermen, oystermen or freight boat captains, and the boats measured about 24-26' overall.

The "gentry" in the club membership, none of whom had sailing skills to match the men who had spent their life on the water, came out to watch in an accompanying fleet of 30 flag-bedecked yachts and a string of carriages that lined Westray Point on the calm, sunny morning of the start.

Three weeks of meetings had gone into planning for the race, determining such items as the course (10 miles), starting method, handicapping and distribution of prizes. Captain Cook headed the race committee. The boats were to start from stakes set 50 feet apart, drawing for position, and were to haul to within 25 feet of their anchors at the first gun and to start at the second gun without slipping or tripping their anchors. Time handicaps, presumably based on overall length and sail area, though existing records do not specify, were to be applied at the finish. There had been some discussion of staggered starts and a boat-for-boat finish.

It was fortunate that the latter system was vetoed, because the air was very light from the southwest at the start and fell to almost nothing as the fleet headed south to a stake off the other entrance spit, Good Luck Point. In true Barnegat fashion, however, a lively southerly piped in about noon as the boats were off Cedar Creek, and they had a brisk beat to the next mark, a stake to be taken to starboard off Forked River.

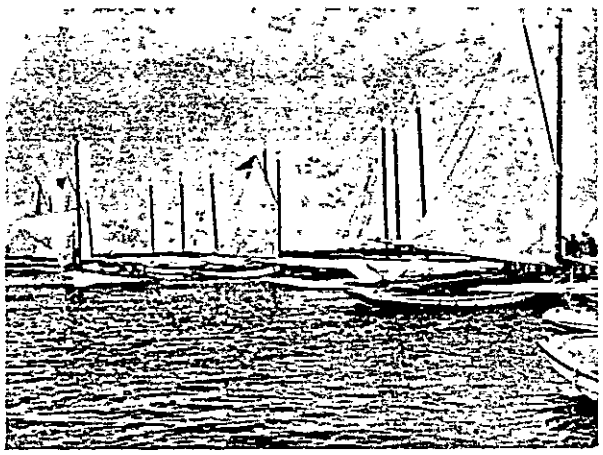
About 1330, the crowd on Westray Point and in the boats anchored around the judges' boat, which had Commodore Charles S. Haines and Cook and his committee aboard, could see sails looming larger across the salt meadows on Good Luck Point as the southerly brought the fleet scudding back for home. George Giberson in *Legal Tender*, the pride of Toms River, was in the lead, but Job Falkinburgh of Forked River in *Vapor*, two feet smaller at 24-feet, was hard on his stern and saved his time by flashing across the finish line only 19 seconds later.

The success of the race brought an immediate challenge for another one, which was set for October 27th. *Vapor* won again on a day of black squalls and heavy wind, and the competition caught hold and quickly became the biggest thing on the bay. At least two races a summer were held until 1876, with interest and betting building to the point where the armed guards came into the picture. In another incident, it became obvious to the crew of a boat that the skipper was not about to win if he could possibly avoid it, though he was sailing the favorite, and a quick mutiny, with some force applied, made him realize that, no matter what bets he had made, he had better not dump.

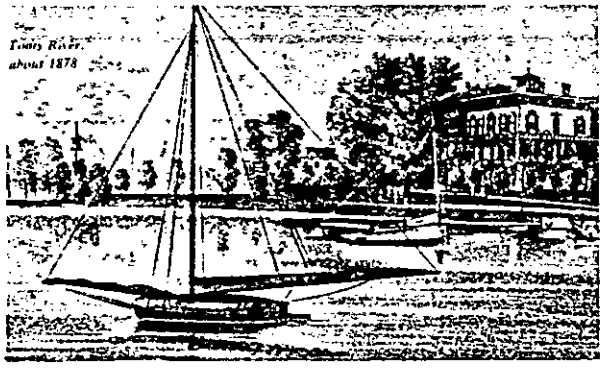
Instead of using workboats in existence, new boats specially built for the competition began to appear. Ephriam Robinson of Toms River was one of the top builders, but one of his finest creations, *Bertha*, was forced into competition too soon after her launching, and, driven hard through a strong northeaster, twisted out of shape and was never the same.

Even with the new boats, *Vapor* remained the boat to beat. She continued to win off and on until as late as 1879, but a boat named *Martha* had become a top threat, and she did well on into the 1880's. In 1887, in a note to the club signed "yr. obdt. servant," Robinson protested her measurement that year.

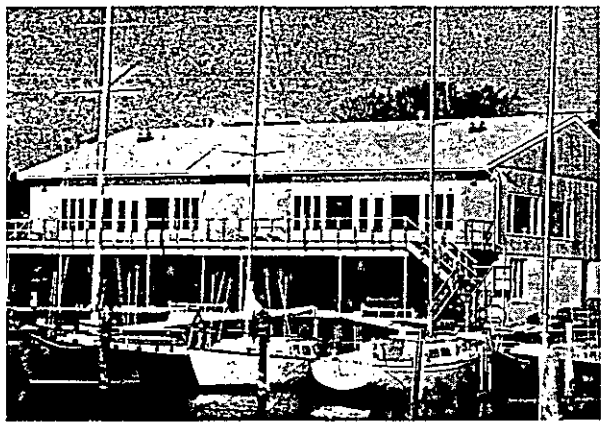
By the '90's, with other clubs having joined TRYC on the bay, summer residents began to have professionally designed boats built purely as yachts, and the old character of the competition changed into an equally intense



The Barnegat Bay catboat fleet in 1880



An odd rig off the Ocean House, 1878



Rollman

The modern Toms River YC, celebrating its centennial

"Corinthian" one. Catboats still swarmed over Barnegat as workboats and yachts, with low freeboard and the usual counter sterns, quite different in their lower profile and shallower and flatter hulls from their New England sisters, but the racing was done in non-workboats.

There were many competitions in addition to the Toms River Challenge Cup, and by 1914, when the Barnegat Bay YRA was formed, there was weekly racing on a circuit around the bay clubs. The records of competition for the Challenge Cup became hazy in this period, although competitions were held in it when TRYC was the BBYRA host, and some of the boats that had raced against the original workboat fleet were still around.

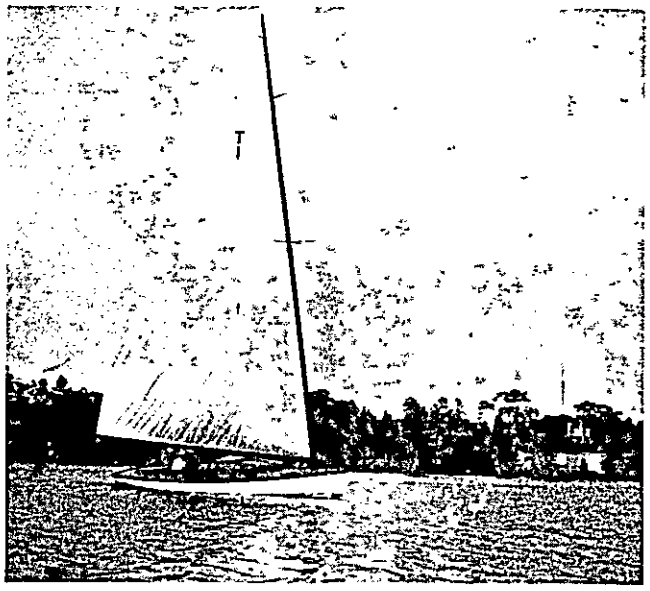
One of them was *Gem*, which first won the Challenge Cup in 1886, sailing against *Martha, Rival, Mist* and some of the others that had been *Vapor*'s competition. The Crabbe family of Toms River did well in her for years and

Commodore Frederic Rollman of TRYC, with the Challenge Cup

still owned her when World War I, and its racing hiatus on the bay, ended.

In the renewed postwar interest in sailing, there was a strong revival in the catboats, and five new marconi-rigged ones were built. They were to be known as Class A catboats. Four were designed by Charles D. Mower, and the first one, *Mary Ann*, knocked off the then-reigning bay champion, the gaff-rigged *Virginia*, also a Mower design, in the 1923 Toms River Challenge Cup. She was followed by *Spy* and *Lotus*, and the Crabbes finally turned in *Gem* on a new boat. This was *Bat*, built in 1923 by Morton Johnson & Co. She delivered for $1,600, and *Gem* was given a trade-in allowance of $700 as the final part of the payment.

These four Mower designs were joined by *Tamwock*, a Francis Sweisguth design with naturally finished cedar planking, but she was lost in a boatyard fire in the early '30's, leaving the four Mower boats to carry on. And they have. For almost 50 years they have been battling bow-to-bow under many different owners. One by one they have gone through periods of decline and neglect that would seemingly mean their end, only to be resurrected and rebuilt by a new owner, and their four names have alternated in being engraved on the old Tiffany coin silver trophy every year since 1923 (except for *Tamwock* in 1928), with the only break during the World War II years.



The Crabbe family Class A Cat "Bat"

Depending on ownership, each has had her heyday, *Bat* under Ed Crabbe, *Lotus* under the Schoettle family, Fred Winkelman and her present owner, Peter Kellogg, *Spy* under Frank Thatcher and the Sayia brothers, and *Mary Ann* under F. Thompson Brooks and Warren Law, her present owner, who proved there was life in the old girl yet by winning the Toms River Challenge Cup in 1970. These boats race weekly in the Barnegat Bay YRA.

And so the line has come down in very few steps. *Vapor* raced *Martha* in the 1870's, *Martha* raced *Gem*, and *Gem* raced *Mary Ann*. The memory of these older boats is very much alive when the A Cats weave their stately way through the starting area in today's BBYRA regattas, their 55′ sticks, 650 ft. of sail and 36′ booms looming impressively over the little plastic boats of the rest of the racing fleet.

They carry 100 years of tradition with them, and though their present owners stoutly insist that they intend to keep the old girls going "forever," the march of time will inevitably catch up with the oft-replaced frames and planks of their graceful hulls. When it does, there will no doubt be a new class of catboat established to carry on the traditions of sailing's oldest continuous trophy. As of the moment, there's a pretty good backlog to keep alive.

SURFING OR SEAKINDLINESS?

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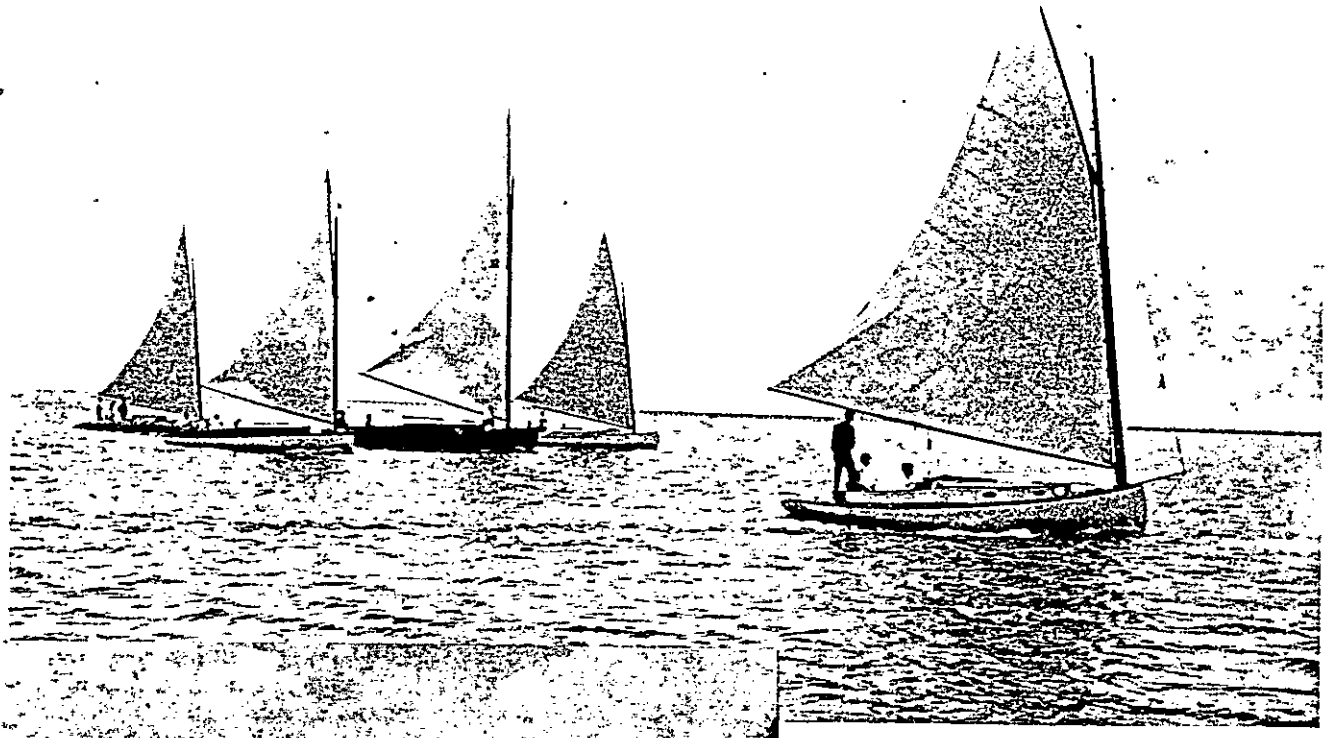
best thing at sea. (Do I hear howls of protest from the shallow-draft enthusiasts?) Outside ballast and deep draft give the ultimate in final stability, which is sometimes a critical requirement. It means, for instance, the ability to carry sufficient sail to drive the boat into making headway when making headway is imperative, and it may make the dicerence between a 90- and 180-degree roll. Beam, in lieu of draft with outside ballast, contributes to initial stability, but it becomes a hindrance if the boat ever turns turtle; more so, if the beam is great, the keel shallow, and the ballast light.

The underwater profile should have a reasonably deep forefoot (the forward underwater keel area) and it should be long, gradually deepening as it goes aft. Such a profile contributes to easy downwind steering, highly desirable on a lengthy ocean passage. The long leading edge improves windward ability. A substantial reverse curve from the forefoot to the ballast keel results in insufficient grip on the water forward, allowing the bow to be easily swung by the scend of a passing sea. Holding a reasonable course before the wind in a seaway can be difficult when the boat has a cutaway underbody, and is even more difficult if the ends are long. Passing waves can pivot the boat 30 to 40 degrees in an instant. A cutaway underbody, especially with high freeboard, complicates the problem of heaving-to and may even preclude the ability to do so. With little grip on the water such a hull lies erratically, presenting her broadside to the elements and incurring unnecessary strain on structure and rig. It would also seem that when running before a storm a boat that surfs readily and/or pivots sharply when hit by a wave, bow or stern, is more likely to be overwhelmed.

Some overhang with flare in the bow is desirable to provide increasing reserve buoyancy as the bow dives into a sea, thus keeping the bow from burying itself and stopping forward progress. In this respect the conventional bow is superior to the clipper bow which, because of its shape, does not provide sufficient buoyancy until well buried. The forward overhang should, however, be moderate with the overhang and forefoot sections shaped in a "V" rather than a "U." If the bow



Robbins Cove (left), and typical 19th Century cat-boat fleet. Toms River YC was formed in building in background in 1871. "Martha" (lower left) was one of the top competitors of the early days of the Challenge Cup. Development of type to boats of the early 20th Century (top), racing outside the Toms River, and to the 48-year-old Class A cat design (below) can be seen. A cats were first marconi-rigged boats, and were designed by Charles Mower. "Mary Ann" is at left with "Spy"