They whip through the freezing wind with the greatest of ease—but at speeds so terrifying that a spill becomes unthinkable. No wonder its devotees call iceboating

Winter's Wildest Sport

By RALPH KNIGHT

One sun-drenched yet ghastly cold day last winter the traffic in a New York City street paused at a traffic light and I said, "Now what in the world has that chap ahead of us got on top of his station wagon? It looks like an oversize canoe, but this isn't exactly canoeing weather."

My companion, who, for some reason incomprehensible to me, likes to play around outdoors in cold weather, said, "You're looking at an iceboat fuselage, and those long things beside it are the runner plank and mast. Iceboats move very fast. Three, four times faster than the wind—a hundred miles per hour when conditions are nice. Say, a friend of mine is a hard-water sailor. Want to get taken for a ride some blustery day?" My reply was vigorously in the negative, but eventually I surrendered. It was terrible. Yet in retrospect it does have a certain hair-raising charm.

That ride can be described with more feeling if first we take a look at what iceboating is all about. A good place to begin is on one of the relatively small lakes that snuggle around the Great Lakes, where the speed demons of the Midwest forgather to see who's boss. The lakes of that weather-favored region maintain sailable ice—are supposed to, anyway—from before Christmastime clear into the mellowing sunshine of March.

Early last February I arranged to attend, purely as a spectator, the Detroit Ice Yacht Club's Gar Wood Regatta, for it features the swiftest of all yachts, the Class E Skeeters. Gar Wood, that great boatman, set up a trophy in 1940 to stimulate interest in speed on ice, and he certainly succeeded. Unhappily the regatta had to be postponed—two feet of snow. But a fortnight later the skippers' telephonic grapevine informed me that Mother Nature would have the ice on Lake St. Clair swept and polished for Saturday. On a map, St. Clair is a little bulge of water in the passageway between Lake Huron and Lake Erie, but in reality it is very big and very lovely as befits that region of mighty waters.

In a rented car I tacked northward through Detroit's eight-lane traffic, and forty miles later came suddenly to a land's end. Beyond the shore stretched very cold-looking green-gray ice, joined at the horizon by the downward arch of very cold-looking pale-blue sky. The nearer ice teemed with walking, running, skating or falling-down spectators and dogs. There were scores of skippers lovingly engaged in the (Continued on Page 91)

Light Yankee Class boats cost about $1500. They are steered by the forward runner and can seat two.

Jane Pegel beat 21 men to win the 1960 Scripps Trophy for DN boats, a very popular racing class.

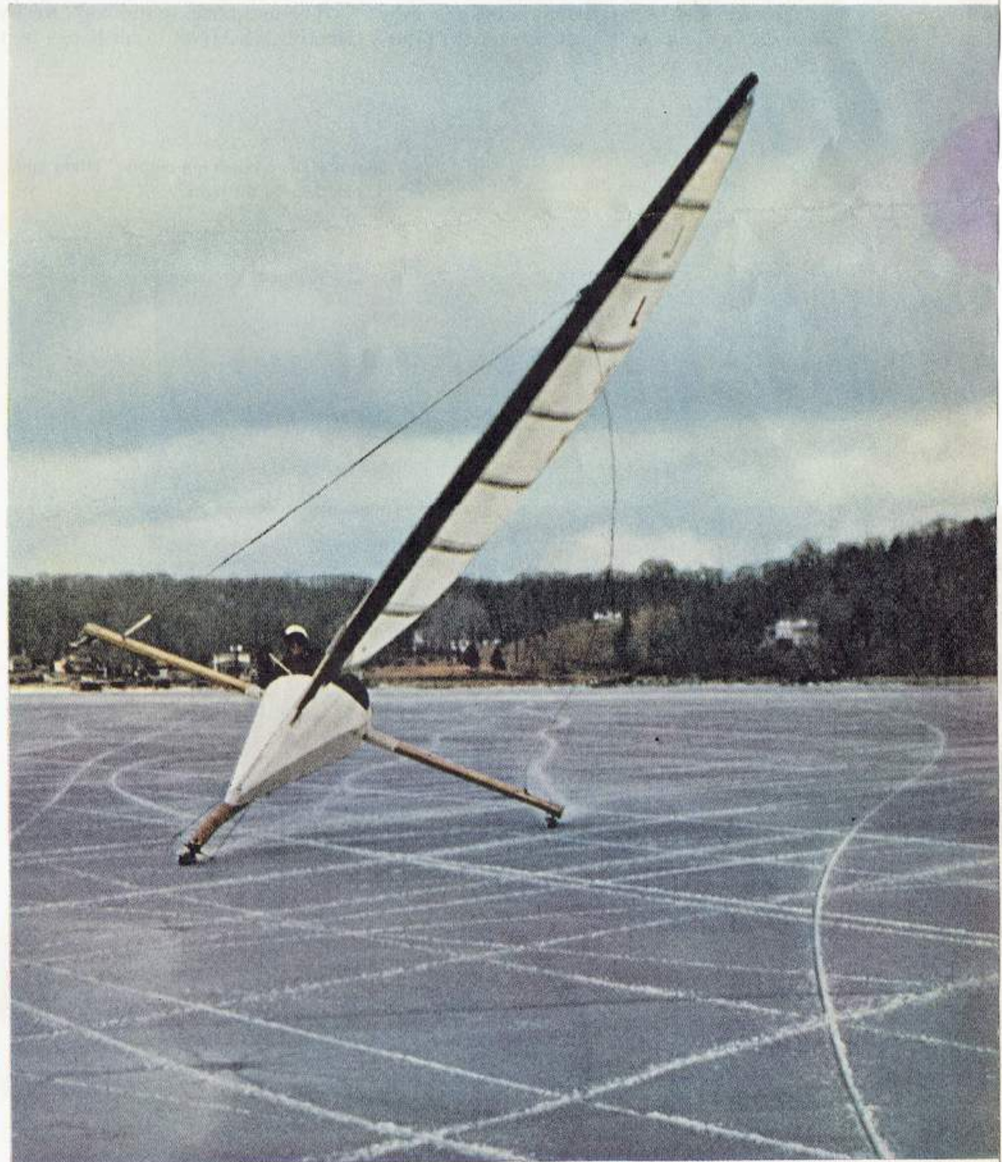
Iceboating competition is enthusiastic in the Great Lakes Basin, where hard-water sailors have ice from mid-December until early spring. Those above thronged to the 1960 Gar Wood Regatta on Lake St. Clair, near Detroit.

Lake Hopatcong, N.J.: The *Post* photographer took a 60-mph ride to shoot a boat sailing in front of him and got this view when its mast snapped in high winds.

Photographs by Larry Keighley

:eboat fever: Two months after breaking his leg while sailing, l Sternkopf hobbled out to his boat on crutches to race again.

Bank, N.J.: This half-ton Class A boat went through the ice n it reached a soft spot left by Navesink River ice fishermen.



A skipper strains to bring his boat level on its sharpened blades when hit by a sudden puff of wind. Iceboats have been clocked officially at 140 miles per hour.

Winter's Wildest Sport (Continued from Page 32)

half-hour chore of assembling or taking apart their boats. Some of the miscellaneous items in view included men roaring around on air-propeller sleds and families with flaming portable braziers enjoying cookouts, for heaven's sake. Far away, maybe a mile, was a thin black smudge of spectators, and past them suddenly swept a dozen white sails, closely clustered, going fast. In all this company I seemed to be the only soul wearing a fedora hat, a businessman's overcoat and the long pants customarily affected on railroad trains.

I climbed down on the ice and set out briskly for the racecourse, but the wind, coming from starboard, blew my galoshes sidewise along the ice, and I fell down, all spread out flat like a crab. "Upsy-daisy," a nearby skipper said cheerfully. "You need creepers"—pointing to cleatlike gadgets around his high boots. "You're not exactly dressed for this racket, brother. What's under your pants?"

"Underpants. Garters," I said with dignity.

"I'll bet—no drawers." He clucked and shook his head. "To be loose in this game, first you've got to be warm. Thermal stuff underneath, good old Korean War stuff. Then you stay toasty and loose. It gets brisk out here, even if you don't feel cold at first."

"I am feeling cold at first."

"Well, you can always melt down in the inn up there. That's headquarters. You can fan the breeze with our wives if they haven't got the kids outdoors, freezing down their animal spirits." He was examining a pretty awful scar on the sleek blue hull of his boat. "Another fellow and I converged a little too close in the last heat. Thought something might be busted, but I guess not. Last year in this race one of the guys broke a framing stay coming into the lower mark, and the boat turned over and pieces of it spattered every which way—nearly crowned the judges. Fellows behind him steered through the mess, which is pretty fair seamanship. Well, want to go out there? You can take the cockpit, and I'll sit out on the crossplank and tell you what to do."

I thanked him warmly. I said I was a writer and that as much as I would enjoy sailing his boat, it was my duty to stay here and interview skippers as they came and went.

"O.K. See you at the dinner dance," he said. "Bottoms down!" And away sped his boat with a flashing of silvery runners.

There was good talking that day with skippers, officials, boatbuilders, sailmakers and just plain talkers who, like fans of any other sport, are fountains of information. Incidentally, most of my notes were written from memory while lying in bed that night under the thermal looseness of three blankets folded double. Out there on the ice my ball-point pen kept freezing and would revive only when hung in an inside pocket close to my heart.

I did manage to record some iceboating lore. It seems that when the wind gets busy on an iceboat it is dealing with a more able and willing instrument than a water boat. An iceboat's runners enable it to move with little friction no matter what hell-bent speed is acquired. Also, those diligently sharpened iceboat blades prevent sideslip more efficiently than a keel does in water. Hence all the wind power generated against a sail is converted into motion—and speed.

When iceboats are sailing along with the wind they do *not* go faster than the wind is blowing, but when they are heading across the wind, that's something else. The wind humming against the sail tries to push the boat sidewise, but the runners won't stand for sideslipping, so the boat tries to get out of this jam by spurting forward. Skippers call this "the squeeze." Come to think of it, if you squeeze a wet piece of soap between your thumb and forefinger, it's apt to squirt at high speed across the bathroom. There's more to it than that in iceboating, but that roughly explains why iceboats can go scooting much faster than the wind.

My notebook also emphasizes a meeting with a pretty, young lady who was putting a tiny DN-class boat to bed in its smartly tailored canvas nightclothes. One needs to know that a majority of iceboats are not classified according to size and design and type of rig, but simply according to maximum square-foot limit of sail—Class A is 350 square feet or under; B, 250; C, 175; D, 125; and E (the ultra-swift Skeeter) 75. But there are a few "one-design" classes. For instance, the DN's, an invention of the Detroit News Craftsman's Shop, which were racing at St. Clair for the coveted Scripps DN Trophy, must be like this: mast sixteen feet, hull twelve, runner or crossplank eight and sail sixty square feet. The idea of the one-designers is to have skippers using exactly the same kind of boat, thus placing maximum emphasis on sailing skill.

Mrs. Jane Pegel, the lady on the ice, and wife of genial Bob Pegel, nationally known sailmaker, said that in the United States there are some 450 DN boats alone and about 1500 boats of all classes. The sport focuses on about fifty ice-yacht clubs, a number with their own clubhouses. I asked her if she had had a good day. "Won both my heats," she said.

"Pretty tough opposition, eh?"

"Well, twenty-one men." Next day in the final heat she slew the twenty-one men again. In the summertime she is a nationally renowned soft-water sailor.

When the waning sun was a golden half-sphere on the rim of St. Clair's ice, in rushed the last competitors of the racing fleet. But many of the skippers seemed restless, and away they went again, just aimlessly and happily darting this way and that like huge white birds. Although iceboating is essentially a racing sport, many of its addicts never race at all; for them the exhilaration of sailing far more swiftly than the wind is enough and they love it.

A final vignette of Lake St. Clair: A boat skimmed shoreward, reaching long sunset shadows across the ice, and out of the cockpit laboriously crawled a man who, when his feet were on the ice, stood up on crutches. It was Al Sternkopf of Nashotah, Wisconsin, president of the International Skeeter Association. His leg had been broken when he had a mishap with his boat a month or so before. The accident happened, friends explained, while Al was trying to make an emergency stop to avoid hitting some spectators. He had dragged the limb overside and it got tangled up with the crosswise runner plank. No harm to the spectators.

When I reached Sternkopf on the ice, he was four-legging on his crutches toward his car, kicking a detached runner ahead of him with his good foot. It saddened him to abstain from racing while his leg was in a cast. "I didn't do well today," he said, yet he seemed in excellent humor. "Usually I use my foot-steering apparatus and man the sail with both hands. Today—one hand steer, one hand sail. Boy, it felt good to be tearing around again."

Using the squeeze to multiply the force of the wind produces some amazing speeds. For example, in 1908 Commodore Elisha Price of the Long Branch club in New Jersey, recorded an officially clocked speed of 140 miles an hour in his big

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yacht, *Clarel.* And yet there can be *too* much wind to suit iceboaters. Indeed, gusts up to forty-five or so are apt to make them resign for the day. A sailor told me that one afternoon when he was out testing the wind to see if a race should be postponed, "Some kind of overstrain hit the hull and the middle section of it just exploded, leaving two half-boats." So what happened? Oh, nothing much—the stern, including the bewildered passenger in the cockpit, caught up with the bow and sort of hugged it until everything stopped.

The basic running gear of an iceboat is deceptively simple, consisting of three "legs," or runners. One of them, a swiveling blade for steering, is attached to the main part of the boat, and the other two, which are stationary, are at the ends of the crosswise runner plank. Sometimes the skipper, or a whim of the wind, hikes one of the craft's runners up in the air and lets her proceed on two runners. During nearly a century of American ice yachting the runner plank was always stationed under the bow, and the steering runner was back under the stern, where everybody assumed a ship's rudder should be. Designs have changed, but even today the stern steering blade remains the best way to control the very big boats, those which have a two-man crew—a sail handler and a helmsman. A distressing trait of the stern steerer is that sometimes the helm gets to vibrating so violently that the helmsman can't make it behave, whereupon the boat goes into a pigeon-wing (spin) and whirls like a magnificent top. A pigeon-wing veteran says, "You can get dizzy, and if you land upside down on the ice, you can get dizzier."

Early in the 1930's came the revolution that suddenly produced smaller, cheaper, more efficient boats, a kind of Model T triumph. A few Midwestern pioneers, notably Starke Meyer and Walter Beauvais, began playing around with the idea of moving the steering runner up to the bow and the crosswise runner plank back under the stern; they eliminated the forward sail, cut the hull length drastically, shortened the mast considerably, and fashioned an enclosed cockpit to keep the sailors inside the boat, where they belong. These svelte craft, of which Chicago's Ted Mead originally was the master builder, could "take" more wind without going haywire, and they maneuvered like a dream. They were called Class E Skeeters, and they soon began beating the whey out of the big, proud stern-steerers, horrifying the traditionalists. In the 1960 Northwestern free-for-all championship on Lake Winnebago, Bill Perrigo's Skeeter, which he calls *Thunderjet*, not only cleaned up on everybody, but beat the big Class A champion by the distressing distance of one lap.

The Skeeter has added to its speed with a couple of latter-day fillips. One was the switch to tough Dacron sails which lather up speed like anything. The other was the use of a springboard to connect the front runner to the boat; this acts as a stabilizer for the steersman in his madder moments. Bow-steering boats don't spin, praises be, but in case one of them capsizes, the runner plank under the skipper hoists him maybe eight feet into the air, from where a descent onto the ice is regrettable—especially if the mast breaks and comes down on top of him.

A boat manufacturer explained all this to me, and I went on to ask him how much he would charge me for a boat. He said about $2000 for a Skeeter and $500 for a smaller DN. With us was a chap who had designed and built several boats for himself in his garage, and he said he did it for maybe half that cost. The two of them got into a hassle about whether or not the professionals were charging too much, so I went away from there, found a skipper who was alone and asked him how I could get started at iceboating in case the urge should overwhelm me. He said to buy a secondhand boat, play with it for two seasons, and then I would know whether to buy a new boat or build my own dream vessel.

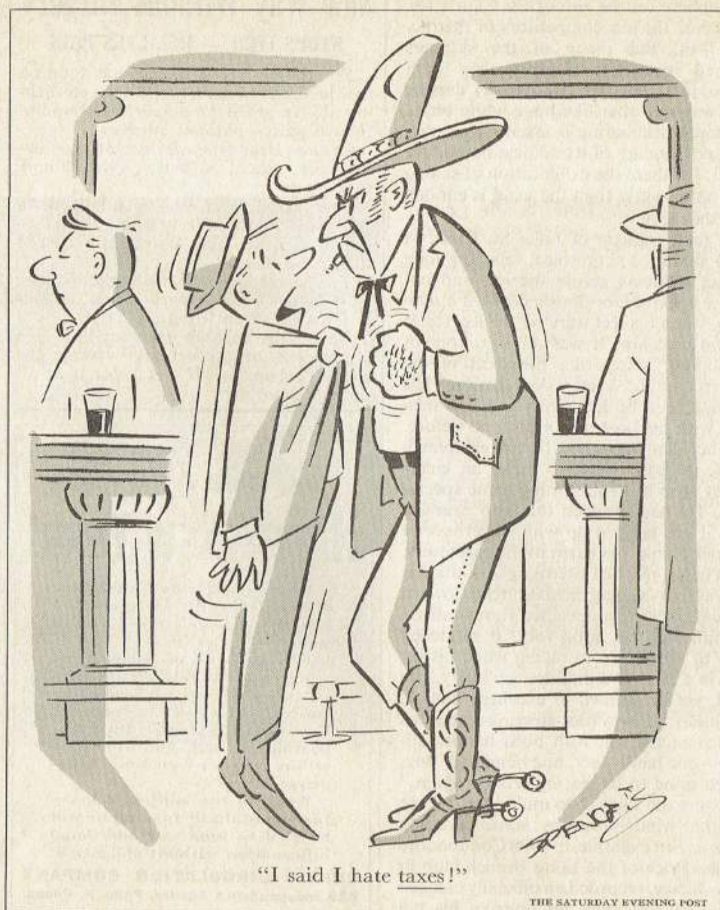
Iceboaters have much more trouble with the weather than most other people have. They want ice, and they don't want snow. When a blizzard comes, they want an unseasonable thaw or a warm rain to melt the snow fast, but not melt the ice. Because they have to motor around to where the ice is sailable, theirs is a weekend sport; so they don't want thaws on Saturdays and freeze-ups on Mondays. They want wind, but not big wind, and they certainly decry "no wind." Last winter some Easterners drove out to a regatta near Chicago, that windy city; for two days not a breath of air blew, and everybody went home. A few seasons ago there was a quaint regatta at Lake Geneva. The racers got hopelessly lost in a sudden and obliterating snowstorm, some of them winding up on unfamiliar shores and returning to headquarters by taxicab.

The weather was the reason I found Joe Irwin depressed when I called on him last February. He is the ex-commodore of the famous old North Shrewsbury Yacht Club at Red Bank, New Jersey. From a picture window we looked out at a soundlike expanse of the Navesink River close to the ocean, out across rippling blue-and-silver water. Another Red Banker said later, "The ice that river has produced all winter wouldn't cool a Martini."

Joe Irwin, like his renowned father, the late Commodore Charles P. Irwin, loves to race the giant old Hudson River-type Class A's which require ten men to carry them. He owns or has controlling syndicate interest in three of them. He reminisced about a race in which a Class A boat hit a patch of thin Navesink ice and disappeared in a geyser of spray. "Some part of a boat usually stays above water. We snaked one member of the crew off it with a rope. But the other fellow was floundering around, all neatly rolled up in the big sail. Well, we just had to unroll him fast." He added dismally, "Nobody will go through ice here this winter." And yet one day in March there came an excited phone call from Red Bank: "Ice on the Navesink! The small boats will race. Too thin for the big boats, but one guy insists he's going out anyway." So *Post* photographer Larry Keighley made a trip over to the Navesink and took a picture of the big boat in action. Just as he finished, up went a water geyser and down went the boat. Joe Irwin arrived rapidly with a rope.

Apparently some restive character in Holland dreamed up the first iceboat, because around 1750 the Dutch were doing something reckless called sleigh sailing. Dutch settlers brought the idea to the Hudson River, and by 1870 the Roosevelt family and other moneyed people were evolving craft so huge, and so close to unmanageable, that many owners considered it prudent to linger on land and observe what happened to their professional crews.

The most titanic of these iceliners, the *Icicle*, now reposes in the Roosevelt Museum in Hyde Park. It won the Challenge Pennant of America again and again. John E. Roosevelt—F.D.R.'s uncle—had this leviathan built out of butternut wood from his own estate. Like every true iceboater he was always rebuilding it this way and that, and at one time it was nearly sixty-nine feet long and carried 1070 square feet of sail! Let's not try to decide if today's supreme boat, the Skeeter with seventy-five square feet of sail, could have beaten the *Icicle* in a free-for-all. One thing is certain: Commodore Roosevelt couldn't have transported his boat on one of today's automobiles—he used a railroad flatcar. Which brings to mind that the Hudson River lads took pleasure in racing the riverside express trains and leaving them astern. Recently a skipper gravely told me about one of these old iceboats' being involved in a train wreck: it got a little out of hand and knocked the locomotive off the track. The raconteur was unable to remember the name of the book in which he believed he read this.



"I said I hate taxes!"

THE SATURDAY EVENING POST

Gradually the iceliners of yore gave way to relatively smaller boats, more like the stern steerers of today. And when, around the turn of this century, unsentimental commercialists began cracking up the Hudson's ice for winter navigation, that finished the rich-man's-sport phase of iceboating. A pleasant postscript about the Hudson comes from John Childs, secretary-treasurer of the Eastern Ice Yacht Association and a busy member of the Westchester (New York) Ice Sailing Club. He reports that Richard Aldrich of Red Hook, up the Hudson, is trying to organize a fleet of big boats which, by steering clear of channel water, will bring flashing sails back to the old river again. Childs lives in New Rochelle, New York, and has a special interest in the Aldrich project. Someone found stowed away the essential parts of one of the Hudson's greatest boats, the *Jack Frost* (720 square feet of sail), and Childs is going to rebuild her at his home. What with other things to do, he figures it will take about five years.

When today's eastern yachtsmen occasionally take the long haul out to the Midwest regattas, they often get shellacked. Western speed merchants reason that periodic plagues of bad weather in the East have a dulling effect on racing enthusiasm and pioneering in design. Maybe. Yet for enthusiasm, ice boating has never known anything like the wild-and-woolly rivalry which for generations has kept New Jersey's ancient Long Branch and Red Bank clubs bashing away at each other in annual challenges—strong men among the losers feel like crying. These fellows still love the grand, big Hudson-type boats. In Red Bank's venerable clubhouse are stored leviathans of yesteryear and this year, and upstairs in the monthly meeting room the boys sit around a potbellied stove, maybe with chowder steaming on it, while faded photos of great sailors and great boats, and fraying pennants of sweet victories, seem to smile down on them.

As for dreaming up new designs, Easterners began to feel that a double-duty boat would be nice, a Skeeter-type boat in which one could go like mad in a race or in which he could take a leisurely afternoon cruise with his wife. So they invented the Yankee class, with a cockpit that accommodates two medium-size persons, side by side. It is a fine teaching boat, a boon to iceboat widows, and something for young lovers to have in mind—they can sail for miles down a lake beneath a great pale moon and run out of wind.

It came to pass in Philadelphia one day last January that there was a ferocious rainstorm, featuring lightning bolts and thunder blast, just as in July. I phoned Homer Sieder, Westfield, New Jersey, president of the Yankee Iceboat Association, to find out whether or not the championship regatta on Lake Hopatcong in northern New Jersey was still scheduled for the weekend. Homer has been Eastern Open champion four times, and he has the depressing tendency to win his own Yankee championships while the rest of the fleet is way out yonder. Considering Homer's velocity and the fact that he had offered to take me for a ride at Hopatcong, I hoped he would call the race off. He said to phone again Friday night. It was raining warmly then,

so he said to call Saturday morning at six. I did, and at that repugnant hour he reported, "The ice hasn't gone out. There's water all over it, but that makes ice faster. We go."

When I got out of my car at Lake Hopatcong the Yankee boats were tuning up at the starting mark, far, far from the shore, raging around on sheets of water. There was some open water around the edge of the mooring bay, and apparently the thing to do was to walk out on the mud hummocks, step on the rim of the ice and see if it broke. A chap who was fixing his boat said cordially, "Watch out for the little rotty-looking spots about the size for your leg to go through. We've got at least the minimum three inches of ice, and four is perfectly safe. Water supports ice—sort of hydraulic principle—but a pocket of air that will compress—and blooey." For a friendly man he was singularly alarming.

As I walked out on the ice—watching for those little rotty spots—I noticed that sometime earlier the ice had broken up into little white cakes, and then the water had refrozen darkly between the blocks. At the mouth of the bay it was necessary to detour around an expanse of open water; this, a man said, was caused by a current, but he did not know if the expanse was getting bigger. Outside the bay there was an abominable cold wind which had to be leaned against, and the temperature fell acutely. At the starting mark the most impressive sight was a contented-looking spectator with a very bald head; he was bundled to his ears in a greatcoat, but, he had no hat! No wonder a man is bald, treating his head like that. I stood on that ice for *three hours and forty minutes,* and every time a chill set in I looked at that head and felt better.

So the fleet captain with the loudspeaker lined up the boats and signaled the start. The skippers gave their craft mighty shoves, leaped into the cockpits, and away leaped the ice yachts. At first they seemed dangerously bunched, and then they came unbunched, tacking this way and that, and by and by they were little white flecks straining toward a mark so far away I could not see it. Spectators exclaimed, "There, Joe has a puff!" or "Look at old Bill ride that puff!" Puffs are swift streams of air gusting through slower or standstill air.

When the fleet was still far away, out of nowhere swept a boat, swished around the finish mark and went barreling off down the lake again.

"What's that?" I asked the man with the checkered flag.

"Oh, that's Homer," he said. "Second lap."

It seems that it is routine for Homer to run around in that lonely way while the crowd grows frenzied about who is second and third. What makes a sailor as good as that, anyway? There are things you have to know in the technical, bookish way, says Sieder, but above that you have to keep *feeling* what is the right thing to do. He makes it very simple: "You sail by the seat of your pants."

There came a moment when sailor Sieder said to me, "Well, hop in. Trouble is, with the wind dying down, I'm afraid I can't get her puffing." I thought, *Is that bad?* The skipper adjusted his goggles, and I adjusted my fedora and inserted my pants and overcoat into the hole in the hull. Sieder gave the boat a galloping shove and leaped in, and before a person could say "Help!" the ice was moving backward at a gruesome speed and so was a barrage of ice shavings from the front runner.

Just as I was becoming used to the unfortunate situation, dead ahead of us and horribly near arose the shore line, heavily timbered and tilting up into a graceful hill. Obviously we must either hike up on two runners and careen out of there or proceed up the hill and take off in the air like a ski jumper. But our three runners remained firmly on the ice—three down, someone explained later, is smarter, faster sailing than two. What Sieder did was turn around on a dime—or at most a quarter. Our low center of gravity and those clinging blades kept us topside up, and the cockpit kept my body from going on up the hill. Some seconds later I was satisfied to be back at the starting point, but the skipper turned around and did it all over again. When we stopped, he said, "You get out first," which I was already doing.

Suddenly I felt wonderful. And this was not because I had survived the ride, but because I had experienced it. The tension and dread and just plain fear disappeared in a fountaining puff of exhilaration. Ice sailing is a releasing, freeing, conquering sport; when birds gather in the evening sky and go whirling and swirling and racing along a sundown wind, they must be having that same kind of fun. I would buy an iceboat if I liked to go outdoors in winter.

THE END

THE SILENT NIGHT

don may

THE SILENT NIGHT was a holy night. All was calm. Bethlehem slept. In silence He came to Mary. In silence He comes to us, when we are free of the noise of men and from the desires that tempt our human nature. His wondrous gift to man was given in the stillness of the night.

For silence is "the virtue of the strong, the refuge of the weak, the modesty of the proud and the prudence of the wise." Silence is a preface to prayer; it is the prologue to progress; it is a prerequisite of peace. Be still my soul that I may hear Him in the silence of this Christmas night.

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