

A FRIENDSHIP COMES HOME

The Friendship sloop *Gladiator*, built in 1902, worked in Maine waters for more than two decades, then wandered to Chesapeake Bay and New Jersey for several decades more. In 1973, it came back to Maine for good.

BY JANET MENDELSON



courtesy of the Zuber family(2)

(top) *Gladiator* hauled for a major rebuild in 1947.

(bottom) The bow number indicates the boat was used on patrol during WW II. (inset) The Zubers with their boatyard dog.



Janet Mendelson

LIKE AN ETCHING COME TO LIFE, a small fleet of Friendship sloops waited in Rockland Harbor while their crews loaded gear under the morning sun in preparation for the 45th Annual Friendship Sloop Regatta. High clipper bows swung down gracefully to wide, open cockpits, then up to rounded sterns, hulls painted cinnamon red, pine-forest green, or snowy white. The sloops looked alert, like hunting dogs, their long bowsprits pointing toward crustacean-filled waters. Designed for function yet beautiful, these craft were the gaff-rigged workhorses for the state's lobstering community until around 1920, when the internal-combustion engine made them obsolete. They are a tribute to the boatbuilders a century ago who adapted the type for fishing in Muscongus Bay. This time, they were here to race.

Even before my first sail aboard *Gladiator*, one of the fleet, I began to understand how the sloop's owners, Bill and Caroline Zuber, fell under her spell. Each Friendship sloop has a distinct personality and a story to tell. *Gladiator's* began in 1902 but is now inextricably tied to the Zubers, who rescued the vessel 65 years later and four states away. Their three grown sons, Bill, Bob, and Andy, can't separate childhood from this boat. The eldest, Bill the third, calls *Gladiator* his grandmother, or perhaps his older sister. Andy, the youngest, claims his career choice, and maybe his marriage, hinged on how much time off he'd have for sailing, including this annual event.

You have to be a wee bit jealous of Bill and Caroline, two down-to-earth, family-centered, unpretentious people who found happiness in a wooden boat that needed some work. Without a hint of

exaggeration, Bill said the sloop brought them back to the way they were raised; Caroline said it gave them roots in not one but two communities: a hardworking fishing village and a group of like-minded friends. The truth is, said Bill Zuber, “After 65 years, we brought *Gladiator* home to Friendship, and six years later she brought us home to Maine.”

I was in Rockland on the first day of the annual regatta, which so far felt more like a happily anticipated family reunion. Captains helped each other with last-minute repairs, crew members—their spouses, friends, children, and grandchildren, infants to teens—stepped from the dock to the decks of boats tied three abreast. They were offered snacks and coffee. Nine total strangers who showed up at the morning skippers’ meeting were matched with boats for the day. I was a newbie here, too. Having once sailed out of Islesboro with my friend, Roger Lee, aboard his sloop *Sazerac*, I had hankered for more. The Zubers have taught sailing forever and welcomed me to join them.

I arrived at the dock to meet my captain, Andy Zuber, who was stretched out beside the wheel, hands clasped behind his head, shirtless and looking as content as a baby in his mother’s arms. I met his wife, Nirvana, and their sons, Ben, 6, and Liam, almost 3, both of whom sailed before they were one week old. I said hello to Carl Damato, his son Marco, and Holly Taylor-Lash and her twins, Erik and Alex. With Matt Phillips, our crew included six boys under the age of ten.

“Welcome to the kindergarten,” Andy said, “but look at Matt’s family over there on their sloop, *Tannis*. They’ve got so many they need their own zip code.” There were at least 15 people aboard the *Tannis*. On the dock, water balloons flew by. Norman Rockwell would have loved this.

“I’ll tell you everything you want to know about *Gladiator* while we’re out there,” Andy said, “but first, if you want to learn about Friendship sloops, you have to talk to Harold Burnham.” He pointed me toward *Chrissy*.

Burnham, a master shipwright, was happy to talk. His grizzled beard and dry wit were the very essence of an old sea captain, but he’s perhaps only 40, the twenty-eighth Burnham to operate a shipyard in Essex, Massachusetts, since 1819. Burnham told me he’s been documenting the construction of the original Friendship sloops like *Chrissy*, which was built in 1912. He admires their strength and agility, the way one man could handle a Friendship sloop while hauling 60 or as many as 120 lobster traps.

“You’ve built wooden boats all your life,” I said. “What makes you want to own this one?”

“These old boats are like an old pair of jeans,” he said. “The more repairs, the more character. Some people like to replace the seat and the legs at the same time.”

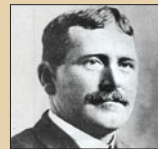
It goes beyond that, of course.

“Their greatest attributes are their speed and maneuverability,” Burnham said. “With the sails still raised, they can sit over a lobsterman’s gear. The genius of the original builders is that these boats were designed to stop.”

Friendship sloops can turn on a dime or race around buoys, Burnham said, but racing is not what they’re about. They are about lobstering and heritage. Among the 276 boats registered with the Friendship Sloop Society, 29 are “originals” built before 1920 and still afloat. The founding of the society in 1961 revived interest in the type, with 79 replicas, or near replicas, launched between 1971 and 1979.

A VERY BRIEF HISTORY

Wilbur A. Morse is credited with being the most prolific early builder of Friendship sloops. In 1902 alone he launched seven of 16 vessels documented that year, marketing the design as “Sloops built in Friendship by Wilbur Morse.” Bill Zuber said that while Morse built the Ford, “Bug” McLain built the Mercedes.



“Bug” McLain

The craft evolved gradually, beginning as early as the 1860s. Muscongus Bay fishermen needed handy boats for hauling lobster traps among ledges; the boats had to be quick in the summer southerly winds, steady and able during a 25-knot sou’wester, but light enough to row in the calms. Best estimates are that well over 1,000 Friendship sloops were built as workboats in the area prior to 1925.

Between then and 1961, when Bernard MacKenzie founded the Friendship Sloop Society, which revived interest in their use as sailing yachts, perhaps six were commercially produced and another six built by backyard boat-builders for themselves. Fiberglass replicas emerged in 1969. Most Friendship sloops carry a jib and a staysail, but unlike single-class racing boats, sail areas vary tremendously.



Gladiator (#71) is second from the left in this shot from the early days of the Friendship Sloop Regatta. This year’s event will be held in Rockland, July 20-22, 2006.

Everett L. “Red” Bouffier



courtesy of the Zuber family

Gladiator under full sail in 1992 off Marblehead, Massachusetts, very much alive after her near-death in the 1960s.

SPECIFICATIONS / GLADIATOR

LOA 32'2"

Beam 11'

Draft 6'

Mainsail 810 sq.ft.

Jumbo Jib 240 sq.ft. (formerly jib and staysail)
Topsail and jib topsail retired when topmast removed

Built 1902

Builder Alexander "Bug" McLain, Bremen Long Island, Muscongus Bay, Maine.

History Fished Maine waters until World War I (without an engine until 1911). Sold as a yacht with cabin added to sail in Chesapeake Bay. In 1944 bought by Raymond Reckerd whose son, Jack, added the distinctive gallows to support the boom. Two subsequent owners sailed in the Chesapeake. In 1967 bought by the Zubers and Hancocks in New Jersey. In 1971 returned to Friendship Harbor.

THREE WEEKS LATER and nine miles east of Waldoboro, in Friendship, where Route 220 South meets Muscongus Bay, *Gladiator* bobs on its mooring, the only Friendship sloop remaining in the harbor that gave the boats their name. It's a working harbor, and the boat is a lot like its home port. Despite stunning views, there are no waterfront eateries, no souvenir shops, a couple of B&Bs but no big condo developments cashing in on the idyllic island-splashed coastline. The Friendship Village Market stocks no wines with too-clever labels; in fact, they stock no wine at all in this dry town. Out front, prices on the gas pumps are covered with a handwritten message: "An Arm and a Leg."

Caroline and Bill Zuber welcome me to their home with warm-from-the-oven coffee cake and a stack of photo albums. Theirs is a modest apartment in the house they built for her parents and disabled brother. One look at the single-themed decor—Friendship Sloop Society trophies, framed newspaper stories about their boat, Gulf of Maine charts, and three generations of Zubers photographed on deck—reveal that Bill is not exaggerating when he says, "*Gladiator* has owned us for a long time."

Bill and the woman he met in seventh grade seem like Mainers through and through, but it turns out they're from New Jersey. Bill's been a sailor since the age of four, a Coast Guard-licensed captain since he was 18. As newlyweds, they lived in the back of his family's boatyard. Caroline taught elementary school while Bill ran fishing charters. Together they rebuilt an old wooden Tancook schooner, but by the time their first son was born that boat was too small. "We became enamored with boating magazine stories about Friendship sloops coming home to the little town of Friendship," Caroline says.

Back in the early 1960s, a fellow named Bernie MacKenzie hatched an idea when his Friendship sloop *Voyager*, built in 1902, held its own in high winds to surprise everyone by winning a Boston Power Squadron race. MacKenzie and two friends, both reporters, cooked up plans for a homecoming race just for these able sailing vessels.

"The Friendship town fathers said: No way, not in the middle of lobster season," says Caroline. "Thanks to Bernie's buddies at the *Boston Globe* and *National Fisherman*, stories appeared in March about the upcoming reunion that summer and the town got on board." The race was a success and came to be held annually. It attracted 10,000 spectators at its peak in the early 1970s before it moved to Rockland, which is better equipped for crowds.

Bill and Caroline drove to Maine just to watch the first-ever event in 1961. "The town and the new Friendship Sloop

“A FRIENDSHIP SLOOP IS A STATE OF MIND COMPOSED OF INDEPENDENCE, TRADITION, RESOURCEFULNESS, AND A MOST FORTUITOUS COMBINATION OF GEOGRAPHY AND LANGUAGE IN THE NAME OF FRIENDSHIP.”

—Roger F. Duncan, *Friendship sloop owner and author of the book Enduring Friendships*

Society just resonated with us,” she recalls. “These were boat owners and townspeople who rolled up their sleeves to dig latrines for the expected crowd. It was our first glimpse of that community, and we loved it.” The town of Friendship (population: 1,200) spoke to them on another level. “It’s like an island. Many of the people here are descendants of those boatbuilders. They live in a way worth emulating, with respect for traditional ways.”

By the time the Zubers got back to New Jersey, Bill had resolved to build a Friendship sloop. He sent away for plans. Even the birth of their second son, Bob, didn’t stop their enthusiasm for the project. Finally, on a rainy Sunday afternoon, accompanied by friends Stuart and Dot Hancock, they started scavenging in local boat yards in search of a mast.

“Stu and I instead found two white Friendship sloops,” Bill says, “both named *Downeaster*, both for sale. One especially caught my eye. There was more rain falling inside the cabin than outside. She looked really old, her deck beam was cut off, and no builder or year was listed, but below we found etched a five-digit number. I knew enough to realize that meant she could be an original.” (Newer boats have six-digit registrations.)

“We went home and drank too many whiskey sours,” Bill says. “I called up the owner in Philadelphia to ask what he wanted for his old wreck. \$4,600. Before we knew it, we were partners with the Hancocks. Caroline and I were in debt for our half.”

Patched up, and with a Chris-Craft Model K six-cylinder gas engine that ran on five, the boat did well enough. With a compass but no radio, a Dutch log, an old radio direction finder, and “very little experience sailing this kind of boat,” Bill, Stu, and three friends decided to cruise from New Jersey to Friendship for the next homecoming. They towed a dinghy loaded with cans of gas.

“The first entry in the log was ‘Dinghy sinking. Moved gas cans onto boat,’” Bill says. “Basically we had a bomb on the water.”

They arrived in time to race. Caroline and Dot drove to Friendship by car.

The next day the four owners scoured Coast Guard records in Rockland, where they found their five-digit documentation number. Their boat was built in 1902 on Bremen Long Island in Muscongus Bay by Alexander “Bug” McLain, who sold it for \$450, which included sails sewed by his wife. That was a tenth of what the Zubers and Hancocks had paid. *Downeaster*’s original name was *Gladiator*, and that was the name it regained on its new trailboards and transom.

During the next three years, Bill replanked *Gladiator*’s deck, added a topmast and new topsails, and installed a diesel

engine. Meanwhile, the couple added a third son, Andy. When they returned to Maine for the annual regatta, *Gladiator* captured a first win. But it’s a long way up the coast with three small boys aboard, even though all the Zubers loved to sail. For the next few summers they traveled to Maine by car. In 1971 they bought 20 acres in Friendship to retire on. “Our hearts,” Caroline says, “had gone to Maine.”

One snowy day, dreaming of summer, Bill saw an ad, and a flash bulb went off. Outward Bound, on Hurricane Island in Penobscot Bay, needed a teacher. He had a teaching certificate that he had never used.

Say good-bye to the boatyard in New Jersey. Their blueberry-covered site in Friendship sprouted a modular home, and they moved in. That was the first of 15 summers on Hurricane Island, where Bill ran the waterfront, did carpentry, and taught sailing. Caroline worked a variety of jobs, and the kids soaked up everything. *Gladiator* was put on a mooring off the island; the sloop had returned to Maine for good. “It was the most wonderful experience of our lives,” says Bill, “a boy’s wonderful dream.”



Priscilla Harper

Bill Zuber has been known to quip: “There isn’t any wind, it must be race day.”

But soon *Gladiator* began to leak. When Bug McLain built the boat he had ballasted the hull with iron weights set in concrete. When iron rusts, it expands. After 80 years, the frames had cracked and plank seams had opened up. So Bill sheathed the hull with pine veneers interlaced with cotton muslin, all set in epoxy. He rebuilt the interior of the boat, including an enclosed head, and installed a 40-hp Yan-

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mar diesel engine. It took five years, but Bill had made *Gladiator* indestructible, short of a shipwreck.

After 20 years of co-ownership, the Zubers bought out the Hancocks. Then Bill reballasted the boat with 6,200 pounds of lead and relaunched it in 1987 as a daysail business with Andy as first mate. That winter, Bill left Outward Bound to go to sea for the Sea Education Association.

Gladiator is retired now from the daysailing business, and Friendship is home to both the boat and Bill and Caroline Zuber, who have finally built a house and a boat house on the land they bought 30 years ago. Caroline is one of three town assessors, and Bill, who couldn't stay off the water if he tried, transports cement mixers, gravel, and the like when the tide is right to nearby islands for Rockland Marine.

Gladiator was so steady that I forgot we were racing. Skies were gray but not threatening, excellent for photography. Wind filled the sails of each racing sloop in perfect formation. While our youngest crew members played pirate in the galley, Andy talked about his boat.

Gladiator was built for long-lining off Monhegan Island and fished until 1927. At 13 tons it is a lot of boat, yet with only occasional assistance, Andy has the sloop completely under control alone.

"She moves deliberately," Andy said, "so she doesn't throw us around much. It takes a while to get going, but what's different about these boats is that they're smooth. At under 33 feet, this feels like a 50-foot boat."

At six knots with the wind at our backs, we prepared to round the mark. The skipper was playing it cool, but Nirvana whispered, "Andy's more the com-

FRIENDSHIP SLOOP SOCIETY

The Friendship Sloop Society encourages the building and sailing of Friendship sloops, and promotes their history and traditions. In addition to participating in several annual races, members raise scholarship funds for college-bound students from the town of Friendship and help support the one-room Friendship Museum, which includes the society's memorabilia and maritime artifacts. The museum is located at Route 220 and Martins Point Road and is open July through Labor Day and by appointment. For more information about both society and museum: www.fss.org. The membership secretary may be e-mailed at membership@fss.org.

All of the Zubers' sons sail, but Andy is the one who caught his parents' fever—and then some. He arranged his life so he would be able to sail. "I told Nirvana she had to learn to sail before we could get married," Andy said. "I even became a physician assistant because I'd have flexible hours." Nirvana learned to sail, and he now works at Miles Memorial Hospital in Damariscotta.

AT THE REGATTA IN ROCKLAND, the starting gun exploded. Fourteen Friendship sloops formed a necklace of sail on a course inside the Rockland breakwater. It was a scene that their fisherman-builders probably never imagined. Today's toughest mission was to round marked buoys in Handicap Alley to equalize competitors that differ by waterline length and sail area.

petitor than he pretends." *Gladiator* made a tight U-turn in spitting distance of our buoy, with *Sazerac* closing in. Suddenly, to port, I saw *Tannis* heading straight for us. In seconds their bowsprit would be in my lap. Whoops and cheers erupted from both vessels, kids and parents alike; I held my breath. The two sloops came about just in time.

"I hope you got a picture," someone yelled my way. "You don't see that every day!" But I was so enthralled with the wooden boat ballet that I forgot. ✨

Janet Mendelsohn is a freelance writer who lives in Charlestown, Massachusetts and Kittery Point, Maine.

2006 Friendship Sloop Society Homecoming Regatta in Rockland: Thursday-Saturday July 20-22. Parade of Sail, Harbor Park, Rockland: 11 a.m., Saturday, July 22.