

## History of the Thistle Class

*Note: The first 50 years of the "History of the Thistle Class" were written largely by Ron Small. Ron was a long-time Thistler - his first Thistle was #221, followed by #979, and #2690. Ron served the Class as Bagpipe Editor in 1952, 1st Vice President in 1953, and TCA President in 1954. In 1957, Ron pulled together the "Thistle Handbook", an early bible for Thistle owners. He sailed for years out of Huntington, Long Island, moving to Maine after retirement. Ron was a regular feature at many East Coast, Midwinter and National Championship regattas for 50 years, always helpful, and ready to chat about the Thistle. He also was a regular contributor to the Bagpipe. Ron passed away in late 2008.*

*Peter Hale, Editor; April, 2009.*

### The First Decade of Thistling

by Ron Small

*Note: "The First Decade of Thistling" appeared in the Bagpipe over several issues during 1974.*

#### Chapter 1 - Prologue

Picture, if you will, a pretty, sun-flecked bay, basking under a bright blue sky. There you are, happily stationed at the helm of your Thistle; a pleasant breeze is rippling the water, the Thistle is virtually sailing hands-off, the sun is shining, everything is relaxed, and you are thinking to yourself that this is really living. After all, where else could you find such a responsive, yet comfortable, craft? What other boat sails so sweetly? And you get no answer...

If you are not a Thistler of many years' standing, perhaps your thoughts will wander further, and you may speculate as to how long this idyllic existence has been going on for other Thistle skippers, the lucky guys who got into the act before you did. You know that the Vikings, for instance, could never have had it so good, and the same goes for Columbus; heck, this is a modern rig you're driving. But *how* modern? When did this wonderful deal start, and who dreamed it up?

You recall that you once saw, at a prominent eastern yacht club, a monument to an old keel class of yacht in the form of the actual No. 1 boat of that class, appropriately cradled and displayed in the club yard. A nice tribute, certainly. But Thistle number 1? Shucks, you raced against her only last summer - and you were beaten at that! How long has *she* been sailing? Obviously, she's not ready

for stuffing and mounting yet - not by a long shot. Significantly, tho' she's plywood, she sure *looks* like your 3000-series glass beauty. Yet maybe you wonder if she's been sailing forever - and will she go on doing so?

Muse on, good friend, and stick around. Thistle number 1, *Paukie*, has a tale to tell, and so have a lot of other Thistles — and their skippers. In the past quarter-century, many illustrious hands have fondly caressed a Thistle tiller, and some are with us today. Others, — well, they've gone on to the Olympics, the America's Cup, the Mallories, and other glittering heights. Maybe, along the way, that interlude with a Thistle added enough to their sailing dimensions to put them into such exalted company. But for others like you and me, the Thistle has proven to be the penultimate craft, beyond which nothing could gleam brighter — and who is to say that we are not the wise ones?

So much for the philosophy; someone had to put it all together in order that today's skippers could enjoy the fruits of an idea which was destined to blossom into reality. Enter a canny Scot by the name of Gordon K. Douglass — Sandy to many of us. He conjured her up, designed her, and then teamed up with Ray McLeod to build and market their creation as a postwar venture.

Just who were these guys, you ask? Well, we all know the McLeods (or at least know of them), and Sandy is still building and sailing boats, although no longer active in Thistles. He came into the picture with substantial credentials, having been exposed to sailing by his father through the medium of such hot craft as the decked sailing canoe and the Canadian fourteen-foot dinghy. He knew how to sail, he knew a good boat when he saw one, and, perhaps more to the point, he refused to be satisfied with anything less; he was most exacting in his standards of performance.

In an article on the Thistle written for *Rudder* magazine in the mid-Fifties, Sandy gave us a few glimpses into his background, and into the birth of the Thistle. Whereas yachting had been, "in olden days", purely a rich man's sport, the need for - and the advent of - such eventually popular craft as the Snipe and Comet opened the door for ordinary blokes like you and me, and the rush was on.

So far, so good - but that was just the beginning. And right here, perhaps it would

be best for us to step aside and let Sandy tell the story, with our thanks to Rudder magazine for permission to reprint the following passages from the aforementioned article:

"As the new generation grew in skill and discernment there was soon a need for a better boat, a boat to give better performance, a boat equal to their growing ability. Also, with the continuing change in the world's economic structure some sailors, finding they could no longer afford their own big boats, looked around for something with the handling quality they knew. But in a smaller size.

"The one missing ingredient in cooking up a boat such as the Thistle was an economical method for building one at a price competitive with chine boats. This at last was provided by the Vidal process for molding hulls of laminated wood which first was put into practical use in 1938. The process made possible, at a modest cost, the strong light hull demanded by the light displacement planing centerboarder. The stage was set.

"There were a number of definite objectives behind the design of the Thistle, most of them in conflict with each other because that is the nature of boats. Every boat is a compromise between what we would like to have and what we can afford to have. The most successful boat is the most successful compromise...

"Needed was a family day sailer with excellent handling and performance characteristics. She must be big enough to carry a large party in reasonable comfort, small enough to fit into the average small garage, light enough for two men to be able to load her onto a trailer, and fast enough to give a good account of herself under all conditions. She must be reasonably dry and safer than the average. She must plane well and handle like a thoroughbred...

"With these requisites in mind, suppose we look into the problem from the view point of the designer? . . . First comes problem of size. We must figure on sufficient displacement to carry at least six persons well and to race with a crew of three. A length of fourteen feet we know to be too small. Twenty feet? Too long to fit into many modern garages. Nineteen feet? Eighteen feet? Makes a pretty heavy boat. Sixteen feet? This is better for weight, but too short to carry the weight well. Seventeen feet. Sounds right. This is the length of most

automobiles so we know she will fit into the garage. What beam? For this length six feet is about normal. If we can utilize the full beam there will be plenty of room inside, but if she has to have side decking she will tend to be cramped even if we stretch the beam another few inches. Also, a six foot beam keeps her down to the width of the car for easy trailering. Narrower than this, she may be tender. Let's try six feet.

"What type of hull? We know that length on the water is probably the most important single factor in the all-around speed of a sailboat so if we are looking for good performance we must make her waterline length as great as possible and the only logical answer is to have a plumb bow and a plumb transom. With seventeen feet overall you then have seventeen feet of waterline length. Some people may object to the appearance, but is not performance more important than looks?

"How about decking? The public may not like an open boat because people associate decking with safety and seaworthiness, and rightly so in many cases because some of the popular one-designs would founder in a short time if they did not have decking and splashboards to keep out the green water of Lake Erie seas. If we give our boat greater freeboard and flare, with her lighter weight she would lift over the seas instead of plunging through or under them. Without the weight of decking her bow will be lighter and will lift better than if she had it. Proper design will keep the water from coming aboard at all.

"What type of rig? Inasmuch as our boat is to be a trailer boat she should have a simple easily set-up rig. Why not follow the rig developed for the International 14? The mast staying is of the fixed-diamond-stay variety which requires only a single main shroud on each side and a jibstay. Two clip pins and a single turnbuckle attach them. It takes but two minutes to rig or unrig. No tuning is required. What could be simpler? Also for simplicity we will use grooved spars and will run the halliards down inside the mast onto small winches. There will be no cleats, no blocks, no mess.

"What shall the sail area be? Interestingly enough, the classes with plenty of canvas are the ones which have lasted longest, such as the fourteen foot dinghies, the Stars and the bilgeboard scows. These are among the fastest for their size and it is significant that they tend toward a low aspect ratio mainsail and small jib

with low fore triangle. So let's give our boat enough canvas to make her interesting, to perform well, and to be fun to sail even in light weather. I think 175 square feet sounds about right, especially if we use a moderately low aspect ratio which will keep the center of effort low.

"Now we come to the lines, the actual shape of the hull. With the greater length and beam we find that the displacement has come up rapidly so that we can ease the lines quite a bit as compared with the International 14 which has to be pretty chunky. Then a compromise. We want firm bilges to give stability, but if they are too firm she will have too much wetted surface, which will make her sluggish and sticky in light weather. Suppose we see what happens if we put the fullness of the bilge just above the waterline. This cuts down the wetted surface greatly, yet the power is there as soon as she heels a little and the big bilge sinks into the water. She may seem a little tender at the dock, but once underway she will stiffen like a house.

"Here, also, may lie the solution to the riddle of designing a successful racing and family boat. With her normal crew of three persons her bilges are out of water, her wetted surface is moderate, and she is light and lively. But as we add additional weight and she sinks deeper into the water her bilges become immersed, she gains tremendously in displacement and stability. She appears to carry five or six persons almost as easily as she carries three and she becomes a comfortable family day sailer.

"If we want our boat to be dry she must have a fine entrance to slice through the waves. A fuller entrance might give a little more speed, but the dryness of the fine bow is worth the sacrifice. Fullness higher up will provide the lift to get her over the seas and the flare to throw the spray down. The forebody, deeply vee'd, will take her to weather, will give her an easy action in big seas with no slapping or pounding, and will lift her into planing and give her plenty of dynamic stability at high speeds. The forebody blends into a flattish afterbody for planing. Her run, which starts forward of amidships, is almost straight for good planing, yet the bilges are tucked up just enough to keep them out of the water in light weather, especially if the crew will move forward a few inches.

"Now we must calculate displacement, run the curve of areas, find perhaps that

we need a little more fullness here, a little less there, rerun and adjust the lines to compensate until she is as she should be. And then we have the seemingly interminable wait while she is being built and finished before we can know how sound our decisions and compromises have been.

"Many people do not realize that the great contribution of the various hull molding processes lies not in just giving us light and watertight hulls, but is more in liberating the designer from the restrictions imposed by the heavy inflexible materials used in traditional boat building. It used to be that the boat must be designed so it could be built from the materials at hand. Curves and shapes had to be simple. Now, dealing with materials such as one-sixteenth inch veneers or glass cloth, the builder can follow almost any reasonable shape and the result is better performance and handling qualities in our boats.

"We have given a description of some of the Thistle's background, our hopes and aspirations for her. What of her actual history? The start of the Thistle Class Association was auspicious although unusual. In the autumn of 1945, as soon as it was evident that the war would end, the prospective Thistle owners, those who had placed orders for boats to be built on an "if and when" basis, met and formed the Thistle Class Association, complete with constitution, by-laws and officers, several months before the first boats were built. The class was so well organized that in 1946, at the end of the first sailing season, the first national championship races were held, the site being Maumee Bay at Toledo, Ohio.

"What had caused this great interest in a boat which was almost unknown? It has been said many times, and with reason, that it was the Thistle's first race that, because of its unusual nature, made the Thistle Class. Because the race told such an eloquent story of the nature of the Thistle a brief account of it here will serve to give a better understanding of the boat.

"I had completed the Thistle prototype early in the summer of 1945 and for her first real test took her to Put-in-Bay for the annual regatta of the Inter-Lake Yachting Association. She was a double planked boat with very light framing, as close an approximation as possible of what a molded boat would be. She obviously was fast, and an open boat. The "experts" sadly shook their heads as they muttered that she was no boat for Lake Erie's nasty seas. If the weather had

remained fair and mild it is possible that the Thistle might have remained unsung.

"Fate was kind to the Thistle in providing an exceedingly boisterous northwester with seas which appeared to be at least twelve feet high but probably were not over six or eight. Being the only one of her kind, the Thistle had to race in the Universal class, a catch-all for the bigger boats that did not fit into any of the various racing classes, with handicaps based on the Universal Rule. There we were, faced with the prospect of sailing the big boat course, a fifteen mile triangle out on open Lake Erie, in winds estimated to be forty miles an hour and higher in the gusts. My wife Mary was my jib tender and our crew was enjoying his first sailboat ride.

"Our competition consisted of a fair number of keel boats, the largest a big schooner, and of which the best performer proved to be a 22 Square Meter. The 22s, coming from the leeward side of the Atlantic, are designed for and at their best in strong winds. The little Thistle, less than half the length of the other boats, was given time by all of them. Under such circumstances my hope was that we might complete the course creditably and perhaps save our time if all went well. I myself did not know what she could do.

"We were given a windward start. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed that a few of the other boats were so smothered by the wind that they were unable to get across the line on the first try. I was astounded to find that we not only were holding our own, but soon were leading the fleet, footing as fast as the 22 and making good a full point higher. Just about every boat on the course was taking green seas aboard, plunging under solid water. The crews of some of the larger racing boats even formed bucket lines to stay afloat. We never once took solid water aboard and with a small tomato can my wife occasionally dipped out what little spray blew into the boat.

"Soon we caught up to the stragglers of the class ahead of us. By the time we reached the weather mark the sail of the 22 was only a white dot in the distance behind us. Then came a wild planing leg and a broad reach home in a lightening wind. The race committee was astounded to see us coming sailing in, almost completely dry, more than twenty minutes ahead of the second boat and some forty minutes ahead of the stragglers of the class.

"We also won the remaining two races in moderate to light winds, being first boat in, never once calling on our handicap. But the old timers still mention "that race" which was the making of the Thistle class because it removed from the minds of those who were there any doubt of whether the Thistle could go out and take it. Now lightweight planing centerboarders have demonstrated their abilities in convincing fashion in such events as the One-of-a-Kind series that we know what to expect, but at that time they were almost unknown.

"Needless to say, I was kept busy after the regatta taking people sailing by the dozens. Everyone wanted to try out the Thistle. And that is why there were so many anxious Thistlers-to-be chomping at the bit long before we were able to commence production.