

Chapter 2 - The First Thistles and Thistlers

Having designed, built and then — at Put-in-Bay — demonstrated to even the most skeptical of onlookers the superiority of his "better mousetrap", Sandy then settled down to determine how to put the Thistle into production so as to satisfy the demand on the part of the sailing world who commenced beating a path to his door. At the moment all he had at his disposal was his own small shop, the Gordon Douglass Boat Co. in Vermilion, Ohio, but these facilities at best were very limited, and it was obvious that additional resources were required to build Thistles in any quantity. John Lovett, a fellow-14-skipper from Vermilion, had helped build the prototype and was subsequently the first to place an order with Sandy for a production model, but was not available for any long-range manufacturing program. And Sandy himself, who was an ex-portrait painter, did not boast of an extensive background in the manufacturing side of the game despite his long love affair with sail.

At this stage a member of the Mentor Harbor Yacht Club, C. Richard Newpher, knowing that Sandy was strangling for lack of space in Vermilion, suggested to club-mate Ray McLeod, Sr. that his marine yard could stand a partner. Ray was a farm-born lad from Wickliffe, Ohio, who went into the boat business by accident, having started off as a painting and decorating contractor (a fact which, coupled with Sandy's bent for art, may explain *Yachting* magazine's subsequent description of the Thistle as "one of the most beautifully-finished yachts to make her debut at the New York Boat Show!").

One Saturday night in 1941, while sailing down the Grand River, Bernard C. McCabe, who then owned the Grand River Boat Works, asked Ray to buy his company. Thinking the offer in jest, Ray agreed, and it wasn't until the following Monday that he realized the boat works owner was serious about the deal. He decided then and there to purchase the place. For a while he operated both businesses, then in '44 he concentrated solely on the yard; Ray was hooked on boats.

It is not revealed in the annals of the Class whether or not Sandy's and Ray's decision to become partners was made over a bottle of Duggan's Dew O'Kirkintilloch, but we can say in support of this notion that, after all this was a

Scots affair! In October of 1945 the firm of Douglass and McLeod was formed, with Ray as President and General Manager and Sandy as Vice-President. Once the deal was consummated, tooling was set up in Grand River, sleeves were rolled up, and all hands settled down to the task of supplying the waiting world. And, for the first time, powerboat man McLeod found himself wrapped up in the wonderful world of sailing.

Once the original prototype had served her function as a trial balloon, she was sold to a private buyer and was not registered or sailed as a Thistle. There were a few design changes in the production boats as a result of experience gained from the prototype, and also to incorporate production manufacturing techniques, but the key features and measurements which had proven so successful in the original were retained. In an ad placed in the January 1946 *Yachting*, the Thistle was offered complete, less sails, at \$600.

Inasmuch as many orders had been placed virtually simultaneously, the question of priority in assigning boat numbers required resolution. This was settled by having the initial group of buyers draw lots for numbers, the sole provision being No. 1 would be reserved for Sandy. In the drawing, Norm Tischler of Cleveland picked No. 2, and Lovett No. 3. Thereupon Tischler magnanimously traded numbers with Dick Shaw, who had drawn No. 13 and who undoubtedly envisioned a calamitous future with this number, replete with last places, DNF's, foul-outs, shipwrecks, torpedoings, and attacks by Moby Dick.

In order to get afloat as quickly as possible, Lovett spent all of his spare time working on his boat and as a result, his was the first production Thistle to be launched, in June 1946. At the end of July — prior to the annual Cleveland Y.C. Regatta — Tischler, Shaw, Ken Glor and Packy Bleckrie from that club and Elmo Farmer from Edgewater Y.C. all took delivery. This was the first time that the Thistle sailed as a class in that event. As for Sandy, he was so busy building boats for — and selling them to — others that he didn't find time to complete "*Paukie*" 'til later in the year.

In addition to the Thistle, Ray and Sandy were building the Douglass and McLeod International 14 and a molded keel sloop called the International 21 (originally the

Great Lakes 21); later they added the Highlander, and discontinued the 14 and 21 lines.

A word here about Sandy's philosophy. Like everything else, Thistles cost less in 1946 than now. He wanted to keep the cost within modest bounds, and was no lover of frills in any event. The boat came basically complete and ready to sail, but by today's "gadgets and gilhickies" racing standards she was, in the opinion of some, a bit spartan. For example, the jib sheet leads were simple pieces of mahogany mounted on the gunwales; at the aft ends there were semicircular notches past which the sheets could be led. The forward ends were mitered on the lower surfaces to form a jam surface. Holes were drilled through the blocks, presumably to reduce weight, and that was it. Sandy sailed *his* boat that way, and most successfully, but others thought it necessary to provide more sophisticated jib-sheeting gadgetry, much to his disapproval.

The centerboard rig was a masterpiece. There was a fixed double block mounted low at the bow; and the board ran a multi-tackle arrangement with a floating block, giving a 5 to 1 advantage, with what seemed to be a hundred feet of rope. Naturally, there was friction aplenty in this set-up not to mention the wear on the rope, and it cluttered up the foc'sle no end. It was particularly distressing when the spinnaker was stowed forward out of the bag, as quite often the chute would be sucked into one of the blocks or get tangled in part of the tackle while an attempt was being made to cycle the board, with disastrous results. Needless to say, this device was not destined for immortality, and the more modern drum rig gradually doomed the original concept to merciful oblivion. Today, perhaps even Sandy would concede that the winch was more desirable.

There were, of course, numerous other standard items which underwent gradual improvement over the years. Initially, the stock boat did not provide a traveller, for instance; nor was a vang standard equipment, although neither was outlawed at the time. Hiking straps were not legal equipment; more about them later. Tilt-up rudders were available, although not widely used, and bailers were a thing of the future. Biggest problem at the outset was the sailcloth scarcity. Howard Boston finally came up with something called Zephyr cloth which was being used on airplane wings. The sails were described as being "terrible" but all alike at first so no one

had an advantage. As time went on, sailcloth progressed through the various material vogues (including nylon and Orlon) until Dacron settled in.

Not the least noteworthy thing about Sandy was his skill as a helmsman. Little ruffled him on the water, and it became apparent early in the game that it would take monumental effort, plus plenty of luck, to beat him across the line. A skipper who knew his trade, he applied his skills expertly to racing. At any regatta he was the guy to best and, over the years, he piled up an impressive number of victories. As part of his "showing the flag" program, he appeared in a vast number of regattas all over the country, and he was almost invariably in the money in all of them. It was a while before the others were able to match him knot for knot, and yet he maintained this standard with little apparent effort. The rest of us had to struggle madly to keep up with this casual Scot and, even with the generous help and advice which he freely gave, it was rough sledding.

Whether or not you agreed with him was one thing; beating him quite another.

Sandy's sailing prowess was nothing accidental. He got off to a good start as the son of the famous George P. Douglass who was one of the world's outstanding small boat racers from 1890 to 1920. Sandy brought a wealth of sailing experience into the firm as he literally grew up with a tiller in his hand, winning his first race at the ripe old age of nine.

In addition, he was participating in — and most of the time winning — open canoe sailing and paddling championships almost continually from 1918 to 1941. In 1932 he finished second only to Uffa Fox, the famous English racer and world-renowned boat designer, in the open canoe sailing championship of that year. Sandy was ruled out of the 1936 Canadian Olympic paddling team, after being chosen, due to his American birth. But no one ever needed a paddle less at the helm of a Thistle than did Sandy! He was also active in barbershop quartet — a very versatile fellow...

Ofttimes his crew would consist of complete strangers, not only to him, but sometimes to sailing. More usually, though, it was Mary Douglass who sailed as one of the crew with her husband, leading the way in demonstrating the Thistle as a real family boat. Mary's proportions and strength would scarcely have qualified her for

a spot say, as a tackle on the Chicago Bears, so Sandy wasn't loading the dice in that respect by any stretch of the imagination. Nor did her value and fine qualities stop there. Afloat or ashore she was a real helpmate to Sandy —but we'll let him tell it:

"I think Mary deserves much more credit than she is given for the success of the Thistle Class. She was my faithful crew all through, showing that wives could compete successfully. More than that, her charm and warmth contributed a great deal toward pulling the class together. She was the Ambassador of Good Will behind the scenes who entertained the visiting firemen, of which there a great many, who gave the class warmth and cohesion. While she never was an officer of the class, she contributed a great deal more to its success than many who were."

Many of the new Thistle buyers had prior experience in other classes, plus which there was available a goodly amount of data on these successful classes which were flourishing at the time. With this to draw upon they were able to break ground judiciously, profiting by the mistakes of others and proceeding on a firm basis toward a class organization. Douglass and McLeod officials of course were able to contribute their own expertise, and the pooling of talent and data helped to get things under way solidly and efficiently. It also went without saying that close liaison between the company and the Association was recognized as essential to the well-being of both.

Thus the Class organization was begun, the first officers elected, and plans to publish *The Bagpipe* and By-Laws and Specifications were under way. It would seem that, in view of their relatively brief association with one another, their estimate of individual potential was necessarily based on reputation rather than direct personal experience, and those with some aura of leadership were solicited to "volunteer" as nominees for the first slate of officers. Out of this emerged the "founding fathers", heroes all:

President: John Bohannon, Sandusky, Ohio

1st Vice-President: I. Louis Carron, Detroit

2nd Vice-President: Robert Laughlin, Vermilion, Ohio

Sec'y-Treasurer: Richard Shaw, Cleveland

Chief Measurer: J. Elmo Farmer, Cleveland

To them fell the tough task of getting things going smoothly, adopting an approved Constitution and By-Laws, working out a set of measurements which would stand the tests of time and practicable one-design control, and piloting the T.C.A. over the first leg of the course. Inasmuch as everyone had his own notion of what was best and what was not, there were many pros and cons on some of the items which came up for discussion and on which agreement was needed, and at times the rhetoric became long and painful. This called for diplomacy and compromise, but eventually wise heads and the charm of the boat herself resolved all conflict, and the Thistle emerged as a going one-design with backing from a strong group of owners. And in those days, the T.C.A. dues were only \$3.00. At these prices both the boat and the Association just had to be the bargain of the waterfront.

With this slate of officers, the Association marked the start of what has — over the years — proven to be a veritable dynasty of outstanding leaders. While the Thistle Class certainly isn't the *only* sailing class to have been blessed in this respect, the fact remains that we have not taken a back seat to anyone insofar as leadership is concerned. Names like Tischler, Minton, Devlin, Hanna, Spangenberg, Herrmann, Himsworth and many others too numerous to spell out in complete detail here have appeared in key roles in the development of the Class down through the years, welding it into a splendid unit.

The results of their efforts show up today in interesting (and sometimes surprising) ways. Only recently the T.C.A. received a puzzled inquiry from the secretary of another sizable (and modern) class. They, it seemed, could not understand how we could so consistently come up with a succession of such great editors as evidenced by *The Bagpipe's* standard of excellence. In that class, apparently, they were unable to locate people in the same news-editing league with ours. Luck? Well, maybe . . . *Esprit de corps?* One would think so. Or are Thistlers simply more cooperative, more willing to take on that extra job, more *dedicated?* This seems "more than somewhat" likely. In any event, if reactions of the sort described are any indication, the T.C.A. may surely take a bow on this score.