

Chapter 4 - Thistling Takes Off

Today, as we sit back and reminisce about the pioneering days of the Thistle Class, the boat and class are well-established and accepted by the sailing world. But it must-be pointed out that in the early days the Thistle was a bit revolutionary. The older, established classes sensed a threat to their nice, slow, orderly, anachronistic world, and there was considerable resentment displayed on the part of their skippers. Perhaps understandably, they took no joy in sitting still in light airs while Thistles glided by, or in pounding waves over which the Thistle rode gracefully, or in watching Thistles plane by in a strong wind. Some saw the light and decided to share our fun; others merely scowled, sneered as they suffered, tried to comfort themselves by knocking the Thistle, and sometimes by more direct physical action. One Thistle owner in "enemy" territory reported that his mooring had been sabotaged by persons unknown; others found their right-of-way trampled over on the race course, along with other incidents.

A particularly sore point arose in regattas involving more than one class. Initially the Thistles were gently but firmly relegated to the tail end of the starting order in some areas. This forced them to sail through virtually all the craft which had started ahead of them, creating numerous unpleasant incidents all around the course, and leading to even more friction as disputes inevitably arose. Eventually the skippers of the other classes got the message and grudgingly accepted a later starting slot, but not without a great deal of static for some time thereafter. Naturally, in many areas where there weren't enough Thistles to start as a class they went into the handicaps. In most cases the Thistles finished the race, made up to their moorings, and were put to bed, with the skippers enjoying cocktails on the club veranda while the others were coming up to the finish line. This led to a big hassle over handicaps but it did serve as a forceful demonstration that the Thistle could really go! And so it is today in various remote outposts that Thistles are still proving what the rest of us have known for a long time.

Originally, of course, by far the bulk of Thistle activity was concentrated around Ohio, from whence it steadily fanned out. One of the earlier fleets was established in Chicago, but that one did not flourish. Roger Brett, who is still very active in the Class, and others carried the ball in the east and before long Fleet 14 was started

in Western Long Island Sound, right on the heels of Fleet 13 in Mission Bay, California. The Thistle chain now extended coast-to-coast. Much of this can be attributed to the efforts of Larry Waldrip of the Mentor Harbor Y.C., who was assigned at the Winter Meeting to the task of development of the Thistle Class throughout the country. The April 1948 *Bagpipe* reveals that there were 70 Thistles active in Ohio, 29 around Detroit, 22 on Lake Michigan, 17 on the Niagara Frontier, 21 in New England, 27 around metropolitan N.Y., 16 in Central Atlantic, 11 in California and 5 in Florida. And, in those days before the development of scores of trailable boats when not too many clubs had hoists, stowing Thistles on rafts was a popular means of dry-sailing.

At the O.I.C.Y.A. regatta on Chippewa Lake in June, Sandy showed he was far from dead by winning over 11 competing Thistles, with Harvey Busch second. Ham deFontaine of *Yachting's* "Gadgets and Gilhickies" fame bought #27, dubbed her *Rascal* and featured her several times in his column. Willard Lenz' No. 78 was leading the pack in the Western L.I. Sound fleet but, with 7 boats turning out for Larchmont Race Week, Gene Stetson's *Quick'un* #(80) came out top dog. New Thistles were forming fleets at Shreveport, La. and Fort Worth, Texas as the result of a barnstorming tour by Ray McLeod. Six Thistles appeared at the Balboa (California) Y.C. for their 1948 Easter Regatta, which Herb Sinnhoffer won aboard his *Pedro* (223). By April 1948, evidence of growing Class organization was apparent with the appointment of ten District Secretaries.

This was the year when Sandy decided a change of color was the ticket for *Paukie*, and from then on her red top-sides graced waters which had previously seen her as blue. It was also the first year in which the Nationals were sailed outside of Ohio: at Canandaigua Lake, N.Y., on September 4th, 5th and 6th. This time it was champ Lovett's turn to be the target, a situation which Sandy must have found appealing.

In the opening race, sailed in a 5-knot NNE breeze, Don Beverage got away swinging at the helm of *Duggan's Dew* (204) to stave off Orrin Keller's *Alibi* (8) at the finish line by 2 seconds. Sandy was right there with a tidy third in a 43-boat field, while Lovett never got off the ground, being buried in 17th place.

The second race was sailed in a dying breeze which failed to daunt Sandy as he

increased his margin right to the finish over runner-up Lovett. Beverage's third tied him with Sandy on series points and set the state for the finals. A 15-18 knot SSW breeze greeted the fleet for the third race. Racine's Tony Herrmann got his *Stickers* (22) out in front, Spangenberg was second and Jim Hendricksen third. Sandy's 6th coupled with Beverage's foul-out was enough to regain the title for the former, with Keller 5 1/4 points astern. Hendricksen wound up with a series third, Carl Barnett in *Great Scot* (263) fourth and Herrmann 5th.

In the winners' circle, we see a new name, one which was destined to crop up time and again — the Class was beginning to develop some top-notchers to match wits with Sandy. No history of Thistling would be worth much without specific mention of Jim Hendricksen of Sandusky who sailed his famous *Blac Jac* to so many victories over a span of several years. Jim's first object on acquiring No. 21 was to make her a show-piece. He put a body-shop black finish on her top-sides which would have aroused the envy of any Cadillac, and matched that with a sparkling brightwork interior. Add to that a black spinnaker, and *Blac Jac* stood out in a crowd. Then, to prove that all this beauty was much more than skin deep, Jim buckled down to some serious sailing and from there on was rarely out of the money. Characteristically, he modestly attributed whatever success he attained to his crew and to his sailmaker, but for the records let there be no mistake: *Blac Jac's* skipper was one of the real greats of the Thistle world.

At the Annual Meeting, officers elected for '48-'49 were: Frank LeBoutillier, President; Don Beverage, Vice-President; Erwin "Mac" McGuire, Secretary-Treasurer; and Ed Hanna, *Bagpipe* Editor. Not an Ohioan among them — in fact, the whole slate from Niagara Frontier!

On the Chesapeake late in the year things were looking up, with an influx of ten hot new skippers to the Thistle, including such luminaries as Dr. Walter Lawson, Bill Heintz, Prentice Edrington, Leigh Brite and the Marquardt brothers—Frank and Gene. Texas too was on the move as Fleet Charter No. 24 was issued to the new fleet in Houston. And Kansas City got into the act when Roger Brett moved his *Lady Anne* (191) there from Bridgeport, Conn.

As 1949 got under way, Jack Price sailed *The Imp* to victory over the Thistle

entries in the Miami Orange Bowl Regatta. To further get the year going with a full head of steam, Sandy became involved in a one-dollar side bet with designer Ray Hunt concerning the relative merits of the Thistle vs. Hunt's new 22-foot Javelin Class boat. But, while the Javelin and Thistle did not manage to get together with each other for a match race per se, the whole affair caught the attentive eye of *Yachting's* Bob Bavier, who went to work to initiate the now-famous One-of-Kind series, where they finally did meet. This event was attended by a goodly number of larger boats, with the Thistle carrying the next-to-lowest rating in the fleet, being undershot only by the small but slippery decked sailing canoe. The overall scoring was complicated somewhat by the fact that many of the competing yachts sailed in only some of the races. The canoe did very well for herself, taking two corrected firsts in two races sailed, with the Star picking up the marbles in the other race. While she did not dominate things as the prototype did at Put-in-Bay, the Thistle did show up very well all in all, with boat finishes of 8, 6 and 7, which corrected to 4, 3 and 4. On handicaps, only the canoe, Raven and 28 ft. scow were able to top her in some (but not all) of the races. As for the Javelin, it was a standoff boat-for-boat in the two races in which they met, and from then on very little was ever heard of her again.

Mohican Sailing Club hosted the OICYA Regatta (in those days a very big event in those parts) that year, with 18 Thistles attending. In light airs, Herm Hanson won with *Coronet* (103), Clyde Gump was second with No. 124, and Howard Boston third, whilst the Leatherlips fleet won the Governor's trophy at that event.

Sandusky was honored in '49 as host of the first District Championship regatta (the Lake Erie Districts) to be scheduled in the TCA, the series being held on July 23rd and 24th, with 32 entries. Carl "Barney" Barnett took a first, second and fourth for a one-point victory over Sandy, with Bob Laughlin third, Hank Cowgill in *Tickle* (12) fourth, and Harvey Busch 5th. For Harvey, that was the beginning of a long and illustrious record of continuous participation in the Lake Erie Districts; in 1971 he ran his record to 25 of these series without a break. In all of them he was usually among the front-runners, and won at least one championship in this period.

The Central New York YRA Regatta fell a bit short of Sandusky's total with 18 entries turning up at Skaneateles for this event, but the competition was keen

nevertheless. Chuck Angle's *Follow Me* (320) was the winner over Frank "Bud" LeBoutillier in *Nymph* (76) and Dwight Murphy in *Laughing Boy* (312).

There were obviously some regattas which carried great publicity value: Larchmont Race Week for one, so by 1949, our sights were set more firmly on that event. The Larchmont people were very cordial and provided all the necessary ingredients for good racing, including excellent courses, handsome trophies, and Morris Rosenfeld to immortalize us on film. This was a week-long affair, hence difficult from the standpoint of available time for those who worked; much of the overall attendance in the other classes was made up of youngsters, of which the Thistle Class had but a few who qualified. Despite this, we managed to scrounge up a maximum of ten or twelve boats that year. Tiny Duys of Oyster Bay, L.I. wound up breaking a tie score at the end of the week to take the honors; moreover, she accomplished this with an all-girl crew aboard her *Tumbleweed* (384).

A month later, Put-in-Bay, Ohio attracted thirty Thistles from twelve clubs for the Interlake Y.A. Regatta. This event was won by sailmaker Howard Boston in *Manawaca*; Bill Irwin was second with *Pipe Dream* and Dick Gibbs third in *Spook*.

As of June, 1949, boat numbers had been issued up to No. 449. The 1949 National Championship, with 35 entries, was conducted by the Baltimore Y.C. as a four-race event. The only qualification restriction was no more than 8 entries from any one fleet. The Marquardt brothers of Alexandria, Va. won the first race, and Jim Hendricksen followed up with a win in the Friday afternoon event. On the next day, in lighter airs, Jim posted another victory, and Dr. Harry Spangenberg of Columbus, Ohio took the finale, while *Blac Jac* dropped to 15th. Top honors went to Dr. Walter Lawson of Washington, D.C., sailing *Jolly Scot* to two 4ths, a 3rd and a 5th, which gave him a six-point edge over runner-up Tony Herrmann of Racine, Wisconsin. Harry Spangenberg was third, just ahead of Hendricksen and Sandy Douglass in that order. Not without a sense of humor, Sandy enlivened proceedings after the first day's racing by sailing *Paukie* about the harbor equipped with a specially-made "non-ducking" boom inspired by a sketch which had appeared in *Yachting* magazine shortly prior, to the regatta.

Officers elected for the year to come were: Jim Hendricksen, President; Dick

Brainard, 1st Vice-President; Ed Hanna, Secretary-Treasurer; Harry Spangenberg, 2nd Vice-President; and Frank LeBoutillier, Chief Measurer. Unfortunately, business pressures subsequently dictated that Jim resign from the Presidency, and Dick took over, with Hanna moving up to 1st Vice-President and Bob Adams of Columbus stepping in as Secretary-Treasurer.