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HIGHLANDER FLEET 14

A history by Don Southam

Highlander fleet 14 was formed in the spring of 1958, only 8 years after the launch of Highlander #1 in 1950. In 1957 there were already two Highlanders located at Edgewater, one owned by Orville Wood (#200) and the other co-owned by Dave Kabaker and Gene Linsey (#27). Orville, known as Red or Woody was clearly the father of our Fleet 14. In late 1957 and early 1958, three TRW engineers, Don Southam, Dick Wulf, and Dave Deibel decided to somehow get a boat and start sailboat racing. The three were interested in either joining forces and buying a cruising type boat that could be raced or a class boat that each of us could own. At the time we were interested in used boats or possibly a new boat such as the Thistle.

We decided to visit Douglass and McLeod located on the Grand River in Painesville to look over the possibilities of the Thistle and also visited Sandy Douglass to look at the Flying Scot. We had seen an advertisement for a used Highlander that was being offered for sale in the Willoughby area. The Lady that had the Highlander for sale was so enthusiastic about the boat that our interest began to increase for the Highlander. At first we believed that the Highlander was too big and beyond our capabilities. We decided to wait for the first Cleveland boat show scheduled for early 1958 where the Highlander, the Thistle and the Flying Scot would all be available for review. The Flying Scot was a venture into the new era of fiberglass construction started by Sandy Douglass, the designer of all three of the boats of interest. Both the Highlander and the Thistle were molded plywood construction. We were concerned that the Scot was experimental and was by far heavier and a less high-performance sailboat than either the more proven Thistle or the Highlander.

At the Cleveland boat show we encountered an extremely enthusiastic Highlander sailor by the name of Art Cutcliff. He more than anyone else convinced us that the Highlander was the boat for our future. David Deibel elected to buy Highlander #234, the show boat, and was the first of our three to have a boat ready for the water. Dick Wulf and I elected to buy kits from which we could complete the Highlander construction. At this time Don and Betty Snoke, also from TRW, were willing to join the Highlander activities. Neither had ever sailed before but were willing to help with the construction and the finances of this endeavor.

The kits were \$1850 complete with main, jib, and spinnaker sails. The completed boat cost \$2500 with sails and all needed lines and hardware. The tilt bed trailer was \$190.

We took delivery of the Highlander #233 on March 15, 1958 and started construction in a 3-stall garage at my home on Glenwood Rd. in Cleveland Heights. The Highlander kit consisted of the molded hull, three large sheets of plywood to be cut and fitted for the deck and a great deal of cut and sanded wood that would become structural members for the seats, seat supports, thwart, mast stanchions, etc. A huge bag of screws and miscellaneous hardware were also part of the kit. Clearly a substantial task was before us to build the boat. All the wood was completely unfinished and in many cases had to be cut for the compound angles of the seat supports. In 1958 an option was available for \$50 to install the deck beams and frames. We elected to take this option because a fixture was employed by Douglass and McLeod that held the hull in position while the deck frames were fitted and installed. Without this particular fixture the shape of the hull was not fixed and as a consequence it was possible with poor workmanship to build a boat that would not measure to class specifications. The kit came with the centerboard installed, which reasonably assured that the finished boat would float!

With 3 engineers in the construction crew, each nut, bolt, and screw that went into the boat had to be carefully engineered. Early in the project we decided to build the boat upside down. We concluded this would avoid the task of climbing in and out endless times in order to install the many required pieces. We propped the boat up on sawhorses and barrels to bring the hull up to the point that we could stand and work inside the hull. With this arrangement we were able to simultaneously work on the inside and outside of the hull preparing it for filling sanding painting staining etc.

Don Snoke was an amateur photographer and decided to document our construction activities by means of time lapse photography. Dave Deibel with his finished boat would often come over to heckle. He would stand in the background of our project and very slowly move his hands and arms while we worked. When you see the movies, there is this feverish activity with Dave in the background moving very normally. During the construction every 15 seconds bright lights would turn on for a single frame of movie and then be turned off. At the end of an evening of construction one was a bit blurry eyed to say the least. We worked two nights a week and at least one full day each weekend for 8 weeks to build the boat.

After considering many possibilities we finally named our boat Checkmate. In chess the name means you are beaten. It also has a sailing meaning with the word mate. Don Snoke used an ingenious method to show the name being carefully applied to the transom. The layout of letters of the name were placed in a pan of water and photographed while the water was stirred. After developing the film he reversed it and showed a picture of swirling water with the name falling into place. These normal speed pictures were interspersed with the hectic pace of our time lapse photography.

Part of our collective effort during this period was to find a place to sail. My father was a member of Lakeside Yacht Club and I had docked a Comet Class sailboat at that location for several years. I also had crewed out of Lakeside with a number of cruising type sailors and raced with an old German sailor, Sig Mueller who owned a 22 square meter boat. Sig was so verbally abusive with crew that he seldom had any. As a young man I thought my ears could stand great punishment if I could learn from this very capable sailor.

I had taught myself how to sail using a model sailboat attached to a fishing line. I would watch the boat sail and then reel the boat back, adjust the sails, and try again. Later I owned a small catboat and continued to learn to sail. At this point in time I did not know the name differences between a sheet and a halyard. The first few times I sailed with Sig Mueller were trying experiences for both of us because I did not know the sailor's lingo. I learned a great deal about sailing from him and the two of us enjoyed winning many races with time. In spite of the background at Lakeside, Edgewater already had two Highlanders and an active racing program. Joining a Yacht Club in those days was not such an easy matter. Dock space was at a great premium and membership was not assured for anyone. Woody was most interested in our joining Edgewater to form the Highlander Fleet. We later learned that as a concession for letting three sailors into Edgewater, Woody had agreed to become chairman of the Social Committee which was a substantial task in those earlier days of Edgewater's existence.

In 1958 Edgewater was considerably different than the club we know today. All the docks were wood. The great majority of the boats were powerboats and a large percentage of these were relatively small fishing boats. Many were moored by means of a bow line secured to a pulley mounted on a cable strung between pilings. Sailors were clearly in the minority at about 15% of the membership and often regarded as outcasts. Comets, Thistles and Flying Scots were the only racing one-design classes along with the "Universal Rated" cruising boats.

The Club initiation fee was \$100 and yearly dues \$38. Dockage for a 20 foot boat was \$48. Lew Johncock was the club manager and only full time employee. During the summer he would hire a few part time boys to help pump gas. He did all the billing, ran the office, ran the crane to launch boats, and otherwise took care of everything. There was no bar or galley and the new club house was smaller ending at about our present meeting room. (The old frame club house had burned to the ground several years earlier.)

As newcomers we were most anxious to learn more about this new craft we had procured. Dave Deibel with the only finished boat was the obvious candidate for our first try. At that time the only way to launch our boats was with the ramps located at the eastern end of our Edgewater basin. The launching ramps were a most interesting location. About once a week a novice boater would back his boat, trailer, and car into the water. A sailboat at this location was most unusual. Most boats would quickly back into the water on their trailer and be off and running in a very short time. A sailboat launch on the other hand was quite a different matter. The mast had to be stepped, the sails rigged, the rudder hung, and the centerboard installed and rigged, all of which took appreciable time. Fortunately the day we first tried a launch the ramps were relatively un-crowded and we were not pressed for time.

As we completed our rigging, an old timer watching these proceedings offered that "it was too bad we were not going to be able to get out of the basin because the wind was blowing from the west". We finally had everything ready, parked the car and trailer and headed out for our first sail. We tacked back and forth in order to get to the Edgewater inlet. We

looked back and saw our observer scratching his head as we managed to exit the Edgewater basin for the open water. We immediately recognized what a great decision we had made in taking the Highlander as our boat of choice. This early sail clearly boosted our eagerness to complete our construction and launch our own craft.

On May 15, 1958 we were ready for our maiden voyage. We launched, set sail with the brand new Thomas sails and enjoyed an uneventful sail to our berth on the South side of "C" dock. Woody took extremely good care to ensure that we tied up properly for Edgewater surge and could enjoy our newfound boat ownership. He willingly showed us all the tricks of rigging and sailing this new high performance craft.

In our early sailing days at Edgewater, Woody, his son Gene and crew Bill Schreiber were all experienced sailors by comparison. They consistently would clean our clock. If we were lucky we could watch what they were doing at the start and for the first few minutes of the race. We did however slowly learn how to make the Highlander go, get on a plane and sail better. When we ventured off to the many regattas the very first year we found that we were still far from a leader but had already learned a lot about Sailing a Highlander. Encouraged by some reasonable performance at the Edgewater Regatta in the summer of 58, we decided to try our hand at the nationals in Corpus Christi, Texas that year. Upon arrival in Texas, I was preparing our wind ticks when a Texan asked what I was doing. I told him I was tying the silk ribbons on the shrouds for wind indicators. The Texan said "down here we use wire". After watching the wind the next few days, I was convinced he was not kidding. The wind would build each day to about 20 knots in a 20 mile basin that was around 10 feet deep and would produce very short steep waves. On one occasion a Highlander was supported by waves at the bow and stem with the center of the boat out of the water. During the very first race, I didn't believe anyone would set a spinnaker.

However, with adrenaline flowing, we all sets spinnakers for the downwind run. The hardest racing I have ever done was to try and stay out of last place. Finally on the last day of racing the winds moderated and we placed third. This made their Sunday newspaper with a quarter page picture of our boat in the race.

In these earlier days at Edgewater our fleet was a do-it-yourself operation. Woody built our first hoist so that we could now launch our boats at the club. By midsummer Dick Wulf finished his boat #234 and brought our fleet of 5 to full strength. We would routinely get all five on the starting line at Edgewater races. We enjoyed Regattas at Mentor, Lakeside, Northeast, and Cleveland as well as out of town at Atwood and Buckeye Lake. We often had evening races from Edgewater to Lakeside for a beer.

The enthusiasm of our fleet was contagious and we soon recruited new members such as Jim Smith who was able to employ his salesmanship to increase our fleet size. By 1964 we hosted the first one design sailboat regatta at Edgewater by hosting the Highlander Nationals.

By 1966 Gene Wood had won the Highlander Nationals 2 times in 1962 and 1965 and our fleet had grown to 18 boats. Members now included: Bronis Vidugirus #20, Bemy

Mathewson #58, Orville Wood #200, Don Southam #233, Charles Daye #235, Jim Smith #247, Frank St. Vincent #262, Gerry Danby #280, Jim Rudy #308, John Yeager #342, Neil Donaghy #344, Al Engasser #356, Chuck Winder #393, Ken Wemer #400, Jim Higgins #401, Frank Bayer #404, Al Anglin #436 and Ron Meridith #444.

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In 1971 Edgewater again hosted the Highlander Nationals with a fleet of 46 boats. Edgewater members placed 5 in the top 10 with Don Southam 1st., Jim Culbertson 2nd, Bill Higgins 3rd, Bob Busby 5th and Jim Smith 8th.

By 1972 we had 27 Highlanders and grew to about 35 over the next several years. The fleet gave a good account of themselves by winning or placing at many regattas and the Nationals.

We are now the oldest continuous racing fleet at Edgewater Yacht Club and again among the largest.

*Recent History: In 1983, Fleet 14 membership was extended to the adjacent Edgewater Marina where the majority of local Highlanders were located at the time. The membership of Fleet 14 was enhanced when Highlander fleet No. 42 – Lakeside Sailing Association were no longer welcome by the power boating majority of Lakeside Yacht Club. In the mid nineties, the Edgewater Marina Highlanders re-located to Whiskey Island when that facility opened and by invitation by Mr. Dan Moore, president of Whiskey Island Partners. This arrangement has assured that Highlander Fleet 14 will continue to flourish and not become a foot note in the HCIA Constitution and By-laws as has happened to Highlander Fleet No. 1 Mentor Yacht Club and Fleet No. 42 Lakeside Sailing Association, a fate that is affecting many small boat one-design sailing fleets on large bodies of water throughout the country. **Highlander Fleet 14 celebrated it 50th Anniversary in the spring of 2008.** In 2008 Highlander Fleet 14 will launch its own website <http://www.HighlanderFleet14.com> . It is essential that Fleet 14 - Whiskey Island section continue to be a springboard to membership at Edgewater Yacht Club.