

Reminiscing on Down the Bay

by Joe Hallissy

After a lapse of almost a decade, the Virginia Cruising Cup Race, a fixture on the Chesapeake Bay yacht racing calendar for many years, will be revived this summer with a start on Friday May 22 in the Annapolis area and a finish as always in Hampton. This race, which is generally styled by Lower Bay sailors as “Down the Bay” and by Upper Bay sailors as “The Hampton Race,” was run every year from 1934 to 1999 except for the war years of 42 – 45.

At its peak in the 1970’s the race was drawing over 130 boats. The rafts of boats extending from the Hampton Yacht Club piers out into the creek were a truly impressive sight. The event was certainly the biggest and most important sailing event on HYC’s calendar. The last year it was run, the number of participants was less than 20. The reasons for the loss of interest in the race have been discussed over and over, always with the hope that a revival could be made. In general the time period from the 70s to the 90s saw a drop in the number of entries for all type of yacht racing, but the overnight races were particularly hard-hit. Consider that for many years there were five overnight races on the Lower Bay each year. In recent years there has been just one – Plantation Light – which perhaps survives because of the warmer water of late summer, a date selected for full moon, and a relatively short course (45 miles for the smaller boats). My own feeling on the matter is that the lighter (and faster) designs of today, which demand crew weight on the rail for top performance, tend to encourage round-the-buoys racing as opposed to distance racing. A race like the Virginia Cruising Cup, an almost straight line 120 mile event, provides the possibility that you might get to sit on the rail for 24 hours. Some crews might object, even when the destination is our fair city! The organizers of this year’s event have coupled the race date with Southern Bay Race Week which occurs the following Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.

Although the Virginia Cruising Cup Race has always been a Hampton Yacht Club event, normally HYC asked another club to help with the start. I believe in the earliest years it was the Gibson Island Yacht Squadron handling the start, but for all the years I know anything about, it was the Annapolis Yacht Club, and I got to know a lot of fine AYC people while coordinating plans. This year the Storm Trysail Club – Chesapeake Station will carry out the starting line chores.

The time required to complete the 120 miles depends of course on the wind and on the speed of the individual boat. Starts for all the years I remember were on Thursday mid-day. The idea was that most boats would surely be in by Saturday morning, winners could be determined and awards made Saturday afternoon, a good party to follow Saturday night, and the Upper Bay boats would head home early Sunday morning. Of course it didn’t always work out that way. I have a distinct memory of my first trip down the bay – a slow race and a slower boat. We didn’t get to Hampton until Sunday morning!

The record for the fastest time was set in 1974 by RUNNING TIDE, a 60-foot Sparkman and Stevens design which towered over everything else when she tied up at HYC. She was owned by Al van Metre of Annapolis and participated in the race for a number of years, skippered either by Al or son Beau. Her exact time on the record run has been lost, but it was around 13 hours – no doubt a good northeast spinnaker run all the way.

An interesting bit of local yachting history relates to the Upper Bay boats heading home on Sunday. A group of local sailors in the 1960s conceived the idea of a series of 4 or 5 informal day races to progress northward from Hampton to begin on Sunday after “Down the Bay.” It would combine some low pressure day racing with evening fellowship with Upper Bay crews on their way home. The idea worked and was a part of the yachting scene for many years. The organizing group which put this idea into effect evolved into the Cruising Club of Virginia (CCV), the organization which today plays such an important role in Southern Bay racing.

There are several perpetual trophies associated with the Virginia Cruising Cup Race, and they are all on display in the trophy case in the HYC entrance hall where you can see them. The oldest and most prestigious is the Virginia Cruising Cup – an unusual three-handled sterling silver cup which has been awarded since the first race. In the early days it always went to the best corrected time using the only handicapping rule in general use – the Cruising Club of America rule. Later CCA was replaced by other handicap systems, and sometimes we had two or even three systems in use in the same race. In those cases the Cup has been awarded to the best corrected time in the dominant handicap system. For this year’s race that will be the Performance Handicap Racing Fleet (PHRF).

The second oldest perpetual trophy is the Hampton Yacht Club Special Award, a large Revere bowl, which was first awarded in 1963. It has been awarded in different ways over the years – sometimes to a smaller boat class such as MORC.

The Robert M. Ravin Memorial Trophy, a beautiful large cup with two ring handles, was given by a yacht owner to memorialize a crewman who was killed in the 1970 race when a spinnaker block disintegrated or pulled out of the deck and struck him. It has been awarded most years since 1971 and will probably be the first-to-finish trophy this year.

A fourth trophy associated with this race is one of a pair of beautiful glass bowls given by the family of E. Ralph James Jr. in his memory. One of this pair is for the winner of the Hampton One-Design class in the Club’s annual small boat regatta, a class in which Ralph sailed at one time and had many friends. The other one of the pair was designated to go to the A-class winner in the International Offshore Rule division in the Virginia Cruising Cup Race. Ralph sailed his Tartan 40 sloop TRAMP in this class in his later years. The IOR rating system became obsolete in the late 1980’s, and the trophy has not been awarded since 1984.

We can all be truly delighted with the revival of a great Bay racing tradition and we express our thanks to Mark Wheeler, HYC Fleet Captain, Vince Behm and Wayne Bretsch, Event Co-Chairmen, and others involved in this effort. Best wishes and good luck to all the competitors.

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