



SENECA

A yacht with a glorious past and a bright future

BY LYNN HELPARD

Seneca is sailing again, thanks to a group of fine fellows who wanted to preserve a beautiful old boat. In 2005 a small syndicate was put together to finance and manage the rebuild of a classic 100-year-old P-class yacht that was doomed for oblivion. There were 34 P yachts built many years ago and some, including the famous Seneca, are still around.

In 1907 a group from the Rochester Yacht Club commissioned Nathaniel Herreshoff to design and build a contender for the Canada Cup, a race series started on the Great Lakes in 1896, and mostly won by the Canadian entries. It would take a book to tell the story of this hotly contested yacht race series. It was the major racing event for the Royal Canadian Yacht Club in Toronto and the Rochester Yacht Club.

Herreshoff, who had a solid reputation for designing fine, fast-racing yachts, pushed the design limits for that class up to and, some would say, beyond the rules of the day. He built a 47-foot gaff rigged sloop with a waterline of only 32 feet, resulting in huge overhangs (but no bowsprit), a nine-foot beam, draft of six feet, six inches with a lead keel weighing 10,000 pounds. The design was considered to be radical in its day. He built her in his yard in Bristol, Rhode Island and when launched, she proved to be astoundingly fast. The yacht was raced in the 1907 Canada Cup and handily beat the Canadian entry with three straight races in a best-of-five series. That was start of a long, interesting history for Seneca in both Canada and USA. Plus she sailed in salt and fresh water.

The following year she was purchased by Addison Hanan and moved to salt water. She was raced with success in the Knickerbocker regatta

in New York. In 1909 Eric Moore bought Seneca to compete in a race series off Cobourg, Ontario. Next we know that Seneca made her way to RCYC, owned by Aemilius Jarvis, where she had her happiest years. However, when she was at the RCYC in Toronto in 1916 some escapees from a First World War army brig stole the boat, sailed it across Lake Ontario, and beached her at Sodus in New York state. In the 1920s she was converted to a schooner rig and continued her winning ways.

At this point the story gets a little murky. We know she sailed the Great Lakes, and even wound up at the Royal Hamilton Yacht Club, sailed by an all-female crew. She was moved to Maine and eventually to Florida where she did some Caribbean work, but she didn't like those seas. She was then hauled out and left to the elements.

After three years of neglect a New Englander bought her and subsequently resold the boat in 1984. Then Capt. D. Steinman, who had been searching for a schooner with a real history, found Seneca in a barn. He bought her and had the David Stimson Boat Works start the restoration. The Hart Nautical Museum had the original Herreshoff plans and supplied them to the yard.

Little is known about what happened for several years, but Seneca went downhill from here.

Topher Wurts, owner of Gold River Marina, found Seneca in Ithaca, NY and brought her to Nova Scotia where she languished for about six years.

In 2003 Seneca was sent to Herring Cove Marina for a complete refit. The work started but the marina failed, and she was left there until 2005 when new owners, a syndicate headed by a classic yacht lover, Lee Sweet of Chester, had the boat moved to a new yard in Chester Basin.

PHOTO COURTESY OF BRUCE THOMPSON.

Bruce Thompson, a young man with a real talent for wooden boat work who had worked on the Seneca at Herring Cove, started his own operation, Tern Boatworks at Goldwater Marine in Chester basin. The owning syndicate includes Sweet, Sidney Oland, B. Spahr, Topher Wurts, Curt Windsor, and David Creighton. These gents dug deep to produce the substantial funds, reported to exceed \$150,000, to restore the beautiful old Seneca. "We are only the stewards of Seneca, a significant part of sailing history," Lee Sweet said. A great debate ensued regarding whether the rig should go back to the original gaff setup or be changed to the more conventional marconi rig. The latter won, but she was to stay a flush-deck racing machine.

Thompson, a boat builder since he was 16, and his crew in the yard are wizards with wood. They not only completely rebuilt the deck, but replaced two garboard planks and two strakes on each side, plus the stem and other areas weakened by time and neglect. The heavy keel was removed and refastened with new brass bolts. Auxiliary power is provided by a 33 hp Vetus diesel that was rebuilt in the 80s. The new joinery work is astounding, resulting in hatches and bright work that would make the original builders proud.

As a racing machine she was not finished or outfitted below decks, save for a nice paint job and a "biffy." Seneca was beautiful again and with the structural work done she was ready for launching in August 2007 to celebrate her 100th birthday, a major accomplishment for the owning syndicate and Tern Boatworks.

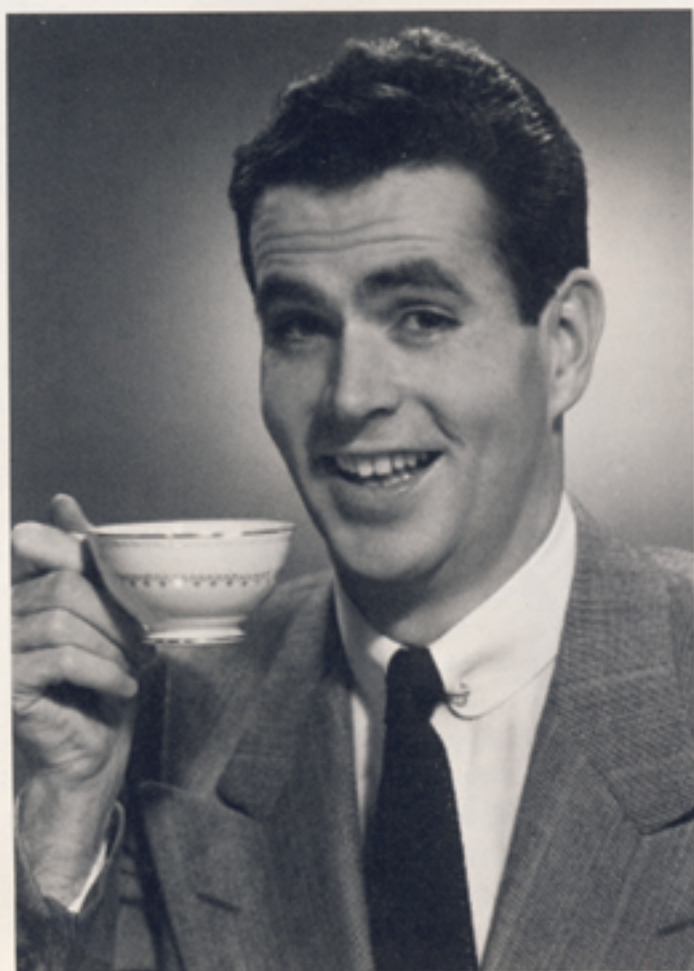
She went back into the shop in the winter of 2007-08 to do all the

deck hardware and rigging. She inherited a 62-foot used spar from a J44. Sandy MacMillan of North Sails Atlantic in Lunenburg saw that Seneca got a nice set of slightly-used sails for the shakedown period, and the rigging was done by Dorian Steele. These experts and others are part of the Thompson's extended family of tradesmen.

Seneca is overpowered with the current sails and will eventually get new sails, says MacMillan. She should have a smaller, flatter 400 sq.ft. genoa and a 600 sq.ft. mainsail. She could carry a 1,400 sq. ft. gennaker for down wind sailing, but not a mast head spinnaker. The cost for new sails could be up to \$50,000. A new foundry in LaHave owned by Thompson and a partner, Lucas Gilbert, will forge some new brass hardware.

Seneca was launched again in July 2008 and sailed in the 2008 Chester Race Week, with two thirds in the classic boat class. She performed very well, but the helmsman, David Creighton of Montreal, and others agree that she is overpowered with the current sails and rig. They had to put in reefs when the breeze got to 15/20 knots.

Seneca sailed in a fun, classic boat race in Lunenburg out around Cross Island in September 2008 and finished with many of the other boats still trying to beat around the island, proving that the old girl still has her racing pedigree. Sweet said if others would like to be part of this project the syndicate would welcome new members. She was back in the shop for the winter of 2008-09 for more work. They plan to tune and replace parts of the rig and maybe sails. Seneca, a wonderfully rebuilt, beautiful, old classic sailboat may be around for another century.



RAYMARINE A500 GPS
CHARTPLOTTER / FISHFINDER

UNTIL THEY START MAKING A HUSBAND FINDER, I'M A HAPPY MAN.

Honey, I'd love to visit your mother but I'm pretending to drink tea while shopping at binnacle.com.

At Canada's largest online marine chandlery, you'll find everything you'll need to launch your escape.

Plus, you'll get free shipping on most orders over \$99.

The **BINNACLE** Raymarine®

www.binnacle.com 1.800.665.6464

15 PURCELL'S COVE ROAD HALIFAX, NOVA SCOTIA