

Whatever Floats Your Little Boats

A Hobby of Miniature Proportions

Story by Cindy Daur

a bikini Barbie riding a remote-controlled Jet Ski glides across the algae-bloom green waters of Golden Gate Park's Spreckles Lake, doing doughnuts around steamships and leaving cruisers in her wake. The man in control, Johnny Gaddis, stands on the south side of the lake with the warm sun at his back. People walking by stop to watch and children are in awe of the miniature boats. Soon after Barbie gets tired (her battery runs down about 10 minutes later), her infamous counterpart, Ken, hits the lake with a splash. He has his own Jet Ski, wet-suit and flashy sunglasses.

"I'm a big kid, like Michael Jackson, but I don't have all that money," Gaddis says, with a look of innocent sincerity in his dark eyes.

The lake is crowded today, with many different types of remote control boats, steamships, sailboats, battleships and hydroplanes, all traveling at high speeds in different directions.

But it is not always this chaotic. Once in a while, there is some order on the lake, when boaters can test their models in structured races and competitions.

These events are the culmination point for an eclectic group of Bay Area miniature boaters who mesh together and create a single culture of diverse people, thriving off of recreation and leisure time.

Jean Nisbett, using a sailboat her husband handcrafted from scratch, started racing with the San Francisco Model Yacht Club (SFMYC) last season in the free sailing class, relying solely on wind power.

"We traded in our full size sailboat for models," Nisbett laughs, her blue eyes smiling.

Free sail races are always in the

intricate metal work pieces on their decks, wait in storage for the season to begin. There are a few for sale, ranging from \$200 to \$650, and people mill about, admiring the craftsmanship.

Bright fruits, pineapples, apples and strawberries, sit next to bagels, cream cheese, coffee and juice. From outside you can hear the buzz of remote control boats on the lake only a few yards away.

It is the day of the monthly meeting for the SFMYC, and the club is getting ready for the annual Frostbite Regatta, an event where members can bring boats they have been working on in the off-season to show and compete, which is scheduled for the following day.

With strict adherence to parliamentary procedure, the sound of the gavel hitting the desk brings the meeting to order. The members file into bright orange chairs and focus their attention on the commodore, David H. Sands, who is conducting the roll call.

On the wall behind him hangs historic photos of the clubhouse, established in 1898, and a grandfather clock embossed with "Model Yacht Club," keeps time.

Today's meeting is business as usual; dealing with technical and mechanical boating issues, welcoming new members and planning for future events, including the upcoming season that officially starts on March 2. Already, the schedule of regattas is booked, extending throughout the season to its end in October.

There is a small awards ceremony for last year's service and craftsmanship at the meeting today. Nisbett receives the award for perpetual congeniality and is shocked and left speechless as she blushes a sweet pink. She thanks everyone graciously and upon returning to her seat, turns to her husband, Frank, and asks quietly, "Do you know about this?" As he swears no, her bright smile still radi-

ates from her face.

The meeting concludes with anxious talk about the races in the near future. Afterward, members remain in the clubhouse to chat.

An enthusiastic and long-time member, Dave DeMasi, the new club historian, stands near the back of the clubhouse, wearing his navy blue SFMYC jacket and enjoying his coffee.

His face lights up as he talks about the history of model yachting. "It was once a hobby of kings," he describes. It has since come a long way from an expensive and skillful craft, using only the best metals and exotic woods, to cheap plastic kits and remote controls.

The commodore begins holding

an auction and the first items up for bid, two antique hulls that were donated to the club, start at \$75 a piece. At the mere thought of bidding DeMasi exclaims, "My wife would kill me if I brought home another boat."

DeMasi has close to 16 boats he is working on at his home. One of his favorites is his submarine, which has such tiny, elaborate parts that he needs dental mirrors in order to see and connect them.

"It can challenge your mind and you can get away from everyday stress, but it can also drive you crazy too,"

DeMasi asserts with a ring of first hand experience in his tone.

DeMasi grew up in San Francisco and remembers coming to the clubhouse as a kid. The members would let him sail their boats, and he has been in love with the hobby ever since.

Bret Armauni, in his olive fleecy and blue-tinted shades, has been at the lake most of the morning. He is testing out the boat he has been working on for nearly three years, the DKM Tirpitz, a scale model of a German battleship that fought in World War II.

Fully equipped with deck guns that fire BBs, the Tirpitz will soon "slug it out" in battle with other military replicas belonging to members of the Western Warship Combat Club, an organization based in San Jose.

"Occasionally someone's boat actually sinks," he says smiling, recalling the sound of shattering balsa wood.

During competition, the captains open fire on one another, leaving BB-size holes in the hulls of their foes. The boats are usually equipped with bilge pumps that often have to work overtime, getting the water out, to save the ship from sinking. The winner is determined by which team has the least number of battle scars at the end of the allotted time. Their season mirrors that of the SFMYC, from March to October, but the battles

occur only about once a month whereas the SFMAC has up to four races a week.

Soon Ken gets tired of Jet Skiing too. Gaddis pulls him out of the water and goes back to his car for yet another boat. He has six boats at the lake with him today, three of which he is testing for speed and efficiency. But back at his home in Oakland, he has close to 30 different boats.

Gaddis first heard about the hobby on the regional television show, "Bay Area Backroads." Curiosity got the best of him and he rode his motorcycle over to Spreckles Lake to check it out. That was 15 years ago, and since



Bob Vitnoe displays his tugboat, the Mary V-5, at the clubhouse of the San Francisco Model Yacht Club in Golden Gate Park.

then, the hobby has consumed much of his free time. He allots himself up to \$400 a month for his hobby.

Gaddis is a member of the Devil Mountain Water Boilers, a club out of Mt. Diablo that also engages in racing all over the Bay Area and the country.

He now sits at his mini boat-station, equipped with a small table, chair and tool box, on the side of the lake, wearing a green plaid flannel and a brown derby. In his lap sits a hydroplane with the motor exposed, his hands are busily adjusting the circuits and wires.

A crowd draws around as Gaddis secures the pieces back in place and sets his boat in the mucky green water.

Whoosh! The boat takes off at top speed, nearly taking out an unsuspecting bird, then it makes a tight turn and flies back the other way.

"If you think this is fast," laughs Gaddis "You should see some of my other boats." [X]

Photo by Lisa Dyos

Klaus Schlemminger (front) makes adjustments to his boat after a race on Spreckles Lake in Golden Gate Park.