



Escanaba Yacht club marks 90 years of achievements

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R. R. Branstrom | Daily Press Sailboats jockey for position before the start of the Escanaba Yacht Club's third race of the season on June 19.

ESCANABA — 90 years ago, a passionate group with shared interests assembled to organize events and improve Escanaba's environment for recreational boating. Today, the port town's harbor, marina, and waterfront clubhouse are representative of their accomplishments.

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Before the formation of the Escanaba Yacht Club (EYC) and the efforts of men like John Mitchell — sailor and talker, whose tenacity led to one reporter in 1941 calling him “*the spark plug*” of the EYC — and Art Aronson — sailor, engineer and city manager who concocted the plans — Escanaba’s shores were not hospitable to pleasure boats.

“It was necessary to drive through the Northwestern yards and walk through ankle deep sand mixed with soot and cinders. The boats, sails and ropes were always black with coal dust,” reads a yellowed news clipping. *“Many Great Lakes yachtsmen wanted to visit Escanaba, but had been advised to stay away because of lack of facilities.”*

And yet, today, visitors make remarks like, *“Escanaba has such a beautiful natural harbor,”* with no idea that its formation was far from a serendipitous happenstance.

In the 1920s, sailing was becoming a popular sport again, after a period during which mariners who had previously cruised under wind power out of necessity began to enjoy the adaptation of gasoline engines for small boats.

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In 1928, John J. Mitchell of Escanaba purchased a craft in Sister Bay, Door County, Wis., brought her back to Escanaba, and rechristened the sloop “*Ghost*.”

According to a history compiled by Mitchell himself, *Ghost* and others from Escanaba sailed to Manistique, Beaver Island and around Green Bay. They fell in with sailors in Door County, particularly around Ephraim and Fish Creek, and began to participate in sailing races in Ephraim and Menominee in the early '30s.

“By 1934, despite (or because of) the Great Depression, which gave all of us a lot of leisure time and little money, quite a few sailboats were owned here and at Gladstone,” Mitchell wrote.

And yet, these handful of Escanaba boats were dealing with the conditions mentioned above — they were docking at a filthy slip along an ore dock, constantly contending with coal dust, soot and cinders. It stands to reason, then, that they spent so much time at Washington Island.

But in August of '34, the group decided that they would hold an autumn regatta (race) in Escanaba on Labor Day weekend and make it an annual event.

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That first race, held on Sunday, Sept. 2, was well-attended and eventful: one vessel capsized while jibing around a buoy, and three more – a spectator vessel and two rescuers – got stuck on the wreck of the Nahant, a cargo steamer that burned in 1897 and whose remains still lie off of Sand Point. Today it is a popular dive site and is marked by a green can buoy, but that was not the case in '34, when the water level was low and excitement over the regatta high.

On Oct. 15 that same year, the core group of Escanaba boating enthusiasts met in the offices of Sawyer-Stoll Timber Company with the aim of forming a yacht club. John Mitchell and Jack Erickson agreed to draft a constitution, which was presented the following week.

On Oct. 22, 1934, the constitution was accepted, and the Escanaba Yacht Club was officially formed. Officers were Fred Royce, John Mitchell, and Jack Erickson.

Between the ruins of the #4 ore dock and the C. Weiss Coal Dock, the boaters cobbled themselves a strip of railway on which to cart the boats from the ore dock to a yard in the off-season and called it the Escanaba Marine Railway. Ed J. Vignette, Bert Jacobsen, “Jiggs” Jacobsen, Sam Wichman, Clarence Falk, and Emerson Kidd were among those responsible for the project.

The marine railway worked, but, like the coal-covered slip, was not ideal. What was needed was a harbor on the south side of Sand Point, away from the ore docks.

In '36, such a project began, with Art Aronson cited as being the visionary behind it.

By efforts of the Works Progress Administration and the City of Escanaba, a channel was dug to the south of Sand Point. Below that, a slightly curved island was formed to protect the new harbor. It was called Sand Island, now known as Aronson Island. The harbor has never needed to be dredged since.

It took a couple years to be completed, but in anticipation of what would become their new marina, a mooring field. Clarence Falk became the first

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Harbormaster and painted “*HARBOR POLICE*” on the bow of his powerboat.

The late '30s and early '40s saw the formation of a fleet of Seagull sailboats in Escanaba. The Gulls became numerous enough to have a class of races on their own; they raced weekly in Escanaba and partook in championship races with others from around Green Bay.

In 1942, the Coast Guard Temporary Reserve was formed to protect the ore docks during the war and was initially made up of men from the EYC. More soon joined.

Since its formation, the EYC joined the Lake Michigan Yachting Association, which regulates rules on the water and also promotes communication between members. Once the word got out that Escanaba finally had suitable accommodations for its own and outside boaters, traffic increased.

“More than sixty yachts visited the Escanaba Yacht Harbor during the 1939 season, bringing approximately 400 people, which in itself is quite a convention,” reads a news article from 1940.

Many of these visitors stayed for a week at a time — truly a boon to the town’s economy, considering hardly any outside sailors at all had even dared attempt to dock at Escanaba just five years prior.

In 1948, construction of a clubhouse began. However, it turned out that everyone who had committed funds came up short, which forced the project to be abandoned for a couple years. In 1950, Les Wentworth revived the task, and after a number of work bees, the clubhouse was completed. A porch was added in 1955.

By the late '50s and during the '60s, the club and the harbor were teeming with activity. In addition to powerboats, large sailboats like Charles Stoll’s *Mindemoya*, and the Seagull fleet, another fleet evolved — of the El Toro class.

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El Toros were small sailboats — the SS I Can Read in the Escanaba Public Library is one. They were simple but popular; by 1967, there were 18 in Escanaba.

Races were multiple nights a week, and in '68, a twist was incorporated, adding a course for the Seagulls from Gladstone to Escanaba.

Often, a race course is set around a few marks but beginning and ending at the same point, as is the case for the race series of recent years.

The current races of the EYC are enjoyed by those who participate and spectate, but there isn't the variety and frequency of years past. In the 2024 June series, there were just two classes — spinnaker and cruising — with a handful racing in each.

The club has far more members than participating boats, though. John Anthony, current Vice Commodore of Sail, said that the EYC at present has about 160 individual members, associated with roughly 80 memberships – it's a family-oriented club, and a single membership covers a spouse and young children.

Some have their own boats; others crew or simply enjoy supporting the organization.

“Sailing has always been about community,” Anthony said. “Like many traditional sports and recreations, it has evolved. Today there are more recreational opportunities, and people have limited time during the glorious but brief summer. Boating has evolved into different segments, including those that enjoy powerboating, cruising, casual sailing, racing sailboats, and the marina setting.”

When passing through, boaters from out of the area may use the clubhouse at no fee. The EYC extends reciprocity to members of other yacht or boating clubs – meaning that if a person belongs

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the benefits that EYC members do and vice versa.

“We’ve had members visit yacht clubs that extend reciprocity in many areas of the U.S. and overseas,” Anthony said.

Burgees – pennant-like flags – of other organizations hang within the clubhouse as testament of these relationships.

As social events and friendships are valued by the EYC, many of the activities they arrange or participate in welcome the public. The first of the season aligns with the Fun Run.

“To promote the EYC, the club has an open house during the summer, provides the club as a staging area for Marina Fest, is available at no cost to transient boaters, is available to the public for rent (subject to availability), serves as an ambassador to tourists and visiting boaters, and offers friendly events for members and guests,” Anthony listed.

Popular for several decades was *“Venetian Night,”* a festive formerly annual occasion that included not only a parade of illuminated boats but also activities on shore.

On the morning of the Fourth of July – this Thursday – the EYC will host a brunch at the clubhouse, which is near the corner of Loren W. Jenkins Memorial Drive and Water Plant Road – marina-side, of course. The public is welcome.

Marina Fest, of which the club is a sponsor, is July 27.

The EYC’s 90th Anniversary Celebration will be held on Aug. 17 and feature music on the porch and a regatta.

The regular August race series takes place on the 7th, 14th, 21st, and 28th – all Wednesdays – beginning at 7 p.m. The best place to watch is from as far east as Water Plant Road reaches – the tip

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