

# To Nova Scotia in the "Elf"

A Record Cruise in a 30-Footer Before the Days of the Auxiliary

By HENRY HOWARD

**A**N INTERESTING account of a quick cruise to Halifax and return in YACHTING for October, 1933, recalled vividly my first offshore cruise in 1893, which was over much of the same waters as those covered in the cruise described. My vacation being limited to about two weeks, the vital question was whether I could safely tackle a cruise to Halifax and get back on time to my home port, Marblehead, in a 28 foot 6 inch water line boat. As in those days the gasoline motor had not been developed for auxiliary use, I had, of course, no power. I decided to try, and we did it with three days to spare, finishing the cruise at 2:30 A.M. Friday, July 28th, making twelve days, nine hours elapsed time.

The cruise was taken in my thirty-footer *Elf* in which for the first time I owned a boat that was really tight and seaworthy and in which it was safe to go almost anywhere. She was designed and built by George Lawley for William H. Wilkinson in 1888. I bought her in 1890.

*Elf* was only 28 feet 6 inches on the water line, 38 feet over all, 11 feet beam and 7 feet draft. She had a flush deck and a small watertight cockpit. She steered with a tiller and was cutter-rigged with the jib set flying. She had a housing topmast and an extension spinnaker pole 38 feet long which, when closed in, could be used with a masthead spinnaker with the topmast housed. She was provided with all the sails now seen but rarely and then only on gaff-rigged yachts of the largest size — a club topsail, sprit topsail, working topsail, balloon jib, number two jib topsail, baby jib topsail, jib, storm jib, fore staysail, balloon staysail, mainsail and storm trysail. Can you imagine anything more fascinating for a young fellow of twenty-one, my age when I bought her?

The *Elf's* interior arrangements consisted of a fo'c'sle intended for one man, but in which two men could easily sleep, with a small galley in the after end containing a gasoline stove. The main cabin was provided with two transoms and two pipe berths. Her eleven feet of beam made this cabin quite roomy and gave plenty of space in which four could live comfortably.

This cruise to Halifax was my first offshore trip. I had made most careful preparation, with new standing and running rigging throughout, oil bags and fish oil in case of very bad weather, and plenty of food in case we were blown offshore. This may sound foolish today when offshore cruising in small boats is an everyday occurrence, but at that time it was practically unknown at Marblehead. Besides getting the boat in good shape, I had been studying navigation for over eight months before starting on the cruise.

During the previous September the *Elf's* former owner, Mr. Wilkinson, wanted to give me something as a remembrance of our season together in the *Mildred* during which she won the Massachusetts Bay championship. I said that a sextant would be most acceptable, and this gave me my

first opportunity to learn something about navigation. I got this at Thaxter's old nautical instrument store on State Street, Boston, and the old man in charge kindly picked out a second-hand volume of Thom's Practical Navigator as being better for me to study from than Bowditch. He was right, and with the assistance of this book I had no great difficulty in studying navigation during the winter, using an artificial horizon made of a pan of molasses, which caused much amusement among my friends, especially in the autumn when flies would light in it and throw it out of level.

Speaking of William H. Wilkinson, owner and designer of the *Mildred*, I take this opportunity to tell of the almost unknown pioneer work which this remarkable man did for yacht racing. He designed the *Mildred* in 1889, she was launched in the middle of the summer of 1890 and she had what afterwards became known as the Herreshoff *Gloriana* bow. I do not mean that Herreshoff got his inspiration from *Mildred* — it was simply a case of two men having the same idea at the same time; but the fact remains that *Mildred* was built one or two years ahead of *Gloriana*.

Wilkinson's great work was in the perfection of rigging. He first substituted wire running rigging for hemp or manila and under his direction Lawley's rigger spliced a manila rope hauling part into a wire halliard after everyone said it couldn't be done. Wilkinson eliminated whips or jigs on halliards, a practice universal at that time, and substituted small mast winches on which the wire halliards were set up and belayed. Such winches were not obtainable, so he designed and built them himself. He was the first to use wire luff ropes in his sails, and all of these innovations were at a high state of perfection on the *Mildred* when she came out in 1890. Wilkinson spent the remainder of the season in tuning her up but went into no races until 1891. Then he was able to sail circles around his competitors and the *Mildred* ended the season as the undisputed champion in the 30-foot class.

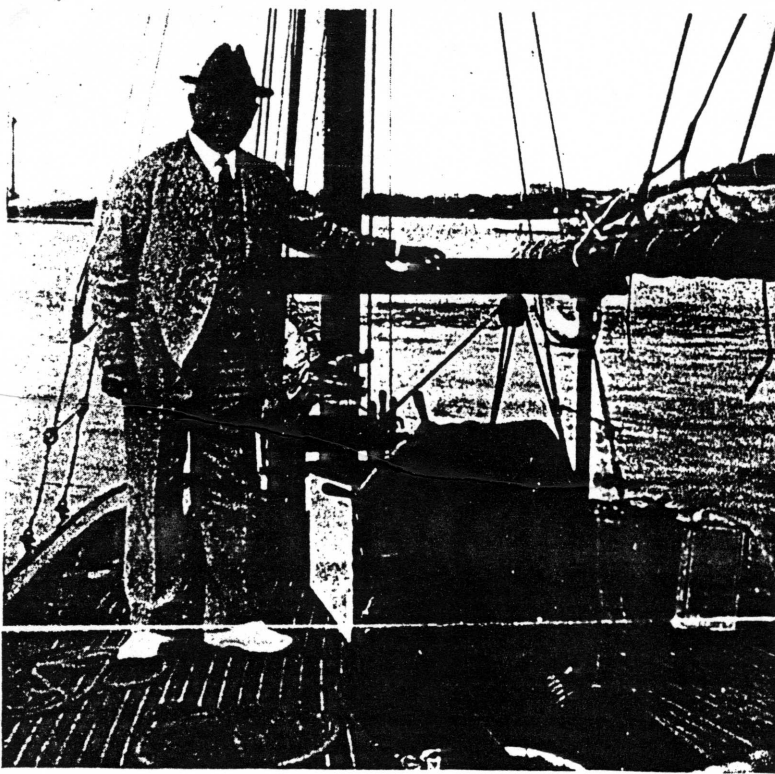
Having accomplished his ambition, Wilkinson sold *Mildred* and has never owned a boat since — a great loss to the yacht racing world.

To return to the *Elf's* cruise. We left Marblehead Saturday afternoon with Ben Knapp in the cabin, Willis Rogers of Orleans, deck hand, Lawson as steward, and myself. The wind was fresh from WSW; our course was E $\frac{1}{2}$ S magnetic to take us 15 miles south of Cape Sable.

We took our departure from Half Way Rock at 5:35 P.M., carrying only jib and mainsail. At 6:30 P.M. we had a good hot meal served on the table in spite of the rough sea, a practice I had already established. By 8 P.M. the wind had increased so much that we housed our topmast — a long, difficult job in the rough sea. In the eight hours between 8 P.M. and 4 A.M. we made 62 miles by our log and later found that the log was underrunning about 10 per cent instead of overrunning as we supposed at that time. The reason was



The author in 1893



*The author in 1934, on deck of the "Elf" in Newport Harbor, just 41 years after he made the cruise here described. The yacht's appearance testifies to the thoroughness of her construction*

undoubtedly the strong following wind and the heave of the sea which caused an actual drift of the surface water, in which the log was working. This drift of surface water should be estimated and allowed for in dead reckoning navigation by patent log. It can easily amount to a mile an hour in a strong breeze of 25 to 30 miles and, of course, much more in a severe gale. It means that when you are running for a mark with a strong wind aft you may get there much sooner than your patent log would indicate.

Between midnight and 4 a.m. the sea was so heavy that it became necessary to lash the helmsman in place. We were driving her so hard that waves frequently broke over our weather rail and would occasionally float the helmsman clear of the deck, but with a stout rope around his waist made fast near the weather rail there was no danger. Throughout the night care had to be taken when going below to watch the seas before opening the companion slide.

All night long we tore along at 8 knots, which is about the top limit of speed for a thirty-footer. For hours it was just a toss whether or not to put in a reef — but each time we talked it over we decided to hang on a little longer because it seemed a crime not to make the most of a fair wind. From 4 a.m. to noon Sunday it moderated considerably but still we logged 57 miles in this eight-hour period.

At 6:26 a.m. Sunday I got a time sight for longitude and this worked out  $68^{\circ} 41' W$ , which indicated our log had overrun 4 miles in 96. This later proved to have been inaccurate, probably due to a poor horizon because the fog shut in very thick while I was figuring it and continued thick until after midnight.

About 8 or 9 p.m. Sunday we ran into distinct tide swirls which made me fear we were too far north and getting sucked into the Bay of Fundy by a flood tide. In this connection a Bay of Fundy professional fisherman had told me that if a boat were becalmed a little to the westward of Cape Sable, a whole flood tide would carry her about 12 miles into the Bay. It was for this reason that I laid a course for a point 15 miles south of Cape Sable and instructed each man at the helm to be sure that any error in his course must be toward the south. In spite of these precautions, the tide swirls worried me as the fog was still dense, although by this time the wind had moderated, so that between 8 p.m. and mid-

night we made only 24 miles. A study of the chart before leaving Marblehead indicated that outside the 100-fathom curve we would be out of all danger. I had, therefore, provided a stout cod line 110 fathoms long and a 12-pound deep sea lead. About 9 p.m. we hove to and sounded but got no bottom at 110 fathoms. This was a great relief, but was only negative evidence; what we needed was positive knowledge of our latitude.

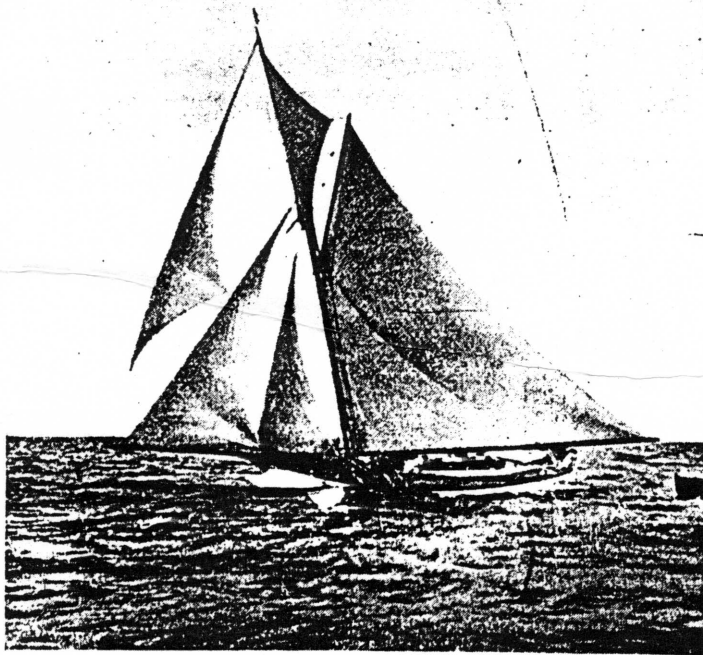
About midnight, to my relief, we ran out of the fog and I immediately started a study of the planets and stars to see what would cross the meridian at dawn. I decided on Fomalhaut which was scheduled for 3:05 a.m. and of which I obtained an excellent sight with good horizon. The observed altitude was  $16^{\circ} 53'$ , which gave us a latitude of  $43^{\circ} 1.4'$  about 4 miles south of the point we had steered for. At the time of this observation our log showed only 229 miles or about  $219\frac{1}{2}$  miles on the basis of the overrun by the log of 4 miles in 96 indicated by the observation of the previous morning — the only data we had at that time. If this was correct it left between 14 and 15 miles to go before we would be abreast of Cape Sable. This position I was, of course, most anxious to check by a longitude observation. So, at 5:17 a.m. with a clear horizon, I got a longitude of  $65^{\circ} 35' W$ , which to my surprise indicated that we were considerably east of Cape Sable and that our log instead of overrunning had underrun almost 10 per cent in the 234 miles from Marblehead to Cape Sable.

We changed the course at once for Point Jolie and by noon had closed in with the land and sighted a whistling buoy without identification mark. As none of us knew any of the coast or landmarks and as it was nearly noon, I took a meridian altitude of the sun which enabled us to verify the buoy as the one off Gull Rocks, a little to the west of Point Jolie. By this time the wind was exceedingly light and we slowly passed the buoy at 1:00 p.m. and laid a course for Sambro Island off Halifax.

In those days one of the trying things in piloting along the Nova Scotia Coast and in the harbors was the absence of paint and all identification marks on most of the buoys except those in Halifax Harbor.

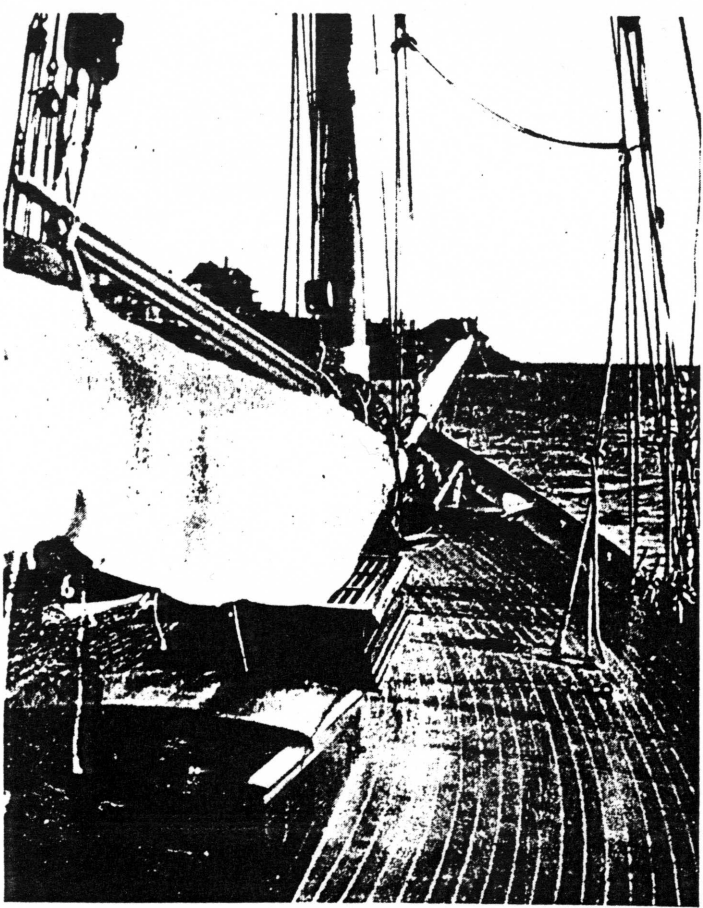
At this point I have a note in my old log book that: "The Steward is getting along very well and we have not missed a hot meal yet, although the angle of the table has sometimes been appalling!"

We drifted along through the afternoon and night, passing Sambro Island about 9 a.m. Tuesday, and sailed into Halifax with a light, fair wind, anchoring off the Royal Nova Scotia Yacht Squadron Clubhouse at 1:30 p.m., making a total elapsed time from Marblehead of 68 hours. Hardly had the anchor reached the bottom when a rowboat came out from the club landing and the boatman gave us a card extending to us all the courtesies of the club during our stay.



*"Elf" carried all the gear of the big yacht, including housing topmast and extension spinnaker pole, and her sail locker had a complete outfit of light and heavy canvas. In spite of a large rig, she carried her sail well and could be driven hard*

*She was flush decked and had a small watertight cockpit, the fashionable arrangement when she was built*



We spent nearly two days in Halifax, enjoying the wonderful hospitality of the yachtsmen, the officers of the garrison and of the British North Atlantic Squadron. Late in the afternoon of July 19th we ran down to Ketch Harbor for a good start the next morning. Ketch Harbor is a charming and picturesque anchorage near the entrance to Halifax, inside Sambro Island. Here two attractive-looking girls rowed out in the twilight and asked us to take them with us to Boston as passengers! — a request we promptly refused. I could imagine nothing worse than two seasick women on board *Elf*.

The next few days were spent thrashing to windward against strong southwest winds but we found a good anchorage each night, stopping at LeHave River, Port Medway, Port L'Herbert, Negro Island Harbor and inside Cape Sable Island at Barrington. Our entry into Port L'Herbert was unexpected and quite exciting. All day long we had been beating to windward in a heavy and increasing sea. The wind had increased so that at about noon we shortened sail to a single reefed mainsail and jib and by 5 P.M. the glass was falling, with every indication of a storm approaching. We did not want to run back to the last good harbor to leeward, while ahead there was only one possible anchorage that we could reach before dark — Port L'Herbert. We had no harbor chart of it, and the Coast Pilot warned vessels not to attempt to enter it without a local pilot because of the unmarked rocks lying off the entrance. It was necessary to run into the entrance dead before the wind, which we did with our sheets trimmed in nearly flat. In the meantime I conned the boat from a seat on the crosstrees, from which position I could see and avoid the sunken ledges. The channel was quite narrow and went close to the land on the starboard hand on which the lighthouse was located. Once inside, we found an excellent anchorage where we listened in great satisfaction to the torrents of rain and the whistling of the gale in our rigging throughout the night. It was a heavy southeaster but by the next forenoon it was over.

We finally left Nova Scotia through Barrington Passage on Tuesday, July 25th, exactly one week after our arrival at Halifax.

From Barrington Passage, Cape Sable, we laid our course direct to Cape Ann. The first 24 hours we made only 91 miles and in the afternoon encountered a heavy white squall from the NW but by quick work got all our sails lowered and furled before it hit. This left a disagreeable and confused sea in the calm which followed. This was succeeded by a fresh WSW wind which at 2 A.M. swung around to WNW and blew a moderate gale varying from Force 6 to Force 7 on the Beaufort Scale. We immediately tied two reefs in the mainsail and gave her the storm jib which was really more sail than she needed. But she went fast by the wind in spite of the heavy head sea. During the worst of the puffs I remember saying to Ben Knapp that with all our gear in perfect condition I couldn't think of anything to worry about.

It was a glorious sail. The northwester had made the air clear and sparkling, the sun was shining brightly and the waves were all cresting and breaking, with the spindrift blowing off horizontally from them.

In the middle of the morning, when the wind was at its strongest, a Gloucester fisherman went a long distance out of her course to investigate us. She was running before the wind with nothing but a foresail set. We waved to each other and she went by, seeing that we needed no assistance. At this time the *Elf* was making good time to windward about five points off the wind in spite of the heavy sea.

In the afternoon of Thursday, the 27th, the northwester began to moderate and about 4 P.M. we sighted Cape Ann, but with the falling breeze did not reach our moorings in Marblehead until well after midnight (about 2:30 A.M.).



