

# **WHO WAS CANADA'S GREATEST YACHTSMAN?**

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**Embodying the research and writings of C.H.J. Snider.**

**YACHTSMAN OF THE MILLENNIUM PAST**

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# Introduction

Yachting has been described as “the action, fact or pastime of racing or cruising pleasure vessels.”

There were vessels referred to as “yachts” on Lake Ontario in the eighteenth century. These were government vessels, part of the Provincial Marine, used for carrying dispatches and passengers. The *Toronto Yacht*, an armed “yacht” or government vessel for the use of the civil administration of the province built at the mouth of the Humber in 1792 is an example.

Sailing on Lake Ontario just for the pleasure and fun of it started at the very beginning of the nineteenth century, and probably before. In September of 1801, Joseph Willcocks “bought Captain Fitzgerald’s boat from Mr. Allan”. Willcocks records working on the bowsprit, the sails, and going for a sail in the evening. Yachting as a private sport was flourishing, in Toronto by 1832. An advertisement in the *York Sapper and Miner*, October 18, 1832, offered for sale “the fast sailing cutter *Dart*, 12½ tons burthen, with or without rigging, sails and other furniture.” She belonged to Captain, the Hon. John Elmsley, R.N., of York (now Toronto).

There is limited information available on pleasure sailing, and particularly racing on the East Coast or West Coast of Canada during the nineteenth century.

By the turn of the century, (1900) the yacht fleet of the Great Lakes alone numbered over 1,000 vessels flying between 30 and 40 club burgees. Yachting in the Maritimes, the St. Lawrence and the West Coast had also seen a dramatic upswing in numbers. With the arrival of glassfibre boats in 1959, the number of pleasure boats multiplied dramatically.

In the first half of the 19th century there was a new kind of seaman out on the waters, mostly during the summer months, handling the most exquisite sailing machines yet devised by men. These were commonly called a Yacht.

These seamen were rooted in all the best of sailing's traditional skills. They refined those skills, perfected and lifted sailing performance to a higher level than ever achieved before. The cream of the men who did this became the great skippers of racing yachts. They were a small select breed of men with a halo of fame that success in sport brings. They were not just seamen, but artists of sail handling. They were called Yachtsmen.

The yachts themselves have evolved, particularly since about 1850, into fast efficient machines. They have brought new trades, skills and techniques - or elaboration's of old ones. Nineteenth century sails of beautifully cut cotton, which was a reason for their efficiency, have been replaced by synthetic materials with the ability to form themselves into aerodynamically appropriate curves and shapes without

the bagginess and irrelevant shapes into which sails of old working sailcraft were liable to fall. Masts are now made of lightweight alloys, and exotic materials having a stiffness and strength-to-weight ratio unknown in those days of wooden masts. They are supported by stainless steel and rod rigging that provides great strength and resistance to stretch. Man made fibres provide ropes with which to sheet in sails with the power of mechanical winches.

I know of no sport or recreation which presents more opportunities for intellectual challenge, relaxation, development of friendships, and the welding of family ties, than yachting.

Yachting is a sport that may be enjoyed not only by persons of different age groups, sex, physical prowess, and by people of different financial means. Boats can be obtained to suit the pocketbook, irrespective of how long or short that may be. It is to be remembered that the greatest amount of pleasure is obtained by sailing smaller vessels without crew or assistance. Well designed, strongly built vessels of the newer exotic materials will last indefinitely, and can always be disposed of at prices that make the cost of ownership very little when spread over the years that they were used.

A study of the background and history of sailing is most absorbing. Sailing today contends with the same natural elements as in more primitive days, with the same devices of mind, hull and sail. The maintenance of new exotic hull

materials is less onerous. New sail material places more emphasis on the design skill of the sailmaker. Many aspects of sailing has become more specialized. Rules are now computerized (as is, in some cases the actual ailing of yachts) precluding the development of more “truly great sailors”. But the development of the fundamental skills and art of sailing, and vessel design is still much the same.

There certainly was a difference in the attitude of the general population to pleasure sailing 100 or more years ago. Wooden boats required much more maintenance. There is no doubt that the “romance of the sea” was more appealing to the male than to most ladies prior to the common use of fiberglass in the construction of pleasure craft, which started about 1957. Without the modern built in conveniences and amenities in pre-W.W.II days, there were fewer woman sailors (and very few woman engineers, police officers, or participants in other sports).

Are modern sailors as skilled and dedicated as those sailors in the days before fibreglass?

When I started a project to determine who was Canada’s Greatest Yachtsman, I assumed that modern sailors/yachtsmen would dominate the list of candidates. Many of the modern day sailors whose names made headlines - locally, nationally, and internationally - and were the subject of discussion at various race meets and around local club bars, I had the opportunity to meet, know, and respect on a personal level.

My research indicated that not much has changed in the past two hundred years. While active participation in the sport of sailing is probably greater now than at any other time in our history, I could find no recent person who could favourably compare, to those that I in my own wisdom, or lack thereof, would include in my choice of the top three or four candidates for Canada's Greatest Yachtsman, or Yachtsperson (from hereon, assume that Yachtsman is gender neutral).

Yacht club records of senior membership indicate that most vessel owners are active as vessel owners or skippers for approximately 10 years. During that time they often accomplish great things - be it through cruising, racing at the local level or on the international scene; or alternately in the development of vessel design and race rules, or in the promotion and development of Yachting.

Very few excel in all of the above. Very few attain longevity at the top of the sport. Those that do are exceptional in many ways. It is for this reason I have elected not to become embroiled in a lengthy discussion on why many outstanding sailors, both male and female, are not included in my list. I leave it to the reader to compare my choices with their own (should they have any).

I trust that what follows will provide reading pleasure and background to what has occurred in the development of yachting in Canada.