

Nautical Neophytes

by David Hampton

It was summer of 1976 in Springfield, Missouri. Jeff and I were at the Village Inn Pancake House. It was nearly midnight on a Friday and we were knocking down breakfast, which had become a weekend tradition after knocking down several beers at the Alibi Lounge. During that era in Smalltown, USA the Inn was about the only place you could get breakfast at that time of night. I normally had bacon and eggs with biscuits and gravy. Jeff, on the other hand, would always...ALWAYS order pancakes with strawberries and whipped cream on top. Plus, extra pancakes. With the number of pancakes that were stacked on the plate, the meal looked like the Capital Records building in Los Angeles after a bloodletting and snowstorm. How anyone could drink beer all night and eat that stuff was beyond me. But I digress.

Jeff glanced up between forkfuls and asked, "Whatcha gonna do tomorrow?"

"I haven't thought that far out yet," I replied.

"Wanna go to Table Rock Lake?"

Knowing Jeff wasn't a fisherman I wondered if he might know some chicks at the lake. So, with curiosity at high volume I casually responded, "What for?"

With a grin mostly obscured by an ample mustache laden with puffs of whipped cream, Jeff ventured, "Ever gone sailing?"

"What, in a boat?"

"Of course in a boat dumbass."

Knowing Jeff did not own a sailboat I wisely wondered, "Where you gonna get a sailboat?"

"The parents of my brother's fiancée have one at their lake house."

"So?"

"So let's go take it out!"

After all those beers merging with pancake glucose I wasn't sure if he was serious or delirious, but I thought it important to ask, "Have you ever sailed before?"

"Nah, but I've read about it."

This was shaping up into a real, *sigh*, adventure like when we tried to slalom ski behind a Jon boat with a twenty-five-horse motor on the Pomme de Terre river. By the time you got the ski at a fast enough speed to plane the surface of the river, you had added two hundred pounds of water weight gain through your nose. Of course this was while you were dodging floating logs with turtles dozing on them. With these images swirling in my noggin, I still nodded for some reason in apparent agreement.

I pretty much figured he would forget about it anyway by tomorrow as I yawned and said I had to hit the sack.

Wrong again. Jeff woke me at nine the next morning and said he was coming to pick me up. On the trip down to Table Rock I hopefully asked if his brother would be joining us, but he said no one would be there. That led me to wonder if he had even checked with him. *Here we go again.*

The lake house was on the first tier of the housing development which meant the lake shore was right out the back door. The place was deserted when we arrived, but believe it or not, Jeff had a key to the boathouse so maybe he *did* have permission. Inside the small building was a tiny, two-person Hobie nestled among assorted sailboat kinda stuff. We dragged the little Hobie out, affixed the mast, and after several beers to stimulate our brain cells we figured out how to attach the sail. Not certain on a method of launch, we decided to grab opposite sides of the boat, steer it into the lake and then jump in. This did not work. Jeff tried to get in and the boat flopped over on top of him. We got it righted and I tried to get in and it flopped over on me. I know the definition of insanity now, but then we were both repeat offenders regarding mistakes. So, we flopped back and forth for the good part of an hour before realizing our point of ingress was fading into the distance.

"Hey Jeffie," I gurgled.

"Hey what?" he gurgled back.

"Don't you think we better head back to port," I whined.

With an arm entwined around the mast and shaking wet hair out of his eyes, Jeff wondered, "Is that right or left?"

Being an action kind of guy, I grabbed the thin nylon rope that was affixed to the bow (I think that's what you call it), put it in my teeth (the rope not the bow) and started swimming for shore with Jeff pushing astern (the boat not me). I thought I was in pretty good shape, but I got to tell you, I was as whipped as Jeff's pancake garnish when we finally made it back to shore. By that time we had worked up a powerful thirst so we limped to the cooler in the trunk of Jeff's car, stumbled over to a couple of handy lawn chairs and contemplated the sophisticated art of sailing.

I took a couple of decent swigs of my adult beverage and wondered, "Is there some sort of an instruction manual that comes with these boats?"

Jeff matched my swigs, imitated a foghorn (not saying which orifice it came from) and glanced over at the boathouse. He did the foghorn thing again and rose from his chair. "Gonna go take me a looksee," he slurred.

For several minutes I heard a bunch of banging around in the boathouse along with several 'damn its' spicing things up. Finally, as I grabbed another brewski from the cooler, Jeff exited the boathouse with a tattered booklet in his right hand and what looked like a big curved piece of fiberglass under his left arm. Being the astute person I am, I noticed it was the same color as the bottom of the Hobie. He walked over and dropped the tall curvy contraption on the ground in front of me. Of course, the only response a person like me with little (no) knowledge of sailing could come up with was, "What the hell is that thing?"

Jeff grinned, handed me the booklet and pointed with his beer can to a diagram on one of the pages. "They call it a keel," he said.

I looked at the diagram, looked at Jeff, looked at the Hobie, downed the rest of my beer and sighed, *Here we go again...What a day.*