

# NORTH HAVEN'S TIMELESS



courtesy the authors

## A Classic B.B. Crowninshield



Art Paine(2)

A century's-worth of models, trophies, and memorabilia is on display on North Haven.

**S**EVEN KNOCKABOUT OWNERS and crews gathered last August for a series of short races in the Fox Islands Thorofare to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the class in Maine.

When they first came to North Haven in 1910, B.B.Crowninshield's 17½-footers, known as knockabouts, were on the cutting edge of yacht design. Nimble and highly competitive, they quickly became ubiquitous in yacht clubs around Maine and Massachusetts, yet by the 1950s, they had almost disappeared. Now, yacht design has come full circle, and knockabouts are making a comeback as more people rediscover the joys of fast daysailers.

Conceived during the golden age of American yacht design, they were among the first one-designs to be built inexpensively, on a large scale, and for more than one community. The class arrived in Maine as summer communities were forming their first yacht clubs.

# KNOCKABOUTS

BY POLLY SALTONSTALL  
AND JOHN K. HANSON, JR.



## Design Turns 100

Left: Knockabout racing in the Thorofare, ca. 1940-1950.

Right: The atmosphere was congenial and the air light during the 2010 centennial regatta.

First designed in 1908 for members of the Manchester (Massachusetts) Yacht Club, these elegant sloops have achieved cult status with sailors and wooden boat aficionados. Known as Manchester 17s, Dark Harbor 17s, Northeast Harbor B boats, or simply “knockabouts,” close to two-dozen original boats, most restored or rebuilt over the years, remain sailing, and a handful of new ones has been built over the past decade.

It all began in 1909, when members of the North Haven Yacht Club, summer residents who knew members of the Manchester Yacht Club as well as Crowninshield himself (he owned land on North Haven), commissioned the naval architect to design a similar boat for them. He altered the Manchester design slightly, adding an open cockpit with seats and shortening the cabin. Most of the original 17s were built by Rice Brothers in East Boothbay (now the site of Washburn & Doughty).

By the spring of 1910, North Haven’s fleet was almost complete. Crowninshield wrote to Rice Brothers asking to have four of the boats ready to be picked up by the new owners. One of those

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owners was Richard Saltonstall, who bought the boat for his teenaged sons. The North Haven owners drew straws for their boats, with the Saltonstalls getting No. 5, which they named *Phoenix*. (The family commissioned Artisan Boatworks to build a new knockabout in 2008 which was also named *Phoenix*.)

The Saltonstalls sent their boatman down to Boothbay in the family launch, towing a rowboat for each knockabout. The intent was for Leverett Saltonstall, 17, and the other teenagers to sail the boats back accompanied by the launch. One member of the gang who did not go was 16-year-old Robert Codman Cobb who wrote about the new boats in his journal. But he was on hand when the boats finally did arrive.

“We were in bed when we heard someone shouting on the Thorofare,” he wrote. “It was Lev. All of them had been towed, I suppose almost the whole way from Boothbay.”

The next day, writes Cobb, the teenagers raced about in the boats for hours. His entries for the rest of the summer are filled with descriptions of races and excursions in the knockabouts. The teenagers used the boats to get around much in the way teens today zoom about in Boston Whalers.

“They’re pretty good little boats,” Cobb wrote somewhat enviously.

Fleets formed in Dark Harbor in 1911 and Bar Harbor in 1912. By 1914, many of these boats were racing in Northeast Harbor, where they became known as Northeast Harbor B boats. With an overall length of 25'10" and a beam of 6'3", the knockabouts were skinny, fast, and handled extremely well. An early brochure noted that the “comparative sharp ends of the hull insure an easy and fast boat in rough water.” While the 17½s sail their best in light to medium air—fairly common conditions on hot summer days on Penobscot Bay—they are remarkably tough in heavier blows. They are not for the faint of heart, though. The low freeboard makes for a wet ride in a stiff breeze.

For example, Cobb, whose family did

not buy one of those first boats, eventually did get one much later in life. He sailed it zealously in the Fox Islands Thorofare until he was well into his 80s. His daughter, Lydia Perkins, who was on hand for the August 2010 centennial, recalled one summer day when a violent squall hit while her elderly father was out sailing alone. The frantic family called the Coast Guard, which found Cobb and his boat in Rockland Harbor, some 12 miles away. He had blown out the mainsail during a wild downwind ride, but was okay. From then on, Cobb never left the mooring without a reef.

Back in those days, a fleet of boats raced regularly in North Haven. Artist Herbert Parsons still owns one that his father bought in the early 1930s from another summer resident.

“I was 12 or 14 when I first started racing with my father,” Parsons recalled. “My job was to stay down below and pump the whole time because even back then the boat leaked pretty badly.”

By the 1960s, the few knockabouts still racing in North Haven were in sad shape. Not built to last, many had been retired to rot in boathouses or yards. Yacht club members looked around for a new one-design, and settled on the fiberglass Ensign, which still is raced in North Haven. But a few sailors kept the faith. North Haven and Bucks Harbor are now home to about six knockabouts each. Parsons and two siblings sailed his boat in the centennial regatta with bilge pumps on each gunwale shooting water in an almost constant stream. Other knockabouts are scattered in harbors along the coast.

Currently, the North Haven knockabouts compete in a special Round-the-Island Race each August, in which they share a starting line with the newer Ensigns. With the right wind, and the right sailors, the antique sloops can, and often do, sail through the fleet of newer fiberglass boats, proving that even after a century, the design remains timeless. ✨

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Art Paine (5)

1910 or 2010? This scene could almost have been photographed 100 years ago.