Wilton Smith at the helm of his boat, Queen Anne's Revenge

Article by Lee Moore and Jody Wilson

Introduction

Since Colonial times, sailing has been a tradition on the Pamlico River. In Colonial times the sailboat provided a way for the merchants of our waterfront towns to transport their goods to market. Although our Pamlico River has lost its importance for transportation and trade, some people keep up the boating tradition with various types of
water recreation, such as sailing, motorboating, and water skiing.

On February 12, 1986, we two Life on the Pamlico staff members and Mr. Armstrong went to interview Mr. Wilton Smith, a sailing enthusiast, who has won several races.

On this cold February day, we talked to Mr. Smith in the warmth of his Pamlico Marine Company, where he sells sailboats. From him we learned about his experiences in sailing and sailboat racing. He told us about the construction of the boats, their rigging, their various sails, about strategies in racing, and about skippers, like himself, who will "take a flier" to win a race.

Mr. Smith welcomed us into his establishment, which is located on the Pamlico River, in Washington.

Life: Wilton, what we'd like to start with are your experiences in sailing, how you got started.

Mr. Smith: Originally, I guess in the early seventies, about 1972, I was looking for a boat. And I was interested in a boat I could sleep on, something I could fish from, something that had a "head" on it, stove and that sort of thing. And I looked around at used power boats and that sort of thing. Most of the ones I could find were older wooden boats, and the engines were maybe suspect. A friend of mine suggested that I take a look at his 25 foot sailboat. So we went out and went sailing. And I started thinking about it; it met all of the qualifications, fiberglass hull and virtually couldn't be hurt even though it was four or five years old. It was in good condition, so, I decided, this makes sense to me. It was in the price range I had allotted myself. So one night after we had gone sailing and it was real pretty and nice and we had a good time and that sort of thing, I sat down and bought the boat.

He had previously entered the boat in the Pamlico Sailing Club's racing series. So I decided since the boat was already entered, I would go out and try to race the boat. I went out with a couple of friends and tried to [race], and, of course, we ended up way back in the pack. We didn't have any idea at what we were doing; we were just learning.

We heard about the upcoming Ocracoke Race, and we decided we would sail the boat to Ocracoke and race. We virtually had no experience and finally bought a chart to find out how to get over there.

So a friend of mine and a girl he was dating set off on the great Ocracoke Race. Well, not knowing any more than we did, we had a spinnaker but didn't know how to fly it. So we actually, at the start of the race, sailed over to another boat and asked them if we could look and see how they had their spinnaker rigged.
And we went out and rigged ours and got it up, and then we went out and left the boat. Of course, we didn't realize that we were not supposed to do that at the time. And once we got the spinnaker up and going, we just started going across the sound.

Well, still, ignorance is bliss, and we didn't know a whole lot about trimming the spinnaker or anything else. So when we started leaving the land at Pamlico Point, we just held the compass which we had figured out to Ocracoke. And we stayed right dead on it.

Well, the wind got real light, and the fleet started going all over the sound trying to find the wind and where the wind shift would be. We didn't know anything about that, so we just held our compass course, and we kept thinking that maybe their compasses weren't working because they were sailing all over the sound. To make a long story short, we ended up third in that race. So the wind just happened to fill in at the right spot. When we had got in, all of the friends that we had met were over there asking us, "Who was your spinnaker man? How did you do that?"

Well, it got to be real exciting, so after that fall I subscribed to every sailboat magazine I could think of and got real interested in racing. And a friend of mine that I race with and I decided to buy a new boat, so we bought a Morgan 27 footer in the fall of '73. We came to Mr. Hodges, here at Pamlico Marine Company, and told him we wanted it for racing. So we wanted all this race equipment and everything else. So we bought it just loaded with equipment and ready to race. That was the first Queen Anne's Revenge. We named it after Blackbeard's ship that sailed out of Bath. That's where we kept the boat.

Life: You said your first boat, the Queen Anne's Revenge, was 27 feet. Is that considered average length?

Mr. Smith: Well, at the time ['73], that was a mid-sized boat. At the time most of the big boats were 30-32 feet. Today, the 27 footer would be in the lower range. I would say the average boat is 30 feet with a lot more 33's and 35's and 37's and 40's.

Life: On one of these boats, like the first one you had or maybe some of the other ones, how many people would you normally have on a crew, and what would their responsibilities be?

Mr. Smith: Well, on the 27 [footer], we would crew that with five people. We would have the helmsman, who would be steering the boat.

Life: Is that all that he would do?

Mr. Smith: That is his primary responsibility. And in most cases, on a small crew boat like that, the helmsman is the owner or the skipper and is usually the head strategist. You would have, probably, two people involved in trimming sails, one on the genoa and the other on the main sheet.
Life: A lot of people, including me, who will be reading this aren't going to know anything about sails. Tell us about the sails. How many do you have, two or three?

Mr. Smith: When you're sailing into the wind (upwind), then you will be using, generally, two sails: the main sail and then a jib or genoa, depending on the wind. Those are both names for a sail that is hanked onto the headsail. They are cut in different shapes and sizes. The jib is the headsail.

Life: The jib is smaller than the genoa?

Mr. Smith: Yes. The genoa is a bigger sail, which we use in this area because of light winds during the July and August period. Many smaller boats, say an 18 foot day sailor, will come with a main and a jib, and that's the only sails they will have on the boat. The newer rigs will have a series of headsails in all different sizes, depending on different wind conditions.

Life: And you would have two people doing the sails?

Mr. Smith: Well, when we would be going upwind, we would have one person trimming the genoa or jib and one person steering, one person trimming the main. The other two would be basically riding the high side until we got ready to make a tack. When we tack, one of them would come back to the cockpit to move the main traveler. The other one would go to the mast and stand in front of the mast to help get the sail around fast.

Life: Explain the tack movement, please.

Mr. Smith: When you make a tack, you go from starboard [right of boat] to port [left of boat].

Life: That's the way you go against the wind?

Mr. Smith: When you take the boat, you can only sail approximately 35 degrees to 40 degrees to the wind. And a tack is sailing through the wind, and the sails go to the other side.

Life: What about the two sails and tacking?

Mr. Smith: In a race you have three points of sail: an upwind leg; reaching leg, where the sails are let out and the wind is generally on the beam; then a downwind leg. This is called an Olympic triangle, such as the America's Cup Race. Ideally, when our sail club go out to race, we generally try to set this type of course so that we have three upwind legs, two downwind legs, and one reaching leg. Most of the races are run in the seven-to-eight mile range, 12-to-13 total. When you make a turn around a mark, part of the time three people are doing the work; two people aren't. But when you get ready to put the spinnaker up and take the genoa down, you need seven people on there, so everybody is really busy to make a good mark 'round so as to not
lose time.

Life: You've won the race to Ocracoke several times?

Mr. Smith: No, actually in the Ocracoke race I have finished second, third, and fourth a number of times; I only won that race one time, 1982.

Life: What boat did you win with?

Mr. Smith: The Pearson 32 footer. That was the fourth Queen Anne's Revenge; that's now known as Natural Lite and is docked down at Bath. As a matter of fact, the first Queen Anne's Revenge is at the Bath dock; it is now painted with a gray hull. The third Queen Anne's Revenge has a red hull [now]. It is a 33 footer that we got lucky and won the Michelob Cup with one year in 1980. The new Queen Anne's Revenge is an Elite 37 footer, which is also at Bath. So four of the five Queen Anne's Revenges are still there under different names.

Life: Let me ask you this. I've just been out on one of these big boats, Bret Smith's boat. As you were saying, it seems that most people are doing the same things on these boats. It's kind of like a stockcar race: all you can do is just go where you're supposed to. But some people win, and some people don't. What can you do on a boat to make your boat get there quicker than somebody else's if they've got the same crew and more or less the same boat?

Mr. Smith: Well, you start with prepa-
ration of the boat, preparation of the bottom, making sure the bottom is fair and as smooth as possible.

Life: Does that make a lot of difference?

Mr. Smith: It makes a tremendous amount of difference, even to the paint. We have products available in the industry that you put over your antifouling paint to make it slicker. A man with a 35 foot boat may spend as much as two-to-three thousand dollars sanding his bottom, preparing it for racing, depending on how serious he is. Our average club racer in this area will haul the boat out once a year and paint the bottom, then swim under it and scrub the bottom off to make sure there's no growth to slow it down. But generally one time a
year is what most racers will haul and paint their bottom.

Life: So one thing is just having the bottom slick?

Mr. Smith: Right, and having it just as smooth as possible. For example, in the America's Cup, if you notice, they take the boats out of the water every night. There is no bottom paint at all; it's just totally sanded and waxed and just as smooth as they can possibly get it.

Then the second is the condition of your sails. On good racing boats the bottom preparation and sails and equipment are going to be equal.

Then it comes down to crew work: how quickly you can perform your tacks, how quickly you can make sail changes, how well you steer through the tack, how well you steer through strong wind conditions. If you tend to pitch the boat too much up to windward, the the waves will tend to stop you more. If you fall off away from the wind, you won't be going up the course as fast. It's finding that groove in the middle when you're getting the most speed and making the ground upwind. In light air downwind, it gets so light we'll hold a cigarette up and watch the smoke to see which way the wind is coming from. Concentration by the helmsman and people on the trim are very important.

Life: Who makes the decisions like when to turn?

Mr. Smith: Well, the helmsman is generally wearing two hats. In something like an America's Cup boat you'll have a helmsman and you'll have a tactician; the tactician will make the decisions as when to tack. You'll have a man who heads the foredeck crew, which is primarily in charge of handling the sails and doing that. Once the tactician makes a decision to change the sails, the foredeck man will say, "You get the sail, you rerun the lines," and he'll direct the activity on the foredeck. At that time the helmsman is supposed to do nothing but steer the boat.

In a boat our size we don't have crews of 18 people. Generally the skipper of the boat is steering the boat. In some cases he may have a good friend who is a better helmsman than he is, but if the skipper is the helmsman, he will be the one calling the shots: looking at the conditions around him, looking at the other boats, looking at which way the smoke is blowing at Texas Gulf, noticing the tide around the mark when you turn around a mark. It runs faster in the deepest part of the river. So that means if you're tacking up the river with the wind out of the west, maybe you would want to tack up the south shore line rather than to tack through the middle because you will be set more by the tide.

Life: So all of those little decisions add up to who wins and who doesn't?

Mr. Smith: Right. The thing that's interesting about it is by the time you
add up handicaps, you may have only a five or ten minute difference in the first boat to cross and the last one to cross. Throw in a 30 second mistake here and a 20 second mistake there, and those add up as you go around the course. A little wind shift here that someone else didn't get, getting a little lift around the shoreline that someone else didn't get, it's a matter of seconds. Like football is a game of inches, sailing is a game of seconds.

Life: Are some helmsmen and tacticians conservative, and others willing to take chances, like different football coaches?

Mr. Smith: Oh, yes! As a matter of fact the year I won the Michelob Cup--

Life: Wilton went on to describe a race he won which was known as the "sandbar" victory.

Mr. Smith: The whole fleet, we started going up the Neuse River, and we were started out on the north shore line in light air, and the whole fleet started reaching over to the south side of the river, expecting the wind to fill in on the south shore line. I was the only one out of 130 boats to stay on the north side.

Life: A friend of Wilton's--"Panama George"--who was listening in on the interview commented: "They said that he was sailing on sandbars!"

Mr. Smith: They were all saying I had a sailboat with four-wheel drive. There's a big sandbar out there in the middle of the Neuse River. Well, I looked at the chart, and mean low tide shows five feet of water. Mean low means exactly that, but with the wind behind us I knew the tide would be higher. And my boat drew five feet, six inches. So we took a chance. I don't know how many inches we had under the bottom, but we made a turn right at the last. And there was a Pearson 28 Sea Ray that was being sailed by Ray King, who was leading the fleet. And [quickly] we made our turn and came reaching across the river under spinnaker, which you can reach a lot faster than you can sail dead down. And he was sailing dead down wind, and we came reaching up and came to the finish line and popped out in front of him about 100 yards within a quarter of a mile of the finish line. And then we turned dead down and went across. So we started fifth place from the last and sailed through the whole fleet to be first place finish.

Life: Panama George said: "If you would have hit the sandbar, you'd be there still!" Wilton told us more about tactics.

Mr. Smith: For example, if we are racing from Broad Creek to Indian Island, and for one reason or another the wind drops out at a certain place in the middle of the river and some boats on the shoreline get way in front, well, when the wind starts filling in and you've got a boat as equally fast as yours, you know you can't sail any faster than him in the same wind. So at
times like that, particularly if it's the windward leg, you take a flier. Or even on a downwind leg, you might turn and reach all the way to the opposite side of the river, hoping that there's going to be a wind shift that will favor you. You might turn and try to reach way over on the shoreline and try to get between him and the wind so that as the wind freshens, you'll get the new wind first, and that way you'll be getting some advantage. You'll be getting a stronger wind before he gets it, which will allow you to gain. I try not to take wild fliers; I try to take percentage fliers.

A year or two ago in the Michelob Cup, I took one that I thought would pay off. The wind was supposed to back all the way around or clock around and come back from the northwest or around to northeast and east. Well, we took a chance that the wind would do that, and while everybody else started under genoa and started reaching across the course on a very broad reach, we started under spinnaker and went way low on the course. Now, if the wind moves around from northwest to northeast, we would be able to sail a longer course, but at a much faster speed under spinnaker, and sail a curve all the way around and up to New Bern. Well, we had passed all but about six or seven boats in the fleet; then, all of a sudden, the wind died. And instead of going that way, the wind went back to the west; and as it filled in, all the boats that sailed on the north side got the wind first. And out of about 150 boats we were about sixth from last to get around the mark. We finally finished about 33rd; we thought it was a percentage flier in the beginning.

But in that race what counts is winning the Michelob Cup. We weren't trying to do a series where we're worried about consistent finishes. Nobody ever remembers who ends up second in class in the Michelob, so we figured we'd take a percentage flier to win it rather than to finish second or third in class.

Life: How much danger is there in sailing?

Mr. Smith: Well, everybody in racing gets some bumps and bruises and things like that. There's not a lot of danger if you're careful. Somebody that is not careful who stands up when the boom is swinging across—you know, there's been a number of deaths.

Life: From here [Bath] to Ocracoke, you could get in some tough weather all of a sudden.

Mr. Smith: With thunderstorms and things like that, anytime that wind goes up, you have to be a lot more careful, whereas in light air, people are running around the boat and you don't worry if the boom swings across. It swings so slowly that you can take your hand and push it back.

Life: How about the danger of the boat actually capsizing?
Mr. Smith: Well, there is no danger of that as long as the keel stays on the boat. I've been in places where we've had such heavy wind conditions catch us with our spinnaker up. In the Wachovia Cup two years ago we were running downwind at about 11 or 12 knots with the spinnaker up at about 4:30 in the morning, and a squall line came through, and our apparent wind, which was from behind us, went up to 22 knots. What that meant was, we were running in front of it at 11 or 12 and the wind pressure was still 22. So the actual wind speed was 34 knots, and we held it for maybe five or ten minutes, and then the boat rolled out and laid, just laid us all the way over.

When we got it up and tried to turn the boat back down, the boat had now...
stopped. When the wind of 34 knots hit the spinnaker, it shredded it. So we had an eighteen hundred dollar spinnaker that was just ripped to pieces.

We finished [the race]. We managed to get that down and sailed under the main, and finally around 6:00 that morning we had a spinnaker off my 32 footer --we were on a 37 foot Pearson, the "Pepperment Patty"--so we took my little spinnaker off the 32 footer and put that up and put another sail, a looper, up. We were able to finish the race.

Life: How about the cost of these boats? I guess they're pretty expensive.

Mr. Smith: Well, racing boats and cruising boats will vary a lot in price according to size, length and equipment. There are a lot of very fast boats now that are available at reasonable prices for racing, fairly stripped out boats without a lot of amenities on the interior. I've always preferred to have a boat that was a nice comfortable sailboat that was nice below and livable and had hot and cold pressure water and a shower and then a racing boat on the outside. To me it's a good combination because I want to use my boat for more than just racing. A lot of people just want to race, so they're not interested in any of the accommodations below.

One way to get started, I would say you can buy a used boat with a lot of equipment that somebody has raced and it has depreciated quite a bit at a very reasonable price compared to a new one.
Generally, I would say at half of what a new one would cost. I know there's a J 29 for sale for less than thirty thousand that would run fifty-five thousand, probably, if you were to buy all the sails and equipment that are on the boat again today.

A new cruising boat, even a 30 footer of good quality, could vary from the low 40's to the upper 70's. The upper 70's would be the Cadillac of the boats, loaded with equipment and electronics and things like that. Generally, you will find that the 30 footers will be in a range from the low 40's to the mid 60's.

Life: Used ones?

Mr. Smith: New ones. And that's a variation of about twenty to twenty-five thousand dollars in boats the same size, probably about 50 percent more. It's sort of like cars; you can buy a $7,000 car or you can buy a $40,000 car, and they all hold four people.

Life: Do you find that there is a strong comradeship among the people who sail? You all seem to know each other pretty well, don't you?

Mr. Smith: We know who the competition is because you earn a respect. When you race against somebody, it's not just one person against another; it is a crew against a crew. You respect them for what they do well, and you get a lot of satisfaction for what you do well. I think there is a lot of camaraderie as evidenced by the fact that after every sailboat race everybody gets together and reraces the race. "Boy! You did so and so great!" or "Gosh! We saw you when you made that mistake!" I think there is a camaraderie that grows on a crew. The fellows that have been crewing with me: David Suits has been racing with me for 13 years, Denny McCotter has been racing with me for 12 years, Dave Everett has been racing with me for eight or nine years. We've sort of had the same crew, which, I think, has been one of the big advantages to us, and we didn't have to go look for a crew for every race. I think that has been evident in the success over the years.

Life: It's really a team thing?

Mr. Smith: It really is a team thing.

Life: It's almost like a basketball game where everybody gets to anticipate what the other is thinking.

Mr. Smith: Yes. I would say it's more like a football team in that everybody participates but you have a quarterback who calls the plays.

Life: You hear a lot about the importance of tying knots in sailing. What's the most important knot to know?

Mr. Smith: The most common knot we use on a boat is the bowline.

Life: Bowline?
Mr. Smith demonstrates the tying of the most useful knot: "the bowline."
Mr. Smith: Bowline. Actually bow--line, but it has been vulgated to be called bowline [with a long "o"]. And that is a knot that you can tie that was developed by some smart sailor to tie to an anchor so no matter how much pressure is put on that line, you could always untie that knot. Consequently, we use that knot in tying lines into sails. We use it to put a loop around a piling and things like that. The bowline is actually the easiest knot or the primary knot. No matter how much load you put on this [knot], you can just pull this away, and when you do, you can just take it and undo it. It makes it real easy. That's why on your genoa sheets, which carry a tremendous load when the sail is full, you have to be able to untie those in a hurry when you want to make a sail change because you're generally going to use the same sheets on the next sail.

Life: Oh, one thing I forgot to ask you. What about the motor? You do have a motor on these sailboats, I guess?

Mr. Smith: Right. On mine we have a diesel inboard.

Life: What horsepower is that?

Mr. Smith: Mine is 27 horsepower, and it pushes the boat at about eight knots. And it burns around a half a gallon an hour on fuel.

Life: That's good.

Mr. Smith: Yes. It's doing super. It's that Volvo 2003.
Life: So when you go out there and there's just no wind at all, unless you're racing, that's about all you can do.

Mr. Smith: Yes.

Conclusion

We have learned many things about the craft of sailing. They vary from the camaraderie of crew members, the skills of racing, basic seamanship—all the way to the construction, repair and proper care of the sailboat itself.

There are many skills involved in sailing, whether racing or just sailing

Mr. Smith explains the construction of sailboats to Lee and Jody.
for pleasure. The crew members are responsible for how a boat performs. They must all work together doing their individual jobs.

The boat itself also, of course, plays a role in sailing. For instance, cruisers and racers are built differently. Racers are built lighter and with various differences in shape, while cruisers are heavier and built more for leisurely sailing.

Sailing also takes a lot of knowledge about the wind and how to maneuver the boat in different wind directions. We have learned sailing to the wind is called tacking to windward, sailing across the wind is called reaching, and sailing with the wind is called running.

It takes a smart person to learn all the tricks of racing a sailboat, but just about anyone can learn to sail for fun if they just put their minds to it. Some people race, and some people just cruise. But Wilton Smith enjoys doing both, and he has certainly convinced me that sailing can be a thrilling sport for almost anyone.

So even though Blackbeard is long gone, the spirit of sailing on the waters of Eastern North Carolina lives—and on a boat named after Blackbeard's Queen Anne's Revenge!
Queen Anne's Revenge on Pamlico River at Bath Creek