



YACHTS FOR A DAY

On the last Saturday in October the work boats
of Chesapeake Bay
become sailing yachts in a unique regatta

story and photos by J. William Joynes

THEIR LOW-SLUNG GUNWALES awash with the cold green water of Chesapeake Bay, they sweep back and forth across the rich underwater treasure troves of oysters, dragging in their wake rust-covered iron buckets called dredges. From November to March, in the year's foulest weather, they are work boats—the last sail-powered commercial fleet in North America.

But one day of the year, painted and prettied like Cinderella going to the ball, they become yachts in a sailing regatta held in the shadow of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge. And 15,000 spectators line the shores of Sandy Point, Maryland's waterfront state park near Annapolis, to witness the colorful event.

"Drudging" season, as Chesapeake watermen pronounce it, opens on the first day of November, but on the Saturday before some 35 of the heavy sailboats—all that remain of a fleet of 300 whose sails once whitened the horizon—sail up to Annapolis from Cambridge, Wenona, Crisfield, Tilghman, Deal and Smith islands, where sails were once familiar sights.

For four years, the last Saturday of October has dawned clear and bright, perfect for a sailing regatta. The fall snap makes for a brisk walk along the quay of Old City Dock in Annapolis, which sees more sails on this day than it has for 50 years. By hand and winch, crews hoist the heavy canvas and the bowsprits, freshly touched with a streak or two of gold paint, head northward past the U. S. Naval Academy to Chesapeake Bay Bridge.

The sky is blue and the air brisk enough to snap the canvas; ropes creak and chafe their blocks as the boats leave the harbor. The port—now a National Historic Landmark—once welcomed rich tobacco planters to the old state capital to attend the legislature, the theater, the horse races and the balls in handsome brick Georgian mansions that still exist on every street.

Almost under the giant bridge that carries thousands of speeding automobiles across the four-mile bay, the heavy boats lumber back and forth around the octagonal, red-brick Sandy Point Lighthouse, waiting for the cannon signal that starts the first leg of their 10-mile, 3½-hour race.

Then ships like the *Robert L. Webster*, built in 1915, or the *Rosie Parks*, of Cambridge, skippered to four victories by a veteran waterman in his 70s, or the *Mamie Mister*, are off and flying before the spanking breeze that kicks up whitecaps from the western to the eastern shore.

These are work boats. They give the appearance of working, even in this holiday afternoon race, as, once across the starting line, they bob heavily in the swell, sails rounding and pulling, masts bending stiffly to the breeze.

Slowly yet steadily they walk away from the watching crowd—some hurrying ahead, followed by the pack, with others straggling behind. Banter from the crews floats back across the water. Soon spectators begin taking to binoculars to watch them down the bay; then, as if a parade had passed, the talk turns to the past.

The workboat races are only four years old—yet they have become as traditional as the boats themselves. Sponsored by the Windjammers of the Chesapeake, the races are preserving the rapidly disappearing symbol of Maryland's seafood industry.

In backwaters and coves along the bay, beached or half-submerged and rotting, lie old schooners, bugeyes and skipjacks that once raced their succulent cargoes to the raw oyster bars of Baltimore to satisfy the palates of gastronomes.

In the 1920s, in an effort to revive a fast-dying interest in sailing and the commercial sailing craft of the Chesapeake Bay, races were organized. They continued until 1931. Then the Great Depression temporarily killed the event. With seafood prices low, there was little money available to get boats ready for mere sport. By the time the Depression waned, most of the boats had disappeared, and, except for a few skipjacks—the rakish, one-masted vessels that now dominate the commercial fleet—none were being built. Today, times are better—hence the revival of the races.

By late afternoon, when the masts cast long shadows across the waves, the losers turn homeward and the winners head for Annapolis, where awards are presented aboard the *Port Welcome*, an excursion steamer from which spectators view the races.

The race over, the boats like Cinderella again, must get back to work, dredging in fair weather and foul for the \$6,000,000 in buried oysters that the last commercial sailing fleet in North America finds annually. But their one day of glory keeps alive a colorful heritage—and the always encouraging thought that, next year, they will again be yachts for a day. □

Sandy Point Lighthouse is the starting point for the races

