

story

Ode To Solidity

JOHN STEINBECK KNEW WHY WE CAN'T PASS A HULL WITHOUT GIVING IT A KNOCK.

As an English literature major, I read the epic tales of John Steinbeck from *The Grapes of Wrath* to *Tortilla Flat*, *Of Mice and Men* to *Cannery Row*. In novels that championed the common man, Steinbeck wrote of courage and struggle and, most of all, about humanity and the meaning of life. Being young and full of life, and being preoccupied with sailing, beer and girls (not in that order), I found his books heavy going and often depressing.

It wasn't until many years later that I discovered, to my delight, that Steinbeck was a boat guy.

Never mentioned in those dusty college courses was his expedition to what is properly called the Gulf of California: a long, thin sea/lake bounded by the peninsula of Baja California on the west and the Mexican mainland on the east. Cortez explored it centuries ago, and I have sailed and raced to it and across it many times. But it was Steinbeck who immortalized it in his work *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*.

It was 1940, and he had just finished his monumental *The Grapes of Wrath*. Burnt out from the effort and under attack for earlier controversial novels, Steinbeck badly needed to get away. With his friend Ed Ricketts (later immortalized as Doc Ricketts in *Cannery Row*), Steinbeck set out on a boating expedition to the Sea of Cortez to collect and research invertebrates, resulting in a 600-page logbook that was as much a commentary on mankind as it was about the various species he found.

He wrote: "A man builds the best of himself into a boat—builds many of the unconscious memories of his ancestors. Once, passing the boat department of Macy's in New York, where there are duck-boats and skiffs and little cruisers, one of the authors discovered as he passed each hull he knocked on it sharply with his knuckles. He wondered why he did it

and, as he wondered, he heard a knocking behind him, and another man was rapping the hulls with his knuckles, the same tempo—three sharp knocks on each hull. During an hour's observation there no man or boy and few women passed who did not do the same thing. Can this have been an unconscious testing of the hulls? Many who passed could not have been in a boat, perhaps some of the little boys had never seen a boat, and yet everyone tested the hulls, knocked to see if they were sound, and did not even know he was doing it."

I thought back and realized that I, too, subconsciously knock on hulls. These days, doing so might be considered merely a test to see if the hull is fiberglass, wood, metal or whatever. But the act is more than just an "I wonder if it's wood" moment.

I realized that I often pat boats, too, as if they were human. Usually my own boats, because I feel no more comfortable patting other people's boats than I would patting their spouses.

If you attend a boat show, you'll see what Steinbeck saw. Even in the most casual passing, people let their fingers trail along the sides of a boat, much as children with a stick can't resist running it along a picket fence. As they stand considering boats, their hands are in motion, touching the varnish and gauging the rigging and playing with the lines.

It is, in many ways, the primeval urge that Steinbeck understood. That before committing to a voyage onto those frightening seas, man needs reassurance that his vessel is sound.

But it isn't just at boat shows where we touch boats. Walk the dock in a marina, and it's hard not to reach out to a curved bow as you pass. It is as much in our DNA as eating and breathing.

A seagull finds its own solidity in the form of a statue of venerable author and "boat guy" John Steinbeck.

Had Steinbeck known what was in store, he might have stayed in the Sea of Cortez. Instead, he went home to disarray: his marriage fell apart, the world went to war and he moved away from California. On the positive side, he wrote *East of Eden* and won the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Ricketts died after closing up his laboratory on Cannery Row one night and attempting to cross the tracks in his ancient Packard. He was killed by the evening train, thus ending their plan to return to the Sea of Cortez. Twenty years later, Steinbeck died in New York, leaving a wealth of fiction and nonfiction. The one that lingers in my mind will always be *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*.

He wrote: "A horse, a beautiful dog, arouses sometimes a quick emotion, but of inanimate things only a boat can do it ... it is very easy to see why the Viking wished his body to sail away in an unmanned ship, for neither could exist without the other."

She Who Must Be Obeyed has long threatened, once I fall off the perch, to load me into the sailing dinghy that is moldering in our yard, build a bonfire and send me off onto our lake.

In that case, I guess I'd better go rap on the hull of the dinghy, just to make sure it's ready for the voyage. ❀



Row, Row, Row Your Boat

IF YOU DON'T OWN A PAIR OF OARS, THEN YOU'RE MISSING OUT ON ONE OF BOATING'S GREAT PLEASURES.

story 

I was a 20-year-old college student about to have knee surgery decades before outpatient arthroscopic procedures. I wasn't looking forward to a week in the hospital, at least a couple of months limping around on crutches, and a long zipper on one knee for a lifetime.

Because I couldn't drop out of college for the surgery (that would mean an immediate draft notice), I was facing a summerlong recuperation. I hunted around until I found a tired plywood rowboat, which I bought for a princely \$50. I slapped on some fiberglass and paint to make it reasonably presentable and, more or less, watertight. A neighbor on the bay, faced with my sob story, was conned into letting me put the dinghy on his dock for the season.

And so it came to be on warm mornings that I would hobble down to the dock with a pair of oars, a paperback book, a canvas backrest, a tube of Sea & Ski, and some zinc oxide for my beak. I would row across the bay to a sandy strip that my mother scorned as "The Mating Beach." I would spend the day trying to get sympathy from the babes.

I thought about those days while sitting at anchor in a crowded harbor a while back. I watched an endless stream of dinghies going to and from shore, and I had a revelation: No one seems to row anymore.

A week after my revelation, I was at a boat show admiring a pretty little fiberglass dinghy, complete with faux lapstrake "planks" and a wineglass transom, but without fittings for oars. When I asked the salesman about the omission, he looked at me blankly and said, "Why?" The transom was braced to handle an outboard. The builder assumed that no one would actually want to row his boat.

Then, while looking at a bunch of tenders at a dinghy dock recently, I realized that most of them had a paddle for an emergency, but not one had a pair of oars.

I find the current reality very sad, because rowing is more than just good exercise or a way to shore. It's a whole mental attitude. Rowing, for me, is about enjoying the delights of an anchorage on a quiet morning, taking the long way to the dinghy dock so I can admire the sweet lines of a trawler that

arrived late, and perhaps even complimenting the owner sitting in the cockpit with his coffee.

Rowing is about taking a moment to lean on the oars and breathe in the sea air and feel the sun's warmth and savor life. Having an outboard takes away that one-on-oneness with nature. There's the noise and the vibration, and a gas tank and protecting the prop when you run ashore on a pebbly beach, and having to unbolt the damn thing at day's end.

Of course, back when I was rowing the Bum Knee Express, outboards were a lot iffier than they are now. Those dinghies that did have an outboard usually had a British Seagull, an engine that was so simple that almost no one could get it to run. Starting a Seagull involved wrapping a cord around the flywheel and giving it a yank, with the loose end certain to whack anyone else in the dinghy. There was never a first-pull start, because you had to fiddle with the carb and the choke and a little throttle lever, and then pray to the gods that you'd mixed the right amount of oil with the gas and that you hadn't flooded the engine, and, well, you get the idea. It was a black art. Most of us rowed.

Rowing was what kids did in a time before PlayStation and Wii and iPods and all the other things that now seem to fill their time. Give a kid a rowing dinghy in the morning and turn him loose; he'd spend the day hooking up with other kids in their dinghies, exploring beaches and islands, and having water fights. He'd enjoy a healthy adventure where time was kept by the height of the sun or pangs of hunger.

Rowing is also a lost art. There's so much more to rowing than just paddling along. There's a rhythm and an elegance that is an acquired competence.

First, you slip the oars into the round oarlocks. Or, if you're good, into U-shaped locks. A real oarsman would never use pinned oars (those pansy oars with pins through them for security). And there's no love for flimsy aluminum oars, either. The right stuff is made of solid spruce, preferably Eastern white, with thick layers of varnish.

You centered the oar and aligned your blade at right angles to the water without a thought. And finally, as you pulled the



oars to the end of each stroke, you snapped your wrists down and feathered the oars so they lifted cleanly from the water without a splash.

When you did this a few million times, it wasn't just second nature. It became a fluid and graceful talent in which you took pride. Splashing water with your oars was embarrassingly painful not only to the rower, but also to any knowledgeable skipper who was watching.

Unless, of course, you were a kid, because you quickly learned how to send a spray of water from an oar with the accuracy of a water hose: a necessary ability in a water fight.

I feel sorry for all those people buzzing to shore with an outboard for their Starbucks fix. It's the nautical equivalent of driving on a beautiful day with the windows rolled up and the air conditioning on high. They have no idea what they are missing. ☼





My Love Affair With Stars

 story

“Why are you sleeping outside?” asked She Who Must Be Obeyed.
 “I’m not.”
 “OK, let me rephrase. Why are you lying on your back on the pool chaise at midnight?”

“I’m looking at the stars.”

She made one of her patented snorting sounds and disappeared back inside, leaving me alone with a black sky pierced with zillions of stars.

I love the stars. My dad was a B-24 navigator during World War II, and so evenings on our boat were often about the stars: “There’s Orion, there’s Sirius, there’s the Big Dipper, follow its edge to Polaris, the North Star.”

But to me, the stars are more than just my father’s love. Stars are a part of yachting life. As the sun sets when you’re far offshore, it’s always a quiet pleasure to see the first star appear as the sky darkens. And sitting in a quiet cove, you can lean back against the coaming and consider the array of stars visible when you’re far from the loom of city lights.

I think my strangest star experience was during one Transpac race to Hawaii when we were totally becalmed somewhere in the mid-Pacific. And I don’t just mean becalmed; I mean the entire ocean was still and there wasn’t a swell or a wave. The Pacific was as flat as a mirror, so it

reflected all the stars in the heavens above. It gave me an eerie feeling, as though we were some sort of celestial sailboat drifting through the universe, surrounded by stars above and below us.

But back to the pool chaise. Well, I’d acquired a product called mySky that sounded intriguing, and is intriguing (when it works). It’s about the size and shape of a portable drill. You point it at any star in the sky, and it tells you what you’re seeing. The pleasant woman’s voice in the earbuds attached to mySky actually tells you far more than you probably want to know about that star, but it’s interesting stuff anyway.

I’ve fiddled unsuccessfully with those star charts on plastic discs and finally gave up on them when I was too dumb to make them work. Besides, I had to keep looking at them with a flashlight, and then my night vision was shot so I couldn’t see anything in the sky anyway.

What fascinates me the most about the stars is that they are unchanging. Coastlines change as the sea erodes the shore; rivers change course as earthquakes and landslides move them; and man bulldozes mountains into parking lots. But the stars? They’re the same as they’ve been for eons.

I look at the Big Dipper and smile when I think that the English call it the Plough and the French call it the *Le Casserole*, or saucepan. So English. So French. And I remem-

ber that escaping slaves in our country once followed “The Drinking Gourd” north to freedom.

Seeing the stars has been a comfort to sailors for centuries, and not just because a clear sky means fair weather. No, the stars led the early navigators on their grand expeditions to find new lands. There is something reassuring about knowing that Polaris is always there in the northern sky, and that, for those in the southern hemisphere, the Southern Cross points the way to the southern celestial pole.

My friend Alec is a professional seaman. We met when he was first officer on a large charter yacht, and I’ve followed his adventures in the Merchant Marine as an officer on cargo ships around the world.

He was in France where, in a small antiques shop in Nice, he came across an old sextant. He was interested, but returned to his yacht. There, the idea of actually owning it festered until he made up an excuse to go ashore to find some nonfat milk. He raced back to the shop, bartered with the elderly owner, and walked out with the sextant.

“When I held that sextant in my hand, I felt many different things,” he wrote. “I could feel the ghost of one sailor’s cold hands, one generation of sea captains passing it down to another generation. Maybe it was responsible for ships safely crossing oceans, maybe it was handed down on a rope to a

lifeboat that was leaving a sinking ship? You don’t know the significance until you are at sea and your life depends on it. It is something worth its weight in gold the minute you cross the 90 fathom curve leaving Spain and Africa. Maybe it’s my destiny to hand this sextant down the line ... maybe God wants this sextant back on the ocean for one more sun sight?”

There we both are with star instruments in our hands. Mine is from the 21st century, all electronics and video screen and soft buttons. Alec’s is 200 years old, made of wood and ivory and faded mirrors and brass Vernier screws. His has the vibrations from two centuries of mariners; mine has AA batteries. Mine came from Amazon, his from a time when ships creaked and sails pulled hard.

But both are for looking at a sky that has never changed. There’s more to the night sky than just those pinpricks of light. There’s history and legend and tales of the sea told and untold.

So, Dad, thanks for leaving me the stars. ✨

