

JUST AN OLD CHART

An unexpected trip down memory lane shows that there's more to traditional navigation than faded ink and forgotten coordinates.

story



It was sort of a spring housecleaning. No, to be honest, it was really just the annual spring ultimatum from my wife: Get rid of all that boat junk scattered around the house and garage.

As a result, I was rummaging around the far dark corner of a closet, and I came across a tightly rolled tube that I couldn't immediately identify. On closer inspection, it turned out to be some old charts I'd taken off our boat. All skippers are pack rats to some extent, and in the new world of chartplotters, I'd forgotten about them.

They were creased and spotted—stained in that peculiar way that charts get after they've been used in times of great concentration. One bore a ring that was certainly from a cup of coffee; another had a dark smear that might have been blood or, hopefully, chocolate; and a third had an oily spot, possibly from a potato chip or sunscreen. They had been marinated, so to speak, in a sauce blended from fear and worry.

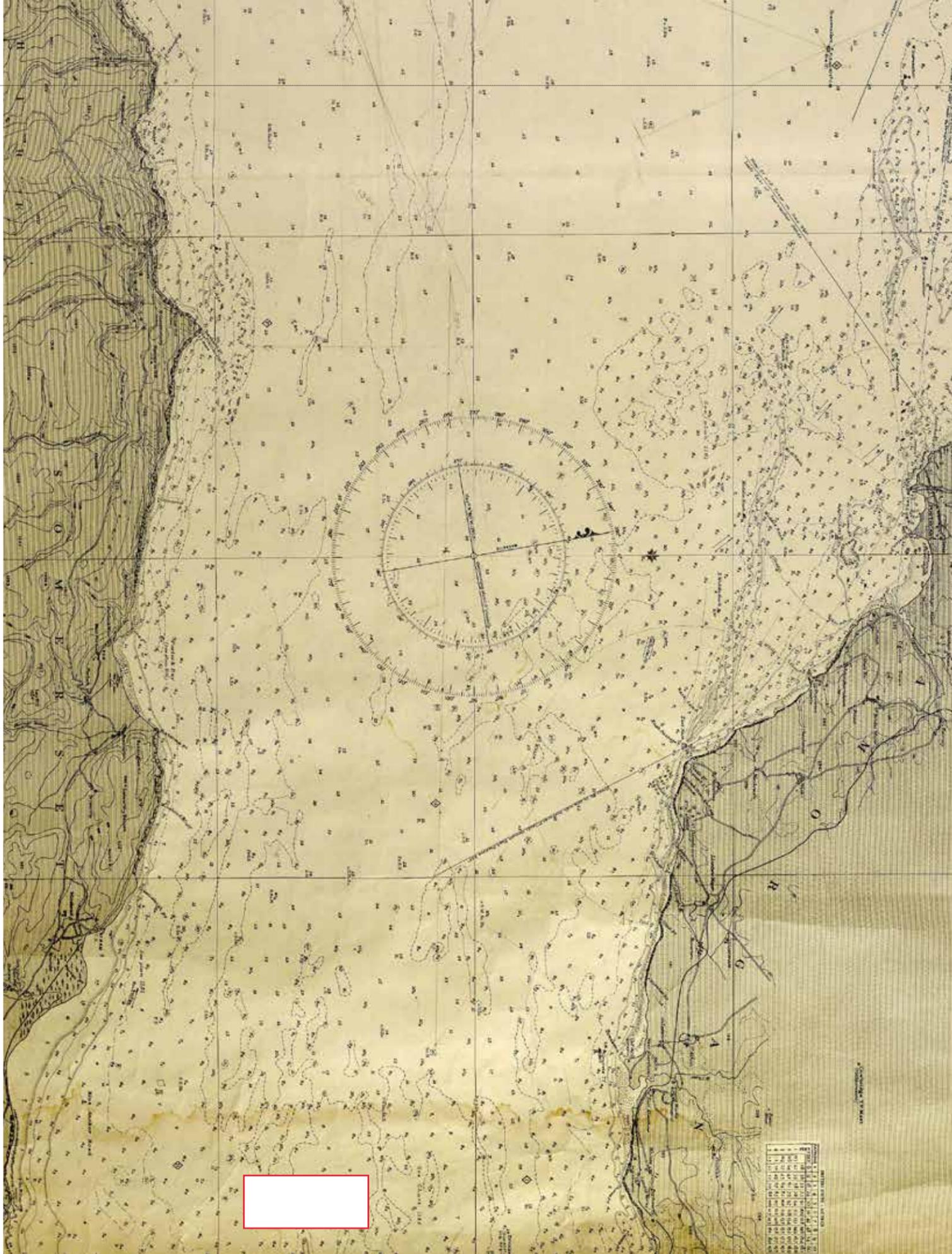
One chart in particular caught my interest. It was a large-scale format covering an area of the coastline north of our home port. Now down on my hands and knees on the floor, I weighted the chart corners and considered the thinly penciled line running northward, through waters notorious for fog, gales and lee shores. Suddenly, I realized that this was a chart I'd used on one particular passage to a regatta. A whole flood of memories came rushing back.

The first notation showed that we'd left our home port with the glow of dawn, and that our course gave us plenty of sea room around a rugged promontory fabled for its winds, seas and voracious appetite for ships of all sizes.

But the position marks were far apart, and the time spans were short; I remembered that we'd made good time motor-sailing that morning. The sea was calm, and visibility was good, so the fixes were spaced at long intervals as we powered north.

But, as the day wore on and the tiny X marks plodded northward, they started moving closer together. I recalled that a sea haze had begun to move in. Then the haze turned to fog, and then it became a fog that would have done Victorian London proud.

With more than two decades elapsed since I had carefully marked each plot on the chart, I had to smile at the increasing frequency of the fixes. Thinking back, I could almost feel the



clinging dampness of the midday fog, the fuel gauge edging steadily downward, and the prospect of an often-fearsome entrance channel somewhere ahead in the grayness. The recollection alone made my palms grow damp all over again.

The chart notations stopped just short of that entrance. I remember that my wife moved to the bow to spot the entrance buoys, and I was far too busy to worry about penmanship on a chart. I can still recall her vague and blurry outline in the pulpit; she was perhaps only 30 feet from the cockpit of our 40-footer, but she was almost lost in the swirling mists. The chart had turned soggy on the cushions, but it had gotten us into the harbor and to a secure mooring. Afterward, it was folded away, still damp, as we thawed out in the cabin. Forgotten as quickly as my earlier worries, it still bears a few furry spots where I erased an iffy fix (and the paper) in favor of a more certain position.

The next chart in the roll took us northward again the next day at a good clip until a gale, unannounced and unexpected, brought us to a halt. Being caught offshore on that nasty stretch of coast would have made me feel worse if the local fishing fleet hadn't also been caught unawares, with several boats disabled by the storm.

A few scribbled calculations in the margin of the chart brought back the agony of a trawler yacht that had left harbor ahead of us. She was only a few miles to windward when we heard her Mayday, but she might as well have been in another hemisphere for all the help we could offer. That boat had taken a breaking sea aboard, and all the forward pilothouse windows had been stove in, cutting the helmsman badly. At that point, we were down to idle speed and our boat was still free-falling off the crests of the breaking seas. There was simply no way we could reach her, but, out of sympathy, seamanship and Samaritanism, I figured a course and distance on the chart, just in case.

Shortly after that, we took our own dusting from a breaking sea, and the decision to run for shelter was suddenly easy to make. All the way back, we listened on the VHF radio to a brave U.S. Coast Guard helicopter pilot as he struggled to airlift the injured man to safety. That chart shows our course as a long loop. A few days later, a straighter line in a steadier hand marks our course after the gale had abated, but the weary chart still bore a gritty powder of salt crystals from the thundering seas on the first attempt.

It's remarkable how a piece of paper, perhaps only a few square feet with a thin pencil line and some notations, can bring back such a vivid array of memories. They are old charts and long out of date, so I'll never use them again, but I carefully rolled up the age-softened paper and put them back in the corner of the closet.

In their own way, those charts are better than a diary. I'd like to enjoy those memories in another few years. ❄