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Summer Studies: Retro Cruising on the Great Lakes

Eternal Springs

It is difficult for a non-sailor to understand the word *anchorage* as a sailor understands it. It implies peace and security. Or anxiety and fear.

Most of us are raised to expect a secure night's sleep, a given that we are normally deprived of only by grievous acts against God or Nature, such as those executed by Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Sleep is something assumed, like the existence of water or, for some people, of God. Many people, perhaps most, go through life without ever thinking otherwise, not questioning or doubting, never expecting anything but peace and security in bed.

For the sailor, ignorance is a good antidote to the apprehension which has come to be the norm for me and most others who get a bit of experience hanging on "the hook." I suppose I anchored several dozen times in total innocence—stop the boat, throw the anchor over the side, hitch the anchor line around a cleat, relax, confident that all's well with the world.

Twenty years ago, when I headed north for the first time, passing through Detour Passage, the North Channel seemed an unspoiled wilderness, somewhere between Eden and Paradise, as innocent as I was about anchoring.

The North Channel is not really a channel in the normal sense of a primary pathway for water flowing. It is simply the northern edge of Lake Huron, but separated from the rest of the Lake by three islands: Drummond, Cockburn, and the 100-mile long Manitoulin.

Though the way there, the first time, had been adventure enough, I arrived with a tremendous sense of accomplishment, having made the 300 miles without

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When you get away from highways, you discover beautiful and little-visited sights—like the Magpie Falls, near Wawa, Ontario.

a single disaster, ready to embark on an even greater adventure. You enter the North Channel, coming from Mackinac Island and the Snows, through Detour Passage which separates the mainland from Drummond Island.

Back then, the only stopping place at Detour was Fred's Bar and Marina, halfway through the passage, right next to the ferry dock which embarked the cars and cottagers to be hauled across to Drummond.

I stopped at Fred's, tying up inside the small break-wall to one of the dozen rickety docks, right outside the bar's picture windows. I walked "uptown," which was a block or so, to the only grocery/general store, and bought a couple cans of supper. Returning, I thought about staying at Fred's overnight, securely tied to shore and two pilings, as snug as a boyhood bed.

But a freighter, one of the 1000' ore boats steaming through Detour Passage from Lake Superior toward the steel mills at Gary, Indiana, alerted me that reality was not identical to my hopes. The freighter threw a

tremendous wake which first nearly beached my boat on Fred's dance floor, then sucked most of water out of the little marina. I decided I'd sleep better, attached to an anchor firmly fastened to earth, so I headed for the islands in the Potagannissing Bay, scattered around the northwest corner of Drummond Island.

A bay of islands like Potagannissing is very enticing but at the same time a little awesome, perhaps dangerous. On the chart there are a host of islands, maybe several hundred depending on how small a pile of rocks you are willing to class as an island.

On the chart, the prominent island in the middle of the bay is called Harbor Island, with a large, south-facing outer bay, a sanctuary from wild winds, and a totally secluded inner bay, the Roman Church of protection and security. For some reason, the chart showed an anchor symbol in the outer bay and nothing in the inner bay, suggesting the outer bay was the place to stay. This seemed a bit heretical, or at least lacking the precision of orthodoxy. This little bit of confusion, along with a forecast for a strong southerly wind and a suspicion that the place would be filled with powerboaters and other undesirables—this was enough to move me to consider some other place.

A little nook between Burnt Island and Wilson Island looked especially promising, with good protection from all winds but northeast, and a fairly uniform depth of 9 to 10 feet, ideal for setting an anchor. In addition, it was about the most northerly of the bay islands, so I would be more thoroughly in the North Channel.

An hour of careful piloting took me right past Harbor Island (sure enough, two masts and three powerboats already there) and into the nook. I took my new 12-pound Danforth anchor (advertised as "hi-tensile" and doubly good at holding a boat), threw it in, cleated off, and popped open a can of beer, first course in my dinner. It took only a few minutes to realize that the boat wasn't staying tethered in one spot but instead was drifting downwind randomly, away from security.

I hauled in the anchor, motored back to my original spot, and repeated the process. Halfway through beer two, I again realized we were drifting.

Repeat. Repeat.

At the finish of beer four, it finally occurred to me that the anchor just might not hold. I had begun getting a "feel" for the anchor line—I hadn't realized before that the motion of the anchor reverberated up the line. I could actually feel the anchor bumping over rocks on the bottom.

I did know that, like wives, it was hard to find an anchor good for all situations. The Danforth was designed for sand and mud, with sharp pointed flukes designed to dig into the bottom when the anchor line was long enough to pull the anchor horizontally across the bottom. It clearly wasn't digging into the rocks on the bottom.

I had another anchor on board, a sort of nondescript thing called a Navy anchor, a miniature version of what hangs on the bows of destroyers. It had been at home when my last boat had sold, so I kept it and brought it along. I hooked up another line to it, threw it over, and felt the line. When it went taut, it felt secure, like it was tied to a piling. I had my sixth course, plus a can of stew, and went to bed to sleep like a rock until morning, waking only occasionally to feel the boat resisting the strong wind, the anchor secure.

I had just quit teaching at Hope College, a small, religious school that used an anchor as its symbol, the way other colleges use wild animals, so perhaps anchors were more prominent in my mind than ever before. The college had a high opinion of itself and taught its students to have high opinions of themselves—reasonable attitudes for Calvinists and others of the elect, a feeling of security represented well by the anchor, at least potentially.



16 *Looking out the entrance to Coursol Bay in the North Channel. The abrupt cliff plunges straight down into 30-foot-deep water. It's a perfect place to catch small-mouth or to take a running skinny-dipping leap from heights you wouldn't normally attempt.*

I had slept like one of the elect and woke to pull the anchor and get underway. The morning was bright and the sun angle low and behind me as I pulled in the anchor line, so I could see the rock-strewn bottom as well as the anchor line. To my amazement, the anchor line had somehow looped itself securely around a large boulder on the bottom, jamming itself tight, 20 feet from the anchor itself which was lying loose on top of another large boulder. It was a half-hour's tugging, and finally motoring around the boulder several times, before I freed the anchor line and pulled the old anchor on board.

The anchor line itself—strong three strand nylon—had been nearly sawed apart by a rough edge on the underwater rock, two strands totally severed and the third about half gone. Had I slept an hour longer or the boat swung a bit more vigorously in the night wind, we probably would have broken loose to drift down on the rocks that we had rounded to get here.

Many of the elect I had known at Hope College and in the town of Holland, Michigan, seemed remarkably similar, amazingly confident of their anchor. When I examine their fastening strands, they seemed to me

well worn and frayed, ancient line that had served its purpose well at one point but was now beyond its useful life, more than two-thirds gone, with little likelihood of withstanding a severe blow, even though the people lived as soundly as I had slept.

Since that time, I've anchored like an atheist, skeptical of what's hidden underwater, doubtful if the chart is accurate or up-to-date or if the chartmaker was competent, expecting nothing to work exactly as it is supposed to.

Typically nowadays, I bring the boat to a dead stop stationary in the water, moving neither forward nor backward, lower the anchor carefully to the bottom, tug slightly so the pointed flukes fall the right direction to dig into the bottom, feed out line steadily as the boat drifts downwind, keeping just enough pressure to feel if the anchor moves at all. When I've let out line five times the depth of the water, I cleat the line and let the boat pull hard to dig the anchor in thoroughly. If there's not much natural wind, I use the engine to power the anchor in. Then, which I'm confident the anchor is holding, I let out more line and fasten everything down.

My anchor drags just often enough to keep me from being confident, and I wake every hour in the night to make sure things are holding.

Last Anchor..

The Indian word for anchor, oddly, is *pontiac*, a combination of *pon*, meaning "stopping," *anit*, meaning "a spear," and *ak*, meaning "a stick." So *anitiyak* was "a spear handle." Thus *Ponitiyak*, a spear-handle planted in the ground to stop a boat. It was probably accidental that the great chief Pontiac was considered the last anchor of the Indian cause—before they were subdued throughout the Great Lakes. And the Pontiac automobile might well be the final symbol of the destruction of the Indian way, the great neck anchor to hold you down.

Borderline Boozin

North of my precarious anchorage there are a number of fine cruising spots, along St. Joseph Island and the north shore—the Portlock harbor area. The problem for Americans going there is that legally you have to check through Canadian Customs before you can set foot on the ground. The locals seem to ignore the border altogether, like the original Indian inhabitants

of the area, but there are dire warnings in all printed material from both the US and Canada about what will happen to cruisers if they fail to check in—things like jail and having your boat confiscated.

It's all a little odd—this boundary between the two countries. It was disputed for a long time, and finally settled after the War of 1812, according to the Treaty of Ghent, by three commissioners appointed for the task—two Americans and one Brit. A geologist, J.J. Bigsby, was appointed as the "expert" to determine the "centerline" of the water channel out of Lake Superior to Lake Huron. But finally it was the British commissioner, a Mr. Bartlett, who was the critical person in drawing the line.

Bartlett was reported to be "accustomed to the heavy dinners and hard drinking connected therewith, of his native environment," a practice which he continued on the sailing ship which carried the party to survey the area and make the final boundary decision. According to the nineteenth-century historian of Drummond Island, Samuel Cook, "It is among the unpublished records of the boundary survey that he indulged in the flowing bowl to such an extent as not only to hinder the work, but also to cause him at times to be the reverse of amiable in his manners."

Mr. Bartlett would apparently get roaring drunk every evening, being mildly pleasant for a short while in the early stages. Then the following day, he would be intractable, irascible, and obstreperous, at least until well past noon, sometimes right up to the cocktail hour. Finally, though, according to historian Cook, "The sailing master

had become somewhat familiar with Mr. Bartlett's moods, as affected by after-dinner potations, and so timed the passages that the difficult places should appear for final determination when Mr. Bartlett would be in his most pliable moods."

One of the main sticking points was whether Drummond Island would be part of the United States and St. Joseph Island part of British Canada. Mr. Bartlett alone seemed to think that all the islands should come under the command of the King. But the sailing master under-trimmed or over-trimmed the sails well enough that the boat arrived at the critical spot between Drummond and St. Joseph at the right time. "The moment had been judiciously chosen," says Cook. "Mr. Bartlett acquiesced, signified to the draghtsmen that the line so suggested was agreed to, and quietly went to sleep in his chair."

Had Mr. Bartlett had one less toddy or the boat gotten there two hours earlier, Drummond and all the lovely little islands of Potagannissing Bay might be Canadian today.

Not that it would make much difference to us sailors.

Dial-a-visa...

Nonetheless, both governments take this arbitrary line very seriously.

The two big items for the Canadians are guns and booze—they don't want the first in at all and they want their additional tax on the second. The Americans are currently hot for drugs, though the agents are on the lookout for illegal aliens and political undesirables as well. A few years back, the Canadian author Farley Mowat was invited down to Michigan to speak, related to an American movie that was made from his book, *Never Cry Wolf*. At the border, the customs agents' computer set off little red flags when his name was entered, and he was refused admission, causing quite a little stink, especially when a newspaper reporter asked why they were keeping him out and the US government couldn't come up with the reason. One agent "guessed" it had something to do with the Vietnam war.

Entering Canada by boat, the nearest Customs offices are in Meldrum Bay, a day's sail east, and in Sault St. Marie, a day's sail northwest. A little closer is Thessalon where, on the dock, there is a telephone and a notice that you must call an 800-phone number, to check in with customs. I've done this several times, in spite of the ludicrousness of it all—if they're going to take my word about whether or not I have contraband aboard, why check at all? Perhaps they think American smugglers are more honest than your average outlaw. Or maybe they've caught dozens of political undesirables that way and told them, on the phone, to go back home.

On the American side, things haven't been too stable. We are required to check back into the U.S. when returning from Canada, but one year I simply couldn't find the office. It had been at Detour but was suddenly not there, closed up, with a "For Rent" sign in the window. The office had also been at Mackinac during the last 20 years, so I went there, only to discover that it had been moved to Drummond Island where it still is today (for a while, anyway).

In its wisdom, the Reagan Administration decided to charge a user fee to Americans for their own customs service—\$25 a year—and civil disobedience is now rampant. Sailors, historically and by virtue of their mode of



travel, tend to think of borders as stupid anyway, and the whole idea of visas, travel permits, check points, duty, and surcharges is offensive. To charge your own citizens \$25 just for the privilege of letting them be scrutinized for smuggling—especially here along the Lake Huron border—is beyond the pale of rationality.

I'm told by Canadians and other foreign sailors that American rules and regulations, and the officers who enforce them, are among the worst in the world, but my experience hasn't been too bad along the Canadian border. The civil servants in Canada have been universally courteous and polite, and the American officers mostly seem peeved at having to screw around with a sailboat. Now, the un-civil servants at Miami—that's another story.

As a result of the bureaucracies, Americans seldom visit the area north of Drummond. I usually pass on by on the way "out" to the North Channel, being properly legal. And returning, I'm usually trying to overcome the loss of the several extra days spent in some perfect anchorage rather than heading home on a reasonable schedule.

In "the North-Channel mooring," you anchor off the stern and tie the bow close to shore, so you can step off the boat onto the rocks. Shown here is our anchorage at Croker Island.

But I have stopped there, once cruising to Portlock and several times coasting along St. Joseph's Island. Early on, I stumbled into Milford Haven, a delightful little bay—really the outlet of a creek—along the southeast shore of St. Joseph's.

It's a completely protected little harbor, with only enough room for a few boats, and there's a summer cottage smack in the middle of the north shore. The first time I stopped, the cottage was unused, and it was an idyllic anchorage, the water like clear green crystal up against the shore thickly wooded with an incredible texture of pine, cedar, and birch. The water surface was alternately like a mirror, reflecting the shore, and absolutely invisible, giving you the impression that your boat is airborne, somehow suspended ten feet above the surface of the ground which was covered with thick fronds of water grass, undulating slightly in the current.

Unfortunately, the two other times I've stopped, the cabin has been occupied, and I've moved on without anchoring, preferring to leave the inhabitants to themselves and to find my own solitude.

I do want to return again, though, since the place is imbued with a peculiar bit of history. It was a place of fascination for the nineteenth-century travellers—that large group of literary and social elite who made expeditions through the Great Lakes, to feed their taste for the unusual, the picturesque, and the bizarre. Margaret Fuller heard the tale with utopian interest; Anna Jameson reported it with alarm; William Cullen Bryant considered it an amazing bit of American exotica.

Milford Haven involved an Englishman, Major William Kingdom Rains, who established his own bit of earthly paradise in the area. He was a Welshman (hence the name, Milford Haven) who spent his early years, as did so many, as an officer in the French/British wars, serving with distinction under the Duke of Wellington. Well after the war, he married Miss Frances Doubleday and retired on half pay. When the opportunity came, he pulled up stakes and moved, with his wife and two children, to Canada. His wife's sister, Eliza Doubleday, accompanied them, and they first settled on a farm near Lake Simcoe, Ontario.

But he wanted to move on, and petitioned the Canadian government for a grant to develop St. Joseph's Island—he had a plan to establish a settlement of 100

families there and to develop “a steam communication” from the Sault and St. Joseph’s back to the foot of Georgian Bay. He didn’t get the free land he wanted, but with two partners, he was able to buy most of the island at a shilling an acre. At the same time, because of his background, he was made a magistrate and commissioned “to preserve order among the Canadian Voyageurs and half Indians” settled in the area. They moved to Milford Haven, opened a sawmill and store, and tried to entice settlers.

Unfortunately, no one came, and the project died. Major Rains, however, stayed on, establishing a farm and trading store at Milford Haven. If he never got rich, he at least survived.

His story, thus far, was pretty typical, or at least not unusual—failed dreams of wealth on the frontier.

However, it appears that his choice to stay at Milford Haven, isolated, was based on other factors. Sometime or other since leaving England, his relationship with his wife Frances had “spread” to his wife’s sister Eliza. Both women, it seemed, loved the same man, loved each other, and he loved them both. Or perhaps it was just convenience. At any rate, they decided just to go with it, which they could do on St. Joseph’s, well away from civilization.

Major Rains apparently never tried to marry Eliza, but they did have four children, to raise alongside the five children that he and Frances had, and all the children used his last name, with no visa problems. Presumably, someone in the triangle objected to living in a polygamous house, as the Mormons on Beaver Island, so the Major built two houses next to each other in Milford Haven, separate families though close and compatible neighbors.

No one outside the families ever knew exactly how the Major divided himself between the two households, but it appeared to be a harmonious relationship for all parties. He lived out his life happily, and was known as an intelligent and bookish man, but quite a recluse.

Of course, even though they kept themselves apart, they became objects of curiosity, even gossip, and their home and living arrangements were apparently a standard item on the sightseeing list for the steamers passing up the St. Mary’s River or going down through the North Channel, though the information



Land-bound tourists never get the sailor's view of Lake Michigan's landmarks, like this approach to the Sleeping Bear, off North and South Manitou Islands...

passed out was often incorrect. Mrs. Jameson said, "The principal proprietor, Major R——, who is a magistrate and justice of the peace, has two Indian women living with him—two sisters and a family by each!—such are the examples sometimes set to the Indians on our frontiers."

After hearing and re-telling the story, William Cullen Bryant added, "It was hinted to me that he had a third wife in Toronto, but I have my private doubts on this part of the story, and suspect that it was thrown in to increase my wonder."

Descendents of the two families reportedly still live on the island, but I have not found out if the cottage in Milford Haven is owned by one of them, or by a newcomer.

Polyester..

Nearby Milford Haven is a lovely anchorage—Beef Island—but in the last ten years it has been amazingly despoiled by hunters or fishermen from the mainland, who set up camps on the island and leave piles upon piles of garbage and debris on the shore. We stopped on our way home this last trip but didn't stay. On the sandy beach I counted over 300 broken bottles and smashed cans, mostly beer cans. There was also a rusting bed-spring that had been abandoned, a damaged umbrella,

a metal cupboard, a steel oven (rusted through), about 20 plastic quart jugs which had held oil for mixing with outboard gasoline, and two shirts made of some undegradable cloth.

On the other side of St. Joseph Island is Neebish Island. “Neebish” apparently means “bad soup” in the Algonquin tongue—it is a mystery how the island acquired that name.

Originally, Drummond Island and this whole area was called Pontaganipy, related somehow to Potagan-nissing, but also with unknown significance.

Boobism

On our latest cruise, we stopped overnight in DeTour, on our way home after being out for 8 weeks. They have a nice new Michigan State marina there now, and they don't even mind sailboats. We tied up, got fuel, showered, and welcomed ourselves back to civilization by visiting an honest-to-god low-priced American grocery store, the first we'd seen in a month.

The big powerboat next to us had a TV set—we could see the glow after dark—and we were trying to recall the last time we'd been in front of the tube.

Gale warnings for Sunday encouraged us to layover an extra day in Detour, during which we picked up our first copy of the *Detroit Free Press* in two months, and read it cover to cover.

Included every Sunday in the *Free Press* is the “TV Book,” a listing and guide to TV programs for the coming week. We didn't read through the whole thing—instead, we looked at the “Highlights” section for every day, in which some unnamed editor at the *Free Press* selects the best that is offered for the TV viewer.

For Sunday, the pick was an evening soap-opera-made-for-tv-movie called “Naked Lies” about a female district attorney whose life gets complicated when she has to argue before a judge she is sleeping with. According to the *Free Press*, “As the trial progresses, the focus shifts in the courtroom and the judge's chambers when she uncovers a shocking piece of evidence that threatens to destroy her case, her career, and her romance.”

For Monday, the critic's pick is a season premier called “Parenthood,” in which “Characters and conflicts besiege an extended family. Based on the movie...” which we've never seen or even heard of.



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Finding your way through the rock-strewn North Channel, you must depend on aids to navigation. Shown here are three generations: a painted bulls-eye (well over 100 years old), a pyramid of wood held down by rocks, and a modern cement and steel triangle, destined to last 1000 years....

For Tuesday, the best offered is "Rescue 911" in which "Operator distracts gunman holding hostages; rescue of beached whales; accident ignites ambulance; boy chokes on marble." Honest to God.

For Wednesday, the TV highlight is "Meet the Raisins," the story of the California Raisins.

For Thursday, the choice is "Glory Days," when "Fopiano's friends chide him for dating a large woman."

Friday, it's "Candid Camera," the only description given being "Host Allen Funt." (Ah, fame!)

And to complete the week, Saturday's pick is "Empty Nest," in which "Harry has an angina attack."

We don't miss TV. In fact, being TV-less is by itself ample apologia for any cruise.