

Off Soundings Club gets cranking on its 62nd season

— "An undesirable person who frequents wharves and boatyards."

Now celebrating its sixty-second year, the Off Soundings Club is one of the more venerable sailing institutions in the Mystic area.

You won't find the club on a local chart, though. Off Soundings draws its name from the term for water that is too deep to obtain a depth measurement by using a hand leadline. It is a "paper" yacht club, with no clubhouse or facilities.

The club, whose archives are housed at Mystic Seaport, is holding its annual meeting and dinner on Saturday, April 6, at the Coast Guard Academy Officers Club. Local officers of the club include Vice Commodore Andy Anderson of Stonington and Rear Commodore Frank Bohlen of Mystic.

Off Soundings is known

primarily for its popular spring and fall two-day race series, providing competitive racing for 150 to 180 boats and upwards of a thousand sailors. All the boats are cruising/racing boats, and they range from 23 to 62 feet in length.

This year, Spring Off Soundings races from Watch Hill to Block Island on June 14 and around Block Island on June 1. Fall Off Soundings races from New London to Shelter Island, N.Y., on Sept. 13, with a race in Gardiners Bay on Sept. 14.

A secret to the club's popularity according to historian and former Commodore Bill Ames of Mystic, is the fact that each race series is also a three-day cruise. The fleet always "goes somewhere" on the Friday race, ending up in a nice harbor for a shore party, followed by a Saturday race and another party.

The boats, which come from as



Wharf Rat

John Brooks

far away as Great South Bay, Long Island to the west, and Buzzards Bay to the east, usually cruise home on Sunday.

Many famous yachts and sailors have raced in the Off Soundings fleet over the years. The late Rod Stephens of the famous naval architecture firm Sparkman and Stephens was a past commodore, and the races have often showcased the latest from top designers like his brother Olin Stephens, C&C, Rod Johnstone of Stonington and Bob Evelyn of Noank.

While the racing is close, sportsmanship is very important. Fouls are infrequent, and protests are frowned upon. Both take away from the fun — and protest hearings infringe on time for the

party. Many members treat the series as mini-reunions of sorts; friendships and friendly rivalries go back several generations.

Dolphin of Mystic, Robin Lockwood's Nat Herreshoff-designed sloop built in 1914, is still winning trophies. Other classic yachts often seen at Off Soundings series include Mystic Seaport's schooner *Brilliant*, Van Brown's Herreshoff *Neith*, and the Coast Guard Academy Luders yawls.

As with any other sailing club, there are some great stories. And these are true. Like the time Off Soundings made the cover of *Sports Illustrated* in the mid-1950s in an article titled "The Fashionably Dressed Yachtsmen

and Yachtswomen of the Off Soundings Club."

Looking at the photos, I saw some familiar faces, looking a lot younger. The red pants and sweaters haven't changed much in 40 years.

There was the time that a local school teacher was "ill" on Friday, then made the mistake of winning his class in Off Soundings that day. The racing performance rated a nice headline in the *New London Day* sports page Saturday morning, causing the school's principal to choke while reading it with his morning coffee.

The annual meeting is the club's only activity besides the two-race series. The evening includes cocktails and dinner, trophy awards, and a movie of highlights of the year's racing. By scheduling the "official" business meeting during cocktails, the club guarantees that it will be mercifully brief.

Ames noted that the average meeting length is "approximately two minutes, but it depends on the commodore. I may hold the record at about 30 seconds!"

He noted that the officers' meetings held three times a year do take longer, usually several hours.

Sailors looking forward to the 1996 Off Soundings season will note a streamlined guest-racer invitation process, as well as the participation of 12-meter former America's Cup yachts in the spring series. Henry duPont's beautiful classic 60-foot motorsailor *Nor'Easter* will once again be the race committee boat.