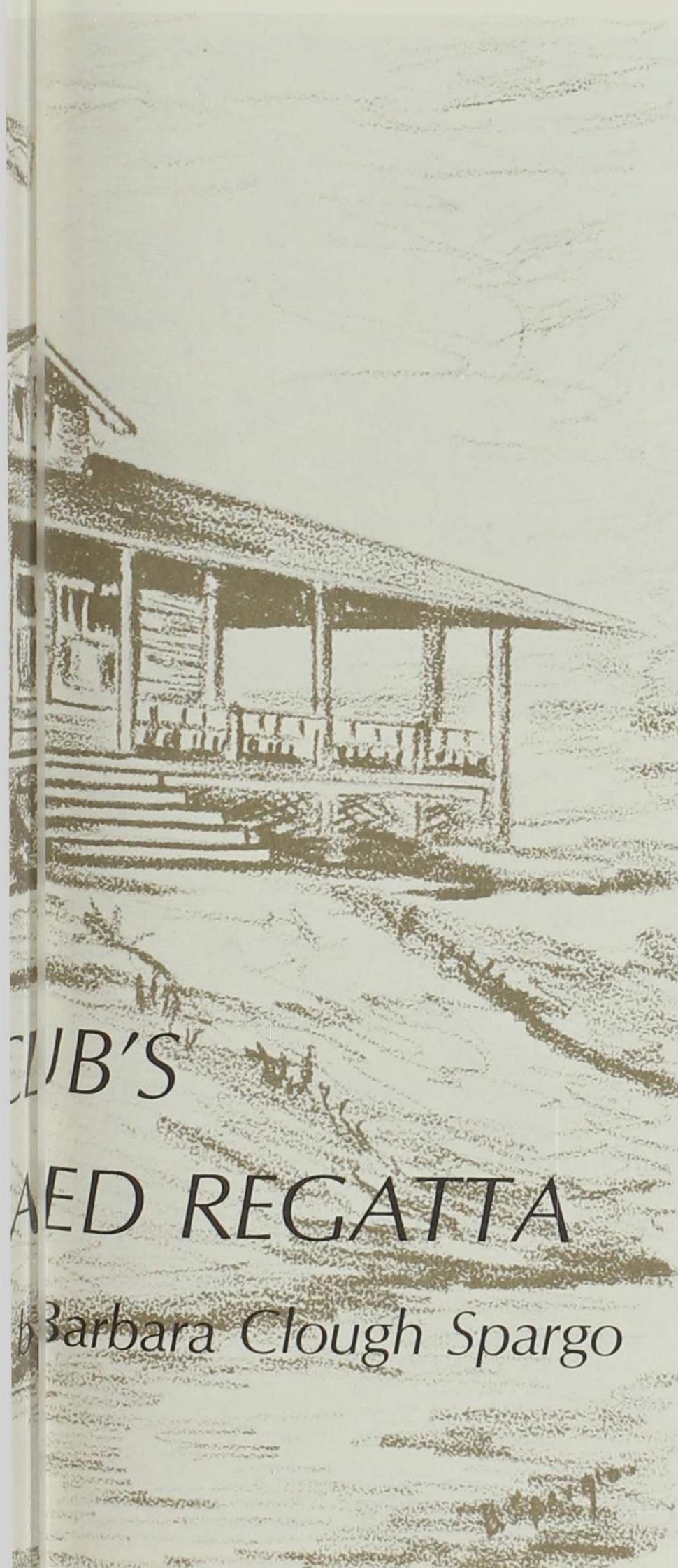


THE DAVENPORT BOAT CLUB

CELEBRATE

The Davenport Boat Club (author's sketch)



CLUB'S

MAILED REGATTA

Barbara Clough Spargo

The Greatest Aquatic Event in the History of Davenport—500 boats and 50,000 spectators expected! 400 visitors coming from Wilton and 2,000 from Muscatine!”

With that rousing headline, the Davenport *Times* of July 3, 1912 helped set the stage for a speedboat regatta to determine the National Champion of the Mississippi Power Boat Association. The fastest boat racers in the United States were coming to Davenport, Iowa to compete on July 4th for more than \$3,000 in cash prizes plus other prestigious plaques and awards, including the famous Webb Cup to be awarded along with \$1,400 in cash. Thousands of bleachers lined the waterfront in preparation for the huge crowds expected.

At the urging of Gar Wood—the “king” of powerboat racing at that time—the four-year-old Davenport Boat Club was the enthusiastic sponsor of the event. Always famous for thinking big, the boat club in its ensuing twenty-one years of life never quite recovered financially or otherwise from trying to run the glamour race of the era.

Speedboat racing in 1912 was a new sport, almost as new as the 20th century itself. The development of an efficient marine gasoline engine a few years earlier had started a revolution that rapidly changed the face of boating. The special “chug, chug” noises of familiar steam launches with prairie-schooner tops and side curtains gradually gave way to luxurious gasoline-powered yachts. Outboard “pop-pops,” originally shaped like coffee grinders (and like coffee, priced by the pound) were becoming racing machines.

Boat people everywhere dedicated themselves to increased speed on the water, always experimenting with both motors and hull shapes. The object was to cram in as much power as a given hull could hold, and for several decades speed replaced comfort as the goal of most boaters.



The Davenport harbor on the morning of July 4, 1912 (SHSI)

The boating boom had already reached Davenport when an avid group of Quad-City motorboaters met one evening in February 1908 to form a club having something for everyone—not only boaters, but all river-watchers, hunters, and fishermen as well. The original constitution even provided for a committee to protect the fish by placing snags in the river to stop the drawing of seines. Wild rice was to be planted to attract birds. That first night, 100 people paid an initiation fee of \$3 and annual dues of \$2, with a membership goal set at 500 persons for the start of the boating season. The group immediately joined regional powerboat associations and began to plan major regattas.

Within a few weeks the club had obtained from the City Council a lease on a 600-foot strip of land at the end of Scott Street between the river and the railroad tracks. It cost just a dollar per year but it was no simple project to transform this area from a veritable dump into park-like grounds. Volunteer labor, however, ac-

complished quite a lot. The club also obtained permission from the Corps of Engineers to construct in the river a breakwater to form a harbor for mooring boats in the swampy area directly downstream. From their own dredging operations upstream near the Water Works, the Engineers provided the new organization with as much as two barge loads of rock per day for fill purposes, and also assisted in dredging the entire area for several weeks. In years to come, the old swamp continuously silted in, but it was a usable harbor most of the time. With the construction of a lean-to shanty of corrugated metal about the size of a one-car garage, the Davenport Boat Club was ready for a new world of speed.

S ometime early in 1912, with regatta ideas in their dreams, the members felt strong enough to make plans for a long-desired club house with wide porches on three sides. In later years, several people recalled being *the* one to dig the first spadeful of dirt when con-

struction began that spring. With great effort put forth by everyone, the house was apparently completed within hours of the big regatta. Indeed, while boaters were registering by the hundreds on that July 4th morning, the club members were literally racing to complete construction of their club house, still hammering and sawing in the midst of the chaos. Nearly two hundred boats had docked at the club harbor by 11:30 AM, and many more thundered over the horizon both singly and in caravans.

Those coming from upstream experienced longer and longer delays waiting for a pilot at \$5 per trip to lead one boat at a time through the treacherous Rock Island Rapids to regatta headquarters downstream. Finally, so many boaters were clogging the Mississippi that a scheduled parade of boats was cancelled and the races necessarily postponed for many hours.

There were many categories of competition according to the size and type of boat—inboard or outboard engines—but interest focused on the Webb trophy and the powerful hydroplanes fighting with fury for it. (In simple terms, a hydroplane is a type of boat that skims on top of the water instead of plowing through it—a “planing” versus a “displacement” hull.) The typical racing hydroplane of this early regatta was perhaps forty feet long with powerful engines that could zoom the boat over the water at speeds near fifty miles per hour. The highest speed of the great sailing ships of the past was about twenty miles per hour; early launches sometimes reached eighteen miles per hour. No one really knows what speed the favorite contestant of the 1912 regatta might have attained. James Pugh of Dubuque, Iowa, the previous year’s winner of the Webb Cup did arrive in Davenport with his new \$35,000



Racers and spectators at the speedboat regatta, July 1912 (SHSI)

hydroplane, *Disturber III*, said to be able to develop 550 horsepower. Before the races, Pugh tested it on the river and shipped the boat back to Chicago without entering a single race. The tests had shown him that if the engine were opened full speed, the hull would disintegrate.

One local boatbuilder and mechanic, Harry Godley, well understood Pugh's predicament. Godley was constantly experimenting and had previously designed one of the first hydroplanes which used the step principle instead of a flat hull. With that boat, known as *Ugly Duckling*, he won many medals in local races, but was not so lucky with a later design, *Ugly Duckling III*. In a local championship race, it developed a commanding lead, then suddenly "conked out," throwing engine parts and pieces and hull all over the river.

In the 1912 regatta, another local powerboater, Bill Stegen, raced a borrowed boat, a single-step hydroplane that reached 29 miles per hour to take fifth place in its class. No Davenport entry took any of the big money prizes, as, of course, the competitors were of national championship caliber.

One of the key challengers was a monstrous hydroplane known as *Wigwam II*, shipped to Iowa from Astoria, Oregon. Sizable crowds watched it being unloaded from the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy railroad station at the foot of Perry Street on the morning before the races were to begin. With Pugh out of the races, bets ran high on the Oregon entry.

The Corps of Engineers had set the race course, starting west of the Government

Bridge, running under the Crescent Bridge to a point opposite Suburban (Credit) Island and back.

When the races finally did get under way, they were almost over before the judges could sort out who, when, where, or what was taking part in a given contest. Somehow they succeeded. The scene was a carnival of slamming, pounding noise, motion, and roaring color, mingled with death-defying spins and turns that required instant timing and flawless judgment to survive.

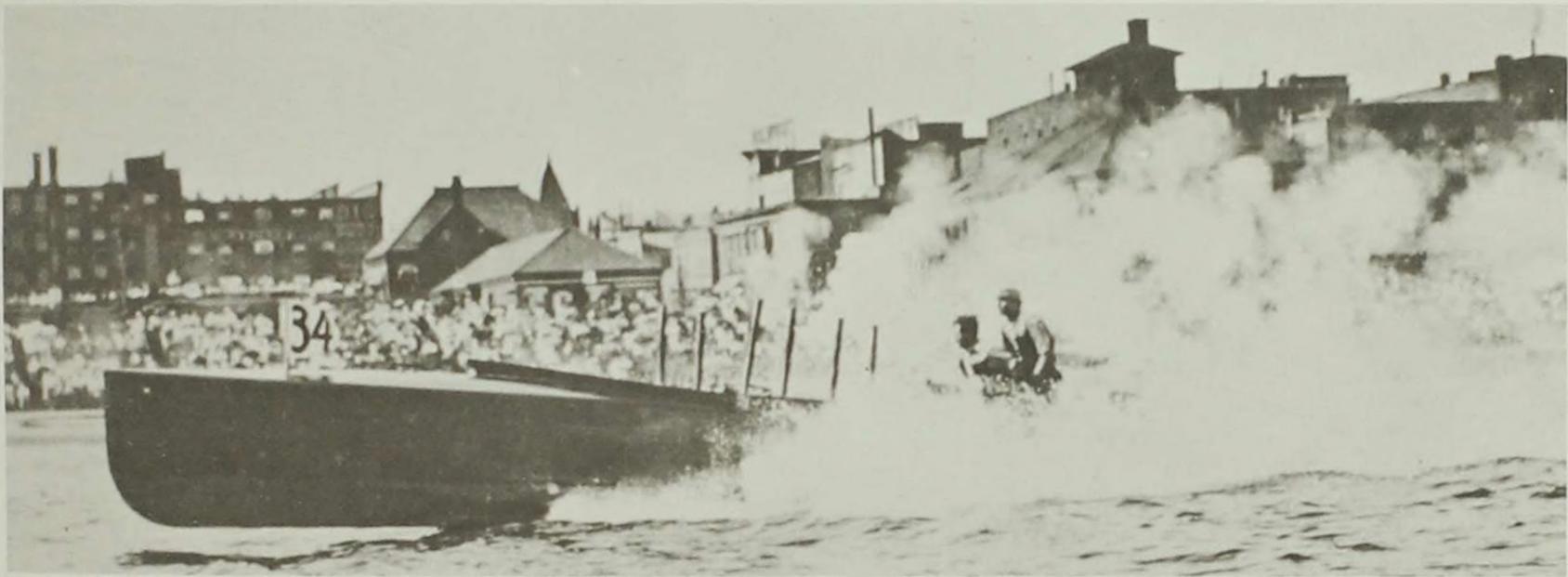
Only a few seconds separated the winners from the losers, but the top boats did deserve their victories. These powerful machines were well-tested and well-financed; their drivers were furiously competitive, ebullient about power boat racing. The ultimate winner of every race and the Webb Cup was *Baby Reliance*, a second-step hydroplane, thirty-two feet long, which surged along at just under fifty miles per hour, and was driven by John J. Ryan of the Smith-Ryan Boat Company. This was a Chris-Craft firm, a leader for many years in national speed racing, and its owner Chris Smith along with Gar Wood succeeded in packing more and more brute force into each successive effort.

Even if one did not care for the ear-splitting thunder and raucous speed of the hydroplanes, there was a spectacular river display to watch that final evening. It was a star-studded night for fireworks, and it featured a parade of elaborate floats on river barges, including such varying themes as "Washington Crossing the Delaware," and "Niagara Falls," gloriously climaxed by one float confidently proclaiming, "Every Year a Better Year in Davenport."

Every year was not really better for the Davenport Boat Club, although it remained a part of the riverfront scene for 21 more years. After the extravagant and clamorous regatta of 1912, the club turned its attention to simpler and quieter things such as cruis-

Note on Sources

Persons and descendants of persons who participated in the Davenport Regatta provided helpful information for this article. They include Burdick N. Richardson, Emeline Godley (Mrs. B.F. Driscoll), Bill Stegen, William Hetzel, Grover Waldman, and Naoma Kistenmacher Buooa. Other accounts of the event and related material appeared in the Davenport *Times* of 1908, 1909, and 1912. Also helpful were D.H.C. Phillips-Birt, *Famous Speedboats of the World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1959) and William Wallace, *Boating* (New York: MacMillan Co., 1964).



Charging along the Mississippi, July 1912 (SHSI)

ing comforts and bill-paying. The tempo of life became slower, almost as if the club had retired. People sat on the wide lawn enjoying sandwiches, drinking beer, sometimes canoeing or swimming, running their boats more casually, and always ready to welcome "beautiful people" on boats travelling up and down the Mississippi. It was always a great day, for example, when the Mayo brothers from Rochester, Minnesota, modeling immaculate yachting attire, landed their vessel at the Davenport Boat Club dock. Their yacht carried on board not only a small launch but, wonder of wonders, a two-seater Cadillac automobile swaying in a sling on the deck.

Local boats couldn't quite equal that one,

but old-timers recall with pride and envy many large cruisers there with polished, syrup-colored decks, one "monster" Gar Wood runabout, and several luxurious cabin boats. Outboards bumped the water in increasing numbers, but organized racing was only sporadic and usually informal. The membership of the Davenport Boat Club gradually declined, especially during the Depression. After Municipal (now John O'Donnell) Stadium was built nearby in 1931, disputes arose over rights to the shoreline between the boat club and the Davenport Park Board. In 1933 the city finally condemned the property, terming it an "eyesore." Nothing like the big regatta would ever be seen there again. □

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