

Bahamian Workboats – Schooners, Sloops and Smacks

By Jane Minns —Photos by Basil Minns

Forty-eight years have passed since the first Out Island Regatta was held in 1954. At that time a fleet of fishing boats with wells sealed, canvas sails patched, and fresh paint hastily slapped on rough wooden hulls, gathered in Elizabeth Harbour to race. And race they did. They were true working vessels. To increase their sail power many of the smacks added the smaller sails from their dinghies.

In retrospect it's difficult to believe that these vessels were the forerunners of today's sleek hulls with their high masts, built not for work but for the sole purpose of racing at a multitude of venues throughout the islands. The development of Bahamian sloop racing and the controversies surrounding it have been well documented elsewhere.

We are a nation of islands, an archipelago, stretching for 750 miles from Grand Bahama and Bimini in the northwest to Inagua in the south east. Even after the advent of motor-powered vessels and aircraft much of Bahamian inter-island transport was powered by the wind. Well into the first half of the 20th century islanders were still very much dependent upon wind-driven vessels for fishing, sponging and the transportation of livestock, farm produce and people.

Sponging and the Bahamian Schooner

Until 1939 when a fungus wiped out over ninety per cent of the Bahamian spongebeds, most schooners were built for sponging. A typical vessel was about fifty feet overall in length (about thirty-five feet on the keel), carried two masts, had a long bowsprit and was typically gaff-rigged with lots of canvas sail. The vessels carried a crew of twenty. Stacked on the deck were eight to ten two-man dinghies.

Some spongers worked nearby their home islands part of the year, but in season (October to June) the majority would head for the big "Mud". This lay on the Great Bahama Bank west of Andros Island. Prior to the blight these sponge grounds were among the most productive in the world.

Having loaded the mother vessel prior to departure with staples including barrels of salt-beef, the men were prepared to remain away from home for a month or two on each trip, augmenting their food supply with catches of fish, conch and turtle. Cooking was carried out on a woodburning fireplace in the cook-house located amidships. Most eating was done on deck.

Sponging was tedious, hard work and low-paying. The dinghies were manned by a sculler and a bowman or "hooker". To "scull" is defined by Webster's Dictionary as "to propel a boat by means of a large oar resting in a notch in the transom and worked

thwartwise with a turning motion.” More simply put, the sculler held the oar with his left hand and pushed and pulled, using his right hand to help on the pull stroke.

The “hooker” stood in the bow of the boat with a wooden glass-bottomed bucket, appropriately called a sponge bucket. He held a long pole with two steel prongs bent into an “L” shape on the end. Using his sponge bucket to survey the bottom, the hooker would call instructions to the sculler, “show from you”; “pull to you”; “let her go ahead”; or “back her” until he was in position to hook the sponge from where it was attached to the bottom. He quickly twisted it away and pulled it up into the dinghy.

Each dinghy brought its day’s harvest to the mother-ship, where the sponges were laid out on deck to dry or taken to a near-by cay. Sponges are animals and when drying they emit a sickening odor. Once dried they were placed in a “kraal,” made by poking sticks into the sand, so that they could soak in seawater. Then they were beaten to get the black muck out, rinsed in the sea and once again dried in the sun, this time ending up soft and pliable. When sufficient sponges had been cured, the next step was to re-wet them so they could more easily be packed in sacks to be loaded aboard. The vessel sailed to Nassau where its cargo was offered for sale at the Sponge Exchange. There’s much more to be told about sponging including the role of the Greek merchants, all the “sorters and clippers” employed in the sponge packing houses, and the inequities associated with the trade. One fact is particularly noteworthy, however. At one time almost 6,000 men and women made a living from sponges, nearly one-third of the then working population of the Bahamas. Added to this number were the boat-builders. According to David G. Campbell, at the height of the trade there were 265 schooners. 322 sloops and 2,808 dinghies in the sponging fleet.

The Nassau Market Range

Smacks lined up along the waterfront. Fresh grunts, turbots and yellow tails dipped out of a well and strung on a silver top string to carry home. Goggle eyes from Spanish Wells. Grouper fresh from the sea. Conch to be broken out for scorch conch; or maybe you prefer it dried for soup. Stands displaying Exuma Onions, Eleuthera tomatoes and pineapples; Guinea and yellow corn grits, bananas and mangos, dilly and soursop in season .

In 1931 Nassau’s population was less than 20,000, a third of the total for the Bahamas. In 1953 it was still less than 50,000, at that time a little more than half of the entire population of all the islands. Unlike today, little produce was imported from abroad. Both the Nassauvian and the islander benefited from this inter-island trade; they were dependent on each other. The city people were assured of a supply of fresh fruit and vegetables in season. The island boats brought sheep, goats, and some pigs to be

slaughtered and processed at the nearby abattoir. The money the islanders received for their produce was spent in Nassau to purchase store-bought goods not available at home.

Fishing smacks were sloops with wells to keep their catch alive. It was only recently that Bahamians would consider eating frozen seafood. Even today, in Nassau one encounters an evening traffic jam caused by cars stopped at the Montagu landing; the drivers and their passengers eager to buy fresh grouper, snapper, jacks or conch from fishing boats there. Most fish in the past were captured using fish pots or by handlining. Jacks, goggle eyes and snappers were netted, and still are. Getting overboard for fish, crawfish or conch was unheard of. Today the fishers use motorboats, dive for conch and spear grouper and crawfish.

Most smacks had at least one or two dinghies. Some dinghies had a single mainsail. Others were just sculled. Fishing dinghies, similar to small smacks, had wells. As mentioned above the large smack was actually a sloop, which was a single masted version of the schooner with a mainsail and jib. Smaller than the latter, the sloop ran thirty-four feet overall (twenty-four feet on the keel). Like the schooner it had sleeping accommodations, and cooking was done on deck using an open wood-burning cookbox. Costing about a third of the price of a schooner, it too was used in the sponge trade.

Crawfishing

After the decimation of the sponge beds which left so many Bahamians almost destitute, Bahamian fishermen realized the market for spiny lobster in Florida was an open one and profitable. They adapted the same technique used in sponging to this new enterprise. For example, the Abaco fishermen, rather than use a “mother boat” as their base, sailed their dinghies to the area where they would crawfish, carrying supplies with them and building temporary thatched huts ashore to live in.

Each morning they sailed out to the fishing grounds. Once there, they would lower the sail. The sculler stood in the stern as usual following the directions of the bowman who scanned the bottom looking through his waterglass. Sighting a crawfish habitat, the bowman used a tickler which was a metal rod attached at a right angle to a long pole. With this he “tickled” the crawfish out from under a reef or ledge. The bowman then passed the tickler to the sculler to hold while he placed the bulley-net, which was also on a long pole, over the crawfish entangling it in the net, and pulled it up into the boat. Because there was no refrigeration, all the crawfish at the end of the day were placed alive in a scow to be kept there until the arrival of the boat from Florida. Today crawfish are either speared or caught in traps, and often sold to a processor to be frozen for export.

Getting Around From Island To Island

Going to Nassau to see the doctor or to take the children to visit grandma? The only way to travel was by sailboat. People today still remember the schooners with names like “Marietta”, “Galvanic”, “Blanche Eva”, “Eclipse,””Columbia” and “Invincible.” Sloops named “Frolic”, “Gold River”, “Sydney”, “Nomic”, “Bright Eyes” and “Celeste” all plied the waters between Exuma, Long Island and Nassau.

Wind is free, but it’s also fickle. It comes and goes. Some days there’s too much and others not enough— or none at all. With a fair wind you’d be in Nassau in two days. Becalmed on the way, you might be anchored for days. With a gale or unexpected hurricane you could be holed up in a cove in the cays, fearing for your life. In some cases the passengers resorted to eating up much of the produce they were carrying to sell in Nassau.

People remember being holed up in the cays for days because of high winds. Some tell of being becalmed overnight between George Town and Long Island. Another person recalls spending days and days traveling from Nassau to Exuma because of light winds and having to tack back and forth seemingly forever without getting anyplace.

There are stories of losses too. The Sloop “Iris” was hit by lightning while sponging on the “Mud”. Eleven men were lost. The “Unique” went aground in George Town during the 1926 hurricane. Kermit Rolle’s uncle some years ago told of schooners being found far inland on the southside of Great Exuma after the same storm.

Following World War II the people of Rolle Town in an enterprising community effort built a sloop, aptly named “Lady Rolle”. It met its demise when a ground swell caused it to sink off Man-o-War Cay.

The builders, captains and crews of Bahamian sloops and schooners are to be saluted. These simple sailing vessels, constructed in Andros, Abaco, New Providence, Exuma, Ragged Island and Long Island, played a vital role in fishing, sponging and transportation of people and goods. For well over a hundred years they were the only links connecting the many, scattered islands of the Bahamian archipelago.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING:

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