

by Philip Howard

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OCRACOKE, N.C.

The old fisherman drew alongside in his crabpot-laden skiff. "Where are you from?" he shouted over the whine of his engine.

"Ocracoke!" we yelled.

Ain't never seen a rig like that before," he marveled. The "rig" was the Mary E., last of the Maine clipper schooners.

Actually the boat captain, and crew were from New York. On their way from Key West to Boston they had ventured into Ocracoke Island's Silver Lake Harbor on North Carolina's Outer Banks.

As part of the Bicentennial Sail jointly sponsored by the National Park Service and "Sea Ventures," a New Jersey-based educational organization, the Mary E. was being used as learning motivation for students in schools near various East Coast Parks. Bound for Manteo, farther north, the schooner made a stop at Ocracoke and was detained by bad weather for several days.

Schooner Mary E:

[\(Click to go to the Mary E's official web site\)](#)

While on Ocracoke Meryl Silverstein, the onboard educator, first mate, cook and deckhand made arrangements for our students to inspect the ship. But instead of giving us the usual 20-minute program, Capt. Teddy Charles invited us to sail to Manteo, 70 miles north. Within two hours, 13 Ocracoke high school students, three adult supervisors, Silverstein and the skipper were sailing out of the harbor with excited and anxious mothers, friends and teachers waving.

The Mary E. is the only historically authentic vessel regularly sailing in New York waters. She was built of oak in Bath, Maine, in 1906. Her two big masts are pine. Originally she was a fishing vessel, carrying four or five dories; her hold, redesigned as a passenger cabin, once stored up to five tons of mackerel. In 1968 she was rebuilt stem to stern by W.T. Donnel. Capt. Charles bought her in 1974 as a passenger windjammer.

From the beginning our trip was a learning experience, one both students and adults were willing to accept with excitement.

“Stand by to raise the foresail!” came the order. “Untie the halyards! Ready on the throat? Ready on the peak?” In no time the foresail was harnessing the legendary winds of Cape Hatteras.

“Trim the sails! Secure the halyards! Secure the sheets!” With all sails raised and a good wind, the Mary E. could cruise at six to eight knots.

Our captain knew his profession. Patiently he and Meryl taught their novice crew the rudiments of sailing by insisting that we do what they could easily have done more quickly and efficiently. For our part we learned well. “David, take the helm. Steady on 045.” Each turn experienced the feel of the wheel. “Don’t oversteer,” he cautioned. “One or two spokes is plenty.” We sailed up Pamlico Sound.

Fifty-three feet long on deck, 72 feet overall, the Mary E. had looked small from the dock, but actually proved quite large. The 18 of us were divided among three watches: on-deck, below, and off.

Keeping on course by compass and “lines of position” from lighthouses and other landmarks, we sailed until 1830. Off Chicamacomico Channel we dropped anchor just before dark. It wasn’t ideal. “Too open; no protection,” the captain said. “But it’s all we’ve got.”

We kept our eye on the anchor till dawn, making sure we were not drifting; rising winds could suddenly force us aground on one of the treacherous shoals so abundant in the area.

In the serene starlight we sat on deck with nothing to disturb the silence save the gentle splashing of waves against the hull and the rhythmic creaking of the rigging. While being rocked to sleep in our berths we lay rethinking the history, just as we had relived it earlier in the day.

The legendary iron fist with which many a captain ruled his ship may seem severe to 20th century city-dwellers. Undoubtedly it was often tyrannical, but the necessity for discipline aboard a sailing vessel was obvious to us after only a few minutes at sea.

Our safety and our lives depended on the skill and authority of our captain. His word was the law. Had we stopped to question, we might easily have been hit by a swinging boom or even entangled in the halyard. We learned the value of proper coiling of ropes, instant

reaction to orders, and dependable recognition of water conditions.

We also discovered that mutiny is a very real possibility even today. That night in the focsle Capt. Charles told us of a near-mutiny aboard another of his vessels in the Caribbean several years ago. Out of sight of land the auxiliary engine died in a calm sea. Within a few days the drinking water ran low and the crew panicked. The captain averted mutiny only by the aid of the U.S. Coast Guard.

In 24 hours we learned that life at sea was far from easy. The Mary E. was built as a work boat and our quarters below deck were cramped with life jackets, bunks, stowage, ladders, a small head and the galley. A remarkable cast iron wood stove designed for wooden sailing vessels was used to cook all meals. Washing up and changing clothes was so inconvenient we slept in them, saturated though they were with salt spray and woodsmoke.

As sleep silenced our exhausted crew, I lay thinking of the long months at sea the early sailors endured and the kinds of men such a life must have produced. It was easy to understand their desperate pleasure-seeking in port.

At 0500 the first watch started breakfast; we were under sail in half an hour. A moderate southwest breeze pushed us at nearly four knots towards Shallowbag Bay, abreast of Manteo on Roanoke Island.

As the Mary E. glided into the channel I manned the helm while others were aloft repairing shrouds. I imagined myself to be Sir Walter Raleigh in 1584, leading the ships that brought into these same waters the first white settlers of North America, the famous "Lost Colony."

By noon we had docked and bid farewell to Capt. Charles and Silverstein and to the tantalizing segment of history they had shown us.

A seafarer lives in the heart of us all.