



A Brilliant Race in Oyster Bay

Written by Dagmar Fors Karppi Tuesday, 02 June 2009 09:23

Oyster Bay Harbor provided a mooring to the 76-year old Brilliant, a career “woman” – a schooner out of Mystic Seaport and her job is teaching sailing. The Brilliant was in Oyster Bay starting on May 23 to take part in the Classic Boat Race run by Seawanhaka Corinthian Yacht Club and Oak Cliff Yacht Club. The race committee members are Hunt Lawrence and Donn Costanza.

During the summer months, a constant string of teenagers come aboard the Brilliant in groups of nine for either five- or 10-day voyages, and work together under the guidance of the professional crew to safely sail hundreds of miles and learn traditional seamanship skills.

The Brilliant program focuses on educating participants about sail handling and theory, teamwork, being a good shipmate, stewardship, navigation, and proper seamanship. All teens are expected to fully participate in all aspects of daily vessel operations from hauling on lines and steering to helping in the galley.

They learn how to sail by the sweat of their brows as they hoist the sails, swab the decks and polish the brass that gleams, surrounded by glowing well-cared for teak.

Constructed in the Nevins Shipyard on City Island in 1932, during the Depression, the owner for whom Brilliant was built instructed the shipyard to make it strong and fast: strong enough to be able to capsize in a hurricane and come up right again. Inside while comfortable, the aim was to make it seaworthy but not necessarily luxurious.



The big trick in racing is to keep your personal balance as the boat angles its way to the finish line. The Brilliant sailed at this angle in Oyster Bay Harbor and in L.I. Sound – with a bit of water sometimes sloshing over the deck – very exciting. Photo courtesy Mystic Seaport

Part of the story of Brilliant is that she has had only four individual owners, plus a brief stint with the Coast Guard and now she’s at Mystic Seaport. As a result, she has always been kept ship-shape – a well-cared for lady. The Captain, Hamilton Moore, said it has escaped some of the renovations other antique boats have endured: adding showers and TVs and the latest amenities. Today, when the young teenager crews come aboard, they have to leave their cell phones at home and forget TV and twittering. Some find it hard to do, especially the younger teens who have been brought up texting their friends – never having been without the perks of technology.

But that is what the cruises are all about – experiencing what sailing a boat entails – and it is all hands aboard at work, learning about working as a team and learning about yourself. The result is more self-confidence and a healthy respect for being at sea – and the skills of sailing.

Saturday, May 23, the Brilliant came into Oyster Bay Harbor to be a part of this working waterfront and the rich maritime culture the bay fosters, said Chris Freeman of Mystic Seaport. It’s where Frank M. Flower & Sons, Inc. grow and harvest shellfish in the bay. “They actually harvest 10 percent of what

they grow – with the other percentage going into the food chain of the bay, including for the starfish – their greatest predator,” said one of the guest crew aboard that day.

There are also local independent bay men who make a living on the bay as the clammers and lobsterman who ply the waters. Large chartered fishing boats come in, their decks filled with anglers. The bay provides its riches to those hunter gatherers, too.

Besides the bounty under the sea there is the sport of racing that is supported by the local yacht clubs: Seawanhaka Corinthian Yacht Club and the Oak Cliff Yacht Club.

John McGrane, manager of the Oyster Bay Marine Center, said the first race this season was the Andrew Roosevelt Regatta which was held by Seawanhaka Yacht Club on May 16 and 17 and was won by Nautilus.

The Oyster Bay Spring Classic race ran May 23, 24 and on May 31 and June 6.

On May 23 the winner was Valora; on Sunday May 24 Caper won. The weekend of May 23, 24 the winner, which is determined by a point system, was Caper and was skippered by Hunt Lawrence.

There was also the U.S. Sailing Regional Match Racing series which Oak Cliff Yacht Club sponsored, on Saturday and Sunday May 30 and 31 at West Harbor.

As Chris Freeman said, “We are here to add to the maritime culture in this active waterfront area.”

Brilliant’s Guest Crew

The Brilliant invited members of the community to experience life as a member of the crew aboard the schooner – as well as learning how to tack during a race. Because a boat sails under the wind power caught in its sails, to change direction, the boat has to physically move into the wind, where the sails don’t catch the force of the wind, as the boat changes direction and the sails are re-positioned on the opposite side of the boat to catch the wind to go in a new direction. It takes a lot of manpower – all working together under the directions of the captain, standing at the helm, watching their actions.

It is an awesome experience that turns strangers into a crew. It also re-enforces the law that the captain’s word is law while at sea. The captain keeps an eye on all the crew members as they perform their actions. At the end of each tack, Mr. Freeman counted the number of people on deck – he didn’t want to lose anyone during the maneuver.

Saturday was a perfect day on the water with strong winds – which characteristically changed direction. The sky was blue, there were white caps on the LI Sound and the waves were from 4 to 6 feet high.

A fleet of Sonars were racing near Connecticut. Their sport started with the invention of the SunFish in the 80s, giving a lone person the racing experience. Now that has been upgraded – as all things tend to be – and the small boats are faster than ever. The lone sailor sits sticking his bottom out over the waves to balance the angle of the sail – so that it can catch the most wind in the sheet. When they capsize, they are quickly righted. It is the first lesson taught for those boat owners. They were great to watch from the advantage of a larger boat using three sails of a possible five. The captain of the Brilliant determined that tying down one-third of the mainsail would be best for the day’s wind. The crew quickly learned how to tie the sail to reduce its draft.

Then they learned how to raise the sail and how to tie the knots that keep the sail in place while making sure they can be released quickly for the next change of direction.

The cruise began at 10 a.m. with lessons from the captain on using the loo – important – including how to bring in water and then pump it into a holding tank aboard.

Lunch was served in tossed plastic bags containing sandwiches from the Bakery on South Street in Oyster Bay, and included a package of baby carrots and cookies. Granola bars, apples, water and soda were options. Although the offer of food came at 11 a.m. everyone was too busy learning to take up the suggestion. When the boat was out in the Sound, at about 1:30 p.m. – with tacking over for the moment – Chris Freeman announced that it was a good time to eat since the boat would be on an even keel for a while.

Several people had the opportunity to steer the boat: a matter of watching the compass, and keeping the needle aimed at the chosen angle. Standing and visually watching a location on shore to steer a course was easier for some old hands at the job.

Many of the “crew” were boat owners and familiar with the drills – pulling ropes around the winches and tightening them with a winch handle – and correctly coiling ropes on the deck for the next go around.

The captain had cautioned the crew to take care of the winch handles – that they were original to the ship and are no longer made. They each had a special place for safe-keeping on the deck.

He said, “Use the flat of your hand when adjusting a rope on a winch – ropes are replaceable but we don’t want to lose fingers.” Respect of the equipment is necessary to avoid accidents. Watching the captain as he walked around the deck you could see that he always had a hand out – unobtrusively touching a part of the ship – always ready for an emergency and the need to brace himself. There is a way to walk on a ship – cautiously and aware of your surroundings – a worthwhile skill to learn.

All that information is taught to the young people who come to take the course – sometime three years in a row, as a great summer experience. Brilliant is also available for charter to schools, Scout groups and other organizations. For more information, please visit their website mysticseaport/brilliant.org.

Adults are offered the experience in the fall and spring. Most of the takers are from the members of Mystic Seaport and most come by word of mouth from people who have had the experience. Not that they don’t have to watch in this economy – “We are always looking for adults interested in taking the course,” said Mr. Freeman – whose job it is to spread the word about the sailing classes.