

ICE-BOATS ON THE HUDSON.

Hudson River Maritime
Museum
Pilot Log 2007

Two Centuries of Ice Yachting on the Hudson

by Brian Reid

For almost two hundred years, boats have been sailing the frozen Hudson River for sport and pleasure. Many of the wealthy Hudson River families, including the Roosevelt's, Rogers, and Grinnells, sailed and raced large, elegant and very fast wooden ice yachts. The competition was keen, yet friendly. The sport continues to this day with a club of dedicated sailors who have lovingly restored, maintained and continued to sail the antique ice yachts of yesteryear. The sport of ice yachting in this country developed in Poughkeepsie, and the level of racing, design and craftsmanship led to Poughkeepsie being, for a time, the undisputed center of ice boating in the world. The sport eventually spread to many other northern parts of the United States, and active clubs still exist today from the Great Lakes region to Maine. Locally, the Hudson River Ice Yacht club brings out its fleet whenever the weather gets cold enough to get a solid 5 inches of ice on local waterways.

Poughkeepsie residents were reported to have been winter sailing on the Hudson River as early as 1812. Early sailors experimented with a box shaped wooden hull with four runners and a spritsail. Over several decades this design developed into a sturdy boat with heavy wooden runnerplanks, a backbone, wooden siderails and 3 cast iron runners (skates). It was around the time of the Civil War, when many Hudson River families realized great wealth, that ice boating really took off. The Poughkeepsie Ice Yacht Club was quite active by 1860. Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper reported that there were over 100 yachts on the river as of 1866. Ice yacht clubs dotted the shores of the Hudson from Newburgh to Albany. It was acknowledged that the handsomest and fastest boats were built and sailed in Poughkeepsie.

Keen competition among sailors from Poughkeepsie and many other clubs up and down the river led to continued refinements and grander yachts. The early designs of the 1860s led to the construction of bigger and faster yachts. The grandest yacht was constructed for John A. Roosevelt. *Iceicle*, built by the renowned boat builder Jacob Buckhout of Poughkeepsie, measured 69' in length and carried 1070 square foot of sail. It was the view at that time that the bigger the boat the faster the sailing. Racing was fierce and the sailors of the day regularly held competitions for silver cups, silver tillers, fur coats, silk pennants and, occasionally, money.

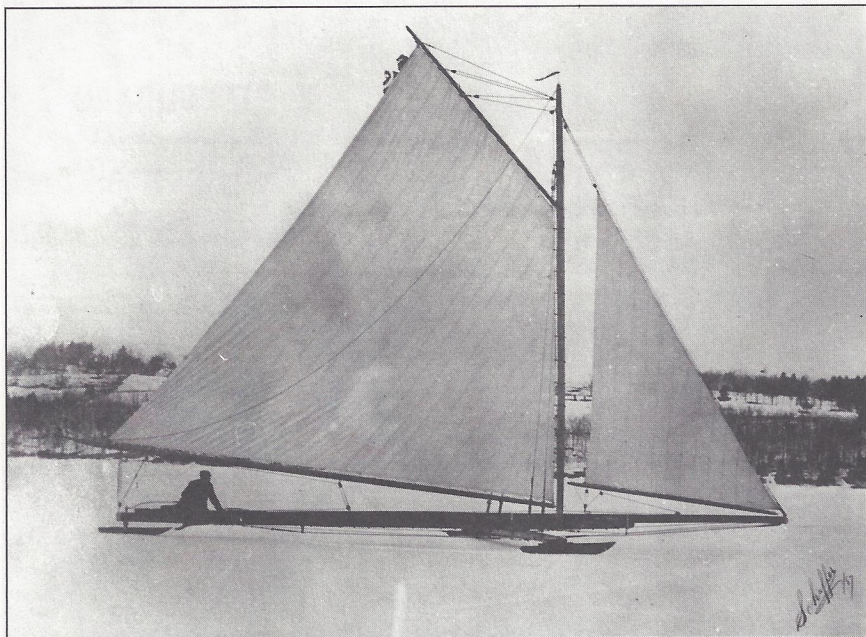
Continued tinkering to design speedier crafts eventually led to smaller, faster and more stable boats. A landmark (icemark?) race took place in February of 1881 when Captain Hiram Relyea, of Athens, came down to Poughkeepsie and swept the competition in his new boat. His yacht, *Robert Scott*, which he

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designed and built with Jacob Buckhout the previous summer, handily defeated the much larger Poughkeepsie yachts. His boat was half the size of *Icicle*, with about 499 square foot of sail. Relyea and Buckhout had reduced the weight of the yacht by eliminating the heavy siderails, replacing them with wire side stays. He shortened the boom and reduced the size of the mainsail. Likewise the jib sail was reduced. Most importantly, they shifted the mast so that it was stepped several feet forward of the runner plank. This gave the boat better balance and it was less likely to spin out as the larger boats, with masts stepped directly over the runner plank, were likely to do. Almost immediately, the sailors of the local ice yacht clubs were rebuilding their boats on the "Scott" design. Fortunately, one gorgeous example – *Whiff* - of the earlier style still sails today.

Irving Grinnell of New Hamburg was an avid ice sailor who owned and sailed many yachts. It was Grinnell who initiated the grandest competition of all. A 30 foot silk pennant, known as the "Ice Challenge Pennant of America," became the sought after prize by ice yachtsman for many years. The height of ice yachting, between 1881 and 1910, was marked by challenges and racing for this much sought after symbol of supremacy on the ice. It was first raced for in 1881 and won by *Phantom* of the New Hamburg Ice Yacht Club. News of this pennant made its way to New Jersey and soon a serious rivalry between Hudson River clubs and sailors from the North Shrewsbury Ice Yacht and Boat Club, in Red Bank, was on. Time and again, the Shrewsbury club sent it's big boats, *Scud & Dreadnaught*, to try and snatch the pennant. Time and again it was the

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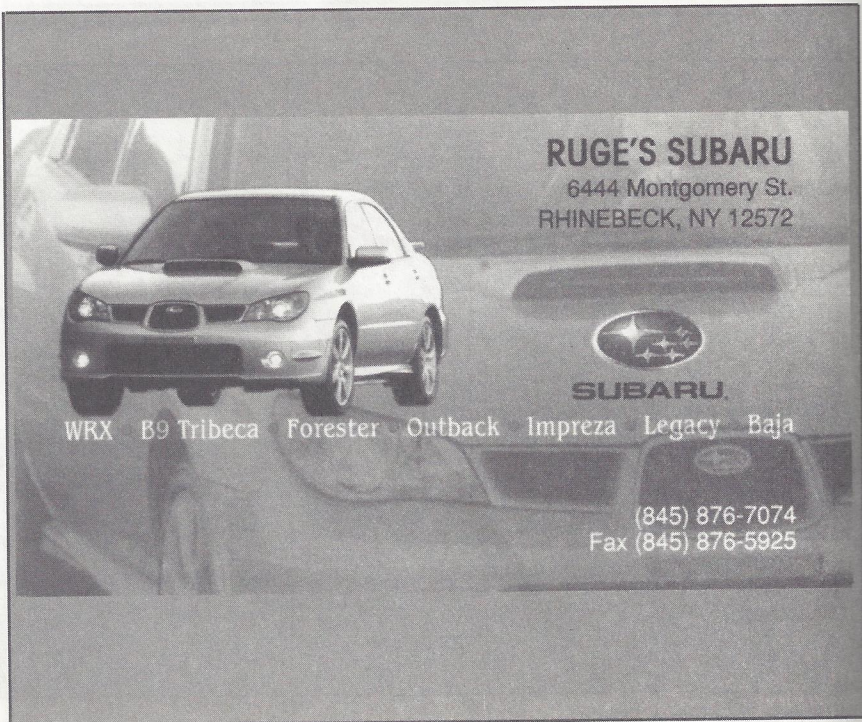


The iceboat *Jack Frost*, 1887.

Hudson River clubs that held the honor of fastest yachts in the world. Two boats from the Hudson River Ice Yacht Club (HRIYC), which was formed in 1885, won the pennant most often. *Icicle*, redesigned on the "Scott" model and owned by John A. Roosevelt, won the title 4 times and *Jack Frost*, owned and sailed by Hyde Park's Archibald Rogers claimed the pennant 5 times. Both boats and the pennant survive today. *Icicle* is on display at the Hudson River Maritime Museum in Kingston. Members of the HRIYC lovingly restored *Jack Frost* in 1973 who maintain and sail it to this day

The golden age of ice yachting began to decline after the first decade of the twentieth century. Aging members, years of no ice, and efforts to keep the Hudson River open for navigation had doomed the Hudson River club. By the 1920's racing was minimal and fewer boats were seen on the ice. The Hudson River Ice Yacht Club, which boasted the largest roster of members at the turn of the century, had all but folded. Boats were sold off, stored away in barns and according to one story, burned by troops stationed in Hyde Park during World War II. Racing and design innovation moved to the Midwest- especially around Madison Wisconsin. New front steering boats became the rage. Lighter, faster and less expensive to build, design classes like the DN, Skeeter, Yankee, Arrow and others became the boats of choice for winter sailors. Fortunately a hardy group of enthusiasts, led by Ray Ruge, of Cornwall, resurrected the old stern steerers here in the Mid-Hudson valley. Ruge had helped re-form the Hudson

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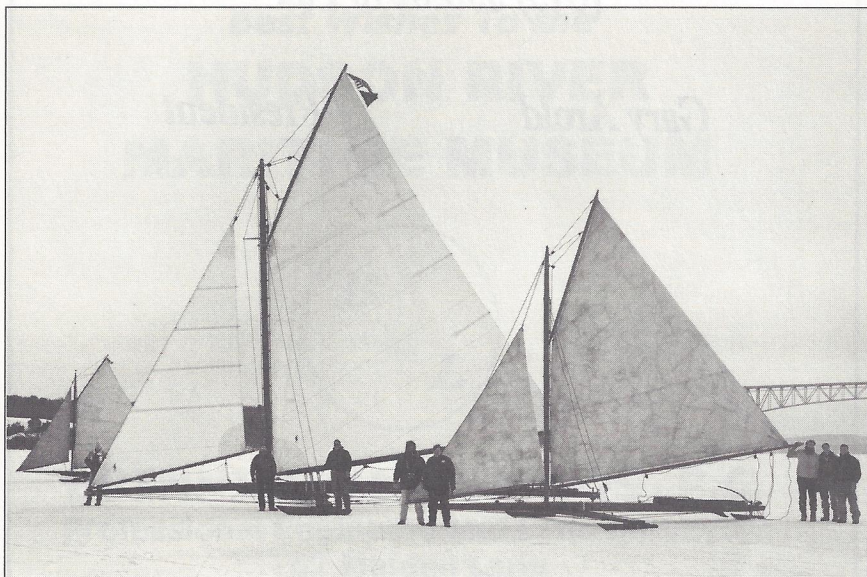
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River Ice Yacht club in 1964. There had been a 40 year hiatus of activity of the HRIYC. But Ruge and others began hauling out the old boats and restoring ones that had fallen into disrepair

While the focus of many clubs today is on racing, the Hudson River Ice Yacht Club is intent on restoration and preservation of the old yachts as well as sailing for pleasure. There are close to 30 of the antique stern steerers still sailing today, Two of John Roosevelt's boats *Vixen* and *Kriss* can be seen on local ice. Archie Roger's *Jack Frost* and *Ariel* have made appearances as well. *Whiff* and *Vera*, boats from the 1870's sail regularly. *Scout*, based at Orange Lake outside of Newburgh is the last boat from the region to hold the Ice Challenge Pennant of America. Boats sail on the Hudson River when conditions allow. The winter of 1994 found over a dozen old yachts sailing on and off for 2 months. February of 2000 brought two great weekends of sailing on the Hudson River at Athens. Area residents are drawn to the ice to see the antique vessels and the scene of children, sleds, skaters and iceboats brings back the simpler times of yesteryear for an afternoon.



"Today iceboating continues whenever the river or its bays freeze over enough to support the sport. Members of the Hudson River Ice Yacht Club with several restored iceboats on the Hudson River near the Kingston-Rhinecliff Bridge, 2003 - Photo by Chris Kendall"