*From the International Etchells Class website, reprinted with permission from the author:*

**The Man, The Boat**

*By Tim Etchells, reprinted on the Etchells Class website with permission of the author and Sailing World Magazine ©May 2000.*

Our family mythology includes the story of my taking the helm of a Star boat for the first time at age three. I have vague memories of this event—the wind on my face, a huge white mainsail with a gold star, the feel of the tiller in my hand almost as if it were a living thing. I don't recall the words my dad, Skip Etchells, is alleged to have used in describing the course I was steering, but I'm told it went something like this: "Look at that wake; it'd break a snake's back." With Dad you always knew exactly where you stood.

Dad was just a couple of months shy of 40 when I arrived on the scene. Born in 1911, he'd already lived through two world wars and the Great Depression before I made my debut in 1951. At that time, Dad, a naval architect and boat builder, was building the fastest Star boats in the world at his Old Greenwich Boat Co., hard by Long Island Sound in Old Greenwich, Conn. And as often as work and family allowed, he was sailing those Stars with my mother, Mary, as his crew. They were among the top teams in the class, which was, even then, ultracompetitive. They'd won enough hardware in regattas all over the world to fill our house. In fact, a few months after I arrived on the scene, I was photographed sitting in the Star Worlds trophy, which Dad and Mom had won in 1951 at Gibson Island, Md. Mom remains the only woman to have ever won the Star Worlds.

Growing up in Trenton, N.J., Dad had always been fascinated with boats, and eventually studied engineering and naval architecture at Michigan, where he earned a degree, along with a couple of Big Ten titles in the discus. A big guy, 6'3" in an era when that seemed taller than it does today, he'd gone out for the football team at Michigan as a freshman. He recalled his role in football practices—during which he was sometimes lined up across from Gerald Ford—as "cannon fodder."

The Star class entered Dad's life after a stint working on the West Coast in Navy shipyards during the Second World War. He built his own Star, and when he and Mom moved back East after the war, they took out the boat, called Shillalah in honor of my mother's Irish roots, to try their luck against some local hotshots. Dad would later recall the reaction of one of those sailors, after being thrashed by Dad and his new boat: "That's a nice boat you've got there. You ought to build a class of them."

He did just that. Having worked previously for Sparkman & Stephens in New York, Dad got into the boat-building business full time. He had a gift for taking a one-design class and finding ways to create a superior shape. Working within the tolerances that are part of any class rule, he drew and built boats that were just plain faster. He did it, most notably, with the Star class; the hull shape of the Old Greenwich Star was the model for several generations of boats from the 1940s right into the '70s. He later built some of the fastest Lightnings. And when his first-born (that would be me) needed a Blue Jay for junior sailing on Long Island Sound, he built a small fleet of those, which were quickly acknowledged to be the fastest Blue Jays ever.

Dad's business was still chugging along nicely in 1965. He'd moved to a boatyard in Stamford, Conn., when he took on the challenge of designing the boat that would eventually become the International Etchells Class. Dad's interest was piqued when he read about the International Yacht Racing Union's search for a new three-man keelboat. The design was what Dad would later call "a very simple rule, very good for the imagination: 22 feet on the waterline, 4'6" draft, 3,700 pounds displacement, and only 310 square feet of actual sail area. A wholesome, heavy-weather boat was clearly invited, we thought."

The boat Dad designed, also named Shillalah, was shipped in the late summer of 1966 to Kiel, Germany, for the IYRU's 3MKB trials. Eight boats entered, including two, Thrice and Trial, built to a design by E.G. van der Stadt of The Netherlands; a new boat designed by Britton Chance Jr. called Conqueror; two German boats, Trio and Kobold XXI; and a Soling, an existing class from Norway. All but the Soling were designed and built to fall near the maximum size called for by the IYRU guidelines.

Shillalah won eight of 11 races. Of the other three, Dad said, "We blew one looking for Denmark, set the chute like a sea anchor in another, and went ashore to replace a damaged jumper in the third." Conqueror, sailed by Chance and Olympian George O'Day, won the other three. None of the other boats factored in the racing. One of the German boats, Trio, sank in five minutes after being hit by some heavy puffs on a reach. On that same reach, Shillalah had set its spinnaker and, as Dad said later, "The next three or four minutes to the jibe mark were an almost continuous plane, in spite of the rough water, rather than surfing down waves. We had expected only to surf and had never seen a boat of this size take off in this manner."

In his report on the Committee proceedings, chairman Frank Murdoch wrote, "The consensus was that Shillalah very closely approximated the kind of boat visualized when the proposed class was discussed and the limits determined. Nevertheless, a boat such as the Soling reveals the unexpected possibility of a high performance in all its aspects coupled with low initial cost (The Committee] therefore concludes that at this stage encouragement should be given to both to form a class, establish class associations, and seek to acquire the popularity which could in due course lead to official recognition. It does not feel other trials would further clarify the issue."

Encouraging stuff. But Dad still felt that there was "an air of mystery about just what we'd accomplished." His instincts proved later to be correct. The Committee's recommendations were presented to the Permanent Committee of the IYRU a few months later. Those in attendance now say the Committee came within an eyelash of approving those recommendations, but that one member, who had backed one of the boats in the trials, convinced the rest that the results had been inconclusive. Another set of trials was ordered, this time in Travemunde, Germany.

Dad was disheartened, and wondered whether the decision signaled that "the fix was in," that an American boat couldn't get a fair shake. But the reaction to his boat at the trials, and later back home on Long Island Sound, had convinced Dad that he'd come up with a winner. Bob Bavier, an America's Cup veteran and at the time executive vice president of Yachting magazine, was the lone American member of the 1966 Committee. In a letter to Dad, Bavier said he felt that "if you had a fiberglass boat in the next set of trials and she did just reasonably well she would almost certainly be chosen, because it was not just speed but other desirable features which made the Committee lean in Shillalah's direction."

So Dad spared what time he could from turning out Stars to build a mold and come up with Shillalah II. This boat went to Travemunde in August, 1967. The field of nine boats included Chance's Conqueror, the Soling, and a new van der Stadt boat called Thrial. Also taking part in some of the races were a 5.5 Meter and a very competitive Dragon. Thirteen races were held, with Shillalah winning 10; Conqueror won the other three. The 5.5 proved to be competitive only in the lightest air, and the Dragon finished a distant last in every race it entered.

The conclusions at the end of this series, however, were very different from those of the previous summer. The decision: "The Observation Committee is of the opinion that the Soling fulfills the requirements of the Union for a new three-man keelboat and therefore recommends it to be encouraged by the International Yacht Racing Union. Although the Observation Committee believes that the Soling fulfills all the conditions laid down by the IYRU Permanent Committee for a new three-man-keelboat for the present and especially for the future, it considers that of the larger boats competing in the trials, Thrial with small modifications to her rig, which would not affect the cost of the boat, should be encouraged by the IYRU if a larger boat be required." No mention was made of Shillalah II, which had dominated the racing.

The decision was devastating to Dad, who felt that he'd been blindsided. And if there was one thing Dad couldn't abide, it was what he called BS. There was no doubt in his mind, reading the Committee's decision, that the Soling had been chosen long before the trials began, that the Committee, and the IYRU, had changed what Dad would call "their alleged minds" about the size of the boat they wanted to consider for the next Olympic class, without actually informing the other designers. Nothing had happened during the trials, as far as Dad or many objective observers could determine, that would support the decision. He and many others thought it was hardly coincidental that neither his boat nor Britton Chance's had been mentioned, even though they had won all of the races for two years running.

When Dad pressed for an explanation of what he felt was an indefensible decision, he received a document titled "Some Reasons for Not Considering Shillalah II." In later years, with responses added, he kept it framed on the wall of his office. Here are some excerpts:

"1. She is too expensive. Her cost of $6,000 is double that of the Soling." Dad wrote, "This was the first price tag I had seen. Boats sell by the pound." "2. Due to her great weight, her trailerability is limited in Europe to a very large car." Dad: "With maximums only published, one would suspect what size category the inventors had in mind. All boats built for the trials were maxis." "4. A very ugly boat." Dad: "There is a difference of opinion these days. Of course, one could see no hint of bias." "5. The cockpit was too big, too wide, and too deep. There were no seats and the crew had to sit on the deck at all times or stand." Dad: "Both S-1 and S-2 had built-in thwarts, but no reclining chairs. We were going to the Olympics." "10. The class has no popularity outside the U.S." Dad: "Makes sense. A big class organization before we get off the drawing board."

Despite attempts by some of the American IYRU members to have it reconsidered, the Committee's report was ultimately validated by the IYRU's Permanent Committee. The Soling was chosen shortly thereafter as the 3MKB for the Olympics, replacing the Dragon.

Dad went home with Shillalah II, wondering where he'd gone wrong. Years later, he had it figured out. "Lesson 783," he said, was that "in working on a new one-design, forget experience and the drawing board. Concentrate on political science."

Truth is, there were few people less suited to politics than Dad. He was a charming guy, but let's just say he wasn't always as tactful as he might have been. He could be blunt, and his sarcastic comments were legendary. Just ask Mom. On more than one occasion while crewing for him on a Star, she found herself wondering if the boat's whisker pole would make an effective weapon. And Dad didn't suffer fools gladly. It's not hard to imagine him as his own worst enemy in meetings with IYRU committee members.

Still, when it came to Shillalah, Dad felt that the boat's performance spoke for itself. Back home, the boat soon attracted the attention of sailors on Long Island Sound, and within six months Fleet 1 of the Etchells 22 class (the 22 indicated the waterline length) was in business. The class has grown steadily in the 30 years since. There are now more than 50 fleets worldwide, and the boat's attributes under sail and its strict one-design rules have attracted some of sailing's biggest names. During the recent Cup races, for instance, Team Dennis Conner (Conner is a former Etchells world champ) and at least one other syndicate honed their match-race skills in Etchells. Today more than 1,100 boats have been built, with about 750 racing regularly worldwide.

Dad died in December of 1998. He was 87. At the 1998 Etchells Worlds held in Marblehead, Mass., a few months earlier, there were more than 100 boats on the starting line. While the numbers probably made for a wild regatta, I know they were a source of pride for Dad.

They were for me, too. I was 16 back in 1967, barely old enough to appreciate what Dad was going through. And it was another few years before I realized just what he'd accomplished with the Etchells.

It was 1971 or thereabouts, and dad loaned me his E-22 for the weekend to race with a couple of friends. There was a strong easterly breeze that Saturday, a rarity for western Long Island Sound. Dad's only pre-race advice: "Steer good, Timothy." I remember the sail out to the starting line off American YC, the gray skies and ocean-like rollers sweeping down the Sound. But mostly I remember the feeling of power in the boat. I'd sailed E-22s before, but not in this kind of a breeze. Going to windward, the boat moved like a freight train. We rounded the weather mark, set the chute on a broad reach, and rocketed away. Our wake stretched out behind us like an arrow.