



RHYC 2015 Hall of Fame John Robertson

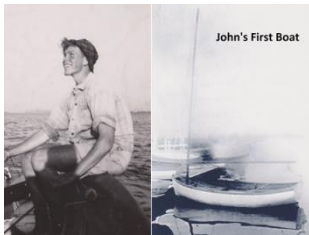
After Norm Robertson sold *Vreda* during the Great Depression, he built a house in Burlington directly across the Bay, with direct access to the water below. There he raised his son John, born in 1929.

Like Æmilius Jarvis, John Robertson grew up sailing on the Bay. However, whereas Jarvis started sailing at age 10, John started sailing at 6 in a 12' dinghy built by his father. At age 8 John's father offered him the boat as his own if he could demonstrate that he can swim. So, with one foot on the bottom, John convinced his father he could indeed swim, and got his first boat.

John well remembers his first sail when they set off from Willow Point with the goal to sail to the RHYC clubhouse at the foot of Bay Street. John looks upon that as a significant moment in developing his sailing skills and self-confidence.



In the beginning he learned how to sail from reading the vast collection of "Yachting" magazines that his father collected. He then started sailing Snipes at RHYC, before the founding



of the RHYC Junior Club. John's Snipe was named *Little Nutmeg* in honour of his Father's P-Boat *Nutmeg III*. John then made the transition to the well-established Rainbow/Crusader class, sailing with Dick Townsend in Dick's Rainbow. However, at that time he was not allowed to compete in the newly established "Royals" regatta of Royal Yacht Clubs in Canada because he was too young!

In 1946, he soon graduated to the new competitive Lightning class, with Don Haines and Archie Howie as crew. Archie used to crew with Norm on *Nutmeg*. John was definitely the youngster on the boat with Don Haines being 10 years older, and Archie Howie 20 years older! Don and Archie was a very experienced crew who handled pressure very well. They knew the geometry and tactics of a race course, always important for a good crew.



His Lightning, named *Rhoda* in honour of his mother, was financed by the sale of his father's beloved *Nutmeg III*. In *Rhoda* John, Archie, and Don raced extensively, racking up an enviable reputation for someone so young. He won the Lake Erie Districts and did well at LYRA in Watertown, NY, two years in a row in 1952 and 53, winning ten races, as well as the North American's in Toledo in a fleet of 80 boats.

John credits their success to not only *Rhoda's* inherent boat speed, but also the fact that they sailed Tuesday and Thursday nights in club races, practiced Wednesday nights, and sailed all weekends at regattas! Don Haines was even away sailing when his first child was born! Not only was their boat inherently fast, and the crew exceptionally good (Tommy Allan called them the best crew in North America), but they were the first to introduce a boom vang and hiking straps, both of which John had picked up sailing in England.



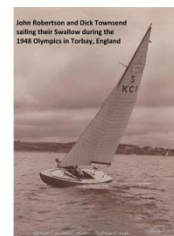
At that time over a dozen Lightnings were kept at RHYC. It was a very competitive fleet. However, John soon dominated the racing. His father would sit up in the cemetery overlooking the Bay and with a stop watch would record the time differences on the different legs between him and the next boats. John was not only racing the other boats, but was also racing his father!



In 1948 John's reputation was so well known that he was invited to take part in the selection trials for the London Olympics, hosted at RCYC. He started competing in the single handed class against Paul McLaughlin and John Henderson. Although in the Olympics they would sail the 12' Firefly, the trials were sailed in International 14' dinghies which were normally sailed by two people. So during the trials he was steering with his toes while using both hands to trim main and jib! Although doing very well in the trials, it was soon decided that John would instead compete in the two-man Swallow Class with his Snipe crew of Dick Townsend. The two-man selection trials were being held at Royal St. Lawrence and John had to beat out the great David Kirby, Bruce Kirby's older brother, for the right to go to the Olympics.

In the 1948 London Olympics sailing took place at Torbay in Devon. Paul McLaughlin was team captain sailing in the Firefly, and Bill Gooderham and crew were sailing the Star.

At age 19, John was the youngest member of the Canadian Olympic Team. After 4 races they stood in second place, but in the end finishing 4th, missing a Bronze metal due to a controversial protest during a mark rounding in the 5th race.



They won one race by 8 minutes in a shifty wind blowing down the valley. John later said it just looked like a west wind on the Bay! John says he learned everything he knows about sailing upwind by learning to sail in a west wind on the Bay. Most of all he learned to pre-tack the heading puffs, to gain that extra half boat length every time.

1948 was not only the year of John's first Olympics, but was also the year he met Sue, and Sue took immediately to sailing. John attended Westdale Collegiate, as did Nadia Jarvis.

In 1952 John again was selected to represent Canada at the Olympics, this time with his Lightning crew of Archie Howie and Don Haines in the Dragon Class for the Helsinki Olympics. Unfortunately, they weren't as successful as they had been in 1948.



After the 1952 Olympics John sailed less. In 1954 at age 24, he and Sue were married. He had sold his Lightning and was working hard, raising a family, and concentrated on becoming successful in the insurance business. He was also advised to stop racing by a doctor who considered it too stressful! But in 1961 he and Don Haines again teamed up and won the Ontario Snipe championships.



At age 32, for "something to do", John decided to get back into sailing, this time in International 14' Dinghies with past Snipe and 1948 Olympic crew Dick Townsend. John had been approached by his past Olympic team mate, Paul McLaughlin to buy one of the new Buller I designs to help get the project off the ground. John and Dick started in Class C in the local 14 fleet and by their 2nd year of racing were in Class A!

They won often and were chosen to be part of the victorious Canadian Team for the 1967 International Team racing in Hayling Island, England. Despite having the slowest and oldest boat on the team and therefore "tail end Charlie" on the team, they handily won the series. Other team members were Ian Bruce, Ward McKimm (with Harry Jemmett crewing), and David Johnson. Two years ago John joined each of those individuals with his induction into the Canadian 14 Foot Dinghy Hall of Fame at RCYC.

In the 1960s and 70s, the International 14 was the most competitive class on Lake Ontario. Fellow 14 sailor Peter Jarvis pointed out that at any particular regatta there were at least 8 skippers who were more than capable of winning that race. With that quality of competition, if



you won one race a year you were doing well! John won substantially more than one race a year! Following the Buller I, they got the new Buller II, than the Kirby III.



In 1971, this time with a new Kirby V, John again won the right to be part of the Canadian International 14 Team, this time with the team racing taking place in Annapolis. George Overend was crewing for John, and the other team members were Harry Jemmett with Peter Jones crewing, Graham Hayward with Ewan Swann, and Arthur Earle with Rob Mazza.

In 1975 John again made the Canadian team, racing in England, this time with Mike Dale crewing. At this point there was a younger breed of 14 sailors entering the picture with the Harvey brothers, Kidd brothers, and Karen and John Bleasby, and John found himself the oldest member of the team. John is very outspoken about the importance of a good crew to any helmsman. You simply cannot win without one. Sailing is a team effort.



John had an amazing career sailing International 14's, starting in 1962 prior to the re-introduction of the trapeze and finishing in 1975 with the single trapeze and larger sailplan. Over that period he owned **six** different 14' designs by Fred Buller, Bruce Kirby, and Charlie Bullock.



During his long career in 14s, John won more than his share of CDA and regatta silverware, including such prestigious trophies as the Bongard, Stevenson, Wilton Morse, Emmerson, Commeford, Belmont, and Weymouth Town Trophy, some multiple times. A heart attack in 1975 at the age of 49 finished John's competitive sailing career. This time he took his doctor's advice and quit racing, but he did not quite sailing or his involvements with boats.

John bought a Nonsuch #18, like his first 14 helping to get a new project off the ground and cruised *Such 'n Such* for the next 15 years. Sue loved that boat.

They cruised the North Channel five times, Lake Ontario five times, as well as the US East Coast.





With International 14s you tended to do all the work on the boat yourself, and when John entered sailing “semi-retirement” that expertise in boat building found an outlet in John building his own boats in his basement. Starting with a cedar strip canoe, then a Mirror Dinghy and an Optimist for his grandchildren, then much more ambitious projects such as a gaff rigged cutter, a high speed classic motor boat, a canal cruiser, and the gaff rigged catboat *Tom Cat*.

At 86 years of age John’s latest project is a 16’ outboard motor cruiser. As with his previous six boats it too exited the basement through an enlarged window and window well.

It is with great pleasure that we induct John Robertson as one of the first members of the RHYC Hall of Fame.

