



# RHYC 2015 Hall of Fame

## Norm Robertson

Harry Penny wrote, "The name of Norman Robertson will always be honoured in the history of the RHYC and, indeed, as the first Canadian Olympic sailor, will stand prominently in the annals of Canadian yachting." But Norm Robertson's contribution to RHYC and to sailing generally is far more than one summer in 1924.

Norm Robertson was born in 1897 and lived at 131 Hess St. N. He attended Hess Street School, and then graduated from Hamilton Technical and Art School in 1915.

He started work with Hamilton Bridge Works in 1915 and remained with that company until his retirement 47 years later in 1962.

Norm and his older brother Archie started sailing 14' and then 16' dinghies on the Bay at a very young age.



Norm probably joined RHYC in 1914 after graduation, and was also most likely a member of the Victoria Yacht Club and Pals Dinghy Club.

The sport of Dinghy sailing at this time was becoming extremely popular in post war Canada. He and his brother Archie soon excelled in the 16' class, which was concentrated in Hamilton.

In 1918, at 21, Norman joined the Royal Flying Corp and was stationed in tents on the grounds of Hart House at the U of T. But the war soon ended and he was honourably discharged, and he also played the bagpipes with the Argyll and Sutherland Band.

Archie and Norm introduced the first Marconi or Bermudian rig on Burlington Bay in 1921.

JP Morgan is reputed to have said with regard to Yachting "If you have to ask the price you can't afford it". Norm Robertson was not of that school. He was not a titan of Industry or living on inherited wealth.





He collected a salary every week and he had to pay for his sailing expenses out of that salary. So Norm was thankful for all prize money awarded for the CNE regattas as well as from the Toronto Telegram. For instance in 1921 at 24 years of age Norm notes that his boat expenses were \$201, with \$54 of prize money.

In 1920 he bought the well-known 24' George Owen designed *Whirl* from Jim Morrow.

Norm owned *Whirl* for five years (1920 to 1925) and raced her with great success throughout Lake Ontario.

A Model of *Whirl*, donated by Jim Morrow in 1918, hangs in the *Evergreen Lounge*, and is one of the prized possessions of this club.



*Whirl*

By 1920, after partially recovering from the loss of the beach strip clubhouse in 1915, and the effects of the First World War, RHYC was showing increased vitality, with the result that LYRA decided to start the first ever Freeman Cup race from Hamilton with the finish at Kingston.

On Saturday morning, 21 yachts of every size and description crossed the starting line on the 180 mile race to Kingston. At midnight a series of violent thunderstorms scattering the fleet. By Sunday evening, only six of the 21 starters had finished..



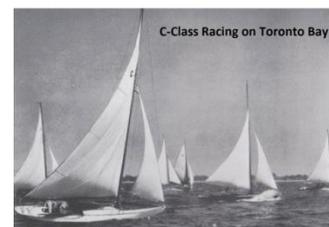
*Whirl* had ducked into Olcott to seek shelter, and being the smallest boat in the fleet didn't get to Kingston until the night before the first course race, in which she finished 2<sup>nd</sup>.

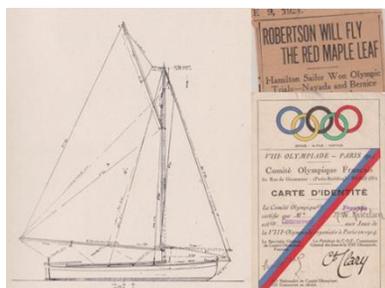
In 1922, *Whirl* won her division in LYRA at Prinyers Cove and Belleville.

By 1924 Norm Robertson is so well known on the Lake that he is invited to join the elimination series for Canada's first Olympic sailing representative in the single handed division for the Paris Olympics of that year.

The Trials were conducted by RCYC in Toronto Harbour from June 4th to June 8<sup>th</sup>.

21 trial races were held in Toronto Harbour over the four days, with nine sailors taking part, two from RHYC – Norman Robertson and Bill Judd.





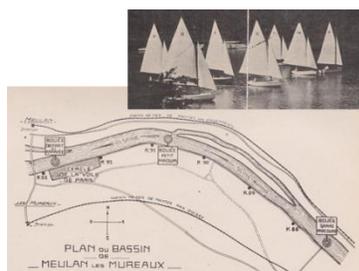
Despite Bill Judd's strong start, it was Norm Robertson who ultimately won the exhaustive series against the finest sailors on the Lake, including George Corneil and Charlie Bourke, both of whom would go on to become well-known names in the International 14 fleet, and early inductees into the Canadian Fourteen Foot Dinghy Hall of Fame.

On June 11<sup>th</sup> Norm was officially notified that he is the Canadian representative for Olympic sailing.

On June 25<sup>th</sup> he boarded a steamer in Quebec City for Cherbourg, and on July 5<sup>th</sup> he arrived at the race sight, and was told that the races would start on July 10<sup>th</sup>, rather than July 20<sup>th</sup>! He and the South African representative were only ones who had not been notified of this change.

Norm barely had time to rig his boat, before he had to return to Paris for the opening Ceremonies and be introduced to the Prince of Wales. With the races being moved up by 10 days, Norm had very little time to prepare his boat or to familiarize himself with the course and conditions.

The Olympic Reporter for Yachts and Yachting reported– “These conditions made yacht racing very difficult, especially in the light air weather, which ruled during the regatta. The wind will sometimes blow from all quarters in turn within the distance of 300 yards. Most of the competitors thought the conditions were impossible for series racing. The draw of boats proved to be a gamble. They were by several builders and varied in dimensions in some places by inches. Some were old and in bad condition, and on more than one occasion gear broke at very slight provocation, while where the gear was new, it was often unsuitable.”



The Elimination series was held on July 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>. “Elimination series”, of course, means if you lost that one race you were immediately eliminated, meaning that you have no time to get to know the boat or the course, which is what happened to Norm.

The final races were held on July 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> – the Belgian entry won both, but Norway, Finland, Spain and Sweden all tied for second!

In 1925 Norm sold *Whirl* for \$1000. Also that year he becomes Rear Commodore of RHYC, and during his tenure all RHYC stationary bore his 131 Hess Street address.

After selling *Whirl*, Norm bought *Crusader* from Stanley Nash. *Crusader* was slightly smaller than a P-boat but often raced with them.



This is another example that when it came to boats, Norm is an excellent judge of “horse flesh”, or boat pedigree.

*Crusader* was a 1907 Canada’s Cup contender built by RCYC Vice-Commodore Frederic Nicholls, but lost the challenger elimination series to Æmilius Jarvis sailing *Adele*. After buying *Crusader*, Norm records that “She leaks considerable when hard pressed. The cabin leaks like a sieve.” With the purchase Norm also acquired Jack Berry and Howard Richards as crew from Stanley Nash.

In August 1925 he also opened discussions to buy the 60’ steel cutter *Vreda* with a \$700 asking price.



*Vreda*, like *Whirl* and *Crusader* also had a very impressive pedigree. A George Lennox Watson design built on the Clyde in 1888, she was brought to RCYC in 1890 by Com. Boswell. She crossed the Atlantic on her own bottom.

*Vreda*’s first great triumph was the Queen’s Cup race of 1891 against *White Wings* being sailed by Jarvis. She won that trophy three times, in 1891, 94, and 1906, the only yacht to achieve that distinction.



She also won the Prince of Wales trophy in 1891 and 1895, the Lorne Cup 1902, Lansdowne Cup, 1900, 1907, Murray Cup 1900, and was a trial horse, along with *Canada* and *Merrythought* for new 1903 Canada’s Cup challenger *Strathcona*.

With the advent of WWI she was laid up and had her lead ballast removed to serve the war effort. Being steel and recently replated, she at least survived the war, when so many of her wooden Class A sisters did not. However, as it turned out, a lot of the sails, spars, and hardware from those boats would go towards rejuvenating *Vreda*.

After the war, *Vreda* was not launched again until 1925. Re-ballasted with sand instead of lead and riggered as a ketch, she was essentially a house boat on Toronto Island.

By May 1926 the lightly built *Crusader* was showing signs of age and hard use, but that summer Norm was still campaigning her with his crew of Howard Richard, Jack Berry, K. Smith, Jack Howard, and Art Brown.



In September, 1926, the owners of *Vreda* called and said Norm could have the boat for \$200, which he accepted with \$25 down and the rest after being hauled in Oakville for inspection. She is then re-launched, ballasted with stones, and sailed to Hamilton. Her masts were removed and she was towed her to slip at Brown's Wharf at the foot of McNab Street.



Norm and his friends worked on the boat evening and weekends all winter. They removed as much sand ballast as they dare, but soon discovered a leak which they could not plug before the boat settled on the bottom at a large angle of heel. After finally pumping her dry, Billy Burnside drove a tapered plug into the hole to keep her afloat.

Norm and Archie decided to rereg *Vreda* as a schooner, and acquired old sails and spars, blocks and hardware from many of the great yachts which had not survived WWI. With the help of volunteers Joe Berry, Ken Smith, Sam Ringer, Howard Richards, Jack Berry, Hugh Brown, and Russell Carrick, they fitted new deck beams in the location of the new masts, installed new bow plates, and reinforcements for the new mast steps, as well as chain plates for the new masts and for the bowsprit.

By the spring of 1927 they had replaced all the sand ballast with steel boiler punchings mixed with concrete to achieve the required 32,000 Lbs of ballast, as well as stepped the new masts and bowsprit, and bent on the recut sails.

In July, 1927 they took their first trial spin in *Vreda*, and soon followed with a big party sail with 22 on board.



It should be noted that while Norm raced all his boats competitively, he also enjoyed sailing them with friends, including his future wife Rhoda. Norm and Rhoda were married on September 3rd, 1928.



In 1930 the British Empire Games are held in Hamilton. RHYC hosted the yachting events, as well as the LSSA Regatta and LYRA regatta at which *Vreda* competed in close racing with *Gardenia*, winning 2 out of 3 races, and winning the Senior Division.

However, by 1930 the effects of the depression were starting to be felt. In 1933 Norm was compelled to sell *Vreda* for \$1000. The new owner installed *Vreda's* first engine and sailed her to the Caribbean to escape the Depression. She was last heard of in Miami, before completely disappearing.



Without a boat, Norm now devoted himself to building a house overlooking the Bay at Brighton Beach (Willow Cove) and raising a family.

But in 1938 Norm Robertson formed a syndicate made up of himself, Hugh F. Brown, and Colin Dunbar to buy the 54'-6" 1911 Herreshoff designed and built P-Boat *Nutmeg III*.

As with *Vreda* they worked all winter to put the boat back into racing condition.

With the completion of a new RHYC Clubhouse, in 1939 RHYC celebrated with again hosting the LYRA Regatta. *Nutmeg* won Division Four, beating *Patricia* sailed by TK Wade, *Mitena* sailed by Æmilius Jarvis, and the NY 50 *Nonchalant*, and four others.



Robertson sailed *Nutmeg* throughout the war years until he sold her in 1946 in order finance his son John's new *Lightning*.

In 1960 Norm Robertson was made an Honorary Life Member of RHYC. On May 1st, 1962 Norm retired from Bridge and Tank Company of Canada after 47 years and 10 months. Norm Robertson passed away at the age of 79 in 1976.

His sailing Career was remarkable – Canada's 1st Olympic Sailor, successful owner and racing skipper of such classic yachts as *Whirl*, *Crusader*, *Vreda* and *Nutmeg*, and father to one of the finest and most successful dinghy sailors Hamilton and Canada has ever produced.

A life lived with justifiable pride.

