

A History of the *Bernida*

Winner of the First Bayview Mackinac Race

By Toby Murray

(The author is the Mackinac Island resident who rediscovered the Bernida. Murray is also Secretary of the Mackinac Boating Heritage Foundation, the organization raising funds to restore the Bernida. This is the first part of a series of articles about this famous sailboat.)

This is the story of an unusual boat and its "spirit". It's about a boat that is a true survivor, one that refuses to fade into the past nor rest on its laurels, one that would like to return to its glory days of racing in the 1920's.

It's all about the spirit of survivorship, a great history and the boat's desire to sail again. It's the story of the ***Bernida***.

The story begins in the world of academia, in the halls of one of the great naval engineering schools in the East, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. It begins with a professor there who had a dream.

George Owen, a professor of marine architecture at MIT, had a vision of creating a very fast racing boat, somewhat similar in design to the huge "J" boats being raced in the early America Cup races, but one smaller in scale, one that might be affordable to a greater number of racing sailors. Professor Owen designed the boat for speed with lots of sail to drive her forward.

Professor Owen was a true innovator and one of the leading yacht designers of his day. Many of the most successful "R", "Q" and "P" boats, all built to the Universal Rule as racing yachts, came from his drawing board.

The *Bernida*, originally named *Ruweida III*, was built in 1921 at the George Lawley and Son yard in Boston. Her length overall was 32' 2", with a beam of 8' and a draft of 6'. An earlier version, *Ruweida II* was larger than *III*, being 38' long with a huge 70' spar rigged as a cat boat.

To save weight most of the "R's" were designed with deep open cockpits, making them very vulnerable in rough seas. *Ruweida III* was double planked, the inside skin of white cedar and the outside of Honduras mahogany with white oak frames and keel. Her finish was natural and a true beauty.

To get the full grasp and significance of this boat and its place in history one must return to its earliest racing days. It was in 1924 that the Bermuda race had just been revived after being dormant during World War I.

The Bayview Club in Detroit, with all of its experience as a fresh water sailing club, was beginning to feel its oats as a newly formed club and decided to try its luck in ocean racing. The club chartered the *Lloyd W. Berry*, a heavy 62 foot two-masted schooner without a motor. The

The boat was entered in the Bermuda race, more for the experience than with the idea of winning, then unexpectedly won in its class "B" and the crew returned home heroes to the local yachting community.

Soon after the Bermuda race, at a Fourth of July regatta with the Port Huron Yacht Club one of the BYC members announced he had just bought the Lakewood, an "R" boat from the Bay City Yacht Club.

Soon to follow were some match races with the Port Huron club one involving the Lakewood, the Grayhaven and the Detroit, owned by Russ Pouliot, the crusty blue-collar superintendent at the Belle Isle Boat & Engine Company.

It was at these match race gatherings that the talk of a jointly sponsored yacht race to Mackinac Island began to be discussed. In the Fall of 1924. In the Spring of 1925, details for the race were planned and training began. At the same time, Russ Pouliot, having been impressed by the speed of the Lakewood, sold his sailboat, the *Detroit*, to Edsel Ford, son of Henry Ford.

He then bought the "R" boat Rueida III in Marblehead, Mass. Shortly after that Neil Lynch also of Bayview bought Lightning, the champion "R" in Marblehead. When Russ saw the speed of Lightning compared to his Rueida III, he began to make some changes to his boat to build up her speed.

Both boats had an open cockpit, as designed by George Owen, but Russ's boat was also carrying 500 pounds of inside ballast. To prepare his boat for the inaugural Mackinac race Russ made two changes: he built a watertight cockpit and designed a special lead shoe for the bottom of the boat's keel.

It wasn't long before Bernida with her new ballast ratio was beating the Marblehead champion, Lightning. Russ also renamed the boat Bernida, which was his wife's maiden name.

It was at this moment in the history of the Bernida that another famous sailor enters the picture. That summer while preparing the boat for the upcoming Mackinac race, Russ told his younger brother Carl and a young friend of Carl's by the name of Bob Roadstrom (17 years old) that if they helped him get the boat ready they could sail with him in the race to Mackinac.

Russ had also lined up three of the best crewmen in the area, Joe Snay, Fred Merz and Bill Petz. A few days before the race Carl Pouliot and Bob Roadstrom learned that Russ had been stringing them along and that there was not enough room in the cockpit for two extra kids.

Totally brokenhearted, but with classic teenage determination, the two paddled across the Detroit River to the Detroit Yacht Club and talked the owner of Calypso, Dr. Gmeiner, into taking them on as crew members.

As history will have it, sometimes by a simple twist of fate, Bob Roadstrom would play a crucial role many years later in the history of the Bernida. But let's not jump ahead to that point just yet.

So on a damp and murky day on Saturday, July 25th, 1925 yachting history was established with the start of the first Bayview to Mackinac sailboat race, a race of 251 miles. The class "A" boats started at 4 pm in the afternoon with the "B" class, which included all the "R" boats, starting 20 minutes later.

With rain and a slight chop, the yachts began on a starboard reach in a slight southeasterly, which was soon to change. A Southeast thunder squall with strong wind ripped through the fleet with plenty of wind, and by 10 pm the fleet was scattered hither and yon over Lake Huron.

Leading the pack were the three "R" boats *Bernida*, *Neagha* and *Rascal*, followed by the cruising class. A half an hour later, with the building wind shifting to the northeast, the seas started to pile up and the fleet began a hard beat.

By dawn Sunday, mother nature had taken her toll: three of the cruising class boats had returned to Port Huron, while the remainder of the class was slugging it out off Harbor Beach. Meanwhile the three R's were in their element well to the north and screaming toward Mackinac Island.

Russ Pouliot's sloop *Bernida* crossed the finish line first at 6:50 pm Monday to etch itself in yachting history forever by becoming the first Bayview-Mackinac winner with an overall time of 48 hours.

Of the twelve boats that started the race only four finished. Three of those finishers were "R" boats and all finished on Monday night with *Neagha* coming in second three hours later and then *Rascal* finished third, three hours after *Neagha*.

Bernida did not race in 1926, but raced again in 1927 once again placing first in her class, and thus establishing herself as one of the premier sailing boats of this period.

And then *Bernida* disappeared from our history books only to be found again by chance. And this is where the current story begins. *(To be continued)*