A Historical Perspective of the Racine Yacht Club Through Time.

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## RYC Notables: Bill Richter



Bill Richter. This photo is from the 1950s. RYC archives

William C. (Bill) Richter was born in 1902 and passed in 1981. He was one of those members who, if you needed something, was always there to help. Bill was a tireless worker at the Racine Yacht Club and had been Vice-Commodore for two years before taking over as Commodore for part of 1944 after Art Harris, who had been elected to the post, couldn't complete his term. Bill was the guy who was there with his barge when moorings had to be set in the spring and pulled in the fall. Bill was the guy who ran the old derrick (photo at top right). Bill was the guy who pulled boats around the yard. Bill was the guy who could, and did, fix just about anything around the Club. And he wasn't secretive about



The Yacht Club derrick ca. 1954. Courtesy of Arlene Whitt

how the equipment worked either...he would eagerly teach anyone who wanted to learn the ins and outs of it. He was also the guy who

knew where everything was; there once was a problem with a pipe or valve under the yard somewhere between where the old Club building was and the new one. Bill was able to pinpoint the location without having to dig up huge amounts of the parking lot.

Bill Richter was born in Racine near the lake, and the Yacht Club, on Chatham Street and he had a long love affair with the water. It seems that his family probably had the lake in their blood, too. It isn't known exactly when Bill became a Yacht Club member but it was definitely fairly early in the Club's history.

When he was in school, he did his homework under an electric light that

he had rigged up. He powered it with nearly spent batteries he had gotten from the trolley company in Racine. This was before electric lighting was really common and people were amazed to see the Edison bulb he used.

Few people ever saw Bill out on the water although he really did know how to sail. His daughter Arlene once asked him why he never sailed and he replied "Nobody ever asked me", which seems a little odd. In about 1938 Bill and his brothers, who also loved the lake, built a 12' or 15' boat in the basement of his mother's house; naturally they couldn't get it out of there and had to dig out the foundation (after asking, of course). They named the boat *Hurricane*. When they were kids they had built a land yacht, basically an ice boat with wheels, and sailed it up and down Erie Street. It was, actually, a four-wheeled cart with a square sail. In later years, Bill had developed a friendship with Petey Goldick, who owned the powerboat



Erin. His daughter recalls that Petey wanted someone to maintain the boat and its engine and he much preferred letting somebody else run it, too. He asked Bill. His daughter remembers spending many enjoyable hours on the Erin with Petey and her dad. Arlene also remembers Bill taking her and a schoolmate sailing on a Lightning a few times.

Bill was a teacher at heart. He taught his kids how to make sundials and tell time with them—this was before the age of cheap watches and the sundials, which they could make anywhere, insured they knew how to tell timeand that would keep them from being late for supper. He taught his kids how to drive, too, but wouldn't let them go forward until they were really comfortable driving in reverse. Those lessons happened in the parking lot at the Yacht Club and Arlene says they all thought that was the normal way to do things (and they learned how to back up trailers in the process). Teaching was a trait Bill passed down to his children. They all taught their kids how to do things in much the same way as Bill had taught them, including driving backwards first.

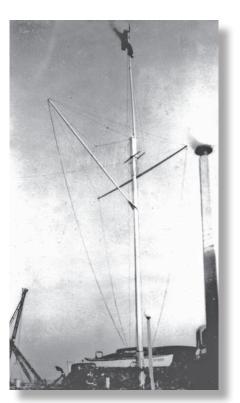
Bill was fearless. Once there was a problem with the derrick. A sheave at the top was jammed or the cable had jumped off if it. Somebody thought the Fire Department, with their trucks and ladders, could fix it but Bill refused. Arlene remembers watching as he free climbed up one of the I-beams to the top to clear the problem. He was also, at least once, on top of the Yacht Club mast fixing a halyard although that time he was hoisted up there in a bosun's chair.

He worked for Racine's Gas Company for most of his life and started out shoveling coal (yes, for the Gas Company) and, later, did repair and installation. He eventually worked his way up to Troubleshooter and Maintenance Supervisor. He was in charge of maintenance for everything



Petey Goldick's *Erin* getting ready to launch in 1945 after four years on the hard. Petey is at the far right. *Courtesy of Arlene Whitt* 

that was above ground: meters, gas lines in houses, gas appliances, etc. Arlene notes he had literally hundreds of keys for restaurants, offices, and



Some sort of problem at the top of the Yacht Club mast. Richter was hoisted up there in a bosun's chair. *November 1944 photo courtesy of Arlene Whitt* 

other buildings and she was always surprised that he could remember what they were all for.

Bill always had candy in his pockets (and would give pieces of it to anybody, including kids, who wanted some). He had dentures and they made his mouth dry; he found he could get around that problem by sucking on candy...and he would make one piece last a long time. He preferred red anise hard candy but he liked butterscotch and root beer barrels, too.

Bill was not particularly comfortable "dressing up". You would always see him around the Club in old coveralls, a checked flannel shirt, and a cap. He did dress up occasionally, though. He attended a kids' Christmas party one year in a suit and tie. The entertainment was a magician and he asked for a volunteer from the audience to come up and help. Bill walked up and the magician promptly cut off his tie. It was all rigged, of course, and Bill had a huge grin on his face but everybody else was shocked. That grin was not unusual. He almost always seemed to have a smile on his face.

Bill was a blue-collar kind of guy, always working and never afraid of



getting his hands dirty. He called the wealthier, white-collar members "silk sockers." But always in jest, never with malice, and always with that smile on his face. Nobody ever took offense.

One of the things Bill loved was dancing but he was not into parties. He was always quiet and reserved. He was, perhaps, something of an introvert around people he didn't know.

Bill was in the Coast Guard Reserve during the war and was intensely proud of his service and the uniform. One photo of him, as Commodore in 1944, has him in that uniform with that ever-present smile on his face.

Bill constantly watched the weather and kept a detailed daily log of weather conditions and brief comments about what was going on at the club at the time. Arlene remembers that people many times asked him what the



Bill Richter as Commodore in 1944. He's wearing his Coast Guard reserve uniform, which he was immensely proud of. *RYC archives* 

weather was going to be if they were going out on the lake that day. And, he most always seemed to be right. He wrote his logs on those big calendars that banks handed out—each date was in a large square that was big enough for what he wanted to record. He kept them for years, along with scrapbooks into which he taped newspaper articles, Yacht Club newsletters and anything else that interested him.

The equipment he acquired was almost always gotten "on the cheap"—either as donations or rescued (after asking) from some scrap pile somewhere.

Much of it looked old and worn and rusty but Bill fixed it up and kept it in tip-top running condition. He was meticulous about everything and was sometimes picky about details. The truck he used at the Club originally came from the Electric Company; it



Bill used his utility truck for many things: hauling boats, picking up moorings, and general odd jobs. It had an "A" frame boom over which a cable ran to the truck's winch. 1952 photo from the RYC archives

had a boom and winch on it and was big and heavy and Bill insisted that you couldn't just turn the steering wheel while the truck was standing still. You had to rock the truck back and forth while turning the wheel—that took the stress off the steering mechanism and the rubber in the tires. That old truck didn't have power-anything. Someone had once managed to fill the crankcase with gasoline and that was one of the few times that Bill could be seen to be really unhappy.

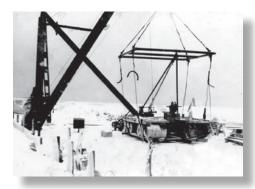
Bill, with help from friends, pretty much built the barge he used to set and pull moorings. It used oil drums for flotation and was eventually plated over with sheet metal (it once sprang a leak and was repaired, and re-sheeted, too, by his friend Sam Azarian). Bill and his barge were out there, faithfully, every spring and fall with it Many Club members, including some of the Juniors, helped him in this. He would pull the barge, which was powered with an outboard motor, up near shore or the Wadewitz dock and load a single mooring onto it using the boom on his truck. Moorings in those days were

large mushroom anchors but were later changed to railroad car wheels; the shanks on top of the mushrooms sometimes stuck up a bit too high over the muck in the harbor bottom if the water was low and that created a problem with deep-keeled boats. Like

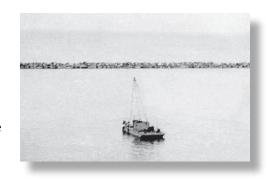
the truck the barge didn't, at first, have power-anything and the winch that was used to raise or lower the anchors was all manual.

Either Bill's truck or his Ford tractor was used to pull boats around the yard. The skid a boat sat on was jacked up and rollers, which were large diameter wood fence posts, were placed underneath. Towing was relatively

easy but the rollers moved from the front to the back as the skid was pulled



Above: Bill's barge. Made largely of oil drums, it would later have the topsides sheeted over. January 1946 photo courtesy of Arlene Whitt Below: The barge in November, 1957. The topsides have been enclosed. Courtesy of Arlene Whitt







Hauling out Jack Kopeyka's Valhalla, October 1973. Bill is sitting on his Ford tractor. Courtesy of Arlene Whitt

along. They would eventually emerge from the rear of the skid and would have to be picked up and quickly carried to the front to be put back down there. Turning was more difficult. Sledge hammers were used to skew the rollers so the skid would pivot. All this was a slow operation, nothing like what is done today.

In the late 1940s or early 1950s Bill and his brother Walter had a hard-hat diving business. They did business mostly in Milwaukee but did work in Racine and, on at least one occasion, did a job in the Wisconsin Dells. They were not into ship salvage but worked, for example, for the police to locate things that had been lost or deliberately thrown away; safes and guns fell into that category. They searched for

a body at least once. They also worked for utility departments who needed to locate underwater pipes and cables.

Bill's house and garage and car were always full of "boat stuff": parts and chain and shackles and rope and blocks and all the other things that were needed at the Yacht Club. After his passing Arlene notes that it took a long time to clear all that material out. In honor of his service, the Yacht Club presented him with "The Old Man of the Sea" award in 1972. It is a copper sailboat mounted on a wood base with a plaque. Bill is also honored with an oil painting, which hangs next to the fireplace in the clubhouse. It shows Bill in his usual work clothes with his customary cap

and that smile he always had on his face.

The Richter Building, built in 1974 and named in his honor. is used for storage of all the things a yacht club usually needs. It was built pretty much where the old clubhouse was and it was done largely with donated materials and labor. That, in itself, would be something Bill would have been proud of. All of these things were well deserved. With Bill's passing the Yacht Club lost one of its most faithful members, someone who can never be replaced.



Bill Richter. Photo courtesy of Arlene Whitt



The Richter building. It stands on the site of the old clubhouse. *Steve Wheeler photo* 



Bill's brother Walter in the diving suit; Walter did most of the diving while Bill usually ran the manual air pump, which he can be seen doing at the left. 1944 photo from the RYC archives





A publication of the RYC Historical Committee, a volunteer group dedicated to the preservation and dissemination of RYC's rich history. Written by Steve Wheeler based on stories and recollections recounted by Bill Richter's daughter Arlene Whitt, and Tom Haakenson and Rick Hennig.