

Sailing Matriarchs

Suzie Macmichael

For those of you who missed the excellent evening held in June when four 'Matriarchs' from the Squadron entertained us over a very pleasant dinner, we present the talk given by Suzie Macmichael. Suzie, now 91, spoke for 20 minutes and had us spellbound. What follows will be a pale copy in comparison, so please read with appropriate pauses and humour!

Just a little background: Suzie (nee Hawker) was born into one of the famous Old Adelaide Families, grew up in Adelaide with her three sisters and was a boarder at an exclusive school of 40 pupils at Mt Lofty.



*Suzie Macmichael
at the Squadron recently.*

This is basically her speech:

There are wonderful women here who have been around the world in a yacht, others who have been round Australia and that makes me unsure of why I am here - I haven't been round anything! However years ago I built a small sailing boat from absolute desperation to ever get a boat. But first, how I obtained my love of sailing.

Now I go back to the 1930s. My father took my cousin Phillipa McFarlane and me down to American River for a fishing holiday. We stayed as paying guests with a Mr and Mrs Jensen. During the day we would go out in Mr Jensen's motor boat and have a wonderful time catching whiting and the like - and then my Dad struck a snag: what to do with two young girls in the evening? The only entertainment offering was to go down to the one store, buy a threepenny ice cream and talk to the locals.

Then my Dad found there were far more boys holidaying on the island than girls. Well he was quite sure he wasn't going to have two young girls just out of boarding school exposed to that menace. So he obtained help from a one armed fisherman called Horrie Radcliffe. I expect many of you knew Horrie. He owned a simple fishing boat with a main and a jib and for some sort of remuneration he agreed to teach us to sail in the evenings.

He gave us a sort of run down on how to set the sails and how to find out where the wind was coming from. Being one armed his method of pulling in ropes was rather different but after a while we did get to use both our hands (before that we used one hand and tucked the rope under the other arm!). At first we weren't much good and Horrie would quietly make suggestions, but we began to get the idea. He always had a funny look on his face as if he was

trying not to laugh. We never knew if it was because of our mistakes - or because he knew my Dad was trying to keep us away from unacceptable advances.

After three weeks of lovely light evening breezes we had a fair idea of how to sail Horrie's boat. The holiday came to an end and we had to go home.

I begged my parents for a boat

but my mother assured me she had no intention of giving me one and said I was to settle down and do as I was told!

My sister Joan was doing just what my parents thought of as proper. She went to university to get a BA but for me, there was a stumbling block. I was really dyslexic. No one I knew then really used that word. I was just considered deficient somehow. No Uni for me! So my mother sent me to the School of Mines which was on North Terrace, for me to learn to be a cabinet maker. I was the only girl there.

My instructor gave me a gentle run down about keeping away from the numerous boys, who were all in shirt sleeves and pinnies. No thank you - I was much more interested in the chisels and gouges, planes and saws that were at my disposal. First a course had to be followed. Sharpening tools were to be mastered first. I'm really grateful to my mother as it was of life long use to me.

The course was designed to teach the use of the tools fairly successfully, and it wasn't long before I took home an aspidistra stand! Next came a wooden bathmat and at the end of the course, a box on legs with a hinged lid which at least proved I could fit hinges.

At this time whenever I had a free hour I'd go to the Public Library to consult books on how to build boats, and read the many magazines filled with sailing

information - and it was there I found a plan for a very small craft called a Vaucluse Junior.

Some one at the Vaucluse Club in Sydney had observed that when members such as Dad and Grandad came to sail they brought along Junior - approximately 16 years old, but all these boys got to do was to be 'officer in charge of bailing'. This meant young boys weren't really learning to sail - and who was going to support the club in the future? So a small sailing boat would be a good idea for these boys and after some stops and starts, the VJ was designed.

It was to be 11ft 6 ins which meant 12ft planks would suffice, be fully decked with a watertight cockpit and a centreplate so that if the boat leaned over too far, one of the crew could press lightly on the centreplate and the boat would right itself. The full cost of the timber, copper nails and screws was to be 5 pounds 17 shillings and 6 pence, the sails were to cost 15 shillings and it could easily be built by a 15 yr old boy with some carpentry skills and perhaps a more experienced older person to help with the fiddly bits.

If a 15 year old boy could build it so could I,

so I applied for the plan and took it to my instructor. At first he said 'No' and then he said I could do it if I passed the Cabinet Makers Exam. The exam was a practical. I was given 4 pieces of timber with which to cut 8 angles, 4 tenons, 4 mortices and 2 grooves, and then fit all this together so it looked like a fancy cutting board - and it had to stay together - no nails or screws. I don't know if I could do it now, but I passed and we could order all the timber and copper nails and screws.

However my boat did not come to five

pounds, seventeen and sixpence. It cost twenty pounds because the School of Mines insisted it was to be all Queensland Maple. No offcuts where you couldn't see them. My instructor insisted on riveting in every place a rivet would go and I had to get my sister Marjorie and cousin Phillipa to assist me. It takes two to rivet. Then we made a sort of waterproof bath and soaked the timber for the sides in hot water so they would bend and soon they were on and it was really looking sailable. Then followed lots of sand papering for the mast and boom.

Now for the sails. My Mum took me to Sydney for a holiday. We had lunch at Government House and afternoon tea with Lady So & So (to try to make me into more of a lady!). She left me alone for one afternoon. I'd seen a boat building yard down at Rushcutters Bay (long gone) so I went down for a chat to the foreman, and to admire a 40 ft boat that was under construction, and it wasn't long before I was red leading the keel and went back to the hotel very grubby. Not on my Mother's list of expected activities! However my Mum did take me to Balmain to order the sails.

I think the owner of the sail loft was rather surprised to see two ladies in hats & gloves, but he came over and I requested the sails be made. He replied by asking me if I knew who Victor Trumper was. Well I was a bit of a cricket fan and said 'Yes', and was told that he had been born in this loft. I'd passed inspection and two beautiful Japara sails arrived in Adelaide in due course.

Now I wanted to be a member of the RSAYS, but they didn't take girls so my Dad got an introduction and a seconder and he became the member so I could come and go as I liked, being his daughter. Years later I became an associate member and the coming and going continued.

My boat had a few faults. I added a lovely little hand pump. The boom was causing the mast to splinter, so I added a leather collar to protect it and then I had trouble with the centreplate. We were coming back into the river. The wind had got up considerably, and over by the far breakwater a rather large wave hit us. The next second we were in the water. The boat turned right over and the centreplate fell out. I was torn between getting rid of my heavy shoes and keeping my boat and me together.

A kind fisherman picked us up and took us back to the Squadron and some wonderful person towed my boat back. My jib had gone for good and of course

I never saw my centreplate again, but they were both replaceable. I was much more concerned with the loss of my rudder and tiller, but my Dad advertised with the magic word 'Reward' and it wasn't long before we got a phone call. They had been picked up at Pelican Point, and to come in from that direction through the sand hills and I'd find them. So I set off and came upon a dear old soul who lived in the mangroves in a very second hand tramcar with a quite impressive vegetable garden in paint tins. I couldn't believe it - I lived in a 7 bedroom house! I gave her the 10 shillings and she gave me my rudder and tiller, still together! After that I put a leather strap across the new centreplate to keep it in place.

Not long after this a much loved great aunt died, left me some money and I was able to buy a 24 ft wooden boat with a simple rig called *Alawoona*. By then I had a nice boy friend, Alan Pilgrim, and with Tich Mitchell and Bill Barton Foster, my crew was complete, and we had many simple delightful sailing adventures.

Then the Second World War came and the boats had to be sold. However in the last ten years (Ed: sixty years later!) I have had great summer and winter sailing and really enjoyed it.

When I go to Queensland in the not too distant future I will indeed miss the RSAYS but I hope I will still be able to visit here.

Thank you.

Other Matriarchs

You could call Kay Turpin a boat builder and circumnavigator. Kay has sailed extensively for many years and circumnavigated the globe in the owner built vessel *Thorfinn*, with her husband Dick. She also spoke at the Matriarchs night.

The other speaker was Dee Henshall who has been extensively involved in sailing in a variety of ways for many years, but also raised very competitive racing sailors.

Anthea Cowell, who didn't speak that night, but who is also one of our treasured sailing matriarchs, sailed no less that 167 Kangaroo Island / Adelaide trips on the S&S 34 *Morning Hustler* usually as foredeck hand to husband Jamie as skipper. As farmers on KI, *Hustler*, without the luxury of a roller reefed jib, was a major form of transport for them. Anthea and Jamie were a real team. They sailed *Hustler* across the Tasman and did a Sydney Hobart in her.

And there are many others.

With a new crop of keen women racers and cruisers coming through, maybe there are other Squadron matriarchs in the making.



The well known VJ sailing dinghies race on Sydney Harbour in the 1960's. They did not have spinnakers when Suzie built hers.