

GOOD OLD BOAT

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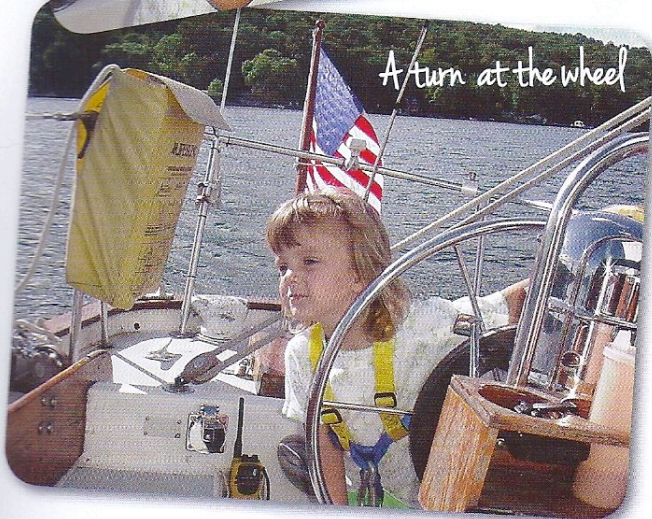


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Cruising memories



Katie, age 3,
Summer 2002
Apprentice deckhand



A turn at the wheel

A young woman traces her avocation to infancy

BY KATIE ALLEY

I am a sailor

I am a sailor. I always have been and I believe I always will be. Most people, when they hear the word sailor, picture the stereotypical image of an older man with a prickly white beard and large, worn, blocky hands. Plenty of the sailors I know match that description. The majority are retired and purchased a boat in which to invest their time. However, there are other sailors. Families with children buy boats on which to pass summer days. Young couples, who typically have a strong interest in sailing from former experiences, purchase boats too. All these sailors gather in one spot and form a community: the marina. I like to think of the Watkins Glen Village Marina as my genuine home because it is where I am truly happy. It reminds me of what I am.

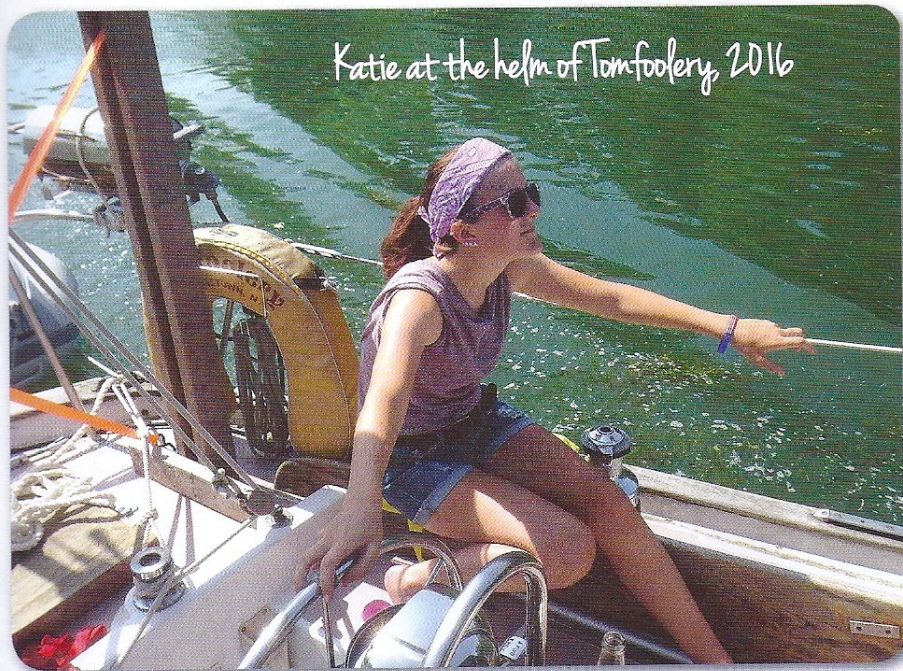
I became a sailor because my dad — whom I refer to as Captain — was drawn to both the sky and the water. When he could not become a glider pilot, he acquired a Grampian 26. During the 1990s, he earned the status of senior navigator and obtained a captain's license. He even purchased a larger boat, an Alberg 35 that I sail on today. My parents circumnavigated Lake Ontario while Mom was pregnant with me, so I am not exaggerating when I say I have been on boats since I was in the womb.

Early days

During my childhood, I spent the endless, hot, dull summer days on *Tomfoolery*, the Alberg 35. Captain would put me in a harness and tie me to the jackline running along the sidedeck so I wouldn't fall into the cold waters of Seneca Lake. I enjoyed sitting on the deck, feeling the cool, crisp breeze in my thin hair while watching other boats shift their tall white sheet-like sails across their foredecks.

On Saturday afternoons, the local yacht club had races and I came along with Captain's crew. They became good friends of mine. On Sundays, Captain, my mom, and I would sail for the luxury of it. We would always sail past the salt plant on the west side of the lake. Occasionally, when I behaved well, Captain would let me touch the steering wheel or the winches. The old men back at the dock would say, "Captain Tom, I believe you have a sailor in the works."

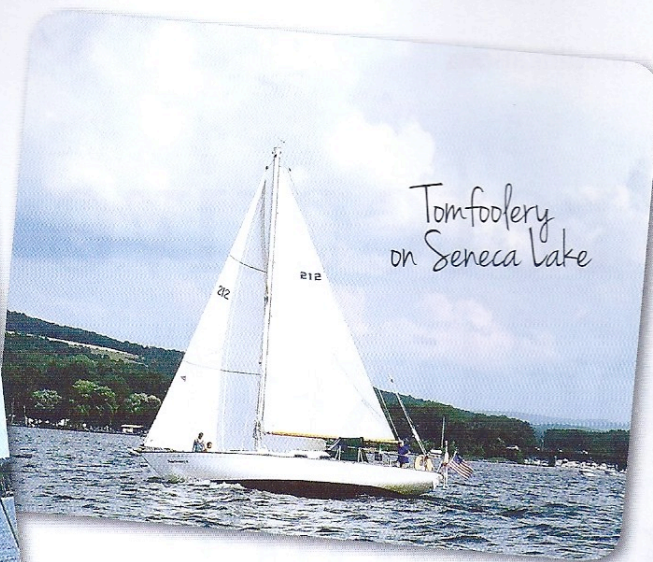
As I grew up, I developed a familiarity with the loose boards and liveaboard boats of Dock 4 and the adults I saw regularly at yacht club picnics. Everyone knew me as Tom Alley's daughter. My younger brother tagged along to these picnics occasionally and sailed infrequently. He preferred the television and comforts of the house. My mom generally stayed home with him, leaving me to join Captain and the racing crew.



Katie at the helm of *Tomfoolery*, 2016



Relaxing
on the boom,
Summer 2016



Tomfoolery
on Seneca Lake

Acquiring skills

When I was 14, I took my first boating class and earned my boating card. I learned sailing terminology and could finally put a name to that rope I had been grabbing all those years and recognize terms Captain used frequently. Sailing made more sense to me. There's more to it than just hoisting your sails and sitting back waiting for the wind to magically move your vessel. Being a sailor is not simple.

By age 15, I had learned more sailing tactics and taken on a leadership role at the marina. To increase the number of younger members, the marina created the Seneca Junior Sailing Program. The dockmaster's son, my best friend whom I call my first mate, and I became very involved in the program. As coaches, the Captain and several other older sailors taught the club's teenagers how to efficiently dock, cruise, and race their sailboats.

There is a process to leaving the dock. The correct lines have to be taken off the cleats in the right order. The wheel must be turned to the correct spot so the boat can glide out of the slip without hitting a piling, the breakwall, or another boat. We must remember to watch the boat's speed and look for traffic as the boat makes its way out of the marina. The vessel must be steered into the wind and the mainsail cover removed. Someone with powerful biceps needs to hoist the mainsail up the mast. The halyard needs to be secured to the cleat. The jibsheet will likely get caught on a stanchion as someone turns the winch handle to pull it out. Is anyone still watching for traffic? The tactician had better be planning tacks and jibes down to the second so the boat will be in the best spot near the starting line for the race.

I continued to develop as a "sailor in the works." My first mate and I cruised with Captain and became his foremost crewmembers. With more experience, we could run the boat ourselves under his supervision. We raced *Tomfoolery* and placed well. We practiced man-overboard drills despite Seneca's cold water. We sailed the entire length of Seneca in windy, rainy, and wavy conditions. We learned how to swap out a sail in stormy weather. We navigated to an unfamiliar lake when original plans did not work out. We challenged


ourselves in circumstances in which other experienced sailors may have chosen to stay put. Sailing demands passion and a sense of adventure, and we certainly possess these.

Confirmation

Along the way, I'd acquired several new titles including, "veteran junior sailor," "youth committee co-chair holder," and even "the dockboy's girlfriend" for a while. One of the junior sailing coaches told me, "Young lady, get a good education, make a lot of money, and buy yourself a boat." I thought about his advice regularly while lying in my berth on *Tomfoolery* awaiting sleep. I know now what he said is what I want to do. It is exactly what I want to do.

Another retired sailor I knew made money by charging people for rides on his boat and then took his wife and his boat down to Georgia for the entire winter. I listen to all the experienced older sailors' stories of sailing in Lake Ontario races with hundreds of boats or navigating the vast ocean and meeting new faces in unfamiliar harbors along the canals and coasts. One day I will visit and experience these places, because I am a sailor.

Captain routinely recited the old proverb, "A smooth sea does not make a skillful sailor." I do not need the luxuries of TV, air conditioning, or WiFi; all I need is the luxury of the wind in my sails. I can navigate the shifty winds of Seneca Lake, make my way through the canals, travel anywhere in the world, and never come back. I will forever treasure the oranges, pinks, and yellows of the vibrant Seneca Lake sunsets. Our dock neighbor, an older man who lives on his boat, said to me that sailing "is tomfoolery, all of it." I am passionate about the foolishness of putting a big sheet up in the sky to push me slowly through the water. Another older sailor in the marina, watching his boat being launched for another season, said to me, "Gee Katie, the older I get the more unsure I am about all of this."

As I get older, I feel ever more confident and certain. I am a sailor. 

Katie Alley has been sailing all 17 years of her life, mostly on Seneca Lake, one of the Finger Lakes in upstate New York. She competes in weekend races aboard Tomfoolery and oversees youth activities in the Seneca Sail and Power Squadron, a non-profit organization that offers a variety of educational boating opportunities. Katie plans to become a coach in the Seneca Junior Sailing program and eventually own her own boat to sail wherever she pleases.