

# Origins of Yacht Racing in British Columbia and Washington, 1870- 1914

by

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After the period of discovery and fur trade, British Columbia and Washington were settled in the 1850's. By 1870, due to the existence of beautiful, semiprotected waters and British traditions, the Royal Navy held sailing regattas at Esquimalt, near Victoria, to celebrate Queen Victoria's Birthday, on 24 May. Civilians began racing at Victoria in 1888 and in 1892 the Victoria Yacht Club was founded. By 1908, the British Admiralty conferred a Royal Charter upon the Victoria Yacht Club, which flourishes today. At Burrard Inlet, now known as Vancouver, the arrival of the Canadian Pacific Railroad stimulated yachting in 1887. Several different clubs started before the turn of the century and by 1906 the Vancouver Yacht Club received a Royal Charter.

In Seattle, the first organized races started in 1875 on July 4. The Independence Day regatta became an annual affair at Seattle until the 1890's. Yacht racing occurred at Bellingham Bay in 1877 and 1890, with a big celebration staged on July 5, 1891 to commemorate the arrival of the Great Northern railroad. In May of 1892, twenty-two Canadian and American yachts competed at the Queen's regatta in Victoria, with L.A. Wheeler's *Mabel*, an American yacht, the winner. In August, at Fairhaven on Bellingham Bay, seven clubs formed the Northwestern International Yachting Association. Thus the pattern emerged: in May the sailors would race at Victoria, on Dominion Day and the 4th of July, they would race at some designated spot north or south of the border.

The fastest yacht of the 1890's in the Pacific Northwest was *Myth*, a 38' Herreshoff design, owned by E.B. Leaming of New Whatcom, Bellingham Bay. Other notable racers were the diminutive *Hettie Bell* and the forty foot *Gracie Felitz*, of Seattle. At the turn of the century, prominent racers were *Wideawake* of Victoria, *Lavita* of Seattle, *Ariadne* of New Whatcom. The development of inboard gasoline engines at the turn of the century drew attention away from sailboats for a time, but in 1904, interest renewed. In the 1904-9 period, the most famous yachts were *Gwendolyn* (39') and *Gwendolyn II* (49') built by Lloyd and Dean Johnson at Seattle, *Two Step* (26') of Bellingham, *Minerva* ('46' yawl) and *Madeline* of Vancouver.

From 1907 to 1909, Royal Vancouver and Seattle Yacht Clubs staged match races in 29 raters. Ted Geary designed and built *Spirit* and *Spirit II* for Seattle, campaigning against Walter Graveley and E. B. Deane in *Alexandra*. These gaff riggers ranged from 42 to 48 feet in length. Geary won in 1907, Deane in 1908, Geary won in 1909, but protests over *Spirit II*'s measurements broke up the regatta. In 1914 with the inducement of a \$2500 cup donated by Sir Thomas Lipton, the club members agreed to race again, but this time in R boats. Geary brought out *Sir Tom* (40') and defeated *Turenga* (36') of Vancouver with Ron Maitland at the helm.

World War I terminated the NIYA which had existed for 22 years. In 1920, at Victoria, Canadians and Americans founded the PIYA or Pacific International Yachting Association, which exists at the present time as from one to two hundred yachts and dinghies, Canadian and American, compete for honors over the binational holiday.

By way of perspective, some of the basic causes of this development would be as

follows: the attraction of semi-protected waters, the British sailing and racing heritage, the appearance of interested individuals, the growth of the population and economy in the Pacific Northwest, the example of the east coast.

Power boat racing began around the turn of the century and was incorporated into the NIYA by 1909, with both speedboat and long distance log races.

All in all the story is one of a remarkable international yachting heritage of over a century.