

Jack Wood's contributions to sailing are recalled

(Aileen Kilgore Henderson is a free-lance writer from Northfield, Minn. A long-time sailing enthusiast, she tape recorded Mr. Wood's recollections while living in San Diego. This story appears in this month's issue of Technology Review.)

By AILEEN KILGORE HENDERSON

Walter Cromwell Wood '17. Recognize that name? You should—you owe him a debt. But for "Jack" Wood you might not be sailing; and neither would thousands of other non-millionaires. For Jack Wood has done more than anyone else to bring the sport of the rich within the experience of almost everyone.

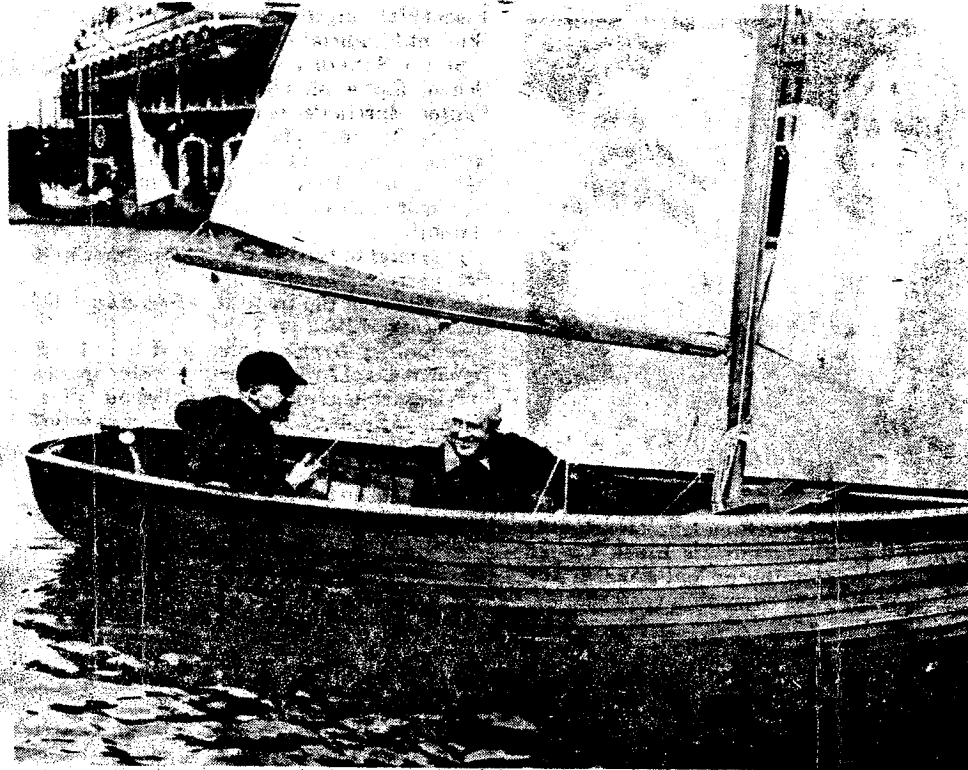
Born in New Bedford in 1894 and raised in Newport, R. I., Jack Wood has been known for decades as the "father of intercollegiate sailing" for his zeal to initiate others into the joys and challenges of the sport. He is in the number-one niche of the intercollegiate Sailing Hall of Fame at the US Naval Academy, Annapolis; the trophy awarded annually at the Pentagonal Dinghy Regatta, oldest of intercollegiate competitions with permanent participants, is named in his honor; so is the new sailing pavilion at MIT, where Jack was sailing master for 27 years.

When Jack looks back, he admits that no one foresaw the consequences of MIT's decision in 1936 to provide recreational sailing for its student body. It all began when some MIT boys approached him in the early 1930s about finding boats to sail in a frostbite meet to be held in Providence, where Jack was then owner of a boat hardware business. This led eventually to a frostbite race in Boston, and as luck would have it Professor Erwin Schell '12, head of MIT's business administration course, was watching out his office window.

Thinking about what a good recreation sailing would be for MIT, right there on the Charles, he went off to see Professor George Owen '94, who was then head of the Department of Naval Architecture, and together they went to see Jack Wood.

From then on things went pretty fast, recalls Jack. He brought his dinghy up to the Institute from Providence, and Professors Owen and Schell announced in various publications that a sailing program was being organized. Here is how Jack remembers it:

"Just before our organizational meeting, which we'd set for late afternoon, Professor Schell got a group of boys to parade through



Jack Wood and Karl Taylor Compton, president of MIT in 1936, when the sailing program began.

the buildings banging on drums and making noise. People flocked after them, right into the meeting room, just to see what was happening. When everyone had crowded in we shut the doors. We had our captive audience. Karl Compton, MIT's president, was very eloquent in his presentation, and things went off well. At one time everybody in the room had hands up. We got 500 prospective sailors out of the first meeting."

Later Professor Schell organized a fund drive for the boats, and Jack Wood recalls that he thought 12 dinghies would be enough. Professor Schell wanted 24, and when he called some prospective donors together everyone in the meeting ordered a boat to be given to MIT—a total of 48. "They didn't argue about why or how many; they just talked about whether to have a cat rig or a sloop rig," recalls Jack.

They settled on the cat rig, for simplicity and because it would make a better teaching boat. Jack thinks it's best to start teaching with a boat with a single sail. "Your attention is on that sail and the boat and the sailing of it—not on how to manage the sails."

All this was in 1936. A year later 27 colleges were invited to compete in Boston Dinghy Club races at MIT, and two years later the intercollegiate Yacht Racing Association (IYRA) had 1,300 individual members from 31 colleges; today over 100 colleges and universities belong.

Before World War II most of the teams from these colleges were for men only. But from the beginning MIT had no sex discrimination, and sailing turned out to be "one of the things the girls liked to do most," Mr. Wood says. Most of the early competitions were for men only, and the co-eds were upset about being

cut out, but Jack Wood urged a different view. "Rather than this being a set-back for women," he remembers, "I thought it was a grand opportunity for them to have more attention—teams of their own, races of their own—and more women sailing... their own meets with their own championships," and it worked out that way.

By 1940 Jack Wood was involved in community sailing, in addition to his work as MIT's sailing master. Already a Community Recreation Service in Boston had begun a sailing program, but there were lots of problems; the Metropolitan District Commission said it would take the program over—if Jack Wood would come in and run it. He did—and in the first year at least 400 children from all over Greater Boston came to the Charles River to learn sailing.

Through the years Jack Wood developed a whole series of gadgets for teaching sailing—a bottom-action winch whose handle doesn't have to be removed—it's in the base; a fuselage-type winch for trimming sails on Stars; a "sail magazine" for changing sails very quickly; an automatic starting signal for frostbite races (now the system for starting all collegiate races, making stopwatches unnecessary); a method of storing sailboats so that the sail, boat, and spars are all together under lock and key; a way of attaching wheels to boats to get them to and from the water more easily.

When he retired from MIT in 1965, Jack went to England with the intercollegiate sailing stars to help coach the exchange races with members of the British Universities Sailing Club. The next year he came to the San Diego Yacht Club to develop its junior program. He was a member of the Olympic Committee that chose US sailing contenders for the Mexican Olympics in 1968. In June 1972, he worked as honorary chairman of the intercollegiate Yacht Racing Association's national championships held in San Diego.

Now 86, he's slowing down a little, living with his wife Helen on an inconspicuous street in the Point Loma area of San Diego. Jack is still a force in the sailing world, the champion of sailing as recreation for everyone. But modesty is another of his strong traits, and too few people know too little about his story and what it means.