

The Origins of the Optimist Dinghy

The following pages, written by Cliff McKay Jr., are taken from the book



The Optimist Dinghy 1947-2007

Robert Wilkes
with Clifford McKay Jr.



available from Amazon:

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Supplement for Optimist Sailing 1947 - 2007

Clifford McKay Jr.

vIntroduction

In 1972, I watched the opening ceremony for the Munich Summer Olympics in the harbor at Kiel, Germany, the Yachting venue. As the historic sailing ships from the Age of Sail, paraded stately past, 400 diminutive sails swarmed around them . . . Optis. The contrast was striking . . . the blend of large and small, of old and new, of work and play. The full panorama and history of sail stretched across the harbor, a fitting backdrop for Olympic competition. Excitedly I called my dad to turn on his TV and share the moment. He conceived the idea for the Optimist Pram, and I sailed the first pram on the day it was launched in 1947. We shared many wonderful memories. As we watched the Optis and realized how far Dad's dream had spread, the dream that boys and girls might sail and race, I determined to gather the writings and pictures of those early days and to tell the story of the origin of this little boat.

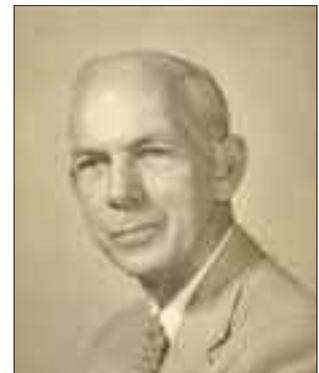
In the summer of 2012, I anchored my research by reading the microfilm copies of *The Clearwater Sun*, Clearwater's local newspaper. I read the files from March 1947 when the Optimist Club of Clearwater was organized, through August of 1949. Based on the historical data and my first hand experiences, I have written the record of the beginning of Optimist Pram and of the two men who were responsible.

Clark Mills and Major Clifford A McKay developed a boat and a plan to make it affordable so every boy could sail. Thousands of parents and club members all over the world have stepped up to supervise the races, teach safety, transport the young sailors, and provide support. Millions of boys and girls have learned the skills and joys of sailing, as this little boat from the genius of Clark Mills has spread around the world. It all began August 14th, 1947, in Clearwater, Florida, USA

NOTE: Clark Wilbur Mills was known to me as "Clarke", with an "e" sound added to the "Clark." It sounds too formal to call him "Clark," stilted and distant. The best way for me to represent this in writing is to write "Clarke."

CHAPTER i - The Origin of the Optimist Pram

The idea for the Optimist Pram, the forerunner of the Opti Dinghy, was formed at my dining room table. My father, Major Clifford A. McKay, shaped the idea from three components. First, the fun and excitement I had the past 18 months sailing and racing Snipes with the Clearwater Yacht Club Snipe Fleet. He wanted that experience for all boys and girls. Second, my frustration designing and building a Soap Box Derby car, racing it down the hill three times and putting it "out to pasture." He thought a small sailboat could get more use and last longer. Third, the financial structure of the Soap Box Derby in which merchants sponsored the cars and paid the modest costs. Using the Derby model, Dad envisioned a way to pay for the boats so there would be one for every boy who wanted to sail. Instead of work-



ing hard to build a car and ride in it once or twice, each boy with a boat sponsored by a merchant could sail it week after week, learning independence, responsibility, and self confidence.

Major McKay had a unique skill in analyzing a problem, developing a plan, and pulling people together to solve it. He was especially interested in programs for young people. Through the years he had developed creative ways to involve boys and girls in a wide variety of constructive activities. The newly formed Optimist Club invited him to speak and to suggest programs to carry out their motto, "The Friend of the Boy." I was twelve years old at the time and attended that meeting to receive an award as part of the Optimist sponsored Boy Scout Troup.

The *Clearwater Sun* reported on August 15, 1947:

The Sun, Clearwater, Florida, Friday, August 15, 1947

McKay Lists 4-Point Youth Program In Optimist Talk

Major Clifford A. McKay, Air Corps Reserve, last night outlined to the Optimist Club a four-point program he advocates to help combat the rising tide of juvenile delinquency.

Commenting on the Optimist Club's activities in the youth recreation field, which include sponsorship of Boy Scout Troop 6 and the staging of the Orange Box Derby, Major McKay suggested: (1) a baseball diamond and playing field on the beach, (2) a Sunday school basketball league; (3) a swimming pool and family recreation center, and (4) a sailboat competition for juniors leading to national competition or regatta in Clearwater.

Speaking on the subject: Did you ever put your hand on the shoulder of a red-headed boy? Major McKay's talk dealt with the importance of parental influence and the home life activities of the boy. He put the major responsibility for juvenile delinquency on parental neglect.

Major Clifford A. McKay, Air Corp Reserves, last night outlined to the Optimist Club a four point program he advocates to help combat the rising tide of juvenile delinquency. Commenting on the Optimist Club's activities in the youth recreation field which include sponsorship of Boy Scout Troup 8 and the staging of the Orange Box Derby, Major McKay suggested: (1) a baseball diamond and playing field on the beach, (2) a Sunday school basketball league, (3) a swimming pool and family recreation center, and (4) a sailboat competition for juniors leading to national competition or regatta in Clearwater. Speaking on the subject: Did You Ever Put Your Hand on the Shoulder of a Red-headed Boy? Major McKay's talk dealt with the importance of parental influence and the home life activities of the boy.

The Optimists liked Dad's idea and asked him to follow up with a boat designer.

The next day Dad called Clark Mills, a local designer and craftsman of small boats. "We need a small sailboat that boys can build. It must cost less than \$50, (the same dollar figure used by the Soap Box Derby); it should be built with two sheets of 4' x 8' plywood; and it should use a bed sheet for the sail."

Clarke tells the story this way, Major McKay: "called me on the phone and asked me to come to his office that evening. He had been a guest speaker at the Optimist Club meeting the night before and said he really had them

all fired up ready to pursue a junior sailing program, and he wanted me to draw him a plan for a simple little sailboat that a boy and his dad could build in their garage with simple hand tools. The boat was not to cost over fifty dollars and his idea was to have some merchants and business companies sponsor a kid in return for having the merchant's name on the boat. . . . I was the next couple of nights getting it done. I drew lots of sailboats every night. The problem was the price. Every time I had a nice little sailing skiff drawn, it figured out too much cost. So I finally cut the bow off making it a butt headed pram . . . I finished a sample the following week. I hauled it down to Haven Street Dock in Clearwater and Cliff McKay, Jr. got in and took off in about a 20 mile breeze. He scooted out into the bay on the wind, off the wind, across and then reached back to the dock, he landed saying, 'It was really great!'"

I heard this same story told by Dad and by Clarke down through the years. It was always the same, "two sheets of 4 x 8 plywood, a bed sheet for a sail, and cost under \$50." Dad was not a sailor. He knew nothing about boat design. He envisioned a small, safe, inexpensive sail boat. His specifics were an attempt to keep the costs down. Clarke said slyly, "I talked him out of the bed sheet," but perhaps a bed sheet subtly suggested to him the shape of the sail in the Sprit Rig so distinctive to the Opti. He said of his "butt headed" pram design that brought the cost under \$50, "It looked kinda funny, but it sailed real good."

Clarke continues . . .

"The evening of the next Optimist Club meeting (Sept 4th) which was held in the Grey Moss Inn, I brought the number one pram down and put it right in the entrance foyer all rigged with sail. It caused a flurry of comment by the members as they came in, and they were most all in favor of proceeding with the promotion of the program."

(From *The Writings of Clark Wilbur Mills and Friends*, privately published by Betty McGraw Perkins and David G. Perkins, Jr., 2002).

The Sun, Clearwater, Florida, Friday, September 5, 1947

The *Clearwater Sun* of September 5, 1947 reported:

Optimist Club members meeting at the Gray Moss Inn last night, heard a program on boats and boat building, presented by Team No. 1 of which Arthur Lee is captain. Guest speakers included Clark Mills, N. M. Faulds, W. Jardine, Commodore Guy Roberts of the Yacht Club, and Major Clifford McKay. Roberts commented on the wider scope of boats and boating and the possibility of a well organized plan to encourage interest in boating in Clearwater. McKay spoke on the originality of design (of the Optimist Pram) and stressed the safety factor.

Dad arranged for persons needed to support the boys building and sailing the boats to attend this meeting. . . . the designer, Clarke Mills; a sailor, Guy Roberts; the Junior High School Wood Shop Instructor, Willard Jardine; and N. M. Faulds, principal of the Junior High School who had incorporated several Industrial Arts programs in his school.

OPTIMISTS HEAR BOAT PROGRAM

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Roberts, Robert Wilfong and Dick Moore were guests of Maynard Bayney; Daniel Barker was the guest of Jim Robison; W. Moore was the guest of Arthur Lee; R. Blossom the guest of Daniel Gogaton; while Faulds, Jardine, McKay and Mills were program guests.

Jardine and Faulds were ready to assist the boys building their boats.

This rather brief report of the meeting was elaborated by the *Clearwater Sun* two days later in its Sunday Edition:

The Clearwater Optimist Club last night announced as its latest project the sponsorship of the building of a fleet of "pram" boats for boys, and the staging of a pram regatta in the bay here, to be followed possibly by a state and national competition.

The pram is a single-masted sailboat, seven feet, two inches long [sic], 42 inches beam, with a blunt nose and with a rake to her keel from abaft the center board well to her forward end.

She is a safe little marine-plywood sailing craft that is original in design, and was created by Clark Mills of Clearwater . . .

Local merchants and individuals are to sponsor prams, retaining title subject to rules and regulations of the Optimist Club Pram Committee, composed of W. Watson, chairman, Art Lee, Ben Magrew and Maynard Barney.

The overall cost of the pram is estimated at about \$50 or less. Plans, specifications and construction procedures are completely detailed by printed instructions, pictures and blueprints available to boys through their sponsors.

Boys from 10 to 16 years of age are to be selected to build their own boats from applicants who qualify for ability to do the job, selection to be made by a committee consisting of N. M. Faulds, Principal, Clearwater Junior High School, W. Jardine, head of manual training department, Clearwater Junior High and Optimist Clark Mills. Prams will be built at the boys' homes or at places provided by the sponsors.

Commodore Guy Roberts of the Clearwater Yacht Club and the seasoned sailors of that organization have prepared rules and regulations covering use of the prams. The pram

The Sun, Clearwater, Florida, Sunday, September 7, 1947

Optimists Sponsor 'Pram' Fleet, Regatta, for Boys

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Commodore Guy Roberts of the Clearwater Yacht Club and the seasoned sailors of that organization have prepared rules and regulations covering use of the prams. The pram fleet will be divided into classes, the first being the novice class into which all the boys starting to sail will fall. As they improve in proficiency they stand for promotion from a holder of novice class papers up to the rating of senior mariner.

An annual regatta will be held in Clearwater Bay to select the national champion pram sailor. Plans are so set-up and copyrighted that use of the name, design of boat, title to and use of craft, etc. is governed by the Optimist Club of Clearwater.

The first Optimist pram already built, is to be sailed in the Yacht Club basin this afternoon. Boys and sponsors interested are invited, as well as the public. Next week the pram will be on display in the windows of the Florida Power Corp., Cleveland Street. Fifteen sponsors have been obtained and the Optimist Pram Committee expects a fleet of not less than 50 to be ready for the first full-scale regatta some time in the spring.

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The article outlines Major McKay's plan in detail. Since he began work as a newspaper reporter, dad often wrote the story himself and offered it to the newspaper, saving them time and effort and helping assure accuracy. Dad's dreams were always large. From the first, he expected a State and a National regatta. In December of 1948, the first large regatta was further inflated to an International Regatta, in spite of the fact that the competitors came from the nearby towns of Dunedin, Pass-a-Grill, and St. Petersburg, the farthest, only 25 miles away.

Clarke and the Optimist Club worked hard to keep the cost at \$50. Merchants came forward as sponsors. Fifteen signed up the first week, including many Optimist Club Members. Clarke began building prams, and on November 16th, 1947, a fleet of eight raced off the Yacht Club Basin on Clearwater Bay.

Clark Mills said in a letter to my sister in 1996, after our father's death, "I firmly believe that Major McKay was the main instigator of the very successful Optimist Pram Program....I'm sure it was just as everyone said, a block-buster of a talk that started the Pram program."

Dad's creative imagination and persuasiveness, Clark Mills design genius and boat building skills, and the Optimist Club's energy and enthusiasm originated and launched the Optimist Pram.

NOTE 1: The language was about "Boys,"... which was typical of the times. The Optimist Motto was "The Friend of the Boy." But the reality was on March 4th, 1948, only 6 months later, The Clearwater Optimist Club voted to include girls in the Pram program. Susan Smith was welcomed to the Clearwater Fleet, sailing the Palm Pavilion pram. The nearby Dunedin Fleet, organized in May, had girl skippers from the beginning, Carol and Jackie Longstreet, Allison Delaney and Barbara Skinner.



Did girls sail in skirts?!

CHAPTER ii - "I sailed the first Optimist Pram"

My dad, Major Clifford McKay suggested to the Optimist Club, a plan that would provide a small sailboat funded by merchants for boys to sail and race, similar to the little cars of the Soap Box Derby. He thought why not race small boats instead of cars? Florida is short on hills, but long on water. They could sail all year long on Clearwater Bay. The Optimist Club liked the idea and before the meeting adjourned asked Major McKay to follow up.

Dad met with Clark Mills the next night and suggested a few criteria designed to help hold the cost to \$50. In less than a week, Clarke conceived and designed the Optimist Pram. He built a prototype, painted it red, and brought it to the Haven Street Dock for a sail. He sailed it briefly and, satisfied with its performance, he turned it over to me. It was lively and accelerated smartly as the sail filled. It turned sharply when I put the tiller over. The bow didn't dig in. It seemed to lift and skip across the water. The low sprit rig and generous beam gave it good stability. It was fun and easy to sail. I thought, "Wow, this is neat." The Snipe I'd been sailing was a little big for me, but the Pram felt just right.

Clarke built a jig to hold the transom, the bow, and a mid-ship thwart. He joined them together with narrow cypress stringers. He glued and nailed quarter inch plywood over the frame. Clarke said, "I hammered it together in a day and a half with ridged nails, slapped on a coat of paint and called her an Optimist Pram."

Dad's original plan, following the Soap Box Derby, was that the boys and their fathers would build the boats. However, we boys never built the hull, nor did we attempt to design it like we did our Soap Box Derby cars. Amateur designs aren't feasible for boats, and even Clarke's straight forward design wasn't easy for amateur builders. I know, I built four Prams with my son in 1973. The change from each boy building his own boat was never discussed. It was obvious to all. Clarke built the



hulls. We boys took it from there, fastening the corner caps, installing the bow thwart and mast step, scraping off the glue that dripped down, sanding, painting, shaping the rudder and dagger board edges, bending the rudder fittings from galvanized sheet metal in the vice at the school woodworking shop, and tying the sail to the mast with venetian blind cord from the hardware store. Dickie Moore, a local sail maker, built the sails from common duck cloth. The mast was a 1 1/2" dowel from the

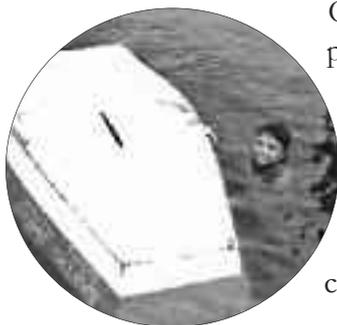
lumber yard. At first, the sheet ran from the boom, through a block on the top of the tiller. You could hold the tiller and sheet in one hand. There was no cleat, no traveler. These came later. When you mounted the rudder fittings on the boat and on the rudder, you had to make sure to get it right, or the sheet would lift the rudder up and off. The fittings on the rudder must go inside the two on the transom. Failing to mount them correctly could produce some exciting moments as the rudder lifted up and the boat sailed off with no means to steer it. Sponsors painted their names on the boats. My sponsor was WTAN, the local radio station. Sometimes the newspaper when reporting a race, would list the winners by the sponsor's name rather than by the skipper.



NOTE: There was no flotation. The Pram was made of wood. It would float, well enough to support both itself and the skipper. There were also no Personal Flotation Devices. The only PFDs at that time were ones with a canvas vest that held blocks of cork, bulky and cumbersome to wear and used mostly for an emergency on commercial ships. The Navy during WW II developed a nylon vest with plastic bags enclosing kapok fiber, but they were not commonly available. Besides, Clearwater Bay was shallow, and the water was warm. All of us boys grew up spending almost as much time in the water as we did on the land. The Gulf and the Bay were like a second home to us. We also lacked gloves, wet suits and other technical clothing. We sailed in a bathing suit and a T shirt. Life was.....well....simpler.

The Optimist committee held races every Sunday afternoon, off the end of Baymont Street near the Old Fish House where the prams were stored. It was a steep learning curve for the committee and boys alike, but everyone had fun. Sunday afternoons we'd race, but after school and on Saturdays, we'd help each other carry the boats to the water and make sail. We explored Clearwater Bay and its mangrove islands on our own. The only rule was "Do not sail in the Gulf." The warm, shallow waters of the bay were protective of the small boats and their skippers. Of course, even while exploring, we were honing our racing skills . . . when two or more boats sail together, it's a race.

In addition to sailing skills, I learned that the wind dies in the late afternoon, and it's a long paddle home. I learned to sail in 6" of water over the shallow grass flats by heeling to lift the rudder almost entirely out of the water. I discovered that my pram would stand up nicely in 30 knots of wind. The only problem was bailing out the spray that splashed in.



One hot day, between races, I capsized, to cool off with a brief swim. I pulled the boat up on the beach, dumped out the water, and returned in time for the next start. I won handily. Before the subsequent race, two others capsized. The three of us outdistanced the field with ease. The wet sail kept air from passing through the duck cloth and created a better airfoil. We learned by experimenting. (Sorry guys, your modern Dacron sails are already air tight so this trick won't work now-a-days.) I never capsized a pram by accident. It was always on purpose.

The boys from Dunedin heard us talking at school and saw to it that they got some Prams. The Florida Sailing Association approved the Optimist Pram for their sponsored races in April of '49. Ernie Green, now head of the Optimist Committee, offered his moving van to transport the fleet to

Florida Sailing Association Regattas. The Prams created quite a stir when the huge Green Moving and Storage Van pulled up at the launch site and disgorged boat after boat onto Sarasota Bay. Older sailors marveled at these little “water bugs” scooting around. My uncle, a seasoned sailor, jokingly offered me his shoe lace to replace the line that held my sail to the mast. The humor and disdain of veteran sailors quickly turned to respect when they saw the skill and the passion of the young skippers. The Prams drew attention wherever they sailed. Optimist Clubs in surrounding cities sponsored fleets. Yacht Clubs from around Florida adopted them. Winter visitors saw the Optimist Prams and took the plans north with them.



By 1948 medals were given for weekly races. Scores were totaled each month and a trophy awarded for the best score. In December the first “International Pram Regatta” was held with Peter Duvoisin taking first place. Pete and I lived next door to each other and were good friends. We both loved to sail and often found ourselves in close competition. We were tied going into the last race. We took turns leading for the first five legs. On the entire last leg, a broad reach with a slight swell coming in from the pass from the Gulf, we were so close we could have reached across and shaken hands. He’d catch a wave and surge forward. Then I’d catch one. He caught the last one and beat me by 18”. It was good competition and great fun. Boats came from Clearwater, Dunedin, Pass-a-Grille, and St. Petersburg. It was hardly international but the dreams and expectations for the Optimist Pram were always large, as large as the boat was small.



“The pram shed’s on fire,” Dad said, as he shook me awake about midnight, April 20th, 1949. I was pulling on my pants and jacket as I ran to the car. “Can’t you drive any faster?” I urged, as we drove in silence the half mile down the beach. The night sky glowed like daylight as the orange flames leapt into the air. The Old Fish House, built during the Great Depression by government paid workers housed a Sea Scout Troup, the Power Squadron, and the Pram Fleet. Its roof was sheet metal as were its sides. The floor and rafters were wooden beams, dry tinder ready to burn. When we arrived, the entire building was totally engaged. Nothing inside could be saved. The Pram fleet was going up in flames.

We did what we could. We helped cast boats loose from nearby Yacht Club slips and pushed them away from harm. We pulled racing Snipes on trailers out of a shed close to the inferno, some with completely flat tires. Then, as the firemen were beginning to tire after hours of strain, we helped hold the powerful fire hoses. By dawn, the Fish House was reduced to smoldering embers and the ashes of 29 prams. The only ones saved were a few that boys had taken home for a repair or to touch up the paint.

At school the next day, it was hard to think of anything other than the fire. The fun and excitement of last year and a half vanished overnight, consumed by the flames. When the ashes cooled a few days later, I poked around for metal fittings from my boat. All I found were melted blobs.



Possibly the first ever Optimist race.
Sail numbers had not yet been allocated, nor had the sponsors' decals been applied.

The sailboat *Salty* belonged to the sail maker Dickie Moore, and the power committee boat with the flag to Wallis Skinner, the first fleet captain.



Dad, the General Manager of WTAN, the local radio station, called news commentator Howard Hartley. Mr. Hartley went on the air, told the story of the fire, and of the dismayed heart-broken youngsters. He asked listeners to sponsor boats to rebuild the fleet. The phones began to ring and in less than two hours generous merchants and friends contributed funds for 43 new boats to replace the 29 lost. In addition, they donated \$6,000 in building materials for a new shed. I was at the radio station that night and helped answer the phones.

Clarke burned the midnight oil building new boats. The story of the community's generosity spread, carrying with it the story of the amazing Optimist Pram and the boys and girls that sailed them. The fire became a springboard that launched the Pram on its worldwide journey.

For me, sailing an Optimist Pram was the start of a life time sailing, racing, and cruising. It was the beginning of "a lifelong apprenticeship" in the finest sport there is. Everywhere I go there are Optis. I've sailed past Coconut Grove, Florida, the western horizon white with Pram sails. I was awakened in Marion, Massachusetts to the squeals of Pram sailors practicing capsizing. I rescued a beginning skipper who'd been blown away from her race at Nantucket, Massachusetts. I've watched prams race in Interlaken, Switzerland and Oxford, Maryland. I've seen the Prams stowed on the quay in Funchal in the Madeira Islands and in Copenhagen, Denmark. And then there was the TV coverage of the Opening Ceremonies in Kiel Germany, the yachting venue of the Munich Olympics as the fleet of 400 Optis, dwarfed by the Tall Ships, swarmed among them claiming their place as sailors among sailors in these rich historic traditions.

The beginning of the Optimist Pram was a labor of love. Dad conceived a plan so all kids could sail and promoted the Pram around the state. In seven years there were more than a thousand of them racing in Florida alone. Clark Mills designed it, built many of the first hulls, and donated the copyright to the Clearwater Optimist Club. The Clearwater Optimist Club with Ernie Green's tireless leadership spent countless hours with the program, supervising races, working with the boys and girls, and transporting them to regattas. The Optimists practiced their motto, "The Friend of the Boy." No one received royalties or any remuneration. Dad's plan worked. It provided inexpensive boats sponsored by merchants for every boy to spend hours and hours on the water, with no time to think about getting into trouble. The goal of these men was that boys and girls could have fun sailing, and grow up to be good citizens . . . and that alone was their reward.

Clarke's skills could have built anything he chose, but he explained his passion for boats, a passion that breathes through every fiber of his Optimist Pram: "A house is a house. But a boat, it's just a gleamin' beautiful creation. And when you pull the sail up on a boat, you've got a little bit of something God-given. Man, it goes bleatin' off like a bird wing, you know, and there's nothing else like it."

Millions of boys and girls on six continents have "flown on those bird wings" in Clarke's amazing little boat, and it has changed their lives.



... grow up to be good citizens. The first generation of Optimist graduates. Cliff seated at right.

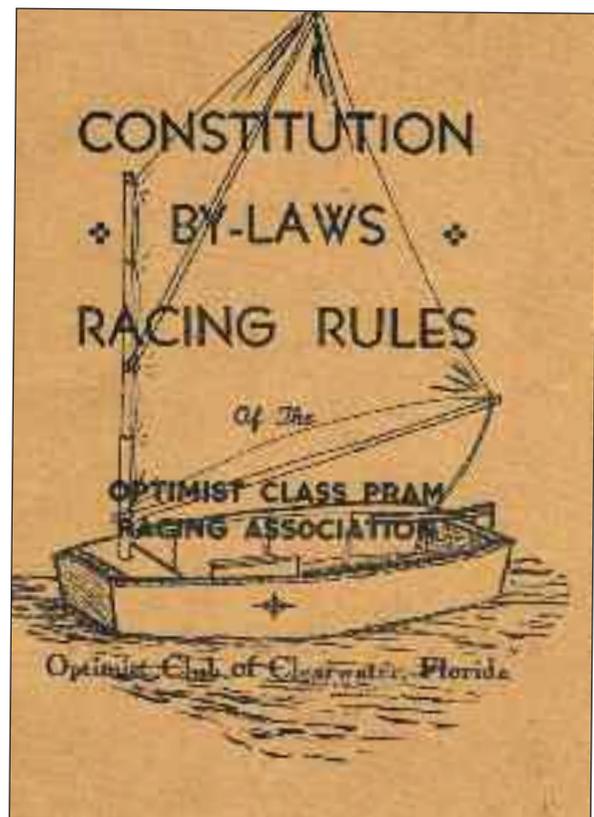
CHAPTER iii: Program Rules & Regulations

BY-LAWS

Section 1. RACING SEASON. The official racing season may extend a full 12 months from August 1st to July 31st.

Section 2. MEASUREMENTS. All measurements of the Optimist Class Pram, the sails, and the mast, must be in agreement with the official plans which are obtainable from the parent organization only, and are not transferrable. Any pram not complying with the official measurements shall not be eligible for registration or participation in any sanctioned regatta.

Section 3. RULES. Except where contrary to rules or restrictions of the Optimist Class Pram, the rules of the North American Yacht Racing Union shall govern all races.



RULES AND REGULATIONS FOR THE CLEARWATER OPTIMIST PRAM SKIPPERS

1. In order to be assigned a pram, the skipper or his parents must fill out and sign the Optimist Pram International Racing Association application. (This application is available at the pram shed.) A fee of one dollar must accompany the application. The application will then be filed in the order received. As prams become available the boy or girl whose name appears on the top application, will be notified by word, if present at the pram shed, or in writing, if not present. After written notice is sent out the skipper will have one week to claim the boat unless sickness requires additional time. If not claimed, the next person in order will be so notified.

2. The skipper must be able to swim.

3. The age range is from the skippers sixth (9) birthday to his fifteenth (15) birthday.

4. No pram is to be removed from the pram shed at anytime without the permission of a member of the Boy's Work Committee. (This means for the purpose of repairs, painting or sundry reasons.)

5. No skipper is permitted to sail his pram unless accompanied by another pram or boat. You are not permitted to take your pram out alone.

6. The pram must be sailed in the bay adjacent to or in the near vicinity of the pram shed. Unless directed otherwise by the Boy's Work Committee.

7. It is the responsibility of each skipper to maintain his or her pram and keep it in good order. This includes such things as painting when necessary, keeping the sail, mast, rudder, tiller and center board in good condition. If on inspection by any member of the Boys Work Committee any of the above things are neglected, and the skipper is notified of this neglect, doesnot within a reasonable time make the necessary repairs, the boat will be assigned to another skipper.

8. Official races will be held at 2 PM on the first and third Sunday's of each month, when the weather is suitable. The second and fourth Sunday's will be used for any postponed races.

9. Skippers must sail each sunday when official races are scheduled. If two Sunday's of official sailings are missed without some legitimate excuse the skipper will forfeit his pram and the pram will be reassigned. Some member of the Boy's Work Committee must be notified, preferably previous to races, of any excusable absence. The Boy's Work Committee will judge the legitimacy of the excuse.

10. It will be the responsibility of the skippers to keep the pram shed in order. After each sunday of racing three skippers will be assigned to do this. Every skipper will be assigned in his or her turn.

11. The fee is one dollar each year and is collected about July 1st. If a skipper joins the fleet after July 1st the fee will be prorated on a quarterly basic. (This fee is to be earned by the skipper.)

12. If a skipper purchases a sail, rudder, mast, tiller, center board or any other accessories for the repair of his or her pram such will become the property of the Optimist Club, when the skipper relinquishes his or her pram.

13. Skippers the pram is not yours. It is assigned to you, to sail and use but not to ABUSE.

YOUR BOY'S WORK COMMITTEE

General Charimen

Howard Smith

Recorder

Tom Graham

Committee No. 1. (Jan, Mar, May, Jul, Sep, Nov,)

Ernie Green Charimen
Dick Drossler
Joe York
Howard Smith

Committee No. 2 (Feb, Apr, Jun, Aug, Oct, Dec,)

Duane Cramer Chairmen
Chick Phillips
Fred Walbolt
Bill Chauncey



Yes, they were watching!

Pram Racing Rules

Adapted from the then current racing rules of the North American Yacht Racing Union

PRAM RACING RULES & REGULATIONS PART I

1. **STARTING-FINISHING** - A pram starts, or is starting when, after her start signal, any part of her mainmast crosses the starting line in the proper direction. A pram finishes when any part of her mainmast crosses the finish line in the proper direction.

2. **LEEWARD AND WINDWARD** - Leeward is the side on which a pram is, or was if luffing head to wind, carrying her sails. The leeward pram is the pram on the leeward side of another pram. The other pram is the windward pram. These terms apply only to two prams on the same tack.

3. **ON A TACK** - A pram is on a tack except when she is tacking or jibing. A pram is on the (starboard or port) corresponding to her windward side.

4. **CLEAR ASTERN** - A pram is clear astern of another when her hull and equipment are aft of an imaginary line projected abeam from the aftermost point of the other's hull and equipment.



H. **LUFFING WHEN ON SAME TACK** - A pram may luff a pram clear astern or a windward pram as she pleases and head to wind if she pleases, until the windward pram is forward of the mast line. Thereafter, or if the windward pram was forward of the mast line when the overlap began, the leeward pram may not sail above her normal course while the overlap continues to exist. The windward pram, unless an obstruction or other object restricts her ability to respond,



4. TOUCHING A MARK - A pram shall not touch a mark unless wrongfully forced to do so by another pram, in which case she must protest.





CHAPTER iv Clarke Mills, the Designer of the Optimist Pram

The designer of the Optimist Pram, Clark Wilbur Mills moved to Clearwater, Florida, from Jackson, Michigan, when he was 3 years old. World War I had just ended. His father sold his grocery store which provided the cash needed to make the move south. His dad was clever and creative, a good model for a son who would become a designer and builder. He worked with his hands and could fix anything that needed fixing, and he could build most anything he wanted. He took his young son and his skills to Florida and started life there. Clarke's grandfather was a cabinet maker, and in addition to cabinets and furniture, he built a wealth of small wooden pieces just for fun during the long winter nights in Michigan. His father and grandfather were good models and teachers and provided Clarke a love of building, extensive wood working skills, and great confidence.

As a toddler, Clarke found a bag of nails and a hammer in the house, so he drove all the nails into the living room floor. His mother was furious, but dad saw it differently, he admired how skillfully he had driven the nails. As a boy, Clearwater Bay captured Clarke's imagination. He built boats using sheet metal on a wooden frame and sealed the seams with tar. But sheet metal boats were hard to move through the water. So he stretched canvas over a wooden frame and painted it. It worked like a kayak and was much easier to move . . . but it still had to be paddled. Finally, he designed and built a small sailboat to sail across the bay's sparkling waters, let the sails do the work . . . he no longer had to paddle. He liked sailing. He liked it so much that he built other sail boats for himself and for his friends. Together they organized the Clearwater Junior Yacht Club at the Haven Street Dock and sailed on Clearwater Bay.

When the clouds of war darkened in 1939, Clarke was a young man looking for work. He worked in housing construction and applied for a government boatbuilding job. But when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, he decided to join the Navy. Just before he'd signed up for the Navy, however, his application to work in the Philadelphia Navy Yard in the Small Boat Shop was approved, so feeling he could serve better there, he moved north to Philadelphia.

The Boat Shop was a block long with a crew of 130. "It's not like I was intimidated," said Clarke, "I was scared spitless. The shop superintendent asked me what kind of boats I built. I pulled my wallet out and showed him a little snapshot of the sloop Richard and I had built, and he said without hesitating, "You will start here as boatbuilder 3rd class." I guess I was just pretty up tight. I said I hadn't come all this way for no 3rd class! No sir I am a first class boat builder and to hell with it.

The superintendent calmed him down, explaining that if he was good, he'd make second and first class in no time, and persuaded him to give it a try. The Small Boat Shop extended his knowledge of boats. He learned quickly and proved his skill. He was soon promoted to first class builder, the first in his group to achieve this honor. In a few weeks he was transferred to the Big Boat Shop and taught how to make the stems for the Navy's 50' Motor Launches. He was always good friends with his fellow workers. They shared knowledge and skills with one another and enjoyed one another's company.

In the middle of World War II, Clarke had had enough of cold weather, so he packed his tools, left Philadelphia, and moved to the Panama Canal Zone as a shipwright. He faced new challenges,

but he continued to increase his building skills and gather new friends around him. The tropical waters were most inviting, so in his spare time he designed and built an 18' sailboat from scraps in order to sail the waters of the Canal Zone. Designing and building sailboats was his hobby, his life's work and his passion.

When the war ended, he returned to Clearwater to see if he could make a living designing and building boats. Whether or not he was a 3rd class builder when he started in Philadelphia, by the time he opened his Boat Works in Dunedin with his friend Walter Pryor, with all he had learned and with his developed skills and experience, he was now clearly First Class.



I met Clarke in 1946 when I first discovered sailing with the Clearwater Snipe Fleet. I was eleven.



I'd get off the school bus, walk across the Clearwater Yacht Club grounds to the old Fish House shed, a cavernous tin building, where in the dark back corner Clark Mills was building a 24' sailboat. A little light crept in through the old weathered windows, but the main light was from two small naked bulbs hung over the work. Clarke always had time for an eleven year old boy. He liked visiting as he worked. He could maintain a lively conversation while his hands deftly crafted the next piece for the boat. He loved wood, all kinds of wood, but especially ordinary woods like pine, oak, cypress and fir. He understood wood, and it responded to his touch. The result was always smooth curves and tight fitting joints. We talked about sailing and boats, we talked about building boats, we talked about Florida and how it had changed since he first arrived in the 1920s. He was friendly

and gregarious. He loved people, he loved life, and he loved to build boats.

Around us in the Old Fish House were racing Snipes resting on their trailers. Clarke didn't race much, but he had repaired many of these boats for his friends. When he built a couple of racing Snipes for local men, the boats sailed so well and won so many races that he soon had orders from all over the United States, orders that would take him much more than a year to fill. At that point, he started returning their deposits. He had too much work to do. A few years before when he first opened his shop he was concerned about enough work. Now he had more than he could handle.



I asked him about "Mills Snipes." Had they a flatter keel with less rocker? Did he build them fuller in the bow? What made them sail fast? In his usual modest manner he answered, "Shucks, I just try to get them inside the narrow tolerances of class measurements. I'm just glad if they 'measure in'." Those who raced them knew better.

He learned from his family to work hard, but also to take time to play. He described gunk-holing

in a sailboat as “sailing down the coast, and when you see someone, or something on shore that interests you, you drop the anchor and go ashore and spend a few days.” He had a great sense of humor and loved to laugh. He proposed the first movable ballast for a sailboat. “You load the bilge with turtles. When you tack, they’ll crawl up to the high side.”

When it came to the Optimist Pram, he designed it quickly, drawing on ideas for small boats that constantly rolled around in his head. It was hard to design a boat for under \$50, but he kept working at it . . . and succeeded. He always seemed a little surprised at the little boat and its popularity, and a little embarrassed at the attention he received. When his grandson asked him why he was famous, he explained that people like his little boat that looked like a “horse trough”. He told the story of a man asking him to build him a Pram with the stringers and keel on the outside. As Clarke was explaining that it wouldn’t sail well and wouldn’t be stable, the man commented that he thought it would be a great place to mix concrete. Clarke was a self-deprecating genius, well liked, fun to be around who was grateful to make a modest living doing what he loved, building and designing boats.

Dad’s original idea was for the boys to build their own boats, but that never happened. Unlike the Soap Box Derby Cars that only needed to be mechanically sound and have similar wheels to be competitive, boats needed to be same hull, same sails and same weight to be fair for all. The skill level to build the boats was beyond the boys and many of their fathers. As the demand grew, Clarke would cut out pieces for 12 or more boats. He’d mount the transom, bow and midship thwart on a heavy jig. The jig held them strong and true as he screwed on the stringers and keel, mounted the dagger board well, and then attached the plywood with ridged bronze nails and casein glue. The sturdy wooden boats never leaked, and stood up to the rough treatment of a bunch of boys.

When Prams and Optis were built with fiberglass and interest in wooden prams was waning, Clarke designed and built several large power boats including a double hulled fishing boat for daily charter in the Gulf. He said, “I wasn’t sure about the double hull, so I got some Styrofoam, shaped a scale model and pulled it through the water to see how it worked. It must have worked okay since that boat has been out in all sorts of weather for years now.”

Clark Mills was a soft spoken, unassuming, gregarious, and highly skilled boat designer and builder. He was a master craftsman and warm friend. His fame spread far and wide. My favorite story about him was quoted in *Wooden Boat Magazine*. Two sailing yachts passed in the mid-Atlantic. As is tradition going back to whalers meeting on the high seas, they hailed each other, “Where away?” The west-bound yacht answered. “To Clearwater Florida . . . to meet Clark Mills.” He was well worth meeting, even if it takes crossing an ocean to do so.



Clark Wilbur Mills is One-of-a-Kind, a capable, unpretentious, and straightforward man, very much like his little boat that has become the largest one-design racing class in the world.