The inevitability of Tom Day

By John Rousmaniere

If a foundational date for the birth of American ocean racing can be pinpointed, it is May 26, 1906. That was when four boats under 40 feet overall crossed a starting line off Brooklyn, New York, and began smashing into a stiff south wind toward a finish line some 700 miles away, at Bermuda.

The sailors must have anticipated there would be storms ahead; they were, after all, headed across the Gulf Steam. But they knew for a fact that they were already in a storm of controversy about the race itself, which traditionalists considered irresponsible if not insane. For weeks they had been warned that their little yachts would never survive the Gulf Stream – but if they did, they would not find the island. So dense and widespread was the pessimism that funeral

wreaths were delivered to the boats, so the sailors would be prepared to make a decent burial at sea.

At the center of the whirlwind was the skipper of one of the entrants –and a also the race's inventor and organizer, Thomas Fleming Day. The editor of a sailing magazine, *The Rudder*, and an energetic promoter of sailing for all, Tom Day modestly declined to take all credit for this pioneering American ocean race for smaller boats. "Deep sea racing was inevitable, " he said. "It simply had to come." One of those people with a gift for making complicated things seem simple, Tom Day was one of the most influential figures in American yachting. Born in England in 1861, the son of a geologist, he came to New York City as a six-year-old and quickly discovered—and quickly fell in love with—the many small boats that raced on the waters of the Hudson River and Western Long Island Sound. Working his way up to larger boats, he nurtured ambitions to sail offshore. In his twenties he was selling marine hardware in Manhattan, representing a firm based in upstate New York that was also trying to make a success of a canoeing and outdoors magazine. In 1895 Tom Day took over as owner-editor, renamed the publication *The Rudder*, and created the most authoritative, energetic, and entertaining publication in American yachting.

As the magazine's editor, writer, and promoter—and as sailing's loudest and most visible cheerleader—Tom Day helped lay the foundations of the sport that we sailors know today. The many people who respectfully called him "Skipper Day" were acknowledging his knowledge and personality. Much of his authority came through his lively, opinionated, and challenging columns in the magazine, yet a lot of it was intensely personal through the energetic seamanship and technical seminars he ran in his Manhattan apartment. Day, said one friend, had "the eyes of

a dynamic personality—eyes that held you, and sometimes told you more than any spoken word."

And, of course, he knew a lot about boats. He set an example for the many new sailors who needed to be assured that a good seagoing cruising boat need not be a gold-plater, but just a modest, seaworthy craft. He had plenty of experience. One of his transatlantic voyages was in a small power boat that he believed would prove the rapid advance of American engineers. Another crossing was in his beloved 25-foot yawl, *Sea Bird*, with two crew (one of whom later defied Day's rather negative feelings about the Yachting Establishment when he donated a small half-model of *Sea Bird* to the New York Yacht Club).

Believing that a good test of a boat and crew is to race hard offshore, in 1906 Day founded, organized, and sailed in the first American long-distance ocean race for sailors in smallish boats, The course was some 700 miles from Brooklyn, New York, across the Gulf Stream to Bermuda. The route to Bermuda was well known for its challenges even to big boats. Many critics took this use of small boats offshore as a personal insult. There were rumors that funeral wreaths were delivered to the fleet before the start so the sailors would be prepared to make a decent burial at sea. To add to the pre-race excitement, a woman, Thora Lund Robinson, stimulated an uproar by announcing that she would sail with her husband. Day's complaint was not with her, but with his fellow journalists who interviewed sources in harbor saloons: "Newspaper men ought to know better than to consult a lot of grey-headed, rum-soaked piazza scows about such racing."

Meanwhile, he was inspecting boats and encouraging their crews. His ride was a 38-foot yawl named *Tamerlane*, against three smaller entries. One boat broke down soon after the start,

but the other three made their way uncomfortably but successfully across the Gulf Stream in rough weather, both when racing to Bermuda and when making the delivery home.

The first "thrash to the Onion Patch" proved that modern small boats and sailors could accomplish much more than they had been given credit for. Before long the Bermuda Race was an institution, not just as a race but as a test of seamanship and boat design in a challenging body of water, with a wonderfully hospitable and beautiful destination awaiting. With the 52nd Newport Bermuda Race coming up in 2020, and many other races and voyages to follow, Skipper Day would be happy to know how very right he was to predict that deep sea racing was inevitable—and a success.

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One of **John Rousmaniere's** many books on seamanship and the sea is a history of the Newport Bermuda Race, *A Berth to Bermuda*. He has sailed in nine races (three times in prize winners) and has made at least 15 deliveries to or from the island.