



The GYC Clubhouse. Photo by Bob Feckner.

# Gulfport Yacht Club Gulfport, FL

By Dave Ellis

Carl and Cleo Kleisch were tired of driving their daughter across St. Petersburg to Big Bayou to sail her Moth. Their two sons sailed along with a dozen other home-made boats on Lower Boca Ciega Bay near Gulfport. But there was no organized activity. So they all got together in their living room and started Gulfport Yacht Club in August 1938.

For several years, various homes were used. Sometimes Bert Mann's boat repair shop was put into service, among the wood shavings, mullet net drying racks and lye vat. Shovels were used to widen the small natural channel from the bay into a spur of Clam Bayou. It later became the entrance to the Gulfport Marina.

During WW II, most of the members were posted overseas. In 1946, a surplus army building was bought and

assembled on pilings over the channel. Members fashioned curtains, painted sailing murals above the windows and a big cistern was installed for the lone head.

The first official lease from the city of Gulfport was in 1952. Soon it was decided to move the building across the sand road to better use the waterfront. A wood-piling hoist was purchased from Sunshine City Boat Club in St. Pete, and wet slips were made by hand-digging and then jetting pilings into the muck with a garden hose.

At that time, there were two mangrove islands in the Gulfport basin with alligators roaming. The sand road would have a foot of water over it at spring tides. The city made the area a brush site, and the practice of the day was to burn it. There are a few old-timers today with lung issues

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Hand-digging the slips at GYC about 1947. Rita Ellis (mother of Dave Ellis). Note the commercial fishing boats that were the sole clients of the Gulfport Basin then. There was no marina. Photo from Dave Ellis.



Launching a homemade Pram of the day in 1952. From left to right: John Sandy, John Light, Dave Ellis, Bruce Ellis (father of Dave Ellis). This was the old club showing the mangrove island in the middle of the Gulfport Marina-to-be. Note the homemade dolly.

from breathing that smoke.

The club has always been oriented toward racing. The Memorial Day regatta was the big event starting in the early 1950s. Nobody thought about charging an entry fee then. The club saved up all year to put on the event. The 1957 regatta cost \$77.62 for food, trophies, gas for the RC boat and incidentals.

The 1959 regatta had 109 entries. Boats included Windmill, Snipe, Y-Flyer, Suicide, Flying Dutchman, Moth, Pram. Boats with sail area under 150 square feet and those over 150 square feet classes to lump everyone else. My second-place trophy on the wall is a plywood plaque with a ply boat, aluminum sails and hand-painted letters and burgee.

The Flying Dutchman class practiced on the bay preparing for the 1960 Olympic Trials. John Jennings, Gene Hinkel, Dutch and Jim Pardee, Barbara Tolson and Frank Levinson were there. Bruce Ellis' Suicide boat was added to the mix to increase competition.

By the 1960s, there were several skilled racers sailing at GYC. The Windmill was a big class with Walter Most, Dennis and Betty Lu Snell and Dave Posey winning regattas. Three Y-Flyers were built out of plywood by Doc MacLellan, Al Snell and Howard Snyder. They were heavier than the new glass boats, so they extended the mast and boom and put huge sails on the boat.

For local handicapping, an arbitrary number was given. If a boat won a race, it was docked a handicap number. If it came in last, it was bumped. One sailor managed to come in last in a number of small events and then won the big local event with ease.

By the 1960s Gulfport Yacht Club members were winning a disproportionate number of trophies at regattas throughout the Tampa Bay area.

There was a junior club but only one decent Pram and no coaching. It usually ended up fourth or fifth in events dominated in those years by St. Petersburg Yacht Club juniors.

Once a junior was sailing his pram into the Gulfport Basin when he noticed a puff of black smoke coming from

the south side of the big metal Osgood Marine Ways building at the end of the point. Quickly pulling the boat up the beach and running to the GYC building, he grabbed the phone only to have someone on the party line. No amount of persuasion would make the adults on the line believe the fire story. So he jumped on his bike and rode the seven blocks to Orion Osgood's house. Osgood jumped in his car to investigate. But by then the landmark and boats within were fully engulfed, done in by oily rags on the sunny side of the building.

In 1960, it was time to move away from the city dump. A spot on a silted lagoon on the other side of the channel was leased from the city for a dollar a year. Much work was done on the lagoon and shoreline. A block building was built by members and a bunch of old Navy Sea Bees. A dozen wet slips were dug for small keelboats.

Like most local clubs, there was a slowing of sailing during the 1970s. But during the following decade more activity ensued, including the Windmill Midwinters.

A few active members sailed catamarans, including early A-Cats. The club embraced multihull sailing while many clubs shunned the type. Today GYC is one of the most active catamaran sailing clubs in the country. Fleets of modern A-Cats, Formula 16s, Hobies, NACRAs and others can be seen practicing on the bay and competing twice a month on Saturday afternoons.

The Area D South Alter Cup will be staged there again this year, and in April, the US SAILING Alter Cup finals will be out of GYC. The city of Gulfport, once a tough fishermen's town, has become quite artsy and welcomes the visiting sailors. A large portion of the fine public beach has been used for major catamaran events.

This is truly a sailor's club. No bar, no pool, no hoist any longer, a portable barbecue, a refrigerator and his and hers heads is it. But you will find more catamaran sailing than anywhere else on one of the most idyllic sailing bays in the country.

For more information go to the club Web site at [www.Gulfportyachtclub.com](http://www.Gulfportyachtclub.com).