

2021 Mariner National Rendezvous

By Nate Bayreuther (#1922 *Orion*)

It's always a thrill for me to arrive in Niantic the Thursday evening before a Mariner Rendezvous, peer with binoculars across the river to the Waterford side, and see how many Mariner masts I can count congregating at the state boat launch near Mago Point Marina. I was pleased to see two Mariners already riding at anchor in the nearby mooring field, and when I

prepared my own #1922 *Orion* and motored over, I identified them as #3200 *Nora Rose* and #1951 *Netticks*, owned by Bruce Robbins and Harald Hefel respectively. Bruce had traveled up from New Jersey with his brother-in-law Mural Rao, and Harald had trailered his boat from nearby Pawcatuck. Upon arrival at the launch ramp, I was enthusiastically greeted by Chris Albert (#2714 *Flotsam*) whose own boat was launched and in a



borrowed slip at Mago Point Marina, and I eventually met up with Tim, Erin, and son Owen Reiche (#2170 *Maggie*); Andy, Bonnie, and son AJ (#3223 *Sheldon Jones*); Dan Meaney and daughter Madeline (#2024 *Clew-Sea-Nuf*); Brad W. (#3582 *Sweet Sadie*); and later, at the Black Sheep restaurant in downtown Niantic, Bruce; Mural; Harald; and James Hollister (#1574 *Lively*). After dinner, I returned to the launch ramp and motored *Orion* a mile up the river to set the hook for the night, intent on escaping the lights and sounds of the Mago Point area, still alive with night fisherman and the rumble of cars crossing the bridge. I was grateful to have bugscreens for the companionway and the forward hatch, and after setting the anchor light and enjoying a little light reading about the Battle of Atlanta, I fell comfortably asleep.

The skies were grey and the air was still when I woke up early the next morning, but by the time I motored back to the launch ramp, the sun was out and a slight breeze was ruffling the top of the water. There was already a lot of Mariner activity with a mixture of boats arriving, being rigged, and launching. Ulrich von Hollen (#2249 *Ob-La-Di*) with sons Caspar and Konrad had just launched his boat, and Brad and Caroline's *Sweet Sadie* was also in the water along with Steve Creighton and Joanne McCarthy's #2065 *The Pod*. Bill and Teresa Eggers's #2280 *Julie B* was getting rigged as well as Gifford Eldredge and Danuta Misthal's Stuart Mariner #4079 *Ripple*. Ann Pollack, a

Mariner Class Association member who drove up from New Jersey, arrived to crew for Harald who graciously took her aboard *Netticks* for the sail up to Mystic. We all chatted with each other as boats were launched one by one and, after a short meeting and outboard check - Ulrich's non-functioning outboard was quickly replaced with a spare brought by James - we were underway promptly at 10:30 am with Spencer Clapp and his crew joining us in #1956 *Aluna* as he motored down the river from nearby Three Belles Marina. Fortunately, we were able to sneak out together underneath the Niantic Railroad Bridge before it had to close for an oncoming train, and the 2021 Rendezvous had officially begun.

There was a light yet steady breeze out in Niantic Bay, and all fourteen Mariners began setting their sails and turning off their motors. The southwest wind allowed us to set our course around Millstone Point and head east, but just as we were settling down, the wind slowly died and our sails began to hang limp and slat around as our boats rocked back and forth in the wakes of passing powerboats. While the current was thankfully with us, headway was difficult to maintain at times, and the VHF crackled with jokes and reminiscences about past



Rendezvous when the wind was also elusive. Approaching the chop of the waters near the mouth of the Thames River, the motors came back on and we motorsailed past Groton and Noank and up the Mystic River channel. In the meantime, Giff and Danuta's outboard on *Ripple* had stopped working off of New London, and Brad and Caroline in *Sweet Sadie* were kind enough to throw them a towline. Although the fleet had spread out quite a bit by the time those Mariners in the lead had reached the Mystic bridges, everybody caught up just in the nick of time to make the 2:40 pm bridge openings.

No matter how many times I have sailed to Mystic Seaport over the years, my heart always beats a little faster when the car bridge raises and I can see the Seaport dead ahead. Tall ship masts poke up above the buildings in the distance. Small, gaff-rigged catboats dart back and forth from one side of the river to the other. Larger wooden ships receiving repairs or maintenance tower above the workshops on land at the Seaport's duPont Shipyard. The 20-foot catboat *Breck Marshall* sails stately by with a load of smiling passengers. Everywhere, watercraft of all sizes make the upper reaches of the Mystic River come alive, seemingly paying homage to Mystic's treasured maritime history. And there, standing at the edge of the floating docks by the 1921 fishing schooner *L. A. Dunton*, are the Dockmaster and a few red-shirted helpers, waiting to guide us Mariner sailors into our spots.

Like a flock of birds settling onto their branches - or, as fellow Mariner owner Dave Palmer once commented, “like a gang of water Harleys rolling into town” - Mariners were tied up and motors were blessedly shut off. All manners of awnings and canopies were erected, everything from simple poly tarps draped over booms to full enclosures. Chris Albert slung his time-tested hammock under his boom, and the Reiches even set up a portable air conditioner! We had all safely arrived, and after walking to the new Dock Office to receive passes and other information, coolers were brought out and pizza was ordered and delivered from the famous Mystic Pizza restaurant. What a blast we had, sitting on the docks and Mariner cabin roofs, enjoying cold drinks, great food, and each other’s company. Eventually, some sailors left to go to nearby hotels, but the majority of sailors prepared to sleep aboard their boats for the night. We were tired yet very happy, and we looked forward to the next day’s activities. I made use of the showers at the north end of the Seaport, returning to *Orion* and reading only two pages about the Battle of Sailor’s Creek before I fell asleep, exhausted.



A lot of folks were already awake by the time the sun came up on Saturday morning, and the Anchor Cafe, located in the old Seaport Bake Shop on the back side of the Gift Shop, received a lot of business from Mariner sailors once it opened at 8:00 am. With no set schedule for the day, sailors were free to do what they liked until the 5:00 pm “Open Boat” hour. A few sailors left in their boats to go back down the river and sail near Stonington. Others kept above the bridges and sailed around the Seaport and the anchorage in the upper basin. Many chose to walk around the Seaport for the day, exploring the downtown and even walking north to the Olde Mystick Village shops. Chris Albert along with Dan Meaney and daughter Madeline rented one of the Seaport’s Beetle catboats for a new experience. The Reiches and others watched a remote-control sailboat race at the north end of the Seaport, and their son Owen was given an opportunity by a kind racer to try sailing one himself! There was no shortage of things to see and do.

Throughout the day, I was so pleased to meet up with Mariner owners who came by car to join in the fun. Marie and Mike Cohen (#2376 *Blondee III*), members of Narrasketuck Yacht Club on Long Island, New York where there is a sizeable Mariner racing fleet, were the first to arrive, and they took me up on my offer to take them for a spin in *Orion* around the area. Marie, a seasoned sailor, crewed like a champ while husband Mike was happy just to come along and sightsee. Shortly afterward, Nick and Eniko DeMarco (#1848 *Rover*), also members of Narrasketuck Yacht Club, met up with

us and came out in *Orion*. It wasn't long before Nick took the helm, Eniko crewed, and I sat back while they short-tacked *Orion* in the channel like the veteran racers they are. Drew and Ann Patton (#1329 *Daydream*), who had driven up from New Jersey, also accepted my invitation to sail in *Orion*. We had a great time sailing as close to the car bridge as we dared before turning around and heading upriver to the north end of the Seaport. Later that afternoon, Jeff Ferguson (#3700 *Elisamy*) from Massachusetts met everyone at the docks, and we were happy to have John Schneider, yet another member of Narrasketuck Yacht Club, show up and surprise his fellow Yacht Club participants.



Chanda Plitt, of Catskill, New York, also arrived to meet up with everyone. Both Chanda and John arrived at nearly the same time and were absolutely flabbergasted to see each other; in one of life's uncanny and world-shrinking coincidences, they had not only attended the same high school together, but they were in the same graduating class and had known each other well! Their lives had taken different paths until that very moment when they just happened to meet again at the Mariner Rendezvous. Truly a remarkable reunion.

At 5:00 pm, after the Seaport gates closed to the public, coolers were brought back out and snacks were shared for the "Open Boat" time. Sailors who had spent the day in Fisher's Island Sound returned, although Harald, a Pawcatuck resident, simply sailed home and crewmate Ann Pollack drove back to New Jersey. It was another great hour of socializing before I gathered the gang together for a photograph on the wharf just above our floating docks.



Although a few folks weren't able to be there, it was still a special moment. I took a couple of pictures and thanked everyone for their participation; while it is always a

pleasure for me to organize these events, I truly hoped everyone else had an even better experience.

And then... the unexpected happened. As I was making my closing remarks, a rather loud and heavily inebriated woman stumbled into our group. A passenger aboard the 124-foot superyacht *Ariadne* berthed at the south end of the basin where we were berthed, she had apparently seen our group gather and came over to us, professing her faith and announcing she felt called to take another group picture of us. In an effort to be polite yet with a great deal of reluctance, I handed her my camera. The Mariner group groaned. I instantly regretted my decision as she staggered

backward near the edge of the wharf to take a picture. The Mariner group gasped. James Hollister and I jumped from the group to make sure she didn't fall off the wharf, and after several tense moments of her fumbling with the camera, I decided enough was enough and I began to take my camera back. She then became belligerent, at first

refusing to return it to me and struggling to hold on to it before I finally wrested it from her grasp. The Mariner group cheered. I wrapped up my remarks and then called the Seaport's Security Office. Unbeknownst to me, Tim Reiche was also in the process of contacting them, and soon a young security officer came trotting out from the Security Office while the woman was talking with other Mariner sailors as they were dispersing. When no amount of effort was going to make her return to the *Ariadne*, a second security officer came on the scene. She refused to budge. It wasn't until other members of her party arrived, returning from visiting the downtown, that she was dragged back aboard the superyacht, and this bizarre and unfortunate incident came to a close.



With the sun setting, a bunch of us walked downtown to find dinner at the appropriately-named Mariner Restaurant. After waiting only a short time, they were able to seat all of us at an outside table where we enjoyed a wonderful meal. We had, of course, to stop next at Mystic Drawbridge ice cream, and even though the line was long, it moved quickly. We ate on the bridge at dusk, overlooking the river with the Seaport in the distance, and walked back to our boats to settle down for the night. I took another visit to the showers and read a chapter about the Battle of Appomattox before I turned in for the night. I hated to think that the next day was already the last day of the event.

Sunday dawned with overcast skies and just a hint of rain. With plenty of time before we had to catch the 9:40 am bridge opening, we lazily packed up our belongings, stowed our awnings and covers, and took one last trip to the Anchor Cafe and around the

Seaport. Spencer Clapp with Laura Jones arrived from his home in Niantic shortly before departure and discovered a problem with his outboard motor. Despite all attempts by him and efforts by our newly-dubbed “Rendezvous Mechanic” Brad W. (who fixed *Ripple*’s motor as well as another balky outboard over the weekend), it would not start, so I rigged up a towline and towed him away from the Seaport docks. The bridges opened in short order, and the group of Mariners motored through and proceeded down the river, continuing around Noank before the wind picked up. Once Spencer raised his sails, I cast him off, raised my own sails, and I was grateful we had enough wind to sail back to Niantic instead of motoring the whole way.

Most of the boats were far ahead by the time I stopped towing *Aluna*, but the breeze began to build significantly, and *Orion* took off with a northerly wind right on the beam. It was a fantastic sail all the way back to Waterford, and I even caught up with a few other boats. In fact, the sailing was so good and we had returned to the Niantic area so quickly that some boats continued to sail around in Niantic Bay and near Jordan’s Cove. Just as we thought we could extend our sailing time a little longer, however, the wind started to dwindle, and Mariner sailors elected to start their motors and return to the launch ramp. I hung around near Waterford and eventually reconnected with *Aluna*, throwing Spencer the towline and bringing him through the bridges right back to his mooring at Three Belles Marina.



By the time I got to the launch ramp myself, some sailors had already packed up and left, but most were still there, so I chatted with them, took some last pictures, and bade them farewell. I motored back to my own mooring, cleaned up *Orion*, and rowed to the beach with my belongings. On the way home in my car, the rain began to fall, and I was grateful it had held off until we had all made it back. The Rendezvous was over, but it was yet another successful event with many memories to share and new friends made.

Mystic Seaport has had many noticeable changes within the past year due to budget shortfalls, including the lack of chanteymen, horse-drawn carriages, roleplayers, the art gallery, and more. Even the eight-member dock staff has been reduced to only three. Nevertheless, we Mariner sailors had a wonderful time, and we enjoyed everything else the Seaport had to offer. It is a rare treat to have an entire secluded dockage area all

to ourselves - with the exception of an occasional superyacht. As someone who is interested in maritime history, to be immersed in a place like the Seaport surrounded by historic vessels and houses is always a unique, exciting, and incomparable experience.

I was thrilled to have three new boats participating in the Rendezvous this year: Harald's #1951 *Netticks*, Giff and Danuta's #4079 *Ripple*, and Spencer's #1956 *Aluna*. On top of that, it was wonderful to have so many people drive from various states to meet up with the rest of the gang, especially the five sailors from Narrasketuck Yacht Club. What a surprise to have so many! While we had a large contingent of drivers for the big 2013 Rendezvous celebrating the 50th anniversary of the building of the Mariner, hardly any have driven to other events between then and now; perhaps that's because it has not been offered as an option. There was more of a push for drivers this year, though, and with ten members in attendance, there will certainly be another push for members to come by car for next year's Rendezvous who might be unable to bring their own boats.

Like any group of people who gather with a common interest, it's remarkable just how diverse we are. This year's Rendezvous sailors included engineers, librarians, medical personnel, military personnel, stone masons, architects, volunteers, boatbuilders, welders, mechanics, teachers, musicians, lawyers, carpenters... the list goes on. Yet we all share in our appreciation for this boat and make the effort to get together. I was surprised to learn a number of boats sit idle for most of the year, but when it comes to the Rendezvous, as one long-time attendee put it, "nothing will stop me from coming to the Mariner Family Reunion!" I'm very thankful for the opportunity to see old friends and make new ones every year, all because of our shared enjoyment with the Mariner.

Plans are in the works for the 2022 Mariner National Rendezvous. I am already looking forward to it.

