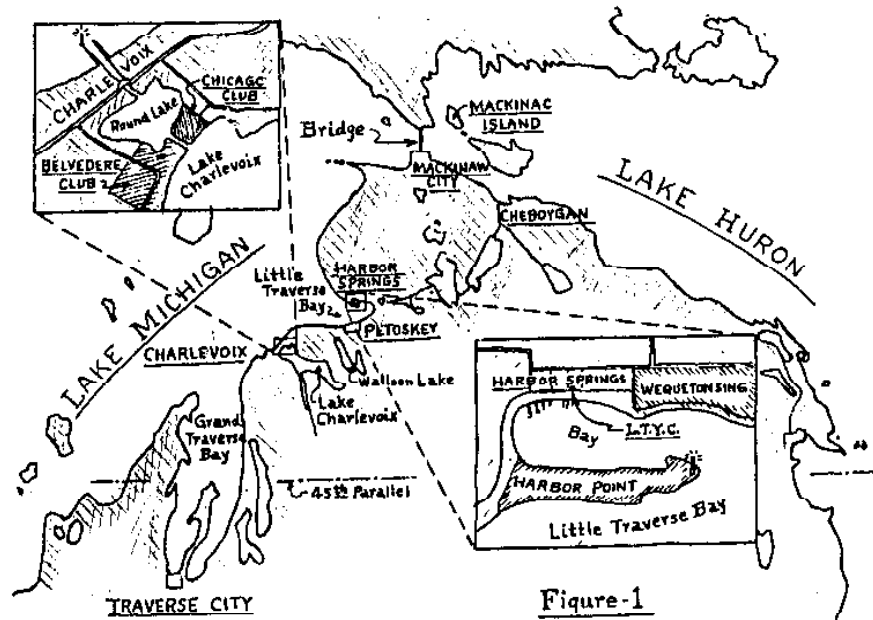


THE "NORTHERN MICHIGAN" (NM) RACING SLOOP
Its design, builders and similar boats

You may see this wonderful boat quietly resting at its mooring in the protected waters of Harbor Springs. You may also see it gracefully knifing its way through the clean waves of Little Traverse Bay. In either case its beauty is a sight to behold and you'll never tire of just looking at it. But the beauty is more than skin deep. This racing sloop handles wonderfully well and is a joy to sail. In addition it is an easy boat in which to crew. In short the NM is the pride and legacy of Harbor Springs, Michigan.

For anyone not familiar with the State of Michigan, Little Traverse Bay is about 55 miles north of Traverse City and about 35 miles south of the Mackinac Bridge. On the south side of the bay is the city of Petoskey. On the north side about four miles distant is the City of Harbor Springs. The waters at Harbor Springs are protected by a mile long arm of land called Harbor Point creating what may be the deepest fresh water harbor in the United States. This is an inspiring place to have a boat of any kind. (see Fig.1)



The NM racing sloop was not known as the "NORTHERN MICHIGAN" until 1935. It was conceived by the yachtsmen of Charlevoix and Harbor Springs during the period between 1933 and 1934 as a "one-design" boat for both racing and just plain sailing pleasure. A young local sailor, LeRoy (Roy) Kramer,[Ⓢ] aspiring to become a naval architect, first sketched the desired concept. He combined what he considered the best features of the 6-METER and 22-SQUARE METER boats which were sailed in that area. This concept sketch was then given to the chosen boat builder for final designing and building.

Concurrent with defining what the new one-design boat would be like, subscriptions were needed from the yachtsmen to purchase these boats. A summertime resident of Wequetonsing, which is adjacent to Harbor Springs, furnished the enthusiasm and the necessary tenacity to "sell" this big project. He was known to his friends as "uncle Teddy" Steedman but his full name was Edwin H. Steedman. It has been said that without his help there would never have been a NORTHERN MICHIGAN sloop or the NM Fleet within the Little Traverse Yacht Club.

A young and talented boat builder who was also a champion racing yachtsman was selected to design and build the first group of NM sloops. The Russell J. Pouliot Boat Works was located in Detroit, Michigan on the Detroit River near Belle Isle. As the boats were completed they were shipped by rail to northern Michigan. The working drawings dated January 5, 1934 called the boat "C-H" for the Charlevoix-Harbor Springs sponsors. Later when the Little Traverse Yacht Club was asked for the fleet's name to enter in the 1935 directory of the Lake Michigan Yachting Association, the name "NORTHERN MICHIGAN" was coined by Roy Kramer.

[Ⓢ] LeRoy Kramer, age 77, is a retired design engineer who has been adjusting compasses on many freighters and Coast Guard vessels since World War II when he did such work as a naval officer. He has also earned himself the title of "Old Goat" having sailed in more than 25 Chicago-to-Mackinac yacht races.

But why would these sailors want a new design when two very fine racing sloops were already in the area ? These were the aforementioned 6-METER and 22-SQUARE METER sloops. In 1933 Charlevoix had the largest fresh water fleet of 6-METERS in the U.S.A. As fate would have it, these sloops were destined to have a short life in northern Michigan. Let's look at some of the reasons:

Both of these classic boats were beautiful but expensive to build and maintain. Their deep wine glass shaped hulls with integral keels were time consuming to build. Not only were numerous curved pieces required for the keel but the rabbeting in them constantly changed to fit the angles of the planking. In addition the hulls were double planked. The inside was cedar while the outside was heavy and expensive mahogany. A lower cost boat was wanted for the Charlevoix and Harbor Springs sailors.

It is important to recall the climate of those times. The great stock market crash of 1929 had occurred and the nation was in the depths of Depression. When the "bite" of the Depression hit, the first area in which the vacationers economized was their expensive toys. Little by little these meter boats were sold and found their way to larger metropolitan areas such as Chicago, Toronto, Canada and as far as Seattle, Washington. The Charlevoix and Harbor Springs sailors still wanted to enjoy their sport but on a more modest budget.

There was yet another more subtle expense item which irked these now cost-conscious yachtsmen. The meter or "formula" boats were built to a rule rather than being a one-design class. As a result, subtle design changes were possible within the rule. This design development took the form of alterations to existing boats as well as whole new boats. What this meant to local sailors was that a person with a lot of money to spend could either make changes to his boat or buy a new one and perhaps become a champion more because of his boat than because of his sailing skill. A "one-design" with the hull shape and sail sizes frozen is what these men wanted for the future. They wished to emphasize racing skills rather than affluence.

It is interesting to note that the design of the INTERNATIONAL ONE DESIGN (IOD) Sloops, which now number about 125, resulted from the same desire to eliminate "check book champions". At first glance the IOD's look very much like the NM; but they are a bit wider and very much heavier than the NM.

There was still another reason for this new concept which the Depression helped to promote. That was to have a sailboat which could extend its usefulness and enjoyment beyond just racing. The cockpit plan for many 6-METERS was fine for racing, but unfit for social pleasure sailing. Wanted in this new sloop was a cockpit which permitted ladies and gentlemen to have an enjoyable sail on a sunny afternoon on the bay or lake. This implied a comfortable place to sit for several people and a sail arrangement which would be easy for the skipper or inexperienced guests to handle.

The concept finally given to the builder, Russell J. Pouliot, had the following main features: First a slim plan-view like the 6-METER but with a single open cockpit. Seats either side were long enough to seat six people but the forward area was kept open so the racing crew could have room to move about. Next, the expensive wine glass shaped hull with integral keel was eliminated and replaced with a graceful but lower cost "fin keel". (see Fig 2) The beautiful profile of the 6-METER with its long over-hangs at the bow and stern were retained. And third, single planking of cedar was used instead of expensive double planking. A small jib was also specified to make crewing easier. A tall mast with a short boom, like the 22-SQUARE METER boats was selected for its sheer beauty and light air ability. But the question often asked is, "was this NM concept original or just an offspring of another design?".

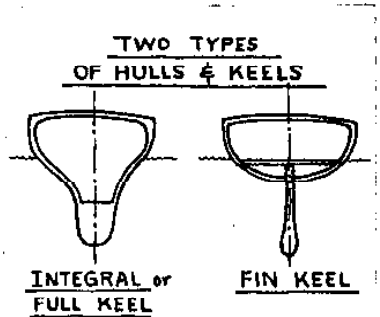


Figure-2

During research into the source of the NM design, several other racing sloops were found which, from a distance, looked very similar

in one way or another. It would be easy to conclude that this new design was just a copy of an existing one. However this is easier said than verified. Probably the strongest influence on the NM and many other designs as well was the 6-METER formula. Designs under this rule had been available for many years for yacht designers to modify and improve.

For example, in 1928 Olin F. Stephens II published an article on a 6-METER design in Yachting Magazine. He had undoubtedly made earlier designs. At the age of 28, in 1936, he was an outstanding designer of 6-METER boats. His successful "GOOSE" was later expanded to a 12-METER design called "VIM". That too was successful.

Also in 1928, the famous designer, W. Starling Burgess, created the ATLANTIC COAST One-Design Class. It too had the 6-METER flavor and beauty but was modified to reduce the cost. Like the NM concept, which came six years later, the ATLANTIC COAST used single planking, a fin keel, a small loose footed jib and a large open cockpit. Ninety nine of these were built in Bremen, Germany in 1929 and became very popular on Long Island Sound. The original cost in New York, complete with sails, was between \$1800 and \$2000.

Between 1929 and 1934 there was plenty of time for Russell J. Pouliot and his father Joseph to be influenced by these ATLANTICS. These two builders were known to be skillful enough to sketch a design which caught their artistic eyes and return to Detroit and build it. But it must be recalled that the Pouliots designed and built the new "C-H" sloop (later NM) from the design sketches submitted by LeRoy Kramer.

In two different interviews with Roy Kramer, he did not mention ever having seen or been influenced by the ATLANTIC class. The most plausible explanation is that two different people started with the lines of the 6-METER boat, together with the attractive tall spar of the Norwegian designs, and created economical one-design sloops which ended-up with very similar features. The work was done on an independent basis. This leaves the NM Racing Sloop a unique design.

Other classes which have been suggested as 'looking just like' the NM Sloop are the INTERNATIONAL ONE-DESIGN, SHIELDS CLASS, ETCHELLS-22, and even the DRAGON. However it should be recalled that people's observations are primarily based on the hull's profile as seen in the water. The sail proportion is probably a secondary impression. Cockpit arrangements are often ignored and the hull and keel construction below the waterline isn't observed at all. Of all these classes only the ATLANTIC COAST comes close to the Northern Michigan in size and features. Even so there are several differences which we will look at.

First, the rudder post angle as measured from the vertical is decidedly larger on the ATLANTIC being approximately 44 degrees versus 32 degrees on the NM. Next the tiller is attached to the rudder post down inside the ATLANTIC cockpit while it is attached above deck and behind the cockpit on the NM. (see Fig.4) Finally there is a difference in the standing rigging. Both boats have two horizontal spreaders but the shroud passing down over the upper spreader on the ATLANTIC returns to the spar near the lower spreader. On the NM the same shroud passes over the tips of both spreaders before being routed down to the chainplates. (see Fig.3) The ATLANTIC's transom appears wider and somewhat less graceful than the NM's. The NM is one and one-half feet longer than the ATLANTIC. Both are good looking sloops.

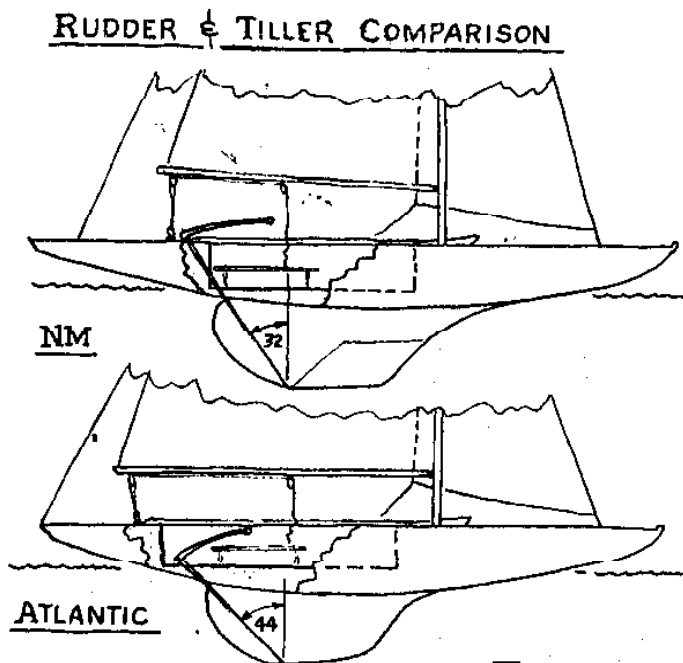
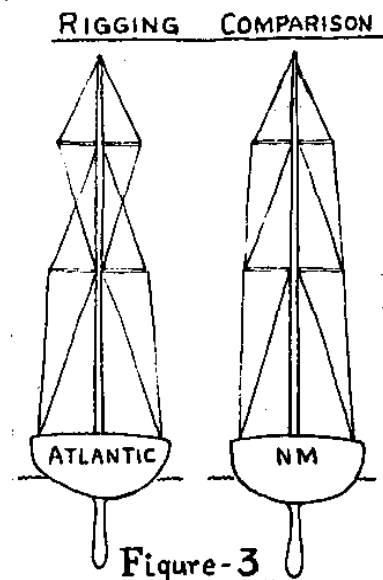


Figure-4



When the working drawing of the "C-H" Sloop were finished by the Pouliot Boat Works, the yachtsmen back in Harbor Springs were amazed and pleased that Russell J. Pouliot had accomplished everything that they had desired. The original cost back in 1934 was about \$2400. This was a bit higher than the sailors had hoped for; but by today's standards it seems low. Back then the workers in Detroit were only making about \$35.00 per week. But who was this builder, Russell J. Pouliot? Let's take a look at his background and a few of his accomplishments.

Russell's father Joseph A. Pouliot was a French Canadian brought up on the Isle D'Orleans in the St. Lawrence River about 8 miles east of the city of Quebec. In his early life Joseph and his wife Emily moved to Detroit, Michigan and settled in the French part of town. Here they raised five children: two daughters and three sons. Russell J. was the first born in 1896. His father farmed in the summer and in the winter built custom yachts. As a result, Russell received training in yacht designing and building from his father. Beyond high school, he had no formal training. However, those who knew him said he was an 'artist' when it came to laying-out a boat full size and building it. Like so many talented people, he was a dreamer, sometimes not practical, poorly organized and a poor businessman. He would often go out of his way to help a friend with boat problems regardless of time or expense. In spite of this we are told that his ability and good works far out weighed any of his shortcomings. When technical help was needed, especially with the mathematics of yacht design, Russell would call upon the help of a naval architect, Nelson Zimmer.

Russell J. Pouliot was more than a yacht builder. In addition he was an excellent racing skipper for many years and later on was a much sought after crew. As a member of the Bayview Yacht Club on the Detroit River he sailed and won the first Port Huron-to-Mackinac Island Race in 1925. In that race he sailed his "R" boat named "BERNIDA". He is considered by some to be one of the founders of that racing event which is still held annually. Starting in his backyard, he later built the famous boat "BACCARAT" in 1932 and went on to win the Mackinac Races in 1933, 34, 35 and 36. This boat also won the Bermuda Race in the class "B" division in 1934. She was so fast that there was serious talk in Detroit racing circles of not permitting her to race.

For many years following the Mackinac Race, Russell Pouliot would sail down to Harbor Springs and Charlevoix from Mackinac Island. He must have been acquainted with other yachtsmen in those areas and known to them as a winning sailor and boat builder. When the time came for the Charlevoix - Harbor Springs (C-H) yachtsmen to seek a designer/ builder for their new one-design class, they must already have known him as the source.

Unfortunately Russell J. was a heavy drinker. In 1956 at the early age of 60 he died of cancer. As often before in his business career, he had run out of money. A real tribute to him came from the love and admiration of his friends at the Bayview Yacht Club. When Russell died, they helped bury him and pay for his headstone. He is buried in Richmond, Michigan not far north from Mt. Clemens.

When the NM Fleet was first listed in the Lake Michigan Yachting Association directory, all the boats from Charlevoix and Harbor Springs were included. This was confusing and may have suggested that they all raced together. Due to the the distance between the two towns, these boat did not compete. The Charlevoix yachtsmen were members of the Chicago and Belvedere Clubs primarily and raced on Lake Charlevoix. (see Fig.1) The Harbor Springs yachtsmen belonged to the Little Traverse Yacht Club and raced on Little Traverse Bay.

The 1935 directory of the Lake Michigan Yachting Association listed the first ten NM's delivered from Detroit. It is interesting to note that six of these went to Charlevoix. This may indicate the degree of support they gave this new racing sloop. By 1937 the number of NM's was up to 17. There was probably one more delivered shortly thereafter. All in all Pouliot Boat Works (later on called Fisher Boat Works) built 18 NM's numbered 1 through 19. Number 13 was never built by him although one exists today.

Russell J. Pouliot was the owner and president who started the Boat Works carrying his name. Because of financial problems resulting from poor business leadership, his company was bought by William P. Fisher. The 1938 Detroit Directory lists Fisher as the general

manager and Russell Pouliot as vice-president works manager. In the 1941 Directory, Russell was still shown as vice president but the company was then called Fisher Boat Works. The building of pleasure yachts ceased with the war effort, and Fisher commenced to build for the U.S. Navy. A number of submarine chasers were built under contract. Just when Russell J. ceased to work for Fisher is unclear; but soon after World War II, Fisher gave up the boat business and Gregory Boat Shop took over the location. Gregory is still in the same location but does not build boats.

There were only two problems with the new NM design: The first was a heavy weather helm in strong winds. This was cured by moving the mast forward. Today these boats have a very neutral helm. An example of this is recalled by Roy Kramer when he first sailed an NM alone following a tiring Mackinac Race in which he crewed. The warm sun and light air soon made Roy fall asleep at the helm. For the next 45 minutes the NM sailed itself. When Roy awoke, the boat's heading was nearly the same as before he dozed-off. The second problem was that the watertight bulkheads fore and aft to provide flotation were ineffective. They have since been eliminated as they merely caused poor ventilation below decks. I have asked many owners what they would change on the NM if they were to redesign it. The answer consistently comes back, "nothing".

Construction of the NORTHERN MICHIGAN Racing Sloops did not stop with the closing of the Fisher Boat Works. In Harbor Springs, Dave Irish of the Irish Boat Shop continued to make wooden NM's starting in 1965. An accomplished boat builder from nearby Walloon Lake named Ted McCutcheon was hired by Irish.Ⓢ Ted had been building some very attractive full keel sailboats called 17-SQUARE METERS. These were and still are popular on Walloon Lake. Ted built NM's 20 through 23 in wood and at that time they cost about \$11,500. Starting in 1971, the Irish Boat Shop undertook making fiberglass NM's. By 1982 NM-24 through 27 had been completed.

Ⓢ When the Mackinac Island State Park Commission decided to construct a full size replica of the 55 foot sailing ship

WELCOME, which was first built in Mackinac in 1775 by John Askin, they chose Ted McCuthcheon from Charlevoix to do the construction. The construction was a 'live craft exhibit' on the museum grounds in Mackinaw City. The work took seven years to complete with the launching in 1980.

As time progressed many of the older NM's needed restoration. Some had planks replaced where dry rot had attacked them. A few owners covered the wooden hulls with fiberglass. Others used the wooden hull as a plug to make molds for new fiberglass hulls. These retained as much of the rigging as possible along with the fin keel and of course the original boat number. As might be expected several boats have replaced broken spruce masts and booms with aluminum. NM-7 ("PDQ") was restored in 1990 and joined the races in 1991. NM-1 ("Yellowbird") had restoration started in 1991 and should be back on the bay in 1992.

For ten years following World War II racing at Little Traverse Bay all but died. It did die at Charlevoix. In 1957, for example, there were only 6 NM's racing at Harbor Springs. By 1967 there were 15. During this time the Charlevoix boats had changed hands. Most had found their way back to Harbor Springs. Some have been retired from racing, but are still found moored in the harbor for pleasure sailing. Within the Little Traverse Yacht Club there are still 10 to 12 NM's at the starting line in season.

The Little Traverse Yacht Club has been in continuous operation since its founding in 1892. For three years it was called the Harbor Springs Boat Club. Sailing activities were carried out without a clubhouse for many years. In 1965 an old cottage was purchased on Bay Street to become the official clubhouse. It is elevated on a natural bluff and its spacious porches overlook the busy and beautiful harbor.

As the Northern Michigan Fleet approaches its 60th. Anniversary in 1994, we find it both alive and well. Wooden boats still hold their own with the fiberglass. The NM One-Design Racing Sloop remains a classic and continues to be the pride and legacy of harbor springs.

D.W. Barton
Draft dated 3-4-92