

ACROSS THE BIG POND IN 1932

By Bob Keidel

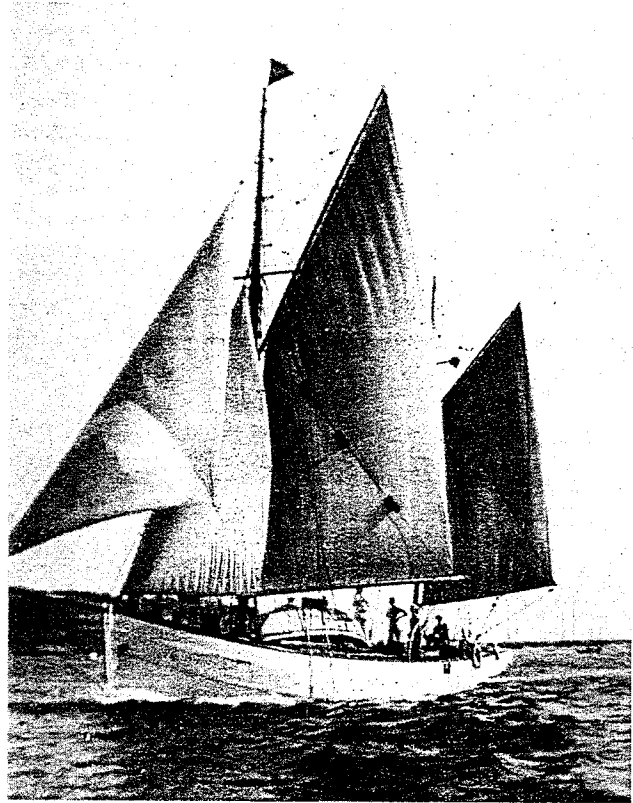
On the evening of July 7th, 1932, with horns blowing, with farewell salutes from the cannons of the Eastern and Corinthian Yacht Clubs and accompanied by a small flotilla of day sailors, the 54 foot ketch *Störtebeker* made its way out of Marblehead Harbor toward the open sea. Her immediate destination was the island of Flores, the westernmost of the Azores; her crew, five Princetonians, one Harvard man and a free spirit, Paul Stillman, who signed on at the last minute as we left City Island, N. Y. on our shake down cruise.

The story begins in early May, 1931, as Captain Schlimbach with a crew of one left the mouth of the Elbe River in Germany bound for America, hoping to enter the Newport to Bergen Trans-Atlantic race at the end of June. Buffeted by storms, he finally arrived at Newport a week after the race had started. Broke and discouraged, he looked around for someone to buy his boat. Ash Hardy and Bill Snyder, both Princeton '32, put up the \$3600.

The plan to sail *Störtebeker* back across the Atlantic the following summer was hatched, and the selection of the crew began. Stan Backus, '33, came in with a third of the purchase price and signed on. Bill Crow, a seasoned sailor from Rye was an early recruit as was Bill Drewry, '32. I managed to talk myself in, and Hardy's boyhood chum, Peter Barry, Harvard '32, made seven. (Just before sailing, Bill Snyder had to back out due to his father's illness).

Shakedown. After strenuous preparations, we finally set sail on a Sunday in June from Rye on a shakedown cruise to Marblehead. On a glorious day with a following wind, we set the spinnaker, pushing the Sound ahead of us as we roared along. I was in the cross-trees looking out over the hundreds of Sunday sails. The boat was so sturdy and stiff that we didn't realize we had a 52 mile gale behind us, even when the spinnaker pole snapped in half. But the next day in Marblehead we read about the boats dismasted and races cancelled. So we figured the gear wasn't rotten after all and had the pole spliced.

At sea. On the evening of July 7 we headed toward the darkening eastern horizon busily preparing for our first night at sea and the long voyage ahead. Watches were



set, 4 hours on and 8 hours off. Bill Crow and I were watch-mates, thus beginning our lifelong friendship.

We settled in pretty quickly, dogging the watches at 1600 each day. Paul Stillman, who had volunteered to cook, wash, clean and be the rigger when we needed one, stood no watches. His pay for the trip was his passage back to America. He was a wonderful cook and an all around gem.

Hardy and Drewry couldn't wait to apply the navigating techniques they had learned that spring at Princeton. (Their first fix, when plotted on the chart, showed us to be about two miles west of Salem, Mass. near U. S. 1) So it was back to the drawing boards. I picked up a little manual Hardy had brought entitled *Master and Mate*, a simplified method of solving the astronomical triangle using log tables. So all three of us practised by the hour taking sights and working them out, and pretty soon were getting fixes that more or less agreed with

our dead reckoning. We got our first position check from a passing steamer when we were 17 days out, and there was only a two mile difference.

On the 4th day, the wind had freshened considerably. Crow and I had the A.M. watch and by 10 we decided to shorten sail. Pretty soon it was blowing a full gale and we were faced with "heaving to", a maneuver we had only read about. It took us six hours. First one rail and then the other would roll under. The seas were 10 to 12 feet high. After blowing out one jib and ripping another, we found the right combination - an improvised sea anchor, a double reefed mizzen, the wheel lashed hard up and storm oil bags off the bow. The change in the ship's motion was amazing. Head just off the wind, she rose and fell with the seas, no rolling, the oil kept down the spray, the decks dried off and we could relax. Paul served up a hot meal and we all turned in and slept for ten hours. The storm abated during the night and the next morning was sunny and no wind at all - just the mountainous seas left over from the storm. A big shark was swimming around the sea anchor line.

Flores. For the next two weeks we fought frustrating light head winds and squalls and zigzagged along making slow progress toward the Azores. Finally, on day 21, Stillman, on lookout from the cross trees, gave us a LAND HO !! The little island of Flores was 35 miles dead ahead. Much cheering! We reached the land about sunset. To avoid making a landing in the dark on a strange shore with no motor (it hadn't fired since we left Marblehead), we jogged offshore all night. It was a lovely night, a bright moon, and in the lee of the island the smell of the land was overpowering. With nothing but salt air in our nostrils for three weeks, our sense of smell had never been so acute.

In a little cove south of the town, off a shingle beach under a cliff where a waterfall fell into the sea, we found our anchorage. It was ideal. The town was a short walk over the hill, and there we found a cable office and managed to send off a message to my father, who was to act as the message center for the other families. Our Portuguese was nil, but a local fisherman, who had spent ten years on a sheep farm in Idaho, became our interpreter and our guide for the next three days. Through him we found three sailors who came aboard to mend our torn sails; he led us to the local wine cellar, where the proprietor insisted that we sample every keg, before we bought a five gallon bottle of his finest. The miracle was that we found our way back to the ship.

At sea again. From Flores, Morocco lies about 1000 miles east. But we had read of the dreaded Azores high pressure area in which clipper ships were sometimes becalmed for months. Flores lies just at the western edge of this area, so we headed northeast to skirt the calms. Even so we caught some of it, and for three days we hardly moved - not a breath. The sea was a mill pond. Even with all the sails set there was no sound and no movement. The water was crystal clear. We swam out and looked at the ship from under water and it was hard to tell which part of the hull was above and which below the surface. A white enamel cup on a line was lowered to 105 feet before it disappeared. Sleeping on deck in the calm silence, I was rudely awakened one night when a whale suddenly broached right alongside and covered me with his foul-smelling spray. That day we had logged three miles.

Soon sailing again, we picked up the northeast Portuguese trades and were able to lay a course for the southern tip of Portugal. One morning at 4:30 we espied the beam of Cape St. Vincent lighthouse over the horizon, and we knew that we had made our second landfall. Two days later, on the eve of my 21st birthday, we dropped the hook among the commercial vessels anchored in the harbor of Tangier.

Tangier. This international city is the home and trading center not only for Arabs, Berbers, Riffs and other tribes but for ex-patriots from all of Europe. It was utterly fascinating. We celebrated my birthday by spending 24 hours ashore, sightseeing, wining and dining, finishing the evening at a suburban night club with a swimming pool in the middle of the dance floor. Succeeding days saw a trip to the ancient city of Tetuan, shopping, an interview with the local press which resulted in a front page story about our crossing, a golf game on a sandy course and a wind-up dinner hosted by the Tangier Yacht Club. At midnight we announced that we were getting underway for Gibraltar, and a dozen boats sailed out with us in the moonlight. It was a beautiful night, so inspiring that we gave our sailing friends an impromptu concert. Hardy on his clarinet, Barry with his accordion and Keidel on the flute, playing America the Beautiful, God Save the Queen and Bugle Call Rag.

The Mediterranean. Arriving at Gibraltar in the early morning, we sailed into the opening of a very inviting walled harbor, only to find ourselves in the British Naval Anchorage, from which we were immediately escorted by two armed patrol boats, and had to settle for the commercial port. Underway again after two days,



The Crew — (L/R) Stillman, Drewry, Keidel, Hardy, Barry, Crow, Backus

we made stops at Malaga, Cartagena and Palma, Majorca - the capital of the Balearic Islands, one of Europe's favorite vacation spots. It was in these islands that Chopin spent his last tormented years composing some of the world's most beautiful music. For five days we forgot the rest of the world.

But September had arrived and we had to get back. After a stormy sail across the Gulf of Lyons, with a strong *Mistral* (local wind) forcing us to heave to for the second time, we finally raised the coast of France just east of Marseille, passed Cap d'Antibes, Nice and reached the picturesque walled harbor of Villefranche, our ultimate destination. There the *Störtebeker* was to spend the winter.

Memorable moments. Diving from the bowsprit into six foot Atlantic waves, swimming astern to catch the life line we always trailed..... Taking our first fresh water shower in three weeks under the waterfall at Flores.....Looking up at the sky during a midnight squall to see a moonbow totally white and eerie.....Taking a swim during a calm spell off Malaga, all sails set, wheel lashed, and finding ourselves all in the water at the same time when a breeze sprang up and

the boat started sailing away. If it hadn't been for the lifeline trailing astern we would never have made it back aboard..... Sailing under a bright moon through the Balearic Islands, accompanied by a school of dolphins brilliantly outlined in the phosphorescence..... Using up the last of our potatoes to scare off a huge frigate bird, a bad omen, trying to alight on the crosstrees during the gale in the Gulf of Lyons.

Back to college. By leaving Villefranche immediately, I might have made it back in time. But the chance to see France was too tempting, so Hardy and I set out for Paris in easy stages on second hand motorcycles. Hardy was planning a year of study in Germany. After a riotous week together in Paris, I booked passage on the *SS France*, arriving at Princeton three weeks after classes had started. The Dean, good old Freddie Camp, an ardent sailor himself, called me on the carpet for an explanation. But when I described our summer and the reasons for my being late, he just leaned back and said "I would give anything to have been with you". Being confined to the campus until Thanksgiving was no hardship. There was a mountain of work to make up, and I had a treasure chest of unforgettable memories.