

*Come
Sail*

Away ...

By Sheila McEntee



Students learn to sail on Bob Richards's Fayette County pond. © Bob Richards

Corliss Road in Fayette County is as pretty a country lane as you'd ever hope to find in West Virginia. From its intersection with Route 60, the Midland Trail, it winds past tidy farmhouses and barns and the quaint Minnie Belle Baptist Church. Along the road, cattle graze peacefully on green, rolling hills while red-winged blackbirds sing from perches above glassy farm ponds.

Nestled on Sewell Mountain, the land here is steeped in history. Indeed, Gen. Robert E. Lee once established a campaign headquarters on this mountain, and it was here that Lee discovered his legendary war horse, Traveler.

Yet today, history of a different kind is being made on Sewell Mountain. On a breezy Saturday morning, travelers on Corliss Road may come upon a sun-dappled pond ringed not

with thirsty cattle but with eager kids and adults—and boats. Sailboats to be precise.

Sailboats on a farm pond in West Virginia? The idea might seem ridiculous to some, but not to Bob Richards, a veteran sailor who, after moving to Corliss Road in 2005, began teaching kids to sail on his pond. He subsequently helped found the first sailing school and sailing association in West Virginia. Today, through the Sewell Mountain Sailing Association, Richards teaches kids and adults to sail for free. He also helps coordinate the Mountain Mama's Hospice Regatta, held annually on Summersville Lake. The event has continued to grow in popularity since its founding three years ago and through it, the association donates thousands of dollars each year to Hospice of Southern West Virginia.

From California to Corliss Road

A decade ago, Hawaii native Bob Richards and his wife, Sandy,

a West Virginian, were living a “country club lifestyle” in Grass Valley, California, where Richards had retired from a career in the industrial chemical business. Richards played a lot of golf and sailed on the California and Oregon coasts, and the couple enjoyed spending time with their daughter and grandchildren.

Then, in 2003, Sandy returned to West Virginia for a family reunion while Bob flew to New Zealand for the America’s Cup sailing races. When they each returned home, Sandy remarked to Bob that she did not realize how much she missed West Virginia. Much of Sandy’s family resides on Sewell Mountain and her roots there run deep. Her great-grandfather, H. D. Adams, founded and helped build the Minnie Belle Baptist Church, and he was its first preacher. Her great-great-grandfather, William Henry Harrison Adams, was the adjutant for Gen. Robert E. Lee.

The following year, Richards traveled to West Virginia for the first time to attend his wife’s family reunion with her. The trip changed both their lives.

“I fell in love with West Virginia,” Richards says. “I can’t explain it past that, but it was probably what I had been looking for in my life for a long time. I love the people of West Virginia. They are hard-working, honest people. There’s a different feeling when you come into the state. You are surrounded by mountains. Where I come from, it’s a different world.”

Richards later returned to West Virginia—this time by himself—and, as a surprise for Sandy, bought 25 acres that had been part of her family’s farm. Though Sandy was reluctant to leave their family in California, the couple moved to Corliss Road in 2005.

After the couple settled in, it wasn’t long before Richards was plying the waters of Summersville Lake in a sailboat he had trailed from California. He took his boat to the lake two or three times and each time found that his was the lone sailing craft on the lake. It was clear there were not many other sailors in West Virginia.

“Then it hit me one evening,” Richards says. “If I wanted people to share the water with me, I’d have to find them.”

Seeking Sailors

At the same time, Richards decided to dig out a bit of swampland on his property and build a quarter-acre pond he could sail a boat on. Seeing him sail on the pond piqued the interest of some local children, so Richards invited them to learn how to sail. He charged them nothing for the lessons. All they needed to bring was a willingness

to learn.

“I was hoping to give kids around here something different they wouldn’t otherwise have,” he says. “A weekend of sailing classes could easily cost \$300 to \$500. But [parents being able to afford such classes] is just not going to happen in big numbers here.”

Slowly, word of Richards’s sailing classes began to spread. He posted a website, which caught the attention of Steve Morris of St. Albans, a retired sales manager for a chemical distributor and an avid sailor. Morris liked what Richards was doing and offered to donate one of his boats to use for the sailing classes. The two men became fast friends and after that, Morris supported Richards’s efforts to teach classes and provide a variety of boats on which students could learn. Since meeting, the two have traveled together frequently to pick up donated or inexpensive, used sailboats, which Richards refurbishes.

Over the years, Richards began teaching adults as well as children to sail. According to Morris, the plan was to continue teaching on Richards’s pond and then take those who wanted to further hone their skills to Summersville Lake for lessons. But, he says, “If we were teaching these people to sail, then it became incumbent upon us to also give them future opportunities to sail. That’s how the Sewell Mountain Sailing Association came along.”



An accomplished sailor and craftsman, Bob Richards enjoys giving old sailboats new life in his garage workshop.

© Clayton Spangler

Richards and Morris began to envision a nonprofit group that would sponsor not only free sailing classes but regular sailing events to foster camaraderie among sailors in the state. Today the association includes 60 members. The group sponsors Richards's free classes, as well as monthly sailing days on Summersville Lake in spring and summer, and the annual Mountain Mama's Hospice Regatta. The no-fee regatta benefits Hospice of Southern West Virginia and is one of 30 regattas around the nation that benefit hospice programs.

Sailors Helping Hospice

"The first Mountain Mama's Hospice Regatta in 2010 raised \$7,500," says Morris. "The second one raised \$11,300. Our goal for this year is \$15,000. Some of our members are not sailors, but they recognize the importance of what we are doing so they donate their time and money. They work all year at it and the regatta is continuing to grow."

Sponsoring the regatta has also put the Sewell Mountain Sailing Association "on the national map," Morris adds. He and four other members traveled to Florida earlier this year to compete in the National Hospice Regatta Championship, held in Tampa Bay.

The 2013 Mountain Mama's Hospice Regatta will be held August 24 and 25 at the Battle Run Campground boat launch at Summersville Lake. Sailors from as far away as Canada and South Carolina are expected to attend. Throughout the event, participants will be invited to write a message about a lost loved one on a sail, which will be raised on a dinghy for a special Memorial Sail. This year, three boats, one from each of the annual Mountain Mama's Regattas, will sail on the lake carrying the poignant messages.

Today, nearly 150 kids and adults, ranging in age from 8 to 60-plus, have learned to sail with Richards. He generally holds classes one weekend a month throughout the summer. Classes are limited to six students, and there are always at least two instructors present. Students must be able to swim, though with a maximum depth of six feet in the center, Richards's pond is shallow and very safe.

By the end of the course, students know sailing techniques and maneuvers, the parts of a sailboat and the rigging, how to tie several knots, and how to recover from a capsized boat. They also learn about proper clothing and equipment for sailing and how to judge weather patterns.

Novices learn in 8- to 12-foot boats on the pond. If students want to continue beyond basic lessons, Richards is equipped to teach in 8- to 12-foot or larger boats. More advanced lessons take place at Summersville Lake. Richards has grown very fond of West Virginia's largest lake.

"Out on the lake you are looking up at cliffs and waterfalls and at some of the clearest water in the eastern United States," he says. "They call it the Little Bahamas of the East Coast. I've sailed on Lake Tahoe and the Great Lakes. Summersville Lake is like the mountains of West Virginia. It hugs you."

Build Your Own Boat

Richards also helps his students determine what type of sailboat is right for them. They may purchase refurbished boats or use them at association events. Richards can even help students make their own boats for about \$200. Through the association's Puddle Duck Program, sailors can build a simple, eight-foot boat that will carry 330 pounds of crew.

"They can build them here or take them home and build them. We'll show them how," Richards says. "Take three pieces of quarter-inch plywood and some two-by-fours and before you know it, you've got a sailboat. They go like the dickens and they're as stable as they can be.

"Sailing is sailing is sailing," Richards adds. "It doesn't matter if it is a million-dollar boat or a hundred-dollar boat. It's just you, the weather, and your craft, and the joy is just unbelievable."

The Sewell Mountain Sailing Association hosts a day of sailing on the first Saturday of the month, from May to October, at the Battle Run Campground boat ramp at Summersville Lake. "We welcome anyone who wants to watch or get on a boat, or bring



their own boat and join us,” Richards says.

When he is not teaching sailing, Richards enjoys rebuilding neglected boats and making them seaworthy once again. A barn and storage building on his property house more than a dozen boats, several of which are finely made vintage crafts from the 1970s and '80s. Many of the boats have been donated to the association; others Richards and Morris have bought for a song.

It seems that Richards’s move to West Virginia has sparked an important recreational trend in the state: according to Sewell Mountain Sailing Association records, 41 sailboats skimmed Summersville Lake last year—the largest number ever on the lake.

For his part, Richards has found in West Virginia a peaceful lifestyle, a new sailing community, and a fine fleet of boats that need his skillful, loving care to return to the wind and water. His only regret?

“I wish I had another 40 years to do this,” he says.

For more information about sailing classes, sailing days on Summersville Lake, or the Mountain Mama’s Hospice Regatta, visit www.soapysails.webs.com, e-mail soapysails@gmail.com, or call 304.438.5035.

Sheila McEntee is editor of Wonderful West Virginia.

Sailing for Others

Mountain Mama’s Hospice Regatta

August 24-25

The 3rd Annual Mountain Mama’s Sailing Regatta to benefit Hospice of Southern West Virginia will take place August 24 and 25 at the Battle Run Campground boat launch at Summersville Lake. Sailors and spectators are all welcome. There is no registration fee, but donations to hospice are appreciated. The day includes sailboat racing, food, a raffle, music, and more. For more information, call 304.438.5035.



Read more at e-WV: The West Virginia Encyclopedia. www.wvencyclopedia.org

(Previous page) **Bob Richards teaches a** group of sailing students about the parts of a sailboat. © Sandy Richards

◀ **Sailboats compete at the** second Mountain Mama’s Hospice Regatta on Summersville Lake.

▼ **Each year regatta winners** receive trophies that are handmade by local artists. Photos this page © Clayton Spangler

