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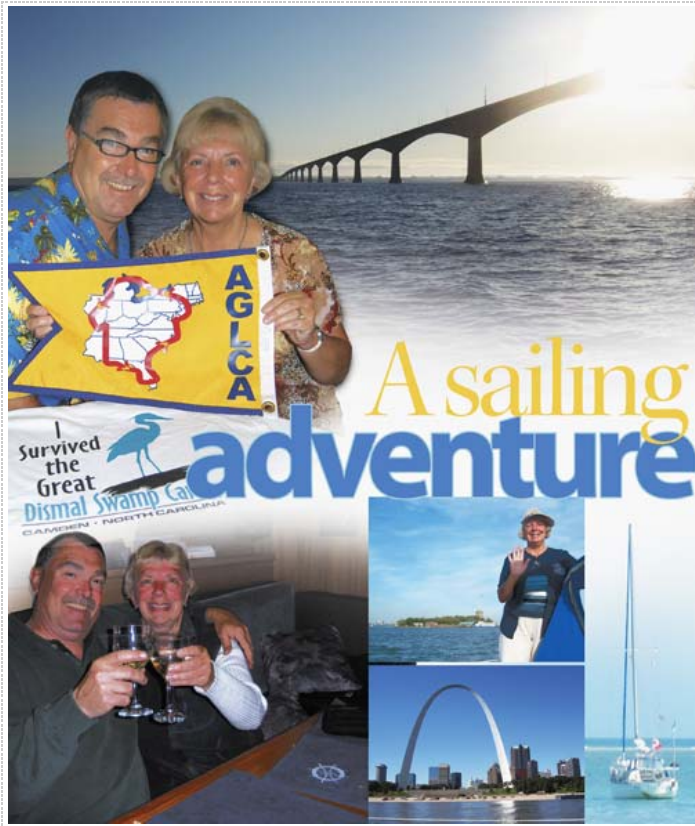
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A sailing adventure

Joe and Mary Beth Amelia spend 54 weeks sailing America's Great Loop

BY SALLY COLE
The Guardian



All his life, Joe Amelia dreamed of going on a swashbuckling sailing adventure.

So last year he decided to make it a reality.

In 2008, the Crapaud resident quit his job as a truck driver and invited his wife, who had just retired from the bank, to join him on an extensive cruise.

"I shared the dream with Joe, but my feeling was let's get started and be on our way," laughs Mary Beth Amelia.

Although the decision was a spontaneous one, it was not entered into lightly.

"We had been planned the trip for five years and received our sailing certification," he says.

Together, they started packing for the trip — stowing away a mountain of food, clothing, supplies and safety equipment in the storage lockers aboard the Pot 'O' Gold, a 30-foot Morgan Centreboard sailboat with a gasoline engine and plotting their path.

"Originally we had planned a trip down the Panama Canal and up the west coast, but then we ran across an article on the Internet about travelling around America's Great Loop, so we changed our course," says Joe.

The cruise, which was comprised of the Atlantic and Gulf Intracoastal Waterways, the Great Lakes, the Canadian Heritage Canals and the inland river systems, could also be done in a year.

They also liked the idea of strength in numbers.

"We learned we would be one of 25 couples doing the same journey at the same time," says Joe, adding the group had a celebration when they arrived in Marathon, Fla.

With their plans in place, the couple said goodbye to their families and set sail from Charlottetown on the morning of June 2, 2008.

"It was so exciting. It was something that I had dreamed about my whole life — getting on a sailboat and taking off to places unknown. And now it was coming true," says Joe.

The 54-week voyage, took them from P.E.I. around the Gaspé, up the St. Lawrence River to Montreal, then the Ottawa River, the Rideau Canal, Trent-Severen, across the top of Lake Ontario, then Georgian Bay, the North Channel and to Lake Michigan and Chicago.

From there, they took the inland rivers to Mobile, Ala., where they sailed the Gulf of Mexico to St. Petersburg, Fla., before heading to Marathon and The Keys.

Originally the couple had also planned to sail to The Bahamas.

"But the weather was not nice enough so instead we sailed to the Dry Tortugas instead, then back across the Gulf of Mexico, crossing Florida through Lake Okeechobee then back to P.E.I. via the Atlantic Ocean, finishing their journey on June 17th."

As sailors, their jobs were set out for them.

"Joe would do all the navigation and get the charts ready the night before. My role was galley slave," she says with a laugh.

"It was an incredible experience," says Joe, who shared the captain's wheel with Mary Beth during overnight sails when they'd take turn about doing three-hour shifts.

Two months later the couple is still smiling as they relive their favourite memories of the trip.

"For me it was the scenery. We got to see things that people don't get to see when they're travelling by car like close up views of the St. Louis Arch and the Statue of Liberty," says Mary Beth.

Another favourite experience was stopping in St. Petersburg to see her father, Ralph Lowther, and Peg Gallant at Christmas.

"We stayed for a month and it was wonderful," says Mary Beth, with a smile.

For Joe, it was seeing natural and manmade wonders.

"The windmills that we saw around The Gaspé fascinated me. There are so many of them. Then on our way to Montreal it was

seeing the big boats and the Canadian lock system. The old locks are still opened and closed with hand cranks and chains," he says.

Although they enjoyed living on board, swimming and catching fish off the boat to cook for supper in their galley kitchen, there were some not-so-bright days.

"We had taken the sails down for the trip through the Rideau Canal and were relying on the motor. But soon our boat started overheating because there was so much reed undergrowth. We just had a screen on our raw water intake and the valve would plug and the vent would overheat. So Joe would have to shut the boat down and then I'd steer but there was no control over the boat.

"We started going the way the current was taking us. Whenever we saw a boat coming he would turn the boat on for a few seconds so we could get away (from them). That was an anxious time for us," she says.

Another time, while traversing the Great Lakes, they hit rocks and had to pull up on Drummond Island last August.

"The keel, the rudder and the tiller needed to be replaced. So we spent two weeks getting an insurance estimate and two weeks getting the repair work done," she says.

But rather than fret about the delay, they relaxed and settled into their new locale. Experiences like this one helped them develop patience and confidence.

"We learned that we're capable of so much more than we thought we were," says Joe.

Mary Beth also discovered something else.

"That we can live in a small space for a year and both come out alive," she says.

Throughout the trip, they relied on America's Great Loop Cruisers' Association (AGLCA) to provide them with information and assistance vital to their successful completion of their trip.

"At the end of the trip they received a BaccaLooperate degree from the association. The degree is given in recognition of completing a trip around America's Great Loop comprised of the Atlantic and Gulf Intercostals waterways, the Great Lakes, the Canadian Heritage Canals and the inland river systems," says Beth McCue of the AGLCA.

The Amelias also relied on a satellite-tracking device to visually track their voyage on the Internet and send the information back to family and friends. In addition, the couple kept in touch through email and by writing weekly updates in their blog. Now back at work, Joe says the journey is still with him.

"When we pick up a magazine and read an article a memory comes back of the wonderous event that we will remember always."

At a glance

Cooking on Pot 'O' Gold

"We used pots and pans and cooked things like spaghetti. Tins of Waddell's chicken and beef (with other ingredients) made some incredible meals. At every other stop there were grocery stores to buy fresh fruits and vegetables and milk," says Mary Beth Amelia, who worked in the galley kitchen, which had a two-burner alcohol stove, fridge, hanging locker and water holding tank.

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