



54 weeks, 7500 miles

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Once again we are back on the land, living as dirt dwellers, after circumnavigating the eastern half of North America.

On June 17, 2009, my wife Mary Beth and I completed a 54 week long, 7,500 mile sailing adventure on our 30 foot Morgan Sailboat, the *Pot 'O' Gold*. We stepped the mast twice, motored down the inland rivers, crossed the Gulf of Mexico, sailed to the Dry Tortugas, crossed Florida to the east coast, then followed both the inter-coastal waterway and the open Atlantic home to the Canadian Maritimes.

We spent 87 nights on mooring balls, 38 nights at free docks, 92 nights at anchor, 15 nights tied up at locks, 113 nights in marinas, 7 nights sailing, and 28 nights in our tree house on Drummond Island.

Preparation for the trip included taking CPS courses. We both took *The Boating Course* and I added *Piloting*,

the *Maritime Radio Course*, and *Fundamentals of Weather*. I also took *Advanced Marine First Aid* from the Canadian Coast Guard College in Summerside, and we both took the Canadian Yachting White Sail courses.

Pot 'O' Gold is a 1969 30' Morgan sailboat, outfitted with the original Atomic 4 gasoline engine, upgraded with electronic ignition and heavier duty alternator. The vessel itself had upgrades to the roller furling, dodger, cushions and curtains. The alcohol stove was changed to non pressure, and we had refrigeration installed, all new lighting, plumbing and a 115 watt solar panel, wind generator and dingy davits installed. We added a larger anchor, a 33 lb. Bruce with 100 feet of chain and 200 feet of line, which, with a spare 22 lb Danforth with 100 feet total rode, made up the anchoring hardware. The electronics were upgraded to a Garmin Chartplotter as well as GPS and software for the laptop as backup, and we purchased paper charts and guides for every leg of the trip.

In the beginning, we headed up the Gulf of St.



page 12: Approaching "Paradise", the 7 Mile Bridge into Marathon FL page 13, left: Part of my "eat what we catch" program middle: Mary Beth says if she saw this lock before we left, she would have changed her mind. Ottawa River right: The Arch in St Louis on the Mississippi

Lawrence and the St Lawrence River (yes, we went against the current) where we saw whales, large ships, huge locks and cold weather. From there, we journeyed to the Ottawa River where we motored through the Canadian Heritage Canals (Rideau Canal and Trent Severn Waterway).

These waterways were quiet and pristine, and the lockmasters (there are almost 90 locks here) were absolutely fabulous in both attitude and work. The majority of these locks were opened (cranked) by hand. Staying at the locks overnight allowed us to appreciate the towns and cities en route, and the quiet anchorages let us feel the solitude of the area. We met several other folks doing the same trip (the Great Loop is a circle that can be started and closed anywhere), and this is where we learned about cruisers and their passion for pot luck dinners and cocktail hour.

The next leg gave us an opportunity to sail Georgian Bay, the North Channel, Straits of Mackinac and south on Lake Michigan to Chicago. This was in July, so the refreshing cool waters of Georgian Bay were welcome after a hot day, as was the fresh fish handily caught for dinner. The rocky bottom in this area demanded strict attention, and after going aground, we were forced to spend a few weeks in the resort area of Drummond Island, where daily fishing, relaxing, and cocktail hour were the story as our vessel underwent some repairs.

Lake Michigan, with its "Harbors of Refuge" every twenty miles, made for a wonderful and exciting sail to downtown Chicago. We were just slightly ahead of Hurricane Ike, and could see bits of it in the sky on the big lake. Ike would determine our timing for the next few weeks, as it overflowed the inland rivers, and stopped navigation. Until the existing boats could leave, we were once again forced to enjoy the big City delights of Chicago.

We expected to be intimidated by the large city marinas (Montreal, Chicago) where we had to step our mast to gain entry under bridges. We were more than pleased with the help, efforts, and low cost of getting this work done there.

Travelling the inland rivers (Illinois, Mississippi, Ohio, Cumberland, Tennessee, Tom Bigbee Canal, Black Warrior, and Alabama River) was like moving through the entire country in one line, and only seeing the best parts of each. The northern rivers offered huge barges (up to 25, controlled by one towboat, downstream with right of way, of course), the tow Captain's own language (see you on the 'one whistle') and the locks. There are virtually no marinas on this leg, it is hugely industrial, with up to a 5 knot current on the Mississippi, and anchoring for the night was an experience that will be remembered for a lifetime. Navigation at night was simply not an option, although the towboats with their "mini sun" spotlights would seek you out in the dark and make you think dawn had arrived early.

The southern rivers were calm, quiet (except for the bass boats), and had the most reasonable pricing and friendliest folks on the planet. I believe that when I retire, the Florida Keys and inland rivers to Tennessee will be where I stay.

After Mobile, AL, we were ever approaching that aqua water I had been seeking. All that was left was to overnight sail the Big Bend of Florida and cross the Gulf of Mexico. And arrive we did, wintering in the Florida Keys (Boot Key Harbor, Marathon), while taking several trips to Key West (we missed an impromptu Jimmy Buffet concert by one day), and an absolutely fascinating 70 mile offshore sail to the Dry Tortugas where there are no supplies, stores, water or public docks. We saw our first real sharks there, and met with cruisers from around the world.

Mary Beth learned to blow a conch shell here, and would nightly blow it at sunset, mostly to receive return



blows in exchange. I purchased snorkelling equipment, a lobster catching kit (lobstermen home roll on the floor laughing when I tell them how I did it), and my trusty spear gun.

Across the Gulf again, to the Okeechobee Canal and lake to cross to the east side of Florida, and up the east coast we came. We met with delightful people, visited and toured incredible cities, Savannah, Beaufort, Charleston. The history and the sights continued.

But, who would name a place “the Dismal Swamp Canal”? North Carolina and Virginia, that’s who. And I agree with the name. This canal is narrow and shallow, the water is clear brown from tannins, and it rained all the time we were on the canal. More adventure. Norfolk with its huge refit harbour, the open ocean, Atlantic City, then onwards to the Verezanno Bridge, New York City and the Statue of Liberty. We were allowed to anchor behind the statue, and although the feeling was comforting to us, the water was rocky, and the anchor was covered with black slime that got all over the boat in the morning. To my great disappointment, the flame the statue holds is fake. Once again a highlight and letdown at the same time.

Next was Long Island Sound and rain. The weather started getting cooler and winds were picking up, not always in the right direction. We were forced to search out an emergency anchorage, and found a quiet spot beside a power plant. Their cameras were on us all day until we left.

Continuing through Nantucket, Buzzards Bay, Martha’s Vineyard to Cape Cod felt like being part of a movie, but the history, the huge fishing vessels, and the accents all made us feel like we were nearing our Maritimes home.

From Cape Cod to Shelburne, Nova Scotia was a 250 mile offshore sail that would require three days and two nights. It went without a hitch or problem, and we were again back in Canada.

We closed our circle by sailing the south shore of Nova Scotia and taking the Canso Canal to the



top left: Pot 'O' Gold at anchor in Dry Tortugas middle: Bush Key in the Dry Tortugas right: Lady Liberty, flame is fake. We anchored right behind her, what a highlight! bottom: trip completion

Northumberland Strait, and home to Charlottetown. Sturdy old *Pot 'O' Gold* is on the hard, awaiting a refit.

It is depressing when I think of how simply and quickly we returned to our old life of working, being busy, and having very little time for each other or ourselves.

However, on occasion, when sitting down at night sharing a cocktail, our eyes will drift to the mantle, to see the unblown conch shell, lobster kit and spear gun, our minds will drift to Schooners Wharf Bar in Key West with Michael McLeod music in the background, Mary Beth’s brow will furrow, and I can almost hear her thoughts aloud, “How long before that refit is done”?

More information on the Great Loop is available at www.greatloop.org.

More information on the *Pot 'O' Gold's* trip at www.potogold.wordpress.com. 