

# WoodenBoat

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AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN GARDNER  
SPRING OUTFITTING WITH A PRO  
SINGLEHANDING AN OLD GAFFER  
THE LAST WOODEN SHIPBUILDING BOOM



# Singlehanded an Old Gaffer



Crossing the Atlantic alone in a 30' old gaffer of sensible design is far more comfortable than most of us might imagine.

**I**t's easy to say it, and most people who come on board ISKRA do. "There's something about a wooden boat—she's got something—there's a feeling about her, an atmosphere, a kind of sympathy."

Quite what it is that attracts such general approval is harder to define. Nostalgia comes into it, and perhaps a touch of snobbery. Wood is a tolerant, sympathetic material, but it has its failings as well. The art of building boats has changed in character over the past few decades, in keeping with everything else. To some extent, a boat, like a house or even an automobile, is a reflection of the society we live in. There are boats whose hulls are constructed of ferro-cement, of fiberglass, or of steel that are splendid vessels—fine sailers, sturdy, fast, elegant, comfortable. Others have the unmistakable stamp of mass production and are thereby less attractive, although their performance may be as good. All boats, including wooden

## by Frank Mulville

boats, have their special advantages and attractions, their own snags and drawbacks, their individual quirks and characteristics. All of them—large, small, ugly, beautiful, wood, not wood—possess the strange faculty to insinuate themselves into a man's soul, to make him a bigger, stronger, more complete person as a result of their association with him. When all is said and done, the wooden boat is much like any other—yet, well, maybe there *is* something a little distinguished about ISKRA. As the Spaniards used to say of her, "Es como el hogar" — "She's like a home."

She was in no way exceptional when she was built in 1930. She was a natural link in the chain of boat evolution from work toward pleasure. There is much of the Falmouth quay punt in her: high topsides, long straight keel, canted transom following the line down to the bottom of the

boat, rudder hung outside, and an uncompromising, sturdy look about her, only softened by an easy sheer. She has something of the workboat as well—cemented bilges with a ton of iron mixed in that has been there for all of her 50 years, a heavy weather helm that is a hangover from the days when sailing vessels pulled trawls, iron reinforcement of her floors, and plenty of beam. Yet she makes concessions to the yacht. She has a cutaway forefoot, giving her a slim entry, and she has a fine run aft with a concave section in the bilge that sweeps from keel to waterline like the opening petals of a flower. She may have been built without an engine, since the existing installation was put in, as far as is known, just before the war in 1938. This would account for her slim bilges aft, a trait that was often lost when designers made provision for engines. But her fine run gives her a pretty turn to windward which, 50 years on, can come as a big surprise to owners of

much younger boats. The engine is an old Ailsa Craig two-cylinder diesel, slow running with a heavy flywheel and a soft and confident thump-thum, which suggests a timeless reliability.

ISKRA was built at Littlehampton, a small port on the south coast of England between the isle of Wight and Brighton, by the yard of David Hillyard, who designed her. She is 30' long overall, 28'6" on the waterline, and has 9'6" beam with a draft of 5'. She's planked with pitch pine on 4" grown oak frames, interspersed with steamed oak ribs. She has a 1 1/2-ton iron keel in addition to the iron set in her bilge, a common habit in those days, even for yachts. She is copper fastened, and the whole of her bottom, from keel to 4" above the waterline, is sheathed in copper.

This copper sheathing was put on just after the last war, before she made her first transatlantic voyage. It lasted until 1973, by which time it had oxidized away until it was paper thin and considerably patched. After much heart searching, I decided to replace it with new copper in spite of the expense. This was done by a yard on the east coast of England where the skill had been kept alive by a shipwright who had worked in the yard for many years. It was a good investment; copper affords protection against marine borers, it saves expense in slipping and painting the hull, and it preserves the hull, keeping the caulking and filling in excellent condition.

But it was a laborious process. The old copper was stripped, the old nail holes were all filled with small splines of pine, gently hammered in so that she resembled a porcupine with a crew cut. The hull was then smoothed and painted with black varnish, a coal tar derivative. She was then covered completely with heavy, tar-impregnated industrial paper that was stuck fast to the hull by the black varnish coating, and this, in its turn, was coated with more black varnish as the copper was put on. The copper strips were about 2'6" long and 8" wide, overlapping from the keel upward. The stem and stern posts were neatly lapped over, completing the parcel.

At home, ISKRA spends her winters fitted with a canvas cover and lying in a mud berth, where she floats only at spring tides. This is an ideal method of laying up; the hull is always naturally supported and the wood does not dry and shrink in the wind. It may have some responsibility for ISKRA's longevity, and it's cheap as well.

David Hillyard's yard in Littlehampton is still building wooden hulls,

but they are no longer like ISKRA. Hillyard's nicely caught the trend of demand between the wars, some time after ISKRA was built, when they developed their center cockpit yachts — owner's cabin aft, children in the fo'c's'le, and guests amidships. They were and still are the embodiment of family cruising with their big reliable engines, simple Bermudan rig, high freeboard, and canoe sterns. What they lost in speed, they gained in solid reliability, sturdiness, and safety. In their way, they were pioneers of all that is worst and all that is best in British yacht design — why we don't win the America's Cup, and why more Englishmen than any other race are found wandering around the world in small boats.

The trade wind route from Europe to the West Indies and back makes an attractive jaunt for an English or continental yachtsman, and now these voyages are numbered in the dozens every year. The voyage starts in September, before bad weather sets in around the Bay of Biscay. The Portuguese trades, a strong northerly wind, can usually be found somewhere close

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to northern Spain, and they will take a yacht to Madeira or to the Canary Islands. The crossing is made in October or November, to arrive in the islands for Christmas, after the hurricane season. To finish off a winter's cruise to the Caribbean, a departure can be made from the Virgin Islands across the trade wind to Bermuda, and then, in April or May, a westerly can as often as not be found to complete the circle back to Spain or straight to England, sometimes via the Azores.

It is the traditional sailing ship route — all sunshine, all downwind. I first used it when I went to Cuba with my family in the 40' ketch GIRL STELLA in 1968-1969. She was an old Looe lugger from the West Country of England, built in 1896. The voyage was successful until, homeward bound at the island of Flores in the Azores, GIRL STELLA was wrecked. Riddled

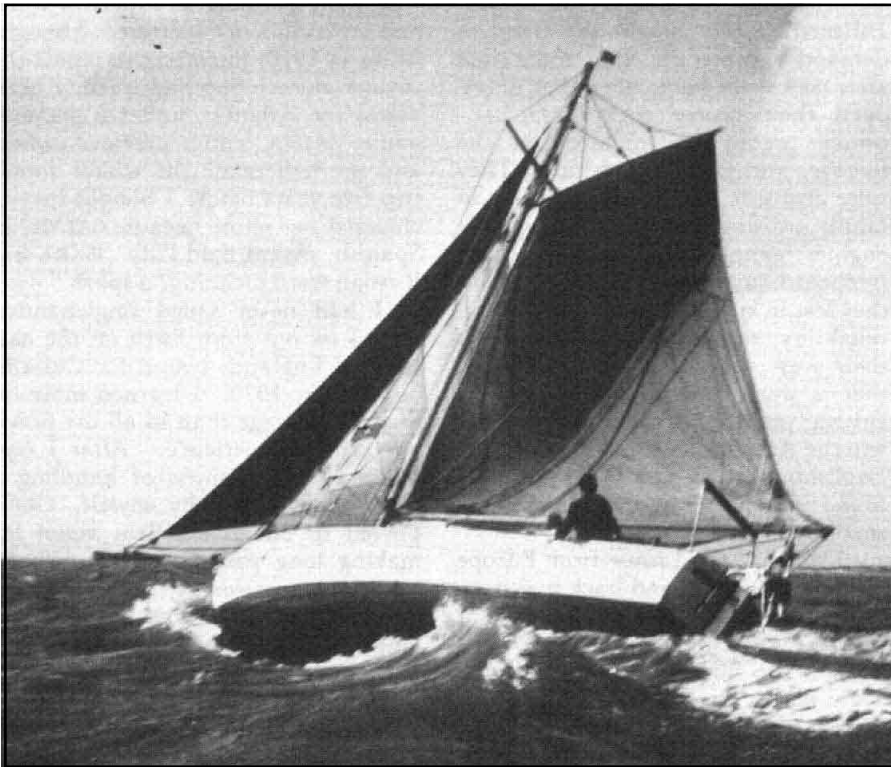
with guilt at losing so superb a vessel and my confidence shattered, I bought ISKRA in 1970, intending to repeat the voyage alone. She had already been across the Atlantic, under a previous name, CALVA, and a previous owner, and she had made the winter round trip five years before I bought her. I changed her name because CALVA, in Spanish, means bald lady. ISKRA is a Russian word meaning "a spark."

I had never sailed singlehanded until I set out from Essex on the east coast of England, bound for Cuba in September, 1970. I learned more on that first voyage than in all my previous sailing experience. After I had mastered the business of handling a heavy gaff cutter by myself, ISKRA proved to be an excellent vessel for making long passages alone. She is immensely seaworthy, she has good freeboard, which keeps her dry, her long straight keel gives her steadiness, and her great weight makes her motion easy and regular. She never jerks or bangs into a head sea unless she is being pressed too hard, she is close winded, and she has a remarkable turn of speed.

The gaff rig is ideally suited to ocean sailing singlehanded. ISKRA's working sails are small and therefore easily handled. She can be snugged down in a hard blow, but in light weather with her tops'l and her big heads'l, which sets from the top of the mast to the end of the bowsprit to abaft the shrouds, she will slip along like a racer. Most important, on a long passage alone, she is comfortable to live in — plenty of headroom, cozy, and at the same time spacious. Being built of wood she does not drip condensation, and she is quiet at sea. She has the distinctive smell of a wooden boat — something between an old-fashioned drawing room and a sail loft.

ISKRA was never intended as a single-handed yacht. She was built long before the days of automatic steering devices, when lone sailors were a rarity. She was heavily rigged as a gaff cutter with a 12' bowsprit and a boom that one man can hardly lift. Originally her boom projected well out over the stern, but in 1970 it was lopped off, bringing it inboard and dramatically reducing weather helm. At the same time a little extra lead ballast was added forward, and she was provided with a larger stays'l and a larger jib, so now she balances well, although in a strong wind she likes a reef in the mains'l.

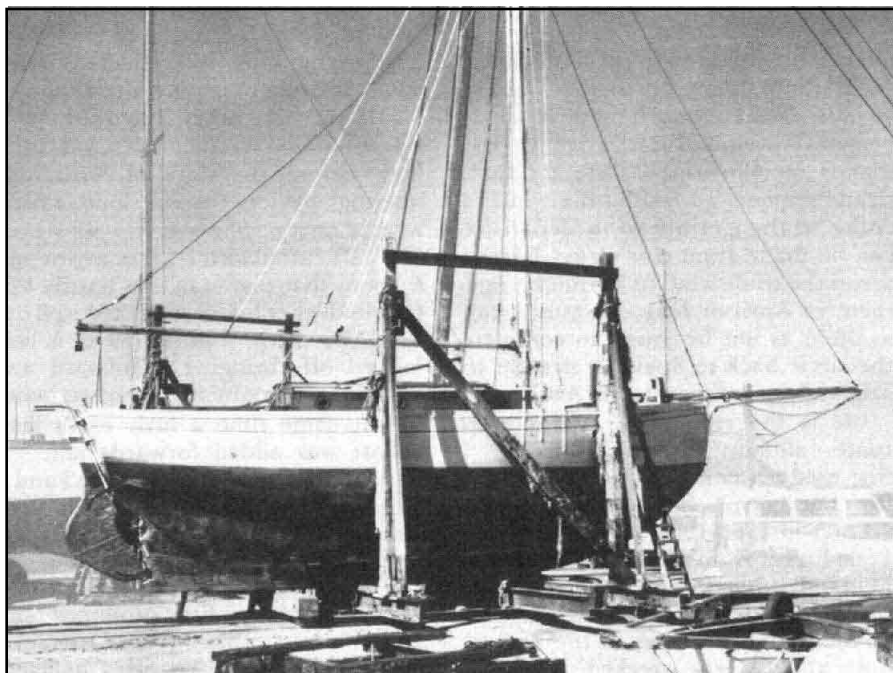
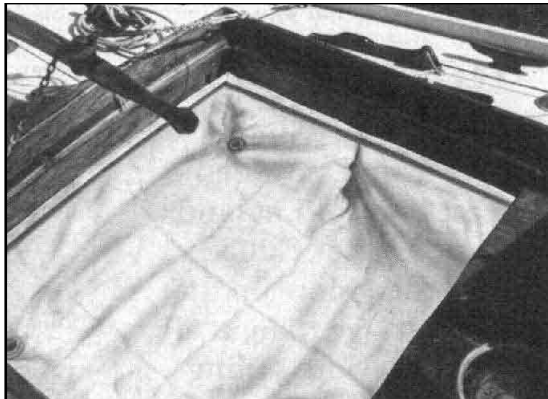
She has an AYRS self-steering gear now, one of the first produced and more robust than those currently made. She was given extra halyards



**Top**—ISKRA really flies in a whole sail breeze. But if the wind pipes up more, it's a simple matter to tuck in a reef so she steadies down.

**Right** — After a bad experience in an Atlantic gale, the author rigged a wide, shallow self-draining cockpit using removable planks and a canvas insert.

**Bottom** — In 1974 ISKRA'S copper sheathing was replaced by one of the few artisans who still do such work.



and wire stays for twin heads'ls, a rig she has used to good effect for many thousands of miles. The twins are as big as can be accommodated, and they set with their foot a short distance out along the bowsprit to give as much lift as possible. They are provided with reef points, essential in a strong trade wind, and when running under twins in a strong wind, the peak halyard is unbent from the mains'l and used as an additional running backstay to support the top of the mast. The booms are rigged independently of the sails themselves, so a man alone can set twin stays'ls easily, hauling the clew of the sails out to the ends of the booms after the sails are hoisted.

Setting the mains'l and, perhaps more important, getting the mains'l down in a strong following wind, can be hard work for a singlehander in an old gaff cutter. The job can be made more simple by rigging the gear correctly.

There should be nothing under the lee of the sail, like runners or lazy jacks or a topping lift, so that even when full of wind it is free to come down. ISKRA's runners can be let go with quick-release shackles, and she has twin topping lifts so the lee one can be cleared away. Lacing is better than mast hoops, provided it is rove correctly—from side to side and not round the mast.

Particularly for the singlehander, vangs should be fitted to the gaff end, and these should be led straight down to the boom, one on either side of the sail and then through deadeyes and along to the mast. For convenience, the two vangs can be spliced together and made fast or hooked on somewhere along the heel of the boom. As sail is dropped, the vangs are hauled. They have a triple purpose: at once controlling the end of the gaff, keeping the gaff clear of the shrouds, and helping to gather up the sail as it drops. They may not look as smart, but they are better than lazy jacks, offering no friction against the lee side of the sail. A gaff sail, when full of wind, should be easier to take in than a Bermudan sail, having no slides and less tendency to gripe against the rigging. A boom gallows is worth its weight in gold.

ISKRA was built as a family cruiser and was never intended for the ocean. She has a deep, roomy cockpit draining straight into the bilge, a dire hazard in a real seaway. After a bitter experience at the pumps in an Atlantic gale I devised a self-draining cockpit for her. Two-inch-diameter drains were fitted to the after ends of the cockpit seats, the top fitting having

wide plastic flanges that can be unscrewed. The central, open part of the cockpit between the seats was then covered with two removable boards making the cockpit a wide, shallow place well above the waterline. A canvas insert drops in, the top flanges of the drains are taken off, the canvas put under, and then the flanges screwed down on top of it. The insert is then fastened to the cockpit sides with four wood battens. Now, when the glass begins to fall, I rig the self-draining cockpit and can laugh when a sea slops over.

During that same pumping session, I determined to fit an inside pump so it would no longer be necessary to dress up and go out into the cold and wet in order to clear the bilge. This is a small diaphragm pump positioned in a locker amidships, with a lead that can be switched from one side of the bilge to the other. ISKRA has three pumps: one inside, one out in the cockpit, and an electric pump. The electric one is a concession to the automatic age, and it has served me well. It's very useful, and sometimes necessary, to be able to pump the bilge while doing other things. ISKRA leaks very little, but you can never be too sure.

What is noticeable at once about ISKRA is that she has no stanchions and wire guardrails around the deck. Instead, she has a single stainless wire at waist height from the boom gallows, outside the shrouds and down to the bitts forward. She had deck stanchions and rails when I bought her, but I took them off. I believe they restrict movement on the deck, they are in the way when ropes are being handled over the side, and they can act as a trip and thus be an actual danger. A man thrown backward against deck stanchions can flip overboard in seconds. Particularly for a singlehander, who should be using a safety harness continually when at sea, the guard wire is safer and more convenient. I clip my harness on as soon as I come out into the cockpit and can move forward freely without altering the clip. Most important, if I'm unlucky enough or careless enough to fall overboard when the yacht is sailing fast, I'd be swept to the stern and towed along clear of the hull. I should then be able to haul myself in as far as the self-steering gear and by moving the skeg or trim tab, bring ISKRA into the wind and climb on board. A harness clipped to a guard rail could cause a sailor overboard to be held up and dragged along hard against the yacht's side, quite unable to haul himself aboard.

Most yachtsmen pay no more than lip service to the safety harness—it usually spends the voyage neatly stowed in a locker. But whether singlehanded or with a crew, it's worthwhile to experiment with a safety harness and find a routine for using it, at least in bad weather. Properly used, it is a real help when working on deck, and it gives a welcome feeling of confidence when it is most needed.

On our first trip together, ISKRA sailed from England to the Canary Islands and then across to Antigua in 30 days. She then sailed to the Virgin Islands and along the coast of Puerto Rico and Hispaniola to the small port of Baracoa in the extreme east of Cuba. In GIRL STELLA we had entered Cuba at Santiago in the south, sailing westward round Cape San Antonio to Havana. On this voyage in ISKRA, I sailed from port to port along the north coast to Havana, thus completing a circumnavigation of Cuba, except for a few miles in the southeast corner of the island.

The north coast of Cuba in winter was not a happy place for a yacht. It is a lee shore in a hard blow, strewn with unlit reefs. The Cubans, though hospitable, helpful, and kind to me, were touchy and preoccupied with the fear of armed incursions at that time, and they had a habit of blacking out coastal lights and even changing the characteristics of lighthouses without warning. This nearly brought ISKRA to grief one black night in a hard norther off the port of Isabella de Sagua.

On the way back to England from Cuba, between the Bahamas and Bermuda, in the much publicized "triangle," ISKRA passed through what I believed at the time to be, and still believe was, a survival storm. She ran through enormous seas with warps streamed for two days and was twice overwhelmed by breaking waves. She survived it with no more damage than a torn stays'l, a flooded engine, and a few inconsiderable bits of electrical gear spoilt. It was after this experience that the self-draining cockpit was put in! She went through several other less severe westerly gales from Bermuda back across the Atlantic. I tried to sail directly to Essex from Bermuda but was forced out of the western approaches to the English Channel by another gale, this time a northeaster. I put in to Camarinas, a small port on the northwest coast of Spain, after 29 days of more or less continuous bad weather. The extra inside pump was installed after this passage.

ISKRA then made voyages from

Essex to Norway as far north as the Sognefjord, and to Denmark, Holland, and France. In 1973 she was given an extensive refit, during which her copper was renewed. At the same time she had her keel bolts replaced and her fastenings doubled in places, decks recanvased, and all seacocks renewed. She was 43 years old at this time, and there was no sign of rot or any serious deterioration in the hull. Two of her frames and a few of her steamed ribs had been doubled a couple of years before I bought her in 1970. The Lloyds surveyor was impressed with her.

I thought that ISKRA might do just one more voyage before her retirement, and so I set out for the Bahamas in 1974, following the usual trade wind route. My daughter lived in Nassau at that time, and had been pressing me to visit her. This time ISKRA was only 25 days on the long crossing from the Canaries to Antigua. In the first seven days she covered 1,000 miles under twin stays'ls, and I have never experienced a more exciting sail. Except for another strong and prolonged gale near Bermuda, which seems to enjoy more than its share of such weather, this was an uneventful voyage from a sailing point of view. To some extent, at least, I had at last mastered the art of single-handed sailing. I found that I made fewer mistakes and was able to withstand solitude better. I discovered, though, that the Bahamas is no place for a man to be sailing by himself. The reefs, shallows and hair-raising cuts, not to mention the sometimes-vague charts, demand at least three pairs of eyes and more than one set of strong nerves.

It was on this voyage that I experienced an encounter with the schooner INTEGRITY from South Dartmouth, Massachusetts, which led to a series of adventures and resulted in my latest book, which you'll find reviewed in this issue. ISKRA arrived back in England in 1975, in time to win the Old Gaffers' Race on the east coast of England. There were 90 starters that year.

After making another voyage to Norway the following year, I quite decided that I would make no more long singlehanded voyages in ISKRA. The business of lone sailing is fascinating, but it can become addictive. Luckily, my resolution was easily overturned when it became necessary for me to visit the United States for business reasons in connection with my *Schooner INTEGRITY* book. I therefore had no choice but to fit ISKRA out for her seventh crossing of the Atlantic.



In many ways it was the most interesting and rewarding voyage I have made.

ISKRA carried a "cargo" of 400 books to America, stowed in the fo'c's'le and under the bunks in the cabin. I came across in the summer, leaving England at the end of May and sailing in a leisurely fashion to Ponta Delgada in the Azores, where I spent two delightful, idle weeks. I then sailed straight to Newport along the rhumb line. In fact, I had no choice of course because once I was clear of the Azores and a week of difficult, frustrating calms and fickle breezes,

the wind settled itself into the southwest where it remained, with variations, until I reached the borders of the Gulf Stream.

My preoccupation was to prevent ISKRA from being driven north, which happened every time the wind veered to the west. She was close hauled, hard on the wind, for three weeks. It was a slow, hard slog such as I had never experienced in the softer trade wind latitudes. The seas were always rough, always with crests breaking aboard. The wind varied between moderate and force 7, with three real gales for good measure. Hardly a day

passed when ISKRA was not reefed at least twice. I would put a double reef in the mains'l first, then three reefs, then change to the storm trys'l and roll up the jib. It was a routine that became a part of everyday life.

After a few days of this treatment, the drips began to find their way in through the coach roof so that the lee bunk was uninhabitable. The motion was violent and unpredictable; my every movement inside and on deck had to be calculated from one handhold to another. Often it was too rough to take sights for fear of spoiling the sextant with spray, or being thrown over and damaging it. But ISKRA went through it all steadfastly, doggedly fighting for every yard gained to the west. Her weight and her steadiness and stiffness brought her through.

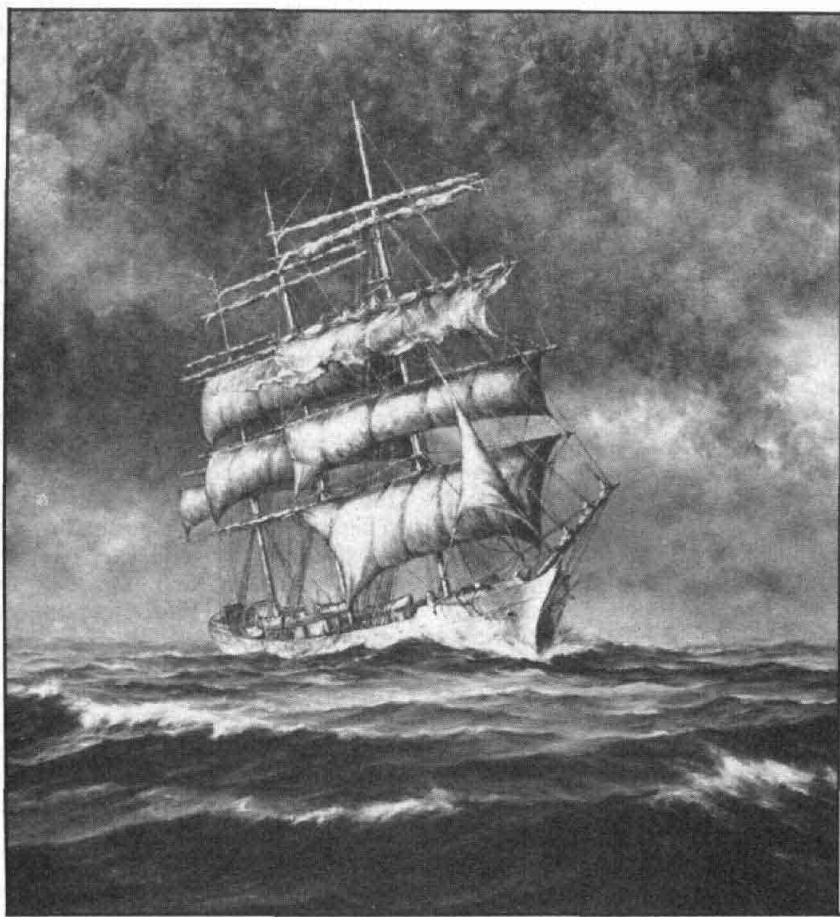
The Gulf Stream brought even worse conditions. The seas became steeper and rougher, sometimes like a tide race. The depressions followed one on top of the next in almost continuous cycle. It was usually overcast with occasional hazy sun showing over an indistinct horizon, making navigation difficult. The current was so strong, sometimes swinging around and flowing east and south in vicious back eddies, that twice ISKRA was taken back on her tracks in a day's sailing. Even the faithful engine was of little use in such a chop.

It took nearly a week to cover the last 300 miles to Newport. I had been 35 days at sea to cover just under 2,000 miles, the slowest ocean passage I have ever made, hardly more than 50 miles per day. But it showed that the old gaff cutter can make passages to windward in difficult conditions. ISKRA's time from the Azores to Newport was the same to within a couple of days as that of two other yachts who left roughly at the same time.

My stay in America has been a wonderful experience which, fortunately is not yet over. I have cruised as far as Mystic, Buzzards Bay, and Vineyard Sound, and met with nothing but kindness, interest and warm hospitality. ISKRA is comfortably laid up for the winter in a Providence, Rhode Island, yard, and next year I hope to sail to Maine, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, and then home by way of the south of Ireland. It is proving to be a very happy round trip for an old wooden boat. And perhaps there will be more.

*Frank Mulville lives on the Essex coast of England and writes about sailing and the sea. He's currently writing a book on singlehanded sailing.*

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