

Our Lovely Daysail to the Goat Farm

Nick Seraphinoff, helm, and Chip Cunningham, crew, on Impulse, Wayfarer 10864, September 15, 2013. A file of relevant pictures follows.

Telling you we are taking a daysail to the Goat Farm is going to give you the wrong idea, but that's how we're starting. Its name is actually the Goat Yard which is more than just a play on Boat Yard. There really was a goat, Nemo. Nemo is gone now. Wild dogs, I hear. And he's not the only one. Everything is changing. People are starting to call it the Goat Farm.

"Let's sail to the Goat Farm!" Nick says.

"Great!" I answer.

"A lovely destination, don't you think? Do we have enough beer?"

"We're good. Camera batteries full?"

"Full up. Swing me the hook."

We are getting very smooth now about hoisting *Impulse*, W10864, off the Bayview Yacht Club pier. When she is fully lowered into the water her mast just clears the yellow hoist motor and chain mechanism. We have been repeatedly disappointed her windex, the delicate wind vane at the top of her mast, does not. At least six of them did not before we got the hang of it. The hang of it is: bow down slightly, and as it touches the water pull the boat forward, away from the hoist arm.

Nick masters a Tilly Hat to complete his fall sailing outfit. He will have an important insight shortly. He will pull this hat off and say, "You take it. I'm not a Tilly Hat kind of a guy."

Free of the hook and floating at the dock we pull up the main and admire the new windex. We sail out what remains of Connor Creek and head west down the Detroit River in the channel along the north side of Bell Isle. Poor Detroit. Detroit will shortly give the state of Michigan a long term lease to take over the island in exchange for little more than a verbal promise to improve it. Can you imagine what it would be worth in New York or Chicago—a thousand acre island right downtown?

In ten minutes we make good over one third of a nautical mile and arrive at the mouth of the Goat Farm inlet.

"Here we are!"

"Great! Ready for a beer?"

The inlet is deep, high banked, 200 feet wide, and extends one quarter of a mile inland to the north. Along the east side is an idle development of upscale brick townhouses, some finished for years but never occupied. They sit in the shadow of what's left of an Edison coal-fired generating plant famous for its "Seven Sisters"—seven identical gigantic concrete chimneys. The girls were blown to dust in 1996. Nick attended the event. The wind that day was away from Bayview, and all over the Goat Farm.

The Goat Farm is the inlet's entire west side. Out here at the mouth and for three quarters of the way back is what you might imagine was the farm's pasture—a field of urban grass and scrub that by its distress and unevenness hints at the rubble beneath.

The high banks confuse the wind. We tack and gybe, heeling leeward to comply, working our way toward the slips at the back. After many ducks under the boom, chasing the wind, Nick says, “Look in that bag for my baseball hat.”

At last we raise the centerboard and glide close by the stern of the Goat Farm’s nearly submerged three masted wooden schooner. She’s missing her masts, but still, she must be a historical treasure of some sort.

Just beyond is the first of twelve or so empty slips. We tie up to the best looking one and consider whether what is left of the wood will hold us.

“I think it will be OK if we step where there are joists,” I tell Nick. Because I was a carpenter, I guess, he believes me. When after a few steps we don’t fall through, our thoughts turn to exploring. A system of jerry built ramps takes us toward shore, over the schooner, to the foot of a long worrisome wooden stairway up the bank. I hedge my recommendation: “Here we’re just counting on good luck.”

The stairway does not collapse and we arrive twenty feet up the bank at the Goat Yard proper—an abandoned brickyard. One is immediately struck by the astounding variety and density of junk.

At first it was not junk. Items arrived and Stephen, the Goat Yard’s owner, placed them in an order. After a time his original inspiration must have gotten overwhelmed. Placement of new stuff became simply a matter of the next vacant spot. Such a tendency has always existed. Silently and unnoticed then, everything transformed into junk. Anything more arrived as junk already. I imagine this part of Stephen’s life became a vast secret from himself.

Before the boatyard went feral Stephen might still have heard his guardian angel speak through a friend—something soft and playful—“Hey, Eve-stay! Ix-nay on the unk-jay!”

Instead, he opened the gate to the yard every morning and let more junk wash in. It washed into his eyes and ears. Baskets full of party lights. More boats and masts than you can count. And bicycles! There is a bicycle leaning on every other piece of junk.

“Look! I have this 150’ hook-and-ladder fire truck here!” Stephen might beam, were he still alive.

“Well, not exactly...,” his angel would want to caution, “It has you.”

The fire truck is not independent either. Along with everything else, it is caught in the draw of the Goat Yard’s centerpiece—a huge, nameless tugboat.

She began as the beautiful Canadian quarantine cutter *Polana* in 1911, and was renamed *Macassa* in 1954. (I’m pretty sure I’m the kid standing on shore, wearing the checked shirt in a picture of her coming in to dock.) Now, one thin coat of paint has wiped away the most recent of her former identities, the *Queen City*.

As the *Queen City* she was a restaurant. Her engine and boiler were removed to make room for a commercial kitchen. Anticipating the crowds dining on her top deck, she was over-ballasted with rocks. She did an unremarkable business tied to the wharf at the foot of Ouellette Avenue in Windsor until she settled awash to her gunwale and the city wanted her out of there.

The plan was to turn her into a cottage at a nearby island, but pumped out and under tow to the island she grounded. It was discovered that with all those rocks she was too deep to go to the island or nearly anywhere else, and she was left at the Detroit Boat Works—the Goat Yard.

This is how it can go, not heeding your angel: Stephen is lured into a slick exchange for the *Queen City's* overdue docking fees that were never too clearly specified to begin with, and—voilà—the derelict is his.

I do not mean to make fun of Stephen. The way I see it there is really no throwing anything away. You may throw a thing more or less far from yourself, but it still exists—here on Earth. Consider plastic and radioactive waste if you doubt me: welcome to the Anthropocene Era, everyone!

Stephen did not cause all the stuff at the Goat Yard to be made—well, not any more than the rest of us. He merely owned the place where it came to rest and he didn't bury it so you can still see it. That's the criterion we have for junk, I guess: something nobody really wants anymore, but you can still see it.

We spent all afternoon marveling at Stephen's collection. There was a convenient smattering of chairs to relax on and regard it from. We didn't move a thing.

No one else was around except the very dog you would expect. Heading for the front gate, it turned stiffly toward us and then, not interested, continued on. Arthritis. Eye trouble, maybe.

The air began to cool. We made it back down the stairs and across the dock to our boat. We set a return course to Bayview and enjoyed an easy evening sail up the river.

Stephen died of cancer three days after our lovely daysail to his Goat Farm. Mary, Nick's wife, noticed the obituary in *Smoke Signals*, their neighborhood association newsletter, of all places. No telling where sailing a dinghy is going to take you.

Our Lovely Daysail to the Goat Farm—Picture Supplement

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“Swing me the hook.”



“I’m not a Tilly Hat kind of a guy.”



Belle Isle, a thousand acre island right downtown



The Goat Farm Inlet



Townhouses



The Edison Plant



The Goat Farm pasture



The submerged schooner stern



The schooner awash



"I think it will be OK if we step where there are joists"



Jerry built ramps





We begin to explore



The worrisome stairway



The abandoned brickworks





The astounding variety and density of junk





Baskets full of party lights



More boats and masts than you can count





And bicycles!



The 150' hook-and-ladder





The beautiful *Macassa*



The ghost of the *Queen City*





A convenient smattering of chairs



We spent all afternoon marveling



We didn't move a thing



The very dog you would expect



No telling where dinghy sailing is going to take you