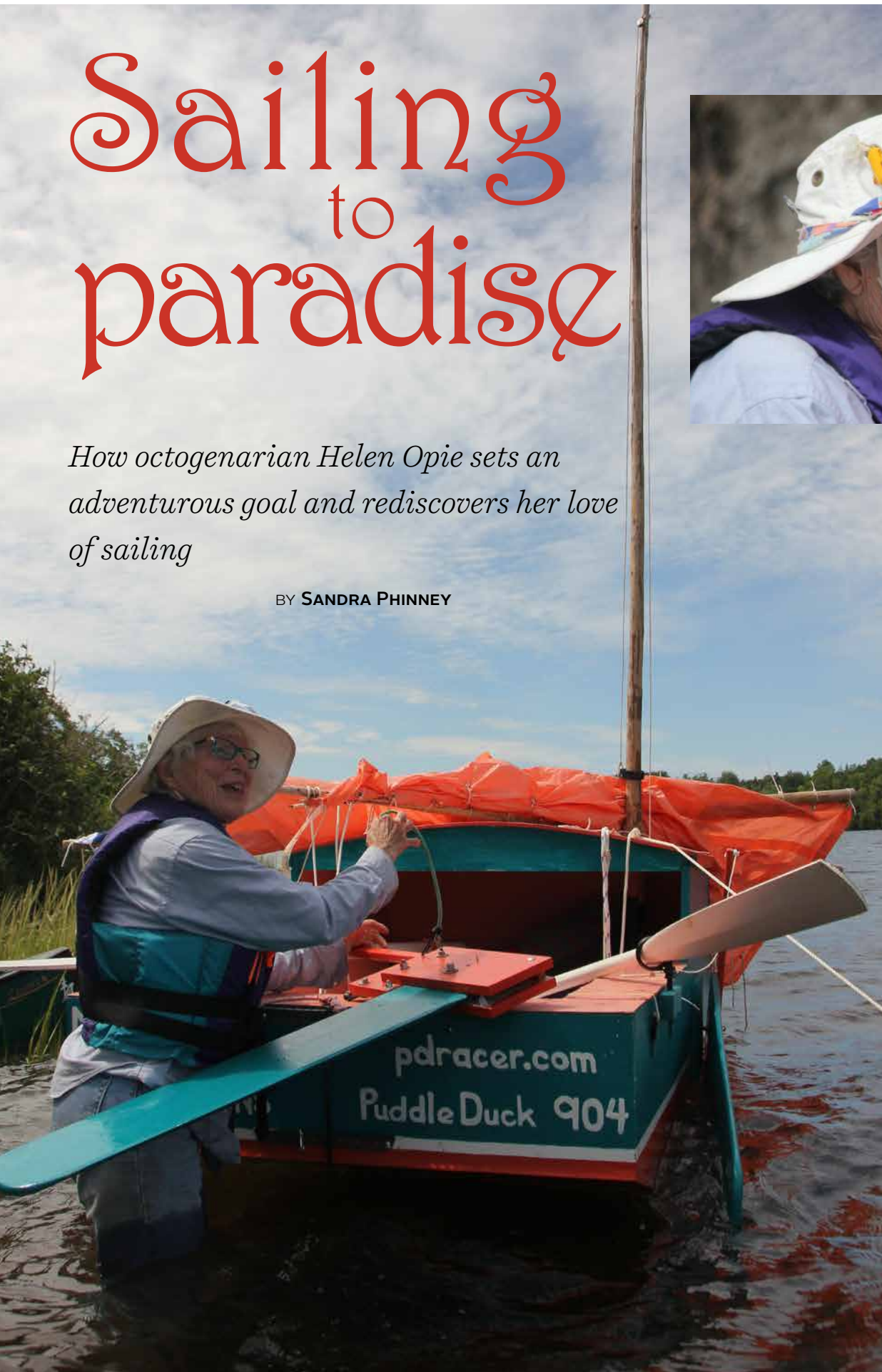


Sailing to paradise

How octogenarian Helen Opie sets an adventurous goal and rediscovers her love of sailing

BY SANDRA PHINNEY



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Above: Artist and boat builder Helen Opie of Granville Ferry, NS. Left: Helen secures *Molly Kool* close to the shoreline before assessing the cause of a loud noise the morning of Day 2.



COURTESY OF HELEN OPIE



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When Helen Opie was four, she stepped into a rowboat. “My mother tied a long rope to a bolt in the transom and shoved me away from the waves where I rowed around, back and forth,” says Opie. She was smitten. It was 1938, and she was with the family visiting her grandfather at his large summer home in Cape Cod.

A few years later, Opie had her first sailing experience in her cousin Gerry Henderson’s flat-bottomed Cotuit Skiff, which her mother was allowed to use while he was away during the Second World War. “My mother went on and on about what a useless landlubber I was. Although that first sail was difficult, I wanted to learn how to sail.”

By now, her parents had their own summer place on Cape Cod and to the youngster’s delight, she was given permission to use the skiff. By 13, she had earned enough money from a paper route to buy a rowboat. “I had my route under a neighbour boy’s name because girls were not allowed to be paper girls and women were not allowed to go to work before 6am.” At 15, the budding sailor had saved up enough money to buy her own Cotuit Skiff, for which she paid \$400 including the sail.

A sailor’s dream

Fast forward to April 2003, when Opie moved to Granville Ferry, NS from Maders Cove on the other side of the province. It was about a month before the artist’s 70th birthday. Along with moving, Opie came up with the notion of building her

Various phases of constructing *Molly Kool*.

own boat and sailing to paradise—up the Annapolis River, to Paradise, NS, that is.

Eventually, she ordered plans for a Puddle Duck Racer (PDR). Touted as the easiest boat in the world to build, this model is basically a plywood box with a curved bottom; the plans are free. PDR enthusiasts exist all over North America and form a huge fraternity sharing everything from blogs to photos and how-to philosophies.

In June of 2012, Opie sliced through her first piece of plywood. She also came up with the name for her boat: *Molly Kool*, after Myrtle “Molly” Kool, North America’s first registered female sea captain. Kool was born in Alma, NB. When she turned 21, Kool joined the Merchant Marine School and graduated with her Master Mariner’s papers in the spring of 1939. As a result, the Canadian Shipping Act had to be amended to “he or she.”

Although it took several summers to complete the construction phase of *Molly Kool*—aided by family members and friends, including the editor of the community newspaper—toward the end of August 2014, Opie conducted her first leak test. Sure enough, there was one, but glue and sawdust took care of that. Helen’s son-in-law Jayar also christened the boat officially—with a can of ginger ale.

Opie spent the following summer making last minute tune-ups. She also started to post entries on the PDR site. Her stories are full of breezy yet informative comments about the process. For example, when it was time to make the spars, she wrote this:

First I talked to a carpenter friend and learned which was the better tree—fir or spruce. Ray [Sanford] told me to choose spruce because that is a tough, flexible wood; fir is brittle and likely to give under strain. Then he told me how to identify both. Fir branches grow out in neat whorls each set at about the same height, sort of like umbrella ribs; spruce branches are more randomly or irregularly spaced.

She added further details about actually getting the spars, the tools she used to prepare the wood, and photos illustrating the entire process from start to finish.

One of the finishing touches included making a sail from an orange tarp she bought at Canadian Tire. *Molly Kool*, Puddle Duck #904, was ready for the journey.

Cast off!

As last August approached, the sailor kept abreast of the weather. Two friends decided to join her in a canoe for the sail to Paradise. Opie wrote:

The plan is to leave around noon, after the tide has turned; this will help push us upstream against the flow of the river and assure no one is sucked into the power station sluice. We have no idea how far we will get, but Bridgetown is my target for the night.

And so it was that at noon on August 1st, Opie and her merry band of family and friends met at Granville Ferry Beach. But there was a small error regarding the tide. Instead of coming in (and flowing up the river in the direction the boats were heading) it was receding and would be working against *Molly Kool* for the next several hours.

Undeterred, Opie set sail accompanied by a small flotilla, while well-wishers waved from shore. It was a balmy summer day laced with a few distant clouds. However, aside from not having the tide in her favour, there was precious little wind. Opie tacked as best she could but in essence, for every 100-metre gain, she experienced an 80-metre setback.

Mercifully, by late afternoon a breeze graced the waters and Opie was able to reach the upper end of the bay close to the narrows. With evening approaching, everyone thought it would be wise to find a place to hunker down for the night.

Distance covered? About five kilometres—about one tenth of the journey to Paradise; no one seemed concerned. Although our intrepid traveller had planned to spend the night in *Molly Kool*, her friends convinced her to hang out with them in the tent.



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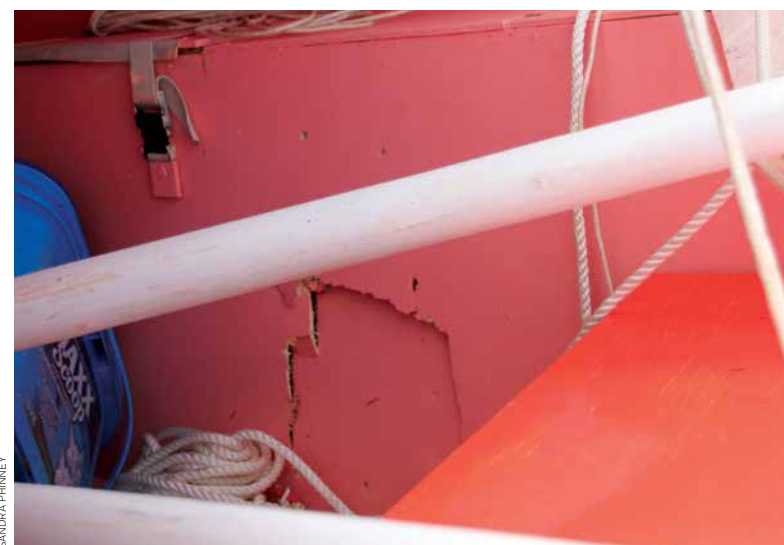
■ Clockwise from top left: Well-wishers gather to say bon voyage; Opie surveys the gear before deciding what needs to go in the tent for the night; Sue Hutchins waiting to catch sight of *Molly Kool*; part of the flotilla that accompanied Opie on the start of her journey.

Sidekicks

Sue Hutchins and Sandra Phinney paddled a canoe and camped with Helen Opie on this journey. They're still shaking their heads in wonder.

Hutchins says, "Age is just a number. What an inspiration this woman is! When many people are sitting home in a rocking chair, she's building a sail boat in her back yard and dreaming about sailing it to Paradise. When Helen resumes her journey this summer, we'll be right along side of her!"

Phinney adds, "I've met lots of feisty older women in my life, but no one quite like Helen. It's tough to sum her up in a word or two. Audacious comes to mind. Plucky. Pig headed. I want to be like her when I'm 84."



■ Above: Part of the damage incurred when the leeboard bolt ripped away from its brace.

While consuming heaping helpings of rice, stir-fried veggies and curried chicken, the discussion touched upon everything under the sun including family backgrounds, DCI (Divine Cosmic Intelligence) and parking lot fairies. Helen and her friends were asleep before dark.

With a rising tide and a steady southerly breeze, the next morning was full of promise. Approaching the narrows, Opie tacked back and forth at a good clip. Mid morning, the breeze morphed into a strong wind; Opie needed to slow down or she'd ram into the shore.

She took a reef (shortened the sail). Then it happened. CRACK! She'd heard the same crack the day before. At the time, she thought the mast had become unstepped, but no water was coming in so she gave it no more thought. But now, *Molly Kool* was not responding as she should; something was wrong. Sure enough, the leeboard bolt had ripped away from

the brace on the inside of the boat and left it flapping like a bird's wing on *Molly Kool's* left side.

After pulling ashore to assess the damage, Opie decided that the best course of action was to wrap up the journey. The challenge would be to find a place where vehicles could pick up the boats without going all the way back to Granville Ferry. She said rather pensively, "Paradise always was illusive."

Back in her boat, Opie started to row. And row. And she rowed some more. Eventually, there it was: a landing and a long driveway, which turned out to be the home of former MLA Greg Kerr and his wife Marcia. Cups of tea and a giant bowl of blueberries appeared out of thin air. Opie called her daughter Jenny and son-in-law Jayar Milligan, who arrived shortly with two vehicles. Kerr pitched in and helped to load the boats. Opie and her friends headed home.

Reflecting on the trip, Opie says, "I learned again how much

I love sailing. And it was good to know that I was not cowed by the stiff wind that eventually caused the demise of the leeboard. Sure, I was disappointed that the day ended that way, but it was just the end of that day. It's all part of the ongoing adventure."

This free spirit will be 84 this May. She's in the process of doing needed repairs to *Molly Kool* and has set her sights on picking up the journey where she left off—around the neck of the narrows—early this August.

When asked what she meant when she said "Paradise always was illusive," Opie smiles. "Searches of that nature are illusive. I think there is a Buddhist saying, *If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him*. I find that exhortation to kill most distasteful and off-putting and do not understand it; but if it refers to getting rid of illusions, then I both understand and like it."