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Sea History for Kids

Sailing for All: Joe Lee and America's First

by Mari Anne Snow, Gary C. du Moulin, and Charles Zechel

Blasted be the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of nothing, blasted be they that mourn, for they shall be discomforted. Blasted be the meek, for they shall be kicked off the earth." This creative interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount is an example of the passionate philosophy of the colorful Joseph Lee Jr. of Beacon Hill in Boston, MA—founder of the oldest continuously running public community sailing program in the US.

Born into privilege, Joe Lee embraced his own brand of philanthropy while nurturing the sons and daughters of the immigrant working classes of Boston. His outspoken approach to facing down those who stood in his way and his willingness to challenge the social conventions of his day have left an indelible mark on the city. The many generations of children impacted by his work and his example were given an exceptional gift—the knowledge that they could change the world when they held to their beliefs and displayed a deep commitment to public service.

While Joe, a long-time member of the Boston School Committee, is most remembered for his commitment to public education, the maritime world, particularly the sailing community, remembers Joe Lee Jr. as the man who helped launch Boston's renowned community sailing program. For seventy-four years, Community Boating has been putting thousands of people in sailboats on the Charles River Basin, allowing them to experience the joys of sailing, and these boats have become an iconic symbol of the City of Boston. This is the story of a man and an organization so indelibly interwoven that it is hard to separate the two.

The Lee family had a long and engaging history among Boston's wealthy citizenry. They were descendants of Thomas Handasyd Perkins, the prominent shipping magnate who once turned down a cabinet post as Secretary of the Navy under George Washington because he owned more ships. Part of the Boston aristocracy, the Lees belonged to the network of families known as the "Boston Brahmins," who shared their prosperity with the city by funding, among other things: the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the Museum of Fine Arts, the Charles River Basin and the adjoining Esplanade. It was Joe's father, Joseph Lee

Sr., "the father of the American Playground Movement," and his uncles, James Jackson Storror and Major Lee Higginson, who in 1903, as members of the Charles River Dam Committee, fought to create the Charles River Basin by damming the river to cover the mud flats.



Joseph Lee Jr.

Joseph Lee Jr. was born in Boston in 1901, the third child and only son of Joseph Lee Sr. and Elizabeth Perkins Cabot Lee. His father, a staunch proponent of public recreation, and his mother, a supporter of the American Kindergarten Movement, held strong views on philanthropy that they passed on to their children. Joe Jr. learned these lessons well and took his civic responsibilities very seriously.

Public sailing in Boston began largely as a result of Joe Lee's vision. He saw the recently created Charles River Basin, funded by an unprecedented \$1 million donation from his aunt, Mrs. Helen Osbourne Storror, and intended as a public water playground, being used mainly by members of the wealthy elite. Determined to fulfill his family's vision to create a water playground for the public on the Charles River Basin, Joe decided to take matters into his own hands. His first plan was to design a simple, inexpensive watercraft, easy enough for any child to assemble and sail. With modest monetary contributions from his friends

and family, in 1936 Joe set out to build a small fleet, which would soon challenge the rights of ownership of the Basin waters.

Joe tinkered with anything he thought would float. His testing site was an area called the Charlesbank, located in the lower part of the Basin just upstream of the treacherous Charles River Locks. One old West Ender recalled: "Joe would lash four bales of hay together with gimp, cover the bales with a tarp, stick a sail on top of the craft and away he would try to sail." Joe built the first two prototypes of his final design with the help of his young nephews, Kenny and Donny Robertson. Just a little more than twenty dollars and twelve hours of labor could build Joe's simple sixteen-foot, fixed-keel craft derived from a northern kayak. They weren't beautiful works of art, but they were sturdy and truly handcrafted, requiring only simple hand tools for construction. The boat's frame, or envelope, was sawed from 24-foot pine boards, whose glued diagonal ends formed the bow and stern. Forward, center, and aft thwarts braced the wooden envelope and floorboards sealed and completed the craft. Mr. Binder, the stitcher from the local shoe factory, sewed sails from heavy-duty hospital sheets, and Mr. Geller, the tailor, made sail repairs. Masts made of simple bamboo provided flexibility and could be easily replaced if broken.

Once the first two boats were complete, Joe negotiated with John Halko, the director of the West End Community Center, for space in the basement of the Community Center facility for use as a boatbuilding site. Joe, a social worker and educator by avocation, was convinced that disadvantaged children living throughout the tenements of Boston could benefit from being taken off the streets and given a break from their difficult lives. Convinced a community boat club could provide this opportunity, Joe began recruiting from the surrounding neighborhoods.

Along with boatbuilding, Joe gave "his kids" the standards for a new kind of life. Mike Vendetti, one of the original gang, recalls, "Joe Lee was very fussy. He carried a tape measure with him, everything had to be perfect. Center was center. An eighth of an inch was an eighth of an inch." Built under Joe's watchful eye, many of these original boats were still in use as late as 1953—a

t Public Community Sailing Program

true testament to the time and attention to detail invested in their original construction.

With boat construction underway, Joe sought out W. Duncan Russell, the head of the Community Recreation Service (CRS), a social agency that provided work programs for underprivileged boys. He asked that the agency become a sponsor for the newly formed Community Boat Club. A CRS staff member acted as club secretary and flyers announcing the new organization were sent to all the settlement houses throughout Boston.

In May 1937, the first organizational meeting of "Community Boat Club" was held at the Community Recreation Service rooms on 739 Boylston Street. Joe, clad in his plaid shirt, corduroys, and work shoes, puffed on a large Italian stogie and offered a challenge to the attendees. Angelo Andon remembers Joe saying: "If you fellows want to learn to build your own boats, I will put up the twenty dollars so you can." The first club members were West End neighborhood kids from the tenements, the sons (and occasional daughter) of first-generation immigrants, along with some Suffolk Law students who boarded and worked as part-time counselors in the settlement houses. Boasting 100 members and a seven-boat, boy-built fleet, Community Boat Club began operating off Percival Watt's boathouse on the Charlesbank that summer. Two dock masters, Mr. Arthur Robinson and Spike (Harry) Lee ran the day-to-day operations, with Mr. Robinson overseeing instruction and swim tests. Sailing theory, safety rules, boatbuilding and boat design classes all took place in the open air of the dock. Out on the water, the kids sailed by "following the leader." If they capsized, they held onto their boat until Kenny or Donny Robertson rowed out to rescue them.

To the sophisticated Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) sailors and the wealthy Union Boat Club rowers in the upper Basin, the Community Boat Club's operation probably appeared run-down, undisciplined, and lackadaisical. To the underprivileged children of the West End whose families came to America with next to nothing, the club was idyllic, a bright and shiny promise of a better future. Frank Lavine later recalled, "Joe Lee taught me what America could be."

The Community Boat Club's first season ended successfully, but it was clear
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they needed a safer location away from the dangerous Charles River Dam to continue. In a calculated move, Joe chose to store the fleet on Metropolitan District Commission (MDC) property without seeking their permission. The MDC administered Mrs. Storrow's generous gift, and it was Joe's plan to force the MDC to use some of that money to build a boathouse for his kids on the Upper Basin. A political chess game was about to begin.

construction. Professor Owens, designer of the MIT "Tech" racing dinghy, responded by announcing he hoped that the flimsy boats would soon fall apart "before serious casualties or tragedies occur." William Whittaker then claimed there was no money for a boathouse because the statutory limitation on the Storrow funds had lapsed. Joe, with the support of the mayor's office, countered by petitioning the House Ways and Means Committee to release the unspent



PHOTOS FOR THIS ARTICLE COURTESY OF CBI

Original Community Boat Club members sailing on the upper basin. (date unknown)

Almost immediately, MDC Chairman Eugene Hultman, a staunch opponent of the Community Boat Club, demanded that Joe remove the boats from MDC property. In response, Joe wrote: "Why don't you take it now and smash the boats the kids built last year? You will only break a few hearts." Then he attacked Hultman in the newspapers, claiming that the MDC had violated the terms of the Storrow gift. Supported by Mrs. Storrow, Boston Mayor Tobin, City Councilor Shattuck, and William Shand (all Lee relatives or family friends), Joe pitted himself against Hultman; Douglas Lawson, the head of the Charles River Association (which represented the Union Boat Club); Professor George Owens, head of MIT's Pratt School of Naval Design; and William Whittaker, Secretary of the MDC.

Joe pushed hard for release of \$281,000 from the Storrow money to fund boathouse

Storrow money. When the committee restored the \$281,000 to the MDC, it went back into Hultman's unsupportive hands. Hultman continued to refuse funding for the boathouse, despite three written pleas by Mrs. Storrow herself.

In June of 1938, the Boat Club opened for its second season in its original location. Over the winter, the fleet had doubled to fourteen, with one design modification—the fixed keels were replaced with side leeboards or pontoons. Youth boat builders from the West, North, and South Ends eagerly signed up. With the help of CBC alumni, dockmasters Jim Marino and Harry Lee taught the new members sail theory and safety rules. For new skippers, a pickle barrel, cut in half and rigged with a sail and outriggers, served as their first "cockpit" on shore. Later, experienced members took new sailors out on the water for hands-on drills.

But Joe was hardly content. The club

needed a boathouse, and he was determined to see it through. The only way to get a boathouse was to lobby for it. Joe decided he must mobilize his club membership. He was determined to teach these children of humble beginnings the meaning of civic action. The upper basin was dominated by the MIT sailing pavilion on the Cambridge bank and the Union Boat Club on the Boston bank. Both MIT and the Union Boat Club considered the upper basin their private preserve. It was time for the tenement kids from the lower basin to force their way up the river, while learning a first hand lesson in how the American political system worked. Joe Lee was delighted to be their mentor.

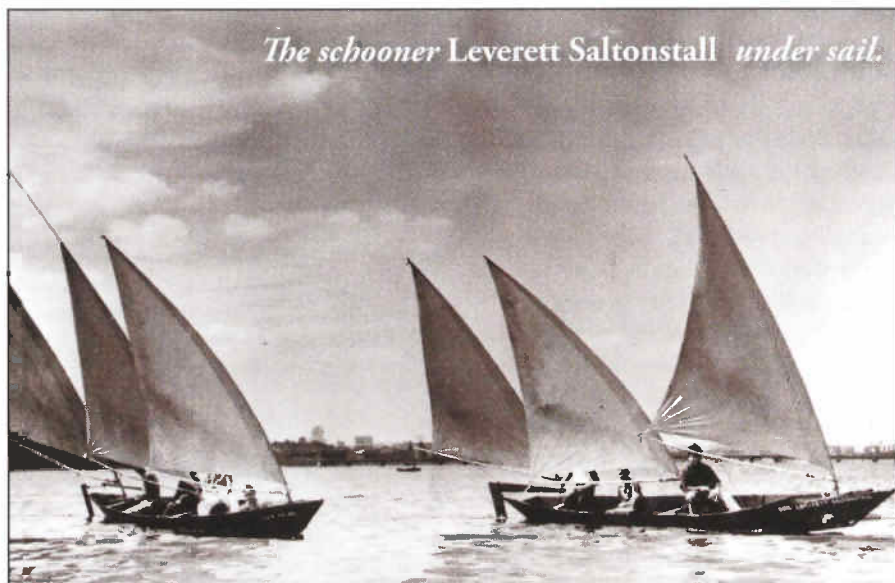
Joe and his young "lobbyists" initiated their campaign during the prestigious Annual American Henley Regatta, held at the Union Boat Club. While Boston debutantes socialized with the academic elite of MIT and Harvard, Jim Marino lead a flotilla of 14 boats under the Longfellow Bridge into the upper Basin. Labeled "river rats" by the MDC police, the scruffy boys with their scruffy boats were promptly towed back below the bridge and ordered not to return. But return they did, on a daily basis, with Joe routinely sending boats to every span of the bridge, trying—and succeeding—to drive the MDC patrol boat officers crazy. On weekends, the battle came to the streets of Beacon Hill with kids assigned to every street corner to ask local Beacon Hill residents to sign boathouse petitions. As the boathouse lobbyists and their opponents gathered momentum for an inevitable confrontation, Mother Nature stepped in unexpectedly to offer her help.

July of 1938 was plagued with torrential rains and severe thunderstorms that caused massive flooding along the Charles. The Charles River locks were opened to alleviate the flood waters, making it impossible to sail safely in the lower Basin. Joe and his boys took to the streets, marching through the West End, across Cambridge Street, up Temple, past Suffolk University to the State House. Carrying homemade banners, petitions, and a sailboat named the *Eugene C. Hultman* that they "docked" on the floor of the State House's Hall of Flags; the noisy lobbyists were greeted by Governor Charles Hurley. Jack Donovan, a Suffolk Law School student, stated the group's purpose and presented the governor with their petitions.

The kids tasted their first small victory when Governor Hurley ordered Hultman to allow the kids to sail from the public landing in front of the Union Boat Club. They had not yet achieved their dream, but they were one step closer to it.

When the Charles River receded, the kids sailed through the spans of the Longfellow Bridge, escorted by the MDC patrol boat that had once chased them out. While neither the MIT sailors nor the rowing crowd at the Union Boat Club welcomed their new neighbors to the Upper Basin, several of the elder Boston aristocracy

kept things relatively organized. "Ordinary seamen" stayed inside the breakwater and were easily visible as they were outfitted with colored sails. "Able seaman" could sail outside the breakwater. "Chief petty officers" among the older kids formed the club management and could sail the schooners. The club ended its third season with 600 permanent, year-round members. That year, the tide turned once again when Joe's cousin, Leverett Saltonstall, was elected governor. Joe had been biding his time, waiting for the perfect moment to advance his cause. He was determined to move the boathouse plans



The schooner Leverett Saltonstall under sail.

embraced the kids. Admiral Richard Byrd, accompanied by his dog, chatted with the CBC kids and brought his grandchildren down to the Basin to sail with them. Henry Shattuck, city councilor, encouraged them and Stephen Cabot befriended them.

In the summer of 1939, Joe's Community Boat Club opened its third season up-river with an expanded fleet of twenty sailboats and four three-masted schooners. In addition to the sailboats, they had built a 24-foot gondola, complete with canopy, cushions, and a rowing stanchion for a standing oarsman in the stern. On hot summer evenings, passengers boarded from the granite steps near the concert shell and were ferried around the Basin as music wafted across the water. Gondoliers were chosen for their ability to sing Italian songs, and the income from this enterprise was used to defray the club's operating costs.

That summer, membership swelled to over 1,000. A new club rating system

forward, and Saltonstall's election presented him with a perfect opportunity.

Early in the spring of 1939, Joe had the kids name one of their three-masted schooners the *Leverett Saltonstall*, then he sent an invitation to the governor for the formal christening ceremony. White hat in one hand and a bottle of champagne in the other, the new governor visited the basin to officially christen "his" ship. The christening was a triumphant success, and it set in motion the kids' next move. As the governor had now publicly declared his support for the CBC, Joe felt the time was right to initiate the next step in the group's campaign. With dock masters Jack Donovan and Jim Marino leading the way, 100 chanting teenagers descended on the State House. Carrying signs and pushing fruit carts, borrowed from several of the kids' parents and packed full of sail boats, the young people surged forward up to the State House steps, where they were greeted by the Governor and the

MDC Commissioner, Joe McKenny. "I'll do what I can to get you your boathouse," Governor Saltonstall promised.

On 11 January 1940, at the hearing of the Legislative Committee on Metropolitan Affairs, more than 100 kids showed up to root for Joe and the boathouse. Governor Saltonstall sent his secretary, Russell Gerould, to urge the legislature to officially designate part of the Storrow funds be used to build the boathouse. As Chairman Hultman had no wish to openly oppose the new governor, his representative, William Whittaker, the MDC secretary, stayed quiet in the background. In the end, after much debate, the MDC agreed to the governor's request—Joe's kids would get their boathouse and public sailing would have its first permanent home.

While the blessing of Governor Saltonstall proved helpful in securing the funds for the boathouse, control of the facility was immediately problematic. Once the decision had been forced on the MDC, Hultman moved swiftly to take over the program. As with the original Community Boat Club, the Community Recreation Service was recommended and accepted as manager. But as the lawyer for the CRS was drawing up the lease for the property based upon the agreed sum of \$1 a year, the CRS management, in conjunction with the MDC, installed Douglas Lawson, MIT Professor George Owen, and Walter "Jack" Wood, Owen's assistant, as the new advisory committee. The foxes had taken over the hen house.

A press release issued on 26 January 1941 clearly laid out the new world order. Heralding the opening of the newly formed Community Sailing Association as the premier public sailing program offered on the Charles River Basin through the "foresight of the MDC," Community Boat Club was summarily dismissed. With MIT sailing master Jack Wood generously on loan from MIT to supervise the sailing curriculum and George Owen to design the new fleet, all would be well. The piece touted the "astounding success of the MIT sailing program; the growth of dinghy racing as an intercollegiate sport; and the desire of Chairman Eugene C. Hultman and the MDC to gain the fullest use of this unequalled sheet of water under its jurisdiction."

Included in the press release was the delineation of the new organization's



dues, which ranged from 25 cents to a full \$15 per year. The new club would serve adults, juniors, and organizations (particularly collegiate sailing groups) with local college men from Boston College, Boston University, Harvard, MIT, and Northeastern hired as instructors. Junior instruction would be organized in stages mirroring aviation training—ground school, passenger, dual control and soloing. Children who completed these stages and followed the "MIT methods" would be issued membership cards that designated their "rank."

Behind the scenes, Wood made it plain he wanted "to start with boys of the right type" for this new organization. In addition, the adult sailing season would be restructured to run from mid-June until September to mirror the collegiate calendar. The junior program would be reduced to a little over two months and the new boathouse workshop, intended as an expanded boatbuilding area, would be kept padlocked. Joe, the lone member of Community Boat Club included on the new advisory board, was outraged.

Despite the conflict, construction proceeded on the boathouse apace. Still exerting influence wherever possible, Joe, along with a delegation of Community Boat Club members, met with the boathouse architect, William Roger Greeley, and convinced him to extend the docks and slips. On 28 June 1941, with Mrs. Storrow in attendance, the new boathouse, constructed of grey brick trimmed with rough granite at a cost of \$55,000, was formally dedicated to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

When the new Community Sailing

Association opened for business that summer, James E. Marino and Lt. John J. Donovan Jr. were the lone carry-overs from the original Community Boat Club staff. Walter Wood, the manager appointed by the advisory board and paid \$2,000 a season to manage the club, seldom showed up for work and, when he did, rarely provided direction. Regardless of the lofty public declaration of a new system, Marino and Donovan, the chief instructors, quietly continued to use the original training materials for the junior classes. Other members from the original club continued to volunteer as well.

The boat designed by Owen for the new club was a 13'4" chine-built, centerboard vessel modeled on the Class B "Frost-bite" dinghy. With hollow, un-stayed masts, a cat-rig, and double-hulled construction designed for buoyancy, the boats carried two sizes of sail: a 72-square-foot sail on a 15½ foot hoist for racing and light air sailing, and a 56-square-foot sail on a 12-foot hoist for heavy weather and sailing instruction. The contract to build the boats was awarded to the lowest bidder, James C. Graves of Marblehead, a friend of Professor Owen. While the original design specifications called for marine plywood or its equivalent, Mr. Graves, with the consent of Owen and the MDC, substituted plywood that he manufactured himself. The cost per boat ran \$435 for the hull, \$60 per mast, with additional costs for the two sails. Joe Lee, ever a frugal Yankee, was apoplectic.

Due to the high cost of the new fleet, only thirty boats were built, which required the new club to use Community Boat Club's original fleet to meet the demand. Joe agreed to lend the boats to maintain a presence

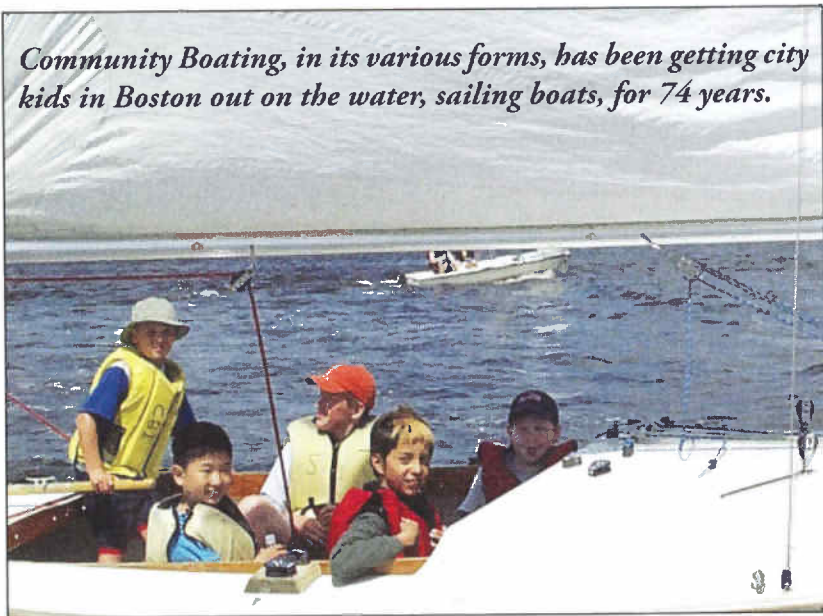
and ensure that his members could still sail. Problems with the new boats surfaced immediately. At 225 pounds, they were so heavy no one could lift them onto the racks built for them, certainly not kids. During the first season, among other things, most of the masts broke and the boats leaked. Many of the boats began to split apart, layer by layer, likely a result of the handmade plywood. In the end, two full-time paid boat builders were required to keep the new boats in usable condition.

With the US entry into World War II, many of Joe's boys answered the call. The 1941 and 1942 sailing seasons passed with ever-increasing tensions that finally came to a head in July of 1942, resulting in Douglas Lawson's resignation as chair and Joe Lee leaving the organization. After the 1942 season, Wood, Marino, and Donovan all retired and Owen was dropped from the advisory committee. With no one left from the original club, the three-masted schooners from the original fleet were left outside all winter, suffering extensive damage.

In 1943, when a friend of Lawson's was put in charge of the boathouse, Joe took the Community Boat Club fleet, which had only been *loaned* to the Community Boat Association, and started teaching city kids sailing at a nearby public landing. Lawson seized his opportunity and immediately placed a sign on the boathouse door that read, "Members and Guests Only." While Joe raged, the MDC ordered Lawson to remove the sign, but Lawson refused and the sign stayed on the door. Returning veterans, many of them the original Community Boat Club "lobbyists" who had fought hard for the boathouse, were now facing another battle, but this time, they were ready to take a stand on their own, without their mentor.

After the war had ended, the men who returned in place of the boys that had left were much changed. Determined to complete their childhood mission, a small group worked behind the scenes against

those who sought to use the boathouse for commercial purposes. In 1946, with little fanfare, Community Sailing Association was dissolved and Community Boating, Inc. (CBI), a chartered, non-profit dedicated to preserving public access to the Charles River Basin, took over operations at the boathouse under the motto "Sailing for all." The new board consisted of many of the first generation of CBC sailors, including Jack Donovan, Arthur Athanas, and Steven "Sully" Cudlitz—but not Joe Lee. Instead, he watched from the sidelines as the CBI board acquired the rights to the boathouse lease from the MDC four years later.



Community Boating, in its various forms, has been getting city kids in Boston out on the water, sailing boats, for 74 years.

Although Joe would eventually return to the boathouse as a member of CBI's board, tensions remained between him and the boathouse crew. He refused to give up his spot on the public landing, and he continued to mentor boys and girls from the old neighborhoods at that location well into the 1960s, teaching them to sail in retrofitted open whaleboats that he bought from the Charlestown Naval Shipyard for \$300 a boat. Ironically, out of loyalty to Joe, this new generation of sailors also viewed CBI with suspicion. Although some of them ended up working and sailing at CBI, many of the public landing group remained apart, content to sail their whalers too close to the CBI docks (much to the irritation of dock master Leo Manfredi, who would shoo them away).

Today, CBI operates a year-round program on the Charles River and time has mended old wounds. The MDC, renamed

the Department of Conservation and Recreation, is a highly valued partner that maintains the boathouse facility. The MIT sailors and the many rowers peacefully co-exist with CBI members, which now total approximately 4,000 adult members and more than 2,500 juniors throughout the season. The current curriculum includes sailing, kayaking, windsurfing, navigation, and, recently, boatbuilding was reintroduced to the program. The Universal Access program accommodates blind sailors, sailors with developmental or physical limitations, and patients from nearby Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital. The Mass

Bay High School Sailing Association partners with CBI to provide safe sailing for high schoolers, and the junior program has a racing team. Volunteer work parties keep the membership active and invested in club activities during the winter off-season.

Today's fleet now boasts 75 Cape Cod Mercurys, a stalwart fiberglass sailing dinghy that has been the mainstay of the fleet since 1952, as well as Rhodes 19s, Sonars, 420s and Lasers. The old rating system still exists

and a member as young as 10 and as old as 100 can earn solo skills sufficient to skipper a boat on their own. Operating expenses are covered entirely by income from adult membership fees and private donations. Junior tuition remains just \$1 per year for any child aged 10-18. The dock staff is populated with junior program graduates who grew up sailing with CBI and who perpetuate the culture of knowledge-sharing and volunteerism with adults and children alike. The general members are still always ready to help, teaching classes, working on committees, or doing whatever needs to be done. Without the enthusiastic participation of its members, CBI could not exist, let alone continue to thrive as it has done.

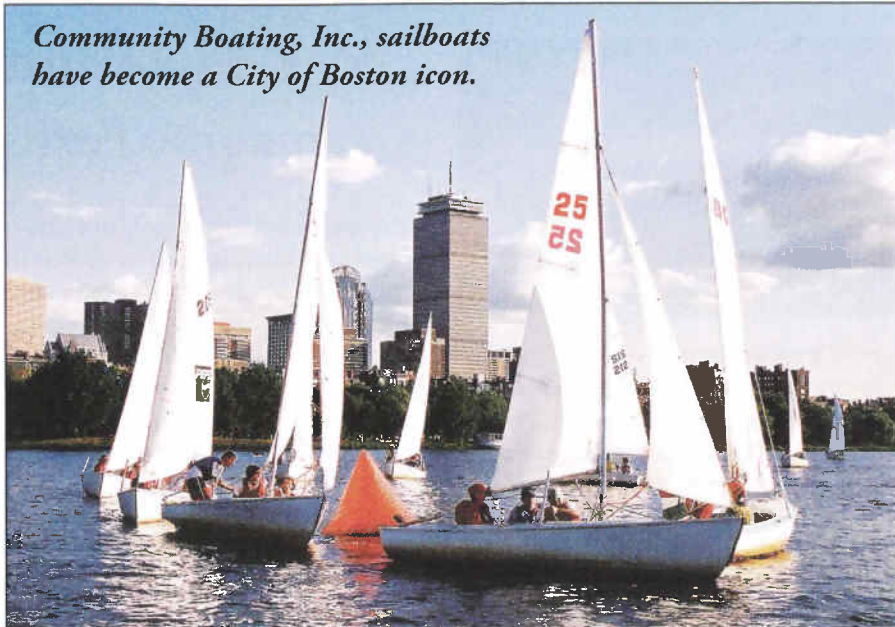
And what happened to Joe Lee? As the battle for public sailing access ended and CBI grew, Joe concentrated on his other cause, public education, where he remained distinctly visible, serving on the Boston

School Committee until his death in 1991 at age 90. Around CBI, Joe is now the stuff of myth and legend. His stories are told and re-told, passed on through generations of sailors who come to the boathouse to learn to sail, and reverently preserved by the original "kids" whose loyalty to Joe is as strong as ever.

Joe's portrait, painted by noted Beacon Hill artist Patricia Tate, hangs overlooking the second-floor function room, part of the boathouse expansion that occurred in 1987. He sits uneasily on the edge of his seat, dressed in a slightly rumpled blue-striped blazer with shocking white tousled hair and a weathered face, looking directly at all comers as if challenging them to battle still. It is impossible to know how many kids have passed through these doorways and into the sailing world. But what is not in question is Joe's contribution to their lives and the impact of his vision of sail training as a tool for something much bigger than tacking and gybing. ⚓

NOTE: Information for this article was gleaned from an article by C. E. Downs, "The Boat Club that Began on a Tenement Rooftop," *Beacon Hill Times*, Vol. 28 (12),

Community Boating, Inc., sailboats have become a City of Boston icon.



August 1992; and a write-up of events by Joseph Lee Jr., 1944.

Mari Anne Snow, co-founder and CEO of SophiaThink Consulting in Marblehead, MA, is an avid sailor and writer. She is a long-time supporter of CBI.

Gary C. du Moulin, PhD, MPH, is trained as a medical microbiologist and is Senior Director, Quality Compliance for Genzyme Corp. in Cambridge. Gary started

sailing at Community Boating after retiring from the US Army, retiring at the rank of colonel. He serves as a member of CBI's board of directors.

Charles Zechel has served as CBI's executive director for the last 6 years. He is a member of US Sailing, a certified Instructor Trainer, and a long-time J-24 racer. Charlie recently launched an Access Sailing program at CBI to ensure sailors with physical limitations can enjoy the pleasures of sailing.

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