

## Crossing Pamlico Sound, the Hard Way

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Many years ago, back in the early '70s, a close family friend named Mr. Twiford took me and my parents across Currituck Sound in his old deadrise, a type of working boat still common among the watermen of North Carolina. Growing up, I'd always assumed he was an uncle, but Mr. Twiford was not a relative in the strict sense of the word, though our family trees did intertwine going back a few generations. He was the son-in-law of Ambrose Sears, a ninety-some-year-old waterman who was a close friend of my grandfather and a longtime resident of Waterlilly on Church's Island. During a particular visit to Waterlilly, Mr. Twiford invited us aboard his boat and took us out across the sound towards the lighthouse at Corolla, where he ran up on a beach and I collected clam shells as big as the palm of my hand.

Corolla was not yet the vacation resort it is today; it was still a poor outpost of the northern Outer Banks which made the western shore of the Currituck seem prosperous by comparison. On subsequent family visits to Waterlilly I'd gaze out across the sound at the dunes of Corolla, imagining going across in a small boat by myself. These early memories were perhaps the genesis for the trip I'd later make out to the Outer Banks in *Rubbermaid*.

Fast-forward about twenty-five years to 1996 and it's Alexandria, Virginia, beneath the shadow of the old, rickety Woodrow Wilson Bridge. I'd just accepted a position with a design firm back down in Atlanta and was only a week away from starting the new job. I'd come to the Alexandria Seaport Foundation office to say good-bye to the people there when I spotted this old, decrepit dinghy for sale. I'd never heard of an Albacore before, but despite the dodgy condition it was in, the lines were absolutely superb – the way boats used to be drawn back in the old days. The ASF wanted \$650 for the boat and another \$200 for the trailer, but I talked them down to \$500 for the whole kit, including spars and sails, and soon had a new boat of my own – my very first. A few months later, after everything had finally settled into place and all the Olympics craziness had cleared out of town, I was sailing the stock '69 Grampian out by my old college sailing haunts off Old Federal Point on Lake Lanier. The boat wasn't in the best shape, and during the second trip up to the lake it suffered a severe knockdown in shifty winds, resulting in capsize and a snapped rudder, and a subsequent beaching on a nearby exposed shoal.

Not wanting to miss the remainder of the warm-weather sailing season, I put the rudder back together using epoxy and two long pieces of stainless steel rod, and was soon back out on the water. After a number of mishaps, including a stormy Thanksgiving eve spent surviving on one of Lanier's uninhabited Three Sisters islands, I'd learned the ins and outs of how the boat behaved in different kinds of weather. Getting off the island the following morning in twenty-five knots of wind, using the jib as a storm trysail, taught me what the Albacore was really capable of; it wasn't just a simple racer or daysailer, but a boat that could actually take you places. Not long afterwards I was thumbing through an atlas and came across a map of eastern North Carolina; it was then and there that I made concrete plans to take the old Albacore across Pamlico Sound and out to the Outer Banks.

By this time the boat had a new name and a new transom, and reef points had been installed in the main for shortening sail while singlehanding. Small plastic padeyes were fixed to the seating tanks and hull interior so that an elastic webbing could be stretched across the forward area of the cockpit, where all the

gear would be stored. In the event of capsizing the webbing would keep all the stores and tanks from going over the side.

I was eager to start the journey. When the time came to take *Rubbermaid* up to North Carolina in August of 1997, the last remaining bits of epoxy around the hull-transom joint were still curing. About two months earlier I'd flown into Raleigh and rented a car to scout out suitable launch sites. The best location ended up being Vandemere on Bay River, a tiny crabbing village about 35 miles away from Ocracoke by water. During the scout trip I made a stop in Minnesott Beach and gazed out across the yawning chasm of water plied by the Cherry Branch-Minnesott ferry, a rough, two-mile-wide stretch at the bend in the Neuse River. This left an indelible mark on my somewhat fragile psyche; if the thought of crossing a stretch of water that size put the fear of God into me, then what business did I have crossing a wild, unsheltered body of water many, many times wider?

Things were still getting pieced together on the dock when *Rubbermaid* touched salt water for the first time at Vandemere. The fact that the boat wasn't 100 per cent prepared when it arrived at the ramp wasn't exactly a morale booster, though hurrying to get things finished did have the effect of temporarily focusing my mind and taking it off the very real dangers of sailing solo across the Sound in such a small vessel. The afternoon heat was also unbearable, mosquitoes were biting, and my nostrils were assaulted by the blended aroma of rural agriculture, spoilt crab meat and acrid sea salt – an aroma familiar to me in childhood, but one that had grown alien to my senses over the ensuing years. After a couple hours sorting everything out I untied the lines and hesitatingly left the dock, taking *Rubbermaid* out about 200 yards into the river before heading back to the ramp with my tail between my legs. The fear that had gripped me at Minnesott Beach wouldn't go away, and in a state of dwindling morale, I figured it was best not to put to sea at all.



The next several days were spent at the Palace Motel in New Bern, switching my focus between the Weather Channel and the NOAA charts laid out across the floor, and I still couldn't overcome the fear – which was largely fear of the unknown. This wasn't a planned vacation out of some tour package, but something completely unscripted, and dangerous – where things could go very wrong. I knew of no one who'd attempted anything like it before in this part of the country, and in terms of sheer craziness, it ranked up there with my fraternity brother, Andy, who used to explore abandoned buildings by himself at night in downtown Atlanta. After days focusing on all the things that could potentially go wrong it dawned on me that my vacation time was rapidly wasting away and that I needed to re-think my travel plans if the trip was to be salvaged in any way. I decided to take the long, scenic route to Swanquarter and catch the ferry to Ocracoke, then spend the weekend day-sailing out in the Sound. I wouldn't get to cross the big water as planned, but it was better than drowning anonymously. And it was another experience I could take back with me, regardless.

If you like seaside towns and haven't ever been to Ocracoke, you don't really know what you're missing. Getting there is a long drive from Nags Head down along the lonely Hatteras National Seashore. But if you come by ferry or your own boat, you arrive right in the center of town where the action is. There's something of a self-contained quality about Ocracoke that you don't see in other parts of the Outer Banks, which is noticeable from the moment you set foot on shore. Tourism is the town's principal industry, and yet you get the sense that the locals could manage on their own without the tourists. I had lunch at MacNally's Raw Bar & Grill, located dockside at the harbor and managed by a former Atlantan. Another

recent refugee from Atlanta was there, a leathery, sunburned woman of about forty named Susan who'd bought a house nearby and started some kind of arts & crafts shop there. We spent a few minutes talking about how much we all disliked Atlanta, but the topic wore thin pretty quickly. Most of the locals were truly *local*, with many mailboxes bearing the surname O'Neal, like hundreds of others along the length of the Outer Banks.



After getting settled and taking in some of the scenery it was time to find a place to sleep and make preparations for the next day's sailing trip. The seasonal campground just outside of town was still open, and I hauled *Rubbermaid* there and pitched the tent. Evening mealtime was spent at Jolly Roger's on Silver Lake Harbor. By early evening I was thankful for having finally visited someplace interesting, other than the inside of a '50s-era New Bern motel, nostalgic as it was.



By eight the next morning I was already showered and clothed, and had cooked breakfast and stowed the tent within the hour. The plan was to sail for about three hours, get lunch, then take the Cedar Island ferry back to the mainland. I was basically packed to go home when I left the campground.

Instead of putting in at the harbor launch ramp, I used the ramp on the exposed shore on the Sound side of the island, located near the Coast Guard station. The wind was blowing about 12 knots from the southwest, which kept *Rubbermaid* pinned nicely alongside the new wooden dock. It takes a while to rig a sailboat, even a simple Albacore, but I didn't want to

keep the guys behind me in the power boats waiting, so I worked quickly to get everything ready. I put a single reef in the main, made a quick cross gesture, then, with a little help from some people on the dock, I shoved off into Pamlico Sound on a close reach. I took the boat up Big Foot Slough Channel past the sandbar at Howard Reef, about three miles from shore, as this was a marked channel and the depths were known. The only real challenge seemed to be keeping out of the way of faster boats and avoiding ferry traffic.

So far, everything appeared to be going well. Even though the boat was three miles out – farther from shore than I'd ever been under sail up until that day – the sprawling sandbar was just a few yards to starboard and would make a good place to beach if anything went wrong. After clearing the channel entrance, I bore to starboard and headed downwind into the lee of the sandbar. All the while, the wind had steadily picked up. Even leeward of the bar, the water's surface was roiling with small wavelets. I'd estimated the wind at a steady 20 knots at this point.



Suddenly and without warning, the wind made a large, vertical rip in *Rubbermaid's* old jib, causing the soft and weather-beaten cloth to flutter violently. The jib was original kit from the late '60s, and being

somewhat antiquated, it was hanked onto the forestay instead of in the more modern fashion of having the jib loose-luffed with an integral luff line. Each of the hanks had to be undone by hand, which meant throwing out the anchor and climbing up onto the foredeck to retrieve the jib. *Rubbermaid* was anchored in perhaps five feet of water, and the waves weren't too bad, but the wind was blowing directly into my face, which is an extremely uncomfortable position to be in. The next thing I did was to put a second reef in the main then sit back and eat a pack of crackers before heading back to shore.

Pamlico winds generally blow either southwest or northeast along the north-south axis of the sound. It's an enormous fetch of wind that can blow unimpeded for up to seventy miles. But the wind had shifted and was now blowing from the southeast, directly from the launch ramp where I needed to go. If I'd had a bit more confidence and experience I would have known the boat could be sailed flat under single reef



by putting all my weight on the rail and patiently tacking back up the entrance channel towards Ocracoke. Two five-gallon tanks of water were lashed to either side of the mast step, and so there was enough ballast down low so that returning to Ocracoke could have been accomplished with a measure of planning and grit. Instead, I was working with an unbalanced, low-aspect setup, trying to get back to the dock in waters too shallow to fully extend the centerboard. It took about twenty minutes to pull up the anchor, as I'd left a lot of scope in the line and had to pull the boat forward against the wind while lying prone on the foredeck.

I tacked the boat back and forth for perhaps an hour, never drawing nearer to Ocracoke, but drifting closer and closer to the windward point of Howard Reef, which I rounded during the early part of the afternoon. By about three o'clock I was still fighting against wind and current, appearing to drift further backwards in slow increments. What's worse, the waves were beginning to build. *Rubbermaid* had drifted steadily southward and found itself in line with the inlet itself, the fetch of wind now producing three-foot waves that gradually grew to four, then five feet. Howard Reef had dropped off about a mile to the northeast with Ocracoke just a streak on the horizon when I finally decided to signal for help. A steady stream of boats motored by en route to Big Foot Slough Channel, and when one sport fisher drew close enough, I cleated the mainsheet and stood up in the boat, waving one arm frantically while managing the tiller extension with the other. The sport fisher came to within about thirty yards and one of the people aboard waved back before the boat turned and bore off full-speed towards the channel. I was relieved that I'd been sighted. Having to be picked up by the Coast Guard was embarrassing, but it was better than being left to the elements and possibly drowning. Pride has its limits.

By the time the sport fisher had dwindled to a speck, it occurred to me that the people on board should have come over and provided assistance, had they actually thought I was in any kind of peril. I remembered something one of my friends said, that if you wave for help in North Carolina, people will think you're just being friendly because everyone waves at each other on the water up there. As time went by, it became apparent that this is exactly what happened; it was a friendly wave I'd received! There would be no Coast Guard rescue – or a rescue of any kind.

This daysailing trip had developed into survival situation, which I'd seemed to have a knack for getting into. The Thanksgiving marooning during the previous year was potentially dangerous in that it was cold and windy outside, with a hard rain that lasted all through the night. I had no food and only two bottles of

water. But I was wearing a complete set of good foul-weather gear and was also able to wrap myself in the mains'l, sleeping under a makeshift tent created by tying the jib between three trees on the island hilltop. Although it was during a holiday, there was bound to be some boat traffic the next day if it came down to having to flag someone from the beach.

Out on the Pamlico the afternoon air was warm with no hint of precipitation. But the boat was a good five miles from shore with no realistic chance of making it back. The Pamlico was also vast and empty. Except along the ferry routes, you rarely see any other vessels, other than the occasional shrimp boat. Imagine a place like the lower Chesapeake being sparsely settled and with virtually zero boat traffic, and you get an idea of how big and isolated this body of water is. The waves were particularly dangerous and steep due to the shallow depths, and sundown would arrive in about another three hours. Fighting against wind and current for about four hours and making negative progress the entire time, I was growing weary and dispirited. And if I lost my concentration there was the very real likelihood of an unrecoverable capsize. There would be no rest, sleep or even the simple luxury of taking my hand off the tiller until *Rubbermaid* reached dry land.

Out on the opposite horizon something caught my eye. It was a tiny, sticklike sliver poking skyward from the water's surface. I knew from the charts – and from riding the ferries – that tall navigation markers were placed at wide intervals throughout the southern Pamlico. There was also the certainty of mainland west of *Rubbermaid's* position; it was only a question of how far and how long it would take to get there. If I sailed towards the navigation tower there was the possibility that it would guide me to yet another beacon, or perhaps to within sight of the mainland itself. This was also the direction *Rubbermaid* naturally wanted to go, so it actually made perfect sense to head that way. Without further hesitation I brought the helm around and headed for the opposite shore, somewhere beyond the horizon. Prior to that weekend I'd never ventured more than a mile-and-a-half from shore on my own.

The idea of being out of sight of land in a stock Albacore in these kinds of waves, five miles from Ocracoke and perhaps eight to twelve miles from the mainland, was not something to be taken lightly. But sailing on the opposite heading proved much more comfortable and easy-going; on a broad reach the waves were no longer jolting, but gentle. Within the space of a minute the mood had changed from frantic to relative calm, albeit with a heightened sensory awareness brought about by the dangerous and unfamiliar circumstances – in which there was no guarantee of a positive outcome.

Dozens of thoughts and feelings swirled about at once; there was the profound sense of relief brought on by the boat's newfound ease of motion. There was some satisfaction to be taken in the decisiveness of the change in plans, audacious as it was. And there was also the sudden and acute awareness of 'place', where you look around and pinch yourself, wondering, "Am I really, actually out here?" Then it began to dawn on me, the irony of it all; in spite of everything that had gone wrong over the previous five days, *Rubbermaid* was still going to cross the Sound after all.

The self congratulation lasted a few minutes, but menacing waves were letting me know who was still in command. Wave trains of this size moved along at a faster rate than the hull, which meant the occasional wave breaking over the stern. Attached up underneath the centerboard cap was a small, hand-operated water pump with a long vinyl hose. Each time the boat was pooped, I'd work the tiller with my right foot and pump the water out of the bottom of the cockpit while the mainsheet remained cleated. I used to hate having to sit up on the rail when sailing by myself, but necessity overrode this fear. To minimize getting pooped as much as possible, I had to learn to anticipate the waves, which meant keeping an eye astern and steering the boat away from the troughs. If you could do this, then it was a reasonably dry ride.



The navigation beacon drew closer and closer. Once just a sliver on the horizon, it had transformed into a towering derrick standing about forty feet off the water. I don't remember if it was wood or steel, or a combination of both. But I remember the waves moving through the girders. The structure gave the first true indication of the heights of the waves, which averaged between four and five feet. Ocracoke Island had disappeared completely over the horizon. And there was no land ahead: only the tower there to keep me company, but that, too, would drift quickly to stern as the boat trundled through the lumpy seas. My hope was to locate another beacon on the western horizon before this one completely disappeared from view. After sailing about two or three hundred yards past the beacon I picked up something grey and triangular out of the corner of my eye. My first thought was that it was a large shark. Suddenly my thoughts were on not capsizing, lest I fall in the water with it. "*Was the shark as big as the boat? Would it attack the boat? Was it just a wave, and not a fin?*" Then the fin appeared again. And with it, another. And another... Soon it became apparent that it was just a pod of porpoises, about eight or nine total. Some came very close to the boat, but never seemed show any real curiosity. I was floored at the size and power of these animals, as I'd never seen any in the wild before. And yet here was a whole group of them out here surfing the wave trains.

The pod disappeared about as quickly as they came. They were moving with a purpose, as if they had some sort of destination in mind. I, for one, didn't know exactly where I was going, other than perhaps the general direction of Wysocking Bay on the western shore of the Sound, based on rough geographic knowledge. But I took the appearance of these animals as a good omen and didn't worry again about sharks for the remainder of the ride.

Not long after the porpoises had vanished from sight, a thin, bluish line appeared on the horizon over the starboard bow. It was land, about six miles ahead! Since bringing the boat around on the new heading I wasn't really sure how long it would take to see land, and for a moment, I understood that timeless emotion that all explorers felt upon seeing a new shore after an uncertain voyage. I was amazed at how little time it took to reach this point, but there was still a lot of sailing left to do. After about a half an hour later, individual trees could be made out along the shoreline by the naked eye, though they were still perhaps over three miles away.

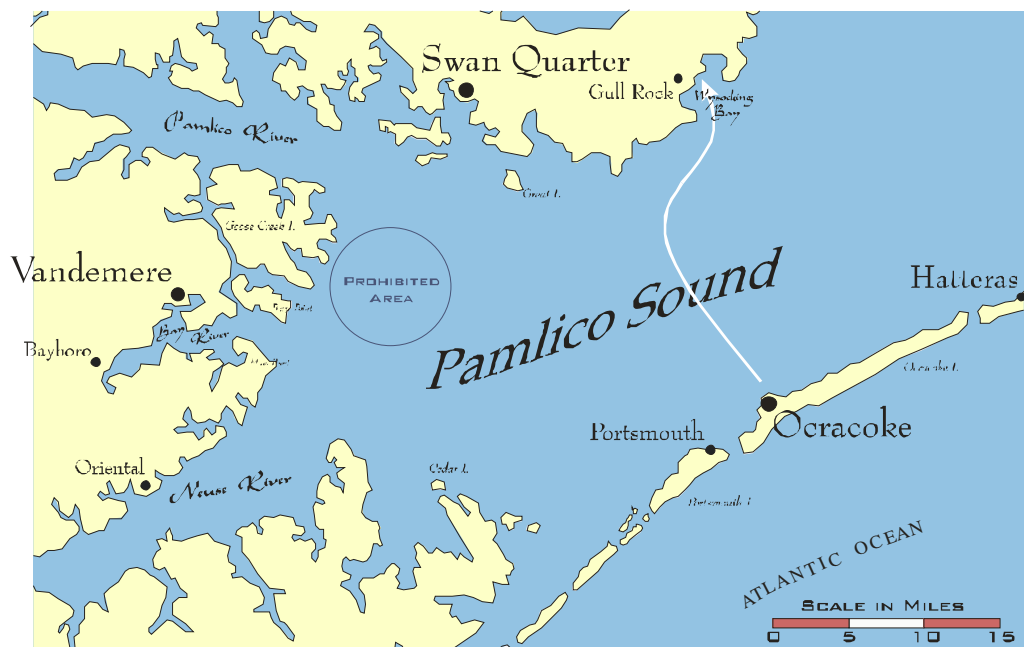
Sighting land was one thing; finding a place to put in was something else entirely. The western shore of Pamlico Sound is mostly wilderness and nearly devoid of settlement. Only a few small towns of any mention are situated along this stretch of coastline, among them Swanquarter, Gull Rock and Englehard. To get all the way from Swanquarter to the bridge to Roanoke Island, you had to drive along a seventy-mile, two-lane highway, much of it through dense forest. The lack of development can be traced to a scarcity of deep water here. Vast shoals, large enough to be named, lurk underwater and stretch for miles in all directions. It's simply too shallow and treacherous for anything other than flat-bottom boats or commercial fishing vessels operated by people with good local knowledge. More important, few protected anchorages exist on this side of the Sound for boats seeking refuge from heavy weather. Any Atlantic weather making it over the Outer Banks ends up pounding the western shore – and those boats unfortunate enough to get caught out. To avoid hitting a submerged sandbar or making landfall in a swamp or marsh, miles away from the nearest settlement, the best thing would be to look for channel markers and follow them into a harbor somewhere. Directly ahead of *Rubbermaid* was a red marker, indicating the mouth of a channel. It wasn't a moment too soon; the sun had just dipped behind the trees, and the bluish sky with its scattered grey clouds had turned to hues of orange and red. Soon afterwards it grew dark.

Most of the channel markers here were lighted. Each flashed at different intervals so that they could be identified in the dark, with red to starboard and green to port. The moon was unusually brilliant that evening, illuminating the surrounding clouds as well as the entire surface of the water. Visibility wouldn't be a problem. The wind had eased considerably to perhaps ten or twelve knots, and the seas had also subsided in the shallower depths. *Rubbermaid* was running dead downwind, surfing comfortably down a three-foot following sea inside the channel at about eight knots. This was perhaps the most enjoyable stretch of the trip, though I was starting to grow restless about finding a town in which to tie up.

After dark you could see domes of light pollution hovering over the small towns, in addition to the occasional blinking radio tower. The biggest source of light came from Swanquarter to the southwest, but getting there was directly against the wind, and it was too far away. I continued up the channel for maybe an hour before it bent shoreward into a nice-sized bay, perhaps a couple miles across. The channel cut directly through the middle of the bay and led to a small, five-acre lagoon surrounded by trees on three sides. There was no evidence of civilization here, other than a 15-foot wooden beacon at the end of a narrow peninsula which poked into the lagoon. But it was already as late as nine o'clock, and I was whipped. There would be no time to search for a town or motel. In order to get some sleep I needed to stop and anchor the boat now. I tossed the anchor overboard and was finally able to unwind, opening the last remaining pack of crackers and enjoying the view. To the east lay the open Pamlico in all its majesty. Sheltered from the south winds by marsh grass and tall pines, it was an enjoyable sight to sit back and watch.

Looking into the darkness of the woods I caught glimpse of a powerful outdoor halogen light, perhaps a half mile away. Whether this was a business or someone's trailer, I didn't know, but it was too far away to reach tonight. And you never knew who might show up at the door with a loaded weapon. So, I decided to stay on board the boat and wait it out for the night. I peered out at the water as it faded into the blackness of the woods and realized that the shoreline was too straight and regular to be natural. Then it dawned on me that I was anchored at the entrance of a long canal. *Rubbermaid* would have to move to a new spot or get run

over in the morning by a work boat. I hauled up the anchor, and as I brought it out of the water I saw that the flukes had big, black globs of mud stuck to them. The rivers brought in tons of silt from far inland, which accounted for the bottom of the lagoon consisting of soft mud, and not sand. I attempted a 'hot-dog' maneuver, trying to sling the mud off the



anchor instead of just wiping it. But the mud clung to the anchor flukes instead of sliding off into the water. With a second and third jerk, all the mud fell directly into the boat, getting all over the seating tanks, the bottom of the cockpit and on top of everything lashed inside.

The tantrums that followed were probably a lot like those pitched by Tom Hanks in *Castaway* a few years later. But that was a movie; this was real – and I was real mad. The moonlight wasn't strong in this corner of the lagoon because of the shadows, but I could see that the fine silt had spread over most of the cockpit and I could also feel it on my clothes. A minute breeze passing through the trees pushed against *Rubbermaid's* hull, moving it out of the canal entrance. As the boat cleared the beacon at the end of the peninsula, I pulled up the centerboard and steered for another sheltered spot in the lagoon, then set the anchor again. I drew some water from over the side by forming my hands into a cup shape and rinsed the mud off my foul-weather clothes. At that moment I began to feel a burning sensation all over my hands and forearms, almost like a chemical burn of some sort. For a minute or two I panicked, thinking the marsh might be polluted with some kind of industrial sludge, but then I remembered that in some saltwater locations the creek bottom was home to millions of tiny stinging creatures, each capable of delivering a potent dose of pain.

The burning continued for about fifteen minutes and then subsided, but I knew I couldn't sleep inside the cockpit with all that stinging mud. And there was no way to wash it all out without getting stung again. The only clean place to sleep would be on the foredeck. I climbed up on foredeck – sitting a few inches forward of the splash rail with the mast between my legs – and leaned back, falling asleep with my head resting on top of a rolled-up towel. If I slid off the deck during the night, the shock of the water ought to have been sufficient to wake me up.

Somehow I was able to fall asleep in that position, and I awoke the next morning during the early dawn hour in a fetal position with my legs still hooked around the mast. Usually there's a short period of disorientation when you wake up in an unfamiliar place, but I don't remember feeling lost that morning. I think I was just happy not to have fallen overboard during the night. The worst part about getting up was being in that damp, sweaty foul-weather gear and not having any clean clothes to change into. Next was not having any food and only water to drink. But worst of all was the anticipation of having to get back to Ocracoke where the truck and trailer were. The first rays of the sun peered over the far horizon and brought a yellow glow to the surroundings. For the first time I was now able to see exactly where it was that I *was*. The place looked utterly more desolate and isolated than it had during the night. There was the long canal, but it didn't really seem to go anywhere, except deeper into the wild. Looking off in the direction where I'd seen the bright halogen light, there didn't appear to be any significant structures which would indicate a gas station, a convenience store, or even a fish house where they might have a pay phone. Never for one second did it even occur to me to come ashore. Sailing back to Ocracoke was the only option considered.

Knowing *Rubbermaid* would not claw its way back across the Sound with a double reef in the main and no jib, I hoisted the sail and took out the second reef. The wind was relatively light at about six to eight knots, but it was coming directly into the lagoon. The water here was mostly only six inches to two feet deep, meaning neither the centerboard nor the rudder could be fully extended. Without fully extended foils, and without the jib to balance the rig and slot the air over the main, *Rubbermaid* would be unable to point, and therefore wouldn't make any forward progress against the wind. I was basically pinned in. The only way it would work was if I physically moved *Rubbermaid* to a spot in the lagoon where I might be able to 'angle' it towards the open bay. Using one of the emergency oars brought along on the trip, I poled the boat over to a point between seventy and a hundred yards away, which took a lot of time and



physical effort. Once I'd found a decent spot I tossed the anchor over the stern and then went forward to raise the sail. The anchor got caught on something underwater, either a tree root or an old cable, and I wasn't able to bust it free. The only way out was to cut the anchor line, which I didn't particularly want to do. With a measure of fatalistic resolve I went forward and grabbed a pair of scissors out of the tool box and cut the line. Like a car in neutral with its engines revved, *Rubbermaid* bridled against the taut line, and when it snapped, the boat took off across the lagoon.

I needed to clear a marshy point of land in order to make it out into the open part of the bay. Once the point was rounded I'd probably be home free. It looked like the angle was pretty good, but because the centerboard couldn't be extended the whole way down *Rubbermaid* was making too much leeway. The closer I got to the point, the more and more I drifted back into the lagoon. It didn't look like this was going to be our day.

The only option left was to head up the canal and find some help ashore, the option I'd earlier ruled out. In theory the canal could be sailed. It was also deep enough to extend the foils, but it was quite narrow and there was at least one overhanging tree branch for the mast to get fouled up in. I took down the sail and allowed *Rubbermaid* to drift over towards the marsh at the mouth of the canal. Then, grabbing the painter, I got out of the boat and towed it up the canal in about waist deep of water. The canal was quite deep, but I found that if I clung to the shoreline I could walk along the muddy canal ledge and keep the upper body relatively dry.

A few months earlier I'd seen some people on US-17 outside of Elizabeth City getting out of their cars and pointing over the side of a bridge. I learned later on the evening news that an alligator had been spotted there. Alligator sightings had also been reported in the Dismal Swamp region, and even as far north as the Virginia line. That was a good hundred miles north of Wysocking Bay. With each excruciating step forward I hoped that I wouldn't bump into one of these creatures. Never mind that they didn't particularly like salt water, and that I was probably a bit more likely to run across a wayward bull shark; all I could think about was getting out of the water before an alligator ate me alive. About two hundred yards up the canal, on the lefthand side, was an intersecting canal which went for about a hundred yards and then ended. There were some buildings and boats at the end of this canal – a positive sign. I climbed about 2/3 the way onto *Rubbermaid's* stern and kicked as hard as I could, trying to get the boat over into the other canal. This worked perfectly, and I climbed back out of the boat and lugged it behind me up the canal.

A couple old crabbers motored by in their small boat and waved, not appearing to think there was anything unusual about a strange man wading in waist-deep water and pulling a small sailboat. They continued on about their business as if I were just another crabber heading in the opposite direction. I slipped off the ledge a few times, sometimes sinking chest deep into the water, but I eventually made it to the end of the canal. I climbed up on dry land with wobbly legs and tied *Rubbermaid* off at one of the wooden docks. The boat looked like it had been through a disaster. If you've ever seen an old fiberglass dinghy in someone's front yard where they'd planned to use it as a large flower pot, that's what it looked like. Dried, caked-on mud was everywhere, and stuff was strewn all about the cockpit. I almost wanted to leave it there and let the locals dispose of it. I'd had enough sailing to last a lifetime.

There was an assortment of different boats there: mostly small crabbing skiffs, a couple deadrises and the occasional weather-beaten runabout. A very large boat was sitting up on dry land a little further ashore. It was easily the nicest boat in the place, and looked brand-new. I went up to have a closer look. While I inspected the hull, a man in his early '40s resembling a young Eric Clapton with the short beard came out

of the crab house wiping his hands with a rag. “That’s a cool boat,” I said. The man didn’t answer right away, but nodded. I asked him if he was fixing it up, and he replied that he’d built it from scratch and that he was going to go back down to Curaçao and get back into fishing. I was astonished. I asked him if he was going to motor all the way down there. He nodded, without a hint of smugness or cockiness. I could have stayed and talked more about the boat, but it was urgent that I went ahead and told someone about my predicament. “Where am I?” I asked. The man told me I was in Gull Rock. “Wysocking Bay?” I asked, wanting confirmation. He nodded.

I told him about losing my jib, that I’d come all the way over from Ocracoke, that I’d spent the night out at the other end of the canal. Many people back at the lake in Atlanta would have freaked out if I told them what I’d just been through; this man, obviously used to putting to sea on his own, and probably having survived a few close calls himself, simply nodded with a grin. “It looks like you had a rough night,” he responded. That was an understatement. I showed him the boat I’d come in on and told him that I needed to get to Swanquarter so I could take the ferry back to my vehicle. He said he would take me there in a couple hours when he was finished working. I thanked him then went over to *Rubbermaid*, grabbed the line and hauled it over next to the launch ramp, where I tied it off. An elderly man walked up to me and introduced himself. I don’t remember his name for the life of me, though I wished I could. We talked for about thirty minutes. I recounted my story, telling him who I was, where I came from and how I got here. He looked around, scanning the property, and grunted, “I haven’t seen a pleasure boat ‘round here in about twenty years.” He pointed over to the woods where the canal made an eastward bend and showed me an old railway, which was still in use. “You’ve probably never seen one of these before. It’s one of the few functioning railways left in these parts. We haul boats out of the water all the time.” I told him I’d only seen them in pictures, that they didn’t even have them up in Currituck, where my family was from. He laughed when I mentioned Currituck. “I went up there a long time ago. Many years ago,” he said. “That’s *po* country up there.” I grinned at what he considered poor. But then again the crab house and boatyard, though small, did appear prosperous.

“So, when are you going to pay me my two dollars for using my dock?” the old man asked out of the blue, pointing to a sign with barely visible writing. Silly me, I thought. I reached into my wallet and pulled out two soggy dollars. I only had one left over. Apparently, the conversation had been to size me up, or maybe he was just killing time, waiting for me to ante up the money so he didn’t have to ask me. In any case, he became a lot friendlier once I’d paid him, and he invited me over into his house, which also served as the town general store. Steeped from youth in the tradition of perpetually being on guard against theft, I grabbed my expensive new life jacket out of the cockpit and followed the man into his house, where I met his wife.

The man melted into an armchair in the corner and didn’t say much more, leaving the talking mostly to his wife. She mentioned that he’d just come out of the hospital two weeks earlier and had undergone open-heart surgery, that he was 82 years old. Everything considered, I was impressed at his energy level. The woman wanted to know about my family, where I came from, and then proceeded to give me the rundown on her entire family history, showing me an ancient photo of her grandfather on an ox cart, and a strange kind of piano with thick wooden knobs that you pushed and pulled, each representing a different key signature. She explained that in the days of her youth, no one had money and that they had to barter for goods and services. Her grandfather hauled things for people with his ox in exchange for foodstuffs and other items. It was how they got along.

The younger man pulled up to the front door in his pickup truck, and so the older couple let me go – but not before she’d given me a small brown paper bag and filled it up with tomatoes she’d grown out back. I

was grateful and even a bit honored to be a guest of theirs. The short visit with them turned out to be one of the bright spots of the trip. I climbed into the truck and formally introduced myself. He introduced himself as Walt, and then proceeded on up the road. Swanquarter was about an 18-mile drive, so I had plenty of time to talk with him about his boat and why he'd chosen Curaçao, of all places. He said that he was from Nebraska (a small town outside of Gull Rock), but that he went down to Curaçao to fish and liked the atmosphere, that it wasn't crowded and he could make a good living. I was extremely grateful for him taking me all the way down to Swanquarter, and to tell you how generous these people were, Walt gave me five dollars for the ferry ride, telling me there was no need to pay him back.

I slept on the ferry all the way to Ocracoke, only occasionally looking out at the water that had spared me my life. Part of the success of this trip was due to the Thanksgiving experience the previous year at Lanier, which taught me it was possible to rescue yourself if you kept your composure. Part of it was also due to an ability to think outside the box, choosing to go west over an unknown horizon when Ocracoke was still clearly visible to the east. But I give most of the credit to Providence. A fiercely irreligious man at the time, I don't know what made me do the cross gesture across my chest at the start of the journey. But whatever it was, someone felt I needed some Divine Help, and I got it.

By October the following year I'd made some customizations to *Rubbermaid's* interior, including the installation of bottom boards so that gear inside the cockpit didn't get wet during trips like these. Then I made a more prepared crossing of the Pamlico, starting in Vandemere and sailing to Swanquarter, then continuing on to Ocracoke before completing the round trip after a total of six days and 100 miles on the water. There's something to be said for sailing with a crew. It generates camaraderie, and you end up with a bunch of shared memories that you can talk about for years. It's good, even if you're the butt of the jokes. I've been privileged to have sailed on crewed trips to Bermuda, and from St. Petersburg out to the Dry Tortugas – not to mention all the Wednesday night racing up at Lanier. But there's nothing quite like sailing solo in a watery wilderness, and I'll always be drawn back to it on occasion; because few things test your mettle and skills the way going out alone in a sailboat can. And in so few ways can you feel so closely connected to God and the natural world around you.



*"Rubbermaid" at Clark's Marina, Swanquarter (1998)*