



The lighters' annual regatta. *Sir William*, with Austin Dasson at the helm, is no laggard even in a light breeze. Astern, *Claudette* skims across the water.

*Sir William* left just before us and now on a broad reach we could not match the powerful gaff sail even though it was of worn out and patched cotton whereas *Mermaid's* sails were made of Dacron by Lee of Hong Kong. I was a little puzzled by this extravagance until I learned that her canvas sails had fallen apart and she was working under the racing suit. Normally calm and self-possessed, Fred perked up when he talked about the previous year's races in which he had won his class.

The early March regatta became a regular annual event in 1926 when an eccentric gentleman, Baron Bliss, willed some money to that express purpose. Being a serious business, the races promised to be great fun so I sweet-talked Fred into inviting two extra "gringos" as crew.

Two days before the regatta, even from a distance we could see that Jones Boat Yard in Belize City was bristling with masts and buzzing with activity. *Radio* had been out of the water nearly a month in the hope of drying out the hull and shedding some weight. Other boats were being sanded and painted top to bottom. The big *United* needed a new transom and some planking and, by the end of the next day, we had evidence of

how easily a wooden boat can be maintained by skilful hands: a large piece of local wood, *Santa Maria*, had been transformed into the new transom and the new planks were already being caulked and painted.

Several lighters installed false keels: vertical planks 6-7" deep and 10-12' long screwed into the worm shoes under the mast steps. Fred decided that, in view of *Mermaid's* good windward performance, he would go for boat speed and sail without such a contraption. He also kept her old bamboo spars because they were dry and light, although other crews had made trips into the forest and had brought back huge pieces of green bamboo. Usually this wood cracks after about a year and only the hardwood gaff and boom jaws are kept to be slipped into the end of the new hollow spars.

On the eve of the races the lighters gathered at Barracks Wharf to unload all their punting and mooring poles, spare anchors, and skiffs, and to prepare the ballast – we filled twenty-five sacks with sand just for *Mermaid*. To tune the boat and crew we pushed off to tussle with *United*, and we, the newcomers, got a first taste of shunting 100-lb sand bags on each tack. Try as she might, *United* could not pass us on the wind. And, even after

we went off the wind, the larger boat lagged behind and Fred, all smiles, called "You excited Carli, excited? We made the big boys think!" Indeed we did. As the sun went down *United* was still at it, changing the mast rake, reeving extra halyards, and moving sandbags.

After such high expectations the first race was a let-down. The crafty Austin on *Sir William* stole a perfect start and we kept behind him on the downwind leg. Once on the wind it became painfully obvious that a false keel made all the difference. Although she was pointing high with perfectly filled sails, *Mermaid* made much greater leeway. We stayed in second position and even an extra jib lashed beneath the main boom as a watersail did not help to regain earlier losses.

The second race included the boats over 34' and as the breeze dropped they made a picturesque sight as they crowded on flying jibs and watersails. Unfortunately, the race was cancelled just when Fred's tacking away to avoid the worst of the current had brought us into a better position.

There were still two more days of racing and *Sir William* turned out to be unbeatable this year. Austin surely earned the Dacron sails promised by the boat's owner.