

The Gloriously Stable Flattie Skiff

IF YOU HAVE SPENT even a minimal amount of time rooting around in boxes of old postcards in antiques shops, you must have discovered by now that the field is divided into certain subjects, or genres, such as “Cities,” “Towns,” “Villages,” “Architecture,” “Humor,” “Holidays,” “Landscapes,” “Monuments,” “Transportation,” etc. And you might have realized that within those genres there are subgenres—and beyond those even sub-subgenres and sub-sub-subgenres.

Consider our postcard. Here we have a lovely young lady in a small boat. The principal genre is “Transportation,” the subgenre is “Nautical,” the sub-subgenre is “Ships & Boats,” and the sub-sub-subgenre is “Women in Rowboats.”

I know what you’re thinking, that taking it down that far is slicing things a bit fine. But you’d be amazed to discover how many antique postcards feature lovely young women in rowboats. You’d be further amazed by how many collectors specialize in that sub-sub-subgenre. I discovered the latter the hard way; I

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had to fight tooth and nail on eBay with a gang of “Women in Rowboats” enthusiasts to get this postcard, and I had to pay a premium to prevail.

Doing what this lovely young lady is doing—standing up in a rowboat—is generally frowned upon, but if you feel you must, this is the type of boat to do it in. Hers is a flatiron skiff, a.k.a. flattie, so named because it resembles an old-fashioned household flatiron used for pressing wrinkles out of cloth. The wide, flat bottom makes it relatively stable as

compared to most round-bilged or V-bottomed boats.

The late Howard I. Chapelle, America’s preeminent historian of naval architecture and wooden boat construction, was fascinated with the flattie. He never revealed why. I’m not sure that anyone ever asked, but my guess is that he recognized flat-bottomed boats of all types to be the definitive national watercraft of the United States, the type that would leap to mind when the words “small boat” and “America” appeared in the same sentence.

Early flatties had one-plank sides of either pine or cypress, depending on the locality of the builder. This was back in the days when a builder could get wide lumber, before the old-growth white pines in the North and the big cypresses in the South became scarce. Later, when wide lumber became unavailable, or too expensive when available, most builders went to two planks

per side. In later years, just before the fiberglass revolution struck, many small-time builders built flatties in plywood. Not long ago you could find such boats for sale by the side of the road. They were usually unpainted, leaning against a tree, with a hand-lettered sign saying, “For Sale, \$50,” or some such low price. Usually they weren’t designed in the conventional sense; that is, nobody drew lines on paper and then used the plans to build a boat. Construction was based on patterns passed down from father to



son, or builder to builder.

In many ways the flatiron skiff is the ideal small boat. “Such boats can be beached easily in shoal water,” John Atkin once wrote when describing the lovely 10-footer *Mabel*, designed by his father William. “They tow well and without difficulty, they are stable and not so dangerously ‘quick’ as some round-bilged models I’ve stepped into, they are easy to pull out on a float, and are much easier to build than a round-bilged boat, therefore much less expensive, and, if properly designed, will prove highly satisfactory in every way.”

Since flatiron skiffs are that good, perhaps there should be a further postcard subgenre, the lineage of which could be “Transportation” ▶ “Nautical” ▶ “Ships & Boats” ▶ “Women in Rowboats” ▶ “Lovely Young Ladies in Flatties.” ☆

Contributing Editor Peter H. Spectre lives and writes in Spruce Head. This postcard is from his collection.

Going for a Ride

I WAS IN AN ANTIQUES STORE awhile back, flipping through a box of old postcards, when I came across this one, an image of a couple having a picnic. Something about it made me pause for a moment, and then I remembered. It was reminiscent of a card I had seen many years ago, admired, yet didn't buy. For a long time afterward I wished I had.

That postcard was of the real-photo type, and it showed an automobile parked under a shade tree by the side of a narrow country road. There was a field in the background and there were cows in the field. Even though the photograph was in black and white, you could tell that it was a beautiful day. The passenger door was open, and there were books on the front seat, and bottles and glasses on the running board. There were two people—a man and a woman—sitting on a blanket on the grass, and they were having a picnic. They had a basket, and napkins and silverware, and they were stylishly dressed. The man wore a jacket and a tie; the woman a dress, a corsage, and



Sometimes they would drive for an hour or two, stop somewhere for a cup of coffee, and then come home. Other times they would drive down to the beach, and my grandpa would smoke cigars with the windows rolled down and my grandma would work on the daily crossword puzzle. If they stayed at home and the

able to appreciate their cars as vehicles for opening up the world rather than shutting it out. I've tried to imagine my grandfather putting the pedal to the metal because he wanted to get to town before the next guy, and I can't. I've tried to picture him drinking coffee from a Styrofoam cup while he drove, a sandwich balanced on his knee, so he wouldn't be wasting his time in a diner or under a shade tree eating a picnic lunch with his wife. I can't do that, either.

I can picture getting up in the morning and crossing over to my grandparent's house—they lived across the road—and finding them packing a lunch and loading it into the car.

"Where are you going?" I would ask.

"Oh, nowhere," my grandpa would say. "It's a lovely day, and we're going for a ride."

It's a lovely day. We're going for a ride. Think about that for a moment. Try to remember the last time you did something as deliciously aimless as that. ☆

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a ribboned hat. Judging by the automobile and the clothes, I'd say it was the late 1920s or early 1930s.

The image was of a long-lost era, when people went for a drive in the country for no other reason than to go for a drive in the country, and it reminded me of my grandparents.

My grandparents went driving in the country all the time. They'd back out of the driveway, take a right, then a left, and see where the road would take them.

day was sunny and warm, my grandmother would sit in the car out in the driveway with all the doors open and read the newspaper.

People of that generation—they were born in the 1880s—had a different relationship with their automobiles than we do with ours. Yes, they used their cars to go to the grocery store and the town dump, and for other mundane tasks, just like us, but they seemed more relaxed, less intense. They seemed much better

Bravo, Mr. Roosevelt

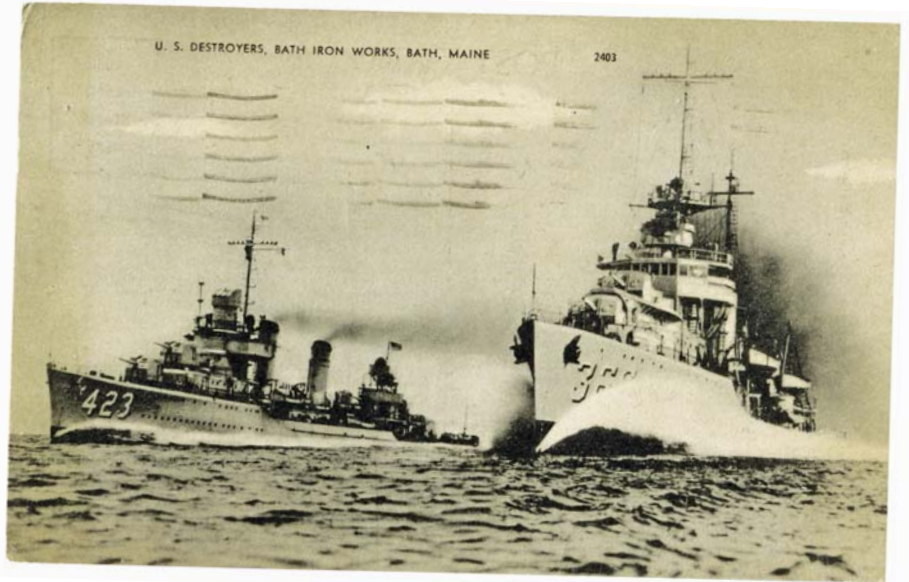
TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO or so I had an assignment from another magazine to travel to England's Lake District, in the northwest corner of the country. My task was to write a story about a gentleman who had established the Windermere Steamboat Museum.

For a serious antique boat collector—as my man, George Pattinson was—the Lake District is fertile territory. One of the most beautiful regions in England, it is a land of contrasts: mountains (fells in the local parlance), woods, open fields, gorgeous lakes—gentle, soft-around-the-edges lakes with romantic names like Derwentwater, Coniston Water, Grasmere, Crummockwater, Haweswater, Wastwater, Ullswater. The area is a delicious mix of rough highland and civilized, bucolic valleys, with a softness to the atmosphere that makes it an ideal vacation spot for those who prefer their wilderness tempered by civility and culture. High tea on the veranda in sight of steep fells and wild and woolly woods, so to speak.

The Lake District's golden era was the late 19th to the early 20th centuries, and the boats left behind from that peri-

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od are among the finest to be found anywhere. Pulling boats with tufted, upholstered seats for the passengers; steam yachts with engraved silver services and tea urns heated by steam piped from the boiler; motor launches with lines as sweet as an Adirondack guideboat; speedboats designed to look good while they go fast, which is no mean feat. They were George Pattinson's kind of boats, and he had the good fortune to be on the



scene after the golden era had passed and the boats, those that remained, were still sound enough to be restored.

Pattinson had a wonderful time showing me his collection, and I had a wonderful time seeing it. He was a gracious host, with none of the reserve that I often felt by others in his country in the presence of a stranger, especially one who arrives unannounced and wants to know everything about everything.

As I was leaving, Pattinson, who had

commanded a destroyer in the Royal Navy during World War II, asked me a few questions about myself, among them: had I served in the military, and did I get anything out of the experience? (I answered yes, and yes.) Then he told me a brief story that I repeat verbatim, transcribed from the tape recording I made at the time.

“I have this enormous feeling about America, for good reasons,” he said.

“When a group of Americans arrives here with advance notice, I have the Stars and Stripes up, and I have my car parked in the driveway. When they get out of their bus, I press the button for the tape recorder in my car, and we have the *Star Spangled Banner*. We all stand with head held high and tears run down our faces. It's really quite emotional, I find, and then I give them a talk about this great Anglo-American cooperation, which has really kept the peace of the world.

“Then I go on to say that when I lost one of my destroyers at Dunkirk—one of the darkest periods of the war—your president, Franklin Roosevelt, gave me another one.” He paused, then thumped his chest. “That is something I will never forget.”

I don't know if George Pattinson's new destroyer was one of those pictured in our postcard, both built by Bath Iron Works here in Maine, but I like to think that it was. ☆

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