

## Sailing the OBX 130 – “The Siege of Portsmouth”

By Shawn “Lawless” Payment

On Sunday, August 6, 2017, I departed Charleston, SC, enroute for the start of the Outer Banks 130 (a.k.a. “OBX 130”). The OBX 130 is a “moving messabout” in which small boats visit a series of mutual anchorages around North Carolina’s Outer Banks. This event is typically held every other year and “instigated”, rather than “planned” by Paul Moffitt in conjunction with his brother, Sean, and their father, Bill.

I first participated in the 2015 OBX and had a great time so I was looking forward to another week of great sailing, camping and camaraderie.

The tentative course was to be as follows:

Start at Cedar Creek Campground, Sealevel, NC

Day 1 – Sail to Cape Lookout (21 miles)

Day 2 – Sail to Shackleford Island (10 miles)

Day 3 – Sail to a spoil island, or as far north as we can sail. Will require camping on the boat at anchor (26 miles)

Day 4 - Portsmouth, Ocracoke Inlet (20 miles, an abandoned town)

Day 5 - Abandoned Gun Club (27 miles)

End Cedar Creek Campground (7 miles)

Total Miles : 110 as the crow flies

Paul Moffitt published guidelines for the trip several months in advance:

Ground rules for this trip.

- 1) I'm just a dude, showing up at a campsite, and going for a sail. If you choose to come along then on your head be it.
- 2) Your ass may grow new cracks.
- 3) Embrace the suck.
- 4) If you've never sailed a week solo before, please don't come.
- 5) The OBX is extremely dangerous, you could die. Don't be an ass.
- 6) Don't talk about politics and I won't either. Let's talk about boats, whiskey, fires, and big ideas. Hairy dog and fart jokes also allowed.

7) You're probably going to die, so don't come. But if you do survive you'll come again. See number 3.

8) Sooo much fun, but only if you're a masochist. I can't stress this enough. You will be lost. You will be grounded. You could capsize. There will be afternoon storms, high winds, water spouts, and all sorts of nasty weather that's not fun to sail in. There's also nature like you've never seen.

And so, with the stage set, the 2017 OBX 130 fleet began to form at the Cedar Creek Campground on the afternoon of Sunday, August 6. In tow, I had a brand new, 16.5' Melonseed Skiff built by Gig Harbor Boatworks which the company had graciously provided for me to sail in the event. It wasn't long before my fellow OBX participants began to appear.

First, was John Juday from Raleigh, NC, in his Tanzer 16—a beamy, sloop-rigged daysailer which John had fitted out with a cockpit sleeping platform. Although John and I had never met before, as I find is all too common when small boat sailors gather, we were soon chatting amiably about all aspects of our boats, lives and adventures ahead.

Moments later, William “Bill” Moffitt of North Carolina arrived with his Jim Michalak-designed “Darcy Bryn” in tow. Bill had commissioned Jim to design a 15’ “solo cruiser with good rough water capabilities” and had then spent the past several years building her before embarking on her “shakedown cruise” on the Texas 200 just two months before. With a spacious cockpit and cabin complete with discotheque-like LED strip lighting, Bill clearly appeared to have the most comfortable cruiser of the group.

Next to arrive was Steve Doll with a very nice expedition-equipped Hobie Tandem Island (“TI”). I had met Steve two years earlier at the previous OBX event when he had sailed tandem with his good friend, Curtis Pack. Steve is a retired engineer who had outfitted his TI with perhaps the most luxurious “Aca-Pods” on the planet. These “pods” were mounted on the crossbars port and starboard between the hull and the amas and each could transform from a flat-pack unit about 2” thick to a full size pup-tent in a matter of minutes.

No sooner had Steve and I exchanged greetings than, speak of the devil, Curtis Pack of Beaufort, NC arrived with his own new ride in tow—A Lockley Newport Surprise 15 sloop that he had recently acquired so that he could sail his own boat rather than riding shotgun with Steve. Curtis had added a rather spoiler-like boom gallows and other modifications to make his little craft expedition worthy.

Our little fleet was assembled. There was still one lost soul reportedly enroute—Eric Jacobsen—who had messaged that he would arrive late in the evening with an odd-looking 8’ cabin-equipped puddle duck racer to be crewed by himself, a teen-age daughter and a dog. We curiously awaited their arrival.

With five boats launched and rigged, the plan was to camp at Cedar Creek Campground for the night and then head out at first light—7:00-7:30 am—the following morning. We enjoyed the remaining twilight eating dinner, sharing tales and sitting through the occasional rain shower before everyone bedded down for the night.

Monday, August 7, 2017

We awoke to partly cloudy skies and light breezes—seemingly a perfect day for sailing. Unfortunately, there was still no sign of our wayward Jacobsens. We could only assume that their plans had changed.

Camp was quickly broken down and boats loaded and since I was the first boat in line on the quay, the group prodded me to lead us out. At 7:15 a.m., I proceeded out the narrow channel under a single reef and into the flat waters of Core Sound. The forecast called for winds out of the southwest for most of the day with scattered thundershowers so the group had elected to reverse the course of our expedition, heading first to Portsmouth about 25 miles north.

Bill Moffitt's Darcy Bryn was the next out of the channel and we fell into formation ahead of the others. It was quickly apparent that the Melonseed was FAST! And I mean, REALLY FAST! Even under a single reef, I could quickly overtake Bill and was easily making 5-6 knots in 10-15 knots of wind. Eventually, I decided to utilize some of my excess speed to tack back toward the others in order to keep everyone in sight.

I soon found John Juday in his Tanzer 16 cruising peacefully along under partially furled jib and double reefed main. Not far behind, Curtis Pack was sailing under reefed main alone and Steve Doll was cruising in company with Curtis, his speedy Hobie heavily reefed to maintain pace with Curtis. Assured that everyone was sailing well, I tacked again and set my sights on reeling in Bill who was now a mile or so ahead. Meanwhile, over my shoulder, darkening skies were looming on the southwestern horizon.

Over the next hour, the winds continued to build and seas rose to 2-3 feet. Although the Melonseed was joyfully racing along like a wild stallion, I began to silently wish that my rig had a second reef point. By the time I caught and passed Bill, it was clear that the approaching storm cell would soon be upon us. With the building wind and seas, the Melonseed was becoming a bit of a handful so I luffed up into the wind and sat bobbing while I considered how to proceed. Bill once again passed astern of me, his plucky Darcy Bryn seemingly unfazed by the increasing winds under double reef. John Juday soon caught up to me in his Tanzer 16 and with the first drops of rain beginning to fall, he pointed at the eastern shore and yelled: "Let's go find a hole to hide in!"

"That's just what I was thinking!" I yelled back as I sheeted in and we set course for shore. Moments later, the skies opened up and we found ourselves sailing through a deluge of rain. Visibility decreased and I quickly lost sight of Curtis and Steve behind us. Bill's Darcy Bryn appeared to be heaving to while John and I darted toward shore. The water depth soon decreased to 1-2' until the Melonseed's tiny 18" daggerboard began to bump on the bottom. John and I were eventually forced to step off and wade our boats the final 200 yards to a tiny, sandy spot on the eastern shore.

No sooner had we arrived than the rain began to let up. We tossed our anchors and set to reorganizing our boats. The Melonseed had accumulated about 3-4" of water in its non-bailing cockpit so I set to bailing while John fiddled with his rig. I checked my GPS to see how far we had come so far only to discover that it was dead. Clearly, the deluge had infiltrated its inner workings. Drat. I checked my SPOT satellite tracker which was happy to see that its little tracking light was still blinking.

With the skies clearing, we searched the horizon for our other companions. Bill's Darcy Bryn was visible to the north and was continuing on its way. We surmised that a couple of specks on the southwest horizon were Curtis and Steve. The radar app on my phone showed that another line of storms was approaching from the southwest but for the moment, the wind and seas had abated and the skies were clear. John and I agreed to continue north, agreeing that we would repeat our run for cover to the eastern shore if or when more bad weather should come upon us.

I retrieved my anchor and set off as John yelled that he would follow shortly. I skirted through a mile of extreme shallows before finally getting back to the channel. I searched the horizon ahead for Bill but

found it difficult to pick out his small, double-reefed sail from the background. Still, I knew that with my speed advantage, I should be able to make up ground fairly quickly.

Unfortunately, it was only about 45 minutes before the next weather front began to close in on me from astern. To make matters worse, this time, the wind and rain included a healthy dose of thunder and lightning. In a matter of moments, the weather went from flat seas and moderate winds to intense gusts and 2-3' following seas. As the front swept upon me, I leapt for the halyard and lowered the sail into the lazy jacks. With little more than a bunched sail and bare poles, I continued to make 2-3 knots toward the eastern shore. I considered lowering the mast into the cockpit but frequent lightning flashes and the accompanying thunderclaps made me reluctant to venture anywhere near the mast. I hunkered down in the cockpit and steered for shore. Minutes later I reached a muddy, grassy shore, tossed the hook and then waded a dozen yards away to sit amongst the reeds and wait for the storm cell to pass.

While I waited, I searched the horizon for any of my companions. Visibility was no more than a mile and no one could be seen. For the first time this trip, I was completely alone. That said, my boat was sound, I was wet but safe, and the skies were beginning to clear and the winds had eased. I bailed the cockpit dry, set full sail and set out again toward Portsmouth.

Over the next hour, the winds slowly filled in again until the Melonseed was once again coursing downwind like a beast possessed. Bill Moffit's Darcy Bryn was soon visible and I began to ask myself how long I could continue my current chase before laying to and tying back in the reef. Finally, I saw Bill turn upwind to tie in his second reef and I knew it was time. I turned to, released the halyard, yanked in the first reef, tightened up the halyard and resumed course faster than greased pig down a chute. Bill was still tidying his own reef when I pulled abeam. Bill informed me that we were about 2-3 miles from our campsite at Portsmouth and now lacking a working GPS, I was happy to follow his lead.

Unfortunately, Bill's slightly deeper draft caused him to run aground not once, twice, but three times as we approached our destination. The second two groundings took our combined efforts to tow/push his staunch little craft back to deeper water. But at last, we reached our destination—the pier at Historic Portsmouth Village.

No sooner had we accomplished all this than Steve Doll came swooping around the end of the pier in his Hobie TI. Steve was no worse for the wear but had lost sight of Curtis in the last line of squalls and after briefly backtracking to search for his friend, had proceeded on, assuming that Curtis had also proceeded ahead. Meanwhile, John Juday and his Tanzer 16 were also unaccounted for.

Fortunately, I had cell service and it wasn't long before I received a text from John Juday. He reported that he had holed up in a shallow spot some distance south of Portsmouth where he planned to camp for the night rather than proceeding in the deteriorating weather. More concerning was a report that the Coast Guard was searching for sailor who had activated his personal locator beacon (PLB) which we could only assume was our friend, Curtis Pack. Steve Doll recounted to us how Curtis had capsized his Surprise 15' in heavy winds earlier in the day and Steve had assisted him in its recovery (dousing his own cell phone in the process). Curtis had also lost his phone and VHF in the capsize but had otherwise, been safe to continue.

Unbeknownst to us, a few miles southwest of Portsmouth, Curtis had gybed in the heavy winds and again capsized his boat. After 30 minutes of struggling to right his craft, Curtis discovered that he no longer possessed the strength to re-board. He struggled for nearly two hours until the boat drifted into shallow water and he was able to bounce off the bottom and roll into the boat. Unfortunately, by this point, the tremendous effort required had caused Curtis to begin to experience chest pains which would

not abate. Curtis prudently threw out his anchor, activated his PLB, said a prayer and waited for help to arrive.

Sadly, all we could do at Portsmouth was monitor the VHF and emails while watching a Coast Guard C130 circling overhead. We assured ourselves that Curtis had all the proper equipment and training and that there was small reason to be overly concerned. We held our breath and waited.

After what seemed like hours, and which may have actually been hours, we spotted a helicopter in low hover in the distance. Minutes passed, and then more minutes passed until finally, the helicopter rose, the C130 broke off its circling pattern and the two sped off toward the horizon. We confidently told ourselves that this could only be good news but still, we continued to hold our breath. Finally, a little after 7 p.m., we got a message that Curtis had been picked up, was safe, and had been transported to Outer Banks Hospital to be checked out. We all breathed a sigh of relief and agreed that we would sleep better knowing that he was safe and accounted for.

Coincidentally, about the same time, we received a message from our wayward Jacobsens—Eric, daughter Julia and a Yorkie dog. We learned that they had been a bit confused about our starting point and had errantly launched from the Cedar Island Ferry Campground several miles north of our own starting point. Then, after sailing through the same storms that we encountered, they had been unsure of our intended end point at Historic Portsmouth Village and had continued north across the inlet to Okracoke Harbor where they had tucked themselves into the Anchor Marina (and Inn) for the night!

As the sun set, Bill tucked into his cozy cabin, Steve popped up one of his ingenious aca-pods and after struggling to erect a untested sleeping platform and onboard tent aboard the Melonseed in the high winds and sloshing waves, I eventually, gave up and moved my tent onto the narrow pier for a restless night's sleep.

Tuesday, August 8, 2017

I awoke before first light and lay in my tiny tent as gusts of wind repeatedly flatted the nylon canopy to within mere inches of my nose. At least, I told myself, it had not been raining. Predictably, about 5:30 a.m., the skies opened up and a deluge of rain began to hammer the tent. I comforted myself with the fact that the wind had let up a bit with the heavy rain.

By sunrise, the rain had passed but the wind returned blowing 15-20 knots out of the southwest and gusting to 25-30 knots. After checking the weather reports for the day it quickly became clear that we would not be going anywhere today. Tomorrow's predictions called for a 180 degree wind shift and lifting of small craft warnings. Conferring with Bill and Steve over morning coffee, we all agreed that today would be spent just where we were, in Historic Portsmouth Village.

Portsmouth Village, we would soon learn, was founded in 1753 and was once a bustling sea village featuring a school, post office, church, general store and lifesaving station. Although, boasting a population of 600-700 in the mid-1800s, frequent hurricanes, shoaling water and the civil war ultimately contributed to its slow demise. The last residents finally departed in the early 1970's after which it was incorporated into the Cape Lookout National Seashore.

We spent the morning exploring the tattered remains of this oddly silent seaside ghost town, trekking from building to building to read each of the historical markers. We also exercised our arms, legs and

adult vocabularies, swatting at the voracious swarms of mosquitos that immediately descended upon us whenever the wind dropped below 20 knots. I swear that at points, the air was 50% insect, and I ate more than my share to prove the point.

Despite the wind and weather, it amounted to a fairly inoffensive day—not as good as a day spent sailing but just as wet. We were thankful for the few diversions which we had to occupy our time and for having each other to talk to. Meanwhile, our fellow adventurer, John Juday, was less fortunate, reporting that he had spent the entire day, pinned down a few miles south, alone and grounded on a mud flat, with only an occasional bird or furry critter passing by for entertainment. Similarly, our unseen Jacobsen's remained pinned down in Okracoke Harbor but reported that dad, daughter and dog were all now camping dockside aboard their tiny 8' hull.

Finally, we also received news that our friend, Curtis Pack, had undergone a successful cardiac catheterization which had resolved a blockage and returned normal heart function. Meanwhile, Boat US has recovered his Surprise 14' and arranged transport back to our start point at Cedar Creek Campground.

Retiring at sunset, we all hoped for a break in the weather tomorrow while heavy wind and rain hammered away through the night.

Wednesday, August 9, 2017

Dawn broke with its dim light barely penetrating a heavily overcast sky. The wind direction had followed predictions and swung nearly 180 degrees to the Northeast although it was still blowing a steady 15-20 knots with higher gusts. As we assessed our options, we soon realized another error in judgment. The tide was racing in at nearly full flood pinning our hulls hard against the dock. We cursed ourselves for not taking the tide shift into account and shifting our boats to the leeward side while we had the chance. As it was, we would have to wait several more hours for the tide to ease before we could see any opportunity to get away from our current position. I fired up another round of coffee as we waited for the tide to turn.

A few hours later when we were surprised to see a small tour group arrive at the dock. The tour operator told us that they had just transited over from Okracoke and though the winds were high, the seas were flat and conditions were improving. It seemed that our window of opportunity had finally opened.

Bill fired up his little outboard and made his way slowly upwind and clear of the dock before falling off for a downwind run to the south. With Steve's help, I was able to lead the Melonseed up and around the pier head. With Steve holding my stern line, I raised the sail to the first reef. Steve let go and shot away like an arrow, quickly setting course towards Bill's wake. Steve was quick to follow in his Hobie TI having been fortunately able to move his hull to the downwind side of the dock earlier that morning.

The winds were heavy but as they were coming from astern and the seas were flat, I was able to keep the little Melonseed from getting too out of control. I was easily making 6-7 knots and occasional gusts kept me constantly on my toes to avoid an accidental jibe. That said, an unexpected gust and accompanying wind shift did eventually catch me off-guard and I dove for opposite gunnel expecting the

worst. And nothing happened. The little Melonseed remained calm and composed. I sheeted in on the new course and gave thanks, not for the first time, for the gentle, forgiving nature of a balanced lug rig!

Looking back, I realized that as I was racing along, I had put considerable distance between myself and Bill & Steve. Bill appeared to be cruising along under mizzen alone and Steve had unfurled only a tiny scrap of his sail to keep pace with Bill. Lacking a second reef point, and with no real way to slow down the Melonseed other than towing a bucket, I instead elected to lower my sail deep into the lazy jacks, reducing my rig to a messy, billowing pillowcase but amazingly, still only reducing my downwind speed to about 3 knots!

I sailed calmly along in that fashion for the next hour or two, maintaining my position relative to Bill and Steve and searching ahead for the first of the channel markers that would eventually lead me back to the Cedar Creek Campground. As we passed further south out of Pamlico Sound and into the more sheltered Core Sound, the winds tempered to a steady 15 knots with a gentle 2-3 foot following sea.

Eventually, I noticed that Steve had unfurled his sail and quickly closed the gap to parallel my course. He explained that he had shadowed Bill as far as the channel and indicated that he was now happy to “poke along with me”.

“Unless, that is, you want to go faster?” he asked nonchalantly.

“I could go faster,” I said.

I raised my sail back to the first reef and off we went! “Cry Havoc! and let slip the dogs of war!” I yelled gleefully as we raced down the waves with speeds peaking at 9-10 knots. The Melonseed knifed forward with a wide bow wave spraying from her teeth, surfing down and then overtaking each fleeing swell. Now we were having fun. Although I suspect that Steve’s TI could have matched the Melonseed in terms of speed, particularly while I was still reefed, Steve eventually yelled across that he would rather throttle back a bit and keep his rig standing rather than risk a failure and hinder our safe return to port. Once again, I eased my halyard a bit and we calmly cruised the last few miles to Cedar Creek at a sedate 4-5 knots.

We pulled into the campground landing a little before 5 p.m., having covered 25 miles in about 5 hours. Impressively, Bill Moffitt’s Darcy Bryn pulled in no more than 15 minutes later, he having also unreefed and enjoying a fast, final downwind run after reaching the channel.

Although the original plan had been to continue south as far as Cape Lookout and Shackleford Banks over the next three days, we were discouraged by the weather predictions for the remainder of the week. 60% chance of thunderstorms on Wednesday, 80% on Thursday, 60% again on Friday. As much as we wanted to sail on, we each conceded that discretion was the better part of valor. The boats were loaded back onto trailers and we began saying our goodbyes.

Meanwhile, we received a message from plucky John Juday that he had sailed his Tanzer 16’ south and was anchored off Dump Island, essentially due east on the other side of the sound. His plan was to continue South to Cape Lookout the following day. In fact, he did exactly that, earning the illustrious honor of being “the sole survivor” of the 2017 OBX 130.

And what of our intrepid Jacobsen family who had remained sight unseen the entire trip? They reported that they had pulled their boat at Okracoke to be transported back to the mainland via ferry. Wishing

them well, we all hoped for future opportunities to re-group on the water, preferably under warm, sunny skies and steady, pleasant winds!

Epilogue:

Despite the disagreeable jags of weather, medical emergencies, lost and malfunctioning electronics, cold food, sodden clothes, voracious mosquitoes, stints of abject terror and long bouts of boredom and isolation, the 2017 OBX 130 proved once again to be a grand adventure.

The little Gig Harbor Melonseed more than proved her metal, ably demonstrating the wisdom of her ancestors in terms of speed, sailing manners and seakeeping ability. Although intended primarily as a day sailor, I certainly believe that it wouldn't take much to turn her into an able, long distance inshore/coastal cruising craft. Obviously, a second reef point would be a necessity. And a few, thoughtfully-placed deck cleats wouldn't hurt. Its three water-tight storage lockers proved adequate for holding a week's worth of food and gear. My attempt to use a free-standing tent for onboard camping had been an utter failure—in hindsight, a low slung boom tent somehow attached to the gunnels would have been more practical but with a bit more experimentation, I do think a reasonable onboard sleeping arrangement could be achieved. All in all, just small tweaks that would only serve to augment the design's already abundant abilities.

Finally, the harrowing experience of our companion, Curtis Pack, once again served as a grim reminder of the importance of diligent preparedness before embarking on any of these seemingly light-hearted adventures. Thanks to his past experience with Watertribe and similar experiences, Curtis had been prepared for almost every eventuality and ultimately, even some eventualities that few would routinely expect. In this case, that high level of preparation resulted in a positive outcome, not only for Curtis, but also for his family, friends and everyone else that might learn from his example.