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Where the Scooter Scoots

by Leroy William Hutchins

"SCOOTER" is a good name for it. It scoots like the snow that currying across the ice before winter wind. It scoots before a breeze that fills its bellying main-sail. It scoots even across open water when its speed is great or the wind is not too great. It scoots—but what is it? Just what is this scooter-boat that scoots on the wings of the wind over ice and water?

A scooter is an amphibious ice-boat, a duck-boat with wings. Therein lies the picture, but let us get acquainted with this strange

so many years ago ducks were plentiful in Great South Bay, that shallow body of salt water, cut off from the Atlantic Ocean by a big bar, which extends along the shore of Long Island from near New York City eastward for fifty miles or more. So extensive a body of salt water, mostly shallow and abounding with duck food, naturally attracted great numbers of ducks during spring and fall migration, but offered open water and food to the winter. It was natural where ducks were so plentiful, no laws to protect them, men would go to shoot them. And they were not only sportsmen, but men who lived along the bay and killed ducks for the market. These men were duck-hunters or pot-hunters. They were without limit and pursued the ducks throughout the year.

These hardy baymen rowed or poled their duck-boats about the bay as long as there was water to float them. When the ice formed along the shores of the smaller bays, they had to pull their boats across the ice to open water. It was necessary to draw the

boats for miles in order to navigate a few feet of water. What was more natural than that some one had the idea of attaching runners to his boat? Certainly a boat with runners would slide along easier than one without. Time slipped by—no one knows how long—and the runner idea became the accepted thing. Still, one wonders if many an old hardhead did not ridicule the innovation, condemning it for reasons imaginary and far-fetched.

The next step probably came about by chance. Who can say? Perhaps some old bayman, dog-tired, was heading homeward one night, his boat heavily laden with Black Duck and Buffle-heads, when an onshore gale seized his steel-shod craft in its teeth. Throwing himself aboard in a vain attempt to stop it, he was swept to his home shore in less time than he had ever before made it. Or (which is more likely) a young chap, a lazy fellow, was heading outward one bright, breezy morning. Hauling an unwieldy boat over the ice was not to his liking. Possibly he tried sitting astern and pushing it with his feet. Then, Eureka! His eyes lit on a bit of canvas, a mere "pocket handkerchief." A sail! And a sail to these baymen meant something more than a sheet of canvas. They were seasoned sailors on the water; why not on the ice?

The day of the market-hunter passed with the enactment of adequate game-laws and their enforcement. The old-time baymen have disappeared from the bay, some to the happy hunting-grounds, others to recline in the easy-chairs of old age. But their invention, the scooter, lives on. Both the boat and its rig have

been developed and refined, and the technique of handling it has been perfected.

To-day there is a standard racing-scooter in use on Great South Bay. It is fourteen feet long and about five feet of beam. The construction is especially strong, to care for the stress and strain of a big spread of canvas, rough ice, and generally hard usage. It has two long runners, set midway from each side of the center, and two short ones, set well out to each side to carry the load when she heels over. The canvas—150 square feet of it—is carried in main-sail and jib. To care for so large a sail on a small boat, a long boom is used, stretching the main-sail rakishly astern. The jib is stretched well out on the bowsprit.

One of the peculiar characteristics of these boats is that they are steered by the jib. The skipper stands or sits beside the mast and controls his craft with a surprising nicety by hauling in or easing off on the jib-sheet. Even a novice can make a fair job of steering, while the expert can do pretty much anything he wishes with a well-rigged scooter.

It is almost as easy to push a scooter around on the ice as it is to pull a sled. So when one fails to come about, or when the wind dies down, the crew, whether it be one or more, jumps off and supplies the power. To anchor the scooter, it is only necessary to turn the thing on its side; really, there is no other way, unless a post or tree chances to be handy. The number of persons a scooter will carry depends on the ice and wind. In a light breeze or on soft ice, one is enough, but with a stiff blow and hard, smooth ice, four make a reasonable load. Two

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can snuggle into the cockpit, while the others must drape themselves around the decking.

But we have said that a scooter is amphibious. Don't get the idea that a scooter will sail as well in the water as on ice. It won't. In fact, it may give the skipper serious trouble, and even duck him, unless he knows his job. It is a seaworthy boat, so it will float—if it isn't swamped when it plunges into the "open." But, as it has no keel, it "makes leeway" badly, and there is danger of its being swept over an air-hole or narrow strip of water when skipping along at a fair

clip, and a good navigator thinks nothing of sailing full tilt into the "blue."

And speed! A regular ice-boat may be faster, but the South Bay scooter-men will argue by the hour and submit proof aplenty that their craft will run the ice-boat a neck-and-neck race—all winds considered. Be this as it may, the scooter is a leaf on the wind that blows. It affords as fine a winter sport as one could desire. It is fast and thrilling, demands skill and quick thinking, sets the blood atingle. The scooter of Great South Bay might well be transplanted to other ice-fields.