

Maiden Voyage

An Adolescent Noah

by Alan Harris

FOUR SEPARATE INNERTUBES from four separate cars lay discarded in four separate fillingstations in Jarvis, Illinois, which in turn lay about seventyfive miles west of Chicago and roughly four thousand miles from the hot molten leadandnickel center of the particular planet on which Illinois lay.

In the Jarvis Public Library lay a littleknownamongscholars book of summer projects that purported to relieve boredom of boys who wanted to make something besides noise and girls (being too old for the former and too young for the latter) but did not know exactly what project would satisfy their curious but lazy minds.

Whitey's Tavern in downtown Jarvis contained a handysix of beer stacked neatly among piles of lookalikes, all of them produced on the same impersonal but perfect assembly line in Peoria, the beerbelly of the Midwest. Since this was July and the weather was hot, it would not be long before this particular chink in the pile would be reached, and essence of hops would then gurgle down some sweaty farmer's appreciative throat.

Five eightfoot onebysix pine boards extracted from the heart of a deceased Northern Minnesota pine tree which for sixty years had stood tall and insignificant among other tallnesses and insignificances and then been felled with a few concatenated snarls, lay in repose at the Jarvis Alexander Lumber Company like corpses in a mausoleum, neatly filed by size and worth, dead but maybe someday useful for something.

An extensive collection of shop tools lay in the basement of a brown house on Brown Street gathering moisture and age and rust from lack of use and lack of proper care (being stacked willynilly in boxes, hung from walls, and stacked on workbenches rendered unusable as workbenches by the plethora of tools cluttering them), including Sears Roebuck bandsaw and jigsaw and tablesaw and drillpress and woodlathe and countless small handtools such as hammers and screwdrivers and wrenches.

Indian Creek flowed muddily south past the east end of Brown Street just at the point where you think you're not in town anymore but you still might be--where you can hear cars slowing down for the residential twentyfivemileanhour speedlimit but you can also hear town boys out by the railroad bridge trying out the new .22 rifles that their fathers have given them because every young boy should know what it's like to have a .22 rifle and be able to hunt and besides (wink) maybe he'll kill himself with it.

Through the east end of Jarvis the creek was full of suspended field mud from yesterday's rain, some of the richest mud in the world. Further south, at the sewage plant down past the golf course, the creek took on the usual cargo of processed human excretion and refuse which did not so much disgrace it as enrich its mud with

more fertility. The carp and suckers and bullheads and thousands of smaller fish not worth separate names but just called as a category "sunfish" seemed to thrive on the richness of Indian Creek, as though they accepted their small-stream provincialism in order to avoid the crowded conditions and polluted waters of the Illinois and Fox Rivers, and especially the Mississippi.

Tom Summers (not Tommie because he was now 14 and too old to add an "ie" onto anyone's name including Mommie and Daddie and he expected to be accorded the same catalexis in return and as with many boys his age he became quietly but quite upset when someone failed to delete the "ie" when referring to him, in proportion to the amount of unsureness still remaining in him as to whether he was a Tom or a Tommie) was the son of John Summers, a town farmer descended from a long line of farm farmers. John Summers and his family of six lived in town because the old farmhouse was falling apart but John continued to farm the same land east of town that had been purchased in 1872 by his greatgrandfather and farmed ever since by successive Summers generations--that is, bought and farmed by Alexander Summers and son John Alexander Summers whose youngest son Robert then farmed it and handed it over before his death to the John Summers who was Tom's father and mentor and critic and eternal but invaluable gadfly whom he called simply Dad.

Dad had built an orange boat for Tom's sixth birthday and it was so sturdily constructed that to this day it leaked no water and was as safe as ever. This boat was pretty all right, to hear Dad tell it. And Tom thought it was all right too but the trouble was that he couldn't take it out just anytime. It somehow had to be gotten over to the creek, and Dad with his car happened to be the handiest gettertothecreek there was. And this wasn't only when Tom was six. This was all the time.

Well, Dad was always watching Tom when he paddled this boat around the creek, and was always telling just how to do it--how to avoid the rocks that didn't quite protrude from the water but were sure there, how to stay in the same spot while rowing against the current, how to paddle backwards, even how to have fun. And it wasn't a lot of fun to have someone all the time telling him how to have fun. In fact it wasn't fun at all to have that kind of fun. But he reasoned "I'm not having fun, but not having fun this way is more fun than not having fun chopping up worms in the back yard or throwing rocks at birds (and invariably missing) or watching ants wandering around in the grass." So he guessed he really kind of was having fun at the creek by not having fun in a more fun way than not having fun at home would be.

When he was fourteen Tom decided to build himself a catamaran, or at least what the book he borrowed from the library called a catamaran. Resembling a water spider, it would be made of four long pine boards which radiated out from under a sturdy central seat which also served as a main brace. At the end of each of the four spiderleg pine boards was to be a mount for a horizontal innertube. This innertube, or rather these innertubes, these four, were what would provide the buoyancy to keep the thing afloat. Anyway, he began to build the catamaran, following the instructions wherever it wasn't practical not to follow them.

Tom followed some parts of the instructions exactly. With a coping saw he cut rounded corners on the parts of the pine boards that curved down to the braces which held the innertubes. Cutting these nice curves served no purpose except to conform to the sleek look of the catamaran shown in the book and also to weaken the whole structure, but for aesthetic reasons Tom thought he would go ahead and

cut them out--that is, cut away those portions of wood that when gone would leave the curves in what was left. And boy did he make the frame solid at the joints. Woodscrews all the way, countersunk, driven in with a vengeance, tightened up to where the screw heads snapped against the edges of the countersink.

He reached the point at which he didn't so much decide to stop building the catamaran as just stopped building it because it was done enough. He mounted the inner-tubes onto its "feet" and carried it over his shoulders uptown to the gas station to get the tubes inflated. Then he returned past home with his new seaworthy spider and headed east for a private launching. From the front porch Dad noticed Tom carrying his catamaran with fat innertubes past the house toward the creek, and thought he would just tag along behind Tom a ways to see how it all worked out. Which he soon did.

Tom, without much ceremony outside of wiggling the awkward structure down the steep bank next to the creek, prepared to launch his catamaran from what his family had always referred to as the launching rock. He now secretly knew how Noah must have felt. As he set his handiwork upon the water of Indian Creek and climbed on he could hear boards or joints or maybe screws kind of crackling, but everything held together. He dipped his paddle into the water and pulled--it was the same paddle he had always used for the little orange boat. When he pulled on the paddle, however, the catamaran moved just a very short distance forward, so Tom naturally thought he must be stranded on a rock. But no. As he continued to paddle with the craft moving along very little by very little, he realized that this thing just plain paddled that hard. Not good news.

Dad was by now standing on the launching rock holding a can of beer from Whitey's Tavern because this had been a hard day of haying for him and he drank beer only and always after haying. But Tom didn't like to see him drink even one beer, ever--it made Tom very angry inside to see Dad drink at all. It shook his confidence in him. Dad said, "I told you you should have made it more streamlined or it would be too hard to paddle."

Tom was perched there above the water on his very solid seat, trying to think of some smart answer to a dad that would stand on a rock by the creek with a can of beer and say something like that. But as usual he couldn't answer the truth with some smart answer and feel right about it so he kept his mouth shut and paddled some more--but the paddling wasn't any easier. And worse yet, when he turned the catamaran around and tried to paddle back upstream toward the launching rock, even at top speed he was barely able to master the current.

Finally, though, Tom did reach the launching rock and took the catamaran out of the water and took it home and put it in the shed where it rotted for a few years and then became pretty good firewood.