

SAIL BY THE MOON

By Gretchen Woelfle

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ON CHESTER'S eleventh birthday, his father said, "It's time to build you an iceboat. I did it and so did your grandfather and his father, too."

"Will I have to sail her alone?" Chester asked.

"A-yuh," Father answered. "Maine boys do that."

Chester frowned. "Why wasn't I born in Boston?"

"You've got nothing to worry about," Father chuckled.

Every winter the two of them sailed from their farm at the head of Lake Damariscotta down toward the Narrows, where the lake fell into a river that ran to the sea. Their iceboat whizzed faster than the wind that stung Chester's eyes and froze his cheeks. The blades bit into the ice and hissed past beaver lodges covered with snow. The beavers stayed warm inside. Chester kept warm sitting close to Father.

Over the years Father had guided Chester's hand in steering clear of jagged ice that could flip a boat. He showed Chester how to let out the sail and lean to the side when the wind tipped the boat on two runners. Father's gentle hand corrected all his mistakes.

Chester loved to sail in light breezes, but when a strong northwest wind blew, he gave Father the tiller. What if a big wind came up when he was sailing alone?

I'll be a year a-building, Chester thought. I won't think about it now.

Chester and Father cut pine trees in February. All spring they sawed and planed the planks. They made a frame for the boat in the shape of a cross and strengthened it with two braces.

"Back in 1871 when I was a boy," declared Father, "an ice-boat won a race against the New York-Chicago express train."

"Will mine go that fast?" asked Chester.

"Not quite," Father said. "Maybe as fast as the local train to Portland."

That's still too fast, Chester thought.

During the summer, Chester nailed slats across the boat to make a platform. Then he sanded the wood as smooth as the lake in early morning. The summer sun raised a sweet smell from the sawdust. Winter seemed far away.

When maple leaves turned red and yellow, Chester filed three steel runners until they gleamed. Father helped him bolt one runner on each side and one on a swivel in the back.

"She'll turn on a dime," Father said.

Chester knew what it took to turn a boat. It took minding the sail, steering just right, and keeping all three runners on the ice.

By the first snow, he had attached a tiller and sanded the mast.

"Are you ready to take her out?" Mother asked as they sewed the canvas sail.

"I suppose so," Chester mumbled.

"I remember when your father was tending a sickly calf and you drove the hay wagon to the barn, just in time to beat a thunderstorm. You didn't think you could handle the horses, but you did."

"Those horses just walked through the field," protested Chester. "They didn't run as fast as a railroad train!"

"You've got a steady hand," replied Mother. "You'll do just fine."

One bright day in January, their neighbor, Mr. Bond, came to visit. "They say the lake is frozen all the way across," he reported.

"Tomorrow you can launch your boat, son," Father said.

"Maybe I should walk across the lake to check the ice," Chester offered.

"Linwood Brewer's done it," said Mr. Bond. "He's one who told me."

I bet I would have found some thin ice, Chester thought.

Father and Mr. Bond helped Chester carry the iceboat from the barn to the lake. "She's ready to go," said Father.

"Don't you want to come on her maiden voyage?" Chester asked.

"No, she's all yours." Father clapped him on the shoulder.

Father and Mr. Bond played checkers while Chester set the table for midday dinner. Mr. Bond ate two helpings of everything, including Mother's apple pie, still warm from the oven.

“Chester,” said Father, “if you’ll take Mr. Bond home in your iceboat, he and I can play checkers all afternoon.”

Chester’s apple pie sank in his stomach. How could he refuse? Mr. Bond lived directly across the lake, a three-mile walk on an icy road.

“I’ll go if you’re willing, Mr. Bond,” Chester said.

“I grew up by the ocean and never sailed an iceboat,” he replied.

“You’ll make good ballast after this meal,” Father chuckled.

After dinner Chester walked down to the boat. He ran his hand over the smooth planks. The wind was light, and Mr. Bond was heavy. If nothing broke, everything might go all right.

When Mr. Bond finally jumped Father’s last king, he exclaimed, “This is my lucky day. I’ll celebrate on your iceboat, Chester!”

Chester wrapped a scarf around his neck and tucked the ends under his collar. He strapped spikes to his boots. Mr. Bond pulled a woolen cap over his bald head. Mother and Father came to see them off. The long afternoon shadows reached across the snow and down to the lake.

Chester walked out on the ice. It was so smooth and clear he could see his shadow in the mud below. Black ice, he thought, the fastest ice of the winter.

“You’re sure Chester can sail alone?” Mr. Bond asked, getting on the boat.

Mother laughed. “Of course he can.”

“He’s been practicing since he was six,” Father added. “But mind the ice slabs, son. They can be dangerous.”

Chester wanted to run away—to the house, to the barn, to the woods. Instead he shouted, “Here we go!” and pushed the boat ahead, his spikes crunching as he ran. He leaped aboard and pulled in the sail.

Mr. Bond clutched the side as the boat shot forward. “Waaait . . .” His voice faded in the wind.

Chester strained to see ahead. He saw jagged ice and clutched the tiller. The boat lurched to the right, skittish as a high-strung horse. As they bumped over the jagged ice, Chester realized he’d pushed the tiller the wrong way.

“Stupid mistake!” hissed Chester.

“Slooow dooown!” moaned Mr. Bond.

Chester pulled in the sail, and the boat went faster. “Wrong again,” he muttered. He let out the sail, and the boat slowed.

He had to change course to get to Mr. Bond’s house. “Coming about! Duck, Mr. Bond!”

This time he turned the tiller and worked the sail just right. He smiled at Mr. Bond, but his neighbor stared hard at the ice, his lips pressed tightly together.

He’s more nervous than I am! Chester thought. He tried to chuckle but coughed instead. Cold wind stung his throat.

Ahead the ice had buckled and thrown big slabs up three, four, five feet high. His heart pounded. What would Father do? Chester sailed along the ice wall until he spied an opening.

“Coming about! Hold on!” he shouted. A side runner rose off the ice as the boat sailed through. Chips of ice stung their cheeks.

“Stop!” gasped Mr. Bond.

“Lean!” shouted Chester. Mr. Bond sat frozen. “Lean!” Chester shouted again. He pushed against Mr. Bond, and the runner returned to the ice. The land rushed toward them.

“My house!” Mr. Bond pointed.

Chester let out the sail and dragged his spikes on the ice until the boat stopped. Mr. Bond stood up, his knees shaking. “Thank you, Chester,” he said. “It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience ... for me anyway.”

Chester waved and pushed off again. The boat was lighter now and faster. Daylight was nearly gone. He hunched his shoulders and peered around the sail.

He glided through the slabs of ice. Suddenly a gust of wind caught the back runner and lifted it off the frozen lake. The boat began to spin. Chester’s scarf flew across his eyes and disappeared. He grabbed the sides as the boat whirled round and round, the sail flapping angrily. Chester waited for the crash against the slabs and the jolt that would fling him out onto the ice.

What if the boat smashed to pieces? What if he broke his leg? Would he freeze to death on the lake?

Without even thinking, Chester leaned back. He felt the back runner touch the frozen surface. The boat kept spinning. He stretched his legs until his spikes gripped

the ice, and the boat slowed. Finally it stopped. Chester lay on his back and looked at the deep blue sky. He and Father had never had a boat “flicker” like this.

Chester walked back to find his scarf. As he wound it round his neck, he gazed at his boat. She was a beauty, and he could sail her alone.

The wind filled the sails, and he took off down the lake. For the first time, he saw the full moon shining bright. Ice mounds sparkled like heaps of diamonds.

Why go home yet? He could sail by the moon. The wind lifted a side runner, and the boat leaped ahead. Chester clutched the tiller, then relaxed, balancing the boat so the runner stayed a foot off the ice. He was floating, he was flying. I could beat an express train! he thought.

Snow-clad pine trees glowed along the shore. The boat runners skimmed the ice, and the wind whistled in his ears as Chester circled a small island. He passed a snowy mound and called out, “Hello, beavers!”

He raced up the lake. “Faster,” he called to the wind. He laughed out loud in the frosty air, and the moon lit up a path to lead him home.

Although this story is fiction, Chester himself was a real person. He was born Chester Erskine in 1881 in Jefferson, Maine, on Lake Damariscotta. As a boy he was the fastest iceboater on the lake.