

Circus minimus – much adventure, little drama – Part I

In all my years of writing profiles I've always wanted to include the sentence: 'As a kid he ran away to the circus.' Now, thanks to the honour of writing this tribute to Bill Mattison, who died on 25 April at 93, I can do just that... without stretching the truth even a tiny bit – Carol Cronin

After hearing so much about Bill Mattison's amazing ability to 'engineer and build anything' I would have loved to have met him. And since he never just sat around maybe I could have watched those big meaty hands working away at one of his many skills. Scarfing a damaged iceboat plank. Repairing a carbon mast. Welding up a replacement piece for a photo developing machine. Or decorating a tiny wagon wheel for the model circus he started as a kid and continued to add to for the rest of his very full life.

How could one man achieve so much success in so many different mediums, on so many different scales, from larger-than-life America's Cup boats down to half-inch-to-the-foot scale models?

Thankfully plenty of 'Bill quotes' and stories survived his passing, and he was already well recognised for victories on both hard and soft water. He has been elected to three very different elite institutions: the US National Sailing Hall of Fame (2020), the Madison (Wisconsin) Sports Hall of Fame (2017), and the Circus Model Builders Hall of Fame (2015). And definitely not because of any self-promotion.

Despite winning more International Skeeter iceboat championships than anyone else (14) as well as countless Scow trophies, *and* building an incredible miniature circus that includes a steam-powered calliope (which plays recognisable circus tunes), Mattison was far more likely to use his usually few words to praise or encourage others.

But before I get so deep into the countless details a worthy tribute deserves, I want to thank everyone who shared their memories with me, especially Bill's great friend and iceboat rival Peter Harken.

Linda Lindquist also performed introductions to many friends and family and graciously turned over all the material she'd pulled together for her own planned profile of Bill.

And Mauretta, Bill's widow, was kind enough to entrust a west coast stranger (me) with the lone copy of a book that their daughter put together for her father. Any mistakes are, of course, mine alone.



Early achievements

Bill was born in 1928 in West Virginia. In 1930 his family moved to Madison, Wisconsin, where he spent the rest of his life. There are four lakes downtown and 'I iceboated when I learned to walk, basically,' Bill told a reporter in 2017. 'First thing I had was a sled with a sail on it.'

According to his Madison Sports Hall of Fame nomination, that sail had started life as a bedsheet. 'For his next iceboat,' the text continues, 'Bill "repurposed" some iron fence posts into runners.' (In another article Bill calls that same act 'stealing', before adding as justification that he was 'putting them to better use'.)

He was equally likely to 'repurpose' stuff found around town for soft-water sailing, the nomination adds. 'When old boats washed up on the shore it wasn't long before [he and his friends] discovered that a bucket of hot road tar begged from a street crew could waterproof one of these derelicts into a fine vessel.'

But it was not sailing or boatbuilding (or 'repurposing') that led to his first two mentions in the local press; it was the miniature circus he built from scratch, starting at the age of six, to give a set of cast iron acrobatic clowns (a gift from his grandfather) a suitable place to perform. According to Bill, he created the very first wagons of the



Opposite: in his element... Bill Mattison suits up for another Skeeter race, the helmet bearing witness to the endless knocks received before the much later introduction of some basic driver protection. As for the gloves, substance over style was a lifelong mantra. **Above:** probably the most famous Class A stern-steerer of all time, *Mary B* won eight Northwest Iceboat Championships between 1949 and 1992 (sic) – the latter after being immaculately restored with the assistance of many of her original builders including Bill Mattison. Built of Sitka spruce, this 39-footer weighs in at nearly a ton – she is now owned by the Ice Boat Foundation of Wisconsin

Mattison Brothers Circus out of ‘Kraft Cheese boxes, with Chinese checkers for wheels.’ In 1941 he set up the show on a street corner with the help of two friends, and the teenagers collected a few bucks from passing admirers that were donated to charity. The *Wisconsin State Journal* noted that even in its first incarnation the show was electrified, lit with Christmas lights and cooled with air-conditioning...

A year later the same paper ran a front-page article about Bill’s increasingly elaborate mini-circus (well below a huge headline promising ‘tremendous victory’ in the Pacific War). The headline was ‘Tiny Circus Boasts Barker, Hot Dog Stand,’ though the follow-on seems even more enticing: ‘Boy, 13, Runs 300-piece Toy Big Top.’

It was around this same time that Bill himself famously ran away to join a real full-sized circus. He spent a summer or two as a roustabout for Barnum & Bailey, later claiming that during the war years ‘they’d take any warm body’. Once the manager promised to return him home safely to his parents before school started up again, but instead they let him stay on... perhaps realising that such an adventure would be the best education of all.

An accidental career

At 16 Bill started a bicycle-based runner service that picked up photo film at the local Air Force base and delivered developed prints back to his customers. By the time he sold the company half a century later Star Photo had become a Madison institution – and Bill was the go-to fix-it guy for some very big names.

‘He got into the photo processing business himself,’ Peter Harken explains. ‘And he became extremely good at it – so good that the US Government used him for their very critical and most secret photos.’

‘They would fly a guy in with a briefcase shackled to his arm that had films in it, and Bill would process the photos. It

was always very hush-hush.’

Bill also helped Eastman Kodak build and maintain automatic photo processing machines all over the country, Harken adds, before confirming a story I’d heard about a DC-3 the company kept on standby for his personal travel. ‘True, they would bring in their plane from Rochester and fly him to the site.

‘Because of his mechanical ability and insight he’d just start working on a problem without ever asking for help – or waiting for permission to do things!’

For the love of the sport

Bill really got hooked on iceboats in the mid-1940s. First he helped build the *Mary B*, an A-boat that was one of the fastest stern-steerers in the world; at the builder’s shop he eventually graduated from carrying wood and sweeping floors to ‘glue mixer’.

Next he built his own one-design Renegade, which unfortunately soon after completion was destroyed by a fire in the family basement during the winter of 1949.

Less than a year later he was about to make his very first start in *Snapshot*, a brand-new Renegade he’d built, when it was mowed down by an iceboat Bill used to crew on (‘which turned it into “All Shot”).

No one wore a helmet in those days, and even spectating was dangerous; once Bill was standing on the ice watching a race when a passing forestay hit him hard enough to slice open his face from left temple to right jaw. He also spent a year in hospital after hitting a hole in the ice on a practice run, damaging his kidney, liver and spleen – and disintegrating the iceboat. ‘I’m full of sponges,’ he often quipped.

Many years later, asked about that accident by a reporter who thought such danger should at least provide some financial reward, Bill disagreed. ‘There’s no money in it at all,’ he said.

‘That’s what’s so appealing about it. There’s a raw element out there, where

everybody, every boat, has a chance. It’s fickle and a challenge every time you sail. It’s all for the love of the sport.’

Korean winter

In 1951 Bill went off to Korea to serve in the US Army Topographic Unit, a title Peter Harken claims is much too ‘nice’ for the dangerous job of night reconnaissance. ‘I was involved in the army myself,’ Harken says, ‘and night recon was the worst damn unit in the world to be in...’

‘They would go out at night and crawl on their bellies and go behind enemy lines to discover where machine gun nests were at. A lot of the guys didn’t come home; I think the attrition rates were almost 50 per cent. It was a terrible, terrible job.’

‘When they finally brought Bill home he’d lost 70lb and they wouldn’t let Mauretta see him for several days. But those are subjects that he would hardly ever talk about. All he ever said was, “It was bad; it was ugly.”’

Bill would later tell another iceboat buddy that on the trip home from the war he laid up full-sized plans for his next iceboat on the deck of the ship. ‘He’s one of a kind,’ Peter Harken says, adding that Bill never wasted a single moment. ‘They broke the mould after they created Bill, I tell you.’

Soft water and the first Honeybucket

Back from the war and back up to weight once again, Bill started sailing Scows in the summer. He hadn’t sailed on soft water before, because ‘To get something that kept the water out cost money,’ as he put it in a 1991 interview.

He also built ever-faster iceboats. They were all red and white and differentiated only by roman numerals, because every single one was named *Honeybucket* – the Army nickname for ‘manure’ spreaders...

‘The Korean War introduced you to the real “Honey Bucket Wagons”,’ daughter



BILL'S "SNAPSHOT" - 1948-'49



Above: Bill Mattison's shortlived first Renegade Class iceboat *Snapshot* was lost in a house fire in 1949 soon after this photo. He immediately built a second *Snapshot*, which shortly after completion was itself then mowed down and badly damaged by a much larger, out-of-control stern-steerer. After his service in the Korean War (*left*) Mattison returned to the Renegade Class with a third *Snapshot*, which proved more enduring and more successful in a competitive fleet that often turned out 60 boats for a weekend race. During the Korean War Mattison lost half of his close friends, most of whom simply disappeared on night reconnaissance and were then never seen or heard of again. Night recon was regarded as the most dangerous posting of the Korean theatre

things that broke – both for himself, and for all of his competitors. Which brings us to the Willy Street Boat Shop.

No charge

The Star Photo office was on Williamson Street in Madison, which Harken and others remember as a hippie area. In the early 1970s Bill set up a second shop nextdoor that he nicknamed the Willy Street Boat Shop, and it quickly became the place for iceboat building and repair.

Anyone who broke boats or parts during a weekend race was told 'Just bring it over and we'll see what we can do to get you back on the ice.' A typical example from 1977: after a brand-new Renegade was literally broken into two pieces during a Sunday on the ice, the owner delivered the splinters to Willy Street on Monday evening. Four nights later the boat was whole again – and out racing that Saturday.

Bill also helped his good friend Peter Barrett earn a medal at the 1964 Olympics ▷

Lynn Mattison Raley wrote in the 2017 book she assembled from all the press clippings her mother had saved. 'You always said, "You can never come out smelling like a rose."'

In 1954 Bill built his first Skeeter. Considered the 'Formula One' of iceboats, these craft are capable of well over 100mph; the only design rule restricts the sail area to 75ft², and even that has workarounds. 'You can get up to 40 or 50mph on just spars alone,' Bill explained in 1991, after labelling himself 'the senior citizen' of the Skeeter class.

'Guys work their way up into this class. This is where you end, it isn't where you

begin.' Two years later he admitted to the *Chicago Tribune* that Skeeters 'do have this tendency to want to go airborne'.

Over the next four decades he would build a string of *Honeybuckets*, each one setting a new benchmark in class development; many are still racing today. In 1958 a Four Lakes Ice Yacht Club news item announced 'Flash! Bill Mattison is building a new boat. All Skeeter skippers have a worried look in Madison.' (He and Mauretta had married in 1957, and that same newsletter had also called out the arrival of Lynn – along with a tongue-in-cheek request for a pink DN, the smallest class of iceboat.)

But Bill's most legendary skill was fixing



Honeybucket XIV is the last Skeeter built by Bill Mattison and is seen here being started by Harken senior engineer Steve Orlebeke. By now aero – as well as driver safety – dominated Skeeter design, along with runner development. The matching of blade and ice involves a level of voodoo comparable only with the mysteries of ‘tuning’ a go-kart chassis, tube flex providing the only suspension

in the Finn, by explaining to Barrett how to optimise the shape of a Games-provided rough-cut wood mast.

‘And you know what, he never charged anyone for his labour!’ Peter Harken tells me. ‘He was such a generous guy. All the iceboaters in Madison, anybody who owned a Scow, or anything that needed work or a repair on it, Bill would just say, “Bring it around to the Willy Street Boat Shop, and we’ll get her sailing the next day.”’

‘And he always did, no matter what the damage was. And people always offered to pay for it, but he just wouldn’t take any money. His most famous saying was “It’s good for the sport.” That’s just what he did.’

Harken was sailing a much smaller iceboat than Bill when the two first met at a regatta. ‘I kept looking at the Skeeters and drooling,’ Peter remembers; ‘we call them the Ferraris of the ice. And Bill came up and said, “I think you should take mine for a ride.” I said, “No, I can’t. I mean, this is your boat, and I don’t want anything to happen to it.” He says, “Oh that’s OK. If you roll it or crash it, it’s your boat!”’

‘It was a thrill and a half,’ Peter continues, chuckling. ‘After I came in I just looked at him and said, “That’s it. I’m gonna get into a Skeeter somehow.” And he said, “Well, you better show up tomorrow morning at the Boat Shop, and start building a boat.”’

When Harken did show up, ‘The first thing that Bill and his partner Paul Krueger did was hand me a broom and a shovel to “clean up this damn place”. And it was pretty messy because they open-ground

everything. Health and safety... ha!!

‘So I spent that whole afternoon and evening just cleaning up. And then Bill told me, “Well, you got to come back tomorrow and then we’ll get you going [on boatbuilding]. But if you haven’t finished this you may have to continue until it’s done.” And they were laughing! I just knew this was the beginning of something... So I picked up the broom again. Finally they started letting me in on some of the building stuff. And, boy, it was almost 30 years of that.’

Four or five nights a week Harken would make the 45-minute drive up to Madison after working all day in Pewaukee. Bill and Paul would already be there, since their day jobs were right nearby. ‘In the shop it was just non-stop, sawing or planing wood, or fibreglassing or carbon fibre, vacuum-bagging. Just bloody continuous, three of us on the job non-stop.’

‘I’d stay there till about 10.30 or 11 o’clock at night and then I’d drive home, full of carbon and fibreglass; my girlfriend didn’t really appreciate that! Or I’d stay at Bill’s house. We’d be all black from carbon fibre and this and that. I think at times Bill just went to bed like that; actually we all did!’

Iceboat hulls are extremely long and narrow, he reminds me. ‘If we were working on a mould or the fuselage Paul and I would be at one end, applying resin to the cloth – not pouring it, being very careful with rollers, because Bill didn’t want one extra drop of resin that didn’t need to be there. He would be at the other end with a pot of hot resin, yelling “Make way, make way, too hot!”’ He pauses for another

chuckle. ‘It was fun, I’ll tell you that. But it wasn’t slow – it was non-stop.’

Linda Lindquist first met Bill in 1995 when they were both working for Bill Koch’s America’s Women’s America’s Cup Team. She stayed in touch with him afterwards because ‘his mind was so truly extraordinary. I’ll never forget visiting the shop and Bill would be covered in carbon dust, surrounded by drums of resin, watching the Green Bay Packers and drinking beer while tweaking and building the fastest iceboats in the world.’

When I ask Peter Harken what beer they preferred he says most of their drinking was done in a dive bar next door to the Willy Street shop (which also had ‘excellent hamburgers’). ‘But that was only ever once we were done,’ he insists.

‘Bill didn’t have any rules like, “Hey, you can’t drink while we’re working on this.” It was just clearly understood.’

Then he carefully differentiates between the laminating evenings when it was just him, Paul and Bill, ‘because we knew how to roll out glass and spread resin without putting too much on’, and the many memorable evenings and weekends when a project required more hands to glue up an iceboat mast or plank. ‘Guys would always volunteer to help laminating a mast, or a big [iceboat] plank out of Sitka spruce.’

‘They must have had 500 big clamps in that shop, and the clamps were only 1ft apart! You had to glue it up quickly.’

‘Linda may have been very right that the secondary help would have a beer during a break, or while waiting to be told what to

do. But I can't remember me or Bill or Paul ever dipping into the dipper, so to speak, not till after work.' (A 'dipper' is mid-western for beer.)

Carol Vernon was a naval architect for the America's Women's Team when Bill asked her to digitise the line drawings for his next *Honeybucket*. Several years later she got the Willy Street Tour. 'He had his whole shop set up for iceboat building,' she remembers, adding that a DN mast had been mounted on one wall of the shop, 'including the shroud points so that you could lay your sail out and take a look at it horizontally. And the finish on his hardware was just spectacular!'

By 1966 a *Wisconsin Magazine* story claimed Madison as 'the boatbuilding capital of the world' – at least for iceboaters!

Harken credits Bill's quietly fanatical work ethic. 'You had to produce or else he just plain embarrassed you. You couldn't stand around and watch him work; you had to chip in all the time.' Then he repeats one of his favourite jokes about Paul and Bill. 'I'm sure that in their bathrooms there'd be a drill press or lathe or something like that right next to the toilet, so they're not wasting any time. I am absolutely sure that was true.'

Mauretta Mattison told a reporter in 2020 that her husband was 'literally always busy... he just never was able to sit still.'

Family

Bill and Mauretta were married almost 65 years; of course Bill introduced both of their kids and several grandchildren to



Don't be fooled, this is just a microscopic snapshot of Mattison's Miniature Circus; his first attempt, built when he was 13, already included over 250 animals and dozens of individual tents and working displays. Mattison was still 13 when he ran off to the big top for real, working as a roustabout at Barnum & Baileys Circus

iceboating. Lynn's book includes a picture of herself at the age of four riding with Bill in the cockpit of *Honeybucket IV*. Below it she remarks, 'Then when I got older it was a ride on the runner plank...'

Mauretta also had a powerboat called '*Honey's Bucket*'. She had had a long career with a credit union, but she travelled with Bill when he headed off to Australia and San Diego for the America's Cup. 'Mauretta was always with him,' Peter Harken explains. 'Their businesses were quite different, and she had her own hobbies. But it was a pretty happy family from what I remember.'

'She was big in helping out with all the iceboat races. And the shop wasn't far, maybe a 15-minute drive from their house down by the lake, so he was home every night.'

'Mauretta was his great champion,' Lindquist adds. 'She joyfully stayed married to Bill Mattison, the crazy man! I don't think he was at a lot of Easter dinners in a suit and tie; he'd be off somewhere covered in dust. But that was just part of their house.'

In 1969 Bill built a DN for his daughter Lynn – also of course named *Honeybucket*. 'Even though I was never much of a racer,' she writes, 'I never tired of the thrill I got in the DN skimming along the ice.' She also remembers a race win on Lake Mendota... as well as flipping the boat over after rounding the leeward mark; 'I am not sure how Mom ever put up with me that day.'

When naval architect Carol Vernon visited the Mattison house she remembers pausing to admire a beautiful grandfather clock standing in a hallway. 'And Mauretta said, "Oh yes, Bill built that for me." And then I admired something else... "Oh yes, Bill built that for me too." Everything he made was like something from Tiffany's.'

Boat tweaks and repairs were a constant at the Willy Street Boat Shop, but they also occurred in the Mattison basement – which, says his daughter, had a minimum required window size: big enough for the fuselage of an iceboat to fit through.

Part II – Decades of improvement □