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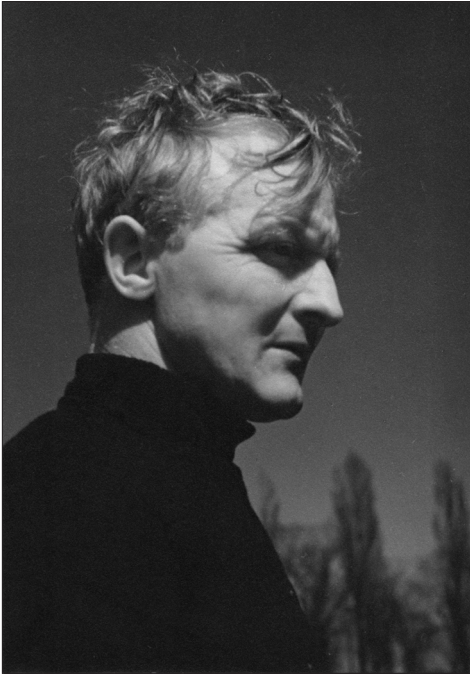
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A Portrait of Paul Henriksen

by Thomas H. Henriksen

Paul Henriksen, my father, was one of those people whose life could have been a Hollywood film. It unreeled from the hardscrabble streets of turn-of-the-century Copenhagen, to five years spent before the mast in saltwater seas, to the battlefields of Flanders in World War I, and finally to the freshwaters of the Great Lakes, where he became a



In this photograph Paul resembles Shakespeare's Hamlet.

prominent sports figure in mid-twentieth-century Detroit. Hard work, persistence, and photogenic looks helped propel him toward the fulfillment of his own American dream.

Born Poul Friis Henriksen in 1895 (according to his death certificate, there is no extant birth notice), he was raised in a single-parent household by his mother, who ran a small hotel in the Danish capital. Unacknowledged by his father, young Paul (who never used his middle name) doubly felt the bite of Denmark's class-stratified society of his youth. He deeply resented enquiries about his father

when the questioner wanted to know his social standing. He had no societal status. On a more fundamental level, the question stung simply because he lacked a father even at home.

The stigma of being fatherless mattered a great deal in Denmark in the first decade of the twentieth century, for which reason Paul took pride in the fact that his father came from a line of military officers.

One of his ancestors played a heroic part in the rearguard battle of Sankelmark in 1864, in the disastrous war with Prussia, which cost Denmark the duchies of Schleswig-Holstein and nearly forty percent of its population. This bitter national humiliation dismayed and irked patriotic Danes for decades, including the teenaged Paul, who eventually took up arms against Prussian-dominated Germany in World War I. My father's exact link to Denmark's military aristocracy was always a little hazy to me, his only son. First, I was too young and later too preoccupied with my own activities to focus intently on a far-removed battle which meant nothing to me or the America into which I had been born. It is one of my regrets that I did not listen more attentively when my father spoke about his own familial background. All that lingers in the deep recess of my memory is that this remote Sankelmark hero enjoyed an annual lunch with the Danish monarch for his actions on the battlefield.

As a youth, Paul was an indifferent student. By his own account, he rarely studied. He took pleasure, in fact, in recounting to me the many pranks and practical jokes he sprang on his classmates and neighborhood friends. This was an age—pre-World War I—when boys could still be boys, without all the societal and educational pressures of postwar America. Taking into account the differences in culture, it could be said that young Paul was a sort of a Danish version of Mark Twain's Tom Sawyer.

School-leaving in early twentieth-century Denmark occurred at just age fourteen, so Paul left the schoolyard for seafaring with the equivalent of an eighth-grade education. Paul made his first voyage on a sailing ship from the port of Marstal on Aerø Island in the southern Baltic Sea. This maiden voyage was on the *Dorthea*, a Danish-flagged brigantine vessel—a small sailing ship with two masts that use both square and lateen sails. Its length was approximately 125 feet and its masts reached about 120 feet above deck. Years later while still a sailor, Paul used a month's pay to buy a watercolor painting of the *Dorthea* by the well-regarded seascape painter Reuben Chappell (1870-1940), who painted some 1,200 ship portraits. Chappell was something of a fixture at harbors and on docks in England. Common seamen, like young Paul Henriksen, may quite possibly have purchased such paintings directly from the artist. Years later, he had the picture of the wooden sailing craft riding through stormy seas framed. It hangs

in my home today, as a constant reminder of the beginning of my father's odyssey from Denmark to the United States.

Life aboard sailing ships at the turn of the twentieth century was anything but easy. Imagine being sent aloft—eighty to a hundred feet above a pitching deck—to furl sails in a freezing rainstorm. A sailor first had to climb the ratlines (the rope ladders up the mast). When he reached the yardarm, he shinnied out and then hung over the yardarm at his waist, careful to hang on with one hand, while using his free hand to gather in the sail before tying it fast to the wooden yardarm. When the winds subsided, the crew crawled aloft to unfurl the sails again. Even a slight miscalculation could cause a fall to the deck below or into the sea when the ship lurched from side to side in the turbulent seas. Adjusting sails on square riggers often took place in a cold, wet universe with nothing like today's high-tech Gore-Tex or Arc'teryx clothing to shield the sailor from the elements. Getting soaked to the skin in winter meant shivering until the reefing of sails was completed and the crew could go below in search of dry clothes.

Life in the fo'c'sle (derived from forecandle—living quarters of ordinary sailors) presented another set of hazards. Seamen of different nationalities and ethnicities were thrown together in minimal space to survive best that they could. Fatigue, short-temper, and a fondness for amateur pugilism made for frequent brawls among crewmen. Fights erupted among the young men over any number of slights or misunderstandings. Sailor Henriksen had his nose broken twice. Food was hardly palatable. Cold coffee washed down salted fish or smoked meat. Hardtack (a long-lasting biscuit of flour and water) was a daily staple. Pay was minimal. There were no labor unions to stick up for workers' rights, improve safety, or advocate for higher pay. Rather, ship captains could mete out stern punishments for infractions or disobedience to orders. Life under shipboard conditions was dangerous, arduous, and even cruel. The usage of sailing craft was prolonged by the shipping necessities of World War I. Oil-powered and steam vessels were pressed into ferrying troops or munitions. Wooden sailing craft carried nonessential civilian items such as lumber and hardware. Henriksen and thousands like him found employment on coastal ships as well as a few trans-oceanic voyages. After the war the sailing merchantmen soon waned from commercial life.

My father never complained to me about how tough he had it. Life was something one accepted despite its unfairness and difficulties. I

have reflected on the phrase that “ships were made of wood and men of iron,” which has become a cliché in our time. But a hundred years ago or so, it summed up real maritime experience. At times, even my father seemed to have enjoyed the rigors of the sea. He told of one winter crossing of the Atlantic to Jacksonville, Florida. The relative warmth there was a godsend after the cold passage across the storm-tossed ocean in December. Another time, he spoke of the high adventure involved in sailing to Mombasa in Kenya on the Indian Ocean. The local people had often seen Europeans but rarely someone as fair of complexion as my father. His whitish blond hair and light blue eyes attracted frequent glances and curiosity from the locals in the African seaport. I am sure he enjoyed their wonderment.

My father may never have realized that life in a seaborne crucible prepared him for a far worse ordeal—trench warfare in the Great War. Psychologically and physically the years spent at sea were akin to the grueling physical and mental stress undergone today by recruits for elite fighting forces. One reason that he survived combat without any lasting mental trauma was the fact that the hardships he had faced in shipboard life had hardened him. He suffered no symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Nor did he ever display shell-shocked behavior, the World War I term for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). He simply soldiered on.

Just twenty-one, Paul Henriksen jumped ship in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada in mid-1916. He enlisted with the Seventy-second Seaforth Highlanders, a storied Canadian battalion from Vancouver which still exists today. I think he was attracted by the desire to avenge Prussian-German aggression against Denmark fifty years earlier in what was known as the Second Schleswig War. He may also have fancied the splashy kilt uniforms, the Scots tam-o'-shanter with a feather, and other Highland regalia. But if wearing a tartan was the motivation, he paid a dear price to dress in a Scottish kilt. For two years he endured front-line combat in northern France in some of the most savage fighting of World War I. Time and again, his battalion was shredded by German artillery and machine gun fire, requiring frequent troop replenishments to keep the unit up to strength.

Because he was a fast sprinter and resilient, his captain picked him to be the company's message runner. Armed only with a revolver, he set out at night all alone to deliver written communications to other units, since telephone wires were often cut by vehicles or shells.

On these harrowing runs, he often found himself in no-man's land between Allied and German trenches, a target for either side. A few times on the shelled-out moonscape without trees or buildings to guide him, the Canadian private even ended up behind German lines, where he could have been shot at any moment. In an almost surreal landscape devoid of natural or man-made features for land navigation or safety, he was forced to move over the often-muddy terrain by crawling over bloody corpses and dismembered limbs in pitch darkness. After the battle of Cambri (a small town in northeastern France), he received the military Medal of Bravery (equivalent to the American military's Silver Star) for pulling eleven of his wounded fellow soldiers to safety—against orders and in the teeth of enemy fire.

When the war ended, Paul was demobilized in Canada, where the Ottawa government granted him landed immigrant status (not citizenship) for his military service. For the next decade he lived and worked in Canada, perfecting his English language and writing skills. In 1927, he crossed from Windsor, Ontario to Detroit, Michigan to take advantage of the opportunities that America offered

so many Danish immigrants. Thanks to his seafaring skills, he landed a job at the Detroit Yacht Club (DYC), the most exclusive yachting establishment in Detroit in the "Roaring Twenties." In time, he became the Club's dock master and chief sailing instructor. After nearly a decade at the DYC, Paul struck out on his own. He established his own sailing enterprise and named it the St. Clair Sail Club.



Here Paul, wearing a yachting cap, looks like a modern-day Viking.

Lake St. Clair is in the Great Lakes water system but is much smaller than the five major lakes, although it is twice the size of Lake Tahoe in California, twenty-six miles by twenty-four miles at the widest points. It is situated between Lake Huron to the north and Lake Erie to the south. The Detroit River leads out of Lake St. Clair, connecting it with Lake Erie. The river is marked by several distinguishing features that bear on its sail-worthiness. It has a relatively strong down-river current at four miles an hour. This meant that tacking up the river against an east wind required skill as well as at least a moderate breeze. From the 1940s to 1970s, the Detroit River was the second busiest waterway for commercial ships in the world. Only the Suez Canal surpassed it in traffic by transports and freighters.

By this time, after his years in the Canadian army and employment at the DYC, Paul had begun to speak English almost exclusively. Paul, along with a small knot of fellow Danish yachtsmen and a larger group of Scandinavians along the river, used language as a means of assimilating into their adopted country. Therefore, they spoke in English about business matters instead of nostalgically reminiscing about the Old World. They also tended to marry outside their Scandinavian ethnic group. It was in this period that Paul met and married Irene Hollinger, a Scot born in Glasgow. Married to an English speaker, my father did not often speak Danish in our home. Around the holidays, he did burst into Danish to sing Christmas carols in a surprisingly good voice. Irene, like her decade-older husband, had left school at age fourteen, but she had continued to educate herself. She spoke French, read avidly, and quoted poetry at length. When she met Paul, she was working as a governess for a family in Gross Pointe, a wealthy suburb of Detroit that was home to automobile industry executives. Until Paul's death and the sale of the business, she labored to mend sails, keep the financial books, and perform myriad other tasks to sustain her husband's boating venture.

As an entrepreneur, Paul endured many challenges to keep his business afloat. His chief problem stemmed from the difficulty of securing property along the Detroit River. The city government decreed that private land could not be sold, so Paul had to lease space. Twice, his fledgling sailing businesses were closed because of cancelled agreements. The result was financial hardship for him and his family. During World War II, he took a job on the assembly line in one of Detroit's defense plants to make ends meet. His last commercial effort, started

in 1953, was on property owned by the city of Detroit. To get the lease and its subsequent renewal, the Danish immigrant, who spoke English with a decided accent, donned a suit and tie to appear before the mayor and city council. Accompanied by his lawyer, he made the case that his sailing passion was also a recreational service for all city residents. The council agreed, and he obtained a small slice of river frontage near Lake St. Clair, for which the city received a rental payment. All of this was a giant leap for the former poor sailor with minimal formal education in a foreign land.

The St. Clair Sail Club stood apart from the other sail clubs on the Detroit waterway. Unlike the Detroit Yacht Club, the Detroit Boat Club, Edison Yacht Club, or the Bayview Yacht Club, my father's business was privately owned. Like the other clubs, it was membership-based and offered sailing lessons, in addition to providing sailboats for its members. Yet the St. Clair Sail Club rather momentarily broke ranks with other sailing concerns by allowing women to join the club as full members. Other clubs openly discriminated against women and minorities. For decades, they were barred from sailing memberships in the elite clubs of a then-flourishing Detroit.


As an immigrant from a socially stratified country, Paul spurned the prevailing class norms of his new country. As gender divisions began to fall in the 1950s, Paul extended the same welcome to all comers. He thought it simple fairness as well as good business to include an untapped market segment. He believed that sailing was an acquired skill, which women as well as men could master. Moreover, small boat sailing (around twenty-five feet or shorter in length) demanded no great masculine strength for pulling in sails. With pulleys and jam cleats (fast-gripping locks to secure the sheets), women were not disadvantaged in hauling in sheets and lines. Thanks to Paul's open-door policy, professional women flocked to the St. Clair Sail Club in droves to learn to sail and then to venture out on the Detroit River and Lake St. Clair on their own. Eventually half the membership was female, and the male members never objected. Women participated in and won the sailing races organized by the club membership in which men and women competed against one another, not in separate races. More cleverly, Paul seized on the publicity that he received for promoting female sailors as advertising for his business. On many occasions, photographs in newspapers and weekend news magazines featured attractive women smiling while holding the tiller or checking

the telltales for wind direction. In a word, his gender fairness brought an advertising bonanza.

The Scandinavian pioneer ushered in other breakthroughs in a tradition-bound sport. In an age when all sails (the best made from Egyptian cotton) were white, he outfitted his boats with red or blue sails. This advertised his business because spectators always asked about the boats with the colored sails. More significantly, he introduced fiberglass sailboats to the Detroit area in the late 1950s. Up until the appearance of fiberglass hulls, boats were constructed by master craftsmen who steamed and bent wooden planks to fashion the curved watercraft. It was an art, like stonemasonry, which lost its craftsmen with each passing year. Wooden boats also leaked, demanding painstaking caulking and sometime new planks to keep them seaworthy. Fiberglass was almost maintenance free with baked-in colors. Yet, when Paul introduced fiberglass boats to his fleet of twenty wooden Luedtke catboats, his competitors ridiculed him for breaching traditional sailing etiquette with his “gluepots.” In time, they came around to his persuasion. Today, almost all sailboats are made from fiberglass or derivative materials.

Over the decades, the St. Clair Sail Club catered to middle-class men and women who wanted to sail but were barred or financially excluded from the upscale clubs. It was from this grouping that a competitive team evolved in the early 1950s and out-sailed their peers from the establishment clubs along the river. Paul trained many of these young skippers, who swept all the races in the river and nearby lake. The St. Clair Sail Club’s mantel overflowed with sailing trophies. Paul Henriksen was the acknowledged godfather of these winners, so it was often said that he had instructed half the skippers for the larger-boat races such as the Port Huron to Mackinaw regatta. He became a prominent local sports personality—not as famous as the Detroit Tigers lineup—but still a personage of standing in the metropolitan sports world.

In my mid-teen years, I recall walking with my father on Woodward Avenue in downtown Detroit, a city of nearly two million people at the time. It seemed that every few feet, someone would greet him by name. “Hello, Paul!” one passerby after another hailed him. Even at this young age, I was impressed that so many Detroiters knew my father and awaited his response to their hello. By this time, his



health was deteriorating. A life-long smoker, he had warning bouts but characteristically kept up his vigorous pace.

Paul Henriksen's ship left the harbor of life on May 24, 1964. It happened as he would have wanted it. It was on a Sunday afternoon on a breezy day; the river teemed with sailboats. Walking up from the docks to the clubhouse, he sailed away doing what he loved. Medically, his death was diagnosed as heart failure; but his spirit never failed him. I ran the St. Clair Sail Club with my mother until 1967 while she prepared to retire. Then, we sold it to the membership who kept it going for a few years. However, without the master skipper at the helm, it was destined to fade away. During his time on the Detroit River, this Danish immigrant transcended his humble beginnings in the stark environment of his homeland and changed many people's lives, on a river far from his native land.

