

# Simple Man, Simple Boat

By Bill Douglas

Fifty years ago in Clearwater, Florida, Clark Mills designed and built the first Optimist Pram. Re-christened the International Optimist Dinghy, 300,000 are now being sailed by children in over 105 countries around the world. Mills has become the father of the largest, and the most truly international, of all international classes.

"All this publicity is gonna give me a big head!" laughs the 82 year old Mills. He puffs up his cheeks and gestures with his hands to show a swelling head, but his humor proves otherwise.

Growing up in Clearwater, Mills learned to love boats and the water. He still reveres the Florida west coast. "It was beautiful back then," he reminisces. "Beautiful." He closes his eyes, remembering back 70 years. "I sailed everywhere around here. There's not a square foot of Clearwater Bay that I haven't capsized in."

Mills began building boats as a young man, then worked in Philadelphia during World War II as a boat builder for the U.S. Navy. "I hated the cold and begged 'em to send me any place south. Someone in the Navy with a sense of humor decided they'd fix my complaining, so they sent me to Panama. But I loved it down there. Warm weather suits me fine. I work best with a little mist under my arms."

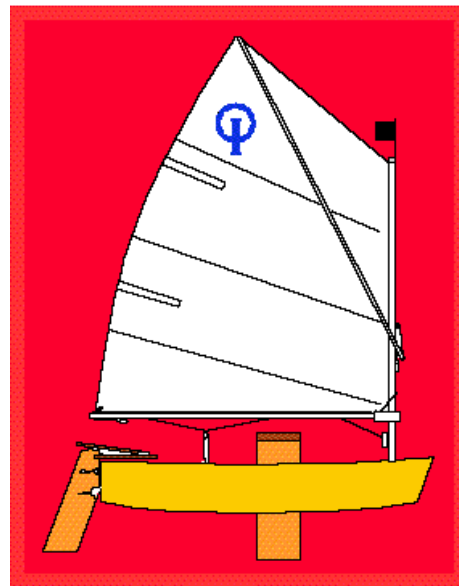
Returning after the war to live in Clearwater, Mills became a well-known and respected designer and builder. He built boats—lots of boats. Snipes, Lightnings, and a flotilla of custom boats cruised away from his Dunedin loft. A later Clark Mills design, the Windmill, became a well-known and very popular class. But back in 1946, his most renowned design, the Optimist, was still a dream away.

Mills balks at accepting credit for his most popular boat. "That's something that's always ticked me off," says Mills. (He's a sailor, so he doesn't actually say, "ticked.") "Whenever people write about the Optimist, they give me

all the credit. Heck, I didn't do anything but draw up the design. The folks who came up with the idea, they're the ones who really got the ball rolling. Give them the credit."

Soon after the war's end, the idea of commissioning a small sailboat which children could learn to sail and race was raised by a civic organization, the Clearwater Optimist Club. This club actively embraced the motto of their parent organization, Optimists International—"Friend of the Youth". Their mission was shared with Optimist clubs worldwide—to develop programs benefiting the children of their community.

Ernie Green, an Optimist club member and an early proponent of a children's sailboat, was stymied by other members who were determined—



despite Clearwater's totally flat terrain—to instead promote racing in soap box derby cars, or "orange crate specials." Green tried several tacks, all unsuccessful, to promote the sailing idea, even proposing a children's regatta called "The Orange Crate Regatta."

Mills has his own view of these events. "In any club, there are always a few people with good ideas, the doers, really gung ho. And then there are the bald-headed idiots who stand up in the back of the room and tell the doers that their ideas stink." Clearly, Clark Mills has no use for the "bald-headed idiots" whose resistance delayed the launching of the first Optimist.

Enter Major Clifford McKay, to whom Mills gives much of the credit for

the development of the Optimist. "McKay was a mover and a shaker and a shouter. He was a Rotary Club man and a good speaker. He urged the Optimist men to build a children's boat."

McKay's enthusiasm for the project, together with Green's lobbying, won some converts, but McKay knew he needed something dramatic to launch wavering club members into action. He sought Clark Mills help. "McKay didn't tell me much. He just said to design a children's sailboat. It had to cost no more than \$50 and be simple enough to build at home."

Mills started sketching and soon ran into a basic limitation. "Plywood was the problem. It comes in eight foot sheets. I could special order it ten feet long, but that cost a fortune, so I knew the boat had to be less than eight feet. Since it was hard to put a pointed bow in an eight foot boat, I made it a pram." So the size and shape of the world's largest class was dictated by the dimensions of a sheet of plywood and by McKay's \$50 budget. Mills chose a sprit rig, to allow some shape in the poorly designed, often home-sewn sails of the era.

Mills vividly recalls the very first Optimist hull. "It wasn't pretty, because Major McKay wanted it fast, for the next Optimist Club meeting. I hammered it together in a day and a half with 10 penny galvanized nails, slapped on a coat of paint, and called her an 'Optimist Pram.' We rigged her up in the hotel lobby where the Optimist Club met."

The club's members were amazed at how quickly the boat had gone from dream to dinghy. "They didn't know that McKay had hired the world's fastest, skinniest, hungriest boat builder," laughs Mills. His prototype converted even the soapbox derby car advocates. The year was 1947 and the design was a hit.

The Optimist Club promoted the boat, selling plans at cost—about \$2.50. A fleet of Optimists with young skippers were soon racing on Clearwater Bay. Other fleets quickly followed, in Dunedin and at Pass-A-Grille Yacht Club, on what is now St. Pete Beach. St. Petersburg and Miami weren't far behind. Although the Clearwater Optimist Club has been defunct for many years, it well deserves historical recog-

## Simple Man, Simple Boat - (cont)

inition for breathing wind onto the sails of the original Optimist.

The world's first Optimist skipper was Clifford McKay, Jr., Major McKay's son. "He must have been about 11. We launched the first boat on Clearwater Bay in a good breeze. Clifford handled the boat well and had a great time."

It took 1 1/3 sheets of plywood to build an Optimist. With careful layout, Mills could cut three boats from four sheets. For bulkheads and other structures, he used juniper, spruce, or large pole pine. He glued things up with resorcinol glue and used bronze nails for fasteners.

The Optimist was mainly a Florida phenomenon until 1958, when Axel Damgaard, the captain of a Danish tall ship, visited the United States and was inspired by the design. With Mills' permission, he took an Optimist back to Europe, modified it, and renamed it the International Optimist Dinghy. The IOD had a battened sail and much simplified running rigging. The new design spread quickly, first through Europe then all around the world.

Its acceptance in the U.S., however, was far from immediate. In returning to U.S. shores, the IOD collided with a large, established fleet of Optimist Prams. The Pram's well anchored popularity stemmed from its low cost and ease of home construction—aided by building tolerances far more lenient than the tight scantlings of the IOD.

As more and more IODs landed on the shores of the U.S., regattas were scheduled for both Prams and IODs. As late as 1985, separate regattas were held for both boats. Many sailors from the 1970s and 1980s owned two boats,

to sail in both types of regattas.

In the early 1980s, the scales were tipping in favor of the IOD. The number of Prams steadily declined and, by the mid 1980s, Pram racing opportunities had dried up.

Today, Prams are occasionally found in learn-to-sail and community sailing programs but they are no longer an organized class and are virtually never raced.

By contrast, with 300,000 boats worldwide, IODs have become the world's largest class. In the U.S., according to Charlie Montgomery, president of the U.S. Optimist Dinghy Association, there are now 7,300 Optimists, in 36 states. "The number of boats here has more than quadrupled in this decade," he reports proudly.

Ireland's Helen Mary Wilkes, international president since 1989, thinks that Clark Mills is one of the most unusual inventors in history. "There can be very few inventions which, 50 years later, still so closely resemble the original design. The materials have changed, but a blurred photo of a 1947 and a 1997 Optimist would be indistinguishable. From the start, the Optimist was a kid centered design. Clark Mills looked at kids, saw what they needed, and gave it to them."

The simplicity of the design is a reflection of Mills himself. "If you want a simple boat, ask a simple man," he says, cocking his glasses at a screwy angle on his face, crossing his eyes, then laughing at himself.

Although the modern design looks very much like its ancestor, Mills is not entirely pleased with the boat's evolution. "I used to sell hull, blades, and spars for just \$50—\$47 for materials and \$3 for profit. Now the boat costs so much that it's no longer very accessible," he laments. "And all that fancy hardware..." He shakes his head. "All I needed was one screw eye and some

stainless steel I bent up for rudder fittings."

Spurred by the promotional efforts of Green and McKay, Mills designed and built a wonderfully simple, stable, and safe boat. The Optimist has proven itself to the millions of children who have learned to sail and race in it. Mills' achievement was recognized in April by Clearwater Yacht Club, at its annual Clark Mills Optimist Regatta. Fifty years after launching the first Optimist, the club presented Mills with a silver tray, simply engraved "To Clark Mills—Thanks for the vision. 50 years of Optimist sailing, 1947-1997."

Mills is humble, totally unpretentious, completely genuine, and very salty. He enjoys laughing with people, making faces, and cracking jokes. If he's impressed with being called "The Father of the Optimist," it doesn't show. He deflects praise with a laugh, trying hard to give others the credit for his most successful design.

How rich did he get from designing the Optimist? Clark Mills never received—and never sought—any royalty or licensing fees from the Optimist. Had he done so, he and Helen (his wife of 48 years) would be receiving fat annual checks from busy Optimist builders all around the world. But Mills has no regrets as he looks back on his boat building career. "I didn't make out very well on the money end, but I certainly enjoyed myself. The boat building business is just great." He sighs, pauses, and smiles to himself. "Yes sir, it's just great!"

— Bill Douglas is a writer, an attorney, and editor of *Optinews*, the Optimist class magazine. He lives in Florida with his wife and two sons.

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