

Jack Painton: He's been a sailor 50 years

A Port Arthur News personality profile – January 13, 1985
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If you've ever thrilled to the sensation of being propelled in a sailboat by the clean power of the wind, you know the feeling of quiet pleasure that has motivated Jack Painton for most of the last half-century.

Painton has been one of the area's most enthusiastic supporters of the sport of sailing, and recently he was honored for his years of service by being informally cited as "Mr. Port Arthur Yacht Club."



Painton has been active in the Yacht Club since 1930, and his love affair with sailing began when he was 12 – with some help from his older brother and sister.

"I had a little skiff that I used to row around Sabine Lake," Painton said. "I really think that my brother felt sorry for me, because he put a little mast in the boat, and my sister stitched a sail for it. After they set it up for me, I just took off."

Painton has been sailing ever since. Now that he's retired from his job as a petroleum inspector, he has enough time to sail two or three times a week and visit the Yacht Club even more.

It's probably no accident that Painton's love for sailing is connected to his proximity to Sabine Lake, regarded by many as one of the finest sailing lakes on the Gulf Coast.

"For boats that are smaller than 30 feet or have less than a four-foot draft, you can't beat it," Painton said. "You have about 70 square miles for sailing, you're always in sight of land, the maximum depth is probably eight feet, and two of the biggest rivers in Texas empty into it. If something happens, you just drift to shore, and most of the shore is accessible (to vehicles).

In addition to the unlimited possibilities for sailing in the Gulf of Mexico, the Intracoastal Waterway also stretches to Brownsville and Florida.

"You can sail most of the way in the Intracoastal," Painton said, "and most sailboats over 20 feet have auxiliary power.

Today Painton has a 27-foot O'day sailboat called the *Hijack* – as in "Hi, Jack." It has a small galley, sleeps four, and has a six-foot clearance below deck, but it's not the biggest boat Painton ever had.



From 1963 to 1980, Painton owned a 36-foot wooden "super-racing boat" call the *Pirate*. It was built in 1927 for former Texas governor Ross Sterling, and Painton said it was a classic beauty. The *Pirate* was sunk during Hurricane Carla in 1961.

"It had a 45-foot mast, and if a gust of wind came up, you had to be ready to act," Painton said.

Throughout his sailing career, Painton has been more a short-distance “around-the-buoy” racer instead of a long distance competitor.

A trip to Galveston might take only an hour-and-a-half in an automobile, but it’s a daylong journey for a sailboat.



Painton said sailboats smaller than 25 feet in length have a top speed of five or six knots, and larger boats can only increase that to 10-12 knots.

Even though Painton has always loved sailing, he said the sport’s popularity really took off during the gasoline shortages of the 1970s.

“It’s so popular now that it’s difficult to get mooring space in some cities,” Painton said. “In Galveston, you practically have to buy a boat in a slip to get the slip.”

Part of the reason that Painton enjoys sailing is the challenge it represents. He said that while any child can operate a power boat safely or unsafely, sailing is a different proposition.

“We call someone a novice sailor for the first two years,” Painton said. “Almost anything will sail with the wind, but when you’re going against the wind, you have to know the principles of sailing.”

“A novice won’t take a boat out alone because he knows he might not be able to come back against the wind. That’s why our junior sailing program in the yacht club is so important. It teaches kids the right way to sail.”

Sailing has changed a great deal in the years that Painton has been involved in the sport. Wooden hulls on ships have given way to fiberglass, which is lighter, stronger, and easier to maintain.

Canvas sails are giving way to Kevlar, a modern fabric that is lighter and more stable than older types of cloth.

“Sails have improved just like motors have over the past 50 years or so,” Painton said. “If you put a good motor on something with wheels, it will move it. It’s the same way with sails. A good sail will move any boat.”



Undoubtedly bigger and better sailboats are on the drawing board somewhere, but Painton doesn’t need any more of an incentive to hoist his sails and let the wind carry him along.

“Sailing is very relaxing,” Painton said. “You get four or five people on a boat and go out somewhere, and you go swimming off the boat or go sunbathing. Of course you bring your food and drink with you, and you have a galley in the boat.... It’s a great way to have fun, and it’s very good for the entire family.