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Five year journey ends with welcome-home flotilla



A flotilla greets the 42-foot ketch Felicity (second from right) as she entered Holland Harbor Saturday.

(Sentinel photo by Mark Copier)

By Ron DeKett
Sentinel staff writer

MACATAWA — Horns blew, whistles whistled and cannons roared Saturday morning to welcome Gene and Kathy Davidson home after five years and 44,000 miles sailing the Atlantic Ocean on their 42-foot ketch, Felicity.

The day couldn't have been better for sailing: a weekend, rare of late, with cloudless skies and friendly winds. At least 50 boats, big and small, powered by sail and motor and gently rolling with the waves, welcomed the double-masted vessel as she slipped through Holland Harbor and docked at the Macatawa Bay Yacht Club.

The Davidsons and crew were greeted with banners, a champagne shower, roses, a silver cup with the inscription "Gene & Kathy Davidson; 44,000 mile trans-Atlantic; 1975-1980," backslaps, handshakes and kisses.

"It was something to behold," Mrs. Davidson said of the welcome, as she spoke with about 100 of her friends who greeted her at the yacht club. "It's great to be home."

The festivities were not so much for the magnitude of the voyage; although it was an impressive feat it had been done before and will be done again. Rather, the celebration was one of friends showing admiration and respect for friends.

"We sort of thought maybe something was going on," Davidson said. "The fact is I probably worried more about coming into port because of it then we did about sailing across the Atlantic."

Davidson was the good-natured recipient of playful consideration when some of his crew dumped him into Lake Macatawa rather than spill champagne on him which they said was bad for the skin.

As he was pulled from the murky water, Jack Smith, rear admiral of

the yacht club, quipped, "Gene, you realize we don't keep nothing that goes into this water."

Later, aboard the Felicity, Davidson talked with The Sentinel about his interest in sailing and the voyage.

The 52-year-old Holland native, a former co-partner of Enterprise Tool and Die in Grandville, learned to sail when he was 12 but did not own a boat "for quite a few years." He became interested in sailing in 1966 and participated in chartering and racing.

Davidson owned and raced a boat, but in the early '70s he and his wife sold it and began looking for a vessel that was built for cruising.

They came back to Holland and put their ideas on paper as full drawings, designing the keel, sails and hull around a social area. He met with a friend who worked at Whitbe, a boatmaking company in Ontario, Canada. His friend said if he could sell 12 boats off the design, he would build it. The drawings were refined and the friend sold more than 12 boats. Felicity was delivered in November 1973.

Meanwhile, Davidson and his racing buddy, William Millholland, talked and dreamed about making a trans-Atlantic journey.

"The thing was to cross the Atlantic in a sailboat," Davidson said. "So I guess between the two of us we sort of decided if we could get a boat over there he would go along and be part of the crew."

"It worked out real good that way because it relieved me of a lot of the responsibilities. And we went for a fun trip, we didn't go for a do-it-yourself thing, to prove something. We just wanted to go."

Much of the trip to the various islands, the Mediterranean, and all ports in between was smooth, he said. But they did have some rough

weather.

From Florida to Bermuda the weather was squally and required 35 sail changes. From the Azores to Gibraltar Felicity encountered rising winds and gail force winds.

"We were sailing in seas in which a freighter 1,000 feet away would disappear behind a wave. But they (the waves) were easy on us. We would sail up the wave and over the top."

"We had a very severe mistral (a violent, cold, dry, northerly wind off the Mediterranean provinces of France) when there was only two of us aboard in the Mediterranean ... We had two of us aboard, Bill Millholland and I, and we were tired of sailing by the time we got across that."

But other than that it was smooth sailing, he said.

Davidson sailed Felicity by celestial navigation. He said he learned all his navigation from the Grand Rapids Power Squadron, a group of sailors that takes the time to instruct in the skill of sailing.

He said Felicity was never hard put to find a crew.

"We had lots and lots of people willing to spend the necessary dollars to get from one port to another. And they were all very generous friends because they all demanded that they share expenses while they were on board," he said.

The differences in cost in the United States and other countries is vast, he explained.

"It is interesting, the difference of pricing. We all think we got it pretty tough here in the United States as far as buying groceries. But to provision a boat for three months, a crossing of the Atlantic and into the Mediterranean, I spent \$700 in Florida. Now that bought meat, groceries and beer. When we provisioned the boat to do the same thing coming back from the Canary

Islands it cost me \$2,100," he said.

He said the people of the many countries Felicity visited were friendly.

"Most people are friendly toward the sailor coming in by sailboats. I'm not sure they're so friendly with people coming in by airplane, the general tourists. But we found everybody in all places extremely helpful. We did not have any problem with the language barrier. If a Frenchman knew English and knew that we didn't talk any French he would talk English with us, which they don't always do ... We have friends all over the world that we sailed to that write to us."

"That was one thing we were quite interested to see, what the people away really thought about the United States. They have some mixed feelings about us. They think we are wasteful and a whole lot of other things but they still think we are the only hope the world has to keep it together," he said.

"It's a marvelous life. But I can't really say I would want to make it a full time occupation being on the boat," Davidson said. "But when you considered you sailed where the Phoenicians sailed and you anchored in harbors where Columbus anchored...that is absolutely thrilling and not very many people get to do this."

"If I was going to do it over again I would have a whole lot more confidence. You build confidence on the way. But every time you have to move the boat across the Atlantic...you go through a period of soul searching. You have to make sure that everything is right. You got the crew and you got the boat and that is your responsibility," he said.

Davidson said he plans no future trips out to sea. With a contented voice he said, "We have crossed our oceans."

State Democrats backing Proposal C

DETROIT (AP) — Michigan Democrats and Republicans have found a common ground for the November election: Proposal C.

A week after state Republicans endorsed the tax plan, Democrats followed suit Sunday, adding condemnation of one rival proposal which will be on the November ballot, and ignoring a third plan backed by one of their largest factions, the Michigan Education Association.

Proposal C, authored by Republican Gov. William Milliken and leaders of the Democratic-controlled state Legislature, offers an estimated \$800 million worth of property tax relief coupled with an increase in the state sales tax from 4 cents to 5.5 cents on the dollar.

The proposal is a "far more sensible approach" than either of the other two, state Rep. Joe Forbes of Oak Park told convention delegates.

Proposal D, authored by Shiawassee County Drain Commissioner Robert Tisch, was labeled in the state party platform as "an irresponsible tax-slashing scheme" which Democrats will "actively oppose."

The Tisch plan would cut property taxes in half and require a vote of the people for any tax increase to offset the lost government revenue.

The MEA, largest teacher union in the state, is spending thousands of dollars to fight the Tisch plan and support Proposal A, which ties property tax relief to increased state income taxes.

The proposal was rejected by the state party's platform committee and didn't come up on the convention floor. But there was no call in the platform for "active opposition" either.

The Democrats, voting by a show of hands with no count taken, also joined Republicans in endorsing proposals B and E on the November ballot.

Proposal B calls for lowering the legal drinking age in Michigan from 21 to 19. Proposal E would increase the state income tax from 4.6 percent to 4.7 percent for five years, raising an estimated \$275 million for the construction of new prisons.

A special platform plank was endorsed expressing support for striking workers in Poland.

U.S. Sen. Carl Levin urged delegates to send food to workers in strife-torn nation.

"This is important," Levin said, quieting Cobo Hall with a call for "moment of silence and solidarity" for the Polish workers.

"These are workers struggling to create a workers' movement in a slave nation," he said.

In the platform plank, the dominated Michigan Democrats said Polish workers have "courageous" adopted the legitimate tactic of peaceful demonstration in demanding rights.