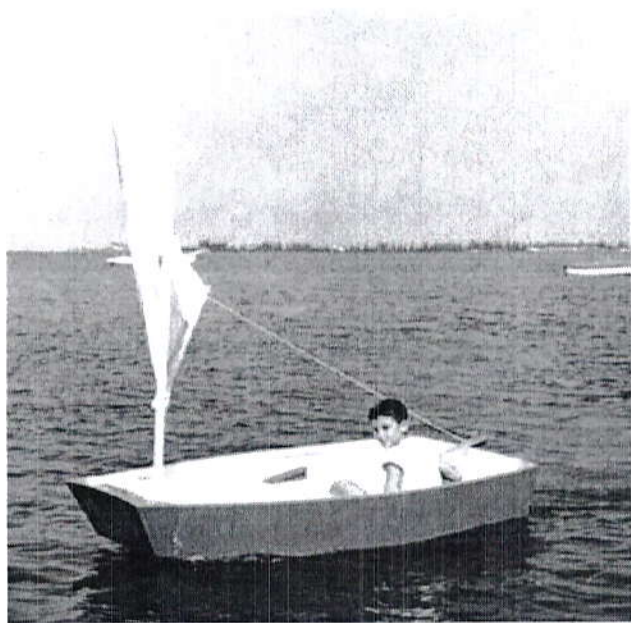


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The Origin of the Optimist Pram

By Clifford A. McKay, Jr.

The first Optimist pram.

The idea for the Optimist Pram, the forerunner of the Opti Dinghy—the largest one-design racing class in the world—was formed at my dining room table. It was 1947. My father, Maj. Clifford A. McKay, shaped the idea from three components: first—my experience building a Soap Box Derby car, racing it down the hill three times and putting it out to pasture; second—the fun and excitement I had experienced the past 18 months sailing and racing Snipes with the Clearwater Yacht Club Snipe Fleet; third—

the structure of the Soap Box Derby in which merchants sponsored the cars and paid the modest costs.

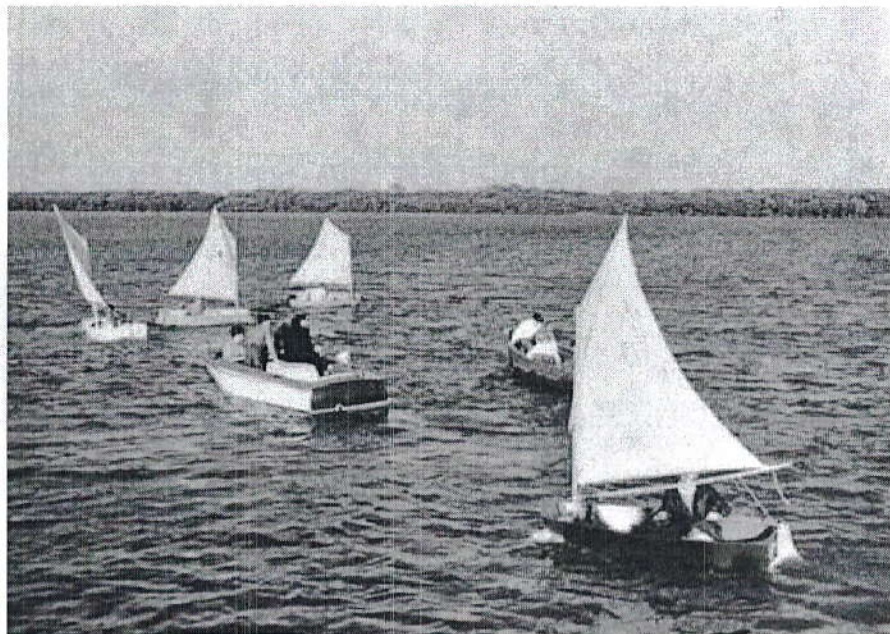
Dad's idea was—using the derby model of supporting merchants—small, safe and inexpensive sailboats could be widely available so every boy could sail. Instead of working hard to build a car and run it once or twice, each boy could sail his own small boat, week after week, learning independence, responsibility, and self-confidence.

Here's how it happened.



Clarke Mills on the 18-foot Alden catboat he built.

The first pram race.



Dad had a unique skill in analyzing a problem and pulling people together to solve it. Through the years, he had developed many creative plans to involve boys and girls in constructive activities. The newly-formed Optimist Club invited him to speak and to suggest programs to carry out their motto, "The Friend of the Boy." I was 12 years old at the time and attended that meeting as part of the Optimist-sponsored scout troop.

The *Clearwater Sun* reported on August 15, 1947:

Maj. Clifford A. McKay, Air Corps Reserves, last night outlined to the Optimist Club a four-point program he advocates to help combat the rising tide of juvenile delinquency. Commenting on the Optimist Club's activities in the youth recreation field, which include sponsorship of Boy Scout Troop 8 and the staging of the Orange Box Derby, Maj. McKay suggested: (1) a baseball diamond and playing field on the beach, (2) a Sunday school basketball league, (3) a swimming pool and family recreation center, and (4) a sailboat competition for juniors leading to national competition or a regatta in Clearwater. Speaking on the subject: Did You Ever Put Your Hand on the Shoulder of a Red-headed Boy? Maj. McKay's talk dealt with the importance of parental influence and the home life activities of the boy.

Dad's idea for small sailboats was much more specific than the terse comments reported by the *Sun*. The Optimists liked Dad's idea and asked him to follow up with a boat designer.

The next day, Dad called Clarke Mills, a local designer and craftsman of small boats, telling him, "We need a small sailboat that boys can build. It must cost less than \$50, and it should be built with two sheets of 4' x 8' plywood with a bed sheet for the sail."

Clarke tells the story this way: Maj. McKay "called me on the phone and asked me to come to his office that evening. He had been a guest speaker at the Optimist Club meeting the night before and said he really had them all fired up ready to pursue a junior sailing program, and he wanted me to draw him a plan for a simple little sailboat that a boy and his dad could build in their garage with simple hand tools. The boat was not to cost over \$50, and his idea was to have some merchants and business companies

sponsor a kid in return for having a sign on the boat...I was the next couple of nights getting it done. I drew lots of sailboats every night. The problem was the price. Every time I had a nice little sailing skiff drawn, it figured out to too much cost. So I finally cut the bow off, making it a butt-headed pram...I finished a sample the following week. I hauled it down to Haven Street Dock in Clearwater and Cliff McKay, Jr., got in and took off in about a 20-mile breeze. He scooted out into the bay on the wind, off the wind, across and then reached back to the dock. He landed saying, 'It was really great!'

I heard this same story told by Dad and by Clarke down through the years. It was always the same. Dad suggested a boat built with two sheets of 4 x 8 plywood, a bed sheet for a sail, and cost under \$50. Dad was not a sailor. His specifics were an attempt to keep the costs down. Clarke said, slyly, "I talked him out of the bed sheet." He said of his "butt-headed" pram design that brought the cost under \$50: "It looked kinda funny, but it sailed real good."

Clarke continues: "The evening of the next Optimist Club meeting (Sept. 4), which was held in the Grey Moss Inn, I brought the number one pram down and put it right in the entrance foyer all rigged with sail. It caused a flurry of comment by the members as they came in, and they were most all in favor of proceeding with the promotion of the program." (*The Writings of Clark Wilbur Mills and Friends*, privately published by Betty McGraw Perkins and David G. Perkins, Jr., 2002)

The *Clearwater Sun*, on September 5, 1947, reported, "Optimist Club members meeting at the Gray Moss Inn last night heard a program on boats and boat building, presented by Team No. 1 of which Arthur Lee is captain."

"Guest speakers included Clark Mills, N. M. Faulds, W. Jardine, Commodore Guy Roberts of the yacht club, and Maj. Clifford McKay. Roberts commented on the wider scope of boats and boating and the possibility of a well-organized plan to encourage interest in boating in Clearwater. McKay spoke on the originality of design and stressed the safety factor."

Dad arranged for persons needed to support the boys' building and sailing the boats to attend this meeting; the designer, a sailor, and the Clearwater Junior High School wood shop instructor.

The rather sketchy report of the meeting was elaborat-

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ed by the *Clearwater Sun* in its Sunday edition, two days later:

The Clearwater Optimist Club last night announced as its latest project the sponsorship of the building of a fleet of "pram" boats for boys, and the staging of a pram regatta in the bay here, to be followed possibly by a state and national competition.

The pram is a single-masted sailboat, seven feet, two inches long (sic), 42 inches beam, with a blunt nose and with a rake to her keel from abaft the center board well to her forward end.

She is a safe, little, marine-plywood sailing craft that is original in design and was created by Clark Mills of Clearwater..."

Local merchants and individuals are to sponsor prams, retaining title subject to rules and regulations of the Optimist Club Pram Committee, composed of W. Watson, chairman, Art Lee, Ben Magrew and Maynard Barney.

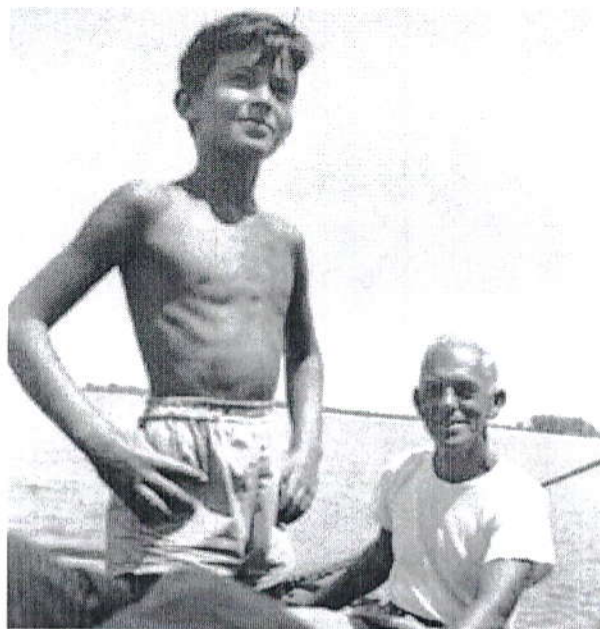
The overall cost of the pram is estimated at about \$50 or less. Plans, specifications and construction procedures are completely detailed by printed instructions, pictures and blueprints available to boys through their sponsors.

Boys from 10 to 16 years of age are to be selected to build their own boats from applicants who qualify for ability to do the job, selection to be made by a committee consisting of N. M. Faulds, principal, Clearwater Junior High School, W. Jardine, head of manual training department, Clearwater Junior High School and Optimist Clark Mills. Pram will be built at the boys' homes or at places provided by the sponsors.

Commodore Guy Roberts of the Clearwater Yacht Club and the seasoned sailors of that organization have prepared rules and regulations covering use of the prams. The pram fleet will be divided into classes, the first being the novice class into which all the boys starting to sail will fall. As they improve in proficiency they stand for promotion from a holder of novice class papers up to the rating of senior mariner.

An annual regatta will be held in Clearwater Bay to select the national champion pram sailor. Plans are so set-up and copyrighted that use of the name, design of boat, title to and use of craft, etc. is governed by the Optimist Club of Clearwater.

The first Optimist pram already built is to be sailed in the Yacht Club basin this afternoon. Boys and sponsors interested are invited, as well as the public. Next



The two Cliff McKays, father and son.



An early Optimist race.

week, the pram will be on display in the windows of the Florida Power Corp., Cleveland Street. Fifteen sponsors have been obtained and the Optimist Pram Committee expects a fleet of not less than 50 to be ready for the first full-scale regatta sometime in the spring.

The expanded article outlines Maj. McKay's plan in detail. Since he began work as a newspaper reporter, dad often wrote a story himself and offered it to the newspaper, saving them work and helping assure accuracy. I can hear him speaking: "The Soap Box Derby model included the \$50 cost, and for the boys to

build the boats." Mr. Faulds and Mr. Jardine were to direct that aspect of the program. Guy Roberts drafted the class rules and the sailing rules. Dad's dreams were large. From the first, he expected a state and a national regatta. In December of 1948, the first large regatta was further inflated to an international regatta, although the competitors came from nearby towns of Dunedin, Pass-a-Grill, and St. Petersburg—only 25 miles."

The boys never built the boats. I received a raw hull. I installed the mast thwart, mast step, and other small parts. I planed the edges on the dagger board and rudder, fashioned rudder fittings, rigged the sail, and painted the hull. After the fire in 1949 that destroyed the whole fleet, Clarke completed the entire hull. The first boats cost \$50. Merchants stepped forward as sponsors. Fifteen signed up the first week. Clarke began building prams, and on Nov. 16, 1947, a fleet of eight prams raced off the yacht club basin on Clearwater Bay.

Clarke Mills said in a handwritten letter to my sister in 1996, after our father's death, "I firmly believe that Major McKay was the main instigator of the very successful Optimist Pram program...I'm sure it was just as everyone said, a blockbuster of a talk that started the Pram program."

Dad's creative imagination and persuasiveness, Clarke Mills' design genius and boatbuilding skills, and the Optimist Club's energy and enthusiasm originated and launched the Optimist Pram.

NOTE 1: The language was about "Boys,"...which was typical of the times. The Optimist motto was "The Friend of the Boy." But the reality was that on March 4, 1948, The Clearwater Optimist Club voted to include girls in the pram program. Susan Smith was welcomed to the Clearwater Fleet, sailing the Palm Pavilion pram, and the nearby Dunedin Fleet had girl skippers even earlier. Carol and Jackie Longstreet, Allison Delaney, and Barbara Skinner sailed shortly after the Dunedin fleet was organized in May of 1948.