

PROLOGUE

One of the great, triumphant achievements of man is the sailboat, a solid mass which can be directed through a volatile element without machinery to power it. Yet the achievement was incomplete: “the perfect hull and rig” were still to be attained. (even in our own days competent authorities have wondered whether the combination can ever be found!) The search was to produce geniuses among designers.

—*Jerome E. Brooks*

IN THE WINTER OF 1895–1896, THE LINCOLN PARK YACHT CLUB OF Chicago challenged the Royal Canadian Yacht Club of Toronto to a series of races between a yacht belonging to the fleet of the R.C.Y.C. and *Vencedor*—a sloop currently being built at the Racine Boat Manufacturing Company (RBMCO).

The challenge came from a thirty-one-year-old cigar manufacturer from Chicago, Illinois. Edward C. Berriman, who besides running one of the biggest cigar-manufacturing businesses in the country with his brother Matthew, was also an avid yachtsman and the Commodore of the Lincoln Park Yacht Club. Berriman had confidence in the ability of the RBMCO. The company had built for him the forty-two-foot center board cutter named *Valiant*, which had won several regattas. Prior to that, the company had built a twenty-five-foot Sandbagger named *American Girl* for him. And unbeknownst to the Canadians, the Racine Company had informed Berriman that they were bringing in a young Danish American naval engineer by the name of T. Sch. Poekel to be its chief engineer and superintendent. Poekel had been a key draftsman with Nathanael Greene Herreshoff at the world-famous Herreshoff Manufacturing Company (HMCO) in Bristol, Rhode Island. The eager and aggressive owners of the Racine Company had decided to go on the world nautical stage. The challenge was to determine international yachting supremacy on that “great unsalted sea”—the Great Lakes.

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After the challenge was received, there was some preliminary correspondence and then the R.C.Y.C. formally invited the Lincoln Park Yacht Club to send a committee to Toronto to work out the details. Thus, a proposal was set in motion to bring international racing to the Great Lakes. Before this, international yacht racing had been confined to the American northeast after the sloop *America* won what would become known as the America's Cup in 1851, and brought the British American competition to American shores.

This was game on. It was the first major international battle on the Great Lakes since 1812, when Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry triumphed over the British navy declaring, "I have met the enemy and they are ours." This friendlier contest would pit the talents of Will Fife Jr., scion of the famous Scottish family with over 150 years of designing the world's fastest yachts against those of an unknown thirty-three-year-old Danish-born engineer who had honed his skills, working hard in hand with Nathanael Greene Herreshoff, perhaps the greatest yacht designer the world has ever seen. This would be Poekel's first attempt at designing a yacht in had own name. Perhaps the race was not actually between the United States and Canada, but between Denmark and Scotland. In any event, the race would be a test to determine whether Canada or the United States had supremacy on the waters of the Great Lakes. The yachting world in 1896 was waiting to see if *Vencedor*, Spanish for conqueror, would live up to its name.