

History of the 'R' Class

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Little is known today about the Universal Rule Class "R" which was such an important part of American yachting during the 1920's and the 1930's. The class became very strong in most of the country's principal yachting areas which certainly included our San Francisco Bay. The "R"s were not a one design class, but rather individually designed and built to a formula that produced yachts in the range of 38' to 42'. At one time we had 13 boats locally racing designed by 7 different designers. This was very good for the class as well as yachting racing in general. The competition between designers and builders contributed greatly to the advancement of the sport. In today's world we have many one design classes with hundreds of boats all the same with little advancement in general generated. Make no mistake, the "R"s were flat out racing machines and very much the state of the art at the time. For the most part they were long, lean, and very wet with big rigs. The rule required only that they have a cabin (very small) with 2 bunks; no head, engine or electrical system.

The "R"s impacted heavily on the new St. Francis Yacht Club, and vice versa. In 1922 member Lester Stone designed the "Rascal" and built her in his yard in Oakland. There were already several "R"s on the bay. In 1923 our member Arthur Rousseau commissioned Charles Mower in New York to design a new "R". Mower designed "R"s had been very successful on Long Island Sound, Rhode Island Sound, in the Boston area, and around Detroit and Chicago. Herb Madden in Sausalito was to build her for delivery in late 1923. Madden had already built an "R", the "Machree" just as World War I was over. The New Rousseau "R" was christened "Lady Gay". As the "Gay" was building in Sausalito, George Knesse in his yard on Stewart Street on the San Francisco Waterfront built the "R", "Francesca" for our member, Albert Weil. She was designed by the Boston office of John Alden. Weil already owned the 65' yawl, "Corsair" a beautiful model of which is in the Northwest Room.

Commodore Cliff Smith of The San Francisco Yacht Club locally had the "Lady V" built. He is credited with bringing the first Star Class boat (1920) to the Bay. He designed the "V" himself: She had hard chines, and looked just like a 40' Star Boat. She was not successful. As mentioned earlier, this was a development class; not all developments were successful, but all contributed even if only to show where not to proceed.

By 1925 the "R" class was in full swing here on the bay. Arthur Rousseau and his "Lady Gay" were a little stronger than most in the class. Rousseau also owned the 6 Meter, "Maybe", and often times would race the "Maybe" on a Saturday morning and the "Lady Gay" the same afternoon. If scheduling wouldn't permit, his 20 year old nephew, Denny Jordan would sail the "Lady Gay" with great success. The class was also very strong in Southern California, and many challenges for the San Francisco Perpetual Cup came forth for the cup from the Los Angeles Yacht Club, The California Yacht Club and the Santa Barbara Yacht Club. From 1923 through 1932 there were 10 challenges for the Cup sailed in the "R" Class. The best that the Southern California Clubs could come North with were turned back by the likes of the "Lady Gay", the "Machree", the "Rascal" and four times by the "Ace".

In 1925 Arthur Rousseau decided to build a new "R" boat. He was motivated by wanting to see the class grow locally and also to celebrate the planned opening of the new Yacht Club soon to become the St. Francis. He needed to sell the "Lady Gay", and while he had several offers from Southern Californians, he would not sell her off the bay. He also wanted her to be kept on the new club's rolls. Commodore Charles Langlais at Christmas in 1926 bought the "Lady Gay" from Arthur Rousseau. The sale was announced at the new Club's first Christmas Party held at the St. Francis Hotel. The new clubhouse was still the best part of a year away.

Rousseau again commissioned Charles Mower to design the new "R" which Herb Madden would build for delivery in early 1926. However, He and his confidant Herb Madden gave much impetus to Mower as to what they wanted as a development of the "Lady" Gay". Mower in New York had little firsthand knowledge of racing conditions on San Francisco Bay. His instructions were to design as big an "R" as possible under the rule, sacrificing some sail area to get what was to be a giant 42' "R".

The new yacht was launched right on time in time for the 1926 racing season. She was christened, "Ace", and was as fine a yacht as could be built at the time. She had varnished topsides over a polished red bottom with varnished spars, and an off-white canvas covered deck. Her sails were delivered by Ratsey & Laphorn in New York. Everything about the "Ace" was as perfect as it could be made. Rousseau, besides owning the "Maybe," also owned the 60' gaff rigged sloop, "Fulton G". The "Fult" as she was known, had been designed by Frank Stone, Lester Stone's father, and like the "Yankee" built right here in 1908, just about where the Yacht Club stands today. She was a fine big classic centerboarder with a 12' bowsprit; Rousseau raced her in various handicap divisions with great success. Now, however, after receiving a complete rebuild and refit she was to become the mother ship for the new racing yacht. Wherever the "Ace" was scheduled to go, it would be on the end of a tow line from the "Fulton G". Often over the years the "Ace" was sent South on one of the coastal steamers, the "Harvard" or the "Yale", to race. The "Fult" would make her own way South to have a presence delivering her charge from the anchorage at the Los Angeles Yacht Club out to the Pt. Fermin buoy for a day of racing. This was indeed the day of grand and proper yachting.

The "Ace" over the years proved herself to be among the "best of the best". In some ways she did just what her owner really didn't want to do. She was so good that some thought that she killed the local class. Perhaps that is true, to some degree. Alfred F. Loomis, at the time the dean of American Yachting Writers in his book, "Yachts Under Sail", says; "in the hard breezes of San Francisco Bay, Arthur Rousseau won the 1927 Perpetual Trophy Series. His "Ace" is one of the finest ever turned out. Mower designed her". Later in the book, he states "Class "R" is the important racing class on the Pacific coast. The boats such as the "Ace" are of the very wholesome type, and the heavy ones at San Francisco are probably the most powerful sailing yachts of their size in the country. This can be said because the winds that prevail on San Francisco Bay are stronger than those on any other body of water in America on which races are regularly held, and for this reason "R"s are of very generous detentions built for those waters. To the south in Los Angeles milder conditions are met, and the typical "R"s resemble the Eastern ones in length, displacement and sail area."

While the success of the "Ace", and Arthur Rousseau, may have contributed to the demise of the organized "R" class on San Francisco Bay, it must be noted that the class all over the country was on the decline in the early 1930's which can be attributed to the onset of the great economic depression. Sadly by the mid 1930's Arthur Rousseau became a victim of the hard economic times, and sold all of his yachts. He was to return, but passed away just prior to World War II.

Rousseau's unique creation, the Ace, lives on today as a St. Francis Yacht, in Seattle, where she has been lovingly restored and handily raced by our member, Bob Cadranell, under the StFYC Burgee.