

# We Took the Kids

by Jane Babbitt, from *Cruising World*, July 1989

**A family from Maine takes the big leap together and heads into the sunset.**

As Sunday evening drew to a close 200 miles offshore our daughters climbed wearily into their bunks. "Now you can stay up as late as you want when we do the offshore passage," we'd told them but, after 30 hours of sailing, they were tired. The previous night had been special our first all-night sail and both girls were fascinated by the onset of darkness. They marveled as the sun set behind us, over Great Exuma Island. As we passed the north end of Long Island, Bahamas, heading east for the open ocean and the Virgin Islands hundreds of miles away, the orange ball of the full moon rose on the eastern horizon. Mary, age 10, and Laura, age 7, admired the spectacle, then silently disappeared down below as they surrendered to sleep. Visions of another lovely Sunday evening, more than a year and a half before, came to mind. After a weekend family cruise aboard our old J-37, Bravo, on Casco Bay, Maine, we were returning to our mooring in South Freeport. Though we'd had only average weather - one day of fog, one of clear skies it had been a marvelous time. Tom thought he'd float the trial balloon to the girls. "If you had your choice, would you rather stay on the boat for a few more days, or go home?" A risky question, we thought. Mary and Laura had all they could want at our home on the York River, near the New Hampshire border. To our amazement and delight, they both quickly answered "Stay on the boat!"

Weeks later, after a 10-day cruise with the girls, we floated the Big One by them. "Now, this is just a dream, but what would you think of going sailing for a whole year?" Their response was instantaneous. "Yes!" "Awesome!"

The dream we shared as a couple we could also share as a family. The right opportunity to fulfill that dream came in the fall of 1987. Tom walked into his boss's office, sat down, and told his friend of 20 years that we were going sailing for a year, from Maine to Grenada and back. Incredulous, his boss advised him to think it over, hoping he would come to his senses. To leave a great job in a successful company, a beautiful waterfront home and scores of friends in order to live on a boat was a dream to us, a nightmare to others. "You're awfully brave to do this," we heard. "You're crazy!" a few said. "What will you do when you come back?" asked others. We were crazy to have given up the security of a comfortable life for the insecurity of a year on a sailboat? Naturally we had concerns, but it was our sincere belief that the benefits would outweigh any risks. One concern was providing the girls with a proper education. We'd heard of so many success stories about children being educated through the Calvert School courses that we felt confident about this method. Mary was accepted by Calvert for the fifth grade program, but we knew we faced a challenge. She had come out of fourth grade still counting on her fingers and with minimal spelling skills, but with a special award from the state of Maine for her creative writing. Laura's first grade experience had been excellent, in an experimental multi-graded class with a truly gifted teacher. Having already mastered much of the second grade material, she is now hurtling through her lessons from Calvert and also supplemental work from our elementary school. Neither Tom nor I had been trained as teachers, but the Calvert lessons are easy to administer. In a burst of patriotic enthusiasm, we began lessons on July 4, 1988, while we were spending some time in Blue Hill, Maine, where my parents live. As Tom and my father worked on the boat installing the autopilot, cabin heater and sundry other things, the girls spread out their books on my parents' dining table. At first it was a breeze, as the introductory lessons weren't terribly involved. With Mary on my left and Laura on my right, I bounced from one to the other, explaining, helping, checking answers. But as the days wore

on, I wore out. Spending time listening to Laura read a story meant that Mary had to wait for me to dictate her spelling words. They were getting bored and I was getting dizzy bouncing from second grade on my right to fifth grade on my left. By the second week of lessons, Tom had become Mary's teacher. His superior work habits were vital to her progress, as she drilled her math lessons until she was able to complete them sitting on her hands. No more finger counting! The one-on-one teaching not only sharpened Mary's skills, but also enhanced her relationship with her father, which had suffered from Tom's years of business travel.

Of course, education hasn't been limited to the prepared courses. While still dreaming about the trip, we asked the girls what they would miss most about living on a boat. "Books!" was their reply. So now our second-largest storage commodity on the boat (first being food) is books. We have over a dozen Peterson, Audubon Society and other miscellaneous guidebooks, books on the ocean, The ABCs of Nature, books about Caribbean trees, flowers, fruits and vegetables, all dog-eared from the girls' constant perusal. We have cupboards and bags full of paperbacks-over 20 Nancy Drew mysteries, almost the entire "Babysitters' Club" series and scores of novels ranging from Anne of Green Gables to A Wrinkle in Time. Luckily, the girls enjoy the same books, and that doubles their usefulness and extends our storage capabilities. Between them, Mary and Laura have read well over 100 books in eight months, sometimes at a rate of one book a day! They're both also learning a lot about life in general and the world of nature surrounding them. Together they often row to the nearest shore, where they scoop up starfish, crabs, jellyfish or other assorted local wildlife. Intense observation and the naming of each specimen is followed by a sometimes tearful farewell to "Fuzzy," "Quilliver," or "Big Mama."

Another concern we had in removing Mary and Laura from the security of their normal childhood environment was the trauma of leaving hometown friends and the uncertainty of making new ones. Mary's best friend in York has tried hard to have a letter waiting at each of our mail drops, and Laura's friends have sent enough notes and cards to let her know she's not forgotten. Making new friends has been one of the surprising highlights of the trip for all of us, but Tom and I are especially gratified to see the girls developing the poise and confidence that enables them to meet people easily. Formerly shy violets, they're now comfortable striking up conversations with people of all ages and nationalities.

Before we left home, we listened one evening to the shrieks and wails of a "sisterly disagreement." Tom said to me, "When we're on the boat, Jane, just remember, they did this at home, too!" That advice has reassured me many times on the boat, whenever the shrieks and wails start up. Although sometimes I think we've destroyed their psychological well being by forcing them to live in such a small space, Tom's reminder makes me remember that the girls are just normal siblings.

From having separate bedrooms in our old house, Mary and Laura now proudly share their aft cabin, dubbed "The Fox Den." All their toys (Barbie dolls, mostly) fit in one plastic sweater box; all their clothes are in one cabinet, two drawers and a hanging locker. The close quarters sometimes aggravate them, but overall their relationship has grown stronger. They depend on each other more than ever before, and value each other's friendship. Some of their best lessons are learned from one another. Laura's swimming skills lay dormant until Mary took her under her wing, gave her lessons and encouraged her performance as only a loving sister can do.

Spending 24 hours a day together has been a challenge for all of us. Not many kids have to endure their parents' watchful eyes with such regularity; not many couples have to endure such close scrutiny by their children!

New family traditions have sprouted, which has been one result of the girls' growing creativity. One day Mary said, "Let's all vote on who we think deserves to be the Guest of Honor at dinner tonight." I humbly admit to having won the vote, and I was pampered, praised and excused from dishes that evening. Since then, "Guest of Honor" has evolved into a surprise award, bestowed on the unsuspecting recipient with his or her favorite cassette playing, a "cape" (beach towel) draped over his/her shoulders, and a special table setting with a prized placemat (current favorite: laminated array of stamps of the Netherlands Antilles) festooned with "kid art" created for the occasion. Being chosen never fails to bring tears to my eyes, but then I'm the sentimental one in the family. We hope this delightful tradition can be transplanted successfully someday to a land-based home.

Maybe their creativity would have blossomed on land, but we think the distractions and turmoil of our children's old lives would have subdued it. The girls are forced to be more creative on the boat, because they have less with which to work. Hours were spent making Halloween decorations that filled the boat - Kleenex ghosts hanging from thread cobwebs, graveyard scenes cut from construction paper. For Christmas, Mary wrote and directed a pageant for herself, Laura and three of their friends. Mary has devised a unique and tasty salad using ingredients we often have on board - apples, carrots, raisins and an assortment of other fresh ingredients with her own magic dressing. She and Laura also create spontaneous and original breakfasts and lunches for us. Would they bother on land?

We've often looked forward to returning to a land home, but lately it's been discussed less and in more abstract terms. It's hard to think about going "home" when we already are home. Granted, our home is more mobile than most and occasionally rocks from side to side, but it's a home with which we're all comfortable. As the girls point out simply, it's got everything we need.

The challenge of our new cruising lifestyle was never greater than when we faced the offshore passage from George-Town, in the Exumas, to St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands. We'd set our sights on Grenada, ultimately, and the biggest step in getting there was this passage. While we both had concerns about it, Tom was confident that we were capable of doing it successfully. I was afraid that my physical and psychological limitations would hamper our efforts. My strength is no match for a hefty muscular male and I'm a somewhat tense sailor who suffers intestinal pains and headaches when agitated. Since developing allergies a few years ago, my tendency toward seasickness has intensified. Being one to choose worrying over not worrying, I agonized about taking our children out into the open ocean. I knew there was a good chance they'd get seasick also, but they've become used to that and are good-natured and resilient. Rough days bore them. When restricted to sitting topside, too queasy to read, time hangs heavily. Could they endure that for five or six days, and was it fair to ask this of them? I wanted to do an offshore passage in spite of my reservations, because the challenge appealed to me. We had explained the passage to the girls thoroughly, the route, the weather possibilities, the anticipated schedule and as many pros and cons as we could think of. Voicing their own concerns and expectations, they accepted our decision to go.

From the outset, safety and ease of handling had been prime considerations in choosing and outfitting our boat. Having been pleased with three previous J-Boats, and being able to help redesign the interior of the J-40 to make it more suitable for extended cruising, we were quick to make it our boat of choice. With all operations other than spinnaker work accessible from the cockpit, the new Bravo is easy for the two of us to handle. Reefing is quick and simple, accomplished from under the protection of the dodger. We upgraded to heavy-duty ports, added single-side band radio for offshore communications and installed a Ronstan Latchway system, which allows us to move freely about the boat without unhooking our harnesses. We were confident the boat could handle the passage, without taxing our small crew.

Having the inflatable dinghy stowed below, our "abandon ship" bag ready in the cockpit, a float plan transmitted to friends in Man O' War by way of SSB and three dinners frozen in plastic bags, we departed George-Town at noon on Saturday, January 21, 1989. The afternoon sail was delightful, which lulled us into neglecting seasickness medication. As the night went on, the wind rose and so did the waves, and Tom was saddled with all the navigation chores in the cabin because I was unable to go below in the unsettled seas. The SatNav and radar guided us past Conception Island, Rum Cay and, finally, San Salvador, the last land before St. John, over five days away.

By Sunday morning I was seasick. The waves were erratic and building with the increasing wind. Tom had allowed me plenty of sleep, which had left him with almost none. Conditions deteriorated through Sunday, but as the girls went to bed that night, they were still healthy and happy. Monday the wind was averaging 25 knots and the seas were high and sloppy. Now the girls were seasick, too. We took turns on the leeward rail, often climbing over each other in the process. Our safety harness tethers crossed and tangled, and sometimes we caught up short before we reached the rail. Through our misery, we laughed. We kept count of our rail side excursions and Laura won. "I did it twelve times," she crowed. These were the girls I worried about?

Tom has an iron stomach and survives all, thankfully, but he was exhausted from doing almost everything himself. If I couldn't rally enough to give Tom adequate rest, we would have to heave to or turn back to San Salvador. Thus began a series of two-hour watches, with Tom's two hours always slightly longer than mine. Monday night our course and speed were determined solely by comfort. We had already dropped the triple-reefed main, so by staying with just the 85 percent jib we were still making distance east, but at only five to seven knots with an easier motion. The performance and handling of the boat in the large breaking seas delighted both of us.

By Tuesday the wind dropped to under 20 knots and we decided to hoist the main again. Tom started to hoist it and suddenly shouted as the halyard came loose and went flying up the mast, almost to the top. We set the autopilot on as calm a heading as possible in the erratic 10foot waves and slowly I cranked Tom up the mast with the spinnaker halyard. After some gut-wrenching misses, he grabbed the flailing halyard, but a knot prevented it from running free through the stopper in the cockpit.

We shouted for Mary, who came barreling up the companionway in response. Her face was a picture of surprise, and questions were ready to spill from her mouth, but we stopped her short with a command to free up the main halyard. This was an order she'd heard before, and soon she had the line untangled and moving freely. Tom worked the halyard down to the deck where I could reach it and secure it. I eased him down as fast as he could handle and we both breathed a sigh of relief.

When Mary's questions poured out and I heard the fear in her voice, we reassured her that all was well and that the problem was resolved. We resumed our course and collected our wits before finally raising the main, this time with the halyard tightened pliers-tight.

The sunrise Thursday, our last day at sea, was spectacular. The wind had filled in from the east and we surfed down the waves. I stayed on the helm most of the day, allowing Tom to nap as much as he could between navigation chores. Mary and Laura were back to normal, which meant staying below most of the day, eating or playing. They weren't fazed by the fact that we were hundreds of miles from land; they were home and this was just another long day of sailing.

At dusk we saw a loom of light on the horizon, bearing 240 degrees. It was San Juan, Puerto Rico, over 70 miles away! Before dawn we could see the lights on the hills of St. Thomas in the distance. As

promised, we woke the girls so they could share this first sight of land. They rose wearily, but as they looked forward and saw the lights twinkling onshore, great smiles of satisfaction spread across their faces. We were there; we'd done it. The log read 920 miles.

We launched this dream trip expecting to see and experience new things, to pursue special goals and accomplish the challenge of a lifetime. We were excited by the prospect of stretching our limits. The offshore passage was a leg of the trip we'd planned on from the beginning. The decision to go was one I regretted often during the first few days of my bout with seasickness, but one that delighted me once we'd completed the passage. To accept a challenge I thought was beyond my capabilities and to succeed was surprisingly rewarding.

In St. Thomas we went out for a celebration dinner and talked about the trip. The effect on the girls was already apparent too, by the subtle, easygoing bravado they wore so well. Awards were bestowed: Mary was "Most Helpful Midnight Visitor" for her cheerful nocturnal visits and for assuming watch over Albert the autopilot one night when neither Tom nor I could stay awake. Laura was proud recipient of the "Leeward Rail Award." later Mary said, "I used to think school was hard, but not after that Passage! If I can do that, I can do lots of things." Was our decision to surrender the security of our comfortable life onshore the right one for us? Absolutely.

**Jane and Tom Babbitt and their children lived in York Maine, before embarking on their cruising sabbatical to the Caribbean.**