



Elizabeth F. Reed House

1874

BOOTHBAY REGION HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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The following article was written by Barbara Rumsey and appeared in the Boothbay Register. Proceeds from the sale of this article support the historical society and make possible the preservation of local history for the benefit of all.

1917 Hodgdon Brothers Subchasers



Subchaser SC138, launched in January 1918 from the Hodgdon yard, is dockside at the main steamer wharf in Boothbay Harbor with her crew and laundry fluttering.

Out of Our Past

Boothbay Region Historical Society

By Barbara Rumsey

The World War I years marked the first time local yards built vessels for the federal government. The Townsend Marine Railway in Boothbay Harbor (now Boothbay Harbor Shipyard) built the 108-foot *Halcyon* in 1916. She was a fisheries research vessel designed by J. Arthur Stevens, founding partner of East Boothbay's Goudy & Stevens shipyard, now the site of Hodgdon Yachts. The construction of *Halcyon* first brought J. Arthur Stevens to town from Popham, and I believe it was the first federal vessel built here.

Rice Brothers Federal Work

The following year in 1917, Rice Brothers, the East Boothbay shipyard now the site of Washburn & Doughty, built a federal lightship which was destroyed in the devastating July 1917 fire there. Robert Rice,

grandson of one of the Rice brothers, told me that our town was on edge during the war, as was much of the country. Many local people, ever vigilant for suspicious activities, traded in conspiracy theories, and I heard similar local stories set in the World War II era. Following the July 1917 fire that destroyed Rice Brothers and the lightship under construction, rumors floated around town that the fire was the work of German saboteurs. Robert and I snickered about that, certain that real saboteurs would have targeted a slightly more vital war production facility, maybe something at least along the lines of Bath Iron Works....

Hodgdon Brothers Federal Work

Also in 1917, East Boothbay's Hodgdon Brothers shipyard, already 100 years old, built two federal subchasers in its yard, currently the site of Ocean Point Marina. The old Hodgdon business (now called Hodgdon Yachts) is

now in its modern form south across the little harbor, as noted above.

During the first World War, 303 subchasers, intended to pursue and attack enemy U-boats, were built for the American Navy. Another 100 were built for France, and more were ordered but not completed until after the Armistice. In all, 441 subchasers were built. They were 110-foot vessels, manned by a crew of about 25, with 220-horsepower engines able to theoretically achieve 18 knots, and with a range of 1,000 nautical miles. Their armaments included deck guns and depth charge equipment. For communications and detection, they had radio telephones and telegraphs and various hydrophone devices.

According to the Boothbay Register, Hodgdon's started building their subchasers in May 1917 while continuing with ongoing work on a three-masted 88-foot yacht and power launches. We

have photos, which I believe were taken in June 1917, of one of the subchasers in frame just north of the main building. The bow extends to the backyard of the first house on Lincoln Street, built by Will Hodgdon of Hodgdon Brothers in 1915. By October, part of the first subchaser's future crew was in town and boarding at the rambling Granville and Harriet Seavey boarding house on School Street, just above Shipbuilders Park. That house was torn down in the mid-1900s.

Subchaser Launchings

In mid-November 1917, the first of the subchasers, SC137, was launched into the Damariscotta River, as seen in the photo above with the little island behind. That island is now part of the mainland, joined by 1960s fill. Just east of Lincoln Street, the filled area is used for boat storage space. The vessel went to Bath for engine installation, but returned to East Boothbay for fitting out and speed trials. The first powered trip out of local waters was to Rockland in early December. Finally in mid-December, the vessel with officers and crew left for Portsmouth, New Hampshire. By early January, the second and last, SC138, was launched from Hodgdon Brothers at 6 a.m.—a

propitious time for a good turnout at launchings was obviously not a priority. Growing up playing in the yards and having a father and husband who worked in the yards, I remember hearing often, "Get her over, get our money." The

captain is in the rather low crow's nest.

Subchasers at War

SC137 was one of 133 subchasers sent overseas. She left her training base of New London,



From what looks like launching wedges on her starboard side, subchaser SC137 was just launched from East Boothbay's Hodgdon Brothers yard in November 1917. The photo looks north up the Damariscotta River.

other photo shown above is SC138 at the steamer wharf in Boothbay Harbor, with Pierce & Hartung's sprawling coal shed (now Rocktide) on the east side in the background. A homey touch is the men's laundry hanging along the wharf's edge. The officers appear segregated on top of the vessel's pilot house, and Robert Rice and I both think the

Connecticut in convoy with 18 other subchasers in late April 1918 and hopped across by way of Bermuda, the Azores, and France. She carried too little fuel, 2,400 gallons, to make it across in one shot. She arrived at her base of Portsmouth, England in mid-June 1918, where her commanding officer was the unit coordinator for hunting, pursuits, and attacks, and she herself participated in two attacks. SC138, on the other hand, stayed in America, serving on the Atlantic coast in patrol duties.

After the war, SC137 was ordered to proceed to northern Russia to assist the U.S. troops withdrawing during the Russian Revolution. However, after arrival at Scotland, she was directed home and recrossed the Atlantic. Both SC137 and SC138 were decom-



Subchaser SC137 is under construction next to the Hodgdon Brothers shipyard building in East Boothbay. Just launched is the Alden-designed three-master W.I. Bowditch in late June 1917.

missioned in Newark, New Jersey, and were sold in June 1921. SC137 became a New York private yacht called *Junior Annapolis II*. I don't know what became of SC138.

The war work at Hodgsons was the beginning of decades of such federal contracts for that and other local yards during World War II and the Korean War. The federal work went on in peacetime and to this day for federal seagoing readiness and for milder domestic forms of war—rumchasers during Prohibition, and lightships and other Coast Guard craft for the fight to keep vessels safe at sea.

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Of great help with this article was Todd Woofenden of Bowdoinham, whose chosen field of research is World War I subchasers and who edits the website, subchaser.org. A year ago Todd supplied the society with photocopies of National Archives documents pertinent to SC137 and 138, including war diaries, ship movements, photos in Europe, and telegrams, and he gave the society a copy of his book on the topic, *Hunters of the Steel Sharks*.

This article appeared in the Boothbay Register on March 3rd, 2009. Additional articles are available by calling the society or by going to our website at www.boothbayhistorical.org.

