

## The Grand Finale: A Tribute to My Father

by

Anne M. Wall

My father, John E. Wall, and I shared a number of interests. In particular we both loved to read and learn, we enjoyed meeting and working with people around the globe, and we shared a passion for many of the same outdoor sports. It was through these shared interests and the values he taught me that I will forever be impacted by his influence.

In addition to skiing and biking, my father's greatest passion was sailing. The story I am about to tell is one of courage, confidence and determination. It's both a tribute to Dad and also an adventure story about survival on Lake Michigan.



In the summer of 2011, my father and I set sail with his sister and brother-in-law aboard a 36' cutter rigged sailboat. This was our final sail aboard "Tara." After 20 years of enjoyment, Dad had decided to sell the sailboat.

We began our journey under blue skies, along the familiar coast of Wisconsin's Door County Peninsula. Having cruised this area many times, we knew weather on the Great Lakes could be challenging and unpredictable – sometimes even deadly.

One week earlier, news reports indicated that two experienced sailors had died when their 35' sailboat capsized during a storm on Lake Michigan in the "Race to Mackinac."

On this day in July, we woke to a sunlit sky and a gentle onshore breeze, ideal conditions for a day-sail. The forecast called for the possibility of an evening storm. Anticipating a lovely cruise, we set sail from our slip in Fish Creek.

For the better part of the morning, we sailed under a light breeze and sunny skies. I served as navigator and crew, while my 85-year old father assumed his rightful role as skipper.

By late morning, we dropped anchor in a bay off on the north side of Chambers Island for lunch. As a precaution, we checked the weather forecast again. No storms were forecasted that afternoon.

While my aunt prepared lunch, I took a brisk swim. I noticed an unusual occurrence while swimming. There were no surface waves yet underneath the surface, I felt a strong current building with each lap. I could sense danger and instinctively knew the weather was changing - even though there was nothing in the recent forecast.

I rightly assumed this unusual current was caused by a sharp drop in pressure, which signaled a change in weather. Following my instincts, I quickly climbed aboard and encouraged everyone to finish lunch and set sail for homeport. After we rounded the first buoy, the wind speed rose and waves began to build. The sun was still shining as a thin line of clouds appeared along the distant horizon.



Still protected by the island, we made our way along the eastern shore, when the wind shot up to 18 knots. The sky above us was clear, but I noticed a squall forming across the bay along the Michigan shoreline, so I put a reef in mainsail to reduce the exposed area.

Once we cleared the island, the northwest wind climbed to 25 knots. My father was enjoying himself at the helm. I requested permission to take down sails. Dad assured me that our boat could handle 35 knots of wind. But I knew I would not have the strength to drop the mainsail and furl the jenny if the winds got any higher. It was at this point that Dad became aware of the squall building in the northwest. He allowed me to douse the sails.

As the wind continued to accelerate, I checked to make sure the radar and GPS were operational. To ensure that we would be prepared, while Dad stayed at the helm, I distributed foul-weather gear, lifejackets and safety harnesses, and brought up a hand held radio and emergency beacon.

We hoped to stay ahead of the front, but bad weather hit us long before predicted. The barometric pressure continued to drop. Within minutes the skies turned dark and ominous. It was only mid-afternoon, yet day turned into night. We got hammered with wind, rain and waves as a tremendous storm moved overhead. The task of returning safely to homeport grew by biblical proportions.

The mounting waves and wind caused the vessel to heel as if under full sail, although we were now operating under bare pole and motor power. It took all Dad's strength to keep the boat from broaching, which could have damaged the rigging and injured the crew. We hung on for life while water washed over our deck.

I secured my safety harness to the mahogany after taffrail. Dad did not take time to put on a lifejacket or safety harness. I held onto his foul-weather jacket to keep him from washing overboard as he continued to steer the boat with all the force he could muster. My aunt and uncle sat low in the cockpit to avoid being pitched out.

With a strong weather-helm, the boat became extremely difficult to handle. Autopilot was of no use. The job required tremendous strength, determination and a cool head. Dad wrestled with the helm and contemplated the best course of action, while our guests remained calm and confident in my father's ability.

Our options were: (1) try to out run the storm back to the harbor; (2) ride out the storm offshore; or, (3) head to weather and hope the storm passes overhead. None of these options were without risk. Dad decided to run with the wind and waves, and head back to Fish Creek.

The storm continued to rage all around us. There were waterspouts forming. The wind ranged from gale strength to hurricane force. According to my father, our anemometer showed wind gusts peaking at 77 knots, which is roughly 86 miles per hour! (That's higher than Hurricane Sandy, when it hit the east-coast.)

As we made a run for the harbor, the front rolled over us from the stern. We pitched and rolled on the waves. Fierce winds blew the sailboat below the mouth of the harbor. We struggled to avoid an unmarked but well-known reef. Fortunately, we made it!

Once we entered the harbor, we faced another challenge. The wind direction made it impossible to get into our slip. As if by divine intervention, we found shelter in the lee of a massive motor yacht secured to the main gas dock. It blocked the worst of the wind and shielded us for the time being. Dad spun Tara in circles to stay tucked behind the motor yacht, prepared to ride out the storm there if necessary.

With assistance onshore from my brother Terrence, we obtained access to a temporary slip. There was a strong tail wind and no room for error. Dad skillfully maneuvered the sailboat into the slip.



By this point we were wet, cold and exhausted. Terrence offered us a warm, dry place to stay with a hot shower at his condo. We felt relieved to be safely onshore and happy to accept his invitation.

My father's courage, confidence and determination saved us that day. Decades of sailing experience paid off. Together, we persevered in the face of adversity.

Our story ended well. Nobody aboard Tara was injured and we had an exciting adventure to share with friends and family. Mother dubbed this our "Grand Finale." It was the last time we sailed together aboard Tara and the final sail for my father.

Sadly, John Wall passed away on October 30, 2017 at age 91. He lived a remarkable life and will be missed by those he left behind. Outdoor sports and travel adventures shared with my father over the years have become treasured memories. As we adjust to life without Dad, the lessons he taught us will serve us well.