

## **How Tough Can Anchoring in a Lake Be Anyway? Or “Just in Case”**

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M/S Sojourn  
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**We began an extended Labor Day weekend peacefully swinging at anchor east of Central Point in Lake Pepin, Minnesota. All was well with the world, at least until Sunday night, when all hell broke loose.**



Lake Pepin is actually a wide spot in the Mississippi River about three miles wide and seventeen miles long. She's seventy miles or so southeast of the twin cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, and is nestled between the Minnesota and Wisconsin borders, surrounded by bucolic tree-encrusted bluffs rising nearly a thousand feet above the water.

We have learned that Lake Pepin can yield fickle but interesting racing and cruising conditions, including diverse and sometimes volatile weather. We had chosen a favorite anchorage about 200

yards offshore in the wind shadow of a prominent point of land to our west.

We arrived at our “getaway” in our forty motor sailor, “Sojourn” after bolting from work on Thursday afternoon for the forty-five minute drive to the boat. Due to lack of wind, after casting off, and motoring (not sailing) for less than thirty minutes from our home port of Lake City, Minnesota, my first mate, Kay, drove the boat for our anchoring procedure. I had the honors of handling the anchoring gear (ground tackle to you salties).

I dropped our fifty-five pound anchor down into the good old sticky Mississippi bottom mud with one hundred and twenty feet of chain attaching it to the boat. With no significant weather events in the forecast, we felt this was adequate. We would learn just how adequate later in about seventy-two hours.



Over the course of the long weekend, we took several dozen sextant sightings in preparation for our upcoming celestial navigation class. We lounged, read, napped, shared some wine, and generally relaxed. We intermingled this with some boat maintenance and filling out the ship's logs.

We enjoyed sitting under our heavy white canvas awning, which almost entirely covers our rather generous foredeck. This awning would also become a point of intense interest later in the weekend.

By Sunday, the weather channels on our marine radio were forecasting a 50% chance of showers and thunderstorms with wind southeast at only ten to fifteen miles per hour. By mid-afternoon, we could see cloud cover building over the horizon to the northwest.

I was checking all our anchoring gear, and ensuring all was secure down below--just in case--when friends of ours cruised by in their get-to-shore boat called a dinghy and invited us to dinner at a nearby restaurant later that evening. We gladly accepted and agreed to meet them at the restaurant. After closing up our boat (thankfully), we made the quick trip to the restaurant in our own dinghy. They went by car from their home port.

As we were sitting in the restaurant, the weather quickly worsened. Lightening struck frequently, and heavy rain ensued. We ate a leisurely meal, hoping the rain would stop for our ride back to the boat. Ultimately it did. We said good bye to our friends, and headed back to the boat. By this time, we could barely see her anchor light from shore only three hundred yards away.

Fortunately, the rain had mostly abated, but the wind had whipped up to twenty five MPH or so, and the ride back was a rather rough and wet. While our boat has considerable clearance above the water, making it difficult to climb aboard from a small boat, it fortunately also has a

swim platform near water level. That was the good news. The bad news was that the platform and the boat were moving around a good deal, as was the dinghy, but, of course, never in the same direction or speed at the same time.

We cautiously approached, and Kay quickly and successfully stepped aboard, but not without severely bruising her leg and ankle on the dinghy's bow rail as it suddenly decided to launch skyward as she disembarked. This was to be the first of several badges of courage to be earned this weekend.

With some difficulty, I secured the dinghy at the end of her doubled-up fifty foot polypropylene (floating) tow line, and we decided to button up for the night, with the dinghy trailing the mother ship nicely twenty-five feet to her rear. This would also be of interest later that evening.

We watched movies in the main cabin until about 10PM and went to bed with lots of lightening, only about twenty MPH, and two to three foot seas rolling in from the southeast, which was only half a mile to the near (Minnesota) shore. It was still raining, so we left the awning up. This enabled us to leave a large hatch open for ventilation above our bed on that warm night. All in all, not too bad.

I got out of bed several times over the next two hours to deal with an uneasy feeling over the anchoring gear. I tied a protective cover around the anchor chain and wrapped it around a strong attachment point on the boat—just in case.

We were plumed toward the southeast wind when we went to bed. The boat was facing northwest when we were awakened by a feeling of weightlessness in our forward stateroom. This uneasy sensation was followed by a good deal of irregular motion, accompanied by a screeching noise from the anchor chain. Our boat seldom heels, or tips toward one side, but at that moment, at anchor, we were heeling more than either Kay or I were comfortable with, especially since down in the bedroom, we had no idea what was going on. The anchor chain was protesting loudly. We traded rather intriguing looks with each other, and few out of bed.

Rapidly, on the way topsides at midnight, I swung by the breaker panel to turn on the instruments, getting to the cockpit at the rear of the boat about the time the boat started SAILING BESIDE anchor. High winds were pummeling the foredeck awning, which was acting like a sail, but it would have clearly been dangerous to go forward at that point, much less try to tame a hundred square feet of wildly buffeting canvas.

Now just two miles for the wave to build, now from ACROSS the lake from the Wisconsin shore, we were experiencing five to seven foot rolling waves, the tops of which were being blown off, and felt like breakers. As I looked at the wind instrument, in our cockpit which is protected by a canvas and clear plastic windshield / awning combination called a bimini top, the digital wind meter read a steady sixty knots (that's seventy miles per hour for you lubbers) for over five seconds, which felt like an eternity, before it dropped to a fairly steady fifty MPH.

The wind remained at this level for over fifteen minutes. Seemed much longer !

During this time, Kay and I were in the cockpit together. There was no panic. We constantly reviewed contingencies, safety measures, risks and watched the most dramatic show Mother Nature had ever revealed to either of us.

Lightening was now non-stop all around us. The wind howled with impressive ferocity. There was a great deal of water in the air, not so much from rain, but from wind-whipped lake water. At one point, the dinghy, which was momentarily beside the mother ship subsequently disappeared from sight UNDER the rear corner of Sojourn, reappearing behind us seconds later.

Our first concern was not the ship. We had ultimate confidence in her. Our fear was of dragging the anchor and being tossed onto the rocky shore behind us. Although we were more than a third of a mile from that hostile shore, I had only had enough chain to be confident in the moderate conditions that were predicted, not the kind of maelstrom we were experiencing at that moment. We started further preparations anticipating the worst--just in case.

Peering over the back of the boat called the transom, we learned that the dinghy's apparent trip under Sojourn's transom had fouled her tow line in the rudder or propeller. We didn't know which, but both are bad, folks! Kay and I agreed that since we did not seem to be dragging at that point, and that we had some distance to real trouble, we would wait until the wind subsided a bit before attempting to clear the tow line. We also agreed, however, that we needed to be

able to maneuver if the situation demanded.

Let's review: twenty-three feet of water, seven foot seas that seemed to be increasing in size, sustained winds over fifty MPH, insufficient anchor chain for these conditions, a huge awning over the foredeck causing us to potentially sail off our anchor, and a fouled propeller while being blown toward a hostile shore. But you know what? We were supremely confident in the boat and her crew. All the rest was just a fascinating adventure. This was a defining moment for us as an aspiring liveboard couple. We could deal with this!

The wind dropped to "only" a steady forty MPH. Kay and I cautiously went forward, always with one hand for ourselves and one hand for the ship, as they say. As I cut the lines securing the awning with my trusty jack knife, Kay immediately began stuffing it below through our forward hatch. We then almost crawled back to the cockpit. The next order of business was clearing the propeller.

We tied a rope around my chest and then to boat. I crawled down onto the swim platform, which was six feet out of the water half the time, submerged the rest of the time. When it plummeted from the former to the latter, the teak grate work below me became dozens of efficient inch-square water cannons, pelting me with high velocity bursts of the Mississippi River's finest.

Face down on the platform, I managed to cut the dinghy's tow line as close to the rudder as I could reach, and Kay was then able to pull the rest of the line

through from the other end. Success! Now we could maneuver if necessary.

Back on board, we "high-fived" each other, feeling pretty cocky at that point. Later, we would inventory some rather colorful bruises and scratches not yet evident on various parts of my anatomy, but each one would be an equally colorful memory and story over the coming weeks.

It was now 130AM Labor Day morning. The lightening and rain had moved off to the east, and while the wind was still blowing from the northeast at about thirty-five MPH, this now seemed tame by comparison. We started to think about taking turns watching for trouble while the other slept. Kay was experiencing her first adrenalin hangover ever, and was a bit queasy from it, but she was about as wide awake as she could be, so she volunteered for the first watch from the cockpit. I set up the bed in the cabin, right inside the cockpit door, and was asleep within five minutes.

We took turns until about 3AM, when the wind remained mostly below twenty MPH. With increased visibility, we could now see that the boat had not moved from her original location. Bed time for all!

By morning, with winds less than fifteen MPH out of the southeast again, there was no visible damage to the boat, or, miraculously, to the dinghy, other than minor nicks and scratches. Both boats and crew had performed admirably.

Back at the marina, it was a topic of some discussion that we were "out there" during "the storm", but both Kay

and I were quite casual about the whole affair. Felt darn good.

The previous night had been the worst storm that Kay and I had experienced so far in our thirteen years of experience as a boating couple. It further increased our confidence in ourselves and our vessel. It also reinforced our faith in the wisdom of planning for “just in case”. We wouldn’t have traded this experience for anything. I guess that’s why boaters are considered a breed apart.

