

53 YEARS AFTER SAILBOAT CAPSIZED IN SOUND

Splashy reunion



PHOTO BY KELLY QUINLAN GODDARD

Rescuer William Parsons, left, a circuit court judge in Florida, met with Ed Gaffney, whom he rescued 53 years ago when Gaffney's 26-foot sloop, The Falcon, capsized in the Sound.

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Rescuer meets up with grateful rescuee in Old Saybrook

By Lisa Reisman

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OLD SAYBROOK » On the afternoon of Saturday, July 22, 1962, Ed Gaffney and four companions set sail in The Falcon, his 26-foot sloop, from Old Saybrook's Cornfield Point for Clinton Harbor. They never got there.

At Old Saybrook's Fresh Salt last Saturday, Gaffney, a resident

of Old Saybrook, met William Parsons who, at the age of 15, saved the lives of him and his shipmates in a series of events so sudden and unlikely that the Hartford Times splashed the story across its front page. The two had not seen each other since the rescue. That's 53 years.

Parsons, now a judge in Florida's 7th Judicial Circuit, was in town to celebrate the 50th re-

union of his class at Old Saybrook High School.

"He contacted me a few months ago and asked if I wanted to get together," said the 76-year-old Meriden native who, years before, sent Judge Parsons "The Falcon," a lively 15-page account he wrote about his adventures on his eponymous sailboat. In it, he vividly details the hours leading to the famous rescue that Saturday af-

ternoon in late July 1962.

There was the picnic at his uncle's Old Saybrook house he enjoyed with a pair of friends and "two ladies" they'd met at a restaurant before they set off from Cornfield Point for Clinton, he recounts. Five minutes into the sail, a great blast of wind struck The Falcon, forcing the main sail to tip over. With "water filling the boat in about ten seconds," he writes, he ordered everyone to abandon ship.

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Given the abrupt and violent nature of the squall—“there were no warnings whatsoever,” Gaffney said—the dinghy that the sailboat was towing got pulled down with the boat, leaving the five “with only two cushions to hang onto for support.”

In their effort to stay together, they “started singing songs for entertainment,” he writes. But because the waves were turbulent, they gradually drifted apart and further and further out to sea.

Some in the group began to lose hope. Seeing the Coast Guard Cutter pass without sighting them, one told the rest, Gaffney writes, that “he was getting tired and to let him go and save ourselves.” The two women on board were “screaming and crying.”

Unknown to any of them, the sinking of *The Falcon* had not gone unnoticed. As the *New London Day* reported, “calls informing Old Saybrook Police of the incident jammed the police switchboard.” But the Coast Guard was already occupied with several other boats that were in trouble.

Then there was 15-year-old William Parsons who was standing on nearby Knollwood Beach Pier. “Someone told me a boat had sunk and pointed toward Cornfield Point,” he recalled in a telephone interview from Florida.

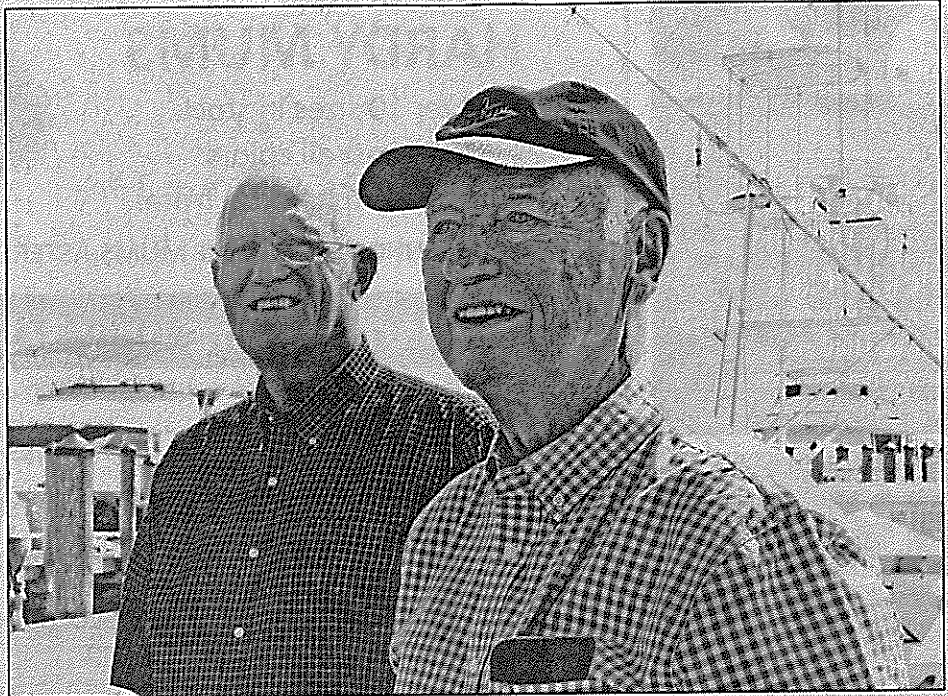


PHOTO BY KELLY QUINLAN GODDARD

Rescuer William Parsons, a circuit court judge in Florida, left, rescued 53 years ago when his sloop capsized in the Sound, with Ed Gaffney, whom he

Parsons had grown up on those waters. He knew the tides. He knew the waves. He knew the currents. “That was my world,” the 68-year-old said.

“If they sank near Cornfield Point, I was pretty sure they would have drifted toward the Saybrook Breakwater Lighthouse,” he said.

Using his 16-foot motorboat with an old 30 horsepower Johnson, he headed in that direction. First he saw cushions on the water, then five people clinging to the seat cushions.

Having loaded them onto his motorboat — “it must have looked comical,” he said, “all of them on my lit-

tle boat” — he proceeded to Cornfield Point, encountering a Coast Guard captain on the way. “It appears you have everything under control,” the captain told the teenager and saluted him.

Until his lunch with Judge Parsons, Gaffney, the president of the Old Saybrook Lions Club, wasn’t aware of that interchange. Nor did he know just how well the future judge knew the waters—once, in fact, challenging himself to swim from Cornfield Point to the Saybrook Breakwater Lighthouse, a considerable distance.

“He was familiar with the currents and the tides, and that’s how he knew we

would be where we were,” said the former Industrial Arts teacher at Southington High School and the retired founder of The Work Bank Inc., a Hartford-based nonprofit that provides jobs to people with disabilities in a cooperative arrangement with area industries.

“That’s probably what saved our group,” added the grandfather of three.

“That a 15-year-old would go out and take charge like that,” said Ree Gaffney, Ed’s wife, who attended the lunch. “No wonder he’s gone so far.”

For copies of “*The Falcon*,” email Ed Gaffney at irishedree@comcast.net.