



An unexpected halt on the Dismal Swamp Canal leads to a cherished holiday memory

By Ellen Massey Leonard

I thought the hardships of the day were over when I steered our 38-foot cutter *Heretic* into the Intracoastal Waterway. I had been up since well before dawn, battling the 45-knot headwinds of a November storm to reach the shelter of the rivers and canals that wind just inside the coast from Virginia to Florida. We had only sailed from our last anchorage in Hampton, VA across to Norfolk and then down the harbor to the Waterway's entrance, but the struggle had lasted hours under a triple reefed main and blade staysail. My husband Seth and I, and two friends who were along for this first

East Coast leg of our global circumnavigation, had had to turn circles in the harbor, waiting for a lull to let the bridges open—they won't lift in winds over 50 mph.

Seth and I had begun our voyage late in the season, leaving our home state of Maine on October 31, so we had weighed the risks of winter storms and chosen to transit the Intracoastal Waterway (ICW) from Norfolk to Beaufort, NC in order to avoid the nasty seas that brew around Cape Hatteras. Our decision was a good one: the wind churned Norfolk harbor into whitecaps and rain pelted *Heretic's* decks on the day before Thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving on the Intracoastal Waterway

The air felt suddenly warm as the gray, wind-whipped harbor gave way to the muddy water of Deep Creek and the shelter of tall trees. Everything would be straightforward from here; just motoring along the river, locking into the Dismal Swamp Canal, and then more motoring until Elizabeth City, NC. I was a little nervous about locking, which I had never done before, but that proved easy.

The Deep Creek Lock operator swung open the doors, Seth brought *Heretic* alongside the wall and we slipped lines around yellow bollards at stem and stern. I found it surprisingly simple to keep *Heretic* stationary as

the water rose in the lock, but we had come on an unusual day. Normally boats have to come up nine feet in the lock, said the operator, but the storm had flooded the Dismal Swamp and we only had to rise two. As the water entered, we chatted with the operator, and he showed us his conch

shells, demonstrating how to whistle a surprisingly sweet note through them. Cruisers returning from the tropics often augment his collection with new shells. He opened the lock doors when all was ready, and we waved goodbye, anticipating no more delays until docking at Elizabeth City.



The Dismal Swamp Canal cuts a straight path through a forest of cypress and pines, and despite its name has the quiet, peaceful quality of the wilderness, with no development in sight. It must have been worse than dismal for the laborers who built it, however. Slaves hired from nearby landowners spent twelve years digging by hand to create the 20-nautical-mile long canal. It first opened in 1805, and today is maintained at a six-foot depth by the Army Corps of Engineers. Because of its shallowness, it is not the recommended ICW route for boats drawing more than 5 ½ feet, and its width limits its usage to boats under 50 feet long. An alternative route for bigger boats lies to the east, closer to the coast.

We had motored out of sight of Deep Creek Lock when the ICW ceased to be easy. A sixty-foot tall pine had fallen across the canal, completely blocking it. Our southward progress was at an end. We had to anchor and wait for the Army Corps to clear the tree, which wasn't likely to happen for days. Thanksgiving was the next day and at that time of year very few boats were still transiting the ICW, so the need was urgent only for us who

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had anticipated a pleasant holiday in Elizabeth City, famed for its hospitality to boaters.

The current in the canal was running with us, so in order to anchor, we had to turn *Heretic* around. I could now understand why boats 50 feet and over are not allowed in the Dismal Swamp, as even 38-foot *Heretic* was difficult to turn between the banks. Seth spun the wheel and adjusted the throttle in a series of back-and-fill maneuvers before she was facing upstream. We took the precaution of setting a stern anchor as well as her usual CQR so that she wouldn't swing into either bank. Then we radioed our friendly lock operator on the VHF.

"I thought something like this might happen," he said, "considering the big blow. I'll call the Army Corps, but no promises. Tomorrow's Thanksgiving, you know." All of us retired to blankets, books and beer that evening, disappointingly sure that nothing would happen.

But well after dark, at 8:00 p.m., came a knock on the hull. "Do you have an eight millimeter wrench?" called a voice. "I need one to fix my chainsaw." Five men from the Army Corps had come out in a skiff as soon

as they had gotten the call; on the night before a holiday, for one lonely sailboat! We willingly handed over the wrench, and for an hour heard the whine of chainsaws as they attacked the tree.

"It's too big," they reported as they returned the wrench. "We're going to need to bring out *Elizabeth*, the barge

with the crane. She'll be able to move it, but there's no guarantee that'll happen tomorrow, it being Thanksgiving."

We thought we would sleep in, anticipating a rather dull day aboard, but at 6:00 a.m. were startled again by a shout across the water. My sleepy ears heard the rumble of an engine, and for a moment I thought of

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the barge *Elizabeth*. That would be too good to be true, though, I reasoned, until I stepped on deck and saw her black and white superstructure, immense crane and crisp American flag. *Elizabeth* had arrived.

We hastily weighed anchor to move *Heretic* out of her way and she set to work on

the tree. When the canal was clear and *Elizabeth* was readying to leave with

her cargo of timber, the same men from the night before zipped over to us in their skiff. The one who



had asked for the wrench handed me a post-it note with an address. "We'd

really appreciate it if you wrote a letter saying how much it meant that we brought out *Elizabeth* on a holiday.

The Dismal Swamp isn't the Army Corps' top priority and we'd like them to know how much our work affects people like you."

Writing the letter in Beaufort, I smiled. We might have had a beautiful sunny day sailing down Albemarle Sound and warm Southern breezes as we worked further south, but that drizzly Thanksgiving

in the Dismal Swamp was my best memory of the ICW. **BWS**

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