

ANCHORING – PART THREE
HOW TO ANCHOR

By Wiley and Merry Edmondson



This article will discuss picking a suitable spot to anchor, and then anchoring correctly, and then mention a few anchorages we have enjoyed cruising Lake Michigan.

Where to Anchor

When selecting an anchorage there are a couple of preliminary considerations. Will you be some distance from boat traffic? If you anchor near a navigation channel, boat wakes can make your time at anchor miserable. If you plan to go ashore, is there a safe place to leave your dinghy? A place to lock it up? In the Chicago anchorages of south Monroe Harbor and the “Playpen, the answer is “No!”, unless you can afford to leave several armed guards to watch it. Is the anchorage bottom sand, rock, weed, gravel, or mud? Will your type of anchor set in this type of bottom?

The next consideration is protection. You want a breakwater, or land, between your boat and the seas, which is why good anchorages are in a harbor or bay, or up a river. We once anchored our boat on the Bahama bank, by Memory Rock, in twenty feet of crystal-clear water. The sea was calm. We put on our masks, fins and snorkels and scrubbed the bottom of our boat. After a nice dinner, we enjoyed glasses of wine and a beautiful sunset. We turned in, expecting a blissful sleep but forgetting that half-a-mile to the west of us the sea was thousands of feet deep. We woke up at about 3 am, because we were suddenly in 3-foot seas from the west, with waves growing to five feet.



(Memory Rock, Bahamas)

Your boat is in this same situation when you anchor off a beach. We all know how the weather on Lake Michigan can “turn on a dime,” so you need to keep one eye on the boat and the other the weather. We anchored off Sleeping Bear Dune in calm seas one time and rowed ashore in “Dimples”, our 8’ Fatty Knees dinghy. We took the stairs and trail to the top of the dune, where we could see our boat in the distance below us. The lake now had whitecaps, and our boat was bouncing around like crazy. By the time we got back to “Dimples”, the waves were 4’ and the wind was blowing like crazy. The first two attempts to push “Dimples” out into the waves and row off the beach resulted in the dingy getting swamped. With a heroic shove by Merry, followed by a dive into the dinghy, and a hard pull on the oars by Wiley, we made it off the beach on our third try. Our Bruce anchor had not dragged, and the boat was fine.

Depth and room are important considerations in selecting an anchorage. You obviously need enough water under your keel at anchor so that your boat will not go aground, or be bouncing off the bottom if the anchorage gets choppy. This includes the entire circumference around the point where you lower your anchor, because the boat will change position if the wind changes direction, or just “wander around” her anchor if there is no wind.

Getting the Hook Down

Having selected the spot, it is time to get the anchor down and set. We always start our engine and get the sails down before we go into an anchorage. After we have selected the spot where we are going to lower our anchor, we maneuver to approach it from down-wind, with one of us at the helm (the “skipper”) and the other up at the bow. It is recommended that the crew at the bow, who will release the anchor, wear sturdy gloves.

Our anchor is on a bow roller, secured to a cleat by a line. When the skipper yells, “prepare to anchor,” the line on the cleat is removed so the anchor can run free, but the chain is held so that this can’t happen prematurely. The skipper puts the engine in neutral and the boat slows to a stop. The skipper then yells, “Lower the anchor!”

You have all heard the phrase, “drop anchor.” DON’T! Lower the anchor by playing out chain or line until you feel that it is on the bottom. If you literally drop the anchor you can end up with a pile of chain on top of it tangled up with the flukes and or shank of the anchor keeping the anchor from setting.

As the wind moves the boat astern, slowly play out the chain or line, not allowing slack. If there is no wind or current, it will be necessary to power slow astern. If the engine is in gear it is very important that no slack be allowed on the anchor rode to keep it from fouling the prop.

Setting the Anchor

You should let enough anchor rode out so that the ratio of the (water) depth to the length is at least 5:1; 7:1 is preferred. If we have enough “swing room”, we will sometimes use a 10:1 ratio. To the maximum extent possible, you want the “pull” [load] on your anchor to be horizontal along the bottom. If you do not have enough room [or anchor rode] for a 5:1 ratio, anchor somewhere else.

It should be understood when figuring the “depth”, for purposes of the anchoring ratio, you add the distance between the deck and the waterline, to the depth of the water. (We measured this at the dock and then wrote it in our log.)

You also need some system for knowing how much anchor rode you are letting out. We use small colored cable ties, attached to the chain and line at ten-foot intervals.

After the right amount of line is let out, the crewperson at the bow cleats the line and yells “anchor snubbed”. The skipper lines up landmarks on shore, and the runs the engine astern. We run it all the way up to 2500 rpm for five minutes or so, but this is probably overkill. By noting the boat’s relative position to the landmarks, and watching the chart plotter, the skipper can determine if the boat is dragging anchor. If she is, get the anchor up and try a different spot.

Diving the Anchor

We always have mask, fins, and a snorkel aboard, mostly for fun, but very useful if you drop something important (like \$80. Sunglasses!) overboard at your dock or at anchor. When the water is clear enough and warm enough, one of us will dive down and check the anchor to make sure it is set. You may discover that it is a weedy bottom, and that your anchor is mostly being held by a tangle of weed (if so, re-anchor!). One time, our Bruce anchor was resting on its side, with only one fluke dug in. The diver righted it and jammed both flukes into the bottom.

After you anchor, don’t forget to turn on your anchor light if it the boat will be there for the night.

Getting the Anchor Up

Ah! You have had a wonderful night’s sleep on your boat in a quiet anchorage, and you wake up to a glorious sunrise. Or, you and your kids have spent the day at the beach, and everyone enjoyed the dinghy ride back to your boat. Time to go!

We have not usually had a great deal of trouble getting the anchor up. We start the engine. We like to leave it at idle, one of us at the helm and the other at the bow. We can usually pull the anchor rode in by hand (once again gloves are helpful!) and thus pull the boat up to the anchor. Since we are now elderly, the foredeck crewperson may need to take “breaks” from time-to-time by giving the rode a couple of turns around a cleat; this allows the foredeck crewperson to rest, and also feed the rode on deck into the anchor locker.

There have been times when the wind or current was too strong to bring the boat up to the anchor by hand, in which case we do it the way the more intelligent boaters do it all the time. Put the engine in forward, at idle speed, and move toward the anchor as the crewperson at the bow pulls the rode in. The risk here is that the skipper will move the boat forward faster than the crew at the bow can bring in the rode, causing slack, and the rode then gets wrapped around the turning prop, stopping the engine, bending the propeller shaft, and wrecking the coupler and maybe even the stuffing box, all while the crewperson was shouting, “STOP! STOP!”, and the skipper yelling, “WHAT? I can’t hear you!”. Thus, you need hand signals for when engine noise and the wind prevents voice communication. Even better, there are sets of (battery operated) earphones and microphones sold for use when anchoring, bringing the anchor up, or docking. They are called, very appropriately, “marriage savers”.

Once the chain is vertical – the anchoring ratio is 1:1 – we have almost always been able to break the anchor out and lift it by hand. When this didn't work, the skipper has put the engine "slow ahead," and this breaks the anchor out.

Some Overnight Anchorages on Lake Michigan

Chicago has the "Playpen", and South Monroe Harbor.

We have anchored in the playpen on weekdays a couple of times, and spent a surprisingly quiet night. Always turn your anchor light on if the boat is spending the night, even in a designated special anchorage area!

Saugatuck has an anchorage to starboard after you enter the channel. It is small and shallow – but perfect for a shallow draft power boat or a swing-keel pocket cruiser. We have anchored our fixed-keel boat overnight up the Kalamazoo River, on Kalamazoo Lake, just past the downtown. If you anchor here, be sure your anchor and boat are well-clear of the chain ferry.

Pine Creek Bay, on the north shore of Lake Macatowa at Holland, is more than three miles up the channel from the break-wall, but it is worth the trip. It is quiet with forest on all sides and stars above, and good holding on a mud bottom.

South Manitou Island has a natural harbor that offers protection from north, west and south winds; it is entirely exposed to the east however. The beach is nice, and you can take a tour of the lighthouse and explore the old abandoned farms. The anchorage is a shelf of shallower water with a sand bottom, so holding is good. The bottom drops off very steeply to deep water (150 ') so make sure your anchor is well set. One cruising couple anchored on the shelf, went to bed and woke up the next morning drifting in the Manitou Passage!

Finally, Charelevoix (Round Lake) is our favorite anchorage off Lake Michigan. You'll have to wait for a bridge opening (named, appropriately the "Bridge Street Bridge"). It opens on the half-hour. Try to time it so that you are not drifting around in the narrow channel waiting for it to open. Right after the bridge, you enter Round Lake, which offers good protection from all directions and good holding on a mud/sand bottom. You can find a spot within an easy dinghy ride of the town, which has lots of neat restaurants and shops. It is only a short walk to a nice beach.

Anchors Away

Hopefully, many of you may know of additional places to anchor, and different techniques, and will be willing to share them. There are many day spots where you can anchor to go for a swim and no doubt many anchorages were not mentioned. Let's continue to grow a list of great anchorages for all to share.