

Chico the Boat Dog

By Vicki Lathom

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Before Chico was a boat dog, he was to be a show dog. Chico's Sheltie super-parents, winners of many national AKC shows, looked like a good start for their child's future.

But it was not meant to be. His chart of projected growth showed a future

Chico to be too tall. So, he became a kind of special rescue dog, sold at six months because he wasn't show quality.

Enter Vicki, boat lady, seeking attractive, healthy Sheltie. Adaire (his given name) was already house-broken and ears made floppy with tape. A beautiful specimen.

Bonding with Adaire was not easy, and changing his name to Chico at six months probably didn't help. When I brought him home, he'd stand off, eyeing me from a distance. A friend familiar with dogs said he'll bond if you put his nose in your armpit—and it worked.

I've been sailing for forty years and have always had a boat dog,

or rather, a dog who could tolerate a boat. My dogs all happen to have been Shelties, but that really makes no difference. The first one was a substitute for a baby sister. My only child, Jim, age five, whined, "I need a sister." I asked him if he would settle for a dog and, after about a minute, he said OK. Enter Lassie.

Over the next forty years, Lassie morphed into Ginger, who morphed into the current boat dog, Chico.

My husband and I sail a 43-foot Irwin ketch named *Cantabile*, a musical term for singing softly. The reason: Barry used to be a music major.

Since we live in Annapolis, Maryland, we mostly cruise Chesapeake Bay, but we went to Maine last summer and the Abacos in the Bahamas this past winter. Chico also went to the Bahamas and carved out his life on *Cantabile* in a marina resort in Marsh Harbor. Chico doesn't seem to mind where he is as long as he's with us. I think I could carry him around in a large bird cage in the back seat of the car and he'd be happy as long as one or both of us were in the front seat.

Chico is considered laid-back by some and a snob by others. He's very adaptable and I take a little credit because I've never allowed myself to think he couldn't be comfortable in the human world, no matter where or when. I never treat him like a glass menagerie, anxiously coaxing him into the vet's office like some owners. I handled his being on the boat the same way.

Regarding the boat, a question that I always get is, where does he do "it"? On the bow, I say. I have no intention of rowing a dog ashore. I assumed he would adapt, even if it took 48 hours at first, if we just calmly wait him out. There's a trick to it, but let's just say it involves getting his scent on the bow.

Once you give in and start rowing them ashore, you're dead. There's nothing more pathetic than a human being in a slicker rowing a wet dog to a little beach. That is, if there is a beach. It's usually a swamp full of mud and ticks, or the beach has a "No Trespassing" sign backed up by two large Dobermans.

The only time Chico is a problem is when the dock we're tied up to is much higher or lower than the boat. Getting a 30-pound animal across the divide between boat and pier is high anxiety. This was the situation at the Abaco

Beach Resort marina and I knew it was only a matter of time before Chico went into the water.

As I gingerly stepped off *Cantabile* one day when the tide was really down, Chico's back paw missed the dock and he went in—and me with him. The only thing positive to come out of this was I learned he could swim. Since I still had his leash, he couldn't doggy-paddle away from the dock.

Of course, I called for help, but people don't hear you when you're down between boats in slips. After much too long and I was sure this was it, someone heard me and we got Chico in the dinghy and back up on the boat.

Was Chico upset? Of course not. He shook himself off and turned to the dock, ready to try again. I had a late-morning glass of wine. So, thinking of boating with a dog but not sure it'll work? To be fair, it's easier when the dog starts as a puppy; he or she doesn't know the difference. On the other hand, it might be possible to turn a landlubber dog into a boat dog if you can "wait him out" and be very laid-back in the process.

I am not a dog whisperer, just an owner who believes that pets can be more adaptable than we think. Chico lives his life wherever we go as a kind of bowsprit, nose literally pointing ahead to wherever he's going—forever calm and trusting, like all of us humans wish we could be.

POSTSCRIPT

*In September 2011, Chico was run over by a car. He was only six years old and a remarkably beautiful dog with a calm and easy demeanor. Like the author's previous Shelties, he made a wonderful boat dog. Kota, a Sheltie puppy, became the author's fourth boat dog, making the Cantabile his home while cruising in the Bahamas with the author this winter. Now about six months old, Kota is also picturesque, but with his own take on being a boat dog. He is courageous to the hilt. **WGM***



Vicki Lathom on board with Kota. Photo © Vicki Lathom.

Anchoring Update

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when even the FWC admits that the vast bulk of the problem is caused by "local boaters," I question why responsible cruisers are targeted with restrictive ordinances as the solution.

Long-term anchoring is a stickier problem, but the complaints of homeowners are reminiscent of those who buy homes close to an airport and then sue over the noise. In the same way, boats have been anchoring in Florida waters since long before any of these homes were built.

Responsible boaters recognize when anchoring that they are much akin to neighbors to those on shore and behave accordingly. There are, unfortunately, a certain percentage of those who don't and that's where problems start. There are, also, some waterfront property owners who believe that they own the view to the horizon, rather than their property line as the law dictates, and are quite vocal about their displeasure.

How successful have the mooring fields been? On a recent pass through St. Augustine, well over half of the moorings were vacant, yet there were dozens of boats anchored outside of the city limits, including mine. When passing through Titusville, which has installed a mooring field, I noted 3 boats on moorings out of 75 balls. There were over 20 boats anchored outside of the field. Fernandina Beach? Perhaps three or four boats on balls, at least a dozen at anchor.

Boot Key Harbour, Marathon, just approached the city for funds to pay for the refurbishment of over 70 mooring balls (out of 223) considered unusable. It has drastically raised its rates for transient boaters. A protest of local boaters has been called for. The point here is that Boot Key Harbor is recognized as the best mooring field in Florida. If it can't pay for itself, how will other mooring fields survive without tapping their municipalities' tax revenues?

Here's yet another issue: insurance coverage. When you sign a contract for a mooring ball, you've also signed a hold harmless clause in favor of the municipality. In the event a mooring ball fails and yours or another boat is damaged, your insurance will not cover you. You can't sue the city because of the hold harmless clause.

And did I mention you also signed that you examined the mooring ball and were satisfied with its condition? For a longer discussion on this topic, check out my blog at <http://anchorsawayinflorida.blogspot.com/p/mooring-contracts-invalidate-boat.html>, which includes the Boat US analysis of the problem.

So what are we, as cruisers on the ICW supposed to do? Marinas in southern Georgia are reporting more boaters staying longer. In online cruising forums, many have indicated that they will be avoiding Florida entirely, going offshore direct to the Bahamas. Because of the anchoring hassles of the past, Florida has gained the reputation of a "boater unfriendly" state and, if appears, that reputations won't be vanishing any time soon. Florida may be the sunshine state, but there are nothing but storm clouds on the horizon for boaters. **WGM**