ROW GENTLY
By Richard W. Emery

You Don't have to be a brawny weight lifter--or even half of one--to row a boat easily and well. The trick is in knowing how. Just watch an old-timer between the oars and you'll get a few pointers right away if you observe closely. There's no splattering of water, no rolls or gurgles--the stroke of the oars is slow, the rower's whole manner impresses one as plain lazy. But, unless you are a skilled boatman just jump in another rowboat and try to follow him single handed. He'll leave you behind as if you were painted on the landing.

Here are some reasons why: In the first place, for rowing on rough water the pretty technique of collegiate racing crews won't altogether do. The average rowboat is a tougher, more seaworthy craft than the average racing shell and it rides higher out of the water. It lacks such refinements as "roller-coaster" seats and sliding footrests. But there are some ideas in racing which can be applied to ordinary rowing and they'll give you more miles with less manpower.

While it is true that you'll learn a lot by watching good oarsmen, the only way really to learn correct rowing techniques is to get the oars in your hands and begin rowing, just as you would with any other work or sport requiring the development of manual dexterity through continued practice. While you're learning, go out in the boat only on quiet days. It's not a good idea to attempt handling a rowboat in rough water, unless, of course, you take an experienced oarsman along to coach you. Always take it slowly during the practice periods. Speed and skill come later. At first concentrate on handling the oars--how to drop the blades into the water and get them out again without throwing or splashing water to no practical purpose. Getting down to the first principles the theory says simply that the energy spent throwing water into the air should have been expended pushing the boat forward.

The rower holding the straight course and getting away fast is the one to watch, for you can be sure he knows exactly what he's doing, where

he's going and about how long it will take him to get there.
Don't take out a boat without first making reasonably sure it will bring you back. If it's your boat, look it over carefully before you launch it. Make this a habit and you won't miss. Do the same with any craft you rent. Look sharply to the rowlocks, the seats, or thwarts, if you want to be salty, and to the bottom boards--those you walk on. Do all this before you bother to examine the oars. If you're going out on fairly deep water where the wind may come up and make the water choppy, provide life preservers, a bailing bucket and an anchor with plenty of line. These are just ordinary common--sense precautions without much to do with the actual rowing, but they may help to get you home again.
The oars should fit the boat. That's a first requirement. Fig.1 gives the average proportions while the photo above Fig.2 shows what a good, sound oar should look like and also tells what to call its principal divisions. Again the don'ts: Don't take out an oar that's warped or one that has a weather-roughened handle. It'll cut your hand to pieces on a hard row. A tear, break or bulge in the chafing band will bind in the rowlock and make the oar difficult to manipulate. Some oars, due to age or other causes, are too springy in the loom section for good rowing. An oar should be fairly stiff. Considerable pressure should be required to deflect a good one as much as 2 in. or so. When buying new oars or renting a boat for a long row on open water, check the oars for uniform weight and correct springiness. And note in Fig. 1 that the oar length is about twice the beam of the boat. That's an average requirement, not an absolute rule. But all things considered, oars of this length handle easier under average rowing conditions.
Another important feature is the position of the chafing bands. When you're in rowing position with the oars in place, ends of the handles should clear by at least 2 in. and the chafing bands should center in the rowlocks. Some good oarsmen like the ends of the handles farther apart, as much as 6 in. in some cases, but that of course is a matter of personal preference. In general the proportions of oar length to beam given in Fig. 1 give better purchase.

Stepping from the landing into a boat may be a trickier venture than it appears to be. If you step into the boat and push it away from the landing with one foot, while the other foot supports part of your weight on the landing, you may end up in the water. Hold the craft against the landing, place one foot well into the center of the boat and on the bottom boards. Keep your weight low, as in Fig.2, then transfer quickly into the boat and sit down. Always "trim" a rowboat by sitting in the center of the thwart and instruct your passengers to position themselves so that the craft rides on an even keel. You can't row well if weight causes the boat to list to port or starboard. Also, if you have a load, the boat should be trimmed fore and aft as well. As a rule the bow should ride a little higher than the stern. You'll stay a lot drier if you never stand on a thwart, but always on the bottom boards. And if you are boating solo, stow everything for the trip within easy reach so that you won't have to leave the seat while offshore.

A gentle push will put the boat clear of the landing. Only then do you place the oars in the rowlocks. Once the craft is riding free, the beginner at rowing should resist the urge to dig the oars deep and give it the heave ho. From here on you take a tip from the racing crews and dip'em gently. Drop the blades lightly into the water and take a series of short, light strokes, only about 18 in. or so until you get underway. Then lengthen the stroke to the full sweep, Figs.3 to 7 inclusive, and settle down to that long, rhythmic swing that makes the workouts of collegiate rowing crews something to watch.

If the oar handles are gripped too tightly, arms and hands will tire quickly. You won't be able to feather the oars correctly and your back will do work that your fingers should do. At the start of each stroke, the pull of the handle should lie within the curve of your fingers and thumb, as in the detail below Fig.7 where the dotted line A--B represents the angle of the blade. In this way, several inches are added to the length of the stroke. Through about two thirds of the power stroke, Fig. 5 your arms should be nearly straight. Your legs and back do most of the work. Then the arms take over, for the final

third of the stroke, Fig. 6, bending at the elbows and bringing the oar handles close to your chest. As the stroke ends, the wrists drop, and the blades emerge at a 45--deg. angle, dotted line A--B, Fig. 8, complete their turn to a 90--deg. angle parallel with the surface, and are ready to return to the starting point of the next power stroke. Study Figs. 8 to 12 inclusive, and also Fig. 16.

When you bend your elbows in that final one third of the power stroke, keep them close to your body, Fig. 14. Then they will be in position for easiest flexing of the wrists to make the special twist of the blades known as "feathering." This is necessary to prevent the wind from catching the flat blades and slowing forward speed. A little extra push or flip to the last part of the stroke gives speed to the boat just as a pitcher's fingers give speed to a ball. It also helps to bring the blades cleanly out of the water, Fig. 15. Catching the oars on the rebound from that final flip against the water, and returning them briskly in feathered position, conserves strength and provides a resting point just before the beginning of a new power stroke. The rest is only momentary, of course, but it relaxes your arms, legs and back. The blades turn from feathered position in order to dip again into the water. See Fig. 16. Blades should be slightly off vertical, with the lower edges leading. This whole maneuver is a neat trick and it's worth a lot of practice. Fig. 16 shows the cycle of one complete stroke in ordinary rowing--not the racing stroke where feathered oars are skipped along the surface of the water.

Starting the power stroke before the blades are three--quarters immersed, Figs. 10 and 12, wastes strength and upsets rhythm. A skilled oarsman knows by the feel of the blade when to start the power stroke. From long practice he learns just when the blade will "bite" with full effect.

With a light grip on the handles you can slip the blades into the water without splashing. A moderate chop won't bother, once you get the knack of feeling for the water before pulling on the oars. In rougher waters, one blade probably will take hold before the other. This may be troublesome at first, but the same gentle pressure on the

oars, until they both get a grip on the water, will bring you home dry.
To hold a straight course is generally quite easy. Just use the boatman's trick of taking a sight on two distant objects astern which happen to line up conveniently and then vary the pressure on one oar or the other, without breaking the rhythm of your rowing. You'll find a good boat quite sensitive to variations in pressure on the oars which makes it easy to keep the objects in line. After a time this dodge will be unnecessary. You'll get eyes "in the back of your head" like all good rowboat men. For maneuvering in close quarters, you may find single stroking very handy. To rowing, it's what dog-paddling is to swimming. Stroke alternately, port and starboard, making the oars "walk" through the water. This stroke is restful, too, after rowing a long distance. You can turn a boat almost in its own length by pulling on one oar and pushing on the other. See the photo at the left of fig. 13. Pull on the right oar to turn left and vice versa. By making quick, short strokes with one oar without lifting the blade out of the water you can warp a boat sideways up to a landing or alongside another craft anchoring in open water ship the oars. Don't take any chances on losing an oar. It floats, of course, but it might be hard to recover in rough water. *