

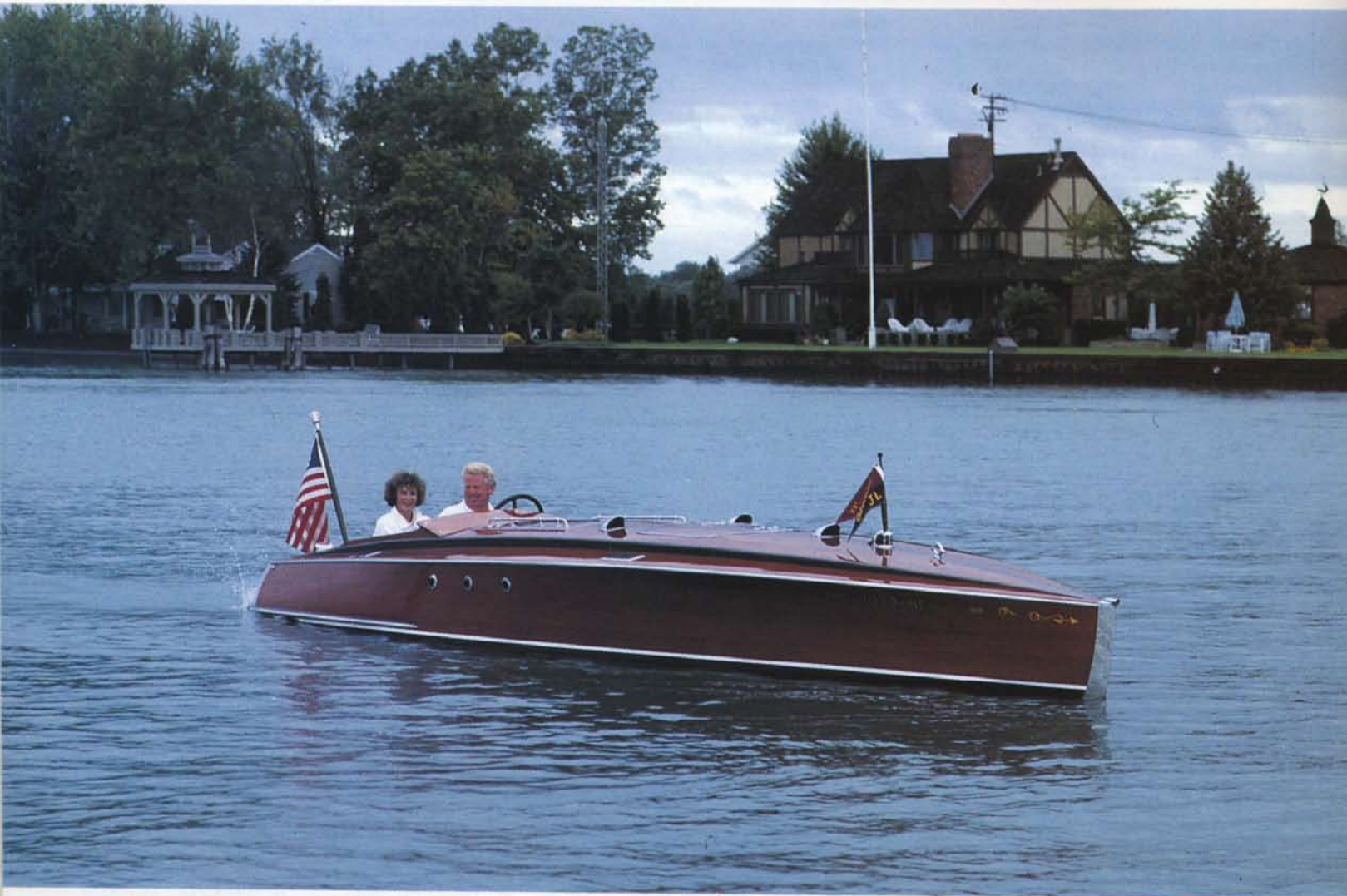
CLASSIC BOATING

THE MAGAZINE OF VINTAGE POWER BOATS

MAY-JUNE 1990

ISSUE NUMBER 35





Gail & John Lindsay

DREAM MAKERS

Exotic custom boats with Hemi engines are the benchmark of the Mayea family craftsmanship.

Speaking of his family's third generation craft at Mayea Boat Works in Fair Haven, Michigan, Larry Mayea says of the Mays Craft they custom-build, "We're the dream makers." Anyone whose needs or wants have been ignored by the standardized boat builders can be put on the Mayeas' waiting list and when their turn comes, the Mayeas will decide if the project is something they can handle.

The Mayea family custom builds boats under the name Mays Craft. Their two most recent projects are *Savannah Jane* and *Obsession*. The

two are examples of Hemi-powered dream boats that are as much a part of the Mayea boat building philosophy as they are their owners' personalities. Like the Mays Craft owners, each boat the Mayeas build is unique and a duplicate hull will never be built.

The Mayea operation parallels the Canadian scene of the first half century and is equally steeped in tradition. In 1910, Louis T. Mayea, who was affiliated with John Hacker, founded Mayea Boat Works in Detroit. The auto executives there from the fledgling auto industry

by Jim Wangard

created a market for waterfowl hunting and fishing craft and speedboats in general. After moving to Fair Haven on the shores of St. Clair's Anchor Bay in 1914, Mayea Boat Works got a lift from the Wright Brothers by building pontoons and from the U.S. Navy for work on some early flying boats, leading to the name of Mayea Boat and Aeroplane Works.

During the depression, Louis saw his customer base change from a declining auto executive market to a new cross section of society. The Prohibition created a whiskey transportation network from the U.S. to Canada.

By World War II, Louis and his sons, Herbert and Louis Jr., were under contract from the Armed Forces building experimental boats. One prototype the Mayeas came up with and the Navy loved was a landing craft that could be compactly shipped in pieces to an invasion launch site and assembled. Asked if they could deliver 1,000 craft per month, the Mayeas, with just a handful of workers and a few

sheds, conceded that the order would be a bit much. The Navy then kept the Mayeas busy building experimental patrol craft in lengths up to 65 feet.

Today, Mayea Boat Works, under Herbert and his sons, Larry and Don, and son-in-law Norman Plettl, continues to break new ground, turning out innovative speedboats

either for themselves or for their customers.

Savannah Jane owner Robert Scherer knew of the Mayeas from the work they had done on his *Constellation*. When his brother-in-law asked if he had seen the unusual hull being built, he went to see it. Off in the corner was the boat, still only a frame, but with a





Photos by CLASSIC BOATING

Savannah Jane, shown in three views, reflects Mayeas' philosophy for a contemporary boat



clearly discernible outline. When Bob inquired of Larry as to what they were going to do with it, Larry came across as cordial, although laid back and almost indifferent as he indicated in so many words that he was not sure. Bob asked if they would sell it to anybody. "No," replied Larry. Bob told him to call him if they intended to sell.

Often times the Mayeas, who have more than enough restoration work waiting for them, will start a new boat project they would be happy to keep for themselves. Kept busy twelve hours a day, six days a week, on repair work and getting boats ready for spring or fall storage, the Mayeas often get started on a new

project, only to set it aside for awhile. This was the phase Bob Scherer's boat was at when he found out through a friend that he would be the owner. Once a boat is sold, the Mayeas get to work on it. The completion still takes time.

All Mays Craft begin with a keel whose preparation takes about six months. The Mayeas go out and search for a Michigan white oak. After buying the tree, they cut it down, allowing half a year's natural drying time without forcing progress by kiln drying.

A keel and a half model is what owner John Lindsay saw when he walked into Mayeas to look for an antique boat after attending a vin-

tage boat show one summer afternoon. After seeing Bob Scherer's future boat in progress and thinking it was too large, John was shown a keel to a 25' 1920s styled racer, again stored off to the side. If he wanted to acquire it, that was fine; if not, that was fine, too.

Commissioning a custom boat is a lot like the marriage commitment for better or worse. The 1980s was a decade that saw major breakthroughs in boat design as well as some major flops. Both Bob Scherer and John Lindsay committed themselves to proceeding with projects that were without prototypes. Both admit that there was some question as to the final outcome. Yet both ex-



pressed confidence in the Mayeas' abilities to figure out any problems like weight distribution and planing attitudes.

The Mayeas say they have done enough of this work to anticipate what they're getting into. Larry says that between the four of them, everybody's a separate designer and after thrashing around an idea or problem together, they come up with a workable solution. The Mayeas have their own body of experience from the various boats they see and work on, yet at times they learn from their customers' input.

Larry says their customers are brilliant people who are great to be



The Mayea crew consists of (L-R) Norman Plettl (son- and brother-in-law), Don, Herbert, and Larry Mayea.

around because of what they can learn from them. With the trouble shooting encountered with the unknown that custom projects venture into, the customer has been known to solve his own problem.

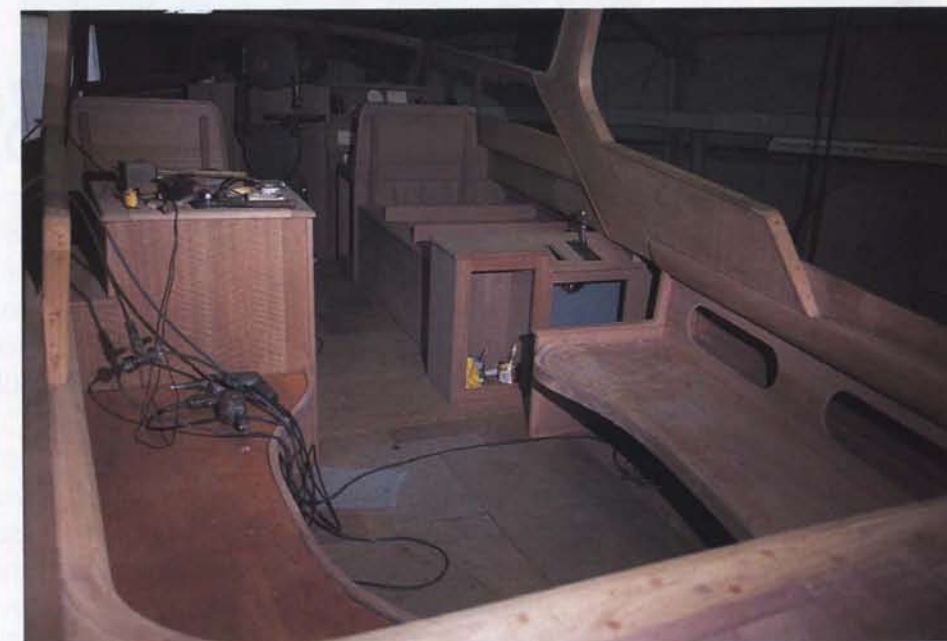
Something like cabinet construction might seem pretty rudimentary for a boatbuilder, although making the door operate nicely has already stumped the Mayeas. When a customer, a Lear jet owner, explained the construction of the cabinet on his plane, Larry admitted he wasn't impressed until mulling it over late that evening. The engineer who designed the plane's cabinet had to factor in user friendliness, aesthetics, and lightweight materials, and his way was workable and acceptable as a pattern.

Owners appreciate their opinions being respected. When John Lindsay indicated that he wanted to do his trim in Bordeaux, the Mayeas weren't sure how nautically aesthetic Bordeaux would be, so they tried it on the bottom where it would be safe to experiment. They liked it and expressed interest in having all the trim done in Bordeaux. John carried the Bordeaux theme throughout—the instrument faces, hydes, step pads, engine block, trailer and tow vehicle are all done in Bordeaux.

The Mayeas have already been accused of not building boats for their customers, but for themselves. "I guess maybe they have a point," concedes Larry, "but we only know how to build boats one way: the right way." Both *Savannah Jane* and *Obsession* were already committed to their final designs when their buyers stepped in. Bob Scherer, for one, had no problem with the Mayea philosophy, saying that they're the boat designers; they should know what is best. There was not much to disagree over since their ideas were good.

John Lindsay enjoyed working with the Mayeas and didn't have any problems listening to their advice, saying that the only things that were changed were the things

(Continued on page 41)



From the traditional to the exotic, Mayea craftsmanship is renown.

DREAM MAKERS

(Continued from page 33)

that made sense.

If the Mayeas really do do things their way, they at least take the customer's input into consideration. The boats are still tailored after the customer's needs, such as adjusting the seat brackets to provide the best view over the deck. Matching the uniqueness of a Mays Craft hull is the hardware, especially cast for the boat. Models made to fit the style of boat are shown to the buyer for approval, then sand castings are made. Everything is custom through and through, which can lead to a two year period of decision making involving the owner and builder.

Much of the artistry of a Mays Craft goes unnoticed. The hardware, now mostly of stainless steel, is done by an Italian who comes to Florida to work on yachts. While in the states, he travels to the Mayeas for their special projects. The steering wheel on *Savannah Jane* is one inch tubular stainless joined together without any trace of a weld mark. "A masterpiece," says Bob Scherer. The Italian craftsman was so elated to be a part of a project like *Savannah Jane* that he offered his services gratis, just for being able to tell his friends back home that boats like this one built in America made it all worth while.

The attention to detail is not forgotten below deck either. John Lindsay says the 1968 Chrysler Hemi powering *Obsession* looked like a pile of rust sitting on the garage floor. Then Norman Plettl, the engine man at Mayea Boat Works and brother-in-law to Larry and Don, stripped it down to the short block. He hand ground and sanded the entire block, polishing away all the pit marks and parting lines from the original casting, making it smooth. "I come from a tool and die background," says John. "I think I'm fussy, but these guys are incredible."

To capture the essence of emotion and involvement in the project, John Lindsay chose a name for his boat that was in line with *Nightmare*

and *Fantasy*, the custom Mays Crafts of Larry and Don. "I came up with the name *Obsession* three or more years ago when the boat was still in its infancy and I decided on that upfront. Before the boat was completed, everybody and his brother started calling their perfume and aftershave *Obsession* and it really diluted the name somewhat, so it wasn't as original."

Obsession was designed to resemble a 1927 era vintage racer, a profile the Mayeas spent a lot of time studying for proper proportions. According to John, the whole project meshed together, fitting his vision of what that style of boat should be.

Bob Scherer's *Savannah Jane*, named after his Georgian residence and sister-in-law, neither looks ultra modern nor particularly old, leaving novices to conclude that it's old simply because anything made out of mahogany is an old boat. At dockside, people compliment Bob on his "really nice restoration. What kind of boat is it?" To which Bob responds that it's not a restoration, but a custom-built boat. *Savannah Jane* at 31' in length is long and low, but with a 10' beam, even the neophyte knows it's not a Hacker when viewed from the stern.

Both *Savannah Jane* and *Obsession* are twin- and single-engined hulls that easily eclipse 50 mph, although

unlocked at higher speeds. Not the fastest around, a Mays Craft offers the finesse of a gentlemanly ride. How you get there is bound to be of more value to the Mays Craft owner than when you get there. The Mayeas attract the discriminating, knowledgeable type of boater as opposed to the rude, reckless types who have degraded the offshore performance boat.

For all the aura and craftsmanship surrounding a Mays Craft, their final price tags are on a par with comparable offshore editions. The customers pay as the boat progresses.

Standard Mayea construction involves all epoxy encapsulation with double planked bottom of two $\frac{3}{8}$ " diagonal layers. *Obsession* required approximately 2,700 labor hours and *Savannah Jane* about 3,500 hours.

Continuing the tradition of turning out the unusual and distinctive, Mayeas have just completed a 44' express cruiser equipped with twin V-12 Italian engines. The 6,500 hour project may reach \$1.5 million. What the Mayeas will do for encores is anyone's guess, but it won't be boring.

After mass producers have alienated consumers with standardized products, individual wants and needs can still be turned into reality by the dream makers.



Large Selection of Hardware

Marine engines for Chris-Craft, Hacker Craft, Gar Wood, Century and others. Over 100 bowlights, gauges, classic instruments, stern poles, decals, pennants, vents, N.O.S. exhaust elbows, KBL carburetors, KBL carb covers and windshields, including Capri.

Boats for Sale

1950 CHRIS-CRAFT 16' Riviera, complete, \$2,000. 1958 CENTURY 19' Resorter, excellent, \$6,000. 1953 CHRIS-CRAFT 17' Rocket, good condition, \$3,500. 1955 CHRIS-CRAFT 22' Continental, fair, \$2,000. 1946 CHRIS-CRAFT 22' Sportsman, complete, \$1,800.

Wanted

Old mahogany inboard boats, hardware, gauges and marine engines. Any condition.

CHUCK GREWE, 4600 YANKEE, ST. CLAIR, MI 48079

Call evenings 313-329-7045