



# DAC NEWS

MAGAZINE OF DETROIT ATHLETIC CLUB

VOLUME 89 ISSUE 1



JANUARY

2004



Antique boats mix vintage styling with high tech updates

By Mary Rodrique

They're the classic cars of the waterways, the antique wooden boats that turn the heads of pleasure cruisers on lazy summer afternoons spent on the lakes and rivers around metro Detroit.

Mays-Craft, vintage Chris-Craft, polished "Baby Gar" runabouts at least 50 years old and restored to pristine condition — these aren't your run of the mill cookie-cutter boats.

Antique boating is a favorite pastime for a number of Detroit Athletic Club members like Jim Schroth, who pilots the peppy Bingo during boating season.

"It's 24-feet long and has a Hemi engine, probably one of the fastest on the lake. It cruises at about 40 miles per hour," said Schroth, who gets a lot of thumbs-up signs from other boaters on Lake St. Clair.

Schroth bought his 1948 Mays-Craft in July 1984 and stores it in winter near his cottage on Harsens Island. Like other antique boating enthusiasts, he enjoys the classic look of the vessel updated with the latest marine technology.

"People who know the industry know a Mays-Craft," said Schroth, a Club member since 1969. "All of their work is

done by hand. You have to be privileged to own one. For one thing, there's not another boat like mine — they only make originals."

It's that attention to detail and pride in craftsmanship that drew DAC member Paul Chauvin to Mayea Boat Works more than 25 years ago. Chauvin was the original owner of Schroth's boat, Bingo. Shopping for a boat in a marina one day, Chauvin's then 8-year-old daughter eyed the Mays-Craft wooden speedboat and said "Bingo." The name stuck.

"It's just the beauty and the grace of these boats, that's what attracted me," said Chauvin, a DAC member for 22 years. "It's difficult to explain the allure. You have to see it."

Today he owns Duchess, a 1969 47-foot Chris-Craft pleasure cruiser. Although a fiberglass vessel, Chauvin had Mayea Boat Works remodel the interior in rich mahogany, as well as install powerful new diesel engines, running gear and fuel tanks. The handsome finished product is pictured in a company brochure.

Chauvin now has a business affiliation with the 100-year-old company founded in Detroit by Louis Mayea, who relo-

Jim Schroth pilots his Mays-Craft "Bingo."

cated the operation to Fair Haven in 1914.

"He put a two-story building on a barge and brought it here," said Chauvin, who described Fair Haven in the early 20th century as a vibrant city with train service, plenty of cottages, taverns, hotels and roller rinks.

Today the third generation of family, brothers Larry and Don Mayea, along with their brother-in-law Norm Pleatl, run the boat works. There's a marina and a boat launch right outside their door on Lake St. Clair.

The patriarch, Herb Mayea, 83, still works in the shop five days a week, and sometimes on Saturday, too. Herb is the son of the founder as well as the father of Larry and Don.

"Everything is done by hand," said Schroth. "I had a steering wheel from a Chrysler Imperial in (Bingo). The center where the horn sits was covered with leather and had deteriorated with age. I asked Herb to do something with that. He made a piece of mahogany that fit in there perfectly. All these contours and it sits in there perfect like it was molded. The Mayeas' are the most skillful people I have ever known. It's just incredible what they can accomplish."

Nine craftsmen, including two former engineers, work for the company and are adept at every aspect of the operation. Building, remodeling, repairing and customizing boats is a fulltime endeavor and then some.

It's also not cheap — everything is hand-crafted using the finest wood. Prices can run well over \$1 million dollars and at Mayea, customers include heirs to the Walgreen drugstore and Fisher auto families. Eighty-five boats are housed in five rambling sheds this winter in various states of repair.

Club member Ron Moore has a 1960 Mays-Craft cabin cruiser he bought four years ago from the original owner.

"It's a great boat," said Moore, a DAC member since 1984. "I really like the craftsmanship. I'm not into speed; I'm into comfort."

Moore keeps his boat, Soft Touch, in the Mayea Boat Works marina during the winter.

Nautical nostalgia

"Baby boomers are going back to their roots," said Larry Mayea, who added there's a five-year wait for new boat orders. "They're bringing us pictures of boats they remember from the

Previous Page: a Mays-Craft in dock. Above: "The Fox" and Paul Chauvin's former boat "Bugsy"



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1950s and '60s and asking us to draw up the plans."

Others are hauling in boats that have been in their families for decades and need modernizing. They want conveniences like microwave ovens and showers installed.

At Mayea, the emphasis is on blending classic features like hand-sanded and varnished old-world mahogany and brass hardware with computer design programs and machine formed components.

"We craft the (vintage) looks everyone wants but using the newest advancements," said Larry, whose son Chad is the computer designer. This fourth generation Mayea, along with his cousin, Jared, works in the boat-yard part-time.

The most historically significant boat currently under restoration in the yard is Miss America X, legendary racer Gar Wood's record-setter that clocked 124.8 miles per hour in the one-mile straightaway in 1932, winning the international Harmsworth Trophy. The 38-foot mahogany hull

Chris-Crafts, Hackers, and Gar Wood runabouts (the racer also built boats for a high-end market). They will craft original boats up to 60 feet. The company built sea-planes for the U.S. Navy in World War I and created prototype landing craft in World War II.

"We're going through a period of



"Bugsy," a Hacker

nostalgia," said Schroth, explaining the draw of antique boats. "I used to collect all sorts of marine memorabilia before it was popular."

His office is decorated with maps of the Great Lakes and pictures of boats. Schroth recently



A 1946 cabin cruiser.

houses four 1,900-horsepower Packard V-12 engines. The original leather seats where Wood and his throttleman Orlin Johnson sat were downwind from the exhaust pipes that blasted them with powerful noxious fumes.

The Mayeas have restored a number of classic boats over the years including

bought a binnacle compass in Florida and had it shipped to his cottage.

"I took it apart to clean it and discovered it was made in Algonac," he said, chuckling.

Larry Mayea notes that the area has long been an industrial center

of pleasure-craft production. The Chris-Craft plant was eight miles down the road in Algonac, John Hacker's boat works was 15 miles away in Mt. Clemens. The Gar Wood plant was also in Algonac.

"Everyone knew everyone else," he said.

Club member Mark Gregory is the grandson of the founder of the Gregory Boat Co., established in Detroit in 1908 and known for the Belle Isle Bear Cats it built during the 1920s.

"My grandfather built boats for the bootleggers during Prohibition and for the Coast Guard to catch them," said Gregory, a Comerica Bank executive. "His boats were top echelon."

Gregory Boat Co. folded during the Depression, but was resurrected and still operates near Water Works Park in Detroit today.

"Those old boats had a lot of character," said Gregory, whose brother, Scott, runs the boatyard today. "They were works of art. You feel differently in a wood boat, the sound of water on the hull. It's like a Harley is more than a motorcycle. It has its own feeling and spirit."

Mayea Boat Works has restored a number of Belle Isle Bear Cats, all triple cockpit runabouts ranging in size from 26 feet to 34 feet.

"The Mayea yard is an anachronism of time," said Gregory, a DAC member for 30 years. "That's what shipyards used to be years ago."

Admiration for the old boats runs deep, and is evident at the annual boat

show. Every year Jim Schroth mans the antique boats display sponsored by the Michigan chapter of the Antique and Classic Boat Society (ACBS) at the Detroit Boat Show in Cobo Center.

"It's just a fun thing to do," Schroth said. "A lot of people come through and ask questions."

Michigan is second in the nation for overall marine related expenditures, according to the Michigan Boating Industry Association (MBIA), and also has more registered boats than any other state in the nation.

### Lifelong love

Grosse Pointe businessman Marty Cohan has owned classic boats for years. His first, Last Dawn, was a 52-foot cabin cruiser built in New York for the owner of the American Greeting Card Co. and later bought by the family of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Charles Evans Hughes.

"I ran across it at the Jefferson Beach Marina and that's all it took," said Cohan, a former DAC member and the son of Bill Cohan, a past president of the Beavers and Blackballers and a Club member for 43 years.

"Having grown up in the Algonac area where Chris Craft built boats and living on the water pretty much got me to love the old boats," said Cohan, who sold Last Dawn to New York-based Grammy winning songwriter Jim Webb.

"It was very common for just about any boat running on the water at the same time to pull up alongside to get a better look at her," he said. "I'd get a lot of thumbs-up signs."

After several seasons of cruising Lake St. Clair and Detroit River to the Ambassador Bridge, Cohan decided to sell the vessel. "I had another boat along with it, so I sold Dawn," he



Wooden Greavette speedboat owned by Marty Cohan.

said.

His other craft is an unnamed 22-foot wooden speedboat built by Greavette Boats Ltd. of Ontario, Canada – a mahogany runabout built in 1954.

"The Muskoka area is like the Lake Tahoe of Canada," he said.

Three large interconnecting inland lakes with a smattering of little islands accessible only by boat made it a natural area for a boatbuilding industry to spring up. Cohan bought the Canadian-made vessel in 1991 near Algonac.

"I think antique boats are popular for the same reasons as antique cars," he mused. "They're not being produced today with the same attention to detail, it's almost a lost art. These boats are becoming more and more valuable as time goes on."

This year, the Michigan chapter of the ACBS will show eight classic boats dating from 1949 and older at the Detroit Boat Show.

"The owners put so much time and effort into preserving these crafts, it's an awesome sight to see them in contrast to the new vessels," said Van Snider, president of the MBIA, boat show sponsor.

Volunteers from the ACBS will restore a boat during the show. The Michigan chapter has over 500 members, making it the largest regional chapter in the country. No doubt their efforts will bring even more classic boat lovers into the fold.



A 1927 Belle Isle Super Bearcat built by Gregory Boat Works, Detroit.