



HISTORY OF

# Wooden Boats

ON GENEVA LAKE

By Holly Leitner

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Boat rides always put me to sleep. That sweet hum of the engine, sun petting me to sleep, my mother's fingers combing my hair, my family thrown in the back of the boat, a splash of warm water on us, summer melting everything away. A thick varnish on the boat as it glides through the water. Dad upfront smiling as we bounce on Geneva's waves.

ACCOUNT OF OUR [THE LEITNER FAMILY] BOAT, "GENEVA"  
A 1984 CENTURY WOODEN BOAT.

A wooden boat requires many hours, much heart and soul, a true labor of love for those classic rides. With low-maintenance fiberglass cutting across the water so effortlessly, why bother?

"There's something about wood that's very sensual," says Larry Larkin, a local expert on wooden boats and antique boat restoration. "Fresh varnish is almost narcotic-like, the way the wooden boat rides, feels ... where fiberglass is like driving a tin can in comparison."

Once upon a time there were no boats on Geneva Lake; it was merely a calm inviting sea of crystal water. Indigenous people left no wake, no mark of ever using boat craft. In the 1870s, the first boat, the Fanny Allen, stirred the waters, the gentle wooden sailboat sparking envy. The tattooed sailor, William Woods, built it locally and used the boat to haul visitors and materials to lakeshore homes before the steamboat came here. Through the years, many boats have graced these waters: wood, fiberglass and now a throwback to wood. This lake is made for it.

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"Lake Geneva is perfectly fitted for wood boats," says Randy Streblov of Streblov Custom Boats. "This lake has all types — new, vintage. It's a big lake and can handle it."

As the story goes, Lake Geneva became the favorite summer destination after the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, along with the completion of the Chicago and Northwestern train line to the village. A summer culture was born. People wanted to build a beautiful refuge from the city, and luxury homes sprung up along the shoreline. But from the train depot in Williams Bay, the only transportation was by boat, and steam yachts would bring their summertime visitors home. Word spread about the "Newport of the West" and more Chicagoans flocked here. The local boat-making industry was born.

*The Early Years*

The first vessels on the lake were either steam-powered yachts or small fishing boats. Just a few craftsmen in town constructed the boats. According to Larkin's account, "a quick-witted English immigrant named Napper" set up shop at what now is the end of Library Park in downtown Lake Geneva. Napper and his crew could build a steam-

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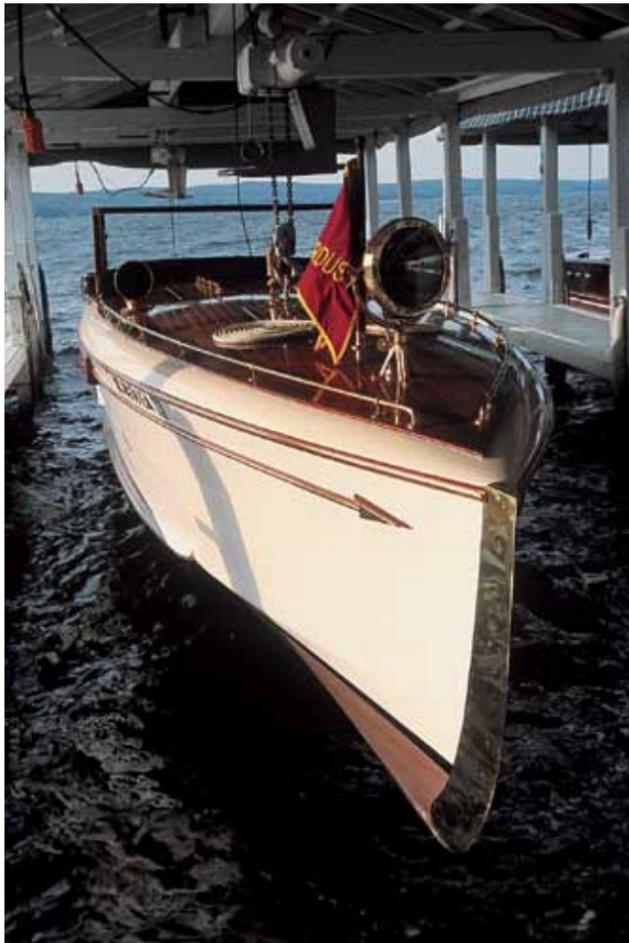
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boat from local wood over the course of a winter.

At this time, he was also building sailboats and small fishing boats. The first of annual 4th of July races were held, leading to the formation of the Lake Geneva Yacht Club in 1876. Sailboats were known as “sandbaggers” at the time, because it was a delicate dance on the vessel to tuck sandbags side to side to balance the wind. The graceful lake’s waters were churning.

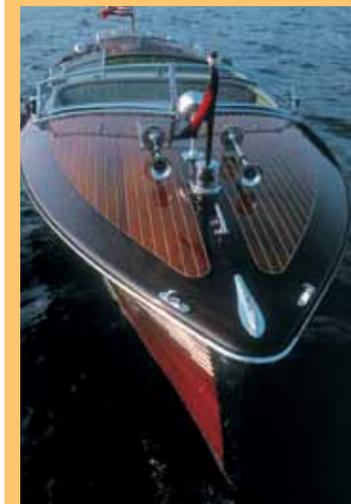
In 1900, the gas engine plowed in, filling the gap between the steam yachts and fishing boats. The sport boat was born; watercraft that could reach a then-amazing 15 miles per hour. Lake life had really begun.

The 1913 Stardust was the supreme speedboat; a high-powered displacement boat, it moved through the water rather than sliding over the water like today’s planing boats. At this time, most boat engines were converted engines, generally airplane engines made marine-friendly. During World War I, the government developed many engines, but when the war ended quickly, it left a surplus ready to power a new era of boats.

### *An Era of Luxury*

By the 1920s, three national boat makers had taken the forefront: John L. Hacker of Hacker-Craft; Chris Smith of Chris-Craft Boats; and Garfield Wood, aka “The Grey Fox” of Gar Wood Boats. Each stamped his personality on his vessel. John Hacker was known for his elegant style; Chris Smith for his runabout design; and Gar

## The Big Three



### JOHN L. HACKER, HACKER-CRAFT BOATS

Hacker’s popular boats were the Belle Isle Bear Cats, owned by famed people such as J.W. Packard and Henry Ford. Early in his career, Hacker designed a floating biplane for the Wright Brothers. The Hacker Company was thriving and in 1921 the company expanded; by 1928, the sales were \$450,000, equivalent to more than \$5 million today.

### GARFIELD WOOD, GAR WOOD BOATS

Gar Wood came into the boat industry by pure love of the sport. As a natural inventor, he already held more U.S. patents than any other living American. Perhaps most famous for his hydraulic hoist for dump trucks, at age 17 he invented a downdraft carburetor that enabled his inspection boat to outrun other inspectors. For him, boating was a hobby, and he wanted speed. As the first man to reach 100 miles per hour on water, he always looked to quicken his boat.



### CHRIS SMITH, CHRIS-CRAFT BOATS

It’s said Chris Smith built his first boat at age 13, and from then on, his obsession for perfection continued. By 1881, he and his brother were producing boats full-time, and in 1922 they partnered with Smith and Sons Boat Company. At this time, the team built a plant in Michigan, where they could produce on the assembly line, making runabout boats available to the middle class, rather than just high luxury customized wooden boats.

Wood for speed. But they all shared the same goal of quality.

“The shear line of a Hacker — no one could draw that line like John Hacker could,” says Larkin. On Geneva Lake, Bill Wrigley’s 1938 Hacker-Craft portrays this excellence, but the Hacker attention to grace and detail made a lasting impact on boat design forever.

With the completion of Highway 12 in the ‘20s, trailers hit the road, carrying these high-performance quality wooden boats. Prior to that, the zigzagging farmland and gravel country roads didn’t allow for towing a boat.

“Route 12 opened up the way to Lake Geneva and brought the speedboats to life,” says Larkin. With the completion of the highway, the demand for Napper’s local utilitarian, rough oak lumber boats disappeared; Philippine Mahogany Chris-Crafts were brought in by the boatload. Napper and other local wooden boat makers faded into yesteryear.

It was the Roaring Twenties; people were dancing by night, boating by day. Money wasn’t an issue, the wealth from Chicago had arrived, and the Geneva mansions had been built. These people had developed a taste, and local, handmade products felt less glamorous. The quality boats were custom-fit with top-quality wood, brass railings, Belgian lace curtains, beveled glass, leather and Oriental rugs.

And they all had power engines.

### *Downslide: The Great Depression*

Then, the rollercoaster plummeted. All the jazz and glitter of the ‘20s was killed by the Depression of the ‘30s. Hacker went bankrupt. Chris-Craft pulled back and later produced utilitarian boats for war. In fact, on D-Day 1944, Chris-Craft LCVPs (Landing Craft, Vehicle and Personnel) led the landings; to this day, Chris-Craft remains the only recreational boat manufacturer to have had its boats at war. Gar Wood, as he had already made his millions with his hydraulic dumptruck lift, kept making boats for fun and was least affected.

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# Streblov - A Family Affair



Streblov boats have always had the same classic stamp: the large wooden vessel, the iconic white wings, that heavy, throwback touch. Larry Streblov started the business in Kenosha in 1954, where he created simple 14-foot custom liners. Today, Larry's son, Randy, and granddaughter, Kris, carry on the family wood-making craft from their Fontana shop. Their boats have developed into seamless works of art, coming in magnificent, purely customized sizes.

"Streblov is an experience, not just a boat," says Larry Streblov, Randy Streblov's cousin. "It's a community."

Spend one Saturday at Randy's shop, and you'll know this is a club as well as a boat-making factory. Boat owners stop in to check the progress of their boats. Randy is part of their family, asking for updates, about kids, homes, life. It's a man-cave for all Streblov owners.

Even today, when economic times are tight, Randy sees a demand for his boats more than ever.

"Everybody wants a wood boat, but it has to be user-friendly."

*"My father wanted a boat that would last through generations, and he also wanted a boat of the highest quality. In 1978, he went to Kenosha with Cory Lazzaroni and Gene Moriarity, who introduced him to Larry and Randy Streblov. He instantly knew that he was in the right place, with the right people and had found what he was looking for: a handcrafted work of art that would last for many years to come."*

*"Our boat was and continues to be used and enjoyed by our entire family. For many years, we would spend much of the weekend on the lake. It wasn't unusual for us to be on the water at 6 a.m., we'd ski for a couple of hours, return to the house for breakfast and then head out again. With family and friends aboard, we'd spend the day on the boat, adrift, jumping in the lake to cool off, enjoying a picnic lunch on board, music playing in the background and the entire day punctuated by laughter. Our Streblov became the vehicle by which we enjoyed Lake Geneva. What is really amazing is that today, 34 years later, the next generation continues to enjoy the lake and our Streblov in the same way — with family and friends aboard and with lots of laughter!"*

*-John Terlato, talking about his family's '69 26-foot Streblov, "JoJo"*

"It really had a big effect on the lake culture," says Larkin. Luxury was quickly stripped back to practical.

After the war in the '50s, luxury boats began to turn their engines back on. Wooden boats graced the waters again during those decades. But just as they would fade into each era, they would disappear again.

"By 1960, it was like a switch was flipped, and everything was fiberglass," says Larkin. Suddenly, wooden boats were a bygone era, and their personality not missed. Gone were the days of difficult-to-maintain wooden boats. Those boats were considered lesser quality; people wanted fast, easy and reliable boats.

Fiberglass dominated the market. Wooden boats had been outcast, the equivalent of last decade's design, burned for metal, shoved away to rot in forgotten barns.

It was the time of new.

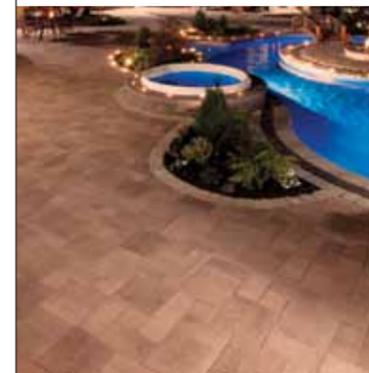
"The pain of the old boat, if you can get it to run, is you just put your knee there, pull, push, learn how many pumps before it goes, soak it long enough, and if all goes right, if you're lucky, it might start..." says Larkin, who owns Alouette, a new boat based on Hacker-Craft design of a triple cockpit, opened up to make it more user-friendly. "That's the nature of the beast."

## Reawakening: Re-creation of Recreation

In 1980, there was a reawakening, a nostalgic re-emergence. People who grew up with wooden boats remembered the old, childhood feel of them. They wanted that piece of their youth back.

A market for the old wooden boats began, with little sophistication. Boats were pulled out of barns and fixed up piece by piece. The Antique and Classic Boat Society (ACBS) started in the Finger Lakes region of upstate New York, a place similar to the Geneva Lakes region. Today, there are 9,000 members throughout 55 chapters. Their goal is to preserve and restore antique and classic boats.

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Once wooden boats were back on the water, the craze spread. Everybody had to have that wooden boat. People had the luxury to be selective. They didn't just want an old Hacker-Craft, they wanted the Hacker-Craft from the choice year of 1935, or a Chris-Craft Barrelback, and found it.

It was a golden era for collecting; these early consumers got top choice of pedigree boats. Companies came back to life; Hacker-Craft began making boats again, and you could have a custom-made 1938 Barrelback or a Globe Boat from 1946-1950. Gage Marine and Hacker had already paired together, creating boats customized for Geneva Lake. While John Hacker had long passed on, his legacy lived on as the tradition continued on Geneva.

By 2000, the boat-collecting market was considered dry by most; all were snapped up and even second-choice boats became collectibles. Dime-a-dozen runabouts were now collectibles.

And boat making went back to its roots and got more local. Streblov Boats moved to Fontana in 1987. The well-built Streblov started to become an icon of Geneva Lake; today more than 150 of these boats roll over Geneva's waters.

So there's a new history. Today, of course, there are many boats on Geneva Lake, from sailboats to ski boats to the new/old "classics". The love of the wooden boat lives on here, and from the looks of the lake, we'll still be writing about them for years to come. ▲

# 36th Annual Meeting & International Boat Show



Hosted by the Blackhawk and Glacier Lakes Chapter of the Antique and Classic Boat Society, Inc.

**WHEN:** September 19-25

Held in conjunction with ACBS's annual meeting, the event includes a Boat Parade at 4 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 24.

**WHERE:** Abbey Resort, Fontana

**REGISTRATION AND INFORMATION:**  
315-686-2628 or [www.acbs.org](http://www.acbs.org)

ACBS anticipates more than 130 of the top-ranked and prized vintage boats in all classes from the entire United States and Canada will be in attendance.