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## Holland Boat Builders

Geoffrey D. Reynolds  
Hope College, reynoldsg@hope.edu

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# HOLLAND BOAT BUILDERS

by Geoff Reynolds

The ship and pleasure boat building industry in Holland, Michigan, has been an important part of the city's past since the 19th century.

The ship building industry started in Holland in 1836, with the construction of the two-mast schooner, the A. C. Mitchell (built where the Marigold Lodge stands today and what used to be a little town called Point Superior), and continued into the Dutch influenced era with the 1848 building of The Flying Dutchman.

The shipyards were concentrated at the eastern end of Black Lake (Lake Macatawa today) where many small builders produced an undetermined number of wooden

schooner type vessels.

At the beginning of the twentieth century boat building in Holland concentrated on the motorized pleasure boat like the launches built by the Wolverine Motor Works, Holland Launch and Engine Company, and Jesiek Brothers of Jenison Park and later Macatawa Park, enjoyed much success on the banks of Black Lake.

In the 1930s, Holland hosted the Gil-Boat Company, a maker of boats from rolled steel and aluminum, and the Campbell Boat Company. The latter was located along the south shore of Lake Macatawa in the Virginia Park area where they made sailboats and large powerboats until the yard was leased and later sold to the Beacon Boat Company in 1953. Beacon made minesweepers and utility boats for the navy during and after the Korean War.

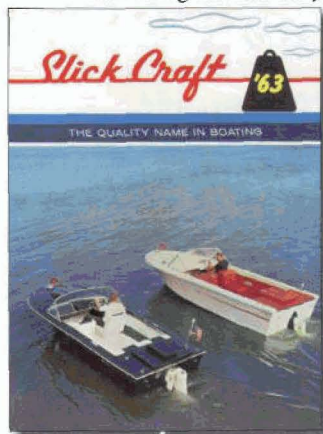
As the pleasure craft builders of Michigan struggled to survive the Great Depression, the Smith family, owners of the Chris-Craft Boat Company, decided to build the largest factory in the history of the company in Holland in 1939, to produce wooden, and later, fiberglass cruisers. A successor owner to the Smith family closed the plant in 1988



Women have a higher attention to detail working with fiberglass.

located on Ottawa Beach Rd. and Analine Rd. There is an old water tower still standing today. The post-war increase in spending on pleasure boats affected Holland like many other American towns. The Roamer Boat Company (located on the south-side of Holland on Washington Avenue near where the Citco is today) began building and selling cabin cruisers made of steel sheets welded together in 1946 until being purchased by Chris-Craft Corporation in 1955. The creation of the Mac Bay Boat Company in 1948 (located near Kollen Park with boat building in the basement of what used to be Bay View Furniture) introduced a sturdy, safe, and affordable molded plywood hulled boat equipped with an inboard marine motor, the first boat company in the United States to do this. The company was purchased in 1956 by the Dobben family and moved to the Muskegon area.

In 1952, two coworkers from the Chris-Craft Corporation began making their own small sheet plywood runabouts. The unofficial partnership of Jason Petroelje and Leon Slikkers was short lived when Petroelje started producing small inboard and outboard motor runabouts under the Skipper-Craft name from 1952-1960. Slikkers formed the Slick Craft Boat Company in 1953. Today, the Holland based company, S2 Yachts, Inc., produces Tiara Yachts in Holland and Pursuit fishing boats in Florida. During the last 30 years makers like



Bandit boats, Bow Winds Boats and the Power Play Boat Company (later named Power Quest Boats), which was founded in 1983 and closed in 2005, produced very fast fiberglass boats. The lone wooden boat



photos courtesy of JOINT ARCHIVES.

builder still in Holland is Grand Craft Acquisition, LLC (formerly known as Grand Craft Corporation until 2005). They make fine wooden powerboats based on classic designs. The history of boat building in Holland, Michigan has been a continuous reflection of the way the United States built commercial ships, military craft, and pleasure boats. The economic comparisons of the nineteenth century shipbuilder and the twenty-first pleasure boat builder are quite dif-

ferent, due to the large amount of capital needed to start and successfully operate a boat business today, as well as the desires of the consumer. Once driven by the need to provide fast, reliable transportation to commercial shippers and passengers, today Holland's boat builders are constantly changing the form of their designs and increasing horsepower to provide entertainment and relaxation.



## The Grand-Craft Story

It started in 1979 with the energy and enthusiasm of Chris Smith, the grandson of the founder of Chris-Craft, Steve Northuis and several retirees from the original Chris-Craft plant in Holland. They put together a 24' Triple-Cockpit Classic, patterned after the Chris-Craft design of the 1930's, and thus the first Grand-Craft came into being.



When Richard and Marti Sligh purchased the fledgling company in 1984, Dick was thrilled to have the opportunity to design new models, update the building process with new technology, and expand. The company, now in its 27th year offers custom-de-

signed completely handcrafted products that function as beautifully as they look. The work ethic of this area, combined with Dick's wood boat-building expertise has created a product worthy of discriminating boaters worldwide.

## Marti and Dick

Dick operated a marina in northern Michigan after growing up in Holland in a family that was known for water skiing events and performances around the state. Dick, at one time, owned and operated a water skiing school in the Detroit area. Wooden boats have been his passion most of his life and over the years he has become an expert craftsman. He is extremely knowledgeable about that subject, as well as all aspects of boat handling. He has degrees in engineering and drafting from Michigan State University. Marti's background is in education and psychology. She's been involved with Grand-Craft since she and Dick purchased the company in 1984, primarily in marketing and sales. Their marriage of 28 years, most of it living on Lake Macatawa, has facilitated countless hours of boating enjoyment with family and friends in this area and around the country.